

From *Bárbaros* to ‘*orbān*’: The Semiotics of Othering/Counter-Othering and the Construction of a Muslim (Quasi-Arab) Tunisian Linguistic Identity

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Résumé

Cet article examine l’interaction entre l’altérité linguistique et ethnique en Tunisie, analysant comment la religion a servi de véhicule d’assimilation tout en permettant paradoxalement une réinvention identitaire. Suite à la conquête arabe du VII^e siècle, les Berbères autochtones ont été stigmatisés pour leur différence linguistique (*raṭānah*), mais ont pu symboliquement devenir arabes par l’islam – un processus parallèle au concept de *passing* de Hall dans la Grèce hellénistique. Aujourd’hui, cette dynamique s’est inversée : les tunisiens utilisent désormais des insultes anti-arabes (‘*rībah*, ‘*orbān*) pour altérer à leur tour le groupe autrefois dominant, exprimant ce que Weinreich (1968) nomme la loyauté linguistique rancunière. Cette étude explore l’identité quasi-arabe de la Tunisie, où l’arabité est à la fois un idéal linguistique sacré et un marqueur ethnique contesté. Par une analyse sociolinguistique des discours contemporains, elle montre comment cette relation paradoxale remet en cause les hiérarchies héritées, contribuant aux approches décoloniales de l’identité nord-africaine.

Mots-clefs : *Tunisie, altérisation, berbère, langue, idéologie*

Abstract

This paper examines the interplay of linguistic and ethnic othering in Tunisia, analysing how religion served as a vehicle of assimilation while paradoxically enabling identity reinvention. Following the 7th-century Arab conquest, indigenous Berbers faced stigmatisation for their linguistic difference (*raṭānah*), yet could symbolically become Arab through Islam – paralleling Hall’s concept of *passing* in Hellenistic Greece. Today, this dynamic has inverted: Tunisians now wield anti-Arab slurs (‘*rībah*, ‘*orbān*) to counter-other the formerly dominant group, articulating what Weinreich (1968) terms resentful language loyalty. This study investigates Tunisia’s quasi-Arab identity, where Arabness is simultaneously a sacred linguistic ideal and a contested ethnic marker. Through a sociolinguistic analysis of contemporary discourse, it explores how this paradoxical relationship challenges inherited hierarchies, contributing to decolonial approaches to North African identity.

Key-Words: *Tunisia, othering, Berber, language, ideology*

Introduction

The linguistic situation of the Arab world has often been of peculiar interest to linguists (Blau 1977; Ferguson 1959; Versteegh 2014; etc.). North Africa, in particular, has shaped its identity over millennia of migration and conquest. The present paper situates itself particularly in Tunisia, a land whose linguistic history is a palimpsest of Phoenician, Roman, Arab, Ottoman and colonial input (Perkins 1997). The Arab conquests of the 7th century C.E. introduced a monumental shift in the makeup of present-day Tunisia, imposing not only a new religion but also a language imbued with unparalleled prestige. Classical Arabic (*fuṣṣḥā*), being the language of the Qur'an and a rising empire, enjoyed unprecedented religious and political power that evidently relegated the indigenous Berber populations to an ethno-linguistically inferior position. Because *fuṣṣḥā* was tightly woven to the faith, speaking a foreign tongue not only reflected a weak lineage but also a weak faith.

The subdued Berber tribes, having been forced into the position of an inferior Other, soon revolted against their colonisers, namely during the Berber Revolt of 740 C.E. It is palpable that this historical dynamic of othering did not immediately initiate assimilation into the Arab identity, but rather ignited a sense of national pride. In linguistic terms, this was accompanied by a sense of “resentful language loyalty” (Weinreich 1968: 101). This paper argues that contemporary Tunisian identity is constructed through a persistent and strategic counter-othering of Arabness, a process that simultaneously embraces Islam and the Arabic language while vehemently rejecting the *Arab* ethnonym as a primary identity marker. This constitutes a central paradox: Arabness functions both as a sacred linguistic ideal and a contested, imposed, and often denigrated social identity.

1. Historical foundations of othering

1.1. Arab-Muslim purism and the stigma of *Raṭānah*

While it may be argued that the rise of Islam bestowed upon the Arabic language unmatched prestige, one is inclined to argue that the pre-Islamic literary production in Classical Arabic provides sufficient evidence to the pedestal upon which the code was placed. The Odes that were hung on the walls of the *Kaaba*, a place of worship whether pagan or otherwise present a clear display of the veneration that Classical Arabic enjoyed. In fact, this register is argued to be the closest to the Quranic language, an ideal often emulated in present literary works. The prestige that Classical Arabic enjoys is often supported through misinterpretations of the Qur'an. The text points to the contextual importance of addressing the people in a language they comprehend, yet it is often interpreted as favouring Arabic above other tongues in doing so. The Qur'an states, in regard to that, “Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you may understand” (12:2). This is reiterated again in 43:3, “Certainly, We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic so perhaps you will understand”.

As the Qur'an came to be considered the apex of Arabic linguistic production, an inimitable text (Baccouche 1998; Chejne 1969), its divine source manifested in its linguistic uniqueness, which became a testimony to the grandeur of the Arabic language as a whole. Eventually, the sanctity of the tongue was extended to the bearers. As Haugen (1966: 932) argues:

To choose any one vernacular as a norm means to favour the group of people speaking that variety. It gives them prestige as norm-bearers and a headstart in the race for power and position.

The assumption that the Arabs were of a superior stock was supported by an apocryphal *Ḥadīth* of prophet Muhammad, in which he encourages people to love the Arabs for three reasons: because he is an Arab, because the Qur'an is in Arabic, and because it is the language of the people of Heaven. The Arabs have consequently adopted the belief – rooted in Quranic verses – that they were God's chosen people. In this respect, the language, the faith and the ethnicity of the Arab became an inseparable whole. Thus, it became implied that the Muslim would generally be ethnically Arab, and would be an eloquent speaker of Arabic.

This generated an ethnolinguistic and religious bond that permeates the literature of early theological scholars. Ibn Taymiyya (1263 C.E.-1368 C.E.), a famed theologian, dedicated a chapter to *al-raṭānah* (speaking in one's non-native tongue). He writes that the act of speaking in a foreign tongue is a *makrūh* (disliked) which is only a rung above the sinful. Ibn Taymiyya elaborates that the Arabic language is the sigil of Islam and its people who must not adopt the language and, by extension, the habits of the *Ajam* (non-Arabs) lest that weakens their faith. In fact, he insists that the Arabic language is in itself part of the religion and that knowing it is an obligation to the pious Muslim.

The conquest of North Africa, particularly present-day Tunisia, had thrust the Arabs into a multilingual and multiethnic hub. Versteegh (2014: 96) writes that al-Qayrawān was founded as a garrison city, yet it soon developed into an urban centre with Arabic as the main language of communication. Nevertheless, he points to the existence of

some reports according to which as late as the twelfth century there were still speakers of Romance in Gafsa and Gabes. Most of the countryside and the nomadic population of North Africa remained Berber-speaking until the second invasion in the eleventh century. (Versteegh 2014: 96)

This multilingual context already posed a threat to Arabo-Islamic uniformity which did not favour multiplicity of tongues. In this respect, the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa, despite their conversion and learning of Arabic, were stigmatised until the eleventh century by their multilingualism.

