

## Études littéraires africaines

# Rewriting Antiquity: Saint Augustine as Mnemonic Figure in Francophone Texts of the Maghreb

Claudia Gronemann



Number 49, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073869ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073869ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association pour l'Étude des Littératures africaines (APELA)

ISSN

0769-4563 (print)

2270-0374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gronemann, C. (2020). Rewriting Antiquity: Saint Augustine as Mnemonic Figure in Francophone Texts of the Maghreb. *Études littéraires africaines*, (49), 189–204. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073869ar>

Article abstract

*In line with current debates on African cultural heritage, this article considers the historical dislocation and a recent revival of Augustine of Hippo as a long-time hidden figure of North African memory. It focuses on the evolution of transcultural meaning in the process of memorization from colonial to postcolonial times. The main emphasis will be on the Algerian context, where Augustine was incorporated into colonial myth (Bertrand's Afrique latine), what provoked a rejection until his figure was re-appropriated and shaped into a site of Maghrebian memory.*

# REWRITING ANTIQUITY : SAINT AUGUSTINE AS MNEMONIC FIGURE IN FRANCOPHONE TEXTS OF THE MAGHREB

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans le contexte des débats actuels sur le patrimoine culturel africain, l'article discute le déplacement historique et la ressuscitation récente d'Augustin d'Hippone en tant que figure d'oubli dans la mémoire nord-africaine. Il envisage son évolution comme signe transculturel dans le processus de la mémorisation de l'ère coloniale à l'époque postcoloniale. L'accent sera principalement mis sur le contexte algérien, où Augustin a été incorporé dans le mythe colonial (*l'Afrique latine* selon Bertrand), ce qui a provoqué un refus jusqu'à ce que son personnage soit réapproprié et transformé en un site de la mémoire maghrébine.

Mots-clés : Augustin d'Hippone – mémoire – oubli – littérature coloniale – littérature maghrébine.

## ABSTRACT

*In line with current debates on African cultural heritage, this article considers the historical dislocation and a recent revival of Augustine of Hippo as a long-time hidden figure of North African memory. It focuses on the evolution of transcultural meaning in the process of memorization from colonial to postcolonial times. The main emphasis will be on the Algerian context, where Augustine was incorporated into colonial myth (Bertrand's *Afrique latine*), what provoked a rejection until his figure was re-appropriated and shaped into a site of Maghrebian memory.*

*Keywords : Augustine of Hippo – memory – forgetting – colonial literature – maghrebian literature.*

\*

## A hidden memory

In Maghrebi cultural discourse, we find a series of ancient historical and mythical figures that became important references for the production of memory and have been (re)discovered at specific moments of cultural and political rupture or conflict, for the sake of stabilizing collective identity. We find emblematic characters as mnemonic signifiers such as Ulysses, Jugurtha or Kahina, the latter are famous Berber warriors, being revaluated to establish a new self-

understanding independent of dominant traditions<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, if we are now witnessing a revival of Augustine of Hippo, a Christian saint, as a long-time hidden figure of North African memory, we might also consider the various references to that figure as involving a production of cultural, social, and political identity. This article, as part of a larger research project<sup>2</sup>, will offer preliminary answers to such questions, describing decisive moments in the structure of Augustine's Maghrebian transmission. Thus, my approach is aligned with current Memory Studies, which focuses on the evolution of meaning in the symbolic and medial processes of transcultural tradition. The main emphasis will be on the Algerian context, where St. Augustine was incorporated into colonial myth and where he has recently been rediscovered, his figure shaped into a site of national memory founded on transcultural ground<sup>3</sup>.

Probably of Berber origin through his mother Monnica<sup>4</sup>, Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis was born in 354 AC in Thagaste, a small town in Numidia (Souk Ahras, Algeria), and he died in Hippo Regius, today's Annaba<sup>5</sup>. He spent only five years out of Numidia and *Africa proconsularis* and acknowledged openly his origins, expressing deep attachment to the continent of his birth. After his return

---

<sup>1</sup> This involves independence from French colonial myths directed against Arabo-Islamic tradition and refers to a spectrum of anticolonial discourses.

<sup>2</sup> This article emerged from my paper given 16 February 2018 at the conference « Re-Centering a Region : the Maghreb in Motion » (University of Marburg) and is part of the research project *North African representations of Augustine of Hippo*, co-directed by Anja Bettenworth (Cologne) and myself. See : <https://www.uni-mannheim.de/newsroom/presse/pressemitteilungen/2019/april/zwischen-karthago-rom-und-hippo-regius-augustinus-in-der-nordafrikanischen-und-der-europaeischen-tradition/> (consulted 24-06-2020).

<sup>3</sup> Due to the time sequence, we speak – with Astrid Erll and Clifford Geertz – of a « travelling memory ». See : ERLI (Astrid), « Travelling Memory », *Parallax*, vol. 17, n°4, 2011, p. 4-18. Concerning the North African tradition of Augustine, I concentrate on the concurrent dynamic, entanglement and polyphony of memory.

