Minority Identities and Cultures, Beyond Essentialisms

We are not mistaken if we say that identity is linked to cultural heritage, the heritage whose cultural legacy is complex and, to a large extent, more intangible than tangible, including the different versions that we have of our own history, although, certainly, it contains some very clear signs of identity, such as language or religion. However, it must be said that this is not always the case, since many countries and communities share a language and/or religion, but at the same time possess diverse identities linked to a desire for recognition.

For current theorists, in the field of anthropology identity is not something given but rather dynamic, a constant set of processes to maintain or correct a self where one accepts, places and values oneself. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues that identity is a narrative that involves what happens to the individual, and we could add to peoples, over time. I think that anthropologists, more than talking about identity, are interested in understanding the feeling of "belonging" and the reasons behind it; a feeling that can affect an individual or a large group. Hence, the various theories, whether constructivist, interactionist or situationist, sit in opposition to a substantial or essentialist approach. Thus, for authors such as Erik Erikson or Edgar Morin, identity must be analysed as an experience lived by the individual or the group. Identity changes with life history, as Paul Ricoeur argues, and the feeling of belonging, which can be very rich and varied, is linked, above all, to the feeling of community, profession, religion, and cultural or political aspects. An individual may identify with several belongings depending on the moment, or all of them may overlap without being mutually exclusive. However, when discussing identity, we cannot overlook the fact that it is usually forged in the confrontation of oneself with the Other, of similarity with otherness.

Mediterranean diversity is a commonplace, given that we find diversity, no matter how minimal, in all regions of the world. It is true that, in general, when we refer to the Mediterranean region, what appears as a constitutive mark is the imprint of the three monotheistic religions and their long duration, established above all by the great Roman Christian and Islamic civilisations, and, later, due to European colonial policy. Cultures are vital elements of civilisations because of their accommodative power, and have their own elements in their different layers. In addition to the three monotheistic religions, internal diversity plays an important role within the cultural richness of the Mediterranean. The close relationship between religion and culture is of major importance, but it does not always denote a difference, and there are other cultural aspects that can also be defended, such as language or lifestyle.

Culture is a very complex concept nourished and enriched by multiple components. From a broad perspective, it can be defined as a way of life composed of systematically accumulated knowledge and experiences, handed down from one generation to the next, not through biological inheritance but learning. The concepts of civilisation and culture have been developed since ancient times in the Mediterranean: Greco-Latin authors provide comparative references on the different peoples they describe, making value judgments about what they consider civilised and what they do not. It is difficult to study a culture without considering otherness, as each people has a cultural specificity that often serves as a yardstick when it is in a dominant position. In the assessment of a civilisation, an ethnocentric perspective tends to be used, based on the concepts of centre and periphery. There is a widespread use of the word civilisation to indicate an advanced, literate and mainly urban culture. In fact, the phenomenon of the countryside-city opposition from a sociological perspective is a key topic that, in the 14th-century, was analysed by the Maghreb historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), born in Tunis to an Andalusian family. He is considered the first sociologist and one of the major thinkers in the philosophy of history. In the preface to his work *Al-Muqaddima* (Discourse on Universal History) he constructs his general sociology around the irresistible and irremediable decadence of the dominant "civilisation" and examines the causes of that decline long before the speculations made, more recently, by European philosophers of history

The traveller and ulema born in Tangier Ibn Battuta (1304-1377) spoke to us about the minority cultures that we feature in this issue in the 13th-century, at the time of the Berber dynasty of the Merinides. The *rihla* (travel story) is a genre that appeared in the 12th-century written by Western figures of Arab culture: Andalusians and Moroccans linked to pilgrimages to Mecca or whose purpose was to acquire scientific knowledge in the great eastern centres of Cairo, Baghdad or Damascus. Ibn Battuta tells Ibn Yuzayy from Granada, who writes the *rihla*, about his journey to Mecca that began on 13 June 1325. On his first and third pilgrimage of his long twenty-year journey, when he focuses on the territories of the first Mamluk dynasty (1250-1382) – which encompasses the current territories of Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan –, he applies, like the Greco-Latin geographers, his vision of what is and is not right. Ibn Battuta was a fervent Sunni and a permanent enemy of Shiism and Shiites: contact with them acted as a wake-up call and he never hid his antipathy from them at any time. However, he spoke well of the Sunni Kurds who protected the castles. As he travelled through Syria and Lebanon, he explains: "The majority of the inhabitants of these regions are from the an-Nusayri sect and believe that Ali Abu Talib is a god." These Nusayrites that he mentions would later become the Alawites, Druze and Alevis. He also calls *Rafida* all Shiites in general, especially those from Persia. In the Middle Ages, this term, meaning "those who reject or resist", was used pejoratively by Sunni Muslims, especially Salafists, to refer to all Shia Muslims.

