

Cultural Identity according to Malek Bennabi

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Abstract

Culture constituted one of the central and fundamental themes in the thought of Malek Bennabi. Through this, he sought to highlight the value of identity, especially in the aftermath of the cultural, social, and political colonization experienced by Arab societies. Accordingly, Malek Bennabi considers that the identity of nations is defined primarily by culture and the meanings and significance it conveys, particularly in relation to history, religion, and language.

This study aims to define the concept of identity and its representations according to Malek Bennabi, as well as to demonstrate its impact on the revival of the nation, the construction of its future, and the preservation of its essential components.

Keywords: Malek Bennabi, cultural identity, colonization, Arab societies, culture, history,

1. Introduction

The question of identity is one of the essential issues that have increasingly been raised in Third World countries, particularly those that have recently emerged from colonial rule. After the colonizers' withdrawal, the colonized state found itself in a state of cultural, political, social, and economic disorientation. It became evident that no progress or development could be achieved

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without first reclaiming and reconstructing its fragmented self and restoring its true identity—an identity that had been obliterated by colonialism through mechanisms of racial and cultural division. Such mechanisms allowed the colonizers to control the colonized populations more effectively.

Among the countries that suffered deeply from oppressive colonial policies is Algeria, which endured French colonization. The French colonial project went beyond territorial occupation to directly target Algerian identity. It deliberately worked to dismantle this identity and disperse its people. Any fragmentation of the Algerian identity weakened the unity of the Algerian people, thereby making their resistance to French colonialism more difficult. At the same time, French colonizers aimed to erase the Algerian identity by promoting the "Frenchification" of Algerian culture, seeking to create a society that was French in both identity and culture.

Although the Algerian people fought valiantly and ultimately liberated themselves from French occupation, they soon discovered that they were still under cultural colonization. They had acquired a French cultural identity, which clashed with their post-colonial reality. Algerian society became fragmented into minority groups, each clinging to an identity implanted by France. This division hindered the nation's ability to move forward on all fronts. Many intellectuals and theorists realized that the first step toward Algeria's revival lay in reclaiming its national identity, which is necessary to unify the people. A state cannot be founded without an identity that resists change or dissolution because identity is one of the nation's constants—it is expressed through its language, religion, geography, and culture.

This aspect of identity is one of the central concerns that preoccupied the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi, who emphasized culture as a foundational pillar upon which a nation is built. He viewed culture not only as a key component of identity but also as the driving force behind progress and development, so long as it unifies people and guides their direction. Based on this, the main question of this study arises: What does cultural identity mean according to Malek Bennabi? From this central question emerge several others: What is meant by identity? What are its components? What is the state of cultural identity in the context of cultural diversity? What role does cultural identity play in shaping global culture?

First: The Concept of Identity

The concept of identity is among the most complex terms, difficult for researchers to define in a comprehensive and exclusive way. Definitions of identity vary from one nation to another and from one philosopher to another. In the Arabic language, "identity" is derived from the pronoun "هو" (he), much as "humanity" is derived from "human." Linguistically, identity refers to that which distinguishes something from others and remains constant despite changes. It represents the essence that persists even when its external attributes change. Thus, identity linguistically is derived

from the pronoun "هو" and is considered a transferred term—originally a particle, now used as a noun. Some translators coined the term "هوية" (identity) to replace "existence," making it lighter in tone and more relatable to human nature.

Philosophically, identity is defined as the unknown, absolute truth, or God. It is centered around the notions of self, truth, and essence. Identity refers to the reality of a thing and its unique characteristics that distinguish it from others and make its personality recognizable. Al-Farabi defines it as "the identity, distinctness, individuality, and specific existence of a thing, the very indication of which points to its unique nature that cannot be shared with others." Furthermore, identity is seen as the crucible in which the individual connects with the group, transforming the singular "I" into a collective "we." Therefore, identity embodies all the characteristics shared between the individual and their group, which distinguishes them from others. It can thus be summarized as "the total of spiritual, intellectual, and emotional traits that define a specific society, including ways of life, value systems, traditions, beliefs, methods of economic production, and rights."

A distinction is often made between two types of identity: individual identity and collective identity (also called national identity). Individual identity refers to the personal traits that differentiate one person from another, such as physical characteristics and personality traits. In contrast, collective or national identity refers to "a set of cultural characteristics shared by all members of a particular nation, distinguishing them from other nations." This form of identity gained significant attention in the Arab world during the 19th century, especially as a result of the fragmentation caused by colonialism.

