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Title:

Towards a 'new' Moroccan Capital? Democratisation, Diversity Politics and the Remaking of National Space in Rabat

Abstract: This article addresses the ways in which the Moroccan state's recent acknowledgement and promotion of cultural diversity has assumed form in the national capital of Rabat. It considers two cases – the official recognition of Amazigh culture and the development of new cultural infrastructure – in order to interrogate how urban restructuring in Rabat has become an expedient for transmitting a new sense of national identity to domestic and international audiences. In doing so, the article critically develops the idea of 'diversity management regime' to think about how diversity is operationalised in Rabat, the dimensions that get included and excluded within its remit, and the sorts of challenges it faces in the political arena. The contradictions that underscore Rabat's transformation into a showcase for a multicultural nation are to be understood in the limits of the democratisation of Moroccan society over the last two decades.

Keywords: diversity management regime; urban restructuring; national identity; Morocco; Rabat; Amazigh

Introduction

> Cultural diversity is without doubt the sesame that opens the door to every State and country. […] It has become an ally of all nations, from the poorest to the most powerful, irrespective of the regime in place, for even the most bloodthirsty dictatorships celebrate diversity! (Jaydane 2016, 19-20)

Until recently Rabat had a reputation among foreign visitors and many Moroccans for being a somewhat lacklustre place. Overshadowed by the neighbouring metropolis and economic powerhouse of Casablanca, and lacking the touristic appeal of Marrakech, Tangier or Fès, Rabat was essentially a political and administrative centre. Since the turn of the millennium, however, Morocco's unsung capital has undergone major redevelopment that has sought to recast the city as an international cultural destination and the showcase for a nation integrated into the global liberal order. A number of large-scale interventions – from slum clearance and upgrading to the construction of museums – have left an indelible mark on the built environment. The most high-profile development has been the Bouregreg valley project along the city's northern boundary, which to date has endowed the city with the usual fare of marinas and luxury apartments as well as a tram network that connects the capital with the poorer city of Salé on the opposite bank of the river. On completion, this prestige project will include a Zaha Hadid-designed 1,800-seat theatre, a new cultural district and the 250-metre-high Mohammed VI Tower, billed as Africa's tallest building.

Over the same period, a plethora of low-key but no less significant changes have occurred: public spaces and historic buildings have been restored; new government agencies and international NGO headquarters operating in the fields of human rights and social development have been opened; while the city's linguistic landscape has radically altered as Tifinagh[i] – the Amazigh (Berber) script – has been added to public buildings alongside Arabic and French. Rabat has also become a popular venue for international summits and

conferences, and it regularly hosts festivals that openly embrace cosmopolitanism, cultural hybridity and resurgent pan-Africanism. During my frequent trips to Rabat from 2017 to shortly before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, I was able to discern the rapid pace of change: new building sites sprouted across the city centre, often adorned with billboards promising visions of a citizen-oriented, environmentally sustainable and heritage-friendly future, Tifinagh continued to spread across the city's walls, while in stop-motion-like fashion, the massive hulk of Zaha Hadid's Grand Théâtre proceeded to take form.

Apart from the odd detail, this scenario probably sounds quite familiar. Indeed, in recent years similar combinations of entrepreneurial planning, culture-driven regeneration and global aspirations have characterised urban redevelopment elsewhere in Morocco and the MENA region (Kanai and Kutz 2011; Elsheshtawy 2020). What makes Rabat particularly interesting is the way in which the transformation of the city has been forged at the intersection of urban globalisation and a nation-remaking project. This article focuses on the Moroccan state's recent acknowledgement and promotion of cultural diversity and how this is implicated in the dual processes of staking a place for Rabat on the world stage and remodelling Rabat as a new capital city. By considering two cases – the official recognition of Amazigh culture and the development of cultural infrastructure – I explore the contradictions and conflicts that underpin urban restructuring in Rabat and the concomitant reformulation of national identity.

The present glut of development in Rabat signals the most intense period of change in the city's history since the construction of the Ville Nouvelle, the residential and administrative district built following Rabat's selection as capital of the French Protectorate in 1912. If the city's early-twentieth-century extension reflected the governmental goals of the French colonial state (Abu Lughod 1980; Rabinow 1989), the present-day transformations of Rabat have instead run parallel to a much-discussed transition in Moroccan politics and society.

