

“Cultural diplomacy as a tool of conflict prevention: Spain and Morocco”.

Introduction

Morocco and Spain share a history of mutual recognition and estrangement dating back centuries. Today, this relationship faces reinterpretation in an age of post-colonial migration, economic disparity and ambiguous nationalities. Cultural links to the past are usually drawn in order to understand the present and to design the future. The purpose of my case study is to investigate the state of the relationship between the two nations, paying the utmost attention to how it is shaped by national identities, cultural heritage and stereotypes. These factors all influence the state of political and economic relations, and the emergence of controversial issues and even clashes which at the same time contribute to the further complexity. Thus, the first section of the case study is dedicated to the analysis of the background of Spanish-Moroccan coexistence (in a cultural context) and modern tendencies of globalization. At the same time, a shared Mediterranean cultural space forms many similarities that do exist and do provide opportunity for the mutual understanding. Therefore, the second section of the case study deals with the resources that can be used in order to improve the perceptions that Spaniards and Moroccans possess of each other. The third section provides a short account about the results of cultural cooperation between two countries.

1. Heritage of the Spanish-Moroccan relationship

As good Mediterranean neighbours, Moroccans and Spaniards have always dealt with each other by simultaneously using both their minds and hearts. Reason and

passion have always been present in every aspect of bilateral relations and indifference and neutrality have never been allowed to impose themselves on cultural relations in particular. Although on an official level, Spaniards and Moroccans address each other respectfully and politely but, when in private, they can also possess a completely different image of the 'other'. Some Moroccans regard Spain as an arrogant bully, never to be trusted and some Spaniards refer to Moroccans as the 'Moro', an over emotionally charged stereotype term. Both sides know what the other group thinks in private but they pretend not to¹.

The main source of the aforementioned hostility is due to the often violent and bloody history of their relationship. The contest between Christianity and Islam has been played out on the Iberian Peninsula over the course of many centuries and the Spanish nation (as well as Portuguese) was born out of the context of a struggle against a common enemy - Muslims that came from the North of Africa. Spaniards were eventually victorious even managed to reach the opposite coast. Melilla and Ceuta were taken as a result of century-long Reconquista more than five centuries ago and are still seen as spoils the war that provided the Spaniards with independence on their peninsula. Being endangered for such a long time, Christianity turned into a fierce and almost fanatic form, defining the notion of a Spaniard as a devout Catholic with a low level of tolerance to any other religion or even form of Christianity. In their encounters, both Spaniards and Moroccans saw themselves as blessed by God whereas their rivals were infidel, unfaithful and even Satan's servants.

But the past also provides us with the example of peaceful and friendly relations between two cultures and societies united by Al-Andalus. It was an Islamic state and society with a relatively high level of tolerance (in comparison with other contemporary states) to which the Iberian Peninsula was home². It may provide the examples of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence and serve as a common cultural heritage of both nations. But this opportunity to build intercultural bridges on the base of a common heritage is consciously limited by Spain and Morocco

¹ Benaboud M., Moroccan Spanish cultural relations, Tetouan University Press, 2009, p.20

² Ibid

themselves. Spaniards find it difficult to come to terms with this fundamental part of their history because it does not fit in a notion of a crusading Catholic Spain or an advanced European Union. In addition, Al-Andalus is a part of the history of Castile and not of Catalunya or Basque country. In case the idea of the common cultural heritage with Muslim Northern Africa is developed, Basques or Catalans may find it even more difficult to accept their belonging to Spain. On the Moroccan side there are two contradictory positions regarding the common past with Spain. Some feel the Andalusian culture to have been stolen from them by Spaniards, whereas others have nothing to do with Al-Andalus (especially the Berbers).

Though it is necessary to analyze the historical background when examining the present state of Moroccan-Spanish cultural relations, when presenting any proposals for a more constructive future orientation one should always keep in mind other factors other than historical legacy define bilateral relations, such as present day national interest.

The issues that are considered to be controversial in present day Spain and Morocco are of a political and economic nature. Geographical proximity means that cooperation is a necessity in some aspects of economic activities such as trade, work force migration, use of natural resources and environment protection. Bringing both countries together with common spheres of interest can however, create controversies as well. The illegal migration from the North African coast and the problems related to drugs smuggling causes Spain to accuse Morocco of failing to tackle these issues. Furthermore, a popular image of Morocco as a source of trouble and criminality is created. In many cases Morocco is associated not only with its former citizens that migrated to Spain, but also the emigrants from sub-Saharan Africa who made their way to Spain through Morocco. One should also not forget the fact that 15 Moroccans were indicated in Spanish courts for the devastating terrorist attacks in Madrid on the 11th of March 2004³.