Second: Components of Identity

Most philosophers agree that the components of identity revolve around language, history, geographical territory, as well as religion and shared culture. Some have linked identity to history and language, considering that the identity of a nation lies in its language and history—that is, what unites the members of a nation is the common tongue and the shared conscience represented in history. This is what Zaki Al-Arsuzi emphasized when he considered the components of the identity of the Islamic nation to be found in the Arabic tongue, where:

"It draws its authenticity and its evident genius from the Arabic tongue, which achieves for it the unity of identity as both a source and a goal."

Accordingly, the source of identity and the only path to uniting the nation is the common tongue, represented in the Arabic language, under which:

"The eternal Arab mentality... is neither abstract nor formal (and these are the traits of senile and hollow nations), but rather it is descriptive in all its aspects. The words are but images (with a double function: image and becoming) that rely on the various directions of their ink at their emergence, thus expressing the boundaries of their growth."

Thus, for Al-Arsuzi, language surpassed the idea of being merely symbols and words with meaning, becoming instead an expression of the spirit of the nation, whose genius lies in its tongue.

As for Sati' Al-Husri, he believed that the identity of a nation lies in its shared past and unified language. On these foundations, Arab nationalism is built, as the Arabs have a common language and a single history. He stated that a nation:

"If it loses its language, it has lost life and entered the ranks of the dead."

And history is the artery through which the identity of the people flows.

Malek Bennabi sees that the identity of nations is determined starting from culture and the meanings and implications it carries, especially history and religion. He provided many examples in his books, recalling the Western experience and showing how religion contributed to shaping the identity of peoples—because religion, in his view, is capable of shaping the individual self and the collective self. Bennabi supports this with the Christian experience, which was:

"The first challenge to Western European individuality, and the superior ego that the Westerner felt at the beginning of Western colonial expansion in the world."

The Arab peoples that have recently emerged from colonialism are required to return to their identity embedded in history, language, religion, and culture. Nations are recognized by their identity, and their fate is tied to it. Therefore, Bennabi believes that the absence of identity components will lead a nation to extinction. If the Algerian nation wants to continue, it must restore the components of its existence that grant it a presence among nations.

Third: Culture in the Thought of Malek Bennabi

The issue of culture is among the matters that occupied the attention of Malek Bennabi, to which he gave great importance in his writings, attempting through them to present a comprehensive and deep vision of culture. He considered it a problem of the modern era that demands attention and reflection. He showed that the concept of (culture) is newly coined and of recent origin—it did not exist before in ancient civilizations nor in Islamic civilization. It took shape during the European Renaissance, thus reflecting the intellectual and literary development that Europe witnessed.

As for Arabs and Muslims, they took the concept from Europe. It is a translation of the word *culture*, which itself is derived from the Latin word *cultivare*, which means agriculture, and its meaning evolved until it came to refer to everything produced by European man. As for the Arabs, the concept is still not precisely defined. Some trace it back to the verb "thaqafa", whose roots go back to the pre-Islamic era and is mentioned in many Quranic verses, such as the verse:

"And kill them wherever you overtake them." (Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 191)

Despite this, Malek Bennabi says:

"The word (culture) in Arabic has not yet acquired the determinative power that its European counterpart has. We are therefore forced, for this reason, to link it to our artistic works."

This makes the Western term a necessary support and reference for defining the concept of culture in Arab civilization.

Malek Bennabi believes that interest in culture increased greatly in the seventeenth century, when many sciences related to culture emerged, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political economy. Culture thus became one of the problems studied by sociology. Nevertheless:

"The perception of culture remains as it was during the Renaissance—that is, as the sum of the fruits of thought in the fields of art, philosophy, science, law, etc."

However, this perception was no longer suitable for the nineteenth century, given the characteristics that distinguished this era, such as the trait of dissection and analysis. For this reason, the nineteenth century considered the concept of culture to go beyond the definition that prevailed during the Renaissance.

Malek Bennabi begins from the psychological analysis of culture, where he tackled the concept of culture from a historical perspective and how we understand culture, concluding that culture as a concept appeared with European civilization. As for Arab Islamic civilization, it is still not precisely defined. In doing so, he employed the development of the concept through historical eras and cited definitions of many Western thinkers such as the Marxist Yadanov, who defined culture as:

"Functionally related to the group, as culture to him is the philosophy of society."

Malek Bennabi also mentions that in the West, some define culture as the Greco-Roman humanities, and from here culture becomes the philosophy of man. William Ogburn distinguishes between two levels of culture: the material level, which is represented in the collection of things and work tools produced by man, and the social level, which includes beliefs, customs, traditions, education, etc. However, Malek Bennabi rejects these and other Western definitions of the concept of culture:

"Because their content cannot provide us with the key to the problem in the psychological and temporal circumstances surrounding it in the Arab and Islamic countries."

