

TUESDAY, JUNE 15, 2010

Speaking Arabic in the Land of Croissants

Admittedly, I did not speak as much Arabic as I could have in Morocco, instead relying on my French to carry me through our month in one of France's former North African colonies. However, on Saturday I managed to make ample use of my Arabic, in Paris of all places.

On a gray weekend afternoon, we hopped on Paris' labyrinth of a metro to meet a friend from Colby who is currently in France's capital studying to be a pastry chef. Summertime has begun to show itself in the city of lights, and so too have the tourists, hundreds of whom swarmed our destination of the famed Sacre Coeur and Montmartre, accompanied by droves of touts and hawkers reminiscent of the Pyramids in Egypt. After climbing the stairs of Paris' most famed Roman-Catholic church to take in a panoramic view of the city, we descended into the streets of the 18e arrondissement and tucked into a small table outside of a corner bistro.

In between bites of onion soup, steak, and salad, we regaled Ling with tales of our adventures in Egypt and Morocco. Demonstrating what we learned in our Arabic classes in Rabat, we wrote the Arabic alphabet, our names, and a few random Arabic words in Ling's notebook to give her a taste of the language. When our waitress returned to clear the table and make room for dessert, the notebook page filled with our Arabic scribbles caught her eye. She looked at it, brow furrowed for a moment, then asked if she could take a closer look. She mouthed the letters of the alphabet we had written silently, then read some of the words we had written aloud and laughed, clearly pleased.

“You speak Arabic?” she asked us in French.

“Na'am. Hal tataqawlameen al arabeea?” Evan responded.

In Arabic, Evan and I explained that we had studied the language for one month in Morocco during our travels. The waitress was delighted, albeit slightly shocked, that two white kids had showed up at her French restaurant in Paris and conversed with her in Arabic over lunch. She clearly informed her sister of the American customers who spoke Arabic, as it was the waitress' sister who returned with our dessert, lingering to gaze at the words we had written in Ling's notebook.

After some final small talk in Arabic, our waitress brought us “al hisaab”, we said “shukran” and “ma'a salaam” and wandered down to the Seine, giddy that we had made use of our Arabic outside of Egypt and Morocco. (Evan was even happier since he was finally able to understand what the waitress was saying to him, instead of listening to rapid-fire French!)

Later that evening, we ventured onto a side street of boulevard St. Germain after a leisurely afternoon of exploring Notre-Dame, the Eiffel Tower, the Sorbonne, and the Jardin du Luxembourg. Slipping into a small, traditional French restaurant that was more or less geared towards tourists (but had a reasonable prix fixe dinner menu), we congratulated ourselves on having been able to remember enough Arabic to form complete, intelligible sentences when talking with our waitress at lunch.

As we watched pedestrians weave through the surrounding Latin Quarter, our waiter arrived to take our order (in English) and I responded (in French). When it became evident that my French was fluent, and not simply a tourist's struggling attempt to be Parisien, the waiter inquired, in French, how I had come

to speak the language so well. I explained that I had studied French in university, and the waiter then asked if Evan also spoke French, to which I responded no. Evan, wanting to assert his foreign language aptitude, interrupted and said, in Arabic, that he didn't speak French but he could, in fact, speak Arabic. At this, the waiter turned to Evan, shocked. We explained that both of us speak a little Arabic, and the waiter's face lit up. "Marhaban!" he exclaimed, shaking our hands. We reverted to Arabic for the remainder of our meal, and soon became a spectacle for the restaurant's staff.

The bartender, Hakim, came to our table and introduced himself. Of Berber descent and originally from Algeria, Hakim studied fine arts in university and proudly drew our attention to his paintings that decorated the restaurant's walls. We also introduced ourselves, in Arabic of course, and then explained how we had come to speak Arabic well enough to converse with him. Hakim was elated, and quickly pulled out a pen to write all of our names on the paper place mats lining our table. Simultaneously, our waiter whispered to the woman standing at the front of the restaurant (the owner, I assume) that she had two American customers seated behind her who could speak Arabic. She, too, was taken aback, and quickly made her way to our table to see if it was true.

We requested bread in Arabic, ordered our desserts in stilted Arabic and, after another round of satisfying Arabic conversation, received "al hisaab", where I discovered I had only been charged for one of my two glasses of wine. As we stood to leave the restaurant, Hakim hustled over to us. With his hand over his heart, he told us with utmost sincerity that we were truly impressed with our Arabic language skills, and with our respect for Arab and North African countries. In a day filled with two restaurant run-ins with North Africans who were thrilled that we spoke Arabic, we watched the sun set over the Paris skyline knowing that the month of effort we had put into Arabic classes has given us the ability to surprise people in the best possible way.

It shouldn't come as a shock that I was able to speak more Arabic than French during our outings in Paris, considering that Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia were French colonies during the 19th and early 20th centuries. France established a protectorate over Tunisia in 1881, and after a lengthy struggle, Tunisia was granted self-governance in 1955 and independence in 1956. This same year, France granted independence to French Morocco, following 44 years of French rule. However, France's most closely-guarded North African colony was Algeria, where in 1838 Algeria was incorporated into the French state. Stirrings of independence in Algeria commenced in 1954, quickly erupting into the eight year Algerian War that concluded with Algeria's independence in 1962.

French overseas colonization held to the principle that it was Europe's duty to bring civilization to "uncivilized" populations, and French leaders sought to introduce their language and social mores to their colonies' local people through a systematic policy of cultural integration. Africans who adopted the French culture and language, and who converted to Christianity, were granted French citizenship, including the right to vote.

During the two world wars of the 20th century, the French depended heavily on African troops from their colonies, as soldiers from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia (as well as French West Africa) were sent to fight alongside the French. People of the Maghreb not only served as soldiers, but also replaced French workers serving in the army, thus beginning the formation of the North African diaspora within France. Starting in the 1950s and peaking in the 1960s and 1970s, the post-war period brought a flood of North African immigrants to France, encouraged by a French government that needed to fill labor shortages, rebuild the country's war-torn infrastructure, and encourage France's economic development. However, racist attacks on workers in Marseilles in 1973 led France to order a halt on labor immigration.

Currently, 8% of France's population is comprised of foreign-born immigrants, a majority of whom are from North Africa. Furthermore, France's most recent census indicates that 6.7 million people in France are citizens of foreign origin, and Muslims have grown to become the second largest religious community in France, following Roman Catholics.

Given the discrimination that the people of the North African diaspora in France face on a regular basis (e.g. President Sarkozy calling on a “burqa ban” in all public places), it is no wonder that individuals of this large minority population in Paris were shocked, surprised, and thrilled that Evan and I had taken an interest in their language and culture, and had conversed with them with interest, rather than seeing them as less than equal, or ignoring their heritage altogether.