Although in his 13th-century account Ibn Battuta only considered the difference as negative in the religious sectarian character, if we take into account the vision from the states, religion is an element of identity beyond the purely religious phenomenon due to its

historical and geographical origin, an element that can persist in the diaspora to other places where the prevailing religion is different. As Didem Doğanyılmaz argues in her article in this issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, the relationship between culture and religion has been a strongly debated topic in academic circles and she focuses mainly on how deep the impacts of religion are on culture, based on the recognition of an established correlation. According to some scholars, culture is a phenomenon entirely related to religion, while others consider this to be very reductionist, as it devalues various components of culture, and suggest instead that religion should be considered one of the most prominent determining factors of culture, since culture cannot be reduced to a single component differentiated from others, such as values, norms, symbols, language and geography.

Not all the cultures that we feature in this issue are minorities, but sometimes they are "minorised", since they correspond to millions of people, as in the case of the Amazighs, the Berbers from North Africa, the Kurds, divided into various states, or the Copts of Egypt. We have added reflections on the Balkan Peninsula because it is usually presented as a border and demarcation line for various traditions – Catholicism, Christian Orthodoxy and Islam – as well as an area of problematic interrelation of various ethnic groups. Moreover, we have included the gypsies, currently dispersed all over Europe – talking about their origins and their adaptation process – whose religion is the same as the countries where they live, while their lifestyle and rituals are different. In the Middle East, apart from the aforementioned Kurds and Copts, we look at the Sephardic Jews, the Alawites of Syria, the Alevis, mainly from Turkey, the Bektashis and the Druze, who also live in various states, as well as the Christian communities of the Middle East – although very much a minority, some have survived since the beginning of the Christian era. The authors of the articles write from various disciplines, and the majority are from the communities they deal with and provide current references to their people, as well as their cultural origins. In this introduction we have traced a geographical-historical relationship that goes from the westernmost part in the south, with the Berbers, to the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The peoples we are talking about have a historical relationship with the Ottoman Empire and, in some cases, with the Persian Empire, except for the Amazighs of Morocco. Thus, the Ottoman Empire and European colonialism are two important factors in relation to the history and current geographical division of the minority cultures featured.

The anthropologist Tassadit Yacine tells us about how the Amazigh have been "minorised" in the Arab Muslim world. In her article, the terms *Berber* and *Berberity* are used deliberately because they appeared as a denomination of identity very early in history and are widely known by the general public, although we understand that the populations affected, that is, those who speak the language and recognise themselves in that identity and culture, define themselves as Amazighs – an indigenous term that means "free man, noble man". This does not mean that those who do not speak the Berber (or Amazigh) language are not ethnically Berbers. In fact, the North Africans living in the cities and plains gradually underwent assimilation and became Arabised, resulting in a majority of Arabised people. In the absence of a reliable census, we can argue that, in the case of Libya, it could