One must keep in mind that favouring monoliths is not solely an Arab behaviour. Barth (1969) argues that an ethnic group can be understood as equating a race with a culture and a language, just as society is equated with a unit that either rejects or discriminates against others. As Milroy & Milroy (2012) have stated, homogeneity bred out of standardisation generates stability. Unity is perceptible in a common language, making monolingualism the desired norm

(Gumperz 1962). What is inherent in multilingualism is not only a deviation from the norm (Meisel 2006), but also the insinuation of a split self. Because language is the carrier of culture in all that it encompasses, speaking two tongues means having two cultures, two lineages, and – in the case of Arab culture – two faiths. Because Islam and Arab culture viewed Arabic as their carrier, stigmatising *al-raṭānah* was/is understandable. Moreover, zealously championing a standard “superimposed on dialects” (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 7) and local languages was the more foreseeable means for securing unity in an expanding state.

The rapid geographical expansion and contact with a multitude of languages and ethnicities gave birth to this hyper-fixation on purity. The frequent contact with speakers of other languages (Berbers, Copts, Persians, Turks, etc.) rendered the maintenance of a pristine Arabic lexicon an arduous mission. It was not merely a purification of the lexicon from the intruding elements (*dakhīl*), it was also an act of protecting a “pure” culture (Suleiman 2006).

Monès (1988) notes that the indigenous tribes accepted Islam *en masse* which conferred upon them equal rights as their peninsular co-religionists. Nevertheless, Umayyad caliphs (7th-8th c. C.E.), as a means to preserve their revenues, did not integrate new converts to the fabric of the Islamic nation (*ummah*) and treated Berbers as second class citizens especially with respect to *Jizyah* (taxes on non-Muslims). Monès (1988: 244) writes that

The last Umayyad governors introduced a harsh policy that soon provoked a hostile reaction: the Berbers were regarded as a vanquished people, to be governed by force, even though almost all of them had already converted to Islam, had fought for Islam, and therefore considered themselves an integral part of the Islamic empire, on an equal footing with the Arabs.

It is important to note that Berber resistance to the Caliphate was not a resistance to Islam but rather to political injustice and ethnic discrimination. This is evident in their giving an Islamic character to their political opposition, such as *Khārijite* or *Shiite* factions. Elfasi and Hrbek (1988: 65) note that “Berbers vigorously opposed any forceful or arbitrary imposition of foreign rule or rulers, but were ready to accept by free choice non-Berber Muslims as their chiefs”. The exclusion of Berbers from the Islamic *ummah* may have arguably been an attempt to preserve a pure bloodline and a pure language stemming from an ideology that considered Berbers to be irredeemable *Others*. The Arab-Muslim purist tendency is at one genealogical and religious (Thomas 1991). Thomas writes that genealogical purity as a notion can only be understood in absolutes and does not lend itself to quantification. In other words, one is either pure or not. It may be safe to argue that Islam – in theory – provided this overarching sanctifying quality where it absolved its adherents of their “mongrel” (Thomas 1991: 23) ethnicity and bestowed upon them the much-desired Arabness.

The Qur’an itself makes clear anti-discriminatory statements (49:13). Likewise, a *Ḥadīth* of the Prophet declares that Arabs and *Ajams* are equal in the eyes of God, the only difference being their faith. That being said, being faithful allows the Muslim to be exempted from past lineage and to adopt a “holier one”, i.e. Arab. Nevertheless, despite their adherence to Islam, the assimilation of Berber tribes of North Africa to an Arab identity is a complex process.

1.2. Linguistic othering of Berbers

Guttormsen (2018) argues that cultural contact is at the heart of identity construction whereby individuals assert their belonging to an in-group (Us) and their difference from an out-group (Them). He argues that this “Otherness” assigns attributes to the Other that are markedly different from in-group qualities.

It is argued to be expressed through conceptual markers of the boundaries of what constitutes Us, as opposed to Them...Othering, however, reflects the above boundary production as an underlying cultural process which maintains (and reproduces) such boundaries. (Guttormsen 2018: 316)

Earlier accounts of marking Otherness date back to Hellenic times in which the geographical border separating Greeks from Others was simultaneously a linguistic border. This geo-linguistic border drawing is not uncommon, as Wilmot, Vigier & Humonen (2024) argue that language is a salient marker of boundaries assigning/revoking memberships to linguistic communities “either by providing a person with solidarity or by giving a person the role of Other, leading to exclusion and alienation” (Wilmot *et al.* 2024: 62).

Hall (2005) elaborates that the Hellenic identity was “linguistic”, evident in the othering terminology of *bárbaros* (βάρβαρος) which designated “those who were not considered Hellenes, [and was] onomatopoeic in its etymology, deriving from the incomprehensible babblings of non-Greek speakers” (Hall 2005: 111). *βάρβαρος* designates a foreigner and also that which is “uncivilized”, i.e. Barbarian (Beekes 2009: 201).

Unlike Arabness which hinges on bloodline (*nasab*), these barbarians “could ‘become’ Greek by adopting Hellenic practices, customs and language” (Hall 2005: 8). Anson (2009) cites Herodotus’ belief that a substantial number of the inhabitants of the Greek peninsula were of non-Greek stock, yet had become Hellenes “through the adoption of the Greek language and culture” (Anson 2009: 16). This is what Hall (2005) describes as “passing” in Hellenistic Greece. Highlighting the importance of language in preserving Hellenicity, Anson (2009) cites a letter ascribed to Plato which states that “if the Carthaginians won completely in Sicily, over time the Greek language would disappear from the island, and with it Greek civilization” (Anson 2009: 18). In this respect, and unlike non-Greeks, speaking Arabic did not allow Berbers to pass for Arabs.

It is of peculiar interest that Plato feared the barbarian Carthaginians, inhabitants of North Africa, who were also considered barbarians by the Arabs. Leo Africanus (15th c. C.E.) writes that the inhabitants of North Africa, particularly the Barbary Coast, gained their exonym from the verb *barbara* (بربر), signifying *to murmur* “because the African tongue [tongue] soundeth in the eares [ears] of the Arabians, no otherwise than the voice of beasts, which utter their sounds without any accents” (Leo Africanus 1896: 129). This definition is backed by Ibn Manzūr’s (13th c. C.E.) definition of the noun *barbarah* (بربرة) in his *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Tongue of Arabs) in which he states that it means babbling, shouting, and a commotion. Likewise, Ibn Khaldūn (14th c. C.E.) identifies the etymology of Berber as related to *barbarah*. He argues that

Afrîqus b. Qays b. Şayfi, one of their great early kings who lived in the time of Moses or somewhat earlier, is said to have raided Ifrîqiyah. He caused a great slaughter among the Berbers. He gave them the name of Berbers when he heard their jargon and asked what that barbarah was. This gave them the name which has remained with them since that time. (Ibn Khaldūn 2005: 62)

Etymologically, non-Greek barbarians and Berbers share the stigma of being ethnolinguistically distinct, and – by extension – uncivilised. In fact, *barbarī* (بربري) is at once a Berber and a barbarian, depending on the context. Jones (1971) argues that by the late Middle Ages, barbarism was confused with Barbaria,

to signify both the realm of the Moslem Berbers of North Africa, the modern ‘Barbary’, and the eastern lands inhabited by ferocious barbarians... African ‘Barbary’ assumed an ethnic connotation, although the notion of the land of the Berbers sometimes elided with the sense of ‘barbarous’ as pagan. (Jones 1971: 393-394)

This assumption of paganism and barbarity surrounding North Africans is in flagrant disregard of their conversion and of the role they played in the spread of Islam. It is argued that their resistance to Muslim conquerors may have strengthened their stereotypical representation as the savage pagan tribes of the West. As aforementioned, Berbers were not keen on acquiescing to unjust foreign rule, regardless of their conquerors being Muslim.

