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The Kahina and Kateb Yacine: mythology and feminist politics in post-revolutionary Algeria

The mystical Berber queen known as the Kahina boasts a hagiography that stretches all the way back to the time of Ibn Khaldûn, the notable North African historian of the high middle ages.[1] It is in his history of the war-faring Berber peoples that we learn the story of the Kahina, who bravely resisted the onslaught of Islamic warriors who pressured her people to convert. According to Ibn Khaldûn, the Kahina was courageous, brave, and defiant. Though her own religious background is unclear, Ibn Khaldûn suggests she may have confessed Judaism.[2] Although she eventually succumbed to the Arab invaders and her people accepted Islam, she nevertheless contributed importantly to what he refers to as, "the great deeds of the Berbers."[3] Roughly seven centuries later, the Kahina appeared in the thoughts and fictions of Kateb Yacine, a mid- to late-20th century Algerian writer and intellectual. Politicized by the events of both the Algerian revolutionary war, which lasted from 1954 to 1962, and the resulting feminist struggle, Kateb's Kahina emerged as a feminist. Assuming both literary and historical roles, the Kahina provided an outlet for Kateb's outspoken commitment to women's rights in Algeria.

I

The literary representations of Kateb's feminist Kahina have been explored in significant detail, though it is my contention that these studies do not provide sufficient evidence to justify interpreting her in this way.[4] Literary theorist Winifred Woodhull explored the feminist undertones of Kateb's 1956 novel *Nedjma*. Though the Kahina played a small role in her analysis, she nevertheless argued that the legend is the link between Algeria's uncertain ethnic past and its modern future, observing that the mixed heritage of the novel's titular character speaks to that of the Kahina and that this ambiguity represented the overall ethnic and colonial tension that was occurring within revolutionary Algeria.[5] The vague, symbolic references to the Kahina do not properly justify interpreting her as a feminist, although the subject of Woodhull's work undoubtedly attempted to portray her in that way.

Anthropologist Majid Hannoum similarly tied the legend to the titular character of Kateb's *Nedjma*. According to Hannoum, the character of Nedjma in the context of the events of the novel represented a "humiliated" and ethnically uncertain Kahina, one successfully overcome by powerful foreign invaders.[6] In this interpretation, *Nedjma*'s literary representation of the Kahina gave voice to Kateb's anti-colonial views and suggested a glorification of the multi-ethnicity of Algeria. In addition, Hannoum described the Kahina's portrayal in Kateb's play *La Kahina*. The play is a dramatization of her final days and suggests that the Arab conquest of Algeria brought with it oppressive treatment of women, as it led to the downfall of the previously powerful Kahina who once held sway over North African society.[7] Again, while Hannoum's description of Kateb's Kahina is posited as being feminist, it is my view that the connection in *Nedjma* is too vague and symbolic and that the association in *La Kahina*, while more direct and historical, was similarly weak in showing the ways in which Kateb portrayed her in this way.

The above research neglects historical contextualization of the Kahina: in other words, these studies fail to see the ways in which Kateb's Kahina might have reflected surrounding historical circumstances. In addition, these studies do not historically justify the Kahina as an actual figure in North Africa, and thus do not give proper credibility to the argument that she was indeed a feminist. Therefore, in being interpreted as a mythical figure, as opposed to a historical one, the Kahina in Kateb's fictional works serves no relevant political or feminist function. Indeed, I argue that many other Katebian sources, such as interviews and correspondences, provide evidence for a historical, feminist Kahina. In my view, it is only by presenting her in this way that she becomes completely politicized as a feminist figure. Furthermore, the above-mentioned fictional works – *Nedjma* and *La Kahina* – can be reinterpreted in light of the Algerian feminist struggle of the 1980s to provide further evidence that Kateb's Kahina was a feminist. Thus, his Kahina emerges to give voice to his views on not only the feminist struggle but also the general status of women in Algerian society as well.

