# The Mediterranean Memory of Anthropologists

**Maria-Àngels Roque.** Anthropologist

The gaze towards the Other has a long tradition in the Mediterranean. First, Greco-Latin historians and geographers, then, Arab travellers and, finally, European romantic writers and travellers left their fantastic, realistic or moral observations on the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea long before the weight of "Mediterraneism" fell almost exclusively on the backs of academic anthropology. Since the beginnings of the discipline, in the late 19th century, the myths and descriptions of the Mediterranean have always been a source of reflection and comparison, to the extent of becoming a classical space in anthropological studies from the second half of the 20th century.

It is difficult to describe a culture without bearing in mind otherness, given that the diverse human groups have their own cultural specificities. When assessing a culture we tend to develop an ethnocentric approach, in keeping with the classical centre-periphery concept in relation to the prevailing system or stance. Several cultures can coexist within a civilisation but there will always be some guidelines that lend a "civilising" cohesion. These can consist of parities of a religious, legal, political or economic nature.

The Mediterranean is a comparative cradle of civilisations which, within quite a vast area, have developed new undertakings, especially providing their culture and memory in diverse fields, often expressed through aesthetic elements and also myths, legends and rituals.

Among the diverse existing disciplines, social and cultural anthropology has probably attempted to free the concept of civilisation from any value judgement. Anthropologists do not usually distinguish between civilisation and culture since Edward B. Taylor, in 1871, made these concepts synonyms in his classical study *Primitive Culture*: "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole is knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

The ancient societies of Greece and Rome and classical and biblical myths have been a source of study and knowledge for the pioneers of anthropology. In the mid-19th century, the Mediterranean became a laboratory which, thanks to examples of *longue durée*, enabled lawmakers such as Bachofen and Maine – passionate about comparative law and great connoisseurs of classical philology – to develop their evolutionist theories of social structure. The Finnish philosopher Edward Westermarck, who in *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1906-1908) promoted a science of moral ideas, broke with subjectivism and attempted to define a shared cultural space through cultural analogies. This aspect was criticised by the French sociologist E. Durkheim, an early advocate of functionalism, who found these analogies too naturalistic.

Durkheim developed the theory of segmental societies, while the British anthropologist J. G. Frazer explored, without moving from his desk, issues of comparative mythology based on multiple texts in depth. Alongside the foundations of anthropology, concepts such as kinship, social structure, myth, magic and religion were developed, mainly in Anglo-Saxon universities.

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The expansion of ethnography and social anthropology between 1950 and 1990 enriched knowledge about hitherto unknown aspects of cultural change, the dissemination of cultural elements, their geographical and ecological distribution, as well as "appropriation" and "acculturation". For anthropology, culture is the process and result of the transformation that human activities bring about in nature, from work and technology to arts and ideologies. Without forgetting the importance of the binding values of the group, as well as the specific relations between its members and a given physical element: its natural or artificial environment. In the field of communication, Edmund Leach (1978) argued that "if we are to understand the ethical rules of a society, it is aesthetics that we must study." Because, although originally the details of customs can be historical accidents, for living individuals of a society these details can never be irrelevant, as they form part of the global system of interpersonal communication within the group.

After the Second World War a large number of "Mediterraneanists" – a term used in the pejorative sense, just like "Orientalist" – appeared that followed the fieldwork methodology and sought their objects of study in mountain areas, in small Iberian, Italian and Greek villages, or in the tribal inland areas of the Maghreb or Middle East, trying to find some exoticism in societies that, ultimately, were not so different from theirs.

This diverse, complex area has often been considered as an "exotic relative", especially in Anglo-Saxon universities, and has become a privileged setting to debate the great issues that concerned researchers; for instance, the diverse political, religious, ethnic, cosmopolitan – sometimes shared, sometimes rejected – civilising currents, as well as a series of resistances quickly rooted in a climate and smooth yet abrupt geography. All these aspects and many others have helped shape this space, which, despite the diversity and individualism, has a certain "family air", as Julian Pitt-Rivers, among others, pointed out.

