Etymologies

et·y·mol·o·gies, n. pl.: true sense or form of the network of keywords: public, publicity, public opinion, public sphere.

et·y·mon, n. (*Greek*): true sense or form.

et·y·mol·o·gy, n.: the explanation of words: (i) "requires a degree of knowledge in all the ancient northern [sic] languages (H. Tooke, *Purley*, 1798 I ix 456)"; (ii) "with explanation drawn from the Greek derivation (cf L. *veriloquium* by which Cicero renders the Greek word)" (Oxford English Dictionary).

'ilm ṣarf, n. (*Arabic*): etymologies, derivations. Conjugations and word formations from Arabic triliteral roots; the first subject in the *muqaddamat* (preliminaries) of the traditional Qur'anic and Arabic schools.

Ü·ber·setz·ung, n. (*German*): translation, putting across, setting on top of (viz. "under erasure"); compare metaphor (Greek *meta-phorein*, "to move over").

tar·ju·mah, n. (*Arabic*): translation (cf *Targum*, Greek translation of the Bible); Ibn Abbas, the father of exegesis of the Qur'an, is called *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*; "the written Qur'an requires an interpreter (*tarjuman*): it is men who speak on its behalf" (Imam Ali, *Nahj al-Balagha*, 182)

How does one translate the term "public"? How do networks of meaning in different languages and cultural registers affect the notions of public sphere, public, public opinion, and publicity as these are articulated across historical and contemporary cultures? This is the gaming challenge we have assigned ourselves, and you our readers, with this new section, Etymologies which will be a regular feature in *Public Culture*.

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A for Arabic, P for Persian. We begin with Arabic and Persian not only because Arabic begins with the first letter of the alphabets. We begin with Arabic and Persian because their articulations of notions of public and public sphere have been, and continue to be, hotly contested battlegrounds, and thus illustrate some of the difficulties of translating across etymologies with very different philosophical presuppositions, semiotic configurations, and political implications.

We invite your contributions of similar meditations on these and other languages and cultural registers. Please send your cross-linguistic Safires to Michael M. J. Fischer (S.T.S. Program, Bldg E-51, Rm 201B, M.I.T., 70 Memorial Drive, Cambridge, MA, 02139).

Thinking a Public Sphere in Arabic and Persian

Mehdi Abedi and Michael M. J. Fischer

Notions of the public sphere and its allied terms—public opinion, the public or publics, publicity, and public culture—come from particular histories of political development in Western Europe, yet increasingly are inscribed in transnational arenas through global media and politics, and legally are grounded through nations becoming signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. It is worth exploring the difficulties of translating such notions across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The Moroccan feminist and anthropologist Fatima Mernissi provocatively asserts "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights . . . is frightening because it awakens the memory of the Kharijites . . . linked in our memory to terrorism and anarchy. . . . The United Nations translators, charged with putting the charter into Arabic, reeled under the weight of the task, using four words to render 'freedom to change his [or her] religion': *haqq hurriyat taghyir al-diyana*, instead of the more appropriate word, *shirk*, which is found in the Qur'an . . . not less than 160 times" (Mernissi 1992:87). Mernissi's use of *shirk* is highly inventive, but not entirely idiosyncratic: see below, third section.

Translation is challenging not merely because—*traduttore traditore* (translation betrays)—it is difficult to match up semantic fields in different languages, but especially because the differences uncover sub-versions, latent meanings, substrata of cultural alternatives. Cultural reformers often make use of such

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etymological subversions to attempt to redirect the associations and implications carried by key vocabularies. In the Islamic world, it is noteworthy that both leaders of modernist Islam over the past century, and feminist leaders, have mined the resources of such etymological sub-versions. The legacy of the male modernists and their fundamentalist-modernist opponents – from al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in the early part of this century to Ali Shariati in the 1970s, from Maududi in Pakistan and Hasan al-Banna in Egypt to Khomeini in Iran – is well known and often rehearsed (e.g., Fischer 1982). The interventions of feminists are growing in power and could well prove to be an important transformative force in the Islamic world in the next half century. Mernissi points to the gender and class dynamics of opening university education, arguing that a new form of class struggle has been created between university-trained village males and middle-class females: "In 1987 50 percent of all medical students in Tunisia were women, 37 percent in Syria, and 30 percent in Algeria. . . . Even in Egypt, where the virulent fundamentalism of the Muslim Brotherhood is equaled only by the agitation of Egyptian feminists, [the percentage of women university professors] was 28 percent in 1986, higher than the United States (24 percent in 1980) and France (23 percent in 1987)." (Ibid.: 159–60.)