<sup>4</sup> Berber at this time meant above all « of indigenous blood », which was probably the case with Augustine according to Lancel who rejects nonetheless any attribution of a specifically Berber personality to Augustine as biased. See : LANCEL (Serge), « Augustin (saint) », in : *Asarakae – Aurès*. Edited by Gabriel Camps. Aix-en-Provence : Edisud, 1989 (available at : <http://journals.openedition.org/encyclopedieberbere/1222> (consulted 15-05-2018)).

<sup>5</sup> For relevant biographies of Augustine see : BROWN (Peter), *Augustine of Hippo : A Biography* [1967]. London : University of California Press, 2000, 576 p. ; LANCEL (Serge), *Saint Augustin*. Paris : Fayard, 1999, 792 p. ; O'DONNELL (James Joseph), *Augustine, Sinner & Saint : A New Biography*. London : Profile Books, 2005, IX-448 p. ; LANE FOX (Robin), *Augustine : Conversions and Confessions*. London : Penguin Books, 2015, 672 p., ill.

in 388, he did his best to overcome a growing tension between his sense of being a *homo afer* on the one hand, a *homo romanus* on the other hand<sup>6</sup>. The decisive category defining his social and existential position was affiliation with the Catholic Church<sup>7</sup>. After his death, Augustine emerged as an exemplary representative of the Late Roman Empire – a status attested to in the *Vita Augustini* (437) written by his disciple Possidius<sup>8</sup>.

As one of the most important Church Fathers, Augustine became, of course, a pivotal figure in the historiography of Christianity and Christian thinking, with its centering on Western culture; his African origins appear to increasingly recede from that history<sup>9</sup>. Although his identity as an indigenous member of North African culture was never erased, it has never been a focal point of his Western reception. With the Vandal invasion and conquest of Carthage in 439, the Roman State Church lost its influence in North Africa. A complex process of Christianity's attenuation now began, with eventual Islamization and Arabization, beginning with the *fath* in 647 and reaching a crucial stage with the conquest of Carthage in 698. The eleventh century then saw the truncation of pontifical relations, marking what Talbi has described as the « dissolution of Maghrebian Christianity » within the Islamic epoch<sup>10</sup>. The shrinking of the Maghreb's Christian communities was not so much the result of direct religious repression but rather of profound political, social

---

<sup>6</sup> See : CONYBEARE (Catherine), « Vt tecum tamquam mecum audeam conloqui : The Politics of Return », *Augustinian Studies*, vol. 48, n°1-2, 2017, p. 105-117 ; p. 115.

<sup>7</sup> See : LANCEL (S.), « Augustin (saint) », *art. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> See : AUGUSTINUS, *Opera / Werke : zweisprachige Ausgabe. [2] Possidius, Vita Augustini*. Hrsg. von Wilhelm Geerlings. Paderborn ; München : Schöningh, 2005, 237 S. ; BASTIAENSEN (A.A.R.), éd., *Vite dei Santi, 3. Vita di Cipriano ; Vita di Ambrogio ; Vita di Agostino*. Introduzione di Christine Mohrmann. Testo critico e commento a cura di A.A.R. Bastiaensen, traduzioni di Luca Canali e Carlo Carena. Milano : Mondadori, coll. Scrittori greci e latini, 1981, LXIII-464 p. ; p. 42-63. Moritz Kuhn prepared a new text commentary on Possidius's *Vita Augustini* (forthcoming 2021).

<sup>9</sup> We thus find Saak stating bluntly that « [i]n the period between Augustine's death in 430 and the year 1000, [he] lost his African heritage : he became a European saint » – SAAK (Eric L.), « Augustine in the Western Middle Ages to the Reformation », in : *A companion to Augustine*. Edited by Mark Vessey & Shelley Reid. Chichester. West Sussex : Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 465-477, p. 467.

<sup>10</sup> See : TALBI (Mohamed), « Le Christianisme maghrébin de la conquête musulmane à sa disparition : une tentative d'explication », in : *Conversion and Continuity : Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*. Edited by Michael Gervers & Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi. Toronto : Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990, p. 313-352 ; p. 326.

and cultural changes over centuries. The idea of *jāhiliya*<sup>11</sup>, a demotion of previous knowledge emerging from the region, also contributed to the process. Thus, we can consider both that Ancient Christian era and Augustine's personality as a *site of oblivion*<sup>12</sup>.

Speaking generally it is clear that Western Christian interpretation and memorization of the Augustinian heritage worked hand in hand with its *dislocation* during centuries of change in North African political and religious systems, identity, and culture. What seems important to note is a gradual if fundamental rupture in African memory of the historical figure of Augustine within local traditions. Augustine was for the most part a hidden figure until the French occupation of Algeria began in 1830 and transformation of the territory into a settler colony in 1848. If that Church Father is now modeled as an Algerian, an *Amazigh*, or a Carthaginian Philosopher, this does not result from historical continuity but rather constructs Augustine as a figure of memory. As one of the Christian emblems of colonial culture, Augustine was mostly excluded from Maghrebian discourse until a revival of his presence after 2000. In this light, one question that needs to be asked is whether such reappropriation would have been possible without a colonial production of knowledge concerning Augustine as an African that took place in the nineteenth century : an episode that initiated a complex mnemonic process still waiting to be fully explored.

