

Joël Reland (History) – Morocco, Summer 2014

My decision to travel to Morocco this summer relates to the changing way in which I am thinking about and choosing to study history as I move towards my final year. After two years of studying papers which encapsulate broad chronological periods, Part II is an opportunity to narrow the focus of study and increase specialised knowledge. Thus I have chosen a collection of papers which put a significant emphasis on political theory and, more specifically, the ideas of post colonialism. This does not simply mean looking at the histories of postcolonial nations, but rather providing new angles of analysis, histories from below, moving past the narratives of great men and nations, asking how identity, personal and collective, generates meaning in an increasingly globalised world.

And a large degree of what Morocco taught me is that these postcolonial narratives are increasingly complex and interactive. I arrived expecting French to be the *lingua franca*, yet it turns out that in the major cities English is an increasingly common means of interaction between North African and European. The great, long boulevards constructed by the French remain Marrakech's main arteries, but they carry through a city which upholds many historical layers.

At the heart of the city stand the elegantly carved walls of the Medina and the looming minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque. The Ben Youssef Madrasa also attests to the near-1000 long year history of the city, as a place of learning, art and trade. Yet merely hundreds of metres away is the *Jardin Majorelle*: an evocative, blue relic of French colonialism, richly coloured walls and abundant plant-life evoking Europeanised visions of a tranquil existence in North Africa. And indeed to walk the main road further is to arrive in Guéliz, a quarter in a state of reconstruction, home of shopping malls and McDonalds. Taking this walking route as an historical narrative poses questions: to what extent is Marrakech a Moroccan palimpsest? Is its identity derived from moving past French oppression, a reassertion of what it means to be Moroccan? Or are visions more global, Morocco reaching less into itself than looking outwards in the modern world?

I was fortunate enough to arrive in Morocco towards the end of Ramadan, and this offered a glimpse of Morocco thinking in specifically national and religious terms, as the old Koutoubia Mosque and Jemaa el-Fnaa square remain integral to modern practices of worship. The street sellers flogging imitation football shirts and taxi drivers in their bright yellow Renaults would all come to a stop when the call to prayer came from the Mosque; streets buzzing with the sounds of trade turned their collective attention towards the oldest elements of the city.

The port city of Essaouira offered another glimpse of how Eid was celebrated. Whilst tourists head there for the relief of a sea breeze in contrast to the sweltering cities, many Morroccans also travel there during religious celebrations, whether to see family or for a break. Whereas men and women seldom interacted publicly in the markets of Marrakech, on the cobbled streets of Essaouira families walking hand in hand was a common sight. Men also tended to wear jeans and shirts, rather than the kaftan, and women also wore more colourful versions of their own dress. Where Essaouira was once a favourite haunt of Jimi Hendrix and a generation of hippies, today it still has this sense of retreat, liberation from the heat of the city, yet its precise meaning is changing.

What I saw of Morocco was but a snapshot, and not a means towards forming tight conclusions. However, the opportunity to travel there has been a great starting point for opening up questions about postcolonial identities as I head towards my final year of study.