

Developing Readers: The Crisis of Reading in Morocco and Recent Initiatives to Promote Reading

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Abstract:

The fact that Moroccan “libraries and archives are well-positioned to serve scholars” (Moulaison 2008) belies the reality that, as one representative of the Ministry of Culture explained, there is a “crisis of reading” in the North African Kingdom.

The crisis, while related to relatively high levels of illiteracy in the country, is not likely to be solved by the literacy campaigns launched by the Moroccan government in recent decades. The 2007 survey conducted by the Next Page Foundation, “What Arabs Read” found that approximately 51% of Moroccans were “non-readers,” having read neither a newspaper, nor book nor magazine in the 12 months before being surveyed. Non-readers were not illiterate, but people who “used to read” and nearly 70% of non-readers had never visited a library.

Several indigenous initiatives are seeking to (re)awaken a culture of reading in Morocco. This paper looks at how Yalla Nkraw (Let’s Read), which provides spaces for reading and books to the general public; Bibliotram, a project which offers free reading materials on Casablanca’s tramways; La Caravan du Livre (The Book Caravan), a project that encourages reading in rural areas through festive workshops and book giveaways, Initiative la Lecture pour Tous (The Reading for All Initiative), a project to support and promote reading in public, Ktabi Ktabek (My Book is Your Book), a project to build mini libraries in neighbourhoods across Morocco, and The Reading Network of Morocco (Réseau de la lecture au Maroc), a pro-reading advocacy group, all promote reading as a crucial part of social and cultural development.

Keywords: Morocco, reading, libraries, books, literacy

Morocco and the Crisis of Reading

The North African country of Morocco has had a sense of itself as a distinct cultural and political entity since the pre-modern period (Wyrzten, 2008). It simultaneously nurtures an

identity as an African, Muslim, Arab, Berber, and Mediterranean country. Colonization by France in the early twentieth century (1912-1956) and its close proximity to Europe has also resulted in intimate understanding of European customs by large sections of the population.

A country of nearly 33 million people with a median age of 28 years old (CIA, 2014), Morocco struggles with high levels of unemployment, even amongst educated degree-holders. Its economy, based primarily upon agriculture and tourism, is “increasingly challenged by globalization” (Wyrzten 2008). Moulaison (2011) described Morocco as a place where “poverty, limited access to education, limited resources, and a fundamentally oral culture contribute to a society rich in traditional social networks” based primarily around the extended family unit.

A “crisis of reading” has been used to describe the current situation in Moroccan society where low levels of reading and the absence of a culture of reading is widespread. While relatively high levels of illiteracy are also found in Morocco, illiteracy is not the main reason for the crisis of reading. Yet, with only an estimated 56 to 62 percent of its population being literate (UNESCO, 2014), illiteracy is a significant challenge to the ability of Morocco to make serious strides towards being a knowledge economy.

Bougroum, Diagne, Kissami, and Tawil (2007) believe that Morocco has made progress in battling illiteracy in the past few decades, and reference the high number of participants in literacy programs as proof. However, their research found a continuing reproduction of youth illiteracy in North Africa. With respect to Morocco, they noted a reduction in the percentage of illiterate people since independence by 37 percent (from 87 to 40 percent), but an overall increase in the “absolute number of illiterate adults [which] has grown from six to nine million persons” (p.4). This increase in illiterates has happened in spite of the “literacy and non-formal education strategy” Morocco adopted in 2004 that aimed “to integrate literacy programs within all poverty reduction interventions” (p.5).

Among Bougroum et al.’s (2007) suggestions for improving literacy outcomes was “the strengthening of post-literacy environments that encourage the use of reading and writing skills in daily life” (p.22), i.e. creating a culture of reading and writing whereby skills could be utilized and further developed, or at least not lost. In order for this to happen, it may also be necessary for literacy campaigns to encourage “pleasure” reading by weakening reading’s tight coupling with practical everyday life matters in illiteracy campaigns. For example, Bougroum et al. (2007) note that literacy manuals in Morocco are developed for very specific populations with the goal of providing know-how relevant to their daily tasks and occupations. These have included literacy manuals that focus on agriculture, dairy farming, and fishing. In some literacy programs literacy is also tightly coupled with religious instruction (Dardour, 2000).