The following brief meditation on the political difficulties of thematizing public sphere notions in Arabic and Persian – of foregrounding the semantic sub-versions within the cultural repertoires that facilitate thinking about public spheres and civil societies – is intended as an invitation to readers to think about struggles in other linguistic and cultural arenas. Suzanne Jill Levine (1991: vi, 3), translator of postmodernist fiction from Latin America, suggests that English, in contrast to Spanish, provides certain resistances to multicultural efflorescences because of the official suppression by the Royal Society in the late seventeenth century of baroque extravagance, an attempt to restrain the polyvalences of language.

Language, of course, is not the only means for creating and reflecting upon new public spheres. The visual media have their own culturally structured figurations of meaning. It has been argued, for instance, that one of the most insidious means of reworking the public arena by Hindu fundamentalists in India is the saturation of the visual field by small stickers on walls, vehicles, and trees that disseminate recodings of the traditional epic Rama-Ravenna antagonism into Ram as the opponent of Babur and thereby of all Muslims. (Basu et al. 1993).

We begin the discussion of the problems of translation around the notions of the public and public sphere by considering the linguistic strata of Persian and Arabic.

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Arabic vocabulary is produced through a tri-literal (and occasionally quadrilateral, e.g., j.m.h.r.) root generativity. Often the same root will generate words with contrary meanings. Occasionally, borrowings will be turned into Semitic triliteral forms that fake out etymologists: a classic case is *masjed* (mosque) which comes from a Pahlavi word but is often thought to be a form of the Arabic word for prostration (*sijdeh*) since that form of ritual is what occurs in a mosque.

Persian is an Indo-European language which uses Arabic script and contains many Arabic (and Turkish) borrowings. Arabic saturates religious and moral language in Persian.

Because of the centrality of Islam to the moral and public discourses of the Middle East, it might be important to point out some of the usages in the Qur'an which, like Plato's *Republic*, work on a totally different presuppositional basis than the democratic ideological presuppositions of "public," "public culture," "public sphere," "publicity," etc. in the post-burgher and bourgeois polities of Western Europe and the United States. From that basis, one can get an appreciation for the social innovativeness that democratic, pluralist, multicultural, socialist, market-consumerist, feminist and other contemporary ideologies have demanded over the past century. To deal with the series of English terms public, publicity, public opinion, and public sphere, one needs to identify several different semantic networks.

Moral, Political, and Public Sphere Terms: the Qur'anic and Philosophical Registers

(From the root j.m.h.r:l) *jumhūr, jumhūriyyah, jamāhiriyah;* (from the root j.m.ʿ:l) *jamʿ*
P. jumuʿat, jamaʿa, jāmiʿa, jāmiʾah, yaum al-jamsʿ, ijtimāʿ, ijmāʿ, jimaʿ

The Qur'an takes what might be called a Platonic view of the public sphere: the majority is not to be trusted, but rather the small elite in the know are a touchstone of truth, of rights, and of public policy decision-making. Plato's *Republic* was translated as *al-Jumhur*, and ***jumhur*** is one of the words for "public". In contemporary times ***jumhuriyat*** is used for democratic republics (*Cumhurriyat* is the name of the leading Turkish newspaper), and Libya uses the plural form ***jamahiriyah***, meaning regime of the masses and the utopian

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vision of Colonel Qadhafi that the Libyan republic will be one of many allied republics, as well as perhaps that the Libyan republic is to be composed of many subordinate collective decision making groups (parallel to Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani's vision of Iran as composed of consultative units, *shura*, another term used widely in modernist Islamic discourses, originally meaning merely consultation, but in modernist interpretations meaning democratic electoral representative bodies, and particularly parliaments are often called *shura*). ***Jumhur*** is used for "public," but also for the "multitude." Amusingly, in older usages it was a term for "wine" (compare the English "pub" and "publican").