With the emergence of the early regional syntheses (Davis, 1977) that marked the foundational period of Mediterranean anthropological studies, the most recurrent major issues and representations of the Mediterranean *ethos* (lineage, patronage, revenge, honour, etc.) appeared. The trend tried to show the relative primacy of unity over diversity, although this aspect was later strongly contested.

Among the early co-authored works, we find the essays compiled by Pitt-Rivers and John George Peristiany between the 1960s and 1970s, which tried to provide that notion of Mediterranean society with content, emphasising, beyond the real diversity of societies and cultures, the existence of linked forms of social structure and with shared values. In contrast to these, we find the works of the British anthropologist Ernest Gellner (1981), in which he introduced the "mirror" oppositions between the Christianity of Southern Europe and the Islam of North Africa. This same idea of refraction also appears in the studies of Eric Wolf or the French Germaine Tillion. However, the cultural, economic, political and social upheavals after the independence of the Maghreb countries have changed the character of the

Street in Lisbon (Maria-Àngels Roque).

research in North Africa beyond the aspects mentioned, again playing down the differences.

Although, as Davis (2000) argues, the work of diverse Anglo-Saxon anthropologists have resulted in a better understanding of the Maghreb countries, even taking into account their state policies, most of the studies promoted in the colonial states, as well as some carried out by the "academic" anthropologists, were strongly contested in the 1980s by local anthropologists as they often provide a Western-centric vision. This attitude still prevails with the globalisation of the economy and the search for identity of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, which, in their turn, usually see in the European approaches a new colonialism in a univocal and biased direction.

Although it is true that part of anthropology was developed through colonialism, this discipline cannot simply be attributed with colonial barbarisms: the political doctrine or economics were much more relevant than anthropology itself, which, at least, provided a major corpus that today enables us to know aspects of other cultures that no other discipline would have provided. In any case, anthropology has also helped place on an equal footing the demands made by subjected or peripheral cultures. We are not only referring to colonialism but we can apply the same idea to the homogenising, that is "civilising", nation-state.

Certainly, although the areas of Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece or the Balkans), also chosen as an object of study, could escape the colonialist connotations for which Anglo-Saxon anthropologists were blamed, at that time they still did not escape from being considered, a priori, "primitive".

Pitt-Rivers (2000) explains, in a direct way and yet not lacking fine British humour, the line of research promoted by those pioneers of the first Mediterranean studies. Moreover, he notes how, to avoid the trap laid then and now by the notion of modern nationalism, as early as 1959, he insisted on the need to study the Mediterranean at the level of the local community and thereby avoid national stereotypes.

Let us recall that, at that time, the Maghreb was experiencing the end of colonialism and the emergence of the new national states, while Spain and Portugal were subject to Franco's and Salazar's dictatorships. As a fine connoisseur of Mediterranean diversity, in which it is possible to find stark contrasts, Pitt-Rivers points out that neither Peristiany nor he ever conceived their anthropological trajectory as a cultural area.

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Three decades ago, Michael Herzfeld (1987) acknowledged quite critically that the images of the Mediterranean were, on the anthropological side, the romantic quintessence for English and American tourists: supposedly primitive communities with a stereotypical code of honour and hospitable societies, different from the industrialised world. The Portuguese anthropologist Joao de Pina-Cabral (1989), in his turn, argued that the theses of some "Mediterraneanist" authors, such as the American David Gilmore, in relation to the idea that the Mediterranean north and south shared a similar environment, became particularly meaningful after the Second World War, when ethnographers were able to find physical and technological similarities between the underdeveloped Italian, Greek or Spanish rural peoples and those in the south of the Mediterranean. However, this was no longer so clear in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, the economic, political and social changes both seen in the Maghreb, after the experience of the new national states, and in the unstoppable process of peri-urbanisation of the Mediterranean landscape, helped bring about a new homogeneity of the urban periphery; and, from the 1970s, new industries and residential areas emerged to accommodate the flows of migrants from rural areas. At present, over 80% of the Mediterranean population lives in cities of more than one hundred thousand inhabitants. The Mediterranean coast is suffering the pressure of urbanisation, infrastructures and crops, which are transforming its morphology. With the popularisation of the car, in recent years there has been a process of expansion of that urban periphery. Undoubtedly, the urban lifestyle again reveals the typical climate and food characteristics that bring us closer to a certain Mediterranean *ethos* in Casablanca, Valencia, Naples, Tunis or Agadir.