### **Constructing Augustine's African identity in the colonial era**

In the nineteenth century within the Algerian context, a new mnemonic inscription of Augustine was initiated through intensive work by French protagonists<sup>13</sup>. In respect to three levels of reappropriation – that evident in the symbolic politics of the Algerian Catholic Church, in literary texts, and in official colonial commemoration – it would appear that Augustine became an important reference within French colonial society. Emphasis on his Latin-African origin as nothing less than a decisive element culminated in

---

<sup>11</sup> The term refers to the pre-Islamic period and means the « Age of ignorance ».

<sup>12</sup> For a theoretical approach to the idea of *lieu d'oubli*, see : PORRA (Véronique), « Des lieux d'oubli à l'hypermnésie : remarques sur la gestion mémorielle post-coloniale dans l'espace francophone », in : *Les Lieux d'oubli de la Francophonie*. Edited by Danielle Dumontet, Véronique Porra, Kerstin Kloster, Thorsten Schüller. Hildesheim : Georg Olms Vg., 2015, 228 p. ; p. 5-25.

<sup>13</sup> Before the nineteenth century, Augustine has been translated and intensively studied in France from the Middle Ages to Jansenism and in literary tradition.

texts by the French colonial writer Louis Bertrand, whose literary work was deeply inspired by Flaubert and his own travels in the « South », as he referred to Algeria<sup>14</sup>. With an idea of *Afrique latine*, Bertrand established, from his distinctly European perspective, a new vision of the Roman legacy in North Africa, while also creating a highly potent Augustinian image.

In any case, fertile ground for a new shaping of this saint and his renaissance in colonial Algeria was also provided before Bertrand, through establishment of Catholic institutions meant to evangelize the local population<sup>15</sup>. Important Church representatives contributed to this reshaping with specific strategies. In the first years of colonization, Dupuch, bishop of Algiers, forced a public commemoration of Augustine. The cardinal Lavignerie<sup>16</sup>, appointed archbishop of Algiers in 1867, was expected to organize the indigenous population's conversion. The African origin of the modern Christianity's « precursor », as he referred to Augustine of Hippo, thus seemed highly useful in disseminating Christian faith to the Algerian population, beginning with a Christianization of Berber culture<sup>17</sup>.

Where the Catholic Church's Algerian strategy was meant to establish and consolidate religious connections in the country and convince local people to adopt a new « true » faith, Bertrand addressed his historical, novelistic, and publicist writing to Algeria's European population, proposing the idea of *French* national renewal. His program for what Déjeux has described with Bertrand as a « physical, intellectual, national, and social regeneration »<sup>18</sup> of France was, then, to start in Algerian soil. Thus, Lorcin strongly emphasized that « the spatial and ideological transition from East to West » included a particular spiritual linking of the settlers with the African soil<sup>19</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> See the biographical introduction by : DÉJEUX (Jean), « Louis Bertrand (1866-1941) », in : *Hommes et destins. Dictionnaire biographique d'outre-mer. T. I.* Paris : Académie des sciences d'outre-mer, 1975, 668 p. ; p. 149-151.

<sup>15</sup> On the Algerian Catholic church see : SAAIDIA (Oissila), *L'Algérie catholique : une histoire de l'Église catholique en Algérie : XIX<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Préface de Jacques Frémeaux. Paris : CNRS, 2018, 313 p.

<sup>16</sup> He was the founder of the Pères Blancs and Sœurs blanches congregation, of the École missionnaire and the Œuvre de Saint-Augustin.

<sup>17</sup> See : DIRËCHE (Karima), « Les écoles catholiques dans la Kabylie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle : entre évangélisation et assimilation », *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, n°75 (*Islam et éducation au temps des réformes*), 2007, available at : <http://journals.openedition.org/cdlm/3333> (consulted 10-04-2018).

<sup>18</sup> DÉJEUX (J.), « Louis Bertrand (1866-1941) », *art. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> « [...] binding the settlers spiritually to the soil of the land as a regional extension of France required more than heroes of conquest and images of Arab "inep-

Bertrand came to Algiers in 1891 as a *lycée* teacher ; he would remain for a decade, in the course of which he did a great deal of traveling around the country. In 1895, together with his friend, the archeologist Stéphane Gsell, he visited the Roman ruins of Tipasa, an experience he would describe as a groundbreaking, epiphanic event – something like the revelation and incarnation of the concept of *Afrique latine* that would continue to highly influence his thinking<sup>20</sup>.

