The Geopolitics of Immigrant Remittances: Comparative Prospects from Northern Africa and Northern India

Thomas Lacroix

HAL Id: halshs-01577754

https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01577754

Submitted on 28 Aug 2017

Thomas Lacroix
CNRS research fellow
Migrinter, University of Poitiers

Migrinter,
MSHS, 5, r. Théodore Lefebvre
TSA 21103
86073 POITIERS CEDEX 9, France

Thomas.lacroix@univ-poitiers.fr

The Geopolitics of Immigrant Remittances: Comparative Prospects from Northern Africa and Northern India

The recent literature on immigrant philanthropy and hometown associations has documented the surge on transnational involvement into homeland development. Various categories of diaspora organizations, from informal hometown networks to established immigrant associations, are engaged in development projects in their respective homeland such as the building of schools and health centres or village electrification. And yet, beyond the general observation of a development turn in transnational practices, a closer examination shows that the scope, forms and domain of engagement of immigrant organizations vary a great deal. This paper draws on a comparative study between three groups: the Algerian Kabyles and the Moroccan Chleuhs settled in France and the Indian Sikhs living in Britain. The number of Algerian organizations registered in the FORIM, a platform of migrant NGOs, amounts to three compared to 15 Moroccans and 23 Asian organizations, which were registered with the British equivalent of the FORIM, Connection of Development (CfD). These figures are far from being comprehensive since they do not include numerous informal groupings, but this weakness of transnational commitment to development among Algerian Kabyles in France is confirmed by personal investigation.

The literature accounts for this difference on the ground of economic and cultural parameters (Orozco 2006) or of the power relationships between emigrants and villagers (Mercer, Page, and Evans 2008). By contrast, little attention has been paid on the bearings o the geopolitical inscription of beneficiary areas in their broader national and international context. And yet, the literature on collective

remittances sometimes indicates that there are autonomist tendencies or distant relationships between the sending area and the national authorities of the origin state. This has been noted in Western Africa (Daum 1998), and Latin America (ref.). Following Yves Lacoste who defined geopolitics as the study of power rivalries on a territory motivated by confrontational representations associated with this territory, my aim is to highlight the geopolitical dimensions of collective remittances (Lacoste 1996). Indeed, collective mobilisation for development is a way of projecting a community ethos and imaginary on the local territory. In confrontational contexts between the state and local groups, the way the communities imagine their territory, its limits, management and future may be at odds with the state project of nation-building.

The Berber and Sikh investigated communities, are themselves ethnic or religious minorities in their host country confronted with homogenising nation-building policies. The situation became particularly strained in India and Algeria, where economic and cultural homogenization policies led to open conflicts in the 1980s. In addition, over the last decades, the three states adopted economic liberalisation policies in line with IMF structural adjustment plans, which transformed state governance and centre/periphery relationships. These policies were conducive to state withdrawal at the local level, which opened new avenues of involvement for civil society organisations. This paper will examine the consequences of ethnic resistance and economic liberalisation policies for migrant civil societies, and, in turn, for collective remittances.

1. Minority politics in Northern Africa and Northern India

1.1. Colonisation and the paradoxes of state integration

Arguably, a common trait of Berber and Sikh communities is a long history of resistance against incorporation into neighbouring states. Colonisation put an end to the relative autonomy enjoyed by Sikhs and Berbers, but this was achieved at a high price and against fierce resistance. The bravery of Berber and Sikh troops impressed the French and British colonial administrations to such a point that they initiated a specific strategy to manage these populations. This strategy was based on labour migration on the one hand and army enrolment on the other. Berbers and Sikhs soldiers became the backbone of the locally-recruited colonial army. Sikhs servicemen were sent to various part of the

British Empire. Moroccan and Algerian Berbers also served in the French army during the First and Second World War, which led to the settlement of the first sizeable North African community in the country.

Workforce recruitment was another strategy used to eradicate potential opposition. This was a deliberate strategy in Morocco where Commander Lyautey, after the First World War, restricted the recruitment by French companies (mainly the Collieries of Nord-Pas-de-Calais) in Southern Berber areas. In Algeria, direct recruitment was also limited to Kabylia, mainly because of the reluctance of colonial farmers of the Arabic plains to see their employees leaving to France. In India, Punjab has been one of the main labour sources since the 1830s up until now.