All this makes us consider new syntheses and visions of the anthropology of the Mediterranean. But the aim is not to seek or find the most exotic but, within diversity, for even the most classical themes to be seen as evolving: honour, gender, segmental societies. Undoubtedly, however, over the last two decades the studies on this inner sea have also targeted new objects and themes: international migrations; tourism; the conflicts in the Middle East; the Balkans; the emergence of new states and the dissolution of others after the fall of communist states; gender studies – with a more nuanced vision than 1970s feminism –; religious studies, in which rituals and the elements involved take on greater strength; sports as a social phenomenon; food and commensality; the transformation of values; lifestyles – seen in a more complex way, if possible –; as well as the opportunities provided by the Mediterranean countries to address in an innovative way concepts related to political anthropology, re-approaching those that were addressed by the "colonial" anthropologists and adding symbolic qualitative aspects that politics hardly conveys.

Today, undoubtedly, anthropologists follow the currents of a new anthropology, abandon the generalist community ethnographies, and place greater emphasis on the problems, without losing sight of local ethnographies, while giving a voice to the actors. Most of these

professionals feel freer to approach issues in an interdisciplinary way and, often, they even want to stress that they feel involved with the subject and those who study it, producing works that are at the same time *emic* and *etic*; in other words, which reflect both the point of view of the actors themselves and the researcher.

The Mediterranean is revisited, reformulated, often by local anthropologists, who, as around twenty years ago John Davis (2000) commented, have the advantage of having a wide knowledge of the language, are familiar with the history and are involved with the issues they study. In this way, Davis points out that these anthropologists "play at home and win," approaching their studies from a critical and open view that in new terms redefines the classical discussions on tradition and modernity, on unity and diversity. More than ever, the Mediterranean appears today as a space in motion.

If, on the one hand, and speaking of the rise of local anthropologies, Davis (2000) considers that this contributes to a greater knowledge of the region, on the other he also fears that, far from carrying out a comparative anthropology, the departments of anthropology that have been opened and continue to open – remember that in the Southern Mediterranean, where, despite the existence of good professionals, this discipline is not recognised as an area of official knowledge – means that these anthropologists are forced to build local cultures within local universities, losing the comparative momentum needed for the progress of the discipline. This reflection is useful, as is the extension of local knowledge, as we believe that approaching one's own culture and the culture of the Other from a point of view that introduces comparative visions and diverse perspectives is not only positive but completely necessary to open up new interpretative outlets; however, we could also wonder if the vision from universities such as Oxford is still, also, a local gaze. Within this framework, as Dionigi Albera and Mohamed Tozy (2005) argue, we could conceive the Mediterranean as a "stage" in which anthropologists of diverse cultural and scientific traditions have the opportunity to explore a new form of collective identity without necessarily rejecting the legacies and ignoring the interdependences, but being more demanding and tolerant with the individual gazes.

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*Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, in its mission to shed light on Mediterranean cultures, has from the outset welcomed the contribution of young and not so young anthropologists. These studies have been developed based on the fieldwork in Mediterranean countries, or on the age-old knowledge of their culture; they are, all of them, interdisciplinary reflections that bring us closer to that space between unity and diversity.

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