be estimated to be around five percent; in Tunisia, about one percent; in Algeria, between twenty-five and thirty percent (counting all regions: Kabylia, Aurès, Chenoua, Timimoun and its region, M'zab, Hoggar); and in the case of Morocco, the figure rises to seventy percent (Rif, Middle Atlas, High Atlas, Sus). After the Second World War, we must also take into account the existence of a significant diaspora in Europe, the United States and Canada. In France, the largest community, the Kabyle, has around a million people. It is clear that states do not wish to make the number of their Berber speakers public because they deny this reality and, in the best of cases, they try to reduce it to a much lower figure. The same thing happens with other minority cultures in national states of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Why do we give a voice to the Sephardim when talking about the Jews? Sephardic Jews lived in the Iberian Peninsula, long before Christianity was the official religion, and throughout history they have been representative of their identity despite diasporas. This is how it is recalled by sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin, whose family is of Sephardic origin, from the Kingdom of Aragon, and emigrated to Thessaloniki. In the 15th-century, the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula began a diaspora after the Decree of Expulsion imposed by the Catholic kings. Bayezid II, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, offered hospitality to these Sephardim, who settled in cities such as Thessaloniki, Izmir and Istanbul. Thessaloniki thus became a very important trade and cultural port, a unique place of exchange promoted especially by the networks of trust established by these Sephardim. The golden age of the city continued with the appearance of the printing press and continued until the 19th-century, with the arrival of a privileged group of Livornese Jews who acted as agents of Western trade. After the Greek invasion of Thessaloniki in 1912, a new diaspora to the West began, which marked the end of "Sephardicism" as such. However, its fruits, Morin reminds us, are important, from Marranism to the Turkish *deunmés*, and survive in the origin of the great currents of modernity now found in the Mediterranean and that make up its plural identity.

The Sephardic writer of Moroccan origin Esther Bendahan emphasises that the word *Sepharad* designates a distant place of exiles that was used to refer to the Iberian Peninsula, which many of them left when they were expelled in 1492. Some went to the north of Morocco, others to Eastern Europe or Holland, and others decided to stay and convert, but they paid a high price for doing so. They all maintained a collective awareness of belonging to a culture, the Sephardic culture, which has survived over the centuries, although the common language, Judaeo-Christian, is no longer spoken at home. Over the years, many famous figures emerged from that exile, such as the writer Albert Cohen, the philanthropist and businesswoman Gracia Mendes or the poet Emma Lazarus, whose verses are engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Today, thanks to a series of reunions and approaches fostered by historical and political vicissitudes, the memory of these Sephardic communities can be recovered in their various dimensions.

Marija Djurdjevic, a social anthropology researcher, tells us about the ways in which the cultural pluralism of the Balkans has provided riches and threats due to having been part of competing empires in the course of history that have shaped a great diversity that

is difficult to manage. As we have already said, the Balkan Peninsula is usually presented as a border and demarcation line of different traditions – Catholicism, Christian Orthodoxy and Islam –, as well as an area of problematic interrelation of different ethnic groups and peoples of Slavic, Latin, Finno-Ugric, Greek and Turkic origin. This mixture of races and beliefs, described by many as "explosive", has, however, shaped a fairly homogeneous modus vivendi throughout history. Within this Balkan mosaic, Esma Kucukalic, from the European University of Valencia, focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite its almost millenary territorial continuity, the country has suffered constant and intentional historical obstructions of denial of its statehood due to its status as a multiethnic republic. The three majority groups that make up the territory – Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslims – lived together until war broke out in 1992, a tragedy triggered by the ethnic ideology of identity populism that had been brewing in the previous years and would become essential for generations to come. Since then, Bosnia and Herzegovina has found itself in crisis – aggravated by the war in Ukraine – that drags on due to a poorly resolved peace and has trapped the region in a convoluted system of ethnic weights and counterweights.

Within the Balkans, although Albania has Orthodox, Catholic and Sunni Muslims, Bektashism is considered the country's specific religion. In her article, Edlira Osmani introduces us to the Bektashi order, whose origin dates back to the Sufi movements that took place in the 11th and 12th centuries. Bektashism is defined as a branch of Shiite Islam, moderate and open to interreligious dialogue, which is often accompanied by adjectives such as heterodox, esoteric, pantheistic or syncretic. Its customs include women not wearing veils and praying with men in the same space, as well as tolerance of alcohol consumption. Originally, its dervishes or common members of the brotherhood were responsible for Islamising the Christian peasantry of Anatolia, Bosnia and Albania. The most representative Bektashi figures in the history of the Ottoman Empire were the *devchirmé* Janissaries, Christian children between seven and fourteen years old recruited in the Balkan territories, Islamised and educated to be part of the army, who on many occasions came to occupy high positions; *Yeniceri* in Turkish means "new troops", since the Ottomans did not trust the loyalty and morale of the tribal warriors.