What gave the Kahina such significance in Maghrib society that Kateb would use her as a symbol for his feminist views? The answer lies in the middling seven centuries between the Kahina's first appearance in *Al-'Ibar* and her later resurgence in Kateb's work. These centuries boasted numerous interpretations of the legend, creating a cultural vitality that held relevance for generations to come. Often bridging the gap between myth and history, the Kahina's hagiography – a term borrowed from saintly scholarship – illustrates the breadth of her historical and mythical intrigue and demonstrates her effectiveness as a cultural tool among North African cultural groups. The French and Berbers, Muslims and Jews, and men and women alike used her as voice for their own views, often rewriting both her history and the history of North Africa in the process. It is in this multivocality that the significance of the Kahina lies. She is more than simply a myth; in her role as a conduit for the views and opinions of particular groups, she becomes politicized and transformed into a symbol of the groups' discontent, dominance, or both.

The historical and sociological role of the Kahina legend might be made most clear by employing a framework of cultural hegemony. Coined by Antonio Gramsci, the concept attempts to explain how one ruling group establishes norms that enable them to dominate a culturally diverse society without the use of force. The Kahina was both a tool and symptom of cultural hegemony; she was a symbol for political views that often rewrote history, and her employment by various groups in this way demonstrated the difficulty of achieving cultural superiority in a heterogeneous society like that of North Africa.

While early depictions of the Kahina indicate mild cultural hegemonic goals, the historical circumstances that justified a more valid application of this theory did not arise until the time of French colonization starting in 1830. It was in Algeria specifically, where French presence was most felt, that the Kahina's continual depiction assumed decidedly cultural hegemonic overtones. The myth likewise began to take on special significance, as the overwhelming French presence essentially created a new Algeria. As Kahina scholar Majid Hannoum asserts, the French colonial experience in Algeria effectively cut off Algeria from its history.[8] Thus the Kahina, in being politicized by various Algerian inhabitants in both the native and colonial populations, was evidence of an attempt to create a history that was becoming harder and harder to retain. For the French colonizers, this erasure of history was intentional, and as we will see, provided legitimization for the Algerian colonial incursion. However, for Algerians, the Kahina was used to construct their lost history, at the base of which was a forgone sovereignty that would eventually come to justify their aspirations for independence from the colonizers.

Informed by these theoretical frameworks, I argue that Kateb's feminist Kahina emerged as a result of several important factors. Kateb stressed the historical existence of the Kahina to justify the feminist views he portrayed onto her. In addition, these feminist views and his politicized Kahina must also be seen within the context of Algerian feminist struggle post-revolutionary decades. Last of all, by reinterpreting *Nedjma* and *La Kahina*, Kateb's two most notable fictional works in which the Kahina is a character, in the context of this feminist struggle, new meanings may be gleaned which further emphasize her portrayal as a feminist figure.

II

Before recreating Kateb's feminist Kahina, however, it is first necessary to briefly overview her hagiography, as well as provide a brief narrative of the events of the Algerian post-revolutionary feminist struggle. To illustrate the impact of the Kahina legend on Algerian society, it is necessary to examine a basic microcosm of the competing claims portrayed onto her since the time of the French colonial period. Both the colonizers and the colonized presented their own interpretations of her to justify whatever political goal to which they aspired. These often-antithetical renditions of the Kahina legend rewrote the history of Algeria to provide a "factual" background that could validate these political goals. Though the Kahina's hagiography consists of renderings represented across an extremely diverse collection of North African cultural groups, her relevance as a tool for cultural hegemony, and more specifically, one that contrasted with Kateb's feminist Kahina, may be limited to what the following writers have presented.

