

LA RELIGION LIBYQUE PRÉROMAINE.
ETHNOGRAPHIE COLONIALE ET LE PROBLÈME
DES « SURVIVANCES » RELIGIEUSES

Pre-Roman Libyan Religion. Colonial Ethnography and the Problem of Religious “Survivals”

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Abstract

Since its inception, the study of Iron Age North African (“Libyan”) religion has been bound up with European ethnographic accounts of modern Berber practices and mentalities. Analyses are based around notions of “survival” and “permanence” observed in later (Roman, post-antique) material and retrojected as belonging to an earlier stage. This approach is itself drawn from 19th

Résumé

L'étude de la religion maghrébine durant le premier millénaire av. J.-C. – la religion « libyque » – est toujours mêlée à l'ethnographie européenne coloniale et la construction d'une mentalité berbère basée sur les observations contemporaines. Les méthodes d'étudier la religion libyque sont fondées sur les concepts de « survivance » et « permanence » visibles dans les pratiques plus récentes

century anthropology, and remains current. To move the study of Iron Age cult forwards, we must pose new questions which recognise that religion is never an ahistorical mentality, but rather is entangled with dynamics of social power and lived experience.

Keywords

North Africa, anthropology, colonialism, historiography, Iron Age, Maghreb, religion, Roman

(romaines, islamiques, modernes), qui sont rejetées à une période plus antique. Cette approche est empruntée de l’anthropologie anglaise du 19^e siècle, mais elle reste au courant. Pour renouveler l’étude des cultes pratiqués par les libyens antiques, nous devons poser des questions qui prennent en compte que la religion n’est pas une mentalité ahistorique, mais des pratiques vivantes impliquées dans les dynamiques de pouvoir social.

Mots-clés

Afrique du nord, âge du fer, anthropologie, colonialisme, historiographie, Maghreb, religion, romain

“LIBYAN RELIGION” IS AS AMORPHOUS and problematic an analytical category as its two constituent parts: neither “Libyan” nor “religion” exist as natural and predetermined objects of study. The presuppositions and intellectual processes that defined both the peoples of the pre-Roman Maghreb and their dealings with divine powers through the 20th century have – like all scholarly endeavors – been tightly bound to ideas surrounding the legitimacy of power to control the peoples and territories of Africa. All discussions of the religion of indigenous North Africans are entangled with racialized discourses of civilizational superiority, colonialist justifications, or Berber nationalisms. The modern political dimensions of claims about the ancient Libyans and their “culture” – mostly language and iconographic traditions, only rarely including “religion” – have been well studied by others¹.

Here, I instead want to draw attention to another dimension of the historiography of Libyan religion: its intellectual basis, and the ways a particular metanarrative became the singular structuring device used to connect a small body of disparate pieces of data drawn from ancient authors and modern archaeology². This narrative scaffold is one adapted indirectly from 19th-century British evolutionary anthropology, with its focus on “primitive” cultures, their unchanging psychologies, and the kinds of religious “survivals” thought to be held over as a people progressed to new levels of civilizational complexity. The indirect means by which this scaffold became the primary way of attributing meaning to a lacunose data set was via a set of ethnographers working within the colonial milieu of the *École supérieure des lettres d’Alger*. This framework became integral to accounts of pre-Roman religion from the work of Stéphane Gsell onwards; his eight-volume *Histoire ancienne de l’Afrique du nord* (1913-1928) defined (and continues to define) the types of legitimate questions and modes of explanation used by subsequent French scholars like Gilbert-Charles Picard and Marcel Le Glay.

1. E.g. M.C. Sahli, *Décoloniser l’histoire : introduction à l’histoire du Maghreb*, Paris, 1965; M. Brett and E. Fentress, *The Berbers*, Oxford, 1996, 5-9; J. McDougall, “Myth and Counter-myth. ‘The Berber’ as National Signifier in Algerian Historiographies”, *Radical History Review*, 86, 2003, 66-88; C. Fenwick, “Archaeology and the Search for Authenticity. Colonialist, Nationalist, and Berberist Visions of an Algerian Past”, in C. Fenwick, M. Wiggins and D. Whyte (eds.), *TRAC 2007. Proceedings of the 17th annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (London, 29 March – 1 April 2007)*, Oxford, 2008, 75-88; Y. Modéran, “Des Maures aux Berbères : identité et ethnicité en Afrique du nord dans l’antiquité tardive”, in V. Gazeau, P. Bauduin and Y. Modéran (eds.), *Identité et Ethnicité. Concepts, débats historiographiques, exemples (IIIe-XIIIe siècle)*, Caen, 2008, 95-97; B. Maddy-Weitzman, *The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States*, Austin, 2011, 14-36.

2. For the challenges of narrativizing the past and the development of meta-narratives, see “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”, in H. White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, 1978, 81-100.

And what is particularly striking about the historiography of religion in North Africa is the way these colonial, ethnographic models themselves survive and shape explicitly post- and anti-colonial accounts of indigenous North Africans and their religion. If the goal of historiography is to understand how particular narratives become the dominant means of creating a coherent picture in order to allow space for alternative voices and narratives to emerge³, then it is especially imperative in the context of Maghreb studies to find ways of decolonizing indigenous religious histories.

But who were the ancient “Libyans”? The simple answer – and the one given by nearly every modern scholar – is simply to say that they were the indigenous, autochthonous peoples of the Maghreb. Yet “indigeneity” itself can be a problematic category, based on essentializing ideologies of culture and identity, and often bound up with imaginations of primitiveness⁴. The tendency to reify indigeneity in terms of a fixed Berber identity, which then provided a set of religious predispositions, is particularly marked in North African studies, as we shall see. In practice, identifying the pre-Roman inhabitants of North Africa and their “religion” has been, and continues to be, a subtractive process⁵. In nearly every discussion, indigenous peoples and their cults are identified by removing cultural practices that are seen to be foreign: if something is seen as Punic, or Greek, or Roman, it can be excised; whatever is left is indigenous. Indeed, indigenous religion in the Iron Age – the period between Phoenician colonization (10th-9th cent. BCE onwards) and the gradual Roman political absorption of the Maghreb (2nd cent. BCE – 1st cent. CE) – is only ever discussed as an afterward to prehistory or a preface to Roman Africa. Indigenous peoples are known only as predicates, as relational, as dependent on others for their identities.

Even staking a claim about the cultural (and religious) unity or diversity of the peoples who lived from the mountains of Morocco to the desert of Libya is politically and racially charged. Most ancient authors insist on the political and cultural fragmentation of the Maghreb⁶. Herodotus (writing in the mid-later 5th cent. BCE), divides the *oikumene* into three zones, with “Libya” being one (alongside Asia and Europe); the inhabitants are generically “Libyans” based on the continent where they resided: I will maintain that conventional shorthand here. Still, Herodotus divided the Libyans into named groups, each with its own customs – *nomoi* –

3. See “Literary Theory and Historical Writing”, in H. White, *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, Baltimore, 1999, 1-26.

4. A. Kuper, “The Return of the Native”, *Current Anthropology*, 44, 2003, 389-402; for critique, *inter alia*, J. Kenrick and J. Lewis, “Discussion of Adam Kuper, ‘The Return of the Native’”, *Current Anthropology*, 45, 2004, 263.

5. Consider G. Camps, *Berbères : aux marges de l'histoire*, Toulouse, 1980, 18: “Est berbère ce qui n'est punique, ni latin, ni vandale, ni byzantine, ni arabe, ni turc, ni européen...”.