The Janissaries adopted Haci Bektash as their spiritual leader – they even called themselves "sons of Haci Bektash" – and took from the Bektashis certain ceremonies and some elements of their clothing and rituals, such as the hand of Fatima and the Zulfikar sword of Ali. In the case of Albania, after a period in which it enjoyed great political importance during the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, this order was banned and forced to disappear under the communist regime, at a time when Albania became the only atheist state in the world. Even so, and thanks to the secret practices of the Bektashi Albanian community in the diaspora, the religion survived and spread throughout several countries. In 1988, the new Constitution of Albania guaranteed religious freedom, and Bektashi beliefs once again occupied an important place in Albanian society. Osmani says that the country of the eagles thus recovered its tradition of tolerance by allowing Bektashis, Sunni Muslims and Christians to pray in the sanctuary of the divinities in Albania.

Most of the minority populations of the Muslim religion that we will refer to in the Middle East arise from brotherhoods (Tariqa) of Shiite origin, as we have seen with the Bektashis, who recognise Imam Ali as their legitimate successor. In *L'Empire Ottoman*, the historian Edhem Eldem points out the difference between Europe and the Ottoman Empire in relation to the religious aspect "although conversions [with Islam] were numerous, especially during the period of expansion in Rumelia and Anatolia. These conversions were caused by a wide variety of factors: incitement, intimidation, fear, pragmatism, calculation, opportunism, ambition... It matters little, the essential thing is that the conversions were not forced and that, therefore, a large proportion of the Empire's population remained non-Muslim."

In relation to those minorities arising from different sects of Shiite origin, the study by Turkish political scientist Didem Doğanyılmaz Duman aims to provide introductory information about Alawism and present Alevism with its most syncretic and genuine characteristics, focusing on the debates related not only with the definition of the term from objective and subjective identity perspectives, but also with social and legal status. Today the Alevis make up twenty percent of the population in Turkey, although it is not easy to count them because the official religion is Sunni Islam, which is why many of these Alevi groups, as well as other Alawites or Druze, have practised *taquiya* or dissimulation for centuries.

The author argues that the Alevi identity should be recognised both at a social and official level. Religiously, although today many are secular, they recognise Hak-Muhammad-Ali, a unity in which the Alevis or Anatolian Shiism believe. Alevism was an identity that the Alevis themselves consciously concealed throughout history to protect themselves from the hostile approach of state authorities due to their differences with the main Sunni branch of Islam. They used dissimulation even after settling in areas of heterogeneous population, as a result of national or transnational emigration. Throughout the last decade of the millennium, the Alevis began to reveal their identity and undertake a process of adaptation to urban conditions. Dissimulation in this kind of environment threatened the continuity of Alevism, but they gradually formed a community through the various institutions, while consolidating networks of solidarity. These institutions facilitated the process of not only mobilising Alevis, but also systematically passing on knowledge about identity and practices to younger generations, thus forging a realm of community security. Therefore, Alevi institutions managed belief, which paved the way for it to be heard through legal entities. Doğanyılmaz argues that all the rights that Alevis have acquired so far abroad were the result of negotiations between state institutions and authorities.

Unlike Anatolian Alevism, the also Shiite sect of the Alawites of Syria was founded in Iraq in the 9th-century. It gained followers in Syria in the next century, long before the arrival of the crusaders. At the beginning of the French mandate, the Alawites were still a poor, undisciplined and despised population. They did not welcome the French any better than the Ottomans, but the establishment of an Alawite State in the 1920s greatly strengthened their position, and being part of the special troops opened new horizons for them. The end of confessionalism in Syria deprived the Alawites of the autonomous status they had with the Ottomans; on the other hand, the secularisation of society, of which they were fervent

defenders, removed them from their situation of marginality. However, Alawite solidarity did not disappear, quite the opposite.