Over the last two decades, the Moroccan state, under the helm of King Mohammed VI, has embarked on a lengthy and carefully controlled programme of political and economic liberalisation; guided by an ostensible commitment to human rights and greater social justice and by the desire to transmit the image of a modern, stable and tolerant nation into the global arena. This has involved a plethora of reforms, ranging from the decentralisation of political power to the local and regional level and the formal involvement of civil society organisations in policy-making processes to the revision of family law, the official recognition and promotion of the nation's non-Arab identities and the introduction of immigration legislation (Dupret et al. 2016; Abourabi and Ferrié 2019). The reforms are, in part, a response to a groundswell demand for greater freedom and rights, but also a strategic manoeuvre by the state to maintain domestic consensus, to curry international favour and to stymie challenges to its power, in particular those posed by the rise of Islamism (Tozy 2008). In addition, a major switch on the foreign policy front saw Morocco look beyond its traditional allies in Europe and the Gulf region to build closer economic, security and political ties with, among others, sub-Saharan Africa. This "African reconnection", crowned by Morocco's admission to the African Union in early 2017 after an absence of more than thirty years, has been accompanied by an emphasis on cultural and religious diplomacy and a state-driven discourse about Morocco as an integral part of an economically and culturally dynamic continent (Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso 2019).

This reform-minded agenda appeared to accelerate after 2011 when the state sought to appease the political demands of the 20 February movement (which organised protests during the Arab Spring in Morocco). Moreover, the 2011 Constitution, which was swiftly drafted and approved in the wake of the protests, appeared to confirm a shift away from the Arab-nationalist ideology that had previously underwritten nation building after Morocco's independence. According to the Constitution's preamble, the nation's unity is now "built on

the convergence of its Arab-Islamic, Amazigh and Saharan-Hassani components [and] is nurtured and enriched by African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean constituents". At the same time, the Constitution highlighted the limited reach of democratisation. While it enhanced the legislative powers of parliament, Mohammed VI and his inner ruling circle ultimately retained control over key areas of the economy and international relations, as well as their influence in defining policy priorities (including, crucially, urban development), and they have proved themselves adept at containing political opposition and, when necessary, curbing the freedom of speech. Moreover, Morocco continues to be afflicted by deep social and economic inequalities, especially between urban and rural regions but also within large cities, which have led to moments of social unrest such as the Hirak protest movement in the historically marginalised northern Rif region in 2016 and 2017 (Jebnoun 2020).

Many political analyses of contemporary Morocco and the MENA region at large – especially those conducted by Global North scholars – have interpreted political reforms and upheavals through the binary logic of democratisation versus enduring authoritarianism, in which western liberal democracy provides the normative benchmark (see, for instance, Hill 2016). As Koenraad Bogaert (2018, 29-30) notes, such studies have little to say about the contemporaneous impact of capitalist globalisation upon the society, economy and politics of the Arab world and how different cities across the region have actively positioned themselves to intercept global flows of capital or how they have appropriated transnational policy agendas and architectural forms. Bogaert's own research provides ground-breaking insights into production of neoliberal urban politics in Morocco through detailed analyses of redevelopment schemes in Casablanca and Rabat. In the case of the Bouregreg project, he examines the governmental design of the semi-autonomous agency set up to manage planning procedures and bypass local authority controls, as well as the impact of partially completed facilities upon inhabitants of surrounding low-income neighbourhoods (Bogaert 2012; 2018).

If, as Bogaert argues (2018, 30-38), conventional accounts of contemporary politics in the MENA region adopt a regime-centred perspective and largely neglect the ways in which changes play out at the urban scale, it is also the case that recent research on Moroccan cities has tended to gloss over the interconnections between urban policy and attempts to reimagine the nation and its place in the world. Indeed, recent work on Rabat (see also Bargach 2008; Mouloudi 2015; Wagner and Minca 2014) has reflected relatively little on the fact that it is also *the capital city* of Morocco. The reinvention of Rabat as a (multi)cultural metropolis cannot be interpreted solely as a Moroccan version of the commodification of urban space that, like countless other cases across the world, is oriented towards local elites, international tourism and foreign investment and pays lip service to the celebration of cosmopolitanism and connectivity. While it is fundamentally important not to lose sight of the impact of globalisation upon urban governance, the processes that have driven and shaped the transformation of Rabat need to be viewed as *also* embedded in national political priorities (such as security, stability and the rapprochement with Africa) and in the concomitant rewriting of nationhood. In other words, the 'new' Rabat is not just a neoliberal Rabat but it is also the manifestation of national state power (Therborn 2017).

Building on critical insights into urban transformations in Rabat and Morocco's political transition, this article examines how the Moroccan state's promotion of cultural diversity – a key dimension in the nation's rebranding – has been given form in Rabat and simultaneously underscored the capital's transformation. 'Diversity' is not simply conceived here as a shorthand for socio-cultural differences in a given setting that has become increasingly common in the global discursive field, but as a *dispositif* that is harnessed for a range of governmental goals, from managing a diverse workforce to integrating newcomers into a society (Matejskova and Antonsich 2015). In the specific context of Morocco, 'diversity' has

today become a political catchword, joining the pantheon of tropes such as ‘sustainability’ and binaries (e.g. ‘tradition’ versus ‘modernity’) with which the state and elites frame challenges facing Moroccan society. At the same time, it has been anchored to a set of policy reforms such as gender equality, inter-religious dialogue and the recognition of linguistic minorities.

