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ARAB IDENTITY AND CULTURE THROUGH ROMANIAN EYES

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Nadia Anghelescu, *Identitatea arabă: istorie, limbă, cultură*. (Arab Identity: History, Language, Culture) Iaşi: Polirom, 2009, 442 p.

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Nadia Anghelescu is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bucharest, where she specializes in Arab Anthropology and Linguistics. She is a leading academic expert in Arab culture, and this volume continues the inquiry begun in her 1998 book *Limba şi cultură în civilizaţia arabă* (Language and Culture in Arab Civilization), which was well received internationally as well as in Romania. Her current book attempts to make her work accessible beyond academic audiences and reach a general audience interested in the problems of Arab civilization. She does acknowledge the difficulty of covering the whole range of issues in such a small study, and this book presents only an introduction to the extremely complex issues involved.

The author uses a wide range of sources. The book represents scholarship published after World War II, including the most recent literature. Most of them are in Arabic, although Western literature is included, notably French, but studies in English and Italian as well. Few of her sources are Romanian, and she shows a broad knowledge of the international periodical literature, including journals like *Studia Islamica*, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, *The Canadian Journal of Research* and *Semiotics*.

The complex and sophisticated narrative seeks to present the extremely diverse problems of Arab civilization. Significantly the author is first of all a Philologist. Her interdisciplinary approach emphasizes primarily the Arabic language and cultural habits. In addition she uses historical data well, albeit in a secondary role compared to her anthropological emphasis. Only occasionally does she delve into chronological presentations of historical events.

The book is structured in twelve paragraphs, each in turn with sub chapters. Every chapter focuses on the problem identified in the title, but

the majorities of problems are not fully developed in single chapters and overlap into others. The first chapter, called *Arabii din vechime* (*The Arabs Since Antiquity*) deals with the definition of the Arab population and the nature of Arab ethnicity before the appearance of Islam. Three short subchapters treat matters like socio-anthropologic differences between sedentary Arabs and nomadic Bedouins, definition of the term Arab, and the names by which other nations (Greeks, Babylonians, first Christians etc) referred to Arabs.

The second chapter, *Începuturile Islamului și cuceririle arabe* (*The Beginings of Islam and the Arab Conquest*) is also divided to three subchapters. It pays relatively little attention to the person of the Prophet, but provides a very good synthesis of the geographical-political context for conquest. It also contains a socio-anthropological and military analysis too, exploring the causes and circumstances of the rapid Arab conquest of very large areas. The *Arabizarea teritoriilor cucerite* (*Arabization of Occupied Territories*) is the largest subchapter and is concentrating language as a tool of Arabization,

Chapter three is called *Arabii și Străini în Imperiul Arabo-Islamic* (*Arabs and Foreigners in the Arab-Islamic Empire*). It deals with the issues of the Arab-Islamic world after Mohammed's death : the question of collective Arab identity, the definition of foreigners, and the integration of these foreigners, with a very good case-study which focuses on the so-called *al-shu subiyya*, a concept which defines the cultural struggle of non-Arab (especially Persians, but not only) Muslims of the Empire.

The fourth chapter concentrates on the personality and work of al-Jahiz. It bears the characteristics of a biographical work and its title is *Discursul de autolegitimare : al-Jahiz* (*Discourse of Self-legitimization: al-Jahiz*). As we find out, al-Jahiz's most important work was the *Book of Clear Expression and Clarity* (*Cartea expresiei clare și a clarificării*) or *Ktab al-bayan*, and the analysis focuses mostly on this one. The author treats al-Jahiz, respectfully but critically.

The *Mituri identitare* (*Myths of Identity*) is the longest chapter of all, the only one which is divided into six subchapters. Probably this is the most useful one for those readers who wants to get a simple, but complete synthesis regarding issues of Arab identities. The synthesis of this chapter concentrates on socio-anthropological topics reflected in Arab writings (especially the Koran), such as the changes and development of early Arabic writings, the nature of life in Desert reflected in vocabulary and linguistic rules, or the idealization of Bedouins at a certain moment in Arab culture. This last case resembles certain former Western literary ideals, such as the concept of the "noble savage" of European Enlightenment, suggesting parallels between these two cultures.