Ibn Khaldûn's basic narrative of the Kahina, discussed previously, persisted through the centuries, although each successive historiographical account manipulated peripheral details to alter the way the Kahina and the Berbers were perceived and argued for a specific interpretation of their history. This vitality continued into the French colonial period starting in 1830, having become firmly rooted in the Muslim North African imaginary.[9] It was at this point that the Kahina's reinterpretations assumed cultural hegemonic roles. Realizing the importance of history of a tool for establishing dominance, the French colonizers especially refashioned the Kahina in the early 20th century. In these renderings of the Kahina, the aim was to establish cultural hegemony by politicizing respective peoples to whom the myth had meaning; in other words, the promulgation of these ideologies in the Kahina effectively justified colonial presence. The first significant historical account of the Kahina written during the colonial period comes from Ernest Mercier, a politician-cum-historian who worked tirelessly to establish French colonial rule.[10] The land of the Kahina, North Africa, is portrayed as being "Berber, and no less significantly, Roman."[11] Having established the supposed European origins of Algeria, Mercier then goes on to suggest that the French occupation of the North African region was not only justified, but bound by historical duty. Mercier's account of the Kahina and the Berber people was posited to challenge the assumption in Europe and France that North Africa was an Arab land, thus justifying and even necessitating the intervention of the French colonizers. The Kahina, in this version a Jewish queen, while portrayed as humane and intelligent, is significant only because of her resistance to the Arab invaders.[12]

Mercier's history of the Kahina provides one of the first colonial interpretations of the Berber queen, though many more were to follow. An account by Emile-Félix Gautier portrays the Kahina as a nomadic queen, who ultimately doomed North Africa to its Arab-overrun fate.[13] Again, this view can be seen as an attempt to necessitate French rule in North Africa, as it blames the Berber queen, in this history resembling an Arab in mentality and genealogy, for the destruction of the region, which only the French could mend.[14]

Arab historiography also sought to conform the legend of the Kahina to its own view of history, as evidenced by the works of several prominent Arab historians who wrote during the colonial period. In the 1930s, Algerian writer Tawfîq Madanî penned a history of Algeria that portrayed the Arab invaders as heroes who brought peace and civilization to the Berbers.[15] The Berbers, by his account, had been searching for salvation, that is to say, an end to the constant warfare that plagued them. Salvation comes in the form of Islam, and the Kahina, having been fatally wounded by the invaders, asked her sons to accept the religion, which thereby reconciled the tense relations between the Arabs and the Berbers into a single civilized force. Though the Kahina herself did not become a Muslim, as she dies before she can convert, her ignorance of the fact that the Arabs were liberators rather than foreign invaders qualified her to be rendered, in this account, as an Algerian heroine. What is more, she is believed to have foreseen the societal advances the Arab conquerors were to bring and thus her submission to Islam was evidence of her sagacity. In this account, any glorification of the Kahina is secondary to celebration of the Arab conquest, which was seen to have brought relative stability and development to the North African region. Thus, as the developers of the Maghrib region, the Arabs were seen as its true heirs. This Arabo-Islamic cultural hegemony provided an anti-colonial justification for the emerging revolutionary cause: Algeria belonged to the Arabs and no less importantly Islam, and it was their historical duty to evict the French colonizers.

To properly contextualize Kateb's feminist Kahina, it is first necessary to examine the surrounding historical circumstances that influenced his views, especially those concerning the feminist struggles of post-revolutionary Algeria. Having been colonially occupied by France since the early 19th century, Algeria moved to gain independence in the 1950s, sparking a decade-long conflict that ended with French concession in 1962. The conflict is noted for the extensive use of terrorism by both sides and the objectionable use of torture by the French to punish the Algerian rebels. Important for our feminist discussion, however, is that the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the predominant Algerian revolutionary body, strategically employed women to achieve its goals. It is only by first analyzing the status of women both during and especially after the revolution that we can find a foundation for Kateb's views.