The socialist party Baath was founded in 1943 in Damascus by two Syrians, the Orthodox Michel Aflak and the Sunni Salah Al-Bitar, with the aim of creating "the great Arab nation". Although the party recognises Islam as a heritage, it is committed to secularism and is organised through a "national presidency" at the level of the Arab nation as a whole, and regional presidencies according to each country. It came to power in Syria in 1963 and in Iraq in 1968. At the end of the sixties, constant hostility reigned between the two branches, the Syrian and the Iraqi, until, after the coup d'état in Syria, it became an instrument of Hafez Al-Assad's personal power, as it would also be in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Who are the monotheistic (unitarian) Druze? It is a rhetorical question asked by Amal Afif Bou Ghannam, a member of the Lebanese Association for History, where he warns us that the society of the Druze monotheists remains a mystery to many researchers in the social sciences and history. Much has been said about them, some scholars in a somewhat incredulous manner and others based on their own opinion. As an ethnic religion it incorporates elements of Ismailism, Gnosticism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity. The Druze do not allow outsiders to convert to their religion. Most religious practices are kept secret, in their desire to maintain a rigid faith of strict unity. Reincarnation is a primary principle, but it is different from that of the Syrian Alawites. The primary Druze principle is that a human soul can only be transferred to a human body. A Druze cannot incarnate in the body of a non-Druze. They do not accept polygamy.

After the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, which was very advantageous for the French and British, the French mandate took into account ethnic-religious minorities because, as happened with the Alawites, it provided an autonomous region to the Maronites and an autonomous emirate to the Druze in the Jabal Al Druze in 1921, but the French did not know how to manage the struggles between clans, so they had to deal with the Druze revolt of 1925-1927. In independent Syria, the Druze allied themselves with the Alawites, but after the failed coup d'état led by Druze Baathist officers in 1966, they were removed from power. Arabic-speaking and with a population of approximately between eight hundred thousand and one million people, the Druze are found mainly in Lebanon, Syria and Israel, with small communities in Jordan. The oldest and most densely populated Druze communities are found in Mount Lebanon and southern Syria around Jabal Al Druze, the "Druze Mountain". In Palestine/Israel, this community reaches 122,000 inhabitants and, unlike other Arab minorities, is part of the Israeli army. As historian Afif Bou Ghannam explains, despite the serious circumstances suffered, they have managed to preserve their authentic Arab customs of chivalry, courage, hospitality, dignity, honour and modesty. However, like other communities, the Druze have been greatly influenced by the openness to Western customs resulting from education, work-related travel, and the difficult living conditions in their countries, which has patently conditioned their lives and evolution. Today, Druze monotheists live under the protection of the state in which they reside as a minority. They have voluntarily renounced authority in favour of the establishment of the state and its

institutions, as long as this state preserves their rights as citizens. Religiously committed people strive to preserve religious customs and be faithful to their origins.

The researcher Dastan Jasim, who writes from the diaspora, is more interested in explaining current aspects of the Kurds, although she pauses briefly at their origins. The Kurds are an ethnic group originating from northern Mesopotamia included in the Arab Caliphate in the 7th-century that, little by little, converted to Islam. The first years of the 16th-century saw the beginning of the confrontation between two great powers, the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Empire, a fight that would determine the history of the Kurds to this day. Their language, literature and religion reflect their unique journey throughout history. The Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family and has several distinct dialects, such as Kurmanji, Sorani and Gorani. Kurdish literature, deeply rooted in oral traditions, has evolved over the centuries, with poetry playing a central role. Some notable literary figures were, for example, the writer Ahmad Khani or the poet Mastura Ardalan. In terms of religion, the majority of Kurds today adhere to Islam, predominantly Sunni or Shiite, although there are many other groups, such as the Yazidis, a religious minority with ancestral roots. The Kurds – between twenty-five and thirty million people – are divided into four countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The majority are Sunni Muslims, and Shia Kurdish minorities live in southern Iranian Kurdistan.

For the researcher from the University of Hamburg, the Kurdish cause is championed mainly by groups that are considered specifically progressive and, in many cases, even left-wing. In a short time, it has become a cause that goes far beyond the national issue or a fight for cultural rights, and confronts various forms of oppression such as capitalist or gender exploitation. This democratic nature of the Kurdish struggle has a lot to do with the way their geopolitical and historical struggle is situated. Today, the Kurdish community has numerous challenges ahead to prosper, but, according to the author "Kurds take responsibility for wrongdoings. They call out their own when corruption and mismanagement are at play. They criticise their leaders, reinvent their movements, and call out not only what their occupiers do but what their own privileged classes, their capitalists, their men, their chieftains, and military leaders do. And that is not a weakness; it is a power." In this article, Jasim shows us the important visibility of women and their active participation in the territories of Rojava against the Islamic State.