While reference to the Ancient African Church was decisive for missionary work by the French clergy in Algeria, Bertrand was himself influenced by the idea of the Romanization of African culture. Hence the Latin language served as the criterion interlinking ancient and French culture, both being equally of Roman imprint. The title of one of his public speeches expressed his conviction that *France is the inheritress of Latin Africa* (1922). Here, then, the colonial occupation appears as a form of return, of recovery and recapture of a lost heritage and the Muslim-Arab era deemed a « disruption » of the civilizational process. In Bertrand's model, Algeria as part of the old Latin world, now turned quasi-naturally into part of French territory, an « Afrique latine toute contemporaine »<sup>21</sup>. Bertrand was one of a number of authors making use of that concept to, as it were, symbolically conquer the new territory, rendering it part of the French empire. In this manner, the colonial expansion was meant to contribute to the renewal of France, which at the end of the nineteenth century found itself in an economic and cultural crisis after defeat in the 1870's Franco-German war.

A discursive distinction is manifest in the Algerian context, with specific interest in Saint Augustine evident in Bertrand's framework. The titular saint as presented in his *Saint Augustin* (1913) served as nothing short of an emblematic representation of his *Afrique latine*, reoccupied by the Third Republic's army to fulfill the nation's revitalizing *mission civilisatrice*. The novel of this renowned writer was

---

titude" in the face of modernity [...] the French in Algeria created a tradition of regionality that bound them to France » – LORCIN (Patricia), « Rome and France in Africa : Recovering Colonial Algeria's Latin Past », *French Historical Studies*, vol. 25, n°2, 2002, p. 295-329 ; p. 297 and 305.

<sup>20</sup> BERTRAND (Louis), *Sur les routes du Sud*. Paris : Fayard, 1936, p. 216 : « Je voyais se lever devant mes yeux l'image d'une Afrique inconnue de moi et pourtant fraternelle... ». On Bertrand's ideology of space see : LÜSEBRINK (Hans-Jürgen), « Imperiale Träume – Französische Reisen in den kolonialen Maghreb (1881-1954) », in : *Reisen in den Mittelmeerraum*. Edited by Hermann H. Wetzel. Passau : Passavia Universitätsverlag, 1991, 282 S. ; S. 213-232.

<sup>21</sup> DÉJEU (J.), « Louis Bertrand (1866-1941) », *art. cit.*, p. 149.

often being referred to and establishes, by literary success, a concept for Augustine's construction as a Latin African personality. Placing him in his historical, local African context and using a narrative strategy suitable to that task, Bertrand aims at reviving Augustine as a literary persona attractive to a contemporary reading public. To that end, he incorporates specific episodes from the *Confessions* (396-97 AC) into his narrative, culminating in the saint's baptism in 387 AC, but also covering the time after the conversion, as recounted by Possidius.

Bertrand's third-person narration idealizes Augustine into both a moral-ethical role-model of African origin and an exceptional personality. But this idealization is part of a more general strategy, a location of the *Confessions'* genius in transmission of a specific experience on North African soil<sup>22</sup>. This was, in effect, the sort of experience Bertrand himself would have in Algeria, where extraordinary sensations and images would shape his own literary production. North Africa here no longer functioned as an exotic space for literary creation but rather as a forgotten world *inside* Western culture. Writing from a transparently anti-modernist standpoint, he idealized rural life, extolling the positive effects of European colonial contact with the local landscape in harmony with the French current of *régionalisme* – but also warning against the settlers' intermingling with the indigenous population. In line with Gobineau's theory of unequal human races, he proposed an ethnic difference between the Muslim population and an ancient Latin African race that, it would appear, included Augustine in its ranks.

Bertrand's ideas about Augustine exerted powerful influence, as he was the first author who, writing within a colonial tradition, « restored » Augustine's Latin African face – this through construction of a new mnemonic figure inside a more complex French political myth. For Bertrand, the historical Augustine represented a powerful, yet geographically marginal figure ; as a Lorrainer, he saw himself as embodying that figure. The marginal personality here emerges as a specific cultural type incorporating significant national values, in this case Catholic values, these benefiting from distance from a supposedly decadent center : Rome for Augustine, France for Bertrand. In this way, the writer rendered Augustine, the

---

<sup>22</sup> « C'est ici, à Madaure, à Thagaste, pendant les années avides de l'adolescence, qu'il amassa les germes de sensations et d'images, qui, plus tard, écloront en métaphores ardentes et bouillonnantes dans ses *Confessions* » – BERTRAND (Louis), *Saint Augustin* [1913]. Préface de S.E. le cardinal Paul Poupard. Versailles : Via Romana, 2013, 386 p. ; p. 65.



Church Father, into the utopian symbol of a renewed French nation<sup>23</sup>.

Continuing the traditions of Augustine's religious and literary modeling, in the twentieth century the Algerian Catholic Church made its own important contribution to promulgating and reshaping the saint's image to connect it with his North African origins. In 1930, the Church organized an ambitious program dedicated to the saint's memory as part of the *Centenary of the French Conquest*<sup>24</sup>, speaking directly of « two glorious centenaries », the second one being the 1500<sup>th</sup> year since Augustine's death in 430. The entire, underlying discourse had the effect of suggesting – here as well – a Latin Christian revival in Algeria. Consequently, the emphasis on the Latin origins of French settler culture was supposed to distinguish the settlers from the indigenous population majority losing its cultural heritage when the imperial culture cut off the institutional support needed maintaining awareness and knowledge of other traditions.