6. For discussion of these “tribes”: J. Desanges, *Catalogue des tribus africaines de l'antiquité classique à l'ouest du Nil*, Dakar, 1962; both Y. Modéran, “Des Maures...”, *op. cit.*, n. 1, and C.R. Whittaker, “Ethnic Discourses on the Frontiers of Roman Africa”, in T. Derks and N. Roymans (eds.), *Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity*, Amsterdam, 2009, 189-206, rightly shift to focus on the process of ethnogenesis.

which, for Herodotus, included ways of dealing with the gods⁷. There was hardly such a thing as “Libyan religion” for a 5th-cent. Greek viewer. Pliny (writing in the mid 1st cent. CE) counts 516 peoples (*populi*) in Africa from the Ampsaga River east; he is probably recording political units recognized by the Roman state, but this still indicates a fragmented world⁸. Speaking of a unified “people,” a common culture, or a shared religion in this tessellated world seems a stretch⁹. A significant degree of political centralization does seem to have taken place from the 4th cent. BCE onwards, with the creation of a series of larger “kingdoms” stretching from the Atlantic to eastern Algeria and even into the Garamantian kingdom of the Sahara¹⁰.

And while this political centralization may have offered a prime opportunity for the invention of new and shared traditions (including the religious sphere)¹¹, nearly every modern account of the indigenous peoples of the Maghreb has stressed their timeless, essentializing ethnic unity as Berbers, manifested in common language and/or traditions, and driven – as we will see – by an assumed shared psychology¹². Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress have demonstrated the circularity of the chain of reasoning that leads to this outcome: modern “Berbers” are studied, their practices retrojected millennia, and then the perceived similarities used to demonstrate how a people has been timeless¹³. Of course, Ramzi Rouighi has argued that such views of “the Berbers” as a unified people sharing customs, language, and religion was the product of post-antique imaginations – what he calls “Berberization” – an invention of medieval Arabic authors like Ibn Khaldoun¹⁴. The translation of Ibn Khaldoun’s description of North Africa into French in 1858 was what established and naturalized a racialized notion of Berber indigeneity for modern scholars¹⁵. Retrojecting a cultural unity that was imagined and imposed by foreign powers is a dangerous endeavor, but one that has become commonplace in accounts of ancient North Africans. All of which is to say that one

7. Hdt., IV 168-197.

8. Plin., *H.N.* V 29; see B.D. Shaw, “The Elder Pliny’s African geography”, *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*, 30, 1981, 424-471, for the political context of this list.

9. Cf. M. Brett and E. Fentress, *The Berbers...*, *op cit.*, n. 1, 3-4.

10. P. Lévêque, “Avant et après les Princes. L’Afrique mineure de l’Age du fer”, in P. Ruby (ed.), *Les princes de la protohistoire et l’émergence de l’État*, Rome, 1999, 153-164; M. Sterry and D. Mattingly (eds.), *Urbanisation and State Formation in the Ancient Sahara and Beyond*, Cambridge, 2020.

11. M.M. McCarty and J.C. Quinn, “Echos puniques: langue, culte, et gouvernement en Numidie hellénistique”, in D. Badi (ed.), *Massinissa, au cœur de la consécration d’un premier état numide*, Algiers, 2015, 167-198; M.M. McCarty, “Africa Punica? Child Sacrifice and Other Invented Traditions in Early Roman Africa”, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 3, 2017, 393-428; Whittaker, “Ethnic discourses...”, *op. cit.*, n. 6.

12. For a critique of this practice, M. Brett and E. Fentress, *The Berbers...*, *op cit.*, n. 1, 5-7. Note, though, that Brett and Fentress ignore matters of the gods entirely, focusing instead on economies and political systems.

13. M. Brett and E. Fentress, *The Berbers...*, *op cit.*, n. 1, 9.

14. R. Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers. History and Ideology in the Maghrib*, Philadelphia, 2019.

15. *Ibid.*, 133-163.

of the base assumptions that continues to shape accounts of the ancient Libyans and their religion is itself the product of modern narratives and imaginations.

Of course, it is no more obvious what constituted “religion” in the ancient Maghreb, or the ancient Mediterranean more broadly. A number of recent works have challenged the use of “religion” as a category of analysis distinct from other forms of practice and ideology, tracing the genealogy of the concept to the Enlightenment¹⁶. To search for “religion” in the ancient world is not merely a positivist effort to recognize it in surviving texts or material, but to impose a modern category on data. The contours and boundaries of that category are arbitrary, and the choices made to define them inevitably shape the final picture produced. Many who have studied the ancient Maghreb have embraced an opposition between “religion” – something complex, with personified deities, priests, and temples – and “magic” – something primitive, dealing with nebulous transcendent powers and without the hierarchy or furnishings of “religion”. Whichever the ancient Libyans possessed was a reflection of their own cultural complexity; defining the object of enquiry itself staked much larger cultural claims.

If “the religion” of the indigenous populations of the Maghreb prior to the process of Africa’s provincialization in the Roman Empire is hardly an obvious – or intellectually neutral – object of study on its own, then the method by which it has been studied has also brought its own problems. From the 19th century onwards, accounts of Libyan religion have been steeped in a scientific positivism and claims to work inductively from the ancient sources available. In practice, the evidentiary base itself is so thin and problematic that any attempt to turn the disparate fragments of data into a coherent whole rely on a narrative to structure them.

1. A Thin Evidentiary Base

The challenge facing all attempts to make sense of Libyan religion is the lack of clear ancient evidence, which also makes the historiography of Libyan religion all the more interesting: larger gaps in data require seeking – or unconsciously accepting – models to connect the disparate fragments, and the models selected in turn reveal the wider intellectual and political stakes of the enquiry.

Archaeological sources for ritualized practice in the pre-Roman Maghreb are almost non-existent beyond the funerary realm¹⁷. This itself is a product of an archaeological tradition focused on epigraphy, monumentality, and urbanism: the Phoenician colonies of the coast and the cities of the Roman Empire. Archaeology, after all, does not merely discover traces of the past, but actively creates versions of the past by revealing what archaeologists

16. E.g. B. Nongbri, *Before Religion. A History of a Modern Concept*, New Haven, 2013.

17. On which, see M. Gatto, D. Mattingly, N. Ray and M. Sterry (eds.), *Burials, Migration and Identity in the Ancient Sahara and Beyond*, Cambridge, 2019; N. Kallala and J. Sanmartí (eds.), *Althiburos III. La nécropole protohistorique d’Althiburos-massif du Ksour*, Tarragona, 2017; S. Aounallah et al., “Architecture et pratiques funéraires préromaines dans la nécropole du Nord-Ouest à Dougga”, *Antiquités Africaines*, 56, 2020, 185-206.

seek: in the case of North Africa, a colonial Punic and Roman world¹⁸. Few pre-Roman settlements – and thus few settlement-based sanctuaries – have been excavated, save parts of some Phoenician colonies; this has begun to change with new work on the earliest phases of sites like *Althiburos*, *Lixus*, *Simitthus*, *Thugga*, *Volubilis*, and some smaller settlements.

Still, the number of ritual sites is quite small, with the exception of the epigraphically rich tophet-like sanctuaries of the late Hellenistic period¹⁹. Such sanctuaries, where burned offerings that could include children and/or animals were buried in urns and marked with carved stone stelae, were closely tied to Phoenician colonies in the early Iron Age, but became widespread across much of North Africa from the 1st cent. BCE onwards²⁰. Given that the archaeological record is formed by the choices and interests of excavators, modern fascination with child sacrifice and the archaeological visibility of tophet-like sanctuaries means that they are probably over-represented in the archaeological record²¹. Of course, tophet-like sanctuaries are often bracketed from discussions of Libyan religion, seen to be an adopted Punic practice and thus not authentically indigenous²².

Beyond tophet-like sanctuaries and a few other sanctuaries in the Hellenistic cities of Mauretania²³, archaeological evidence is scant and problematic. Rock carvings potentially showing cult-related subjects are difficult to date or even identify iconographically: are the anthropomorphic figures shown gods or humans? Are the animal-headed figures divinities, monsters, or masked people? Are the rams with spherical head-coverings the objects of zool-

18. B.D. Shaw, *Environment and Society in Roman North Africa*, Aldershot, 1995, 34; D.J. Mattingly, “From One Colonialism to Another. Imperialism and the Maghreb”, in J. Webster and N. Cooper (eds.), *Roman Imperialism. Postcolonial Perspectives*, Leicester, 1996, 49-69; C. Fenwick, “Archaeology...”, *op. cit.*, n. 1.