Another common aspect of the colonial management to which these populations were subjected is the implementation of a divide and rule policy which led to a reification of the Berber and Sikh identities. Colonisation exacerbated the grievances between Berbers and Arabs or Sikhs and Hindus and the colonial authorities drew upon these grievances to impose colonial governance.

Colonisation equally led to the sharpening of religious identities. In order to resist Christian missionaries, religious reformist movements emerged in Punjab. At the same time, the creation of several bodies and gave the Sikh community its contemporary institutional framework. The Akali Dal, the main Sikh political party, and the Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) were created in the 1920s in order to regain gurudwaras'[1] control over British influence.

Paradoxically, the colonial attempt to integrate the countries under one single political authority was conducive to ethnic fragmentation. In the three cases, the independentist movements rose against this endeavour. The Indian Congress in the 1890s, the Algerian MTLD in the 1920s and FLN in the 1950s, and the Moroccan Istiqlal in the 1930s were created to react against the colonial dismembering of the nation. This colonial paradox set the stage for post-independence minority conflicts.

1.2. The turn of independence

Strengthened during the colonial period, the community identities faced a new challenge during the nation-building process of the new states. In Morocco, Berberism was associated with colonial

---

[1] A gurudwara is a Sikh temple

divisionism. In Algeria, the nationalist movement harshly criticised Berber revivalism as anti-national rhetoric and the Kabyle leaders of the independentist guerrilla were evicted by the head of FLN (Roberts 2003). In both cases, the nationalist movement bore grievances against the active enrolment of Berber soldiers in the French army.

In India, the Sikh issue was temporarily glossed over by the partition process between India and Pakistan. In 1949, the new constitution declared the India Union of States. The federal architecture of the country favoured the concentration of powers at the central level to the expense of state powers. The constitution thus heralded the refusal by the Congress Party and the Hindu majority of a multinational state (Singh 2009, p67). It was only in 1966, when the government of New Delhi needed a flawless support against Pakistan, that the creation of Sikh state was conceded with the merging of the Hindu majority districts into the state of Haryana. For the first time in history, Sikhs became the main ethnic group in Punjab (only 30% of the population was Sikh before independence).

1.3. Minority conflicts in a postcolonial context

Morocco is the first of the three states that spiralled into open conflict. Immediately after independence, in 1958, the monarchy faced an uprising in the Northern Berber areas, in the Rif Mountains. However, contrary to what happened in Algeria and India, the uprising was not fuelled by identity claims, but was related to the post-independence economic crunch and the contested legitimacy of the new King, Hassan II. The Moroccan authorities quieted the unrest like the French did 40 years earlier in the Atlas, i.e. by opening the migration valve. The authorities, which signed workforce agreements with four European countries in the early 1960s, encouraged recruitment in this region. The 1958 events were the only sizeable riots that broke out in the rural Berber areas after independence, even if recent events shows that the bone of contention has not been fully solved[2]. The systematic downgrading of Berberist claims and the absence of an education policy (which maintained the highest level of illiteracy in Northern Africa and prevented the surfacing of the linguistic issue) resulted in the relative peaceful relationships between Berbers and the state. Probably more important is probably the fact that Moroccan Berbers, as opposed to Sikhs and Kabyles, have, for centuries, acknowledged the political

---

[2] In March 2012 and in May 2017, riots flared in the Rif area for several weeks, triggered by police violence and precarious economic conditions. It should be noted, however, that the Arab Spring in 2009 did not specifically affect Berber speaking areas.

authority of the Sultan. Even if Berber tribes were not submitted to the administrative rule of the state (they were not, for example, eligible to pay taxes), the Sultan could rely on well-established political connections to spread its legitimacy. The remnants of this political architecture still exert their pacifying influence.