The Chapter six title *Cultura arabă și cultura arabo-islamică* (*Arab Culture and Arabo-Islamic Culture*) suggests a subtle difference between the two terms, but this is not fully explained in the text, only suggested. It deals

with subjects like genres and subgenres of classical Arab literature, the social position of Poets in society, the motive of Love in literature. One fascinating part concerns the issue of Arab “Humanism” as cultural trend, which is very different from Humanism in Western European civilization. Actually, as the author points out, such a concept never existed in the internal definition of the Arab cultural world, but was utilized by French Orientalists for the definition of a scientific and cultural trend manifested in the Arabic world during the XI-XIIIth centuries.

If the first six chapters deal with issues of the Arab prior to the appearance of Islam and the centuries of the classical period of Islam, especially on the field of Culture and Literature, the next six chapters, which practically – even if this is not marked in the *Table of Contents* – form the second part, have a chronologically linear structure organized around the major eras of Arab cultural history. The seventh chapter deals with the events of relative “dark ages”, those centuries which followed the demise of the united Arab-Islam Empire. A separate subchapter deals with the issue of early Arab book-printing by presenting an interesting case-study of the printing-house of Snagov, where the some of the first Arab Christian books were printed, and about the transport from Snagov to Aleph of the printing press with the official permission of prince Constantin Brâncoveanu. The eighth chapter is dedicated to the “Renaissance” of Arab culture, called “Nahda”, emphasizing the role of Arab personalities and the major works translated from European languages, especially from English and French, and their impacts on Arab scholarship.

Chapter number nine deals with the situation of Arabic populations under the Ottoman Empire. From a political point of view the last issue in this chapter, the movement of the Young Turks and their nationalistic approach to other ethnic groups, and the Arab reaction to this, is very important.

Readers interested in contemporary Arab Politics will find the last three chapters to be the most interesting. The *Naționalismul arab în perioada de decadență a Imperiului Otoman* (*Arab Nationalism in the period of decay of the Ottoman Empire and after installation of European Powers in the Area*) represents a good synthesis of regional political and social realities during World War I and the subsequent interwar period. Especially interesting is the critical approach to the personality of Lawrence of Arabia, based on contemporary Arab sources. It also examines English-French competition after World War I. *Limba arabă în vremurile moderne* (*Arabic language in Modern Times*) and *Scurt despre arabi și cultura arabă* (*Short Treaty about Arabi and Arab culture*) are dealing mostly with contemporary issues concerning the topic described in the title, from the XXth century to the present. Some themes, which appear in previous chapters, are presented in a different way, once more, more briefly and from different perspectives. The presentation focuses mostly on important cultural and

political issues like Western influence from World War I until the present, political-economical evolution of Egypt and Syria in this context, the bilingual popular culture of Maghrebian states, language politics in Arab countries, main political ideologies of contemporary Arab world (Pan-Arabism, different local state-nationalisms, Baath etc.), the complex relationship of Arab civilization with the Western world and its values, and the approach of the Arab collective mentality to worldwide phenomena like Modernization and Globalization.

Generally speaking the author did a good job and realized her main goal as outlined in the forward. The synthesis is successful and unique, because of the literary and linguistic perspective from which she examines social, political, and economic plans. In many cases, the presentation of institutions of the Arab world and their functional aspects are completely missing, and there is little concerning administrative and legal aspects. Those which are presented are in the context of other issues, but this is not necessarily a major lack, since other parts of the presentation are well written and form a very well realized unit from an esthetic and scholarly point of view.

It is important that while a „foreign” culture is presented and analyzed, the author does not contact with her own world, and deal with her subject as an isolated phenomenon. The best example for this is the printing house of Snagov where under certain religious-legal circumstances Christian books were printed for Arab Christians and which is a good example for those cultural interchanges which existed a time at that time, and which nowadays, with the globalization process, grow rapidly in number and comprehension. At the other hand the author often suggests certain cultural fault lines, in the whole work, for example, between urbanised Arabs and nomads, Muslim Arabs and other Arabs, Arab Muslims and Arab Christians, pointing out some truly major differences.

In summary, Professor Anghelescu produced a new, very interesting and well-documented work, which can be recommended for both specialists, as well as general readers. Hopefully, translations will make it available to readers outside Romania as well.