In order to contemplate how diversity plays out in Rabat, I adopt the idea of ‘diversity management regime’ introduced by Peggy Levitt to refer to the “strategies, labels, and power relations underlying how difference gets talked about, measured, and negotiated” (Levitt 2015, 3). I interpret the diversity management regime to be a historically and spatially specific governance arrangement through which certain aspects of diversity get represented and integrated into policy goals while others are marginalised or precluded altogether. This process is not just driven by national imperatives but is shaped by the exposure to global discourses about pluralism, irrespective of whether these are embraced, appropriated, subverted or rejected. At the same time, the definition of cultural diversity is neither fixed nor resolved; on the contrary, as it has forcefully entered into public discourse in Rabat and Morocco more generally, the remit of diversity politics has found itself contended by different actors – from Islamist movements to anti-racist activists – and is thus susceptible to expansion or contraction.

I focus here on two issues that have acquired particular prominence in Rabat over the last decade: first, the incorporation of Amazigh references within the city’s institutional and linguistic landscape and, second, the development of a museum sector and festival circuit. The article is developed around an analysis of official representations of diversity in the publications, websites and social media platforms of key cultural institutions and museums in Rabat and diversity-related debates in the local and national media. In addition, it draws on

evidence gathered during frequent field trips conducted in the city between 2017 and late 2019, which included: repeated site visits to the spaces discussed in this paper; conversations with members of cultural institutions, academics and journalists; participation in public initiatives such as exhibition openings and conferences; and the mapping of Tifinagh signage in different parts of the city.[ii] In other words, the article does not purport to present definitive findings based on systematic data collection but rather starts to grapple with the (contested) discourses and practices of urban elites in order to formulate new avenues for making sense of current transformations in the Moroccan capital.

The two selected cases offer different entry points for considering the interconnections between diversity and urban change in Rabat: the Amazigh question has been a key beneficiary of Morocco's diversity politics, while the city's new cultural facilities have been used as a conduit for championing diversity. There is a substantial literature that addresses the recognition of Amazigh culture vis-à-vis broader shifts in Moroccan politics (Aït Mous 2011; Maddy-Weitzman 2011; Ennaji 2014). To date, however, there has been little reflection on how this question has unfolded in urban contexts (although see Cornwell and Atia 2012). Vice versa, although researchers have paid critical attention to the policy dimension of Rabat's new infrastructural projects, analyses have rarely addressed the political and cultural discourses deployed to legitimate their construction (although see Bogaert 2018). By bringing the two cases into conversation, I want to indicate some of the overlapping ways in which different actors have sought to remould Rabat in the image of a nation apparently at ease with its own cultural and linguistic diversity, and how this is operationalised to advance Morocco's influence in regional and global affairs. In conclusion, I return to reflect on Rabat's diversity management regime in terms of its principal proponents, exclusionary dynamics and challenges, and what these tell us about the role of diversity in the remaking of urban-national space.

The Amazigh question: diversity politics, Moroccan-style

Over the last two decades, the Moroccan state has been actively engaged in redrawing the boundaries of national identity, albeit one that remains firmly rooted in the unifying force of the monarchy and the kingdom's territorial integrity. This move has been accompanied by a reappraisal of the country's cultural and linguistic differences. In particular, the official recognition of the culture and language of the Amazigh people – who according to estimates account for between 40 and 50% of Morocco's total population (Zouhir 2014) – provides a lens for understanding the dilemmas and contradictions that have framed the country's diversity politics.

The current emphasis on the nation's cultural heterogeneity signals a major break from the past. The Moroccan nationalist movement that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century mobilised around the idea of Arabic and Islamic unity in opposition to what it saw as France's divide-and-rule tactic of exacerbating differences between ethnic and religious groups (Wyrtzen 2014). Following Morocco's independence in 1956, Modern Standard Arabic became the official state language, while French continued to be used in the public sphere. Meanwhile, Berber 'dialects', as they were officially termed, were considered to be confined to rural communities or domestic settings. In its first forty years of existence, the postcolonial Moroccan state was generally suspicious of Amazigh claims to difference, not just because the idea of a separate Berber culture had been delegitimised during colonial rule, but because the monarchy was wary of any potential threat to its authority. At most, depoliticised, 'folkloric' expressions of Berber culture, especially music and traditional crafts, which were staged in festivals targeted at local elites and international tourists (Boum 2012). From the 1970s, groups of Amazigh activists started to campaign around cultural and linguistic issues, but also broader questions of social justice and democracy. Under the

repressive ‘Years of Lead’ during the reign of Hassan II that lasted until the early 1990s, many were also jailed.