19. Even those ritual sites that have been identified are known from their monumental remains, including the sanctuaries(?)/victory monuments at *Simitthus*, Ksar Toual Zammeul (the Kbor Klil), and now *Althiburos*, on which, see recently J.C. Quinn, “Monumental Power: ‘Numidian Royal Architecture’ in Context”, in J.C. Quinn and J. Prag (eds.), *The Hellenistic West*, Cambridge, 2013, 179-215; see also recent work on late Hellenistic temples in the urban core of *Thugga* (S. Aounallah *et al.*, *Dougga, études d’architecture religieuse*, II, Bordeaux, 2016).

20. M.M. McCarty, “*Africa Punica...*”, *op. cit.*, n. 11 for dating, and for argument that such sites represent responses to encroaching Roman hegemony. Cf. also B. D’Andrea, *I tofet del Nord Africa dall’età arcaica all’età romana (VIII sec. a.C. - II d.C.)*, Collezione di Studi Fenici 45, Pisa-Rome, 2014.

21. For discussion of interpretation of these sites, see B. D’Andrea, *Bambini nel “limbo”: dati e proposte interpretative sui tofet fenici e punici*, Rome, 2018; B. D’Andrea, in this volume, 149-176.

22. For more recent arguments about such practices serving to create shared identities for towns caught between Numidia and Rome, M.M. McCarty, “*Africa Punica...*”, *op. cit.*, n. 11.

23. C. Aranegui and R. Mar, “*Lixus* (Morocco). From a Mauretanian Sanctuary to an Augustan Palace”, *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 77, 2011, 29-64, for sanctuaries at *Lixus* that probably date to the late 3rd cent. BCE and participate in a Hellenistic repertoire of temple architecture; A. Ichkhakh, “Nouvelles données sur l’évolution urbaine de *Volubilis*”, *L’Africa Romana*, 16, 2006, 2201-2218, for *Volubilis*. The focus of such works has been on urbanism, though, rather than on the rites taking place in these sanctuaries.

atric worship, or sacrificial animals²⁴? With such uncertainty, claims about the significance of these images depend largely on the metanarratives into which they are ultimately fitted. Of course, even the majority of these rock carvings come from a rather different geographic (Saharan), environmental (arid), temporal (early-middle Holocene), and cultural milieu than the zones with which we are primarily concerned; using such material, or the more extensive evidence for Neolithic ritual sites from across the Sahara²⁵, to fill in evidentiary gaps from the northern Maghreb only perpetuates a myth of timeless pan-Africanness.

Epigraphy, of course, has long dominated North African studies: part of an agenda that privileged Latin-reading, European ways of knowing as the legitimate means of reconstructing North African pasts²⁶. Over a thousand inscriptions in a script known as Libyan (whose dating is problematic) have been published; many are funerary, but some – especially a group from *Thugga* – refer to communal monuments erected in the town, including a temple to Massinissa²⁷. Nearly all known Punic-language inscriptions are on the stelae of tophet-like sanctuaries, scattered across North Africa. And a number of Latin inscriptions that invoke deities with names that seem neither Punic nor Latin are often brought to bear as evidence for Libyan religion, with varying degrees of sensitivity to the fact that these texts were commissioned at a much later date by people participating in the social, political, and religious structures of the Roman Empire.

Ancient literary sources are hardly more abundant, and certainly problematic in their own right. Every modern scholar studying Libyan cult turns to the same handful of passages scattered through Greek, Latin, and Byzantine sources. In the only contemporary account of Iron-Age Libya, Herodotus claims “They [African ‘nomads’] sacrifice to the sun and moon alone; all the Libyans sacrifice to these”²⁸; describes some odd practices like virgins staging ritual battles in Cyrenaica²⁹; introduces the oracle of Zeus Ammon at Siwa³⁰; and describes how one *ethnos*, the Nasamones, prophecy through incubation at tombs³¹. A few Latin writ-

24. Iconographic interpretation – the freighting of the images with meaning by modern viewers – is wholly dependent on the pre-existing metanarrative brought to bear on these images. Take one of the most widespread rock-cut motifs, the “bélrier à sphéroïde”: S. Gsell, *Histoire ancienne de l’Afrique du nord*, Paris, 1913-1928, VI, 126-128 saw this as evidence of zoolatry, confirming his ideas of primitive peoples worshipping animals directly; G. Camps, “Animisme”, *Encyclopédie Berbère*, 5, 1988, 660-672, argues these are instead sacrificial animals, elevating the rock-art to images of religious ritual. For further discussion, S. di Lernia and M. Gallinaro, “The Date and Context of Neolithic Rock Art in the Sahara. Engravings and Ceremonial Monuments from Messak Settafet (South-West Libya)”, *Antiquity*, 84, 954-975.

25. On which, S. di Lernia *et al.*, “Inside the ‘African Cattle Complex’: Animal Burials in the Holocene Central Sahara”, *PLOS ONE*, 8.2, e56879. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0056879>.

26. Mattingly, “From One Colonialism...”, *op. cit.*, n. 18.

27. For the inscriptions, J.-B. Chabot, *Recueil des inscriptions libyques*, Paris, 1940, remains the major collection.

28. Hdt., IV 188.

29. Hdt., IV 180.

30. Hdt., IV 181.

31. Hdt., IV 172.

ers of the imperial period, such as Pliny the Elder, include snippets about practices related to divine powers in North Africa. Early Christian authors – especially Arnobius and Augustine – also record (or polemically distort) contemporary religious practices or concepts in 3rd-5th cent. CE Africa, some of which are taken to represent long-standing traditions particular to the region. And in the 6th cent. CE, the Latin poet Corippus composed an epic celebrating the Byzantine “reconquest” of Africa that includes lists of peoples – often problematically connected with earlier Graeco-Roman and later Arabic lists to demonstrate tribal and cultural continuity³² – and some details on cult. For example, Corippus’ mention that the Laguatan’s chief was priest of Gurzil – son of “horned Ammon and a cow” who was represented in an image – is cited in every discussion of Libyan religion³³. In modern accounts, snippets written by authors using very different kinds of source material, and separated from one another by a millennium, are often divorced from their wider literary and historical contexts to present a coherent whole.

The dearth of evidence means that every modern account returns to the same pieces of data again and again: a kind of obligatory name-checking of passages, sites, and monuments. The relative lack of new evidence discovered over the course of the 20th century precludes any paradigm shift driven by changing data. Any shifts in interpretation from Gsell onwards must, then, stem from changes in how the discipline constructs its narratives in the context of contemporary power structures and ideologies. And yet despite significant shifts in both – the independence of North African states and the rise of postcolonialism – the basic outline of Gsell’s narrative, and the conceptual categories with which he produced the data set from which all subsequent scholars have worked, have remained central in studies of Libyan religion.

2. Stéphane Gsell and the Ethnography of Libyan Religion

As with nearly every aspect of ancient North Africa, Stéphane Gsell (1864-1932) authored the first major synthesis of “Libyan” religion as part of his *Histoire ancienne de l’Afrique du nord*³⁴; in so doing, Gsell established the types of questions, methods, and the boundaries of enquiry that would shape nearly all subsequent work on the topic³⁵.

32. A. Merrills, “Corippus’ Triumphal Ethnography. Another Look at Iohannis II.28-161”, *Libyan Studies*, 50, 2019, 153-163.

33. *Ioh.* 2.106-111; 5.495.