He then moves on to define culture from the perspective of the psychological composition of culture and speaks to us about the practical and applied side of culture from the viewpoint of its connection to society on one hand and civilization on the other, in order to highlight the influence culture leaves on both, which gives it an educational dimension based on defining goals and means. This is confirmed in his statement:

"The foundation of every culture is necessarily a (composition) and (structuring) of the world of persons, and it is a structuring that occurs according to an educational methodology that takes on a philosophical moral form."

Through psychological analysis and the psychological composition of culture, Malek Bennabi concludes by defining culture as:

“A set of moral attributes, social values received by the individual since birth as initial capital in the environment in which he was born. Culture, in this sense, is the milieu in which the individual forms his character and personality.”

Fourth: Cultural Representations and Identity in the Thought of Malek Bennabi

Malek Bennabi establishes a distinction between culture and science, considering that culture is more a theory of behavior than a theory of knowledge subordinate to science, because:

“Similarity and difference in behavior result from culture, not from science.”

Accordingly, it is culture, not science, that distinguishes one society from another, and through the culture of a society, we judge whether it is developed or backward. Consequently, culture is more comprehensive than science and differs from it in subject and function. Hence, it is necessary not to adopt the definitions that other societies have placed for culture—that is, we must not borrow the concept of culture that Western civilization has created and use it to define Arab civilization. Each civilization has its own concept of culture that aligns with the nature of its society, because culture is a clear expression of the identity of the society from which it emerges.

Malek Bennabi believes that if culture carries the identity of peoples, it must be based on four essential elements or foundations. Meaning, we cannot speak of culture in the absence of these four elements; that is, culture is the sum of these elements, namely: the moral constitution, aesthetic taste, practical logic, and industry, as he identified in his book *The Conditions of the Renaissance* and discussed and analyzed in his book *The Problem of Culture*.

The moral constitution or moral guidance is a condition for organizing society and organizing relationships between individuals within society. Since man lives within a community, there must be moral controls that guide his behavior. Consequently, they enable a person to integrate with other members of his society and to have an active role within the group in building society. This is reflected in Malek Bennabi's statement:

“The world of persons cannot have effective social activity unless it is organized and transformed into a (structure).”

Thus, the individual's goals can only be achieved within the cultural group to which he belongs. Any activity an individual undertakes only acquires meaning within the framework of his group, with which he shares the elements of his existence. This indicates that the presence of the individual within the group gives him the ability to contribute and work through the moral values that the group plants in the individual's soul, giving him a sense of belonging to his group or homeland.

As for aesthetic taste, it reflects the lifestyle in society. The aesthetic element is not limited only to the visual aspect but also:

“Relates to dynamic cultural elements such as movement and activity, which to a certain extent determine the effectiveness of society.”

Beauty has an impact on human thoughts, pushing them towards creativity and perfection in their work in order to develop the aesthetic taste latent in the human spirit, which in turn positively reflects on society. The aesthetic aspect reflects the extent of a people's advancement and sophistication, providing a clear image of their civilization. Nations are often distinguished by their aesthetic dimension and the extent of their attention to it. It has become customary today that Western peoples are more civilized, and the evidence of this is their attention to aesthetics and the arts, which is evident in the cleanliness of the streets, the beauty of architecture, and the precision in design. On the other hand, backward nations are recognized by the reality of their environment and the nature of their individuals, who pay no attention to the aesthetic image of their society. Thus, it can be said that the aesthetic element today imposes itself as one of the components of a person's identity and his belonging to his group and society.

As for practical logic, it is represented in the applied aspect of culture—an aspect lacking in Islamic civilization, which gives great importance to theory and neglects application, which reflects the validity of the idea. In this case, Malek Bennabi believes that there is no benefit from an idea if it is not implemented in reality. This is reflected in his statement:

“We are in urgent need of this practical logic in our lives because abstract intellect is abundant in our countries, but practical intellect, which consists in its essence of will and attention, is almost non-existent.”

The reason for this is that the Muslim individual spends much of his time in trivialities, making him ineffective. Thus, action and work are the best ways for nations to confirm their presence in history. For this reason, Malek Bennabi calls for the need to pay attention to the application of ideas and not to leave them floating in the sky of theorizing so that they may have a beneficial impact on the individual and society. The West is a model to be emulated in the field of action, as it has realized that the value of the individual is manifested in his work. Therefore, it sanctifies work and gives great importance to time. Indeed, the West has been able to impose itself on all nations and, subsequently, seeks to impose its identity and promote it within the framework of what is known as globalization. Western culture in thought and action has become a reference for all nations that desire imitation and dependence.

Industry is considered one of the elements that form the cultural identity of societies, as it includes all arts, professions, abilities, and scientific applications. “Industry, for the individual, is a means of livelihood, and perhaps of building his glory, but for society, it is a means of preserving its entity and continuing its growth.” There is no industry better than another in the view of Malek Bennabi, for all industries are of equal status, where the shepherd and the man of science are equal.

