

Black Sun of Renewal

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The magazine Souffles made an important contribution to modern Moroccan culture in the 60s. The impact of its literary, artistic, and cultural production were of the greatest importance. Since its inception, it attracted some of the best young poets, artists, and intellectuals. It was not only a literary magazine but also included notes and comments on the sociocultural situation, cinema, theater, and art, as well as critical texts, manifestos, and historical essays. By demasking neocolonial ideology, it stirred up the stagnant literary and intellectual situation in the country.



Souffles (Rabat), 6/1967 cover

Souffles was a literary and cultural quarterly review published in Rabat, Morocco. Its first issue was published in February 1966, the last in December 1971. In all, there were twenty-two issues. The cover, designed by painter Mohamed Melehi, was austere yet elegant: under a geometric square glowed a round circle, a black sun. The composition remained unchanged for the first fourteen issues. Only the cover and the circle's color changed. On the back, the word "*Souffles*" was written in Arabic: *anfâs* ("breeze," "breath"). Up to the double issue 10–11, the magazine was only in French; it then became bilingual (French and Arabic). After the fifteenth issue, the layout, cover, and size changed. Those who have written on the history of *Souffles* divide it into two periods: during the first period from 1966 to 1969, its collaborators were poets, writers, artists, and intellectuals passionately working towards a new Moroccan, and Maghrebi culture. The second period, from 1969 to 1971–72 was marked by a radical ideological Marxist-Leninist turn.² "Literature was no longer sufficient," declared Abdellatif Laâbi, the founder and editor of *Souffles*. The literary section became less relevant than the political section, dedicated to Third World struggles for independence from colonial imperialism and to national politics. Because of its new approach, *Souffles* was banned in 1972 and Laâbi was arrested for his political opinions. While in prison he was awarded several international poetry prizes. After a long solidarity campaign, he regained his freedom in 1980.



Souffles – Action et Recherche Culturelle (Rabat), 4/1968, issue relating to the new association ARC

When Morocco gained independence in 1956, much needed to be done to free its culture from the burden of colonial (French and Spanish) ideology. Colonialism had imposed a patronizing, Eurocentric culture and controlled every aspect of life, outlawing political parties, associations, gatherings, and group activities. Moroccan authors and media were often censored, and even the use of Arabic language was carefully monitored. The colonial protectorate had industrialized and modernized the country mainly to control and exploit people, land, and resources for its own profit. Although fascinated by their "exotic" aspects, it had ignored the universal values of the local culture, its historical heritage, the dignity of its identity. By curbing freedom of expression, it had inhibited the development of a national modernist avant-garde. Moroccan culture was mainly regarded as picturesque. Modern thought and intellectual life were not supposed to suit the Moroccans and were considered a dangerous challenge to colonialism itself. But Morocco and the Maghreb had a very rich history as well as a wealth of artistic, poetic, and intellectual traditions, and modernist ideas had spread in many circles and domains even before the arrival of the *colons*. The echoes of the Near East's *Nahda* (renewal) had stirred the Maghreb since the beginning of the twentieth century. Although much of the intellectual elite's energies had been absorbed by the struggle for freedom and although people's desire for progress and development had been curbed by discriminatory policies, modernist movements were on the make. In spite of censorship and control, urban elites had their intellectuals, writers, reviews, and publications.³ Some authors like Ahmed Sefrioui and Driss Chraïbi, and philosopher Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi had published in French.

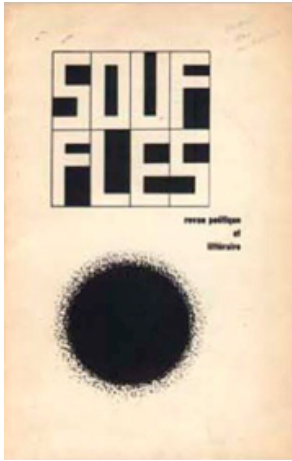
Yet, after the independence, a petty provincial and Eurocentric culture was still dominating the scene. The salons organized for Western artists admitted only Moroccan "naive" painters as a

¹ This text was published in *springerin* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2006). We would like to thank Toni Maraini and *springerin* for giving us the permission to publish it again.