There are other clearly identifiable moments in the ecclesiastic, political, and literary appropriation of Augustine in colonial North Africa, moments that diverge from defining the saint as an African representing a settler culture of Latin origin. In René Pottier's *Saint Augustin, le berbère* (1945), for instance, we find a different version of the French colonial myth. In contrast to Bertrand, Pottier foregrounds Augustine's supposed Berber identity, in the line with the myth still visible in Lavigerie's « Kabyle bon Chrétien ». Pottier produces a political parallel to present times by underscoring presumed close resemblances between the French and Berber peoples<sup>25</sup>. His biography, in offering a conceptual schema centered around racial difference and, at once, cultural conjunction, articulates an essentially ahistorical vision of Augustine as an anti-Roman partisan. In elaborating on this vision, Pottier abstained from citing the historical fact of Augustine's struggle *against* the African Donatist

<sup>23</sup> See Jutta Weiser's contribution on Bertrand and his reception of Augustine, in *Römische Quartalschrift*, vol. 115, n° 1-2 (forthcoming 2020).

<sup>24</sup> See : JANSEN (Jan), « Die Erfindung des Mittelmeerraumes im kolonialen Kontext : die Inszenierung eines "lateinischen Afrika" beim Centenaire de l'Algérie française 1930 », in : *Der Süden : Neue Perspektiven auf eine europäische Geschichtsregion*. Edited by Benjamin F. Schenk & Martina Winkler. Frankfurt a.M. ; New York : Campus Verlag, 2007, 233 p. ; p. 175-205.

<sup>25</sup> See : POTTIER (René), *Augustin, le Berbère*. Paris : Lanore, 2006, 270 p. ; p. 27 : « [...] si, entre lui et nous, il y a des liens, c'est qu'entre les Berbères et nous, il y en a également ». Pottier's image, first presented in 1945, of Augustinian resistance may also allude to the French resistance.

Church<sup>26</sup>. When in his biography's postface Pottier suggests an intent to convert the Berber Muslim population<sup>27</sup>, we may also understand this in the light of a strategy against the Algerian nationalist movement already growing at this time.

What the examples outlined here show us is that this construction had a powerful impact, initiating a process of foundational, symbolic historico-cultural rerooting on North African soil<sup>28</sup>. Strikingly, this process unfolded as a sharp paradox : The construction of an occidentalized saint's Africinity that complicated, on the one hand, the recognition of Augustine as Maghrebian heritage, would nevertheless, on the other, offer new possibilities to postcolonial culture in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, its media, art, and literature, to take up, carry forward, and create Augustine and the larger Roman past in a new cultural perspective. On the strength of questioning the ideological content of this knowledge, the independent Maghreb nations created their own collective memory, with a discovery of Augustine as their cultural ancestor.

### Post-independence constructions of Saint Augustine

To better understand how the saint took on that historical-mnemonic role after the Algerian independence, we need to consider the specific dynamic of postcolonial nation-building, with its creation of new forms of patriotic identification. Unlike Western countries, post-independent states such as Algeria do not have at their disposal the idea – however illusory – of a long-term historical continuum, usually based on a single language and an overarching cultural narrative including all members. To the contrary : in post-colonial states, social, political and cultural institutions, together with historiography, memory, and the collective imaginary, are shaped in a fundamental way by imperialist structures and categories. Hence in the Algerian context, a radical break with French colonial

---

<sup>26</sup> See the scathing review by Gustave Bardy, in *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France*, t. 32, n°120, 1946, p. 123-125.

<sup>27</sup> « Ils seraient étonnés de constater que l'un d'eux ait pu être une gloire de la chrétienté sans rien renier des qualités de sa race, et les conversions se multiplieraient. Ce faisant, ils se rapprocheraient de nous encore davantage, car ils ne peuvent admettre qu'un peuple soit sans religion » – POTTIER (R.), *Augustin, le Berbère*, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

<sup>28</sup> Dunwoodie underlines the link between Bertrand's thinking and contemporary political ideas, as manifest, for instance, in Barrès's concept of settling as *racinement*. See : DUNWOODIE (Peter), « Colonizing space : Louis Bertrand's Algeria in "Le sang des races" and "Sur les routes du Sud" », *The Modern Language Review*, t. 105, n°4, 2010, p. 998-1014, p. 1000.

ideology was necessary – this all the more so in that post-independence Algeria was organized along the lines of French Jacobin centralism, and of the idea of a nation-state consolidating and fostering authoritarian structures. Accordingly, one of the most important responsibilities incurred by Algerian political leaders and officials was to create a new national consciousness, grounded in what were considered appropriate models of history moving past French colonial ideology. In their nation-building efforts, many postcolonial states have made use of an « anticolonial structure of reply », as Lüsebrink puts it <sup>29</sup>, a counter-historical discourse aimed at supporting a new collective awareness.