Furthermore, being treated as second class citizens, in a land that is historically theirs, had deepened the sense of resentment to the coloniser, the Arabs. Berber revolts were quick to ignite after the Islamic conquests, evidencing that Berbers did not conceive of themselves, nor were they considered Arab. Though, Islam, Arabness, and Arabic formed a triad nearly equal in the value of its parts, language, being rather visible, allowed for a more systematic and conspicuous assimilation of peoples regardless of their genealogy. By being Muslim (at least in earlier centuries), and by speaking Arabic, one would become an Arab. However, this did not apply to Berbers. Instead, they remained an Other. Rowe (2012) argues that the other is not only a subjugated group but can also be a force driving “the behavior and sense of self among all communities-members of the dominant society as much as those deemed marginal” (Rowe 2012: 133).

Othering, however, implies an unceasing operation in which the process of identifying and characterizing opponents is never complete, never fixed, leaving open the door for counteractions. (Rowe 2012: 133)

It is arguable that a reclamation of a Berber identity, or at least a non-Arab identity would be underway as a tacit form of resistance against an undesirable encroaching cultural invasion.

The aforementioned historical processes of othering established long-lasting hierarchies of belonging in the Arab-Islamic world, wherein religio-linguistic purity, and ethnic genealogy became intertwined. The Berbers of North Africa, despite their early conversion to Islam and adoption of Arabic, remained marked as perpetual Others. This historical ambivalence would prove elementary for the construction of national identities in the post-colonial Maghreb,

particularly in Tunisia, where questions of Arabness, language, and belonging would take on new dimensions.

1.3. Counter-othering and the construction of a Tunisian identity

Perkins (1997) elaborates on the diverse history that modern-day Tunisia witnessed. Empires of diverse origins have ruled the territory over millennia before the Arab Conquests, from Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, to Vandals. Assuming that these markedly different groups, with their linguistic differences, remained isolated from one another –preventing ethnic mixture – would be short-sighted. Perkins (1997) notes that modern-day Tunisia attracted Spaniards fleeing the Reconquista, Turks and other ethnicities ruled by the Ottoman Empire, and Italians, Sicilians and Maltese merchants during the French Protectorate. Yet, in a quasi-contradictory statement, Perkins (1997: 3) calls modern-day Tunisia predominantly Arab and ethnically homogeneous, perhaps homogeneous in its heterogeneity. Expanding on the assimilation of the Berbers to Arab manners, Perkins (1997: 3) makes a rather pertinent remark: “[p]rolonged subsequent contacts have rendered the terms *Arab* and *Berber* more meaningful as linguistic descriptions, indicating an individual’s first language, than as racial ones”.

This assimilation to Arab manners has made Berbers akin to the *musta‘ribah*. The Arab genealogy, tracing back to Ismael, is shrouded in religiosity as the prophet is considered to be the first Arab prophet. His Arabness is solidified and he had been “made a Meccan” after having settled in Mecca, learned Arabic, and married into an Arab tribe (Retsö 2003: 33). This testifies to the inner divisions within Arabs, manifested in the distinction between the *‘āribah* and the *musta‘ribah*, Ismael himself being a *musta‘rib*. Retsö (2003: 33) notes that this distinction has the Ismael story as its basis, and though the ranking of the *musta‘ribah* as secondary Arabs indicates that “their Arabness may not have been very well established”.

Initially, one would assume that the current inhabitants of North Africa, namely Tunisia, being so ethnically diverse, yet identifying as Arabs, signals a complete process of cultural assimilation into the Arab ideal. Yet, apart from some Berber enclaves, tracing a genealogically pure Arab descent of Tunisians would be a challenging task. It appears as though the second-class *musta‘rib* identity is unavoidable for the inhabitants of Barbary. The question of *nasab* is raised again. *Nasab* is defined as tracing an uninterrupted genealogical line via the father/mother. The bloodlines were secured through the fathers who legitimated their offspring. Moreover, the hadith/legal maxim stating that the “child belongs to the conjugal bed” solidified paternity as a legal status more than a biological one. Legitimacy through *nasab* was sought after by Berber dynasties.

The Almohad Caliphate (12th-13th C.E.) was a “fundamentalist Berber” dynasty in North Africa with autonomous rule from the Abbasids ruling from 1145 C.E. to 1269. Upon the fall of the caliphate, their dominion “reverted to tribal entities, sub-regional sultanates, or city-states” (Liebl 2009: 382). It was followed by the Hafsid (13th-16th C.E.) who were also of

Berber origin. Their ancestor Abū Ḥafṣ was claimed to have an Arab heritage, which Garnier (2018: 566) calls a “forged genealog[y]”.

The question of whether the inhabitants of the Maghreb were considered Arabs was the central point in S’hiri’s research (2013). She argued that Middle Eastern speakers believe that “what Tunisians speak, contrary to their own beliefs, and according to these Middle East Arabic speakers is not recognized as Arabic” (2013: 150). Her study covered the attitudes of different speakers from varied regions and grounded the stereotype further that Tunisians were not “authentic” Arabs. In fact, speakers from Egypt and the Levant hold that “Tunisians are unable to speak the Arabic language (*fuṣḥa*)... [and] [t]hey make no distinction between the different countries of the Maghreb” (S’hiri 2013: 163).

While Tunisian speakers were considered inauthentic, they themselves deemed these views

concerning their ethnic belonging (Berber) and their relationship with France and the West in general (dependence) and how that is affecting their linguistic ability at Arabic as ‘prejudice,’ ‘stereotypes,’ and ‘preconceptions’. (S’hiri 2013: 177)

Likewise, they expressed pride in their Tunisian identity and viewed their accommodation to Mashriqi speakers a matter of “necessity” rather than an acknowledgment of inferiority to a presumed centre (S’hiri 2013: 170). The conclusion that S’hiri (2013: 174-175) reaches regards Mashriqi speakers’ reluctance to passively accommodate as betraying an attitude regarding the speaker’s variety as “unfamiliar and ...unworthy” of processing. This, in fact, is a relic of centuries-old prejudice that links Arabic to a pure Arab ethnicity.