Since Mohammed VI’s ascension to the throne in 1999, *Amazighité* (Amazigh-ness) has instead found itself catapulted to the forefront of the state-driven project to recognise the nation’s linguistic and cultural diversity. The new monarch publicly launched the Moroccan state’s multicultural agenda in October 2001 during a speech in Ajdir, the capital of the short-lived Berber Rif Republic of the 1920s, in which he declared that the “plurality of streams that have forged our history and fashioned our history […] cannot be separate from the unity of our nation” (Wyrtzen 2014, 26). On the same occasion, the King signed a *dahir* (Royal Decree) creating the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture in Rabat, which among other things has since coordinated the creation of a standardised language (Tamazight) and introduced the Tifinagh alphabet adapted from an ancient Tuareg writing system. The 2011 Constitution recognises Tamazight as an official language of Morocco alongside Arabic, while education reforms have led to the formal (if not always actual) inclusion of Tamazight in school curricula.

The recent acknowledgement of cultures and languages previously marginal or suppressed in nation-building processes is certainly not isolated to Morocco but has occurred in numerous African states, including Ethiopia and South Africa (Fessha 2010). Nevertheless, a number of specific reasons should be highlighted with respect to the Amazigh question. First, the belated official recognition of Amazigh culture can be considered part and parcel of the ongoing process of modernisation in Morocco and its integration into global economic and cultural networks, in which internal cultural diversity is considered an asset and a sign of national confidence rather than a hindrance as in the past (Ennaji 2014). Second, recognition is emblematic of the democratisation of Moroccan society over the last two decades, and has

simultaneously worked to win the approval of the wider world by responding to the pressure of international minority and language organisations that during the 1990s had called on Morocco to guarantee equal rights and justice for the Amazigh people (Errihani 2013, 59). Third, and in the eyes of many Amazigh activists, it serves to placate a dynamic vocal movement, or co-opt at least part of it – especially an increasingly influential intellectual elite – in order to neutralise a vocal adversary at a time of increased instability across the Arab region, provoked in particular by the rise of Islamist politics (Cornwell and Atia 2012). Finally, Morocco's attempt to resolve the Amazigh question also reflects the country's geopolitical allegiances, and specifically its increased attention to the African continent. It is important to reiterate that we are talking here about an *indigenous* African people. The officially endorsed Tifinagh alphabet, for example, is believed to have originated from caves in the Sahara Desert. In fact, the increasing appearance of Tifinagh on public buildings since 2011 was seen by some journalists and cultural workers I have met in Rabat as not just recognition of a non-Arab Morocco but also part of the 'Africanisation' of the city's built environment.

Towards an Arab-Amazigh capital?

Institutional references to *Amazighité* are more conspicuous in Rabat than in any other Moroccan city, including those urban centres with majority Berber populations and strong traditions of Amazigh activism such as Agadir on the southern Atlantic coast or Al Hoceima and Nador in the northern Rif region. Rabat is historically an Arab-Andalusian city but throughout the twentieth century it experienced an influx of rural migrants from Berber tribal areas, some of which are located just a few dozen kilometres inland (Abu-Lughod 1980).

First and foremost, Rabat has become the de facto centre of state-sanctioned Amazigh cultural activism. Six years after its foundation by royal decree in Rabat in 2001, the Royal Institute of

Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) moved into a purpose-built headquarters – a striking building with an unusual triangular design supposed to recall Amazigh motifs – that is located in the government and university district of Agdal-Souissi (Aslan 2014). In other words, Amazigh culture now had a permanent, official presence in Rabat. The institution has not been without criticism from within the Amazigh movement. Indeed, many activists see IRCAM as the corollary of the Moroccan state's co-optation of Amazigh demands that aims to divide and debilitate a plural and politicised movement (Silverstein and Crawford 2004), vividly reflected in the fact that its new headquarters is physically surrounded by government ministries and national institutions (Cornwell and Atia 2012). Nevertheless, like the Amazigh movement, IRCAM also has transnational reach: other countries such as Tunisia and Libya have turned to Rabat for guidance in introducing Tamazight language tuition and a new alphabet.