In Algeria, the confrontation with the state started just after independence with the arabisation policy meant to unify the Nation-State within a single arab-speaking entity, but in fact, heavily affecting the Kabyle culture. In 1963, the first Berberist party in the independent Algeria, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), led a year-long insurrection against the Arab-nationalism of the ruling party. In the seventies, the arabisation policy sharpened the social and political climate. Riots, known as the Berber Spring, broke out in 1980. From this upheaval emerged the second main Berberist party, the *Rassemblement Culturel Démocratique* (RCD). In 1988, in a context of high unemployment, a series of demonstrations blocked the country. The government put an end to the one-party system. The two Berber parties were officialized. The first free elections that followed saw the victory of the Islamist Salvation Front. The army reacted with a coup, which triggered off a decade-long civil war against Islamist groups. Finally, in 2001, after the murder of a youth in a police station, the Kabyle population took once again to the streets. The violent conflicts that settled young Berbers against the police led to the reformation of the Arch, a traditional Berber institution uniting the tribes in case of an attack by an external enemy. The Arch had not been convened for several decades and was widely thought as belonging to history. The Arch movement is itself a symptom of the loss of credibility of the two main Berber parties amongst the Kabyle youth. The Arch gathered the representatives appointed by the tribes in an attempt to suffocate the unrest and avoid any additional bloodshed.

In India, in the 1960s, the Indian government, launching a programme of modernizations of agriculture, comforted Punjab into it's a role of "agricultural state" of India. The so-called Green Revolution was meant to create a capitalist agriculture providing food for the rest of the country. Two political strands emerged in opposition to this policy: the Maoist movement and Sikh revivalism. Maoist activism, usually known as the Naxalite movement, sprung up after the conflict between the China and the USSR in 1961. This movement was harshly crushed by the state authorities in the early seventies. The fall of the Naxalites left a vacuum filled by Sikh sectarian movements. In 1982, the Indian government launched the construction of a large canal, the Satluj-Yamuna Link (SYL) meant to divert a part of the

water resources of Punjab to Haryana, thus threatening the agrarian economy of the State. The Sikh party Akali Dal responded by launching a campaign against the building of the canal. Under the pressure of the Sikh fundamentalist groups, the campaign radicalized and secular demands (water) were gradually superseded by religious claims. On June the 2nd, the government of Indirah Gandhi gave order to the army to assault several Gurudwaras, including the Golden temple in Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikh religion, to arrest the leaders of the Sikh movement. On the 31st of October, two Sikh bodyguards of Indhira Gandhi shot her to death. A wave of sympathy for the Gandhi's family and the National Congress brought Rajiv Ghandi (Indhira's son) to power. A political settlement was initiated by the Punjab Accord of 1985. However, the murder of Longowal, the Head of Akali Dal, by Sikh extremists and the betrayal of the agreements by New Delhi threw the country once again into chaos. Insurgents formed an independentist movement known as the Khalistan movement, which launched an armed struggle. Punjab was placed under direct rule between 1987 and 1992. It is only after the Khalistan movement was made insignificant that elections were held in 1992.

2. Hometown migrant networks and ethno-religious conflicts

Due to the freedom of speech they enjoy in the host countries and the shelter they receive as political refugees, the diasporas are, arguably, crucial players of ethno-religious conflicts in the origin countries. The constant re-composition of ideological lines, splits or alliances occurring in the political sphere in the homeland is replicated in the countries of arrival. Hometown networks, as powerful conveyors of resources, ideas and emotions, are expected to affect and be affected by the changes occurring on the political scene of the origin country. The articulation between hometown networks and the rest of the diasporic civil society is yet to be explored. This section explores at first the impact of the conflicts in origin countries on the migrant civil society. These conflicts promote a period of radical transformation of the associational field[3]. At a later stage the role of hometown networks during and after the conflicts will be examined.

2.1. Migrant associational fields and homeland conflicts

---

[3] The concept of associational field, borrowed to Abdelmalek Sayad (Sayad A. 1999. *La double absence*. Paris: Seuil. 437 p.) enables to seize organisations in a set of relationships. A group of associations constitute a field when the statements, positions and activities of each of them depend on the relations they maintain with the other organisations.

The civil war in Punjab led to a radical transformation of UK-based migrant civil society. Before the early eighties, the main organisations enlisting Indian immigrants were the Indian Overseas Congress (IOC) and a working class organisation, the Indian Workers Association (IWA). Both were secular organisations. The IWA was mainly recruiting within the Punjabi working class in the Midlands and the London area. IOC is a branch of the National Congress party of India. The IWA is statutory independent but their leaders were mostly supporters of the Naxalite CPI ML[4] of Punjab.