This zealous defence of ethnolinguistic purity is not an outlandish concept. In fact, it is rooted in what Weinreich (1968: 99) terms language loyalty. Weinreich describes it as a state of mind that considers one’s language as a superposed “intact entity”, rallying speakers to resist linguistic change. Indeed, he explains that it is language contact that awakens the representation of one’s language as unique among its speakers “and it is there that the pure or standardized language most easily becomes the symbol of group integrity. Language loyalty breeds in contact situations just as nationalism breeds on ethnic borders” (Weinreich 1968: 100).

However, this language loyalty defending Arabic in regions that have had their own cultures and languages prior to the conquests may, according to Weinreich (1968), backfire. S’hiri’s (2013) research betrays a latent desire in Tunisian speakers to be an Arab, or at least be considered an Arab. This paradoxical tension between a pride in one’s non-Arabness and a desire for ethnic legitimacy breeds what Weinreich (1968: 101) terms “resentful language loyalty”: a reaction of a dominated group, considering themselves superior to the dominant one, having to borrow from another language.

The more ‘realistic’ members of an objectively dominated group may attempt to better their lot by associating themselves with the dominant group. The sight of such ‘betrayals’ invariably causes resentment among the more steadfast members of the dominated group, a resentment which brings

with it unswerving language loyalty. Divergent reactions and the consequent resentful loyalty can be found in almost any type of group contact congruent with a mother-tongue division: ethnic and cultural contact, immigrant and indigenous populations, lower and higher social strata, rural and urban sections, old and young age groups. (Weinreich 1968: 101)

One may argue that the groups left on the periphery of Standard Arabic did not vanish, but rather survived in parallel to it, creating a seemingly-inevitable split through consistent counter-othering of dominant Arab culture by means of subverting racial slurs such *'rībah* (*Arabs*) and *'orbān* (*Arabicized*) to signal barbarity. These terms do not only reclaim the culture and the land, but also assert a sense of difference from the coloniser. In the Tunisian community, where Standard Arabic is the official language and Islam is the republic's religion, the employment of "self"-denigrating slurs seems rather paradoxical, unless Tunisians consider themselves Tunisians rather than Arabs. In fact, the influx of multiple ethnicities over centuries has rendered the definition of a Berber identity as difficult as an Arab one. Instead, a Tunisian identity, monolithic in its diversity, is championed.

1.4. Tunisian national discourse: Between *La Personnalité Tunisienne* and *La Tunisianité*

Understanding contemporary Tunisian views of Arabness requires an insight into the construction of a Tunisian identity, especially since the independence in 1956. Under President Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987), Tunisia adopted an ambivalent position toward its Arab identity. While Bourguiba officially endorsed Arabism as a component of national liberation, his vision of Tunisian nationhood deliberately incorporated pre-Islamic and Mediterranean elements. For example, Bourguiba was adamant in his opposition to removing the veil, for it served as an identity marker first and foremost.

Despite his modern and revolutionary beliefs and aspirations for his country, he considered such an act an irredeemable mistake that would only aid the coloniser in his attempt to gallicise the Tunisian ummah, as he often called it. Bourguiba spoke often about preserving the Tunisian personality, of which the veil was part, and found himself in a heated debate against Joachim Durel in 1929. In January 1929, in an article printed in *L'Etendard Tunisien*, Bourguiba writes that the veil is a custom rooted in social mores that distinguish the Tunisian group. He writes that

Some overly sensitive ears were not accustomed to hearing such language from the mouth of a "native". The Tunisian personality that many naive people had believed to be definitively dissolved, emerged more alive than ever in the mouth of a young person. (Bourguiba 1967: 2-3)

In 1972, Bourguiba reiterated his nationalistic ideas of 1929, in recounting the fight for independence amidst a famous incident involving Mouammar Kadhafi at the *Palmarium*. As per his habit, Bourguiba delivered his speech in Tunisian Arabic.

The beginning of my activism involved getting into direct contact with the people in order to ... plant the idea of nationalism and sacrifice for the sake of the homeland. Which homeland? The Tunisian homeland! Why the Tunisian homeland and not the Arab homeland? It is because for

thousands of years Tunisia has had a unique personality. It has had its personality for thousands of years, since Carthage... we have lived together one generation after the other. The borders separating us and Algeria or us and Tripoli [Libya] were not created by colonisation... the fact that this person is Tunisian, that one is Algerian and the other is Libyan, was something predating Islam... There was a region since the time of the Romans called Ifriqiya... it is Tunisia. (Translated transcript of televised speech)

The speech given by Bourguiba comes in the context of the post-Nasserist era, particularly after the Six-Day War of 1967 (called Naksa “setback” by Arabs). The reason behind Kadhafi’s visit to Tunisia was to negotiate a unification of Tunisian and Libyan territories under one political body, a project that Bourguiba considered ambitious and distant. Indeed, the Naksa of 1967 marked a general disillusionment with the *qawmiyya*.

The orthodox position considered Arabism a spent force following the military defeat and later death of Arab nationalism’s champion, Gamal Abdul Nasser. The Arab leaders that followed instead consolidated nation-state identities (Wataniya), cynically turning old Arab nationalism (Qawmiya) into empty rhetoric. (Phillips 2014: 141)

The belief in a local and concrete homeland, instead of an imagined one, had persisted in the Tunisian psyche. As Bourguiba had constantly defended the Tunisian personality and the Tunisian ummah, the belief in Tunisian identity first was not a novelty to Tunisians, but rather a revival of a central pillar upon which the republic was built. Perhaps a latent marker of this identity is displayed in the identity cards of Tunisians which were described as *wataniyya* since 1993, after the *qawmiyya* description in a 1968 decree.

Bourguiba’s successor, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), promoted a continuation of Bourguiba’s visions through a modernised Tunisia that is marked by its moderation. The Arab-Islamic identity was to be embraced with caution while simultaneously championing secularism and openness.

Ben Ali heavily emphasized the themes of continuity and change. He accentuated the faithful adherence of his government to Tunisia’s international commitments and, in view of the fact that the Arab summit was taking place simultaneously in Amman, reasserted Tunisian solidarity with its Arab brothers. Furthermore, and more specifically as a reaffirmation of Tunisia’s North African, Arab, Islamic, and Mediterranean identity, Ben Ali promised to pursue the realization of Bourguiba’s vision for greater Arab Maghrib unity. (Ware 1988: 592)

Hawkins (2011) notes that Ben Ali’s rule was marked by a slight return to Arab-Islamic identity, previously abandoned by Bourguiba. This was evident in Ben Ali’s speeches delivered in formal Arabic, carrying “associations with Islam and classical Arab civilization” (Hawkins 2011: 40). Moreover, he was “routinely filmed engaging in important religious events, such as greeting Tunisian pilgrims on their return from the haj and attending prayers during Laylat al-Qadr, the holiest night of Ramadan” (Hawkins 2011: 40).