² Marc Gontard, "La littérature marocaine de langue française," and Bernard Jakobiak, "*Souffles* de 1966 à 1969," in *Europe* (June–July 1979), p. 107f. and pp. 117–23.

³ Abderrahmane Tenkoul, "Les revues culturelles," in *Regards sur la culture Marocaine*, no. 1 (1988), pp.8–13.

touch of “indigenous color.” Local European poets used to gather in clubs littéraires around the foreign cultural missions, “where they wrote verses on the ambassadors’ gardens.”⁴ They ignored the best of Western production and the daring experiments of modernism, as well as the high tradition of classical Arabic poetry, not to mention Afro-Berber and popular arts and literature. They were not interested in the productions of a Moroccan cultural avant-garde. It is important to keep all this in mind, as the Western world has not always acknowledged what colonialism really was. It might be interesting, for that matter, to read the courageous writings of the Moroccan historian Germain Ayache,⁵ who in the 50s denounced the abuses of colonialism, the distress and misery of the Moroccan population, and the control over its cultural roots. To understand the impact of *Souffles*, one has to go back to a situation still shaped by the dramatic consequences of all this. On the other hand, after half a century of colonial propaganda and isolation, the Moroccan bourgeoisie had either lost touch with its roots or found refuge in a nostalgic, if not dogmatic, vision of the past. A modernist national culture had yet to be loudly proclaimed, its theoretical basis openly debated, its creative and visionary nature concretely expressed in terms that would correspond to the new realities of an independent Morocco.



Souffles (Rabat), 1/1966, cover design Mohamed Melehi

Owing to a remarkable set of circumstances, this became possible around 1964, when, in Casablanca and in Rabat, two small groups of young artists and poets joined forces to launch a movement that stimulated profound changes and is today considered the milestone of a new era. Formulating their ideas clearly, they produced vibrant, original works of art and literature and, most importantly, started organizing their own independent events. The same year, 1964, intellectuals had founded the important independent magazine in Arabic, *Aqlâm*, yet its content was mainly philosophical and theoretical rather than poetical and avant-garde. Up till then, culture had either been in the hands of foreign missions or of the state bureaucracy and conservative elites. With the exception of the writer Driss Chaïbi, the older intellectuals looked at the new groups with uneasy surprise or disdain. Who were they? A handful of creative young people with daring ideas suddenly broke into the scene and galvanized the attention of the public.



Souffles (Rabat), 1/1966, back cover with the Arabic inscription “anfâs” [breeze, breath]

The so-called Casablanca Group of artists (Mohamed Melehi, Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebaa) engaged in innovative activities and works (paintings, exhibitions, manifestos, debates, publications).⁶ At the same time, in 1964 two young talented poets, Mohamed Khaïr- Eddine and Mostafa Nissaboury, published the manifesto *Poésie Toute* and the review *Eaux Vives* (only two issues) in Casablanca. “For Khaïr-Eddine, breaking with the existent literatures, both in French and in Arabic, was the main historical duty of the new generation.”⁷ When they met another young poet, Abdellatif Laâbi, the birth of *Souffles* was already almost a foregone conclusion. And when the Casablanca Group joined them, the movement came into being.⁸ They shared goals, hopes, and visions. They considered themselves a generation committed to building a free, just, inventive national culture. They were truly avant-garde. “We work with all our awareness for a future world ... and this review intends to be a tool for the new literary and poetic generation,” declared Laâbi in the first issue of *Souffles*.

When they stood up and said “Enough!” to provincial salons and clubs littéraires, they expressed deep expectations of change. Their artistic and poetical revolt spread like a hot wind in summer.

⁴ Gontard, “La littérature marocaine,” p. 107.

⁵ Germain Ayache, *Les écrits d'avant l'Indépendance* (Casablanca, 1990).

⁶ I was myself a member of this group, and have been writing about their experiences since 1964; see, for example: Toni Maraini, *Écrits sur l'art, 1964–1989* (Rabat, 1990).

⁷ Lahsen Mouzouni, *Le roman marocain de langue française* (Paris, 1987), p. 71.