In the political sphere, the disputed status of Ceuta and Melilla is not the only source of conflict between the two countries. Territorial disputes between the two

³ Moran R., Harris P., 2007, *Managing cultural differences: global leadership strategies for the 21st century*, Butterworth-Heinemann, p.65

neighbours also includes the islands of Peñon de Alhucemas, Peñon de Vélez de la Gomera, and Islas Chafarinas. The severity of the territorial issues was highlighted by a crisis in 2002, when Spanish forces evicted a small contingent of Moroccans from a tiny islet (Perejil Island) off Morocco's coast following its attempt to assert sovereignty over the Spanish island.

Morocco's accusations against Spain often include the unwanted interference in domestic affairs, an issue linked to the colonial past. The existence of a Spanish protectorate in Western Sahara between 1884 and 1975 makes the Spanish government interested in a peaceful settlement of the conflict brought about by decolonization. Western Sahara did not manage to establish its own sovereign state and was occupied by Morocco, which claims this territory to be its own despite the lack of international recognition. Whatever Spain's actions, be it humanitarian aid for the native population of Western Sahara or diplomatic efforts to bring together the Moroccan government and Western Sahara separatists, it is considered to be interfering by the Moroccan government.

This short list of controversies gives an impression that Spain and Morocco can have nothing in common but permanent rivalry, mutual accusations and up to hostilities. Nevertheless there are reasons for the existence of friendship and support.

2. Sources of mutually beneficial relationship: culture and cultural diplomacy.

Whatever the rivalry and controversies exist, Spain and Morocco have enough reasons for their relations flourish. The necessity of normalization is already clear from the reasons given in the first chapter: economic cooperation, environmental protection and the control or eradication of illicit drugs and illegal migration. Both countries would benefit from mutual understanding and cooperation and this means finding a source in culture.

The aforementioned historical links provides a strong argument for defending the chance to stimulate Spanish-Moroccan relations, as there was a time when the peoples of Iberian Peninsula and Maghreb lived as one society, one culture and one

civilization⁴. Though they are divided by religion they are united by Mediterranean cultural heritage and commonalities, even everyday habits and way of life.

The main possibilities of cultural diplomacy lie in the linguistic sphere. Arabic is an important ingredient of Spanish language, and conversely many Spanish words have been incorporated into Moroccan Arabic. At the same time the both languages are present across the border. The Spanish community that lives in big cities of Northern Moroccan plays an important role in country's development whereas many Moroccans and other Arabic-speaking population now inhabit Southern Spain having moved there as economic migrants. Through legal, as well as illegal commerce, many Moroccans have varying degrees of interaction with Spaniards and therefore speak Spanish fluently. Family ties are also not forgotten: many Spaniards have Arabic roots and the same may be said about many Moroccans with Spanish ancestry, especially in the North⁵.

In order to promoting cultural relations between Morocco and Spain, France may definitely be used as an example of changing attitudes. Being a colonial power in Morocco (and thus having made enough negative impressions amongst the Moroccan population) France turned its contemporary policy towards former colonies in such a way that is supposed to be their ally and supporter. The Morocco-France relationship is more friendly and prosperous than Morocco-Spain one and this is not the case of the lack of controversies in the past and present but a result of elaborated policy in the Mediterranean space. Despite being an influential regional power too, Spain pays more attention to its ties with Latin America and EU states than its geographical neighbours such as Morocco. Morocco is also more orientated towards the Arab and Islamic world of which it has historical and cultural ties than towards Spain. Nevertheless, Moroccan-Spanish relations have always been better than with its Eastern neighbour, Algeria.

There is a great potential in the sphere of science and technology that could form an influential part of a shared culture as well. Spain provides many research grants

⁴ Benaboud M., Moroccan Spanish cultural relations, Tetouan University Press, 2009, p.27

⁵ Maddy-Weitzman, Spanish-Moroccan crisis, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, № 42, 2002, p.2

for Moroccan researchers and university professors and thus stimulates the scientific exchange between the countries. Just after the Perejil Island clash, all the Spanish grants were frozen for a year but now the number has returned to the same as previous years. These grants create economic advantages including the studying Spanish and developing tolerance and acceptance towards another way of life and ways of thinking. Spain is the second destination after France for the Moroccan students who opt for obtaining their diplomas abroad. Pharmacy and commerce students even prefer Spanish universities to French ones.

State diplomacy aimed at shaping the relations between the countries and creating the atmosphere of cooperation is only carried out by the diplomatic corps. Embassies and consulates tend to give the priority to intelligence activities over cultural ones – the fact that unfortunately leads to mutual suspicions rather than trust. Cultural diplomacy differs in the sense that is carried out by different groups of populations that not only include the direct representatives of culture (artists, scientists, professors etc) but ordinary people, not involved in politics, that nevertheless represent their country.. Cultural diplomacy is also carried out by numerous tourists making the phenomenon of tourism as well as education abroad some of the most effective means in building cultural bridges.