Algerian women assumed a variety of roles during the revolutionary period, participating actively as combatants, spies, fundraisers, couriers, and nurses.[16] It was reported by the ministry for veterans' affairs that as many as 11,000 women were involved in the struggle for independence in some way, although some scholars regard this as a gross underestimation.[17] Their participation undoubtedly served two primary functions: they not only were aiding in their country's dislodgment from the French colonialists, but also attempting to emancipate themselves from Algeria's tradition of ignorance and servitude towards women. What is more, women participants were not spared by the French military, with some 2,200 combatants subjected to arrest and torture.[18]

To some, this remarkable period ushered in high hopes, as women fought side by side with men, hiding FLN soldiers in their houses, transmitting messages, and carrying bombs in their purses and under their veils.[19] Optimists envisioned these heroines as the harbingers of a new era of women's liberation and advancement in Algerian society. The FLN even had a policy committing itself to women's equality, creating an atmosphere of promise and hope for future generations of Algerian women - one that persisted through the revolution and into the new country's fledgling independence.[20] Upon Algeria's independence in 1962, women secured citizenship, equals rights to coeducation and health services (both free), and entry to the professions.[21]

However, as the glory of new Algeria faded away and the pressures of carving out a suitable global economic and political niche became apparent, the promise for social and gender equality also began to fade. Some, as literary theorist Zahia Salhi notes, even argue that "the backlash against women's rights occurred during the national liberation struggle," as the FLN had begun to remove women from the real fighting zones by sending them to the borders or overseas.[22]

Nevertheless, despite the FLN government's reaffirmation to women's equality in its 1976 constitution, by the next decade all of the social advances made in theory and actuality had been lost. Misogyny, both institutional and familiar, crept back into Algerian society as the economic and political pressures of carving out a global niche became apparent. The first major protest against this wave of misogyny occurred on December 23, 1981, when women war veterans joined young feminist activists in voicing their rejection of the government's introduction of the Family Code. Despite the outcry, the law was passed in 1984, and it appeared to have sealed the fate of Algerian women in its staggeringly reactive measures. The law made it a legal duty for Algerian women to obey their husbands, and respect and serve them, their parents, and relatives.[23] Many other gendered restrictions were also put in place, including oppressive guidelines for occupations, marriage, divorce, and inheritance.[24] Algerian feminists regarded this as a serious blow to their cause, seeing themselves relegated to a never-before-seen low in Algerian society. Proponents of the law claimed it was based on *Shari'a*, or the Islamic legal code, though opponents believed its roots to have sprung from a tradition of patriarchy and misogyny in Algeria that resumed in the post-colonial era.[25]

In October 1988, demonstrations broke out again, this time calling for an end to the Algerian government's routine oppression and corruption, and demanding dignity and justice for all citizens.[26] Algerian youth, feminists, and reformers decried the status quo and its repressive structures, triggering protests and demands for change from many other groups.[27] These demonstrations in part sparked a decade-long civil war, which, although noted for the flourishing of women's organizations that took place within it, is unfortunately outside the focus of this study and beyond the life of Kateb Yacine.

III

As mentioned before, the Kahina's hagiography reveals that she often bridged the gap between myth and actual historical figure. I argue that Kateb stressed her historical presence to give credibility to the feminist views that he portrayed onto her. As an actual historical figure, her discussion gave more weight to Kateb's feminist views. In a 1987 interview, Kateb discussed how the problem of the uncertain religion of the Kahina is evidence of the struggle between myth and history. He wondered, "When the Kahina is presented as a Jew, what does that mean? It is an invention of the Arabs."[28] He went on to say, "If she had entered into history as a Jew, it would be widely known. The Kahina did not enter into history because she fought for Judaism... at least to my knowledge. She entered into history as a nationalist."[29] Kateb suggested that the Jewishness of the Kahina was a creation of early Arab invaders to present her as an enemy of Islam and justify the conquest of her peoples. He argued that it is not because of her Jewish origins that she is remembered in history, as she did not fight for Judaism, and that her refashioning as a Jew illustrates the extent to which she was subjected to a mythical, as opposed to historical, treatment. It is for this, Kateb then said, that "I am against myths. There is still a history!"[30] Thus it can be observed that Kateb was against myths that falsely portrayed the Kahina to suit the ideological goals of their creators because these accounts so often skewed history to advance a political agenda.