⁸ In order to answer the question, “Who are we after the impact of colonialism?” they had to look back at the roots that had been most depreciated both by colonialism and by the national bourgeoisie, that is, oral traditions, Afro-Berber and popular Arabic poetry, arts, and culture. The first to focus on this heritage in Morocco were the abstract artists of the Casablanca Group, who claimed that popular traditional arts were modern *ante litteram* in spirit and aesthetics. Colonial ethnography had considered them minor arts, but for the Casablanca Group, as for Paul Klee and Walter Gropius, a rural carpet was a painting, and the artisan an artist. The poets of *Souffles* could not but agree. In the meantime they were all determined to fully participate in the twentieth century, experimenting with new languages and ideas and sharing universal values with all the poets and artists of the world.



Mohamed Melehi, Abdellatif Laâbi, Mostafa Nissaboury, Rabat, 1966, Foto Noury

Those artists and intellectuals who had up to then worked in solitude were encouraged to join. Thus, when, in 1966, Abdellatif Laâbi concretely started the project of *Souffles* in Rabat, he could count on the support of some talented and committed poets, painters, and intellectuals. The project was heralded and carried on by means of fervid and visionary discussions in cafés and studios. The Casablanca Group designed the cover and illustrations. Getting on one of the old buses that once crossed the country, the painter Melehi took the magazine to Tangier, where it was printed at a lower price than in Rabat. Such was the birth of *Souffles*.

The first issue was thin, but it responded “to an imperative demand” (Laâbi). Soon it reached 100 pages. Khaïr-Eddine had by then migrated to France and his name does not figure in the *comité d’action*, but his presence was assured by his poems. Haunted and solitary, Khaïr-Eddine (whose mother tongue was Berber) had fueled new Moroccan poetry (and literature) with the concepts of the “linguistic guerrillas.”⁹ To finish with the garden verses and the classical elegies, someone had to dare to break the rules of literary French. He did so and opened the way to language experimentation. Widely debated by Maghrebi writers in French, through *Souffles* the topic reached the young generation of Moroccan writers both in French and in Arabic. At the core of the debate was the question, in which language would the new independent Moroccan writers write?¹⁰ The answer given by Laâbi in the first issue of *Souffles* is still valuable today: “The language of a poet,” he wrote, “is above all ‘his own language,’ the one that he creates.” By encouraging translations and collaborations, *Souffles* had the great merit not to divide literary production into Francophone and Arabophone, as creation and culture in both languages were considered (and are) a complementary historical reality rooted in a common ground.



Portrait Abdellatif Laâbi, on the back cover of the anthology *La poésie palestinienne de combat*, Éditions Atlantiques (Casablanca), 1970

Souffles would not have come into existence without Laâbi’s steadfast work. His poetical gift and passion were matched by his rigorous intellect. He was aware of his mission. *Souffles* opened with a severe “*j’accuse ...*” regarding the cultural situation in Morocco and focused on the question of national identity and culture, but did not forget to write that “Our writer friends, Maghrebi, Africans, Europeans, and of other nationalities are fraternally invited to participate in our modest enterprise.” He was farsighted. And he soon received letters from Europe and the Maghreb. The Tunisian writer Albert Memmi wrote “I was waiting for this publication, I was hoping it would exist”; Driss Chraïbi affirmed “your magazine is fantastic!”; and the Algerian writer Mouloud Mammeri welcomed the “young” review. Such encouragement from three great writers of the older generation was important. As the mouthpiece of a new generation, the review took a stand in the defense of those Maghrebi writers – like Chraïbi or Kateb Yacine (Algeria) –whose work had expressed the revolt against both local feudalism and foreign occupation. What the authors who were published by *Souffles* meant to young readers was of great importance. Paralyzed by the language problem (literary French? classical Arabic? Berber oral tradition?), they had long repressed their anguishes, rages, emotions, and hopes. Now each of them could create their language, use vernacular terms, experiment, “scream.” Nissaboury has called it “*poésie chacaliste*”: the screaming of the jackal. Soon, however, *la poésie chacaliste* would be a juvenile joke and each poet—Laâbi was the first—would reach poetical maturity.