It is not possible to build a culture or civilization by excluding one profession at the expense of others, due to the existence of complementarity between the various functions performed by individuals within society. Malek Bennabi also believes that the backwardness of Arab societies or Third World societies is due to the depreciative view of some industries, as we find that the individual in underdeveloped societies establishes a preferential view between professions and crafts, preferring office work over other types of work and shunning agriculture and farming, whereas the advancement of society can only occur through harmony and consistency among all types of work without favoring one over the other.

Thus, culture for Malek Bennabi is that system acquired by the individual from society since birth, manifesting in his behavior and transforming into a lifestyle that distinguishes society from others, which gives society authority over its individuals. That is, the individual submits to the prevailing culture in society due to social pressure, and deviation from this leads to a cultural crisis, which in turn leads to the collapse of civilization. Therefore, any disintegration at the cultural level leads to the loss of identity and consequently to the demise of civilization.

Fifth: Cultural Identity and Global Culture According to Malek Bennabi

Malek Bennabi aimed, by defining the concept of culture within society as a fundamental determinant of identity, to transition to how to deal with other cultures, which interaction with has become an inevitable necessity, especially in light of technological development and the emergence of what is now known as globalization. Globalization seeks to mold diverse cultures into a global culture that glorifies peace and aims at coexistence among nations, which has become:

“An inevitable necessity in a world dominated by technology, which has imposed the existence of others on every society.”

Accordingly, the call for centering around cultural identity has begun to recede in favor of a global culture promoted by globalization, where each civilization seeks to create opportunities for communication and cultural cooperation with other civilizations. This is what UNESCO strives for in order to highlight the role played by culture, especially on a global scale, to alleviate tensions.

Malek Bennabi believes that cultural coexistence or the globalization of culture does not occur on the material level as is prevalent in Western societies, but rather on the moral and intellectual level. This is because the conscience of man in the twentieth century no longer gives importance to the homeland and region; thus, the priority has become for humanity. That is, humanity has taken the lead in the concerns of contemporary man, whether Arab or Western, and identity slogans no longer appeal to him.

Culture is constantly evolving and is defined historically and morally within a global framework that brings together colonized peoples and colonizing peoples in a single global culture. This is evident in Malek Bennabi's statement:

“We are living this conflict today in all its forms, awaiting the moment of synthesis that will fuse the two tendencies into world peace.”

This can only be achieved by supporting the African man, who aspires to reach civilization and become civilized. Nevertheless, the civilized European man must be cleansed of the sins he committed against African peoples and raised to the level of humanity. Thus, the issue of African peoples becomes an important matter for peace, as Malek Bennabi says:

“As much as we elevate the African masses to the level of civilization, we elevate the European conscience to the level of humanity, to place before it a true image of the man whom colonialism considers as a trivial being.”

Malek Bennabi is one of the thinkers and philosophers who defended the idea of cultural coexistence and openness to the other, who in turn is a self with a unique culture. However, this does not prevent the establishment of a global culture whose slogan is humanity, not war—a culture guaranteed by peace and supported by intellectuals who have a great influence in society. The African intellectual plants the spirit of humanity in his society, while the European intellectual instills the idea that the African man is a human being just like his European counterpart.

Cultural identity is no longer the ultimate goal sought by contemporary man. We need to expand the circle of identity so that all racial and cultural differences and disparities dissolve under one identity: humanity, which treats all races as human beings with shared rights, the right to self-determination, and the right to shape their future. This would put an end to colonialism, exploitation, and tyranny, replacing them with brotherhood, humanity, and equality as a goal that unites all people without exclusion or marginalization.

Conclusion

Finally, from the foregoing, it can be said that identity was a fundamental demand for peoples who had recently emerged from colonialism. Malek Bennabi was among those who defended the idea of reviving identity, especially in its cultural aspect, because of its role in the renaissance of the Arab nation, particularly Algeria, due to what it had suffered from French colonization. He considered culture as the only way to determine peoples' belonging, and through it, they come to know their identity. However, cultural identity alone is not sufficient to put an end to all the violations individuals are subjected to today in the name of racial and gender distinctions.

Scientific and technological progress and the human entry into globalization have had a significant impact on cultural identity. Amidst this development, the contemporary human is no longer satisfied with a single cultural identity that excludes and marginalizes others. Rather, he now demands a single identity that brings together all people—humanity, which knows no difference or discrimination and establishes coexistence among cultures, civilizations, and religions, in order to build a global culture that encompasses all peoples. Therefore, Malek Bennabi calls for openness to

the other and acceptance of him with all his differences, without paying attention to the cultural difference that globalization seeks to erase.

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