34. S. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24. On Gsell’s biography: N. Oulebsir, *Les usages du patrimoine : monuments, musées et politique coloniale en Algérie, 1830-1930*, Paris, 2004, 332. On Gsell’s place in the historiography of North Africa more broadly, F. Soufi, “Histoire et mémoire : l’historiographie coloniale”, *Insaniyat: Revue algérienne d’anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, 3, 1998, 53-69 (focusing on Gsell’s colonialist agenda); C. Ford, “The Inheritance of Empire and the Ruins of Rome in French Colonial Algeria”, *Past & Present*, 226, 2015, 57-77.

35. C. Picard, “Notice sur la vie et les travaux de M. Stéphane Gsell, membre de l’Académie”, *Comptes Rendus des Séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1947, 24-86, justifiably notes that Gsell’s

Gsell's oeuvre and biography, including his role as professor in the École Supérieure des Lettres d'Alger (1890-1900) and Inspector of Antiquities of Algeria, are covered elsewhere in this volume. As a Classicist, epigraphist who published thousands of inscriptions, and archaeologist responsible for the *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie*, Gsell was deeply engaged with nearly every Greek and Latin text, monument, and inscription known at the time he was writing; his method of synthesizing these into a historical narrative was fundamentally descriptive and positivist. He aimed to work inductively, drawing together this range of sources. Of course, no scholarly work is purely inductive; models and metanarratives – implicit or explicit – always structure how pieces of evidence are fitted together into a coherent whole. Gsell, confronted with writing about Libyan religion – a subject for which there was little ancient evidence – depended on such models to an even greater extent than in his accounts of Roman history. And the models Gsell used – and baked into subsequent studies of Libyan religion – were those of British evolutionary anthropology, as refracted through his ethnographic colleagues at the École supérieure.

For Gsell, the primary research question was about what constituted “pure” Libyan religion, what was truly indigenous to North Africa. Religion in the Maghreb was a kind of historical palimpsest, full of borrowings and impositions resulting from Africa's history of colonization and conquest: there were Phoenicio-Punic elements and borrowings, borrowings from the Greek world, Roman impositions, and “orthodox” Islamic practices, each affecting or grafted onto native African religion. In this world of shifting sources of colonial and imperial control, what stayed the same were the people; and as a people, they had a core religious identity which could be built upon without its essence being affected. Any change found in Libyan religion was wholly the result of external stimuli. In order to get at Libyan religion, later accretions had to be identified by their origin, and then stripped away: “Il importe de discerner et d'écarter ces éléments étrangers, pour atteindre le fond primitif”³⁶. The guiding assumption was, of course, that there was something of a pure (and explicitly primitive) Libyan religion that could be uncovered and that was intrinsic to the pre-Roman inhabitants of North Africa.

The opening sentence of his chapter on religion in the “royaumes indigènes” section of the *Histoire* lays bare the stakes and guiding assumptions of Gsell's project: “Un grand nombre de Berbères s'adonnent encore à des pratiques d'origine magique, rites mécaniques qui, pour produire les résultats souhaités, les imitent ou les amorcent”. Most pointedly, contemporary Berbers are the true subject of his enquiry; studying their cult was, in effect, studying the religion of ancient North Africans. Past and present were one and the same. Gsell, in effect, painted a picture of the Libyans-Berbers as a “people without history”³⁷.

Histoire has already become, and predicts it will continue to be, “la base de toute étude future sur toute la région”.

36. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, VI, 120.

37. E.R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley, 1982. Note that Gsell was hardly the first to claim that the modern inhabitants of Africa were the same “people” as the ancient Libyans; Thomas Shaw

And throughout Gsell's extensive oeuvre, the native inhabitants of his contemporary North Africa were described in terms of their barbarism and savagery: a contrast with the Romans and the French who brought "civilization"³⁸.

The other claim set out in Gsell's opening is that the Berbers did not have "religion", as it was conceived in the early 20th century milieu in which he was working; instead, they had mechanical, magical rites. Gsell never clearly defines his notion of "magic" (or "religion") – he leaves them as seemingly self-evident categories. That said, his discussion of magic depends heavily on Edmond Doutté's 1909 *Magie et religion de l'Afrique du nord*³⁹. Doutté, Gsell's colleague at the École Supérieure des Lettres d'Alger, focused on post-antique Africa (he makes only passing reference to Herodotus and Augustine); for Doutté, magic was fundamentally a primitive, emotive technical operation that gave way to both religion and science⁴⁰. The supposed primitiveness of the modern Berbers – that they had not achieved anything like religion or science, but had only ill-conceived technical operations – is what allows Gsell to collapse past and present. The Berbers had not moved beyond this early form of cult; their religion *was* static and un-evolved, and thus must have been commensurate with much more ancient cult practices... what could be earlier than magic?

And that is perhaps also the reason why Gsell puts such effort into demonstrating that anything which looked like more than "magic" in ancient or modern Berber religion was borrowed from another group. The influence of Punic colonists caused Libyans to adopt elements recognizable as "religion" into their magic practices⁴¹; even the idea of depicting deities in anthropomorphic terms (something he notes is common in world "religions") is borrowed, as are the (Greek) forms of such deities themselves⁴². Nowhere is this insistence

made a similar claim in his 1743 account of his travels in North Africa, noting religion as the exception (*Voyages de Monsr. Shaw, M.D. dans plusieurs provinces de la Barbarie et du Levant*, La Haye, 1743, 390).

38. S. Gsell, *L'Algérie dans l'antiquité*, Algiers, 1900, 84; S. Gsell, "Introduction", in J. Alazard, E. Albertini, A. Bel, F. Braudei, G. Esquer, E.-F. Gautier, E. LeBalanc, G. Marçais, W. Marçais, P. Martino, M. Morand, M. Reygasse, C. Taillart, G. Yver and J. Zeiller (eds.), *Histoire et historiens de l'Algérie*, Paris, 1931, 1-16. For Gsell's place in colonial politics, P.M. Lorcin, "Rome and France in Africa. Recovering Colonial Algeria's Latin Past", *French Historical Studies*, 25, 2002, 295-329; J. Cantier, "L'Algérie au regard de l'histoire : un exemple d'évolution de l'historiographie coloniale", *Les Cahiers d'Histoire Immédiate*, 6, 1994, 29-55; J. Cantier, "Du discours scientifique au discours commémoratif : les Antiquisants de l'école d'Alger face au Centenaire de la conquête", *Anabases*, 15, 2012, 27-36.

39. The closest Gsell comes to defining "magic" is in *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, I, 242, based on its aims of achieving good, preventing harm, or damaging enemies.

40. E. Doutté, *Magie et religion dans l'Afrique du Nord*, Algiers, 1909, 309-334. Note that Doutté criticizes Frazer's evolutionary progression of magic to religion to science, seeing both religion and science as the twin offshoots of magic.

41. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, VI, 123: "Tout au plus pourrait-on admettre que leur exemple a incité les indigènes à faire pénétrer la religion dans la magie".

42. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, VI, 162: "La plupart des religions ont enveloppé les êtres divins dans une forme humaine. Les Libyens n'ont pas fait exception à cet égard, mais peut-être ont-ils attendu que des étrangers leur en donnassent l'exemple (...). Comme ils étaient incapables de tout effort artistique, ils

on borrowing clearer than in Gsell’s discussion of the oracular god worshipped at the Siwa Oasis, who gained renown across the Mediterranean world as a ram-horned Zeus Ammon. Gsell stipulates that Ammon was something of a Libyan “national” deity, noting the god’s appearance on Numidian coinage. The nature and origins of this god, and the significance of the onomastic homonymy with both the Punic Baal Hammon and the Egyptian Amon-Re, remain subjects of scholarly debate⁴³. For Gsell, Ammon was clearly “borrowed” from the Egyptians. He offers no positive evidence aside from the idea that the Libyans “ont, en général, emprunté, non créé, les grands dieux dont ils ont été ou sont les zélés dévots”, because “leur faculté d’invention se meut dans des limites étroites”⁴⁴. Jupiter Ammon must be borrowed; the Libyans are too primitive to have invented a god with a defined personality and image. He rejects the idea of Libyan origin for the deity out of hand, dismissing the claim that the name Ammon is etymologically Libyan and the notion that ram-worship was uniquely Libyan (the Egyptians could also have highly esteemed rams!). The popularity of Phoenician Baal Hammon in tophet-like inscriptions across Africa was because the Libyans saw him as akin to the Ammon they had previously adopted from the Egyptians. Despite Gsell’s mastery of a range of ancient evidence, rather than interrogating material related to Ammon, the whole argument is built upon his preconceived notion of what Libyan religion *ought* to be: primitive, localized, and uninventive. The metanarrative of Berber primitivism to scaffold Gsell’s account was in place long before any ancient evidence was hung upon it.