One of the most visible changes to have occurred in Rabat since the 2011 Constitution, and one directly overseen by IRCAM, is the proliferation of Tifinagh script on public buildings. This has now been added to the facades of, inter alia, government ministries, courthouses, police stations, army barracks, hospitals, bank and post office headquarters, museums, libraries, schools and university departments. For the moment it is essentially used for ceremonial and representative purposes. Thus, on the new Rabat-Salé tram network the names of the stops are additionally written in Tifinagh, but everything else – from maps to ticket information – is provided in Arabic and French only. Even at IRCAM, which unsurprisingly makes far greater use of Tifinagh in its signage than elsewhere, general information such as directions to toilets and no smoking notices remain in Arabic and French. As Brahim El Guabli has recently observed, "Tifinagh is not there to orientate but rather to remind the public of a hidden past" (2020, 160). Nevertheless, the presence of Tifinagh varies markedly across Rabat, mirroring the city's socio-spatial diversity. Hence, the script is a common sight

in the Ville Nouvelle/Hassan and administrative and university districts of Soussi and Agdal (for instance on the ministries and research institutes that flank Avenue Allal Al Fassi), while it is almost non-existent in low-income residential neighbourhoods such as Yacoub El Mansour and Takaddoum and in the historic Medina due to the absence of government and cultural institutions.

It is important to note that there was an intense debate over the choice of script. Tifinagh was formally supported as the most 'authentic' option by Mohammed VI on the advice of IRCAM, but many Amazigh activists pressed for the use of Latin or Arabic script as a means to facilitate the dissemination of the Tamazight language. Indeed, many refer to the new script as 'Tifinagh IRCAM'. Moreover, the majority of Moroccans, including Amazigh people, do not for the moment read Tifinagh or speak IRCAM's standardised Tamazight, although the numbers are set to increase as (and if) the language continues to be taught at school (Idhssaine and El Kirat 2021).

Nevertheless, the same critics of Tifinagh have since campaigned for an increase in the use of the script in Rabat. For instance, activists have called for all information to be translated at tram stops (Louzi 2017), as this would raise the Amazigh profile among locals and international visitors. Others have protested at the delay and subsequent watering down of the 2019 'organic law' that implements the recommendations of the 2011 Constitution regarding the roll-out of Amazigh language into public life, which should see, among other things, Tifinagh added to street signage and Tamazight used in administrative and judicial procedures (Boukous 2013, 23; Ahdani 2019). Some, including the rector of IRCAM, Ahmed Boukous accused the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), in national government since 2011 and at the head of Rabat's city administration since 2015, of deliberately blocking the passage of legislation due to its ideological opposition to the further integration of

Amazigh culture in Moroccan society (Amrani 2018). Hence, the rapid appearance of Tifinagh signage on public buildings in Rabat is both a sign of the state's acknowledgement of *Amazighité*, but also an indication of the limited impact of diversity policy, given that, as of yet, the script retains a largely symbolic presence in the city. Rabat's recently acquired ceremonial role as a de facto Arab-Amazigh capital thus risks being a short-lived political gimmick unless it is backed by long-term commitment to integrating Tamazight into Moroccan society, as well as substantive improvements in the social and economic conditions of Amazigh regions such as the Rif. Moreover, displays of inclusivity can backfire, as illustrated in August 2019 when the word "Rabat" on the new fleet of vehicles for the city's beleaguered bus service was discovered to have been misspelt in Tifinagh (Yabiladi 2019).

Diversity through the cultural metropolis

The last decade has also witnessed a notable expansion of Rabat's cultural sector. The pivotal role of culture in local development is epitomised by the latest phase of the Bouregreg mega-project which, following the withdrawal of the main Dubai investor in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, saw the originally planned high-end residential complex metamorphosise into a cultural district (Bogaert 2018, 130). The site is considered crucial to achieving the 'Ville Lumière, Capital Marocaine de la Culture' vision launched by Mohammed VI in 2014 that aims to turn Rabat into the cultural hub of Morocco and an international tourist destination. At the time of writing, however, only the aforementioned Grand Théâtre has been completed,[iii] while other proposed institutions, such as a 'Museum of Archaeology and Sciences', remain on paper. Partly due to the unfinished state of the project, critical studies of the redevelopment of the Bouregreg Valley (which has been the dominant topic in recent research on Rabat (Bogaert 2012, 2018; Wagner and Minca 2014; Mouloudi 2015)) has often conceived 'culture' as merely accessory to neoliberal urbanisation; a resource that is "manipulat[ed] […] for capital accumulation, consumption, and dispossession" (Bogaert 2018, 125). Hence, there

has been little interest to consider what a national cultural district might entail, or to draw connections with what is occurring in other parts of the city.