For its part, post-independence Algerian discourse was – and continues to be slightly modified – based on an assumption that national union is grounded in the Arabic language and Islamic religion. As the state's leading party and main political-military force in the struggle against France, the *Front de libération nationale* hoped their program would reunify a population that was deeply divided in the postwar period – that it would heal the wounds resulting from a massive political, social, and cultural rupture. When public actors referred to historical themes and problems, they aimed at producing new forms of a collective imaginary detached from colonial history. In this framework, the anti-colonial paradigm, established to create a new Algerian identity, also referred back to colonial knowledge and categories <sup>30</sup>.

The Augustinian legacy was not entirely forgotten, but, when the question of Roman antiquity happened to be raised, was approached as in conflict with official nationalist ideology. Some politicians expressly denied Augustine a place in Algerian history <sup>31</sup>. A number of authors promptly rejected him as an opponent of the Algerian

---

<sup>29</sup> On the problem of postcolonial history and national figures of identification, see : LÜSEBRINK (H.-J.), « Geschichtskultur im (post-)kolonialen Kontext : zur Genese nationaler Identifikationsfiguren im frankophonen Westafrika », in : ASSMANN (Aleida), FRIEDE (C.), eds., *Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität. 3 : Identitäten*. Frankfurt : Suhrkamp, 1998, 461 p. ; p. 401-426, p. 417 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Lüsebrink (« Geschichtskultur im (post-)kolonialen Kontext... », *art. cit.*, p. 403) emphasizes that in respect to both national identity and history, post-colonial forms of collective conscience have their origins and central reference in colonial culture, its sociocultural dynamics and inconsistencies, not in precolonial identities or post-independent societies.

<sup>31</sup> For example Réda Malek, member of the FLN and former Algerian prime minister (1993-94), considered Augustine's conversion as grounds for such exclusion. See : BENNADJI (Chérif), « Oghestin El Annabi », *El Watan*, 18 November 2017.

cause<sup>32</sup>, which resulted certainly from the colonial period's shaping of Augustine as a Latin African personality. Several authors thus presented the historical figure of Augustine as an enemy of, even a traitor to, the Berber cause. They here referred to the saint's struggle against Donatism. In reality, the conflict between Catholics and Donatists in the early fifth century was of a complex religious nature; it did not divide Roman and indigenous believers. The Donatists were the object of colonial myth in Algeria's post-independence discourse, elevated into the first indigenous independence movement, their anti-Catholic struggle rendered into a basal form of anti-colonial (anti-Roman) resistance. From this perspective, Augustine is considered their enemy, as a treacherous impediment to their autonomy from Rome. This reading clearly projected the binary, colonizer / colonized structure into an entirely different historical situation defined by problems of religious dominance and affiliation. Setting up an opposition between (African) Donatists and (Roman) Catholics overlooked a basic fact: African identity and Catholicism were not mutually exclusive, as Augustine and hundreds of bishops in North Africa demonstrated.

Looking at various articles in official Algerian print media such as *Horizons*, *La Tribune*, and *El Watan*, we can identify, starting toward the end of the 1980s, a veritable debate about the value of Augustinian memory for the post-independence state's identity. Two approaches in particular seem especially salient: a factually inspired approach, and a political one directly focusing on Augustine against the backdrop of Algeria's modern political situation. The post-colonial present is understood here as defined by recuperation of a heritage from which Algerians have been forcibly alienated – a heritage stamped by dispossession.

A milestone in Augustine's memorization as a North African, and thus one for the region as a whole, was the meanwhile famous *Augustinus Afer* colloquium of 2001, held in Algiers and Annaba, organized in cooperation with the University of Geneva, and placed under the auspices of the Algerian president. Perhaps unsurprisingly considering the colloquium's central theme, the scholarly presentations were here framed by political speech, the entire event thus emerging as a highly symbolic commemorative act<sup>33</sup>. It marked the

---

<sup>32</sup> Among these authors are Kateb Yacine, and, more recent, Boualem Sansal, Ahmed Akkache.

<sup>33</sup> Starting in 1999, a series of three conferences were held in this context, all patronized by Bouteflika. The first took place in Rimini (1999), the second at Algiers and Annaba (2001), and the third in Annaba (2017). See the proceedings:

first official recognition of Augustine on Algerian soil and, as it were, claim to his memory. Besides the interesting interdisciplinary research contributions by recognized scholars of different disciplines, this official national contextualization seems highly noteworthy for two basic reasons. On the one hand, as suggested a Christian saint, forgotten after 1962 or else rejected as a purported opponent of the Donatists identified with Algerians, was now being elevated into the nation's official memory. Where as resistant warrior Jugurtha embodied a combative and patriotic heroism, Augustine represented universal values. On the other hand, it was in Bouteflika's interest to make use of Augustine as a symbol of peace and reconciliation on different levels. He wished to overcome the East-West divide, promote the process of rapprochement with France, and reconcile the Arabic and European worlds<sup>34</sup>. He also wished to recover lost knowledge, reconciling Algeria with pre-Islamic past tied to a humanist educational ideal<sup>35</sup>. But the level of internal politics is present here as well. With the Christian saint serving as a symbol of diversity and thus functioning as a binding figure, Bouteflika could use his memorialization to promote his project of national reconciliation. Following the civil war of the 1990s the population was deeply divided between victims and perpetrators. After the end of this conflict a domestic politics of reconciliation was needed and this shed a different light on Bouteflika political motives and in fact the nature of this colloquium. Since his election in 1999 under weak democratic circumstances, he was in search for legitimacy ; that project became a kind of personal banner<sup>36</sup>. In 1999, he proposed a first referendum on a *concorde*

---

FUX (Pierre-Yves) *et al.*, eds., *Augustinus Afer. Saint Augustin. Africanité et universalité : actes du colloque international Alger-Annaba, 1-7 avril 2001*. Freiburg : Éd. universitaires de Fribourg, 2003, coll. Paradosis, n°45, 2 vol., 660 p.