Kateb instead preferred historical veracity, as is evidenced in his reference to Ibn Khaldûn later in the same interview. He remarked, "We have a thread that will help us rediscover the truth through all these centuries of lies, and Ibn Khaldûn is important because he was very much an Arabo-Islamist but he had a scientific mind."[31] Kateb then suggested, "It is necessary that Ibn Khaldûn's *History of the Berbers* be taught. It is this history that concerns us the most. It is a fundamental work. When one reads it, one can arrive at other questions as well."[32] Thus Kateb proposed that a link to the true past of Algeria and the true history of the Kahina could be found in this work by Ibn Khaldûn.[33] Kateb esteemed this work because it was created with scientific sensibilities, not tarnished or influenced by any kind of political agenda or otherwise nefarious attempt to render its subject a myth. The work provided a historical account of the Kahina, and as we will see, Kateb glorified it to give credibility to the feminist claims he rendered onto her. In this way he also emphasized the Kahina's actual historical presence as opposed to her mythical one.

But there is yet another mythological creation that Kateb battled, and one that in his eyes had a direct effect in bringing about the contemporary struggle of Algerian women. The myth was that of "the Arabo-Islamic relation: the longest, most rigid, and most difficult to fight against"[34] Kateb noted, "Arabo-Islamic Algeria is an Algeria against itself, an Algeria estranged from itself"[35] Kateb thus saw the idea of Algeria as both fundamentally Arab and Islamic as contradictory, as it belied the historical reality of Algeria. Absorbed by society partially as the result of French colonialism, which as mentioned before, effectively cut off Algerians from their history, Arabo-Islamism came to be seen as the foundation for Algerian society and its peoples. In that vein, Kateb noted in another interview, "...many Algerians believe themseleves to be Arabs because they've fallen under the Arabo-Islamic myth[36] Furthermore, he argued, "Political regimes use this Arabness to mask their people from their own identity"[37] Kateb implied that the Arabo-Islamic foundations of Algeria are false, and that the real identity of the Algerian people has been kept from them. Lamenting on the effectiveness of this usurpation of identity, Kateb then said, “We are taken by an ocean of lies”[38] He implies that this myth has left the people of Algeria surrounded by falsehoods that “they believe because they have nothing else”[39] Kateb implied that as a result of the erasure of their history, Algerians believed any myth which might have filled in the gap of their unknown past, and that this deficiency was manipulated by Arabo-Islamists who wanted Algeria to be seen as a North African bastion of the Arabo-Islamic culture. One can see how Kateb rejected the cultural hegemony promulgated by proponents of an Arabo-Islamic Algeria. In rejecting this framework, Kateb demonstrated the importance of actual historical veracity as opposed to false histories created by myths.

Above all, Kateb stressed the importance of history as a way of sifting through the lies and falsehoods imposed on Algerian society through the centuries. He remarked in an interview:

> If we know our history – and it is not about idealizing it, nor is it necessary to create a gallery of perfect heroes - we would better understand its weaknesses and its past life, and we would be able to better demystify the moonshine and the junk that constitutes what has been said about Algeria.[40]

Thus, to Kateb, the Kahina can be seen to represent a preserved part of Algeria’s history. It seems that he wanted to guard her as a relic of its past, and that he wanted to cleanse her portrayal, and by extension, the entire history of Algeria, of the dissident political hegemonies that had been thrust onto her. She represented part of Algerian history that had been formerly lost to centuries of Arabization and colonialism, and thus Kateb saw her as a justification of Algeria’s past and a feminist icon for its future. What is more, in emphasizing that the Kahina represents an actual historical aspect of Algeria, Kateb suggested that she might be an example for future generations of Algerians. He said: “The knowledge of our history is thus an urgency for us. For the humans who know their past and the past of their country know who they are.”[41] The Kahina can be seen to represent part of that past, and constituted a part of what Kateb saw as the legacy of all Algerians. In the following discussion, we will see how Kateb suggested that this legacy indicated a more hopeful social position for Algerian women.

Having established his regard for the historical figure of the Kahina, it is now necessary to discuss the ways in which her historicized presence was used by Kateb to voice his views on women's rights and the feminist struggle of the 1980s. As discussed previously, the post-revolutionary decades saw a gradual decline in the status of Algerian women. This decline finally met a backlash in the 1980s, when feminist movements broke out in opposition to the increasing societal misogyny. Kateb, whose comments in the following interviews and correspondences were captured primarily during this decade, emerged the Kahina as a feminist, flanked by both historical veracity and political exemplary.