Jama'a is the verb for: to gather, join, bring together, compose, compile, summarize, rally, round up, pile up, amass, accumulate, convene, call. ***Jima'*** is the polite term for sexual intercourse. ***Jam'*** means to collect, as in the Qur'anic verse (75:17): *inna aleina jama'hu wa quar'anehu* (it is our responsibility to collect and recite the Qur'an). ***Jumu'at***, naturally then, is the Friday communal assembly at the ***jami'a*** or Congregational Mosque (often glossed as the Friday Mosque), and mimes what will happen on the ***yom al-jama'*** (Day of Assembly or Resurrection or Judgment Day), when God will be the *jami'* (collector) of all the people for the final judgment (Qur'an 3:9). In contemporary lingo, the feminine form, ***jami'ah*** is the university. In parallel counterpoint, ***ijtimah*** is the contemporary term for society, but in the Qur'an it is the gathering of jinn and people (17:18), or also the gathering by God of all the hypocrites and unbelievers in hell (4:140). All (*ajma'in*) the angels bowed down to Adam as God requested *ila Iblis* (except Satan). ***Ijmā'*** is the modernist gloss for democratic consensus and **public opinion**, but in traditional theology, particularly for Shi'ites, it meant the consensus of the ulema or religious clerics. Sunni modernists, in particular, draw on some (dubious) *hadith* which assert that "my community (*umma*) does not agree on wrong opinions," and "the hand of God is with the public (*al-jama'a*)." Shi'ite religious experts reject these as valid sayings of the Prophet or his Companions.

Indeed the whole notion of the majority as providing a moral basis for governance is viewed with great suspicion. In the Qur'an the majority is usually condemned; it is an elite, those in the know, who are admired, the *ahl-e haqq* (people of the truth/right), the *khass* (elite, special). Note that the term *haqq* plays ambivalently on "truth" and "rights" language: rights are based on truth, not on the general will nor on contractual constitutional relations. (Compare the evolution of German *Recht* as well as English "right/rights.") During the 1977–79 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ayatullah Saduqi would say (against the socialists and social democrats), What is this majority (*akhsariyya*) that you

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tout: that is not in the Qur'an, which rather praises the minority (*aqalliyya*)? The term *akthar* (most of) occurs thirty-three times in the Qur'an: "if you follow the majority, they will mislead you" (6:116); "most of the people do not know" (7:187; 12:21; 12:68; 16:38; 30:6; 30:30; 34:23: 34:36: 40:57; 45:26); "most of the people are disbelievers" (11:17; 25:50; 13:1; 40:59); "most of the people are ingrates" (2:24; 12:38; 17:89); and so on. It is, of course, a Platonic attitude that underlies: government by the majority is corrupt. *Khass* is the antonym of *'amm* (see below) and is part of the set: singled out, favored or distinguished (*khassa*), private or personal or special (*khususi*), private affair (*khuwaysah*).

In personal morality and behavior there is a profound parallel in the distinction between what is in the public sphere (*zahir*) and what is in the deeply personal, private, or spiritual sphere (*batin*). The pair *zahir/batin* has mystical religious meanings, but also behavioral ones implying that the public realm is one of corruption where one does not allow true feelings to be expressed, but rather engages in formalities of politeness and convention. The political implications of the behavioral attitude are worth some consideration: they are recognized by Middle Easterners to contrast quite sharply with the attitudes of Americans.

[A side note: the term *hurriyya* (freedom) is not cognate with *jumhurriyya*, but as a slogan of contemporary political movements (e.g. *liberté*, *fraternité*, *egalité*, which in Arabic is *al-hurriyya*, *al-akhuwwa*, *al-musabat*), it partakes in the ambivalent play of traditional versus modern registers of meaning, and of a different set of political presuppositions. Ayatullah Saduqi during and preceeding the Islamic Revolution in Iran would remind people that there is no freedom in the Qur'an, that what the Qur'anic *hurriyya* means is only "freedman," the opposite of a slave.]