<sup>34</sup> See : POLLMANN (Karla), *St. Augustine the Algerian*. Göttingen : Dührkohp & Radicke, Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft, 12, 2003, 49 S.

<sup>35</sup> Dirèche refers to Bouteflika's strategy as a « réconciliation avec une histoire ancienne quelque peu oubliée dans les manuels scolaires ». See : DIRÈCHE (Karima), « Convoquer le passé et réécrire l'histoire : berbèrité et amazighité dans l'histoire de l'Algérie », in : *Chantiers et défis de la recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain*. Edited by Pierre-Robert Baduel. Paris : Karthala, 2009, p. 493-5005, p. 499.

<sup>36</sup> For the Algerian process of national reconciliation, see : HOUNET (Yazid Ben), BELHIMER (Ammar), « Les trois temps de la réconciliation en Algérie : une ritualisation manquée ? », in : *Traversées des mémoires en Méditerranée : la réinvention du « lien », XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Edited by Maryline Crivello & Karima Dirèche. Aix-en-Provence : Presses universitaires de Provence, 2017, 204 p. ; p. 47-54.

*civile*. Augustine, in short, was meant to help recreate an overarching cultural imaginary for Algerian society<sup>37</sup>.

Where Western discourse considers Saint Augustine as a thinker whose ideas have universal significance, the figure of this Church saint has been adopted and translated into the Maghrebian context through his geographically bridging of Orient and Occident. In the process, the potency of his African origins also raised the possibility to claim a certain anteriority of the non-Western culture's imprint.

### Saint Augustine in literary texts

If official forms of commemoration correspond to implicit or explicit political intentions, referring Augustine in literature is rather different, creative writers often articulating individual and aesthetic perspectives. In the Maghreb, Augustine's thematic presence has tended to be located inside, but also outside a political-ideological framework. In this context, we find ambiguous and dissonant representations, aimed at either constructing new imaginaries, or at transcribing, overwriting, or deconstructing the collective myths surrounding the saint.

The (re)appearance, presentation, and development of the Augustinian figure in Maghrebi discourse reflects a process of re-appropriation of a confiscated heritage ; at the same time, it is aimed at encouraging the emergence of a new understanding of the Maghrebi present. Observing this process, Augustine's interpretive recuperation of a North African identity and the construction of that identity into a site of memory, allows us to gain a more general understanding of the way both cultural identities and individual poetics have developed in the Maghreb. Moreover, that process sheds light on the general interconnections between contemporary literary discourse and questions of history, identity, and cultural belonging – and finally, on the ways such discourse illuminates the complex processes at work in the construction of transcultural memory itself.

Apart from scattered comments on Augustine as a political and cultural figure of North African origin, literary explorations and essayistic reflection began in the 1980s. More diverse voices treating Augustine in novels, essays, and dramatic texts. In her novel *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), Assia Djebar was one of the first Algerian authors referring to Augustine as a compatriot and tutelary figure,

---

<sup>37</sup> Bouteflika brought up a bill in 2016 to amend the Algerian Constitution in order to officially recognize the Amazigh language (2018), but does not claim the Berber identity of Augustine.

though she never consolidated her vision on a larger scale<sup>38</sup>. For his part, the Moroccan-born writer Kebir Ammi discovered Augustine while engaged in a process of intensive reading as part of an effort to cope with his father's death. In an interview, Ammi explained that he encountered a French translation of the *Confessions*, and that he was spurred, as adolescent, to read the book through a reference in the prologue that had come across to the saint as an Algerian, as had been his father. This early fascination was, Ammi indicates, a main source of inspiration for becoming a writer. In books such as *Thagaste* (1999) and *Sur les pas de Saint Augustin* (2001), he has explored the complex intertwining between Maghrebian and Western history – both those books addressing key aspects of Augustine's biography to offer a complex personal and poetological reflection moving past entrenched ideological positions.