IWA and IOC were the pillars polarizing Indian civil society throughout the sixties and seventies. Both were controlling the Gurudwara as a transmission belt toward the rest of the Punjabi community. Both were deprived of their leadership position after Operation Blue Star in 1984. This was particularly true for IWA, which enlisted most of the Sikh Punjabis in the UK. Their secular anti-Khalistan stance led to often violent confrontation with independentist activists in Birmingham and Southall. The civil war ended the golden age of the Asian working class movement in Great Britain. This occurred at a time when the socio-professional diversification and integration process into British society had already undermined the working class identity, especially for the new generation of Indian origin. Before 1984, the Sikh political movement, embodied by the Akali Dal, held marginal influence on the UK-based community (Tatla 1999). After 1984, numerous Sikh organisations sprung up: the Council of Khalistan, the International Sikh Youth Federation, Babbar Khalsa and Dal Khalsa

Such a profound transformation of the migrant civil society is also observed in the Kabyle case. In France, the Berberist movement emerged along similar lines as in Algeria. The FFS appeared in the 1960s, the RCD in the 1980s. At the opposite side of the Algerian immigrant associational landscape, can be found Islamist organizations or the state support associations, the *Amicales des travailleurs algériens.* Among Berberist associations, each organisation carved out a respective strongholds and frequent disputes used to break out over the control of emerging associations. For that reason, a large part of the Berberist associations chose to remain neutral vis-à-vis the political structures. In 2001, when the Arch was convened in Algeria, this informal customary structure was mirrored in France by a similar organisation, shortcutting the main Berberist organisations. After the Arch movement was started, a group of Berber activists (with no political affiliation) attempted to rely on this type of organisation and modernize it by, among other things, supporting development projects in Kabylia. In

---

[4] After the schism between Moscow and Beijing, the Indian communist party split into a Maoist (the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist, or CPI-ML) and a Stalinist component (the Communist Party of India Marxist or CPI-M)

2004 a meeting in Paris gathered several tenth of hometown organisations. However, it is reported that attempts from party activists to appropriate this initiative put an end to it. Be it true or not (this could not be confirmed by alternate sources), this example proves the difficulty of scaling up an apolitical grassroots movement in such a context of political polarization.

The Moroccan case, in absence of open conflict, is not marked by the radicalisation of the Berberist movement as observed it has been observed in Algeria. With the exception of small-scale associations, the Moroccan Berberist context is by far dominated by non-political cultural associations. However, one observes a deep transformation of the broader associational field, which paralleled the evolution of the Moroccan community abroad and of the political regime in Morocco. During the seventies and the eighties, due to the harsh repression targeting Moroccan leftist parties, associations were polarized between the state-supported *Amicales des travailleurs et commerçants marocains* (Moroccan workers and traders friendship societies) and the umbrella organisation gathering the leftist activists in exile, the "*Association des Travailleurs Marocains de France*" (ATMF). Toward the end of the eighties, social and political factors put an end to this confrontational polarity: the assimilation of leftist parties into the Moroccan political system, the liberalization of the regime, but also the integration of the Moroccan community in France which, as in the Indian case, undermined the influence of working class organisations.

2.2. Migrant organizations in the turbulence

The role of hometown networks during the conflict is manifold. First of all, they are a platform of mobilisation that parallels official organisations. Hometown networks spread information about events occurring in the place of origin and convey emotions which are likely to fuel mobilisation. This was the case among the Indian community in the UK. Hometown groups, along with Sikh temples played a crucial part in the spread of anti-Indian government sentiments before Khalistani organisations became the catalyst of the protest. To some extent, when the associational field itself cannot provide such a catalyst, hometown organisations become themselves a platform of mobilisation. The Kabyle Arch movement is a case in point. The reproduction of the Arch was made possible because of the preservation of customary community structures within the diaspora. Kabyles immigrants have continuously reproduced the Jemaa, i.e. the Berber customary assembly ruling the village, in the place

of arrival. A head (the Amin) and representatives of the main families (the Tamen) are co-opted and their primary function has been to maintain a burial fund to cover the expenses of the repatriation of the corpse in case of the death of one of the fellows. The reinforcement of a tribal habitus within the diaspora was conducive to the temporary, but effective, recreation of the Arch movement outside the existing network of associations, including the Berberist one. In the Kabyle case, the reaction to the turmoil was directed into hometown networks, i.e. into apolitical channels, in order to dampen the riots and avoid the politicisation of the movement. In the Indian case, hometown networks produced a pre-political reaction that enhanced a political movement.