Though being itself a tourist attraction, Spain provides Morocco with many tourists who prefer Southern regions and cities like Casablanca and Berber. Their interaction with local population contributes to mutual understanding and helps to deconstruct stereotypes.

Cultural spheres provides a range of possibilities for the development of bilateral relations between Morocco and Spain but the economy plays in some cases an even more important role: Spain is the second trading partner for Morocco after France⁶ and the economic interdependency plays the same role as cultural ties – forcing compromises between the two nations.

The contemporary situation in Europe shows that despite historical disputes, countries may enjoy excellent diplomatic and cultural relations, as is the case of France and Germany. Therefore Spain and Morocco have the same potential to

⁶ Magone J.M., 2009, Contemporary Spanish politics, Taylor & Francis, p. 234

develop their ties and prevent conflicts (suspicions towards diplomatic corps, territorial disputes, mutual accusations of ineffectiveness) but need the will to do so and knowledge how to achieve it.

3. Cultural diplomacy and cooperation in action

Positive results of cultural diplomacy that uses art, science, education, tourism etc as means to achieve the atmosphere of trust and understanding are more evident in long-term perspective but they have a long lasting effect as well.

The Muslim Arabic-speaking Morocco and now highly secular 'European' Spain must now encounter the new transformation of their relations. Both Mediterranean nations must admit the difficulties but at the same time recognize the necessity to promote their relations. The previous chapter underlined the role of language and education but dealt mostly with Moroccans learning Spanish and studying in Spain. Nevertheless Arabic language and culture provoke interest among Spaniards and especially Spanish students as well. One of the reasons is a strong migratory movement from Arabic countries to Europe and in case of Morocco – to Spain. Spanish society faces a renewed interest in Arabic works of art (Al-Andalus heritage) and wishes to understand the new 'Spanish Islam' that is now practiced on the Iberian Peninsula. Of course, language embodies both a sense of place and the crossing of boundaries. To that end, cultural ministries of Morocco and Spain, as well as a number of their respective chambers of commerce have supported a series of translation projects and art exchanges for performance or distribution in the major urban centres of both countries.

One notable example of this is a project called *El Programa Al-Mutamid de Cooperacion Hispano-Marroqui* that was created as a joint venture of the *Instituto Internacional del Teatro del Mediterraneo* in Madrid and the Superior International Institute for Mediterranean Theatre (ISADAC) in Rabat. Its main aim is to foster an exchange of ideas and an open dialogue via writing, music and performance. Their first project, titled *Tales of both shores*, is a collection of short stories that express the

contemporary relationship between Morocco and Spain⁷. Artistic legacies are taken to promote better understanding of the intricacies of the present.

Therefore the arts as well as notions of bilingualism and translation, seek to foster a platform upon which Spain and Morocco stand as partners in cultural production and the vigor with which the arts are approached reflects a desire to explore the transitive and often challenging nature of movement across borders.

Another example of successful cooperation in the cultural sphere is the activity of the Cervantes Institute in Morocco. The majority of the Spanish language courses in Morocco are organized under its auspices and the materials are provided on its costs.

The relationship between Spain and Morocco through higher education is supposed to be significantly better than the political. The Abdelmalek Es-Saadi University in Morocco possesses dozens of agreements signed by this university and many Spanish partner universities including those of Cadiz, Seville, Malaga, Alicante and Malaga. The cooperation includes launching of common scientific projects, students exchange and support of professors in their research work.

These several examples mentioned in the third chapter provide us with the facts that efforts of cultural diplomacy (such as cooperation between writers, universities, establishment of language courses) tend to be more successful than efforts of official diplomacy.

Conclusion

Despite the geographical proximity that binds Morocco and Spain together and the need of cooperation that comes from their economic and political ties, the strained relations between two nations cannot be denied. Their frontier is the first in the world for the difference in human development, their religions have been bitter enemies throughout centuries, their history is composed of permanent struggle and grievances – nevertheless they share common Mediterranean peculiarities in culture and way of

⁷ Dotson-Renta Lara N. Translating identities: writing Morocco and Spain, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 13, № 4, December 2008, p. 431.

life. The contemporary problems in the bilateral relations of Spain and Morocco include political and economic ones (illicit drugs and illegal migration), and sometimes it even results in violent clashes. But at the same time, Moroccan students and professors come for their scientific research to Spain and Spanish tourists enjoy spending their holidays in Morocco. Culture is the sphere from which the process of normalization may begin and cultural diplomacy is a means that may be more effective in the context of their relationship than anything else.

The main area of cultural exchange and cooperation between Spain and Morocco is education: student exchange and language courses, where the Cervantes Institute plays an especially important role. The communication or the artistic scene is also a special way for bringing two nations together: the Spanish, as well as Moroccan interest in the common past - Al-Andalus – makes them see common things between them.

Therefore cultural diplomacy may be seen as a means to overcome the hostilities in political and economic spheres and prevent conflict and hostility.

Literature

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