

Sarmiento's Africa: A Dislocation of Memory

África de Sarmiento: una dislocación de la memoria

*Sylvain Poosson**



Abstract

In this article, I would like to do further exploration of the significance of the African roots of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888) who was President of Argentina from 1868 to 1874 by analyzing his trip to Africa during the 1840s. For many Latin American scholars, Sarmiento is known as the father of *Facundo*, a book that clearly sets apart the concepts of Civilization and Barbarism. However, the most interesting thing to me goes beyond those two antagonistic (and sometimes parallel) notions to

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* PhD en Literatura Latinoamericana del s. XIX de la Universidad de Virginia. MA en Literatura española del s. XX de la Universidad de Montpellier, Paul Valery en Francia. Pregrado en la Escuela Diplomática de Madrid (Esp.). Profesor en varias universidades de los Estados Unidos, entre ellas Hampton University. Actualmente trabaja en el College Thomas Nelson, en Virginia. Correo electrónico: sylvain.poosson@hamptonu.edu

convey not only a sense of the other but also a reality of distance or dislocation (as in *displacement*) of memory. Such dislocation can be formulated in words (in the case of Sarmiento's *Recuerdos de Provincia*) or in physical displacements (Sarmiento's *Viajes a África* accounts).

Keywords: Sarmiento, Africa, Argentina.

Resumen

En este artículo se explora la importancia de las raíces africanas de Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), quien fue presidente de Argentina 1868-1874, mediante el análisis de su viaje a África durante la década de 1840. Para muchos estudiosos latinoamericanos, Sarmiento es conocido como el padre de Facundo, un libro que diferencia claramente los conceptos de civilización y barbarie. Sin embargo, lo más interesante va más allá de esas dos nociones antagónicas (y, a veces paralelas), para transmitir no solo un sentido de la otredad, sino también una realidad de la distancia o dislocación (como en el desplazamiento) de la memoria. Tal perturbación puede formularse en palabras (como el caso de Sarmiento en *Recuerdos de provincia*) o en desplazamientos físicos (como en *Viajes a África*).

Palabras clave: Sarmiento, África, Argentina.

Mother and motherland

In his book *Recuerdos de Provincia* (1850), Sarmiento writes of the memorable days and years he lived with his mother and sisters, loved and protected by caring nannies and Black slaves. His mother, Paula Zoila Albarracín was not a rich woman and had the particularity of carrying a name that sounded Arabic. In fact, Sarmiento is quick to acknowledge that his mother's last name comes from the Arabic Al Ben Razin. He explains that the surname originated "a mediados del siglo XII [cuando] un jeque sarraceno, Al Ben Razín, conquistó y dio nombre a una ciudad y a una familia que después fue cristiana" [from mid-twelfth century when a Saracen sheikh, Al Ben Razin conquered and founded a city and a family that became Christian] (*Recuerdos de provincia*, p. 34). The Al Ben Razin who founded the city is unknown, as well as the city itself. Here, one might note the creation of a *locus* that, in the mind of the author, is (or was) real whereas such locus does not appear on any geographical map nor has it ever been proven

to exist. The location of that city has not been explicitly evoked nor has its history. What we might see in such a creation is Sarmiento's will to connect to a past that brings glory to him and to his mother. Note that the creator of such a mythical place is none other than a *jeque saraceno*, a sheikh who occupies a very high rank in Islamic society. The transformation from Al Ben Razin to Albarracín is an obvious attempt to transform his mother's legacy and origin from Islam to Christianity or, to put it in Sarmiento's way, from barbarism to civilization. When Sarmiento talks about the memories of his mother and his maternal genealogy, he depicts a very contradictory discourse, quite oxymoronic, of *distantiation* and *recuperation* because such memories contain the germs of both an obsolete and barbaric traditionalism and a secretly revered Arabic nobility. *Distantiation* here mirrors Sarmiento's will to distance himself from the "barbaric" culture of Islam yet through the love of his mother, he tends

to recuperate or associate himself with such culture. While he praises his mother's Arabic heritage, he despises the very Arabs whose civilization is being taken over by Europeans in early 19th century. Sarmiento is proud that his mother descended from a sheikh, a nation builder, a quasiroyal being who governed that imaginary land above all the Arabic vulgus. However, when he looks at his motherland of Argentina, those who populate such a beautiful land are not as enlightened as the mysterious Al Ben Razin. That fact tears apart Sarmiento who is loyal to his motherland, yet fearful of the culture from which his mother descended. The only thing we know of the mysterious Al Ben Razin is the name he left with his daughter who became the Christian Paula Zoila Albarracín. For the young Sarmiento, growing up in San Juan de la Frontera, that maternal surname would have more significance when he traveled to Africa in 1847.