The reverse is also true as conflicts can impact on hometown organisations by reactivating pre-existing networks. This is the case during times of conflict, when, for instance, migrant groups are solicited to support the families of the victims in the place of origin. Their role is even more important in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. Development projects are the main form of mobilisation for the benefit of their country of origin. This form of commitment was enhanced in the nineties by the state withdrawal from local development during the implementation of structural adjustment policies.

3. Filling a vacuum, the political predicaments of development initiatives

3.1. The impact of adjustment policies on local governance and civil society

In the late eighties to early nineties, India, Morocco and Algeria, like most developing countries, underwent adjustment policies consisting of market deregulation, privatization, and power externalization. These policies affected the states' local governance at various degrees. Among the three states investigated, Morocco is the one which proved to be the most deeply transformed by the successive adjustment programmes. The first one was implemented in 1983, followed by an agricultural adjustment plan in 1985. The ensuing creation of ORMVA (*Office Régional de Mise en Valeur Agricole*) centralised and introduced technology into the management of agriculture to the expense of local elite and village assemblies (the Jamaa) which were traditionally in charge in this domain. In 1992 a new adjustment policy initiated a decentralization process aimed to externalise state prerogatives on local authorities (the limits and powers of municipalities were redefined) and the civil society. The procedures to create an association were simplified. The rural elite, deprived of their

traditional power that had been guaranteed by bureaucrats in the eighties, reinvented their role by ensuring their involvement into the public sphere through local governments and civil society. Hundreds of village associations sprung up throughout the nineties. A new elite trained in universities in the 1980s, made of local civil servants (teachers, administrators, etc.), small entrepreneurs and civil servant activists emerged to endorse a brokering role between NGOs, public authorities, emigrants and villagers. The primary goal of this new set of associations was the development of infrastructure and basic amenities, which rural areas had been critically deprived of since the colonial period: electrification, health centre, roads, etc. Village organisations were created in parallel or in place of the Jemaa. Their structure is based on the customary habitus of collective village management, to the benefit of the traditional social hierarchies. The flourishing rural civil society thus nurtures the continuity of village structures. The village development associations, in order to find the financial and technical resources to implement the projects, relied on their internal and international emigrants, thus encouraging a dynamics of collective remittances among expatriates.

In India, the 1949 constitution warranted a certain political autonomy of the states. However this autonomy was constrained by a centrally planned economy, which rendered local authorities dependent on the centre. Economic planning transformed Punjab into a thriving but narrowly focused economy, unable to develop an industrial sector in absence of state investment (Singh P. 2009). In 1991, the Indian government abandoned planned economy for a liberal model of adjustment policy. Similarly to what happened in Morocco, this affected the local civil society. But, in the Indian case, the reorientation of the local volunteer sector towards development was less sudden as it started in the early 1980s. In addition, the pattern of traditional system of village collective management has been fully assimilated into state architecture since independence. A last difference is linked to fact that the Punjabi network of associations, though very active, has tightly remained under the eye of state authorities since the civil war.

However, the combined effects of the conflict of Punjab and the adjustment policy led to a sheer decline of investment in the public equipment sector. Since the civil war, a large part of state resources have been diverted into policing and political control. The fall of transfers provided by the central government did nothing to improve the situation. In that context, philanthropic donations of wealthy emigrants, development initiatives from all sorts of migrant organisations, and collective projects of village expatriates responded to a need provoked by state withdrawal.

Finally, Algeria is the place where adjustment policies had the least impact on the local scene. It is not until 1994 that this gas-rich country solicited the International Monetary Fund in order to reinvigour an economy weakened by the civil war. However, the adjustment measures remained confined to macro-level economic restructuring and only marginally affected the centralised architecture of the state. In terms of decentralization, reforms have remained limited. Most local government institutions in Algeria administer and distribute the public services of the central government. In regard to civil society, the end of the one-party system and the liberalization of the rules of association in 1988 triggered a tremendous transformation of the local public sphere. However, the absence of actual withdrawal of state authorities and the strong competition for political resources between the different factions of civil society left little space for collective initiatives. But foremost, the decade long civil war heavily fragmented the volunteer sector. It was particularly the case in the Algerian and France-based Berberist associations. The participation of the RCD in the coalition government during the conflict led to a protracted conflict between pro-RCD and pro-FFS activists. The migration of Berberist activists in France led to a transposition to this fault-line in the French context. This explains until today the difficulty for associations to form far-reaching coalitions like in the Moroccan case. Among the three groups investigated, the Algerians are the least committed to collective development projects.