Because of this elision of time and supposed Berber permanence, Gsell draws heavily on the work of three contemporary ethnographers who studied North African peoples in order to fill in evidentiary gaps: Doutté and the father-son pair, René and Henri Basset⁴⁵. Doutté (1867-1926), whose work on magic clearly shaped Gsell’s notions of what Berber (pre-)religion was, was a former officer and colonial administrator who had been posted in the Aurès before a bout of tuberculosis drove him to learn Arabic and begin a second career as a scholar of Algerian Islam⁴⁶. He was a protégé of René Basset (1855-1924), Director of the École Supérieure des Lettres d’Alger; Basset sought to elevate Doutté to a vacant chair of modern history at the École in 1903, but was forced to relent given Doutté’s lack of formal academic credentials⁴⁷. Only later did Doutté earn a position at the École. Doutté’s early work on “maraboutisme” (1899) – the worship of Islamic saints and their descendants in North Af-

durent se contenter, soit d’images fort grossières, soit de copies, adaptant tant bien que mal à ces divinités des types créés par l’art grec”.

43. E.g. V. Brouquier-Reddé, *Temples et cultes de Tripolitaine*, Paris, 1992, 262-263.

44. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, VI, 142.

45. On the place of the École in French colonial efforts, A. Messaoudi, *Les arabisants et la France coloniale 1780-1930*, Lyon, 2015, 433-510.

46. F. Pouillon, *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, Paris, 2008, 310-312. On Doutté’s ethnographic work, see “Ethnographie et antipathie”, in H. Rachik, *L’esprit du terrain. Études anthropologiques au Maroc*, Rabat, 2016, 511-523.

47. A. Messaoudi, *Les arabisants...*, *op. cit.*, n. 45, 457.

rica – was full of references to the “English” school of anthropology: translations of Edward Burnett Tylor’s *Primitive Society* and Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. In “maraboutisme”, Doutté saw something primitive and pre-Islamic which survived the spread of Islam; it could potentially be traced back to the practice of the Maures worshipping their kings and to Libyan ancestor-worship⁴⁸. In other words, “maraboutisme” was the kind of survival of primitive forms of worship into later religion that Tylor’s evolutionary theory focused upon. The evolutionary framework offered by Tylor and Frazer provided a model for Doutté to understand localized forms of religion in the Maghreb, and one that – as we shall see – ultimately shaped Gsell’s understanding of pre-Roman religion in Africa⁴⁹.

Gsell’s other major ethnographic sources were René and Henri (1892-1926) Basset, one of René Basset’s sons who studied under Doutté⁵⁰. The Bassets went far further than even Doutté in collapsing pre-Roman religion and modern Berber religion⁵¹. For René, pure Berber religion was best seen among the Guanches of the Canary Islands, “préservés par leur isolement”⁵². They did develop some unique practices, but could be viewed without the contamination of Phoenician, Roman, or Islamic cults. Not only did invoking the Guanches collapse nearly two millennia of time and thousands of kilometers of distance, but the ethnographic accounts that Basset used were themselves products of Spanish colonial refractions of religion. There was nothing “pure” or “Berber” about the religion of the Guanches: the latter was at best an imagination and translation of lived practice and ideas through the lens of Classical and missionary-Catholic concepts⁵³.

René Basset’s collapse of time, space, and allegedly unchanging Berber cult demanded loose handling of any evidentiary material, and a similar collapse of distinctive practices into generic categories. Consider, for example, René’s account of Berber litholatry (rock-wor-

48. E. Doutté, “Notes sur l’Islam maghribin: les marabouts”, *Revue d’Histoire des Religions*, 40, 1899, 356-358.

49. E.g. E. Doutté, *Magie...*, *op. cit.*, n. 40, 347: “les débris de rites qui survivent: c’est là ce que Tylor a appelé des survivances”. Although Doutté went on to offer criticism of the “English school” as he built ties to the French sociological world – the *Année Sociologique* set including Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss – his work remains steeped in citations to Tylor and Frazer (including the untranslated second edition of *The Golden Bough*).

50. René: Pouillon, *Dictionnaire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 46, 65-66; Henri: *ibid.*, 64-65.

51. Although beyond the scope of the present paper, it is worth noting the Bassets’ continued relevance to Classical studies; his argument that the tale of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* drew on Berber folklore (H. Basset, *Essai sur la littérature des Berbères*, Algiers, 1920) continues to be repeated in studies of Apuleius: E.g. E. Plantade and N. Plantade, “*Libyca Psyche*: Apuleius and the Berber Folktales”, in B.T. Lee, E. Finkelppearl and L. Graverini (eds.), *Apuleius and Africa*, London, 2014, 174-202.

52. R. Basset, “Recherches sur la religion des berbères”, *Revue d’Histoire des Religions*, 1910, 31.

53. J.F. de la Rosa, “Archaeology, Politics and Identity. The Case of the Canary Islands in the Nineteenth Century”, in N. Schlanger and J. Nordbladh (eds.), *Archives, Ancestors, Practices. Archaeology in the Light of its History*, New York, 2008, 247-260; the same types of multidirectional translations of religion no doubt took place in the Canaries as those S. MacCormack (*Religion in the Andes. Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru*, Princeton, 1991) identified in Spanish accounts of Inca religion.

ship). He begins by discussing Pliny and Pomponius Mela (probably both using the same source) describing a rock in Cyrenaica that, when touched, could control the South Wind⁵⁴. This account from ancient geographers is set as evidence of rock-related worship comparable to a range of practices attested by ethnographers on the Canary Islands, all of which include offerings (blood of a sacrificed animal, milk, butter) made on the rocks: something not mentioned at all by the Classical authors. What unites the two practices are that they involve rocks: in one case, as a kind of magical tool; in the other, as the passive receptacle of offerings. Unlike things are made to be akin, and more direct possible parallels – the use of natural rock “altars” is hardly confined to “Berbers” or North Africa – ignored to create an image of common, ahistorical Berber practice. These stark differences – in time, space, and action – are elided in order to create a sense of continuity and commonality that is distinctly “Berber”.

For Gsell, this ethnographic work done by his colleagues at the École explicitly provides evidence for beliefs and practices of the pre-Roman peoples of North Africa. He posits, for example, that the Libyans believed in a range of local, impersonal spirits – *genii* – solely on the basis of their presence in modern Berber ethnographies. These supposed *genii* are distinct from the *genii* in Latin epigraphy, which are seen as more individualized, with personalities and/or names⁵⁵. Here, too, contemporary ethnography is used as primary evidence for cult more than two millennia earlier, staking a claim that has been repeated by every subsequent account of Libyan religion.

Apart from the ways ethnographic accounts provided models that could fill in the sparse textual, archaeological, and epigraphic record, modernity shaped Gsell’s approach and conception on a much more fundamental level. Many of the direct connections to the wider history of religion in the early 20th century come not through Gsell’s own readings of theory, but rather through his ethnographic sources on Berber religion. For example, in discussing sacred prostitution in the cult of Venus at *Sicca Veneria*, Gsell debates whether this practice is a Phoenician one – akin to the sacred prostitution attested for the Phoenician Ashtart and to Venus-Ashtart at *Eryx* – or a native African one⁵⁶. Whereas in most other cases, as we saw, Gsell would default to seeing such practices and deities as foreign, here, he demurs, and allows for the possibility that this could be a true African practice. The reason he gives is simply that the practice could be “un vieux rite africain de magie sympathique, propre à stimuler la fécondité de la nature”⁵⁷. Not only is an African origin possible because it seems “magic” – aligned with the sense of primitivism outlined above – but Gsell cites this as *sympathetic* magic.