Post-Ben Ali regimes, particularly under the Ennahda, an Islamic democratic party, saw a shift to a more Islamicised rule that sought to purify the country. The leader of the Ennahda,

Rached Ghannouchi, after the party's victory in 2011 stated that "Arabic-French bilingualism represented a 'linguistic pollution' of Tunisia's identity" (Versteegh 2014: 261-262). The party's Islamic ideology received heavy criticism from secularists who saw it as a threat to Tunisia's modernist legacy. This distrust of Islamic rule was heightened with the increasing terrorist attacks, political crises, political assassinations and stagnating economy. This atmosphere gave way to the decade of Islamic rule to be known as *Al-'ashriyya al-sawda'* (known as the Black Decade (2011-2021)). This resulted in an eagerness to return to the idyllic Tunisian identity: *La Tunisianité*, which is defined by Caïd Essebsi (2014-2019: 401-402) as

a culture of moderation, of realism and consensus. We draw from Islam the idea of 'nation of the middle' which seeks to bring together and unify and favours persuasion rather to coercion. Tunisianité rests on the principle of national unity, natural solidarity and voluntary cohesion of all the nation's social layers. It rejects all dogmatisms and cultivates the spirit of tolerance and the sense of relativity.

Zemni (2016) questions whether this *Tunisianité* would host pluralism in its general distrust of Islam-oriented parties and regimes. The dissolution of the parliament in 2021, effectively ending the rule of Ennahda, was a turning point in Tunisian history. The presumed link of the Islamic party to Middle Eastern nations may be argued as a catalyst for the return to a pre-Arab identity rooted in Berber culture. Despite this tendency, a reclamation of an Amazigh identity remained secondary as *Tunisianité* favoured a sense of unity and uniformity, which may have been threatened by further sectarianism, especially that the Amazigh population was estimated to be less than 1% (Pouessel 2017: 215). Nevertheless, the work of Benammar Elgaaïed on the genetic makeup of Tunisians consolidated an Amazigh lineage. The study found that, even within Arab communities, genetic structures were predominantly Berber: "it would mostly be Arabised Berbers who settled there with Arabic surnames" (Benammar Elgaaïed 2022: 170). The reaction to the book solidified a complex relationship with the Arab component in the Tunisian identity, a constant flux between resentment and eagerness to belong. Moreover, this raised the question of *nasab* and passing once again as legitimacy in this sense was "forged".

The terms examined in this study – slurs targeting Arabs or Arabness – must be understood within this context of long-standing othering, counter-othering, and the specific trajectory of Tunisian nation-building. They represent not merely casual pejoratives, but linguistic acts that index a historical position: that of a population repeatedly positioned as peripheral to an Arab centre, yet possessing its own deep civilisational heritage and distinct national consciousness.

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design to investigate the semiotics of othering and counter-othering in the construction of a contemporary Tunisian linguistic identity. The research integrates qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse data from two distinct domains: computer-mediated communication and popular music.

2.1. Data sources and collection

The data corpus comprises two components. A digital corpus composed of a sample of 30 public Facebook posts was compiled using a purposive sampling strategy. The posts analysed in this study were published between 2021 and 2025, after the period colloquially referred to in Tunisia as “The Black Decade”. Posts were identified via the platform’s search function using the keywords ‘*orbān* (عربان), ‘*rībah* (عربية), and *sīdī ‘arbī* (سيدي عربي) and were included if they were public, originated from users identifying as Tunisian, and used the slurs in a discursive (rather than metalinguistic) context. The final corpus (n=30) was curated to ensure thematic diversity across social, political, and humorous contexts.

A musical corpus of two purposefully selected songs was analysed for its lyrical content. The first song, “Sidi Arbi” by Znous, is a rock track known for its socio-political commentary. The second, “La3riba” by Erkez Hip-Hop, represents an innovative fusion of rap and traditional Tunisian *mezoued* music. These songs were selected for their cultural resonance and explicit use of the slurs under investigation.

2.2. Analytical framework and coding procedure

The analysis was guided by Weinreich’s (1968) concept of resentful language loyalty and Hall’s (2005) work on ethnic and linguistic passing. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was conducted on both corpora. All data were recoded for the following variables:

- (1) Slur Term: The specific lexical item used (‘*rībah*, ‘*orbān*, *sīdī ‘arbī*).
- (2) Primary Theme: The core discursive function of the slur, categorised as:
 - a) *Political Delegitimisation*: Using the slur to frame political figures, parties, or ideologies as foreign, illegitimate, or hostile to Tunisian interests.
 - b) *Socio-Cultural Distinction*: Deploying the slur to mark a group or behaviour as uncultured, vulgar, uneducated, or backward.
 - c) *Moral/Religious Hypocrisy*: Using the slur to criticise a target for failing to live up to religious or ethical standards they profess to embody.
 - d) *Ironic Reclamation / In-Group Solidarity*: Using the slur humorously, self-deprecatingly, or affectionately to build solidarity within an in-group, thereby disarming its offensive power.
- (3) Target: The entity against whom the slur is directed (e.g.: Political Elite, General Out-Group, In-Group/Self).
- (4) Sentiment: The overall affective tone of the utterance (Negative vs. Positive/Ironic).

2.3. Analytical procedures

The coded Facebook data were analysed using SPSS (Version 23). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were calculated to characterise the corpus. Inferential statistics

(Pearson's Chi-Square tests of independence) were employed to test for significant associations between categorical variables, specifically between Slur Term and Primary Theme, and between Primary Theme and Sentiment. Assumptions for the Chi-Square test were checked, and violations (low expected cell counts) are noted where applicable, with a focus on interpreting descriptive patterns alongside statistical significance. Second, the two songs were subjected to a close discursive and pragmatic analysis. This involved examining the lyrical context, contextual cues (Grice 1975), and illocutionary force of the slurs to interpret their social meaning and how they construct in-group/out-group boundaries.

2.4. Ethical considerations

In accordance with the Association of Internet Researchers' ethical guidelines (Franzke *et al.* 2020), all data from Facebook are treated as public discourse. To protect user anonymity, all identifying information (names, profile links) has been removed. The analysis focuses on aggregate discursive patterns rather than individual users.

3. Linguistic counter-othering in popular Tunisian culture

3.1. Analysis of social media

A quantitative analysis of thirty (n=30) Facebook posts employing anti-Arab slurs reveals distinct patterns in their discursive deployment. In terms of lexical preference, '*rībah*' was the most frequently used slur, appearing in 40% (n=12) of posts, followed by *sīdī 'arbī* (33.3%, n=10) and '*orbān*' (26.7%, n=8). The primary pragmatic function of these slurs was overwhelmingly socio-cultural distinction, accounting for half of all instances (50%, n=15). Political delegitimisation was the second most common theme (23.3%, n=7), while ironic reclamation/solidarity and moral/religious hypocrisy were equally represented (13.3% each, n=4). A critical finding pertains to the target of this othering discourse: the vast majority of slurs (83.3%, n=25) were directed at a general out-group, an unnamed other, with specific targets like the political elite being far less common (10%, n=3). Overall, the sentiment was predominantly negative (60%, n=18), though a substantial portion (40%, n=12) leveraged the slurs for positive or ironic in-group bonding, indicating a complex and nuanced relationship with these stigmatised terms.