3.2. The political underwriting of development initiatives

State withdrawal turns out to be a crucial factor explaining the growing volume of collective remittances since the late eighties. This explains why such a phenomenon is observed in very different parts of the world, in Latin America, Africa or Asia. The drop in public investment has prompted local requests for development. However, in areas characterised by pre-existing confrontational relations with the central power, collective remittances tend to be imbued with ethno-centred claims. The Northern African and Indian contexts are cases in point.

As seen in this paper, the local development dynamics in Southern Morocco are related to a grassroots reactivation of Berber social structures. The yearning for development is linked to the limited expectation of the state to fulfil its role and to the reinvention of customary legitimacies. What prevented this process from being politicised is the long-standing integration of Berber structures into the Cherifian political system and the absence of a strong Berberist movement in the Moroccan

diaspora.

In India and Algeria, on the contrary, the autonomist parties received a strong support from the diasporas. This support takes a specific dimension when, in the receiving country, the collapse of working-class patterns of identification is superseded by communitarian claims. « *You say we are an Indian organisation, but I am not Indian, I am Sikh* » the head of a Gurudwara in Birmingham involved in several projects in Punjab said to me. The stance of the Sikh clergyman echoed with the words of a Kabyle youngster, an active member of hometown network in Paris who stated that he refused to be regarded as Algerian. In that respect, development projects serve as an apolitical channel for expressing identity claims.

This study has enabled us to identify the main ingredient likely to produce a dynamic of collective remittances: the will to take charge of its own development linked to a long tradition of autonomy; the possibility of implementing development plans due to a weak presence of the state; the need for public equipment due to the lack of state investment, and the will of diaspora actors to contribute to the projects linked to the maintaining of a village habitus and/or ethnic revivalism.

The three case-studies share these common elements. However, they differ in the way these elements articulate each other. In the Moroccan case, the state presence and investments remain relatively weak, but the Berber ethnic and spatial imaginary is fully integrated within the state political system. The Moroccan state is the one that supports the most actively collective remittances through a set of co-funding policies since the mid nineties. On the contrary, the Kabyles and Sikh narratives of identity and space have become increasingly at odds with the national ones. Open conflicts and riots have been numerous and are still likely to happen in the near future. In this context, collective remittances are implemented outside official frameworks, with no support from the central government. The Indian Sikh diaspora, despite this absence of state support, displays a high level of collective engagement in development projects. It is less the case of the Algerian diaspora. The fragmented and extremely politicised Algerian associational field limits the possibility of collective action, even around non-political matters such as development projects. In addition, the stronger presence of the Algerian state at the local level limits the space for associational mobilisation.

Bibliography

Daum, Christophe. 1998. *Les Associations de Maliens En France. Migrations, Développement et Citoyenneté*. Paris: Karthala.Lacoste Y. 1996. *Dictionnaire de géopolitique*. Paris: Flammarion

Mercer, Claire, ben Page, and Martin Evans. 2008. *Development and the African Diaspora. Place and the Politics of Home*. London: Zed.

Orozco, Manuel. 2006. "Diasporas, Philanthropy and Hometown Associations: The Central American Experience." In *Inter-American Development Bank, Multilateral Investment Fund*, 23. George Washington University, Washington D.C. http://www.thedialogue.org/PublicationFiles/central%20american%20htas%20report.pdf.

Roberts H. 2003. *The Battlefield, Algeria, 1988-2002*. London, New York: Verso. 402 p.

Sayad A. 1999. *La double absence*. Paris: Seuil. 437 p.

Singh P. 2009. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development. India and the Punjab Economy*. New Delhi: Routledge. 223 p.

Tatla DS. 1999. *The Sikh diaspora. The search of a statehood*. London: UCL press. 327 p.