In fact, the palace-driven aspirations for Rabat as a cultural capital are already being consummated through the creation of new national museums, the refurbishment of existing institutions and the organisation of international festivals. These include the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMVI), Morocco's first permanent space devoted to national and international contemporary art inaugurated in 2014 and located close to the parliament building in the heart of the French colonial district, and the annual Mawazine festival, a popular music extravaganza held across venues in Rabat and Salé since 2006, which in recent years has been proclaimed the largest free music event in the world (for an analysis of the cultural politics of Mawazine, see Dines 2020). These initiatives have benefited from royal patronage and financial support, and are backed by new governance structures, such the National Foundation of Museums (FNM) established in 2011 and located a few hundred metres from MMVI, which is responsible for overseeing the development of museums both in Rabat and the rest of Morocco, democratising access to culture and promoting, among other things, intercultural dialogue.

A common discursive thread weaving through the city's assorted cultural events and spaces is that of diversity. The term is continuously pronounced by museum directors, curators, festival organisers, participants as well as affiliated developers, and at times sounds little more than an obligatory mantra. Nevertheless, whether shaping practice (from determining the selection of content to including Tifinagh script in publicity) or simply deployed as a slogan (as in the conspicuous use of the French word '*diversité*' on the hoardings surrounding the Grand Théâtre construction site in 2018 and 2019), the idea of diversity plays a crucial role in

broadening and reorienting Rabat's symbolic and political functions as national capital. It operates at three key levels.

First, diversity is conceived as a constitutive element of both Rabati and Moroccan society, and thus it follows that the city's cultural offerings convey more pluralist ideas of local and national identity. For example, in presenting Rabat's first Art Biennale in over forty years, MMVI's director Abdelaziz El Idrissi described the city as "the result of an intermingling of different populations and ethnicities" which had contributed to its "universalist vocation" (El Idrissi 2019). Illustrative of a substantive shift in the national narrative is the city's colonial-era Archaeological Museum, which was refurbished to include Amazigh artefacts predating the Arab and Roman conquests and reopened in April 2017 as the 'Museé de l'Histoire et des Civilisations'.

Second, the development of Rabat's cultural infrastructure serves to groom the image of a liberal nation open to cultural differences. Hence, the directors of MMVI and Mawazine both make a point of embracing European, Moroccan and African forms of expression, be these secular or religious, high-brow or popular. Mehdi Qotbi, native of Rabat, personal advisor to the King and president of the FNM has been an indefatigable presence in the city's art scene and a particularly enthusiastic champion of discourses about diversity and cultural diplomacy. Hence, MMVI's 2015 show on medieval Islamic art in Morocco, previously held at the Louvre in Paris, was presented as an example of religious tolerance contra the trail of cultural vandalism perpetrated by Islamist militants in Iraq (Michbal 2015), while the decision to reserve the 2019 Rabat Biennale to women artists was, according to Qotbi, "a message to the world about how Morocco has made considerable progress regarding gender equality" (Lefébure 2018).

Finally, diversity connects with the idea of Rabat as a cultural crossroads that is constantly scaled up to highlight Morocco's interconnectedness with Europe, the Arab world and, increasingly, Africa. The city's annual Visa for Music meeting, established in 2013 to showcase up-and-coming Sub-Saharan and Middle Eastern musical acts, serves as both a manifesto for the capital's cultivation of a post-Arab identity and an advertisement for Morocco's relaxed visa regime to encourage the mobility of African artists. Such events also acquire explicitly political connotations. For example, L'Afrique en Capitale, a month of conferences, exhibitions and concerts held across the city in spring 2017, not only aimed to promote the rich cultural diversity of Morocco and Africa, but to commemorate Morocco's recent readmission to the African Union. As Mehdi Qotbi declared on the eve of the jamboree: "I want Rabat to celebrate its Africanity, its belonging to the continent. His Majesty asked me to organise this event [because] he knew that the timing was right for Africa to be celebrated in Rabat" (Majdi 2017). As its status as the centre of national culture is consolidated, Rabat finds itself simultaneously embroiled in wider diplomatic relations. At times this has manifested to the detriment of other Moroccan cities, as illustrated in the last-minute switch in January 2020 of the inaugural African Capital of Culture from Marrakech to Rabat on the premise that the former was not ready in its preparations while the latter was better suited to holding such an event.[iv]

As this last example suggests, the cultural role assigned to Rabat and the accompanying discourses about diversity have not been without tensions. Mawazine is one of the most contested public events in recent Moroccan history, criticised by democracy activists as a symbol of royal extravagance and attacked by Islamists for its secular excesses (Dines 2020). Since first being proposed in 2006, MMVI has also been a recurring subject of controversy. Besides the drawn-out construction of the museum, members of Rabat's arts scene have complained about their exclusion from the decision-making process and have expressed fears

that MMVI ultimately represents a symbolic gesture to the global community (Pieprzak 2013). Such arguments – pronounced from within the narrow world of Rabat's cultural elites – raise questions about MMVI's top-down curatorial approach and about the more general place of national museums in Moroccan society. Despite Qotbi's emphasis on the democratisation of access to art in Rabat, MMVI was always near empty during my regular visits (apart from one school group), while vernissages were typically reserved for royalty and other dignitaries.