A Pearson's Chi-Square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the type of slur used ('*rībah*', '*orbān*', *sīdī 'arbī*) and its primary discursive theme. While the relationship was not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, $\chi^2(6, N = 30) = 11.21$, $p = .082$, the descriptive data from the cross-tabulation reveals strong and meaningful patterns of specialised usage. The analysis indicates a clear functional distribution among the slurs. '*rībah*' demonstrated notable versatility but was uniquely associated with ironic reclamation/solidarity, accounting for all four instances (100%) of this theme in the corpus. A plurality of its uses (41.7%) was for socio-cultural distinction, such as in examples (1) and (2).

(1) إلي موجودة في العربية أطول من برج إيفل وخليفة مع بعضهم [ingratitude] كعبة

The ingratitude found in 'rībah is longer than the Eiffel Tower and Burj Khalifa combined

(2) أش كرهت روحي وكرهت العربية وكهو حاشا الرجال

How I hate myself and hate the 'rībah, except the men.

Conversely, 'orbān showed a marked tendency for political delegitimisation, with half (50.0%) of its instances serving this function, such as in example (2).

(3) لا أتشرف بعروبتكم يا عربان

I am not honoured by your Arabness you 'orbān.

It was never used for ironic reclamation. Most notably, *sīdī* 'arbī emerged as the term most specialised for critiques of moral/religious hypocrisy. This is present in example (3).

(4) سيدي العربي كي تعطيه أكثر من قيمته يولى هكا

sīdī 'arbī when you give him more than he is worth becomes like this.

It accounted for half (50.0%) of all posts in this thematic category and was the only slur for which this theme constituted a major proportion of its usage (20.0%). Furthermore, it was predominantly employed for socio-cultural distinction (70.0% of its uses) and was entirely absent from ironic reclamation contexts.

It is important to note that the Chi-Square test assumption was violated, with 83.3% of cells having an expected count of less than 5, a common limitation in small-sample, high-variability datasets. Therefore, while the quantitative results suggest a non-significant relationship, the clear qualitative patterns in the descriptive data are substantively significant. They indicate that *sīdī* 'arbī specialises in moral and cultural critique, 'orbān in political othering, and 'rībah in versatile othering that includes a unique capacity for ironic reclamation.

A Pearson's Chi-Square test of independence revealed a statistically significant association between the primary thematic function of the slurs and their expressed sentiment, $\chi^2(3, N = 30) = 14.44, p = .002$. The cross-tabulation demonstrates a near-perfect functional divide in how sentiment is deployed across different themes. The theme of political delegitimisation was exclusively negative, with 100% of posts (n=7) expressing negative sentiment. Similarly, posts employing slurs for moral/religious hypocrisy were uniformly negative (100%, n=4). Conversely, the discourse of ironic reclamation/solidarity was defined by its positive or ironic sentiment, constituting 100% of its instances (n=4). The theme of socio-cultural distinction was the most balanced, showing a near-even split between negative (46.7%, n=7) and positive/ironic (53.3%, n=8) sentiment, indicating its versatility as a tool for both genuine social critique and in-group bonding.

This clear dichotomy underscores that the pragmatic function of a slur rigidly constrains its emotional tone: when used for political or moral attack, the sentiment is invariably negative; when used for ironic reclamation, it is invariably positive. Socio-cultural distinction alone operates across this affective boundary.

3.2. Analysis of “Sidi Arbi” by Znous

In accordance with the analytical procedure of subjecting the musical corpus to a close discursive and pragmatic analysis, the song “Sidi Arbi” by the Tunisian hardcore metal band Znous was examined. The song “Sidi Arbi” serves as a pertinent case study. The track, released in 2020, is situated within the protest genre and gained notoriety for its overt social and political critique following the 2011 Revolution. The band itself self-defines as a politically engaged group that utilises art as a means of addressing injustices. The name of the band is the plural of Tunisian word *zins*, a cognate of the Arabic word *Jins* (pl. *Ajnās*). The Tunisian plural is more similar to the Greek γένος, (*Genos*; *race*). In Tunisian Arabic, *znous* is a derogatory term signifying a group of individuals, with common interests, marked by socially unacceptable behaviours, i.e. an act of othering.

The analysis focused on the lyrical context, co-textual cues (Grice 1975), and illocutionary force of the slurs to interpret their social meaning and delineate the construction of in-group/out-group boundaries. The song is a potent instrument of protest, framing the Islamic conquests as a violation of land and people. This establishes a foundational binary opposition between a violated, authentic native “us” (the Tunisian/Berber in-group) and a savage, predatory “them” (the Arab out-group). The band’s own introductory note explicitly frames the song as

an enquiry into the controversial sense of identity amongst the inhabitants of North Africa, and especially Tunisia. It’s a historical analysis of the tragic Arabization of North African natives, cultural hegemony and the prevalence and spread of hardline Islamism as an ideology during the last decade⁹⁸. ([Znousland.net](https://www.znousland.net))

The introductory note prepares the listener for a discourse of counter-othering, within which the slur ‘*orbān*’ is strategically mobilised. The band provided their translated lyrics in table 1 next to the original Tunisian Arabic. The pragmatic force of the slur ‘*orbānah*’ is central to this discourse. Its deployment in the verse – “و من بعد ما سحقتنا الغربانة، و جابو دين رب” (“The ‘*orbānah*’ eradicated us to bring the religion of God!”) – is not a mere ethnic descriptor but a sociolinguistic shibboleth that marks the target as inauthentic and morally corrupt. The phrase «دين ربي» (*dīn rabbī*) is a sarcastic reworking of a blasphemous slur common in Tunisian Arabic. The co-text (Grice 1975) is critical here: the lyric immediately juxtaposes the act of eradication with the bringing of religion, creating a stark contradiction that is compounded by the subsequent line alleging sexual violence. This co-text (Grice 1975) frames the ‘*orbānah*’ as

⁹⁸ <https://www.znousland.net/sidi-arbi/>

entities whose projected religious piety masks an inherent moral vacuity and predatory nature. The illocutionary force (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) is thus one of accusation and historical indictment.

English translation of “Sidi Arbi”	Tunisian Arabic lyrics of “Sidi Arbi”
“Look who’s coming to congratulate us, Our country is open for everyone Just wash your feet before you come in The Arabs eradicated us to bring the religion of God! and raped our women by the same occasion Lucky is who strips us of our riches and sell[sic] us into slavery and earned a fortune while doing so”	و يا سعد من جانا و هَنَّا، بلادي ملك ربي بركة أغسل ساقيك و من بعد ما سحقنا العُربانة، و جابو دين ربي و شدو نسانا بالسيف و يا سعد من باعنا و عَرَّانا و عاش متخبي حشاه تي صحة ليه

Table 1: Tunisian Arabic Lyrics and English Translation of Znous’ “Sidi Arbi”

This act of counter-othering is further crystallised in the song’s title and recurring figure, *Sīdī ‘arbī*. In Tunisian dialect, this phrase is a common adage signifying an innate ungrateful nature, echoing the usage in (4). The song pragmatically reappropriates this cultural trope, scaling it from the individual to the historical. By labelling the oppressor as *sīdī ‘arbī*, playing on the title *sīdī* (*my master*) the artist projects the stereotypes of barbarism and ingratitude back onto the conqueror, arguing that true savagery lies in the violence of political and sexual domination, not in pre-existing indigenous identity. The political and sexual violence is accentuated in the use of the term *‘arranā* (عَرَّانا), which at once means to strip naked and to strip one of his belongings. This constitutes a masterful inversion of the inherited civilisational hierarchy, long enjoyed by the Arabs. In fact, the song portrays the Arab as an ungrateful figure with an insatiable appetite for Berber riches.