Continuing in the above-mentioned 1987 interview, Kateb remarked:

> Concerning women, how did it happen that this country, this subcontinent, was able to be ruled by a woman? And how did it happen that women got to where they are today? It's not difficult to answer: Arabo-Islamism has resulted in the servitude and degradation of the contemporary Algerian woman.[42]

Here, Kateb referenced both the Kahina and the Arabo-Islamic myth to illustrate the position of women in contemporary Algerian society. The Kahina, as a woman who once ruled over Algeria, is compared to the modern woman, who has, in Kateb's eyes become degraded to a deplorable point. The cause of this diminished position was the advancement of the Arabo-Islamic myth, which did not reflect the historical reality signified by the Kahina. Kateb remarked similarly in a message dated March 8, 1989, "When one thinks that a woman ruled an immense homeland of which Algeria was the center, and when one thinks of the current condition of the Algerian woman, a great distance is measured."[43] Kateb then pondered, "What became of the Kahina? She is no longer at the head of the country, and that is the least one might say."[44] Kateb again used the figure of the Kahina to contrast her former power with the relative diminishment in position experienced by modern Algerian women. In addition, she is also presented as a foil to women's occupational freedom. Later in the same message, Kateb stated: "A country that prevents its women from working condemns itself to underdevelopment and becomes sooner later the prey of powerful foreigners. And when women work, the country advances"[45] Here, Kateb directly referenced the Algerian government's Family Code, which had severely restricted women's occupational freedom. Modern Algerian women are contrasted with the Kahina, who once held perhaps the most powerful position that a nation might offer to any of its citizens.

Kateb then implied in this message that the possibility still existed for Algerian women to rule their homeland, using then Pakistani president Benazir Bhutto as an example of a woman in a position of great power in her society. He said: "As if by chance, she was elected president by a majority of Muslims in the biggest Islamist republic in the world, while in Algeria, it is in the name of Islam that women are oppressed..."[46] Kateb seemed to indicate in using this example that he saw the possibility for the majority-Muslim Algerian society to one day uplift its women to the same position that Pakistan had. To that end, Benazir Bhutto represented a "misplaced" Kahina, but one that still signified a definite possibility in Algeria at the very least. Kateb later said in the message, "Our Kahina of today is not longer, not yet at least, at the head of the State, but she is not only at the center of the foyer either. She shines, even veiled, like a secret star"[47] It is evident here that Kateb envisioned a future in which a woman might again lead Algerian society, just like the Kahina had done before.

Kateb's discussion of the Kahina with regard to the lowered position of women in Algerian society suggested that women might one day aspire to reach the same level of stature in their society that the Kahina once had. He saw the potential for this rise in position as being part of the legacy of the Kahina, who represented in herself a factual relic of Algeria's tumultuous, though arguably feminist past. Thus it is observed how and why Kateb stressed the importance of the Kahina as a historical figure in Algeria's society, rather than simply a mythical one. In retaining an actual historical presence, the Kahina served as a factual example of women's exaltation in past Algerian society, and thus the historical potential resides in that same society to similarly promote women to those liberated heights.

It is now necessary to examine Kateb's two fictional works in which the Kahina was most notably represented - *Nedjma* and *La Kahina* – to see the ways in which her representation might have further showed evidence of Kateb's feminist thoughts. The events that occur within the plot of *Nedjma* do indeed imply, as Hannoum and Woodhull suggest, that the character of Nedjma represents a "humiliated" Kahina.[48] In the novel, she is raped several times by various male characters.[49] These episodes represent the initial conquest of the Kahina, and, symbolically, the successive conquests of Algeria by the Arabs, the Turks, and the French. Her humiliated status is the result of the abeyance of her power, and Nedjma in this personification is similarly stripped of her dignity. Nedjma embodies both Algeria and the Kahina, both of which are implied by the repeated rape of Nedjma to have lost both their sovereignty and history.