Conclusion: critical reflections on Rabat's diversity management regime

This article has examined the interconnections between diversity politics and urban change in Rabat. The tangible references to Amazighité and the creation of new museums such as MMVI represent two distinct strategies in the 'cultural imagineering' of the city (Yeoh 2005). The idea of the diversity management regime – in other words, the contextual conditions that shape how diversity is put to work – helps to illuminate the ways in which these apparently disparate cases are co-implicated in the remoulding of national space at the urban scale. Thinking in terms of a diversity management regime also poses critical questions that, while already broached in the preceding discussion, I want now to directly address in conclusion. First, who gets to define and participate in the management of diversity? Second, what and who gets included and excluded? And, third, what are the potential challenges that can alter the priorities or obstruct the maintenance of this management regime?

In response to the first question, there is a vibrant debate on diversity politics in Morocco, especially in the print and online media, but this is limited to a narrow, French-speaking public[v] largely made up of cultural and intellectual elites, state and government representatives, and local and international members of non-governmental and civil society organisations. This said, Rabat vies with Casablanca as the principal francophone city in

Morocco and it also possesses a high concentration of the aforementioned elites, which renders its public sphere relatively dynamic, demonstrated by the regular public events on diversity-related themes held in the city. Nevertheless, the way in which discourses about diversity are formally implemented in the policy arena rarely veer from the course demarcated by the king and his circle of advisors in their pronouncements on the matter. This situation is especially pronounced in Rabat given the city's status as the nation's capital. The proliferation of Tifinagh on the city's walls or Rabat's selection as African Capital of Culture are the outcomes of policy initiatives formulated directly or indirectly by the Palace. The city administration, at most, is canvassed for its support (in the case of the Bouregreg project (Mouloudi 2015)) and is expected to share in the enthusiasm for Rabat's projected future, but it is not in a position to influence the underlying trajectory of the city's development. The consequence is that, besides transmitting the image of a reconciled, multicultural nation, the revamped city functions as an eminently governable laboratory in which cultural and linguistic policies are put to test prior to rolling them out (or not) to the rest of the country.

What are the constituents of this state-endorsed diversity? Certainly, the official recognition of Amazigh culture is a salient sign of the shift in Morocco's national narrative, and one that has permanently left its mark on the cityscape of Rabat. But while the Amazigh question was for many decades the 'elephant in the room' that the Moroccan state attempted to ignore, depoliticise or repress, the way in which this now commonly gets collapsed into diversity *tout court* works to divert attention away from equally, if not more thorny issues surrounding this topic, such as gender equality, anti-Black-African racism, the history of Morocco's pre-colonial slave trade, the fading memory of the country's once thriving Jewish community, and last, but not least, the unresolved Sahrawi issue. Without doubt, Mohammed VI's prompt move to espouse Amazigh identity in 2001 opened up space for broader debates and action around the rights of other national minorities, such as the black Haratine group originating

from southern Morocco[vi], and the status of other languages, particularly Darija (Moroccan Arabic), which is spoken by the vast majority of the population but has yet to be formally recognised by the state (Sefrioui 2018). However, the prioritisation of Amazigh issues in national policy over the last two decades – from the 2011 Ajdir Speech to constitutional recognition in 2011 and the subsequent spread of Tifinagh in Rabat – has worked to ring-fence a particular consecration of cultural and linguistic difference that has marginalised other questions in this discursive field and at times relegated them to other realms, such as everyday social relations in the case of Darija. Moreover, cultural diversity in Rabat and Morocco tends to be officially conceived as an *internal* question. Hence, for example, no direct link is usually made with international migration as occurs in major western European cities (Matejskova and Antonsich 2015), despite the growth of settled sub-Saharan communities and the establishment of migrant organisations and support networks in Rabat and Casablanca. On the contrary, the recent development of a national immigration policy has been primarily couched in terms of human rights and political-cultural diplomacy oriented at strengthening relations with West African states (Abourabi and Ferrié 2019). Although these issues are clearly entangled, the point is that increased cultural diversity is not – currently at least – the principal frame for interpreting the impact of international migration in Rabat.[vii]