The lyrical strategy in “Sidi Arbi” provides compelling evidence for the operation of resentful language loyalty in contemporary Tunisia. The song articulates a deep-seated resentment towards a group perceived as both historically dominant and morally illegitimate. It asserts the cultural and moral superiority of the in-group precisely through the stigmatisation of the out-group’s identity marker. The final verse of the song calls on listeners, the “people who have forgotten who [they] are” to rewrite the past and the present. The artists’ proclamation is a masterful instance of counter-othering, whereby Arabness is vehemently disavowed. The pejorative use of *‘orbānah* and *‘arbī* is not a denial of Islam nor of the Arabic language *in toto* – especially as the song is introduced in Standard Arabic and performed in a variety of Arabic – but a rejection of a specific, hegemonic socio-political identity perceived as imposed, inauthentic and corrupt. Language itself becomes the medium through which this disavowal is weaponised, fulfilling the core function of resentful loyalty as defined by Weinreich (1968).

3.3. Analysis of “La3riba” by Erkez HipHop

The phenomenon of linguistic counter-othering finds a distinct yet complementary expression in the song “La3riba” of the fusion project Erkez Hip-Hop, released in 2019. The song’s very composition serves as a meta-discursive statement on identity. The synthesis of global rap with the traditionally Tunisian *mezoued* – a traditionally Tunisian bagpipe – creates a soundscape where an authentic native sound is asserted within a global genre. This musical choice pragmatically frames the ensuing lyrics as a negotiation of modern *Tunisianness*. The discursive context of the song revolves around themes of self-actualisation and overcoming adversity. Within this framework, the bridge operates as a pivotal moment of explicit dis-identification with the Arabs (*rībah*):

(5) بجاه الله اعفيني مالعربية//بجاه الله اعفيني مالمصيبة//يا وخياني ملا غريبة//إيه يا العربية

By Allah spare me the ‘*rībah*! By Allah spare me the calamity! Oh brothers, what an oddity! Oh the ‘*rībah*!

The pragmatic force of the slur ‘*rībah*’ here is multifaceted. Its use in a repetitive, prayer-like invocation imbues the rejection with a sense of moral urgency and gravitas. Moreover, it accentuates a Muslim identity that invokes Allah in times of hardships. The direct co-text (Grice 1975) – equating ‘*rībah*’ with *calamity* (*mṣībah*) and *oddity* (*ghrībah*) – semantically loads the term with connotations of misfortune and social aberration. The term itself in Tunisian Arabic signifies an uncouth and uncultured individual that one would not associate with. This is in parallel to the uses in (1) and (2). Furthermore, the designation of ‘*arbī*’ or ‘*rībah*’ is often used in the Tunisian context to signify *bedouin* or *rural* in a pejorative rather than an idyllic sense.

The illocutionary act is one of supplication and vehement dissociation; the speaker is not merely describing but actively petitioning to be separated from this stigmatised identity. This constitutes a clear act of boundary policing, where the “Tunisian” in-group is defined in opposition to the “uncultured” and “calamitous” Arab (‘*rībah*’) out-group. The slur performed in “La3riba” is a semantic shift where being Arab is metonymically tied to a lack of culture, refinement, or intellectual depth. The timing of the *mezoued*’s entrance in the track, following this lyrical disavowal, sonically reinforces the lyrical argument: the authentic Tunisian cultural element emerges after the rejection of the ‘*rībah*’ identity.

When contrasted with the first song, a nuanced typology of othering emerges. Where Znous used ‘*orbānah*’ and ‘*arbī*’ to mark the political and historical other, Erkez HipHop uses ‘*rībah*’ to target the socio-cultural other. The target shifts from a historical-political oppressor to a diffuse, vulgar social type. This demonstrates the versatility of the counter-othering lexicon; it can be weaponised across different domains of social life to police the boundaries of “true” *Tunisianness*. It is important to note that a Tunisian would often self-identify as an Arab, yet being called ‘*rībah*’ or ‘*arbī*’ is a conspicuous insult, further manifesting the paradox of the Tunisian identity.

The two songs examined here, particularly Erkez HipHop's track, received widespread popular approval. The group was subsequently invited to perform the song on the private Tunisian television channel Attessia TV, a mainstream platform, signalling not only the cultural resonance of their critique but also a degree of institutional recognition for the sentiment they articulated. In fact, the song was such a success that it was commercially recontextualised in a 2021 Ooredoo advertisement, featuring a military general on a campaign singing the song along with his soldiers and dancing to *mezoued* on horseback (figure 1). Though the commercial did not mention that the general was Hannibal, the public's swift association of the singing general with Hannibal, a pre-Arab Carthaginian figure, underscores how the song's discourse is interpreted as a celebration of an authentic, deep-rooted Tunisian identity. The image of Hannibal singing an anti-Arab slur to the tune of the *mezoued* is a powerful cultural embodiment of the central paradox: an identity articulated in Arabic that simultaneously and vigorously rejects the *Arab* label. Language itself becomes the very medium through which this disavowal is articulated and weaponised. In Erkez HipHop's song the title of the song is written in correct Arabic script (العربية), while the latinised version is typically Tunisian, using the number 3 to represent the sound /ʕ/. The definite marker <Al-> is also written in the Tunisian colloquial form <La->. Thus, Tunisian identity is situated somewhere between these two forms; an evident quasi-Arabness.



Figure 1: Still frames from the 2021 Ooredoo Ramadan advertisement showing a general on horseback singing Erkez HipHop's "La3riba" and dancing to *mezoued*.

4. Discussion

The findings from this study converge to paint a complex portrait of Tunisian identity as constructed through a dynamic and strategic practice of linguistic counter-othering. The integrated analysis of digital discourse and popular music reveals that the rejection of Arabness is not a simple sentiment but a sophisticated, multi-faceted linguistic phenomenon that operates across political, cultural, and moral domains. This practice serves as a powerful mechanism for asserting a Tunisian identity, one that is, nevertheless, deeply rooted in the Arabic language and Islamic faith yet defined in opposition to the hegemonic Arab exonym.

This paradoxical identity can be understood as the modern culmination of a long historical process of linguistic and ethnic focusing. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985: 248-249) posit that internal cohesion is often achieved through "benign neglect" coupled with an "external threat", leading to the totemisation of linguistic stereotypes. In the North African context, a critical factor was the role of Islam as a unifying force that simultaneously "totemised" Classical Arabic (*fushḥā*) as a sacred linguistic ideal.