What is striking about Kurdish culture, its dances, poetry and festivals, is the existence of numerous elements from the pre-Islamic era, such as ancient Mesopotamian and Zoroastrian influences, which the Kurds preserve with pride. An example is the festival of Newroz, the Kurdish new year, which has its roots in pre-Islamic religious practices of Persian origin, which celebrate life by honouring the sun and fire. Although it is not religious, it is the most important Kurdish festival and shows how, in many cases, culture is more important to Kurds than religion. Therefore, Kurdish culture is marked by numerous layers of complexity and uniqueness in its language, literature and religious practices.

If there is a people that has been a victim of speculation about its origin and culture, it is the Gypsy people, given that the stigma continues to thrive in the societies it has in-

habited for centuries. The historian Sarah Carmona presents us with new perspectives on the genesis of Gypsy history. Scientific studies and historical research confirm that, due to the linguistic and cultural similarities between Gypsies and Hindus, the Gypsy people originate from India. They have common linguistic-cultural heritage, of Indo-Iranian origin, although with substantial differences between their subgroups. However, after centuries of experiences in other territories and the consequent modification of their linguistic, cultural and genetic background, proto-Gypsies are currently citizens of the states where they reside. The history of the Gypsy people is divided chronologically into four essential stages: *teljaripé*, "the beginning", shows the historical process that consolidates the proto-Romani language; *nakhipé*, "the march", describes the creation of the Gypsy ethnic group after their experiences in Asia and Asia Minor; *aresipé* marks "the arrival" in Europe and, finally, *buxjaripé*, "the deployment", consists of the spreading and settlement of the Gypsy people all over Europe.

Much has been said about the expulsion of Jews and Muslims, but Gypsies have been cruelly persecuted in Europe. Laws and pragmatics made it impossible for gypsies to settle, so they have to be itinerant. According to Professor Teresa San Román, they moved around the places where they could settle and took up a profession, which in many cases was restricted to a few options. Those legally resident were expelled again and again, and the logic of forced sedentarisation-expulsion would happen in all countries and at all times. The exact global population of Roma and their geographical location is unknown, although the most accepted figure, from data aggregated by country, could be around ten million in Europe. The religion of gypsies varies depending on their place of residence, and they can be Muslims and Christians, Catholics or Orthodox. Since the Second World War, many converted to Protestantism, and those who have evangelical beliefs usually celebrate a ceremony called "worship" in which homage is paid to God through chants or dances called praises.

In the Middle East, Christian communities, which are among the oldest in this region of the world, only come to light when their condition or the situation undergoes violent and brutal events. This is when concerns about their condition and doubts about their status arise. Suddenly, their place becomes an object of questioning; it is as if they were separated from their social framework to undergo an analysis focused on their peculiarity. The Beirut political scientist Joseph Maila argues, however, that the Christian communities of the Middle East can only be understood as groups of citizens whose belonging to the homeland and the country is beyond any doubt, groups deeply rooted in their historical and social framework. Distinguished by their religious convictions in a predominantly Muslim environment, their history has been shaped by that of an East that struggles against its political uncertainties, shaken by geopolitical upheavals and by the various empires that have succeeded one another in this part of the world. These Christian communities are rooted in what today are the territories of Armenia, Syria, Iraq, Iran and India. Unrest linked to political changes, discrimination and the rise of Islamism, especially during the last two decades, have contributed to destabilising the Christian condition in the region. Thus, the massive emigration of Christian populations is closely linked to all these tragedies. Despite

the current difficulties they face, Eastern Christians cannot imagine their future without increasingly greater and more active participation within their societies.