The tight coupling of reading with the practical, or with school work, is part of the Moroccan part crisis of reading. El Yazami’s (1998) *Enquête sur la lecture au Maroc* El Yazami’s survey was carried out in several cities across Morocco (Fes, Casablanca, Tangier, Oujda, Tetouan, Taza, Marrakech, Agadir, Meknes), although 16 percent of the sample said that they resided in a rural area. Its sample population was Moroccans fifteen years of age and older who could read and understand French. This means that Moroccans who were monolingual Arabic speakers were not surveyed. 56 percent of the sample population were less than thirty

years old. Although 97 percent of the sample spoke Arabic at home amongst their families, 50 percent of them said that they preferred to read in French (as opposed to Arabic). 60.5 percent of the sample was male.

The survey results offers insight into the problem of reading in Morocco and highlights certain trends that still reverberate in discussions about the reading crisis today, among them:

- Weakness at the state level to address the problem, specifically the small budget allotted to the Ministry of Culture for this purpose, which leads to an inability to take a leading role in promoting reading at a national level.
- The “competition” between reading and television that “invades” daily Moroccan life.
- A frail circulation coordination (from publisher to bookstore and library) for the book which contributes to reduced availability .
- The existence of an informal network (family and friends) by which Moroccans learn about and procure reading materials.
- Lack of resources for children, from children’s literature to children’s space in libraries.
- Near absence of a culture of Moroccans giving or receiving books as gifts.
- The relative high cost of books. (Only 14 percent of the sample found the price of the book to be “acceptable” (*convenable*) with 82 percent calling the price either “expensive” or “very expensive” (p.67).
- The absence or weak state of public libraries across the country.
- The importance of Moroccan literature in attracting Moroccan readers.
- The lack of places to read in public (81 percent of the sample read at home followed by 6 percent who read in the library or in a café) (p.64).

It is interesting to compare El Yezami’s (1998) results with those of the “Next Page Foundation Pan-Arab Study, “What Arabs Read” that sampled 1,000 Moroccans in 2007. The Next Page survey noted three “triggers for reading” amongst readers in the Arab countries (Morocco,

Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia) surveyed, and these were:

- that reading was endeared to them as children in school
- that they found books whose subject matter were interesting
- and that reading helped them to better observe their religious duties.

With regard to Morocco, the survey found 51 percent of Moroccans to be “non-readers,” having read neither a newspaper, nor book nor magazine in the 12 months before being surveyed. Non-readers were not illiterate, but people who “used to read” (p.270). Amongst the Moroccans who were active readers, the survey found that 85 percent of them read books (as opposed to just newspapers and magazines), with the majority of readers saying they read at home. 91 percent of the Moroccan readers said they learned to read in school and 40 percent of them said that they read for pleasure.

While El Yazami (1998) noted an impotence on the part of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to address the crisis of reading in Morocco, the current Ministry, headed by Mohamed Amine Sbihi has shown initiative in encouraging reading through the active promotion of cultural events tied to reading. One such event is the SIEL (*Salon International de L'Edition et du Livre*) International Book Fair which was begun in 1987 as a biannual event and held its twentieth session in February 2014.

The 2014 edition of the SEIL Book Fair received wide media attention, including a discussion on national prime time television on the reading problem in Morocco. On February 20, 2014, the roundtable discussion show *Mubashir ma`kom* conjoined a panel of authors, professors, and activists to discuss the reading crisis in Morocco and Moroccans relationship with the book. The panelists discussed the need to inculcate among Moroccans a sense that reading is a necessity. Latifa Lbasir, a professor noted that the reading crisis was not a new problem, and that there was a need to increase the amount of “regular” (*adiyoun*) readers, not just “cultured readers.”

Another guest on the show, Rachida Roky, the president of the Reading Network of Morocco (*Réseau de la lecture au Maroc*), an organization that will be discussed later in this paper, said that she believed that many Moroccans did not read because they did not want to have their thoughts disturbed or challenged; that they felt comfortable just “following the group”. She commented that the new pro-reading initiatives being carried out around Morocco were “a good start” which represented the “voice of the Moroccan reader,” but that more pro-reading events were needed besides those that were being done by the Ministry of Culture.

The Moroccan Ministry of Culture consciously promotes the book and reading through its Network of Public Reading Initiative. The Network of Public Reading (*Réseau de la Lecture Publique*) is composed of heritage libraries, multimedia libraries, prison libraries, public libraries, and mobile libraries (bookmobiles), whose mission is to promote reading amongst the Moroccan public(Moroccan Ministry of Culture, 2014).