In the third issue we find mention of a *comité d’action*. It included Ahmed Bouanani, Nissaboury, Abdallah Stouky, the Algerian poet Malek Alloula and the French poets Bernard Jakobiak and André Laude. Bouanani, a fine intellectual and a wonderful storyteller, was the author of beautiful poems later collected in the anthology *Les Persiennes*. His articles on popular poetry were remarkable at a time when that subject had been studied only by ethno logists. The names in the committee were to change somewhat over the years. One of the first to give support to Laâbi, Nissaboury, the amazing author of the book *La mille et deuxième nuit*, remained a member until 1969. So did the painters of the Casablanca Group. In the course of time, among the various collaborators we find distinguished authors like Mostafa Lacheraf (Algeria); Azeddine Madani and Mohamed Aziza (Tunisia); Abdallah Laroui and Abdelkhébir

⁹ The term *guérilla linguistique* was introduced by Mohamed Khaïr-Eddine in his autobiographical novel *Moi l’aigre* (1970).

¹⁰ After gaining independence from French colonialism Arabic was declared the official language in 1956.

Khatibi (Morocco). Except for a long poem by Etel Adnan (Lebanon) and few other critical contributions (by Jeanne-Paule Fabre and myself), women were barely present in *Souffles*. However, when women poets and writers came on the scene with their own books, magazines, and actions, they looked back at *Souffles* as an experience that had prepared the ground for new ideas.



Mostafa Nissaboury, *Plus haute mémoire*, ed. by Collection Atlantes (Rabat), April 1968, Cover design Mohamed Melehi

Every issue of *Souffles* opened with a note by Laâbi. The “urgent matters” were innumerable. Significantly, religion was not an issue: fundamentalism had not yet troubled the old and wise Maghrebi Islam, which was open to changes and secularity. In 1967, besides poetry readings, Laâbi and his poet friends, with the support of Melehi, created the Collection Atlantes, which published booklets by Jakobiak, Laâbi, Nissaboury, Alloula, and Laâbi’s book *L’oeil et la nuit*. In 1968 *Souffles* participated in the birth of the national cultural association arc (Action et Recherche Culturelle), created – as Laâbi wrote – by “some artists, university researchers, scientific and technical professionals, students....” It was an important and ambitious project that also involved political parties. *Souffles* took part with enthusiasm in the first cultural activities that were boldly extended to the rest of the Maghreb. The collaboration of Abraham Serfaty, a notable Moroccan intellectual, became more relevant than the one with Tahar Ben Jelloun. Convicted with Laâbi in 1972 and later imprisoned, Serfaty was set free in 1991. With the fifteenth issue, dedicated to Palestine (“Pour la Révolution Palestini enne”), *Souffles* changed its layout, cover, and format. Laâbi’s review had become “the organ of the revolutionary Moroccan movement.”¹¹ This was a radical change. A decision, recalls Jakobiak, of “idealistic generosity,” “one that pushes you [however] to all kinds of ruptures and divides the world into two halves: the good and the bad. ... Once the euphoria faded there were those who converted to dialectic materialism and those who did not.” Painters and poets of the first period of *Souffles* did not follow the new course (or were not accepted in the new *comité d’action*). In a climate of painful debates, the creative group split from the political group. It was the normal outcome for a cultural movement. The same had happened to other groups in the history of modern avant-gardism. Those who believe in free independent creation resist the diktat and jargon of political parties. On the other hand, ideology needs intellectuals and poets to renew its views on the world. *Souffles* had generously offered its contribution. It then issued consistent documents on the main revolutionary struggles of the time (Angola, South Africa, Mozambique, etc.) as well as on the political situation in Morocco. In a troubled time of “betrayed independence” (Laâbi) *Souffles’* new course was important for the nation’s political awareness. Yet when art and poetry had spoken aloud, they had also set in motion a change that was revolutionary and good for the nation’s awareness. If the *Souffles* of the first period and its collaboration with the Casablanca Group had never been, Morocco and the Maghreb would have felt its absence. That is why, when the younger Moroccan generation writes today about *Souffles*, it looks back with admiration at its artists and poets, who had the courage to create and invent, as well as at its intellectuals, who had the courage to defy injustice.¹²



Abdellatif Laâbi, *L’oeil et la nuit*, Édition Atlantes (Casablanca), 1969, cover design Mohamed Melehi

¹¹ Gontard, “La littérature marocaine,” p. 107.

¹² Vgl. “Revue: *Souffles Coupés*” [Editorial], in: *Tel Quel*, Nr. 148, 2004, p. 23.