Gsell’s invocation of sympathetic magic shows how his ideas were deeply shaped by his ethnographic sources. The term was popularized by the Cambridge Classicist J.G. Frazer in the first edition of *The Golden Bough* (1890), never cited in Gsell’s work. Of

54. Plin., *H.N.* II 2, 44; Pomp. Mela, I 39. See R. Basset, “Recherches...”, *op. cit.*, n. 52, 5-6.

55. S. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, VI, 132-137.

56. *Ibid.*, 156-157.

57. *Ibid.*, 157.

course, Frazer's concept went on to be expanded in the Francophone world as part of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss's *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie* (1904); this, though, is also never cited by Gsell. Yet Doutté, one of Gsell's major ethnographic sources, drew heavily on Frazer and Hubert/Mauss. Gsell does not explicitly cite Doutté in his discussion of Venus at *Sicca Veneria*, either here or in his earlier discussions of the cult⁵⁸; still, it is clear that the conceptual tools Doutté and the Bassets appropriated from Frazer are refracted in Gsell's own thinking. It was modernity – accounts of contemporary Berber practices – that implicitly provided Gsell with the theoretical tools to frame his account. Contemporary ethnography offered a filter and limit to the kinds of explanations and categories available to Gsell for understanding “Libyan” religion.

It is not only Frazer's model of magic, filtered through Doutté, that indirectly shapes Gsell's model of religion in ancient North Africa. Gsell's entire notion of survivals and accretions owes much to the “English” school of religious anthropology, again refracted through Doutté and (to a lesser extent) the Bassets⁵⁹. The foundational work in this school of thought, Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), argued that animist beliefs were part of a common “primitive” mentality, shared by the ancestors of Judeo-Christian European civilization and modern “primitives”. As cultures evolved, aspects of this primitive state remained as a cultural detritus of survivals: “processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved”⁶⁰. These often lose their original significance, and become the subject of folktales or superstition. Several of Tylor's most influential successors further developed this notion: for J.G. Frazer, folktales, folk customs, and odd bits of myth could all be explained by such survivals in the unconscious of a people⁶¹; for William Robertson Smith, even Christian communion was a survival from primitive totemistic rites⁶². In France, the Classical archaeologist Salomon Reinach adopted this view in his work on religion⁶³; Reinach figures prominently in Doutté's work, providing another avenue by which Tylorian models shaped the study of North African cult. Gsell's work on Libyan religion develops along sim-

58. *Ibid.*, 156-157; Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, IV, 403-404 and V, 31-32. Gsell does, however, use both Basset and Doutté to show the sacredness of women in the Libyan/Berber world shortly after mentioning sacred prostitution at *Sicca Veneria*: *ibid.*, V, 32, n. 1.

59. For discussion of the reception of Tylor and his followers in Francophone anthropology, F. Rosa, “Le mouvement « anthropologique » et ses représentants français (1884-1912)”, *European Journal of Sociology*, 37, 1996, 375-405.

60. E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, London, 1871, 15.

61. J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Comparative Religion*, London, 1890.

62. W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. First series. The Fundamental Institutions*, Edinburgh, 1889.

63. A. Rodrigue, “Totems, Taboos, and Jews. Salomon Reinach and the Politics of Scholarship in fin-de-siècle France”, *Jewish Social Studies*, 10, 2004, 1-19.

ilar lines; the main distinction is that while he generally accepts a notion of primitive mentalities and practices, he refrains from the kinds of cross-geographic comparisons that Tylor depends on, and stays firmly rooted in material related to the inhabitants of Africa.

That these ethnographic accounts implicitly shaped Gsell’s metanarrative of Berber primitivism and religious survival is clear, for Gsell himself does not directly engage with the wider anthropological works promoting (or critiquing) such models. Gsell does cite a few wider theoretical works on religion, but only briefly. William Robertson Smith’s *Religion of the Semites* (1889) appears in one of Gsell’s footnotes, but only to reject Robertson Smith’s interpretation of the Punic Tanit as an androgynous deity: a matter of content, rather than approach⁶⁴. Gsell cites Reinach, but almost exclusively for Reinach’s antiquarian work, rather than his more theoretical contributions⁶⁵.

In writing the first – and most influential – modern account of Libyan religion, Gsell’s definition of his subject-matter, the tools he could use to understand it, and the narrative framework into which he fit evidence were all drawn directly from contemporary Berber ethnography emanating from René Basset and his circle, itself steeped in the Tylorian tradition of evolutionary anthropology. The study of pre-Roman religion in North Africa has always been a product of colonial ethnography.

3. Midcentury Models and the Appropriation of Gsell: Gilbert-Charles Picard and Marcel Le Glay

While the amount of information on Punic and Roman religion grew rapidly in the generation after Gsell – thanks mostly to new excavations at sites like the tophets of Carthage and Sousse, and Roman-period sanctuaries across the Maghreb – little new material contributed to understanding “Libyan” religion. The evolutionary ethnological models that Gsell built into his account continued to hold sway over his successors, and provided the framework in which the few pieces of new material could be fitted.

In 1954, Gilbert-Charles Picard (1913-1998), who served as Director of Antiquities in Tunisia from 1942 until he left the country during Tunisia’s negotiations for independence in 1955, published *Les religions de l’Afrique antique*⁶⁶. His discussion of pre-Roman religion occupied the first chapter, and depends explicitly on Gsell’s *Histoire*: the only work that appears in Picard’s annotated bibliography on Libyan religion⁶⁷. Picard’s overall model of religious history is closely calqued on Gsell’s: the religion of North Africa was composed of a

64. S. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, 246, n. 3.

65. E.g. S. Gsell, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, n. 24, I, 59, n. 6; 233, n. 1. Gsell does cite Reinach’s theoretical work on religion once, but in the context of interpreting Egyptian rock art (*ibid.*, 243, n. 1).

66. For Picard’s life and career, N. de Chaisemartin, “Gilbert-Charles Picard (15 octobre 1913 - 21 décembre 1998)”, *Antiquités Africaines*, 35, 1999, 4-8. Cf. J.C. López-Gómez in this volume, 265-288.

67. G.-C. Picard, *Les religions de l’Afrique antique*, Paris, 1956, 253.

historical stratigraphy, with each colonial power contributing a layer in which survivals of previous phases poked through. Each race – and despite political fragmentation of Numidians, Maurii, and other tribes, the “Libyans” were a homogenous race – had its own form of religion. Picard compares the process of finding “Libyan” religion to chemistry, eliminating later (Punic, Roman, Christian, Islamic) additions and looking for the residue left over: a forced metaphor that elevated his work to the level of science⁶⁸.

From the outset, Picard focuses on presenting the indigenous peoples of the Maghreb as fundamentally primitive. He uses the terms “Libyan” and “Berber” interchangeably to describe the indigenous inhabitants of ancient North Africa. The Libyan-Berbers are, and always have been, a primitive peoples, unable to rise out of an early state of human development except when occasionally pushed by outside forces: “La déconcertante stérilité de leur nature, incapable lorsqu’elle n’est pas contrainte par une autorité extérieure, de dépasser les formes les plus primitives de l’activité humaine, se révèle aussi clairement dans la domaine de la religion que dans celui de la politique ou de l’économie”⁶⁹. The ancient Libyans and contemporary Berbers have only the form of religion common to all “primitive” peoples: “a feeling of the sacred”. Like the anthropological and ethnographic literature that shaped Gsell’s account, Picard adopts a framework that sees a universal and timeless primitive psychology.