As Touzani (2003) explained, in Morocco “culture as a domain is less clearly defined than other areas,” therefore “its conception and objectives depend enormously on the personality of the minister in charge” (p. 15). Minister Sbihi hails from an elite family that maintains its own private library of rare manuscripts that is open to the public. Sbihi has continued to serve as the library’s conservator, even after taking office. It is understandable then that the current administration at the Ministry has shown strong support for the grassroots pro-reading initiatives that have taken root in the last few years across the country.

LA CARAVAN DU LIVRE

La Caravan du Livre, (the Caravan of Books) began in 2006 as an initiative of Jamila Hassoune, who as a second-generation bookseller in Marrakech was struck by the lack of familiarity with pleasure reading among the university students who visited her store. Many of these students were originally from rural areas where, as they told her, there was limited exposure to libraries and therefore to reading outside of school work.

The Caravan of Books is an annual caravan that travels to different villages in the rural High Atlas Mountain areas of Morocco for three days of events centered on books. The events are coordinated with local schools, women's organizations, and other non-governmental organizations in the area in order to increase the impact of the caravan, not only on the youth, but also on their surrounding community, including parents and elders. The intention is to begin thought-provoking discussions amongst the entire community.

Hassoune believes that books are developmental tools that can help youth express themselves, develop critical analysis skills as well as "self definition" and that in order for Moroccan youth to become interested in them, they have to be animated through discussion and speakers (J. Hassoune, Personal Communication, December 19, 2013) The caravan introduces rural youth to artists and authors both from within Morocco and abroad, while also allowing the youth to participate in the running of the activities. Open air readings of books are also held with Arabic and French language donated titles being distributed to the participants free of charge.

The caravan has gained a positive reputation to the extent that Hassoune now fields requests from villages for the caravan to visit their community. She welcomes these opportunities because she feels that books need to be endeared to children and youth who can grow to admire authors as much as they admire soccer (football) players. Her prescriptive advice regarding the reading crisis in Morocco is that schools need to teach children pleasure reading, and that this can be done through school libraries (which are rare in Morocco) where the person in charge is actually enthusiastic about reading.

The Bouquineurs and Ylla Nkraw

The *Ylla Nkraw* public reading event was developed by the group *Bouquineurs* (book lovers), a Facebook group, started in 2010, by Aziza Benchekroun, a graduate of Ecole des Sciences de L'Information. The group has approximately 78,000 members (at the time of this writing), of which 90 percent are Moroccans. The mission of *Bouquineurs* is to "campaign for the dissemination of the culture of reading in Morocco." To this end, the group shares information about books in the form of synopsis and about book related events and positions itself as a resource for Moroccans readers. They hold a monthly book discussion in Rabat which as of January 2014 had read twenty-three books together including *La Confrérie des Eveillés* by Jacques Attali, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche, *Le Passe Simple* by Driss Chraïbia, and *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde (Bouquineurs, 2014). Benchekroun says that the group has received a lot of positive feedback from people who said that the *Bouquineurs* site has encouraged them to take up reading.

Ylla Nkraw, which is Moroccan Arabic for “Let’s Read,” was an attempt by the *Bouquineurs* to share their love of books with the larger Moroccan society. Specifically, according to Benchekroun, the group wanted to push back against the cultural stigma of public reading. She says that often in Morocco, the person who reads in public will be laughed at. In addition, the group wanted to change the image that Moroccans do not read by showing that there is a large group of people in the country who *do* read and enjoy reading for pleasure.

Ylla Nkraw was initially conceived of as a public reading event, but through coordination with some key actors in civil society and government, it grew to become a festive cultural event that took place in front of the National Library. The inaugural *Ylla Nkraw* event that took place in May 2012 drew 800 people including vulnerable elderly persons and people with disabilities.