In the political commitment it articulates, Abdelaziz Ferrah's novel *Moi, Saint Augustin, Aurègh fils de Aferfan de Thagaste* (2004) offers a contrast to their approach. Ferrah here retells the first part of Augustine's autobiography, up to the point of his conversion, with famous episodes of the saint's life presented in the framework of an emphasized Berber identity. Ferrah makes use of the Augustinian narrative model in reverse. Augustine's story of his self's development presents readers, famously, with an exemplary movement toward Christian faith, a conversion process accompanied by intense self-interrogation, doubts, shifts, and sermons, culminating in a rupture, that furnishes the shaping foundation for the entire text: a movement often seen as the basic model for Western autobiographical writing and the narrative account of subjectivity-formation. In Ferrah's novel, by contrast, the focus is not on Augustine's evolution *toward* such a Christian identity giving sense to the saint's former life, but rather on a social, political, and intellectual development originating and driven by his *nature* as Berber. The cultural strategy behind this literary modeling is construction of Berber identity not in an essentializing way but in terms of a transcultural Maghreb with strong Muslim-Arabic, Amazigh, and Christian elements. Significantly, this approach, defining *berbèrité* as one important dimension of a cultural and historical model for the Maghreb, is not linked to the political struggle for recognition as a minority. In locating Augustine's intellectual formation within a

---

<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, the author died before being able to complete her last book, which was supposed to foreground Augustine's mother Monnica. See: RUHE (Doris), « Saint Augustin, figure tutélaire d'Assia Djebar », *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, t. 254, n°2, 2017, p. 375-385.

Berber tradition, Ferrah's novel thus aims at its inclusion within an historical awareness being transmitted to new generations of North Africans. Ferrah is here contributing to the development of a new Berber historical paradigm that starting in the 1980s became what Dirèche has referred to as the « texture of historical writing, in a way the grammar of historical narration » in that national context<sup>39</sup>.

This rewriting of Algerian history is based on one particular premise : that Berber culture is the substrate from which developed the Maghreb in fact, which not only became unrecognized, but was effaced from official historiography. Following the anti-French colonial, revolutionary paradigm, in the official history the birth of the Algerian nation is described out of an independence movement grounded exclusively in Arabo-Islamic identity. Such an homogenizing vision involved a falsification of history that Ferrah and other authors, inspired by humanistic and Enlightenment thinking, reject. The writer's focus on pre-Islamic indigenous figures, years after the Algerian colloquium devoted in 2001 to the saint, was, I suggest, a response to Bouteflika's political appropriation without to raise the question of his Berber origin.

## Conclusion

What might appear paradoxical is in fact the reality of memorizing : ancient figures have been frequently selected not only on account of their complex biographies but for having autochthonous origins, i.e. *ancienneté* and nativeness, and because of their legendary defense of – or similarity to the local population. Hence although they are meant to transmit an idea of homogeneity, their presence is not conveyed by cultural *memoria* in a steady stream of tradition over time. Rather they are rediscovered with temporal distance, and mostly in times of crisis or cultural dissonance ; they are always appropriated and rewritten. We have seen that representation of Augustine in the modern Maghreb is the product of transcultural layers of memory together constituting a complex figure of identification.

While treated as an important Latin Christian figure in the colonial-period Maghreb, after independence Augustine of Hippo became a latent memory, this situation only changing after 2000. Independently of the concrete objectives of every representation – be they linked to rejection, to use as cultural myth, to the fragmentation and deconstruction of collective symbols, or to more complex

---

<sup>39</sup> See : DIRÈCHE (K.), « Convoquer le passé... », *art. cit.*, p. 493.



poetological strategies – Augustine has become a decisive reference in Maghrebian cultural memory, in a locus outside iconic Western tradition<sup>40</sup>. Nevertheless, it is important to note that recuperation of the Augustinian African heritage was enabled by nineteenth-century French religious authorities and colonial writers who, rediscovering loci deemed Latin territory, declared Augustine’s nativeness a symbol of superior civilization to create a settler’s commemorating group. The colonial stamp thus placed on Augustine, implying a spiritual continuity between Latin antiquity and the French empire, deliberately omitted all reference to the long Arabo-Islamic history of the Maghreb ; this clearly had an impact on (mis)recognition of any Christian saint in the post-independent era : Augustine could not be a figure of identification for a nation whose self-perception was based deeply on anti-colonial beliefs. Still, it is striking that a prudent recuperative process did take place in post-colonial Algeria, leading to official commemoration of Augustine becoming a figure of juncture of concurrent interpretations. It remains to be seen if the process of laying claim to antiquity and acknowledging a historical link with pre-Islamic figures will continue in post-Bouteflika Algeria – as it happens, in Tunisia commemoration of a Maghrebian Augustine has actually been experiencing a boom<sup>41</sup>.

■ Claudia GRONEMANN<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> See on Augustine as North African and his memory : Winrich Löhr, Therese Fuhrer, Konrad Vössing, Moritz Kuhn, Elena Zocca, Anna Esposito, Stefan Ardeleanu, Jutta Weiser, Ahmed Cheniki, Habib Kazdaghli, Khalid Zekri, Anja Bettenworth and myself in *Römische Quartalschrift*, vol. 114, n°3-4, 2019 ; and vol. 115, n°1-2, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> In November 2019, the *Journées Augustiniennes de Carthage* (JAC) were initiated as an annual commemoration. See: <https://www.agendas.ovh/jac-2019-journees-augustiniennes-de-carthage/> (consulted 10-06-2020).

<sup>42</sup> Universität Mannheim.