

Jacques Berque (1910-1995)

DALE F. EICKELMAN, *Dartmouth College*

JACQUES BERQUE, one of France's most distinguished Islamic scholars, died at his family's estate in Saint Julien-en-Born, France, on June 22. Born in Algeria, where his father, Augustin Berque, was Director of Native Affairs, Berque had a classical French training in the humanities, distinguishing himself in Francewide competitions, obtaining the *agrégation des lettres* from the Sorbonne in 1932. [In 1994, he was elected an honorary fellow of MESA.]

After a brief stay in mainland France, Berque returned to Algeria, then considered an "integral" part of France, and lived for two years with a tribe in the Hodna region of Algeria in order to perfect his Arabic. In 1934, he entered the colonial service in Morocco as an *officier des affaires indigènes* and remained there until his 1953 resignation. His first scholarly publications date from his arrival in Morocco and include a brilliant sociological analysis of the Qarawiyyin mosque-university in Fez and the concepts and practice of Islamic jurisprudence in a colonial setting. These early essays, originally published in key specialist journals, have since been reprinted in various collections.¹ The scope and intellectual vitality of Berque's writings are matched by few of his peers or successors, and his writings show familiarity with most of the major intellectual movements of the twentieth century.

Berque's colonial career was marked by controversy almost from the outset. Together with Julien Couleau, Berque was responsible for a major plan for agrarian reform in Morocco which was submitted to Rabat's *Résidence* in 1944. It drew the wrath of the settler population and became moribund for all practical purposes when the settler lobby forced Berque's transfer to a remote post in Morocco's High Atlas mountains (1947-1953). The characteristic result of this administrative exile was a richly textured, *Annales*-style ethnography, *Les structures sociales du Haut-Atlas*.² Unlike most colonial officials, Berque was also a mentor to Moroccans, including Yahya Benslimane, a young agricultural student in the late 1940s who subsequently became director of the royal cabinet. In Morocco, as elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, Berque sustained close ties with successive generations of intellectuals and writers—in palaces and corridors of power, in the newly-formed universities and in the "opposition."

After Berque's resignation from France's Protectorate administration of Morocco in 1953, he became a UNESCO expert in Egypt. The transition was again marked by an ethnography, *Histoire sociale d'un village égyptien au XXème siècle*,³ notable for its discussion of economic and educational/intellectual innovation, ritual in a time of rapid economic change and its caustic asides on the bureaucracies of international development.

Because he was equally at home with villagers and intellectuals, Berque's UNESCO work and his subsequent appointment to the Sorbonne soon acquired an unmatched interpretive scope. Many of his key works were translated into English, including *The Arabs: Their History and Future*,⁴ *French North Africa: The Maghrib between Two World Wars*,⁵ *Egypt: Imperialism and Revolution*⁶ and

Cultural Expression in Arab Society Today.⁷ His *Al-Yousi: Problèmes de la culture marocaine au XVIIème siècle*⁸ was never translated, but was the principal anchor for Clifford Geertz's influential *Islam Observed*.⁹ These evocative studies represent the historical and cultural epochs in the twentieth-century Arab world, conveying from various perspectives—Arab nationalist and settler, bourgeois merchant and industrialist and peasant, union militant and religious scholar—how key events and contexts were understood and experienced by those who lived through them.

Berque's 1981 retirement from the Sorbonne engendered another change of focus. He undertook a translation of the Qur'an into French, published in the immediate aftermath of the Spring 1991 Gulf war and which for this reason generated considerable comment and debate.¹⁰ On the margins of this project Berque completed a complementary study, *Relire le Coran*,¹¹ an autobiography¹² and a steady stream of essays and interviews.¹³ He was also involved in recent years in projects to improve the education of France's immigrant population and efforts to improve the understanding of Islam and Muslims in Europe.

Berque's academic career was marked from the outset by the encouragement he offered Middle Eastern and North African students and colleagues, and by concerted efforts to forge ties with colleagues and students in the United States. His academic appointments in the US included a year-long stay in the mid-1970s at the University of Texas, Austin, and shorter stays elsewhere, including the University of California, Los Angeles. He may have been a scholarly maverick, but his efforts to break down the barriers to international scholarly communication and to facilitate the work of students and colleagues on several continents mean that his influence will be felt for years to come.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Some of major early essays on Morocco, for example, are reprinted in *De l'Euphrate à l'Atlas* (Paris: Éditions Sindbad, 1978).

² (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955).

³ (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1957).

⁴ Trans. Jean Stewart (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

⁵ Trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967).

⁶ Trans. Jean Stewart (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

⁷ Trans. Robert W. Stookey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

⁸ (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1958).

⁹ *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Tunisia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁰ See Jacques Berque, "Autour d'une traduction du Coran," *Studia Islamica*, 74 (1994), 181-90.

¹¹ (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993).

¹² *Mémoires des deux rives* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

¹³ Such as *Il reste un avenir: Entretiens avec Jean Sur* (Paris: Arléa, 1993).

¹⁴ A complete bibliography of Jacques Berque's writings will be included in a memorial book that Farouk Mardem-Bey (Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris) is currently editing. As yet untitled, it is scheduled to be published in 1996.