The schedule of literary events included children’s storytellers, meet-the author programs featuring Moroccan authors and workshops. The following year (May 2013), they added a book exchange, as well as Amazigh (Berber) poetry recitation. The group is working to revamp *Ylla Nkraw* in light of the popularity of other similar public reading events like those of other proreading groups discussed in this paper. They are working to develop a different method of encouraging reading in 2014 (A. Benchekroun, personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Initiative la Lecture pour Tous

Among the new initiatives that is working to bring reading to the forefront of the Moroccan public’s attention is The Reading for All Initiative (*Initiative la Lecture pour Tous (LLPT)*) begun in the summer of 2013 by a group of Moroccans (some living in France) who were frustrated with the cultural situation in Morocco, especially the poor levels of reading. Mohammed Kharchiche, one of the founders of the group and its current president said that LLPT began with a simple call for people in Tangier to meet together at a park to read books. 70 people showed up to that first impromptu reading. Kharchiche and his group believe that seeing people read in public shouldn’t be strange. Quite the opposite, what is not normal, according to Kharchiche, is a society where people do not read. But he does not believe that there is simply a crisis of reading in Morocco. He believes that there is also a cultural and education crisis. It is a culture crisis in that people have little interest in the Arts. It is an education crisis in that a poor quality education system that does not inculcate reading or the basic skills students need (he cites the UNESCO report as evidence).

In an effort to “wake people up,” and without “waiting for the government to do something” LLPT established branches in cities across Morocco, each with its own character, target groups and priorities. Yet they share the belief that reading is connected with changing and improving Moroccan society. Often within their Youtube videos the members of the group will iterate that the goal of LLPT is “ a Morocco that reads” (LLPT, 2014). With more than 20,000 members the group organizes public readings and uses podcasts, Youtube videos, Twitter and Facebook to advertise the dates and locations of public readings and book discussions or to discuss the benefits of reading in general. In addition, some branches work with school children regularly to discuss and animate books. The group also tries to encourage parents when possible to read to their children and to take them to visit libraries. Another of its ongoing programs is “A Tramway that Reads.” It is an invitation to commuters in either Rabat or Casablanca to bring a book along with them and read during their commute. At the end of the tramway line, commuters are then welcome to a neighbouring

café for a discussion about reading. Kharchiche hopes that the government will use its power to reduce the price of books in Morocco much in the way that it subsidizes sugar and other staples that are considered mandatory for Moroccan life. (M. Kharchiche , personal communication, March 24, 2014).

BIBLIOTRAM

Reading on the Tramway is the focus of another new initiative called Bibiliotram. Bibliotram is an initiative to “bring the library to the people,” specifically the commuters on Casablanca’s newly established tramway rail system. Using the motto, “Read and Arrive,” the group Young Leaders of Morocco (YLM) dispersed books, magazines, and newspapers on Casablanca’s tramway lines for one week in December 2013.

Young Leaders of Morocco, a Moroccan non-profit based out of the University of Hassan the 1st in Settat Morocco whose aim is “the creation, implementation and management of projects for socio-economic and sustainable development” want to encourage reading, make it accessible via the giving of reading material ,create habitual readers, and allow the general Moroccan public to experience the benefits of reading (JLM, 2013). The initial response by riders of the Casablanca tramway was positive and supportive. Riders were aware of the lack of a reading culture in Morocco and therefore welcomed the project while expressing hopes that that it would be repeated on a continual basis. One commuter commented that the project was proof that a new generation in Morocco was “on the move,” and that he as a teacher was pleasantly surprised (JLM, 2013b). The first iteration of Bibliotram had the support of the Ministry of Culture as well as substantial support from private sponsors including book publishers. JLM intends for Bibliotram to be a repeated project, and have reached out to the Moroccan public for support by way of donations of books to make reoccurring Bibilotrams possible. JLM’s leader Anwar Mohamed says that one the goals of the Bibliotram project is to change Moroccan culture (JLM, 2014).

KTABI KTABEK

Another initiative works to put books into the hands of the average Moroccan, *Ktabi Ktabek* (My Book is Your Book) through neighborhood-based book exchanges . Badri(2014) called the project, “a very original step towards spreading the culture of reading in Morocco” (Badri 2014). Ktabi Ktabek was begun by the Association of Young Citizens (Association des Jeunes Citoyens) who connect reading to “good citizenship and democratic values” and who also want to create a “more educated society in Morocco” (AYC, 2013).

AYC believes that one part of the reading crisis is an issue of access. Bassin Khaber, leader of the organization, explained there are many potential readers in Morocco whose circumstances don’t facilitate access to books. One reason for this is the small number of libraries and the other is the financial reality of the country where families with minimal resources will choose to buy other necessities before buying books (Khaber, 2013). Based on the premise of bringing books to Moroccans instead of waiting for them to visit libraries and bookstores, AYC installs mini-libraries in apartment complexes in neighbourhoods of varying economic status across Morocco. Each mini-library, a small 2 shelf wooden structure with a glass door, contains one-hundred books; an equal ratio of Arabic to French and of adult to children’s books (Khaber, 2013).