One of the few pieces of evidence discovered after Gsell’s *Histoire* that Picard discusses demonstrates the way this framework shapes Picard’s interpretation of the material. A relief (probably of the late 2nd or 3rd cent. CE) discovered near Bèjà (Tunisia) shows seven figures, each labeled in Latin with names that sound rather un-Latin: *Macurtam*, *Macurgum*, *Vihinam*, *Bonchor*, *Varsissima*, *Matilam*, *Iunam*. These were quickly recognized as showing “Libyan” deities⁷⁰. Picard suggests that the relief reflects an African pantheon, but that the very organization into a pantheon is owed to Phoenician models; he cannot conceive such organization as belonging to indigenous peoples⁷¹. Even recognizing this, Picard goes a step further to deny the ancient Libyans religious thought and agency: without evidence, he claims that most of the “gods” shown are nothing more than divinized toponyms – the Berber place-*genii* described by Gsell – except, perhaps, for *Bonchor*, the central figure and seemingly senior deity in the pantheon⁷². Following an argument made by Février⁷³, who saw “Bonchor” as potentially a poor (and odd) translation of the Punic personal name *Bodmelqart*, Picard argues that the *Bonchor* depicted is a deified chieftain. The relief becomes evidence for the

68. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

69. *Ibid.*, 25.

70. A. Merlin, “Divinités indigènes sur un bas-relief romain de la Tunisie”, *Comptes Rendus des Séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1947, 355-371, interpreting these as lightly “Romanized” or “Punicized” survivals.

71. G.-C. Picard, *Religions...*, *op. cit.*, n. 67, 23-25.

72. M. Bénabou, *La résistance africaine à la romanisation*, Paris, 1976, 299, rightly criticizes Picard for this claim.

73. J.-G. Février, “Sur quelques noms libyques et puniques”, *Bulletin Archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques*, 1946-1949, 649-652.

kind of primitive anthropolatry that Gsell (and the Bassets) had found in Libyan ruler-worship. Picard works hard to reduce every aspect of the relief to be evidence for Libyan religious primitivism. Ancient material is forced into a framework in order to make the Libyans partake of a universal, primitive mentality.

In short, the ethnological and evolutionary models that shaped Gsell’s account of Libyan religion continue to shape Picard’s work. As new evidence arose, it was simply fitted in to the metanarrative of Libyan religious primitivism. The model that Gsell established in the *Histoire* was firmly baked into studies of Libyan religion by the time Picard wrote; Picard’s account simply continued to foreground and propagate that framework.

Picard’s contemporary, Marcel Le Glay (1920-1992), has perhaps been even more influential in setting the agenda and method for understanding religion in ancient North Africa, above all through his work on *Saturne africain* (1962-1966)⁷⁴. Although Le Glay primarily works to understand a single deity and that god’s transformation through the accretion of cultural ideals from Near East, Africa, and Italy, Le Glay ultimately paints a panoramic picture of a “national” African religion. Like Picard, Le Glay uses Berber and Libyan interchangeably to describe the ancient, indigenous peoples of North Africa and its modern inhabitants, melding past and present. Although he disagrees with Picard on some minor details⁷⁵, the same concept of a layered religion, filled with survivals from earlier stages and peoples, shapes Le Glay’s wider narrative and his method of attempting to strip back later, foreign accretions. “True” Libyan religion is, according to Le Glay, magic, without personalized deities, theology, ritual, or myth⁷⁶: exactly how Gsell defined it. Le Glay even looks back to Basset’s description of the Guanches having a supreme deity to confirm a Berber tendency towards monotheism⁷⁷. Change is driven by external stimuli: invasion or colonization. Even more clearly than Picard, Le Glay points to “une remarquable permanence de la psychologie religieuse des Africains” that stretches from prehistory until at least Late Antiquity⁷⁸. This is, in essence, exactly the kind of psychological view of religion espoused by Tylor and his successors: a people has a certain mentality that no successive evolution can shake. Le Glay’s model continues to shape a number of works that focus on using a “biographical” approach to stratified gods as a means of finding cultural survivals⁷⁹.

74. Cf. M.M. McCarty, “Transforming Religion”, in B. Hitchner (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to Roman Africa*, Oxford, forthcoming. Cf. A. Gavini in this volume, 289-307.

75. For example, Le Glay argues that the Maghreb engaged with the wider Mediterranean much earlier than Picard, and argues for a much stronger Libyan tradition of heliolatry. Le Glay also focuses on economy – modes of production – as a larger determinant of religious practice.

76. M. Le Glay, *Saturne africain. Histoire*, Paris, 1966, 485.

77. *Ibid.*, 425.

78. *Ibid.*, 492.

79. E.g. A. Cadotte, *La romanisation des dieux : l’interpretatio romana en Afrique du Nord sous le Haut-Empire*, Leiden, 2007; N. Benseddik, *Esculape et Hygie en Afrique. Recherches sur les cultes guérisseurs*, Paris, 2010.

In short, mid-century Francophone writers on pre-Roman religion in North Africa continued to repeat and perpetuate the wider narratives and frameworks that Gsell had borrowed from evolutionary ethnography and established in the *Histoire*. For these scholars, beliefs and ways of thinking could survive in a people, even when they “evolved” and adapted (in this case, from foreign peoples) more complex, advanced forms of religion. But even by the time Gsell was writing – and certainly by the time Picard and Le Glay were writing – French anthropologists had long abandoned such models of survivals⁸⁰. Accounts of Libyan religion were themselves a kind of colonial survival, maintaining an unchanging analytical structure shaped by the dominance of Gsell’s work.

4. Postcolonial Transvaluations

What may be most striking about scholarship produced in the wake of Algeria’s independence (1962) and arising from a host of postcolonial movements in subsequent generations is that it continues to employ the same evolutionary metanarratives derived from 19th-century anthropology. The difference is simply in how the terms of those narratives are freighted with value: instead of permanence as a sign of primitiveness, it is taken as a marker of autochthonous resilience in the face of various colonial oppressions.

This dynamic is perhaps clearest in the lifelong endeavors of Gabriel Camps (1927-2002), a prehistorian whose work covered everything from the development of the Numidian state to prehistoric pottery, and whose most substantial legacy remains the creation of the Institute d’ Études Berbères in Aix and the *Encyclopédie Berbère*⁸¹. More than any other figure (except perhaps Gsell), Camps contributed to defining and collating the evidentiary body related to the pre-Roman Maghreb, especially the most archaeologically visible traces of Africa’s pre-Roman inhabitants: funerary monuments⁸². And Camps’ explicit goal was to find the history that colonialism denied to indigenous North Africans⁸³.

Throughout his oeuvre, Camps popularized the notion of “permanence berbère”: a pithier and broader version of Le Glay’s African psychological permanence. For Camps, it is a shared mode of thinking – a mentality – that defines ethnic Berbers; this is expressed via a shared language, social structures, and an art (from tattoos to weaving) that is explicitly “an-historique”⁸⁴. To arrive at this mentality, Camps uses exactly the same subtractive process as his predecessors, attempting to discover the origins of various cultural practices to see what

80. Cf. F. Rosa, “Le mouvement...”, *op. cit.*, n. 59, 404.

81. On Camps, S. Benkada, “Un préhistorien dans l’histoire : Gabriel Camps (1927-2002)”, *Insaniyat*, 19-20, 2003, 133-142.

82. G. Camps, *Monuments et rites funéraires protohistoriques; aux origines de la Berbérie*, Paris, 1962.

83. G. Camps, *Les berbères. Mémoire et identité*, Paris, 2007 [1980], 29.

84. G. Camps, “Avertissement”, *Encyclopédie Berbère*, 1, 1984, 6-48.

is left: “Est berbère ce qui n’est pas d’origine étrangère, c’est-à-dire ce qui n’est ni punique, ni latin, ni vandale, ni byzantin, ni arabe, ni turc, ni européen (français, espagnol, italien)”⁸⁵.