Democratic, Demotic, or Public Opinion Registers

'āmm, 'amma, 'umūmī, al-ra'y al'āmm, al-ṣāliḥ al-'āmm, 'amn al-'āmn, al-'awām, 'āmmī

'Amm is another key word meaning "public," with ambi-valent possible meanings, tending toward the active creation of a public on the one hand, but merely toward the already demotic on the other. (Compare such terms in English as "the public will," "the common will," "common," "vulgar," "the Vulgate.") *'Amm* can mean "general" or "universal"; but also "common folk," "uneducated" (*bi-savad*, or

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"illiterate," in Persian), non-sayyids (i.e. non-descendants of the Prophet, hence common folk). The verbal form ***amma*** has two sets of meaning: (i) to be or become universal, common, prevalent, comprehensive, inclusive, encompassing, extending, stretching (thus also *ʿamim*, "universal, commonplace, all-embracing," or nominalized *ʿumum*, "generality, universality," and *ʿumumi*, "general, public, universal"; (ii) to generalize, popularize, democratize, become open to the public, to put on a turban (*ʿamamah*). Terms for **public opinion** (*al-raʾy al-ʿamm*), **public interest** or **public welfare** (*al-salih al-ʿamm*), **public security** (*amn al-ʿamm*), **public relations** (*al-ʿalaqat al-ʿammah*), **public school** (*al-madrasah al-ʿammah*) are formed with ʿamm. The pluralized ***al-ʿawam*** means common people, and ***ʿami*** "common, vulgar, lay person, man on the street." The only usage of this root in the Qurʾan are the homonymic meanings having to do with kinship: paternal uncle (*ʿamm*), paternal aunt (*ʿammah*).

Transnational Registers

ʾumma

ʾUmma is the Qurʾanic term for the community of believers. It is not cognate with *ʿamm* or *ʿumum*: the latter are spelled with an *eyn*, while *ʾumma* is spelled with an *aleph*. In modernist terminologies, *ʾumma* is used for the political community that usually extends beyond narrow nationalism, thus the *ʾumma al-arabiyya* (the Arab nation or community) is periodically invoked in pan-Arab gestures (e.g., by Saddam Hussein during the Gulf war, by King Hussein of Jordan when he wants to include the possibilities of a future confederation of Jordan and a Palestinean state). Ali Shariati, an Iranian Islamic modernist, tried to invest *ʾumma* and *ʾummat* with philological play, connecting it with the dynamic, goal-directed words *amm* (decision to go) and *imamat* (leadership), reinterpreting Imam for the contemporary generation as equivalent to the Weberian "charismatic leader," one who articulates the inchoate desires of the people. (On the struggles over the terms *Imam*, *umma* and *millat* during the course of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, see Fischer and Abedi 1990: 101, 204, 512; and Fischer 1980: 151–55, 221, 237).

In other words, *ʾumma*, like our other keywords, can extend across a range of meaning registers and historically changing semantic fields. Shariati foregrounded links with *imam* (example, leader), which comes from the same root, but there are other connections as well. *ʾUmma* is a feminine noun, connotes femininity and birth, and is linked to *ʾumm* (mother, source), as in wine and lies being *ʾum*

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al-fisad (mother of corruption). The adjectival *'ummi* means not only "maternal," but also "illiterate," and especially one whose knowledge is oral. (Contrast and compare Friedrich Kittler's analysis of the changes in German around the year 1800, when the mother became the instrument of correct articulation, but local variants of speech were devalued in favor of standardization through writing.) Central to the discussion here is the ambi-valent usage of *'umma* to mean "nation," "people," "generation," indeed any group, and its form *ta'mim* meaning "nationalization," as well as to refer to groups that cross national boundaries, such as a community of believers or a pan-Arab solidarity. The United Nations is *al-'Umam al-Muttahidah*. Instead of *'umma*, Iranian nationalists tend to use the word *millat*, a Qur'anic word for "faith" or "religion," but which has its own interesting history. In the current Islamic Republic of Iran, *millat* is used to contrast with *'ummat*, the former referring to nationhood while the latter refers to the transnational community of believers. The United Nations is *Sazman-e Milal-e Muttahid*.