However, the historical "external threat" to this Arabo-Islamic complex materialised not in the Ottoman Empire, which, despite some linguistic competition, largely shared the faith and

did not seek to eradicate Arabic (Albirini 2016; Suleiman 2003), but in French colonialism. The French colonial project, with its explicit policy of assimilation and *mission civilisatrice*, represented a profound external threat. Yasir Suleiman (2003: 117) writes that “Arab nationalism [treats] language as one of the major ingredients in nation-formation [...] which sets them apart from other nations”. This has rendered Arabic a pillar of post-independence nation-building. In this respect, being Arab is speaking Arabic, in marked opposition to the identity of the coloniser. However, one must acknowledge that colonial powers played into ethnic and religious differences in the Arabophone world, making such a definition problematic. For example, in Mount Lebanon, under French mandate, Christian Maronites, motivated by religious affinity, embraced the French language of fellow Christians as a sign of modernity and culture (Albirini, 2016). This linguistic change was utilised to fuel the flames of division along the lines of ethnicity, religion, and denominations.

[T]he French mobilized the Christian–Muslim rift to carve Lebanon out of the Syrian map, combining the religion argument with a claim of a pre-Islamic, pre-Arab Phoenician origin of Lebanese people – an argument that was ... adopted and propagated by some Lebanese intellectuals. (Albirini 2016: 143)

This Phoenician identity, several decades after independence, is still alive in Lebanon and defended by the Maronite leader of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea. Therefore, such definitions are to be approached with caution.

In the North African context, Alexandre (1963) explains that the French policy had for centuries hinged on universality that welcomed the *βάρβαρος* (*barbarians*), even if such tolerance resulted in these civilised savages using French to attack France (Alexandre 1963: 58). As such, one’s native tongue is a sign of barbarism while learning French is that of culture (Bassiouny 2020). This direct assault forged a powerful, binary opposition, making the defence of Arabness and Islam synonymous with anti-colonial resistance.

It is precisely within this historical crucible that the contemporary practice of counter-othering becomes intelligible. With the departure of the French coloniser, the external threat that once solidified the Arabo-Islamic identity receded. In the post-colonial era, the hegemonic Arab identity could itself be re-evaluated as an internal dominant group. The specialised slurs documented in this study are the tools of this re-evaluation. The statistical patterns from the Facebook corpus provide a foundational map of this post-colonial discursive landscape. The specialised usage of slurs – where *‘orbān* leans toward political delegitimation, *sīdī ‘arbī* toward moral and cultural critique, and *‘rībah* demonstrates unique versatility, including a capacity for ironic reclamation – indicates a highly developed, nuanced lexicon of othering. This functional distribution suggests that Tunisians are not simply rejecting an abstract Arab identity but are engaging in precise discursive work: policing political boundaries with one term, social and moral boundaries with another, and even forging in-group solidarity through the ironic reappropriation of a third. Moreover, the posts were predominantly met with sympathetic reactions from commenters, reflecting the informal, vernacular context in which ordinary

Tunisians engage with contentious identity questions on social media. While the time-frame of the corpus postdates the Black Decade, the recurrent use of terms with Arab referents as slurs reflects a solidification of Tunisian identity in its *Tunisianité* which affirms national particularism markedly different from an Arab Other. The choice to weaponise precisely these terms reveals a shift wherein Arabness itself becomes a carrier of social stigma. This lexical strategy re-inscribes Tunisian identity as distinct from, and implicitly superior to, an Arabness construed as foreign and uncivilised.

The statistically significant relationship ($p = .002$) between theme and sentiment further underscores the calculated nature of this discourse. The rigid dichotomy, where political and moral attacks are exclusively negative and ironic reclamation is exclusively positive, demonstrates that these are not random insults but strategically deployed speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) with clear pragmatic goals. This finding offers robust quantitative support for Weinreich's (1968) concept of resentful language loyalty, illustrating how a dominated group can weaponise language to assert its perceived cultural superiority and resent its symbolic dependence on the dominant group's identity marker. The fact that this othering is overwhelmingly directed at a vague General Out-Group (83.3%) underscores that its primary function is the construction of a cohesive Tunisian in-group by defining it against a diffuse, uncultured or hypocritical other.

The musical analyses provide depth and context to these quantitative patterns, illustrating how this counter-othering is narrativised and amplified in popular culture. Znou's "Sidi Arbi", released during the Black Decade, serves as a clear example of the political and historical pole of this resentment. The song's lyrical content, framing the Arab conquest as a violation and its agents as morally corrupt *'orbānah*, directly mirrors the political delegitimation found in the Facebook data. It performs a profound inversion of historical hierarchy, projecting the label of *barbarian* back onto the conqueror, demonstrating that identity is constructed through opposition. Crucially, the song's use of Arabic to dismantle the prestige of Arabness perfectly encapsulates the central paradox. Moreover, the song overtly criticises the alleged collusion of Qatari government with the Ennahda party, under the garb of religion, echoing Zemni's (2016) ideas of *Tunisianité* being rooted in a distrust of Islam-oriented politics.

In contrast, Erkez Hip-Hop's "La3riba" exemplifies the socio-cultural distinction prevalent in the digital corpus. The use of *'rībah* to signify a vulgar, uncultured calamity shifts the focus from historical grievance to contemporary social boundary-policing. Similarly to "Sidi Arbi", the song was released during a period of political and social unrest, further contextualising its general theme of overcoming adversity. The song's structure – where the authentically Tunisian *mezoued* sound emerges only after the lyrical rejection of the *'rībah* – is a powerful meta-linguistic statement. It sonically embodies the act of purifying Tunisian identity from perceived Arab vulgarity. The image of a pre-Arab Carthaginian hero singing an anti-Arab slur is the ultimate expression of this paradox: a claim to an authentic indigenous identity that is articulated through the very language it seeks to disavow.

Together, these findings compellingly illustrate that Tunisian identity is not a simple alignment with an Arab or Berber pole but exists in a state of quasi-Arabness. It is an identity negotiated in the interstices – between Standard Arabic and Tunisian dialect, between the global reach of rap and the local sound of the *mezoued*, and between the embrace of Islam and the rejection of the ethnic label historically associated with it. This paper thereby contributes to a decolonial understanding of North African identity by demonstrating how inherited linguistic and ethnic hierarchies are actively questioned, subverted, and renegotiated not only in political rhetoric but in the everyday discourses of social media and the potent narratives of popular culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the contemporary Tunisian linguistic identity is fundamentally paradoxical, articulated in Arabic yet constructed through a sophisticated practice of counter-othering Arabness. The specialised lexicon of slurs – *‘orbān* for political delegitimisation, *sīdī ‘arbī* for moral critique, and *‘rībah* for socio-cultural distinction and ironic reclamation – functions as a precise mechanism for policing the boundaries of a distinct in-group, exemplifying Weinreich’s concept of resentful language loyalty. This phenomenon, prevalent from social media to popular music and national advertising, reveals a post-colonial identity negotiated in the liminal space of quasi-Arabness; it is an identity that embraces Islam and the Arabic language while simultaneously using them to reject the hegemonic Arab ethnonym, thereby subverting inherited hierarchies and asserting a unique, resilient cultural self through the strategic reappropriation of the dominant linguistic system itself.

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