Although written during the 1950s during the height of the Algerian revolution, the novel can be reinterpreted in light of the feminist struggle of the post-revolutionary years. The humiliated Kahina, embodied by the ravished Nedjma, is a symbol for all Algerian women and a commentary on the factors that led to the diminishment of their social position. Nedjma is thus not only Algeria and the Kahina, but also all Algerian women. They have been repeatedly conquered by successive foreign forces, which resulted in their dramatically lowered status.

In the previously mentioned 1987 interview, Kateb said: "*Nedjma* is Algeria, the quest for Algeria. Have we found it yet? In my opinion, no"[50] He implied here that Algeria was still without an identity, a deficiency that undoubtedly came as the result of the similarly "lost" position of Algerian women.

Is the humiliated Kahina still a feminist? Nedjma remains resilient after each ravishing, a fact that represents the cultural renewal Algeria experienced after each successive conquest. Similarly, the Kahina may have been decidedly conquered, but the historical potential she left behind suggests that Algerian women may be able to rebound from their depressed position and join in a feminist cultural renewal of Algeria. In addition, the resilience implied by Kateb may be seen as a testament to the strength of Algerian women and justification for their liberation.

The 1972 play *La Kahina* features the Kahina, named Dihya, as the main character, and one can find in the events of the play a similarly feminist portrayal. The play dramatizes the moments before she is killed and her people are proselytized by the invading Arab conquerors. She addresses her people as the invaders approach:

> They are surprised to see you all ruled by a woman.
> It is because they are merchants of slaves.
> They veil their women for better selling them.
> For them, the prettiest girl is only merchandise.
> It is necessary above all that she is not seen too closely.
> They cover her, conceal her like a stolen treasure.
> She is forbidden above all to speak and be listened to.
> A free woman scandalizes them, and to them I am the devil.
> They are unable to understand, blinded by their religion.[51]

This riveting monologue reflects almost directly similar statements given by Kateb in above-mentioned interviews. The Kahina demonizes the Arab invaders, and through her, Kateb again suggested that it is the Arabo-Islamist culture that they represent that brought with it the dwindled social position of Algerian women. Though the play is fictional, the Kahina is more than simply a symbol of her actual historical self. She indeed represents the history of Algeria as Kateb understood it, and her portrayal in this way gives further articulation to Kateb's feminist views. In describing all of the ways in which the Arab invaders view women, the Kahina comes to represent their opposite. She is unveiled and speaks clearly to address her people, who listen to her. She is free, and as a free woman ruling a country, represents the opposite conception of women that the Arab conquerors entertain. She is rational and contrasts herself with the invaders who are instead blinded by their religion. All of these differences constitute her feminist portrayal, and in this way, the goals of the Algerian feminist struggle become embodied in her. The Kahina thus symbolized the aim to which the feminists aspired and the liberation that they saw inherent in both their history and their future.

These fictional portrayals of the Kahina, as reinterpreted in the context of the Algerian feminist struggle, thus assumed more significance with regard to her feminist portrayal by Kateb. She symbolically represented the current diminished status of Algerian women, but also the goal to which they might one day aspire. She was a feminist because she represented the liberation of women from both repressive myths and dominating traditions.

IV

Kateb Yacine's feminist Kahina emerged as the result of several important factors. Kateb stressed her actual historical presence by eschewing certain myths associated with her and instead searching for a direct link back to her documented existence, which he finds in the work of Ibn Khaldûn. Having presented her as a historical figure, Kateb explored the ways in which she served as a foil to the contemporary status of Algerian women, but also how that representation demonstrated the potential for women to again reach that level of social stature. He implied that her legacy left behind the inherent capability in all Algerian women to liberate themselves, and that her previous dominion over North Africa is a goal to which women must yet aspire. Finally, Kateb's portrayals of the Kahina in both *Nedjma* and *La Kahina* presented further evidence that he regarded her as a feminist as they provided further outlet for his commentaries on the status of contemporary Algerian women and their liberation from the oppressive yoke of Arabo-Islamist Algerian society.