It is telling that the *Encyclopédie Berbère* has no entry on religion, but focuses instead on “magic” practices, with lemmata like “animisme”, “litholatrie”, “divination”. “Religion”, for Camps, cannot be part of the package in which ethnic Berberness is expressed; after all, the inhabitants of the Maghreb became overwhelmingly Christian and then Muslim. Finding something authentically Berber, then, automatically means finding something that can persist through changes of creeds: the manners of thinking that can survive.

It is also striking that, despite his explicit goal of restoring the history and agency denied to Berbers by colonial scholarship, Camps reproduces many of the structures of that scholarship. In his synthetic account of the Berbers, for example, Camps devotes a chapter to tracing the (a)history of Berber religion (“From the *Dii Maurii* of antiquity to modern *djennoun*”). In so doing, he follows exactly the same order of topics that Basset had laid out generations earlier: sacred mountains, caves, rocks, water, celestial bodies, animals, and humans⁸⁶. Basset and his circle had set the terms, boundaries, and denouement of the discourse.

Marcel Bénabou’s (1939-) work on African “resistance” to Romanization stands as one of the most thoughtful and nuanced attempts to shift discussion of North Africa under the Roman Empire away from colonial pictures of a binary colonizer-colonized and into a multidirectional dialogue. Drawing heavily on Camps’ earlier work, Bénabou restores agency to the inhabitants of Africa, seeing them as active creators of a syncretized religion rather than passive recipients of Roman cult. He explicitly critiques the way that past accounts have retrojected a kind of Berber “conscience nationale”⁸⁷: the mentalities that served as the central structuring elements from Gsell onwards. He also offers one of the few explicit critiques of the notion of cultural survivals in North African studies, recognizing that the term is often used pejoratively and as a means of creating a binary between cultural practices that seemed universally Roman (originating in Italy and shared across the empire) and what seemed localized or Other⁸⁸. And yet, in discussing Libyan religion, Bénabou returns to many of the metanarratives he rejects, so securely have they become built into the study of indigenous religion.

In seeking to find resistance and traditional African elements of religious practice under the empire, Bénabou must first define what those traditional elements might be. He hits the same notes as each of his predecessors in characterizing Libyan religion: localized *genii*; the sacredness of mountains, caves, and springs; litholatrie; zoolatrie; astrolatrie; funerary customs (not quite Basset’s order... but still the same bounded set of ideas). And like his predecessors, he settles upon hunting for a substratum of beliefs that can be seen as properly

85. *Ibid.*

86. G. Camps, *Les berbères...*, *op. cit.*, n. 83, 200-238.

87. M. Bénabou, *La résistance...*, *op. cit.*, n. 72, 13.

88. M. Bénabou, “L’Afrique et la culture romaine: le problème des survivances”, *Cahiers de Tunisie*, 29, 1981, 9-21.

African, something that can reveal “la mentalité religieuse des indigènes d’Afrique”⁸⁹. Ethnic (or racialized) mentalities – akin to the “conscience nationale” Bénabou rejects – remain the object of study; the process of finding them continues to be subtractive.

A similar tension between the civilizational claims of Gsell’s metanarrative and the desire to find a postcolonial alternative runs through the work. On the one hand, Bénabou explicitly rejects Doutté’s separation of magic and religion as problematic; on the other, he describes the impact of Romanization as contributing to a new “stade de la religion africaine”⁹⁰ – explicitly evolutionary language – that elevates indigenous religion by encouraging the development of gods’ personalities, priesthoods, images, and temples: moving beyond what he calls a “simple magie primitive”⁹¹. The very category and characterization he rejects is so ingrained in the modern imagination of Libyan religion that he has inherited that it proves impossible to escape.

Whether one sees Berber permanence as evidence of a primitiveness in need of civilizing, or as an authentic expression of a pure ethnic identity, the metanarrative into which various practices and conceptions are fitted has been remarkably stable from the explicitly colonial narratives of the early 20th century, through the tribulations of Maghreb independence, and into explicitly post- and anti-colonial scholarship. Even in attempts to reject Gsell and the legacy of early ethnographers, the Tylorian framework Gsell adopted from Doutté and the Bassets continues to structure accounts of Libyan religion. Primitive mentalities, discovered through subtraction, remain the principle objects and methods of study.

5. Paths forward

The purpose of historiography is not to set one narrative of the past on a pedestal as definitive, but rather to estrange us from the processes and assumptions whereby history is made: to allow us to take perspective and to allow space for alternative voices to craft alternative narratives. My goal here has been to draw attention to the way a particular strain of Tylorian ethnographic discourse, based around notions of fixed religious psychologies and “survivals,” became the major means of structuring a fragmentary and disparate collection of material related to indigenous religion in (and beyond) pre-Roman North Africa. And this was by no means a phenomenon unique to North Africa; early 20th-century studies of “Romanization” in Britain adopted similar Tylorian frameworks⁹². But in the Maghreb, scholarship followed a rather different trajectory, due to the ways studies of pre-Roman religion were bound up with contemporary ethnography. Introduced via ethnographers like the Bassets and Doutté, Tylorian language and types of meaning attributed to a thin evidentiary body became naturalized

89. M. Bénabou, *La résistance...*, *op. cit.*, n. 72, 271.

90. *Ibid.*, 284.

91. *ibid.*, 305.

92. E. Gettel, “Culture and Classics. Edward Burnett Tylor and Romanization”, in E. Varto (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to Classics and Early Anthropology*, Leiden, 2018, 99-131.

through the work of Stéphane Gsell. Even when condemning Gsell as an agent of French colonialism, anti-colonial and Berber national histories accept the premises and structures that Gsell wove into his account. The only major change has been one of valuation: indigeneity and survivals mark nationalistic Berber permanence rather than pejorative primitiveness.

Perhaps we would do better speaking not of a “permanence berbère”, but rather of a “permanence des études berbères”, not of a “permanence de la psychologie religieuse des africains”, but of “permanence de la psychologie des africanistes”.

How do we move forward and allow for alternative narratives in the study of North African religion? The easy answer is to call for more archaeological fieldwork specifically aimed at understanding the Iron Age Maghreb. The absence of material related to the inhabitants of the Maghreb between the Capsian Neolithic and Phoenician colonies only encourages using narratives of stasis and permanence to bridge this gap.

But more fieldwork also demands that we fundamentally reshape our questions, and discard the very terms that gave rise to this chapter. Instead of looking for “Libyan” or “pre-Roman” “religion” – finding a “religion” tied to an essentialized people and their unconscious mentalities – we might move away from definitions that are reductive or largely subtractive. A wealth of postcolonial scholarship has emphasized the ways that individuals work to create multiple, relational identities, mobilizing their ways of dealing with divine powers as active processes of identifying or grouping-together. Cult is not a timeless expression of pre-existing racial or ethnic identities; it is a way of creatively making sense of individuals’ and communities’ places in the face of changing power structures. Turning the focus from generic “Libyan religion” to how individual worshippers engaged with gods and groups, discursively drew connections, and adapted ideas and practices for new circumstances – in short, how individuals and communities *lived* religion – can offer valuable new perspectives⁹³. Asking how forms of hegemony and power dynamics fundamentally reshaped – rather than merely added a layer atop – practices, ways of knowing, and ways of grouping can transform how we see Iron Age religion in the Maghreb.

In short, moving forward still requires restoring a sense of history to Iron Age peoples and their cult practices. Religion is never static or ahistorical, even when the modes by which it is interrogated seem to be.

93. See M. Fernández Portaencasa and V. Gasparini (eds.), *Lived Ancient Religion in North Africa. Proceedings of the International Conference (Madrid, 19-21 February 2020)*, forthcoming; M. McCarty, *Empire and Worship in Roman Africa*, Cambridge, forthcoming.