The *Ktabi Ktabek* mini-library project runs on the premise that those who take a book will also leave a book, so that the endeavor continues. The first mini library was erected in January 2013 in Casablanca, with additional libraries placed in Mohamadia, Rabat, Fez, and Beni Mellal (Badri 2014). The project depends on donated books and has received some from the Ministry of Culture as well as private individuals. In general, they ask that donated books be either children's book so that young Moroccans can be initiated into the world of reading or that the adult books be short, so that new readers will not be dissuaded by the volume of a lengthy book. The eventual goal of the *Ktabi Ktabek* project is to installing three-thousand of the one-hundred book libraries all across Morocco (AYC, 2013).

RESEAU DE LA LECTURE AU MAROC

The Reading Network of Morocco (*Réseau de la lecture au Maroc*), mentioned earlier in this paper, was born out of a realization that the high illiteracy rate in Morocco means that parents cannot always be depended upon to convey the skills and culture of reading to their children. Rachida Roky, the president of the organization, is also a university professor in Casablanca who noticed over the years how few of her students have exposure to reading outside of school work. The Reading Network of Morocco is the result of Roky working with some of these very same students to do on the ground advocacy for reading with Moroccan youth and children. The group started working in the summer of 2012 before receiving official government recognition as an organization. Today, the organization works on the multiple fronts of advocacy, training, and staging events to meet its stated goal of "raising awareness of the importance of reading as a gateway to form an informed citizen" (RLM, 2014). This means that in addition to carrying out activities such as promoting daily pleasure reading for children or holding a public reading event in a garden or park, the organization also works to train others about the importance of reading and encourages them to return to their communities to carry out activities such as book discussions with local Moroccan authors, for example.

Roky believes that the solution to the crisis of reading is difficult but not impossible. Among the major steps that has to happen is that the national curriculum for schools in Morocco has to incorporate reading as a taught subject. In addition, school classrooms should develop small collections of books for their own library, and each school should have its own general library. Organizations need to work with the government in ways that multiple the affect of their work similar to how RLM coordinates with the Minister of Youth and Sports to train young people on the benefits of reading. Roky believes that the people who work in libraries in Morocco, who are often para-professionals without formal library science education, need to be trained to put the book in the hands of the reader (R. Roky, personal communication, March 20, 2014). This has not been the case historically in Morocco where the most common word used for library in Arabic is *khazana* which has a meaning akin to a safe or treasure chest. Its root verb means to store, amass, or safekeep (Hans Wehr, 1994). The mentality in Moroccan libraries up to now has been primarily to keep books safe, which has often meant library policies that limit or inadvertently discourage patron access to collections, for example by not allowing patrons to remove books from the library or having very stringent borrowing policies.

It may be that we are seeing a veritable reading movement in Morocco, with the enthusiasm and activity that elsewhere in the Arab World was associated with radical political change. All of the initiatives discussed in this paper are struggling to create a public space for the book and the reader in a society where the person who reads may be seen as “showing off” in public Badri (2014). The initiatives we discuss believe that public reading is and should be a regular habit that is connected with human development and good citizenship.

Much like Arab Spring mobilizations that began in 2010 and 2011, Morocco’s pro-reading ventures make great use of the internet and social media to organize group public readings, share book synopsis and to communicate personal reflections about reading in general and its importance for Moroccan society. Every initiative has a Facebook page and most take advantage of Youtube to share video. Morocco’s internet penetration rate is one of the highest in Africa at 33 percent (Moulaison 2011), and cyber cafes and cell phones which are owned by approximately half of the population facilitate internet access for people lacking their own computers.

The initiatives have found and reached an important target group of urban youth, teenagers and young adults who have been extremely receptive to this form of literary activism. They have found a channel for self and group expression that is generally unavailable in the autocratic monarchy. It remains to be seen however if the trend is truly a movement or just a passing fad. Each movement seems to be aware of some long-term nation-level policy issues that need to be addressed in order to further the(ir) cause of reading in Morocco and create a true knowledge society, be it the price of books, the defunct education system, or library staffing and policies. They are also pushing for changes on the cultural level, to raise the statue of the book and even value it as a gift; and of course, to normalize the practice of reading in public.

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