Kateb's Kahina was clearly posited to provide justification for the elevation of women's position in Algerian society. Politicized by his own feminist views, she came to serve as the example to which Algerian society must strive, and in this way exemplified a dynamic and optimistic future for Algeria. This new Algeria would be free from cultural hegemony, and would celebrate the indigenous diversity that is manifest in all of North Africa. All cultural groups would share in its cultivation, which would result in a modern society that could accurately represent all of its constituents – including women.

Notes

[1] A history of the Kahina was first penned in the 9th century by Wâqidî, but it was not until Ibn Khaldûn that more modern historiographical concepts were applied that would thus render the account more historically accurate.

[2] It has been suggested by many, including Kateb Yacine, that *Kahina* is an Arabized version of the Hebrew word *Kohen*, which means "leader."

[3] Abdelmajid Hannoum. *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories: The Legend of the Kahina, A North African Heroine*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001),17.

[4] See both *Transfigurations of the Mahgreb,* 1993, by Winifred Woodhull, and *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories,* 2001, by Abdelmajid Hannoum.

[5] Winifred Woodhull. *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 31.

[6] Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories*, 165.

[7] Ibid., 169.

[8] Abdelmajid Hannoum. "Historiography, Mythology, and Memory in Modern North Africa: The Story of the Kahina" (*Studia Islamica* 1997, 1 February), 114.

[9] Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories,* 20.

[10] Ibid., 35.

[11] Ibid., 36.

[12] Ernest Mercier. *L'afrique septentrionale.* (Paris: Ernest Laroux, 1888), [E-book accessed on March 31, 2011, from Project Gutenberg].

[13] Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories*, 40.

[14] Ibid., 43.

[15] Ibid., 112

[16] Meredith Turshen. "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims?," *Social Research* 69, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 890.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Winifred Woodhull. "Rereading *Nedjma*: Feminist Scholarship and North African Women," *SubStance* 69 (1992): 47.

[20] Zahia Smail Salhi. "Algerian women, citizenship, and the 'Family Code'," *Gender and Development* 11, no. 3 (November 2003): 27.

[21] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle," 891.

[22] Salhi, "Algerian women, citizenship, and the 'Family Code'," 28.

[23] Ibid., 30.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 31.

[26] Ibid., 31.

[27] Ibid., 32.

[28] "C'est africain qu'il faut se dire, entretien avec Tassadit Yacine" in *Le poète comme un boxeur*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994),106.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 108.

[32] Ibid., 108-109.

[33] The *History of the Berbers* that Kateb refers to comprises part of *Al-'Ibar*, the previously mentioned work by Ibn Khaldûn.

[34] "C'est africain qu'il faut se dire," in *Le poète comme un boxeur*, 107.

[35] Ibid.

[36] "De « si jolis moutons » dans la gueule du loup," in *Le poète comme un boxeur. Le poète comme un boxeur*, 32.

[37] Ibid., 31.

[38] "C'est africain qu'il faut se dire," in *Le poète comme un boxeur*, 108.

[39] Ibid.

[40] "Parce que c'est une femme, 1972" in *Parce que c'est une femme* (Paris: des Femmes, Antoinette Fouque, 2004), 41-42.

[41] Ibid., 42.

[42] "C'est africain qu'il faut se dire," in *Le poète comme un boxeur*, 110.

[43] "Message à l'occasion de la journé mondiale du mars 8 1989" in *Kateb Yacine, éclats de mémoire* (Paris: IMEC, 1994), 45-46.

[44] Ibid., 46.

[45] Ibid., 48.

[46] Ibid., 46.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories*, 167.

[49] Kateb Yacine, trans. by Richard Howard. *Nedjma*. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1991).

[50] "C'est africain qu'il faut se dire," in *Le poète comme un boxeur*, 101.

[51] Kateb Yacine. *La Kahina*, in *Parce que c'est une femme*, 58.

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