"Multicultural" and "transnational" in Persian come out as *chand farhangi* (culture of several peoples), invoking not only the issue of linguistic borrowings (see below), but the literalness of translating a new set of ideas. The model of diversity is one that was in past centuries negotiated through the use of the term *millat*. *Millat* is the modern Persian term for "nation," but, so argues Ayatullah Morteza Motahhari, in the Qur'an, where it occurs seventeen times, it means a path offered by a Prophet, from the root [m-l-l] meaning "to dictate" (e.g., *millat abīkum Ibrāhīm*, "the way of your father Abraham," 22:78). In the Ottoman empire, *millat* was the term for confessional groups which had rights to be ruled by their own religious laws: the Ottoman Empire, like the Mughal Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire, was a multicultural or multiconfessional (the gloss chosen betrays the historically specific political ideologies of the translation language) polity. Motahhari wants to deny the multicultural meaning in the contemporary sense, and to reaffirm the multiconfessional one, which restricts the usage to the three recognized (by Islam) monotheistic religious political paths.

Publicity and Media Registers

'alaniyah, i'lām, i'lān, nashara, idhā'ah, al-radio (midhiyya), ertebat jami'ī, P. midhya', seda va sima, al-telefizion, al-kombuter, al-kamira

'Alaniyah is the third major term for "public," and is connected with the idea of publication as of a piece of news (*i'lam*). *Elamiyya* (Persian, "messages") in

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the form of one page handouts and posters have been a major mode of publicity in Iranian political organizing and publicity. Khomeini during the revolution would send his messages in this form (as well as later by cassette). Publicity thus fits with this set of words (***i'lan***), but also with ***shuyu'***, meaning publicity, but more generally anything that spreads. Note the nuances of both terms. *I'lan* is the antonymn of *sirr* (secret), and means "to bring out of secretness," "to make public," in contemporary lingo, also "to out" or "to bring out of the closet" as in the contemporary political tactic of revealing the identity of public figures who are homosexual. *Shuyu'* in Persian takes on negative connotations: sickness for example, as in *shuyu-e AIDS*. The word comes from the same root as rumor (P. *shaya'a*, Ar. *ishā'ah*), which again in Persian takes on a negative connotation, meaning always *false* rumor. Also from the same root come the terms for communist (*shūyu'ī*), and Shi'ite (*shi'a*). Saudis have much fun confusing the latter two terms. Exactly how the term *shi'a* (partisan or follower of the party of 'Ali) came about from this root is a subject of traditional etymological speculation, as in the suggestion: when one is close to one another, common feeling spreads, so one becomes a follower or partisan (*shi'a*).

The ambivalent play of nuance between traditional and modern meaning registers is interestingly embedded in the term for radio broadcast (***idhā'ah***), which is the traditional Shi'ite term used as an antonymn of *takiyya* (dissimulation in defense of Shi'ism under conditions of adversity). "Dissimulation" versus "broadcasting" is a similar pair with parallel behavioral implications as the *batin* (private, spiritual) versus *zahir* (public) pair discussed above. The repeated traditional advice was: Do not do *idha'ah*, do not unnecessarily broadcast (your opinions, your identity, etc.). We are now also in the realm of technological as well as linguistic borrowings: the common term for radio in both Arabic and Persian is radio. The word *midhiyya* was originally used for radio, but it did not take. The Arabic word coined for telephone, *hatif* (voice from the unseen), still survives but most people say "telephone." Persian officially uses *sedah va simah* (voice and picture) for television, but informally almost everyone says "television." The media are ***ertebat jami'i*** ("public connection," viz. above under *jami'i*). Computer is *al-kombuter*, although people would recognize an Arabic concoction such as *al-ittisalat al-kahrabiyya bi'l 'aql-iliktrunī* (connection with electronic intellect).

More interesting is the term for advertising (***agahī***), not only because a variant with a long medial /a/ is the word for consciousness, but more especially because the word for advertising is gramatically the dimunitive of the word for consciousness. Again note the connotative play: a commercial is an *agahi tejarati* (*tejarati* means trade), but also *agahi tabliqhati* (*tabliqhat* means propaganda, and is used

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both for commercial advertising but also for spreading the message of Islam). Previously, and still in Persian, the term for advertising was *elamiyeh* (see above). With a long a, *agāhi* (consciousness) forms Persian verbs such as consciousness raising (*agāhi dadan*), to become conscious (*agāhi shodan*), and to make conscious (*agāhi kardan*).