Beyond the arguments about their number, which some estimate amounts to twelve million, there is a broad consensus that Copts are the largest Christian religious minority in the predominantly Muslim region of the Middle East, a claim that is also questioned by Copts due to the association often made between minorities, inequality and domination. The Coptic Church is considered one of the oldest institutions in the history of the Mediterranean and the oldest in Egypt. According to tradition, Saint Mark established the Church in this country when it was under the rule of the pagan Roman Empire, and this is how the Copts converted to Christianity. Since then, they have fought to continue existing and preserve their presence, interactions and identity, whose narrative has always been very strong. Egyptian researcher Anis Issa explains the historical cultural roots linked to ancient Egypt and the importance of the Coptic Church for the identity of its faithful, playing a fundamental role in that process – especially since the waves of Coptic migration from Egypt in the 20th-century, which created an international diaspora. In 1962, Pope Cyril VI established the first General Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services, a network with two main objectives: to support Coptic immigrants abroad and to raise funds for development projects in Egypt aimed at young people and families of limited income. Thus, the different dioceses of the diaspora became places of meeting and support. Today, Copts face a historic opportunity not only to survive the challenge but to flourish and experience universal expansion.

In these articles we see that minority cultures have been and are, at certain times, bearers of modernity, and that on many occasions they have had to dissemble and practise in private, which is why they are also interested in secularism. The diaspora is a dominant aspect in the contemporary adaptation of minority cultural roots. Although religion is one of its defining features, the most important thing is the awareness of identity that emerges enhanced as a heritage that allows it to develop in its demand for greater democracy and appreciation of diversity within states. Achieving this, despite the impediments, has demanded a stronger associative world, and the creation of cultural centres, modern organisations and institutions that reinforce knowledge, communication and political participation to call for their citizen rights.

To end the dossier, we thought it would be interesting to add "the gaze of the Other" on the Middle East, insights that the Catalan archaeologist Joan Eusebi García Biosca provides in this issue through the study of photography. The first photographs of the Middle East were taken in the 19th-century with a visual approach that sought to establish nothing less than the reliability and veracity of biblical stories. Many travellers from Europe and the United States came to the Middle East to see first-hand those places full of history and religious meaning. Later, when the State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, photography began to play a key role in publicising the successes achieved in this new country and promoting emigration to Palestine. Many photographers born or resident in the country had their own studios or worked for the local press. The expansion of the written press opened

the doors to the emergence of two new forms of photographic expression: photojournalism and documentary photography. In this context, the photographs taken by Father Ubach and his assistants, monks from the Catalan Abbey of Montserrat, are part of the genre of biblical photography, but they also adopt other enriching points of view and influences from the work of other photographers in the territory.

Unlike biblical and Zionist photographs, produced mainly from outside Palestine and for a foreign audience, local photography is the work of creators born or residing in the country, regardless of their ethnic origin or religious affiliation, and its main target are their fellow citizens. A series of traits characterise the members of these first generations of local Palestinian photographers. On the one hand, almost all of them belong to minority communities (Armenians, Christians and Jews) or find themselves in liminal situations between different faiths. Contrary to what happens in the case of photography intended to publicise Jewish colonisation, which focuses above all on new rural communities, local photography is taken from the cities and is intended for an audience mostly belonging to the urban bourgeoisie of its time and characterised by Ottoman reformism (*osmanlicilik*) promoted by the government of Istanbul, the progressive shaping of a national consciousness encouraged by the cultural and political movement of the Arab *nahda* (awakening), the definition of a set of social and aesthetic practices that unite and single out the wealthy classes, as well as the updating and perpetuation of a patriarchal family model.

This issue also features some of the photographs from Father Ubach's archive. The anthropological and humanist approach that gives rise to a series of surprising portraits seems to have exerted a notable influence on the photography of the monks of Montserrat, in which we can see the same desire for diversity and proximity to the documented subjects that we find their latest bibliographical references in a world that they predicted was close to vanishing.

We end with two interviews, one with Sergi Doladé talking to the Kurd filmmaker Mizgin Mujde Arslan, and the other with Maria Elena Morató talking to the Tunisian writer Hamma Hanachi; and as usual the Overview of Recent Events section, on the young generations in the European and Mediterranean areas.

Maria-Àngels Roque
Editor-in-Chief of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*