Finally, what are the challenges to Rabat's diversity management regime? As already indicated, the integration of Tifinagh into Rabat's linguistic landscape has been met with both obstacles and demands to do more, while MMVI has been publicly criticised as being little more than a prestige project. One major source of resistance to state-endorsed diversity politics in the city has been the rise of Islamist politics, in particular the Justice and Development Party (PJD). For the PJD, Islam is considered the unifying identity of Moroccan society, and thus cultural diversity is marginal, if not antithetical, to its worldview. In the early 2000s the PJD opposed the teaching of Tamazight to non-Amazigh children and

campaigned against the choice of Tifinagh in favour of Arabic given its status as the sacred script. However, in the wake of the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings that killed 45 people, for which the monarchy and establishment parties held the Islamist political forces morally responsible, the PJD leadership shifted its main messages from religious and moral rectitude and social conservatism to an emphasis on good governance and anti-corruption, managerial competence, decentralisation and collaboration with civil society organisations. It also broke away from its former ally, the radical Movement for Unity and Reform, and by the 2007 Moroccan general election, PJD members had begun "to utilise the terminology of human rights, democracy, civil state, pluralism, rule of law, and the peaceful rotation of power more frequently" (Clark 2018, 247). However, in Rabat itself the PJD's culturally and socially conservative outlook has intermittently put the party at odds with the palace's agenda for a culturally liberal city. This has led it to occasionally censure the western and secular excesses of the establishment's cultural initiatives in the city, exemplified most infamously in its protest against Elton John's invitation to the Mawazine festival on account of the singer's homosexuality (Graiouid and Belghazi 2013). The incident became a global media story and gave the festival's artistic director (also the king's private secretary) the opportunity to reiterate the underlying message: the star's appearance was "necessary to promote diversity and cultural tolerance in Morocco" (BBC News 2010). Thus, the strength of the state is demonstrated by the fact that potential opponents of its diversity policy have mainly toed the line in order to stake their place in the political arena, while moments of dissent have been outmanoeuvred and contained by the state's own self-restraint (the said concert went ahead but references to the artist's sexuality were downplayed). For its own part, the PJD-headed administration in Rabat has tended to converge on other, more palatable principles of local urban development such as economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability (Sadiki 2018).

Ultimately, the greatest challenge is posed by the general public indifference towards highbrow cultural consumption amidst more pressing socio-economic concerns, as well as the cynicism that the choreographing of diversity talk is little more than a ruse for safeguarding the preservation of state power, as intimated by the writer and founding member of the Association Marocains Pluriels, Driss Jaydane, in the quote that opened this article. Resistance to Rabat's diversity management regime is most succinctly illustrated by the Amazigh protests that periodically occur on the streets of the national capital, such as the demonstrations supporting the imprisoned leaders of the Hirak movement during 2019. While banners typically display text in Arabic, French and even English, the presence of Tifinagh is largely limited to the letter Yaz that adorns the ubiquitous tricolour Amazigh flags. Far from being brought into the fold of a state-endorsed alphabet, this character remains the symbol of the transnational pursuit for Amazigh rights.

How Rabat's diversity management regime evolves over the coming years will be crucial to the ongoing reshaping of the city's role as national capital and will offer a spyhole onto the transformation of political power and socio-economic relations in Morocco. If 'diversity branding' can be interpreted as part of a boosterist strategy that positions Rabat in the global marketplace, this paper has argued that it cannot be fully understood without attending to its embeddedness within a nation-remaking project.

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[i] 'Neo-Tifinagh' is the technically accurate term because the script in use today is a late-twentieth-century derivative of the ancient Tuareg alphabet of the same name. Throughout this article, I use the word 'Tifinagh' as this is the word publicly used in Morocco.

[ii] The districts surveyed were the pre-colonial city (Medina), the French colonial centre (Hassan), the middle- and upper-class residential and administrative districts of Agdal and Soussi and the low-income residential districts of Yacoub El Mansour and Takaddoum.

[iii] Although construction of the theatre was completed in early 2021, its opening was postponed to an unspecified date after the end of pandemic.

[iv] Rabat's African Capital of Culture events and all its festivals in 2020 were cancelled due the global Covid pandemic.

[v] French is the lingua franca in debates about cultural diversity in Morocco as well as the only language used for the websites of MMVI (http://www.museemohammed6.ma/), FNM (http://www.fnm.ma), and the Rabat Biennale (https://www.biennale.ma/). According to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, 35% of Moroccans are either fully or partially francophone (OIF 2018).

[vi] It is worth noting here the public interest surrounding the Moroccan publication (in French) of Chouki El Hamel's history of black slavery in Morocco (El Hamel 2014). During a nationwide tour in June 2019, the US-based scholar gave two separate presentations in Rabat, the first at the National Library and the second in the city's main bookshop.

[vii] One exception is the annual Rabat-Africa festival organised since 2007 by the migrant support organisation Fondation Orient-Occident, although this is a comparatively low-key event and is mainly held at the organisation's headquarters in the peripheral district of Yacoub El Mansour.