Mernissi argues that women's liberation in the Islamic world "will come through a rereading of our past and a reappropriation of all that has structured our civilization" (1992: 160). She begins the work of reappropriation by rereading the *hadith* literature, finding in it both feminist sources and interpretations to counter the standard male chauvinist ones that have been used by judges and elders against illiterate women (Mernissi 1990). Secondly, Mernissi pursues this work through redemptive etymologies (Mernissi 1992). Among her more provocative etymologies is the word *shirk*, used for the theological heresy of allowing anything other than the one God to share in divinity: "The freedom of opinion and religion of which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks reactivates for Muslims the idea of *shirk*, which etymologically means simply 'to join together' and also 'to participate'" (85). *Shirk* in the Qur'an almost always means polytheist, but Moses does ask God to allow Aaron to participate or share in his task (*ashrikhu fi amri*) of speaking before Pharoah, for Moses feared himself as a stutterer. *Islam* (submission) she locates with the verbal form *istislam* (to surrender, to lay down arms ending a state of war), and *salam*, a word for "prisoner of war," as historically rooted in the demand that the Meccans both renounce *shirk* meaning the "freedom to think and choose their religion," (85) as well as idols and their many gods and especially the goddesses, named in the Qur'an (53:19–2): al-'Uzza (power), Manat (death), and al-Lat (goddess). Mernissi views these goddesses as Kali-like demanders of blood sacrifices, and their suppression as being the repression of all but the maternal side of the feminine (115). *Hawa* (desire, individual wants and opinions,) is sacrificed for the comforting-claustrophobic womb of communal mercy (*rahma*, a verbal form used in the standard phrase, "In the name of God, the all merciful [*rahmane*] all compassionate [*rahim*]," that also means "womb" [89]). In similar fashion, *khayal* (imagination) is viewed as dangerous, easily leading astray into the world of images and idols (*sura*), like a horse (*khayl*, from the same root) which can not only easily become "unbridled," but whose gait is associated with defiance. The word arrogance (*ikhtiyal*) is from the same root (91).

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But if there is a tension between liberatory and repressive registers of these vocabularies, with Islam often invoked on the side of the repressive, Mernissi points out that the liberatory histories lie buried awaiting recovery: "The West which constantly talks about democracy via its satellites and media networks, is frightening to some because it awakens the memory of forgotten greats of the past who are never celebrated by today's leaders" (19). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights awakens memories of the Kharijites, those who said one could "go out" (*kharej*) from obedience to the Imam, and who represent an anarchist tradition (the Nejadat rejected any need for an imam at all), but also a troublesome tendency to regicide, or simple reaction to political ills by killing leaders without doing the constructive work of political restructuring. The ascendancy of this *kharejite* tendency among Islamic fundamentalists today (as in the assassins of Sadat), according to Mernissi, is due to the repression of the alternative tradition of the use of reason (the Mu'tazilite tradition), condemned so often as Hellenistic atheism for insisting upon one's responsibility for one's own fate. This condemnation of the Hellenic and of the West has its own semantic network: *gharb* (West, land of the setting sun, land of the faraway and miraculous), *gharib* (foreign), *gharaba* (strangeness), *ghurab* (crow, herald of misfortune and blindness). (In Shi'ism, of course, the mystical meanings of *gharib*, being estranged from God and from the reign of a just government, is developed in powerful emotional and political registers [Fischer 1980, Fischer and Abedi 1990]. In *The Arabian Nights*, Mernissi notes with some pride, the Maghribians are exoticized as adepts in the magic arts that Islamic conservatives want to sequester. Language itself is one of these transformative magic arts, one that Mernissi and others are determined to reclaim: "Our liberation will come through a rereading of our past and a reappropriation of all that has structured our civilization. The mosque and the Koran belong to women as much as do the heavenly bodies. We have a right to all of that, to all its riches for constructing our modern identity" (160).

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