REGIONAL ATTRACTIONS: WORLD AND VILLAGE IN KABYLIA (ALGERIA)

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There have long been debates over the usefulness of the notion of ‘regions’ in the social sciences. Mostly these have been overridden by practical considerations, such as the categories used in academic administration, the challenges of linguistic training and the demands of the job-market that oblige social scientists to become regional specialists whether they originally intended to or not. Yet regions are notoriously difficult to define, and publications with a regional focus tend to open with painstaking discussions of boundaries without ever coming to any definitive conclusions. Furthermore, delimitations of regions often carry within them traces of past or present power relations and political projects, and might easily become self-fulfilling prophecies; they are therefore easier to deconstruct than to defend. One way of avoiding these problems might be to adopt the notion of borders as suggested more than half a century ago by French geographers keen to dispel threatening German ideas about ‘natural borders’: to shift our focus of investigation away from a region’s boundaries towards its core and the forces that keep it together. Thus, in 1938, Jacques Ancel claimed that every kind of community necessarily produces its own kind of boundaries, and that the study of the former would necessarily

2 For an example of these difficulties, see Dale Eickelman, The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach (Englewood, 1981).
precede the latter: A border is a “political isobar that establishes, for a while, the balance between two pressures”. Decades later, similar notions were put forward by Braudel and Wallerstein, when attempting to define the boundaries of the world-economy or world-system they were aiming to describe; these were seen to be situated where the ‘pull’ of the core was about to disappear or give way to the influence of another regional centre. In such an approach, regions are inevitably dynamic, not static, and contain differences of attraction that hold them together. They are thus politically and economically charged and in themselves expressions of inequalities, rather than similarities; they are never only geographically or even historically determined, but are maintained by constant exchange, movement and activity; rather than as an area that could be coloured in on a map, they appear as significant spheres of action and thought. Such an approach, however, as attractive as it might seem at first, leads to severe methodological difficulties, as regions might overlap or shift over time. Furthermore, if taken seriously, it demands that an in-depth local study precedes any attempt at regional inquiry.

In this contribution, I would nevertheless like to try to apply this definition of a ‘region’ to a village in Kabylia, a Berber-speaking area in north-eastern Algeria, if only to see whether such an attempt might bear any fruit and further our understanding both of the village and Kabylia, and of the local significance of ‘regions’. Kabylia, all French colonial and Kabyle contemporary sources agree, is remote, timeless, rooted, and static. Its population long resisted, it is claimed, both Ara-

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