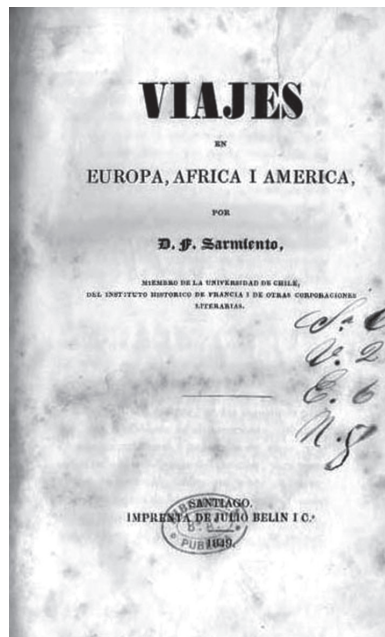
During his worldwide trip, Sarmiento would write to his friends, telling them of his impressions and other oddities he found during his journey. Those letters were gathered in a book called *Viajes por Europa, África y América, 1845-1847 y diario de gastos*. In Algeria, Sarmiento discovered within himself another persona from whom he tried to distance. He became the Arab wandering in the streets of Oran, while the French army was colonizing North Africa by "bringing civilization to the barbarian Arabs". Sarmiento's profound fears were lying right before his very eyes as he started becoming one of the people he so dismisses. After walking up the streets of Algiers, Sarmiento writes:

En Argel, me ha sorprendido la semejanza de fisionomía del gaucho con el árabe, y mi shauss me lisonjeaba diciéndome que al verme, todos me tomarían por un creyente. Mentéle mi apellido materno que sonó grato a sus oídos, por cuando era común entre ellos este nombre de familia; y digo la verdad, que me halaga y sonrío esta genealogía que me hace presunto deudo de Mahoma" (Recuerdos, p. 35)

[In Algiers, I was surprised to see the similarity in the physiognomy of the gaucho and the Arab and my *shauss* (interpreter) flattered me, saying that I could be mistaken for an Arab. Then I mentioned the surname of my mother, and the name sounded pleasing to his ears because it is such a common name among them; truthfully, the genealogy that makes me an adept of the Prophet Mohammed is flattering to me].

In Algiers, people mistook Sarmiento for an Arab and he felt so much pride in being mistaken for a devotee of the Prophet Mohammed. However, the truth is that Domingo Sarmiento neither wanted to look like an Arab nor did he want to be assimilated

to the Arab culture. From Algiers, he writes that "jamás la barbarie i el fanatismo han logrado penetrar más hondamente en el corazón de un pueblo (árabe) i petrificarlo para que resista a toda mejora" (Viajes, p. 202). [barbarism and fanatic behavior have managed to penetrate so profoundly the heart of the Arab people so that they refuse all kind of improvement]. In his book *Facundo* (1845), he portrayed the gauchos as wandering Arabs of the Pampa, who expressed barbarianism more than



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anything else. Being an Arab was nothing to be proud of in Argentina, so why would Sarmiento be so happy to be mistaken for one while in Algiers? He could have passed for a southern Spaniard or a Frenchman travelling in the newly conquered Algeria! Although he seemed proud of being mistaken for an Arab and a devotee of the Prophet Mohammed, Sarmiento did not want to be associated with Islam because such a religion is synonymous of “*pueblo original, idioma primitivo, i una relijion intolerante i feroz por su esencia, que no acepta, sin la perdicion eterna, el trato siquiera con los cristianos*” (*Viajes*, p. 175) [primitive people, primitive language and a fundamentally intolerant and fierce religion that does not accept even a relationship with Christians].

As one can see, Sarmiento is struggling to balance two sets of values that are lauded and discarded in two different spaces at the same time. As he visits Africa, his pride of belonging to an ancestral sheikh's family is completely countered by his distance from the people –like the sheikh– who populate his native land. Walking among the French in Algeria in January 1847, Sarmiento does not bow down to the uncivilized Arab being conquered by the Europeans; he actually sees the Arab as a subaltern being lost in Africa, a being impregnated by true barbarism, completely unfit to live among civilized Europeans. While in Africa, Sarmiento carries within himself two images –one of a noble civilized euro-descendent and the other, of a colonized American trying to

escape the Argentine social and political reality. The first image is linked to his mother, a product of civilization herself and the other image refers to Argentina, the land about which he cares so deeply.

In *Recuerdos de provincia*, Sarmiento mentions that his mother carried out her domestic duties with a Black servant by the name of Toribia who was living in the quarters of the house during Sarmiento's up-bringing. Talking about his household, he writes: “*servían a la familia bandadas de esclavos negros de ambos sexos*” [there were countless Black slaves who served my family], among those maids there was a woman called Toribia, “*una zamba, criada en la familia [...] un ayo que nos crió a todos*” [a Zamba, maid of the family, a maid who raised us all]. More than a maid in the household, Toribia became the second mother to Sarmiento because Paula Zoila Alabrracin and Toribia “*eran dos amigas, ama y criada, dos compañeras de trabajo, que discurrían entre ambas sobre los medios de mantener la familia; reñían, disputaban, disentían y cada una seguía su parecer, ambas conducentes al mismo fin*” [they were two friends, the housemaker and the maid, two colleagues who used to discuss the ways to keep up the household; they argued and disagreed, each one in her own way but both aiming at the same goal] (*Recuerdos de Provincia*, p. 42). One can draw the conclusion that Toribia and Paula were the same person split in two, a true duet that nurtured knowledge in the life of the young Sarmiento. Toribia raised him as if he were her own son, insufflating in him the secret of life and the necessary knowledge to become the man he became. Along with Toribia, lived also under the same roof another old Indian woman named Ña Cleme, “*pura india, harapienta, que pasaba por bruja en la ciudad*” [a pure Indian woman, ragged, who was known as a witch in the city]. Ña Cleme was very superstitious and spent most of her time sharing stories that confounded the mind

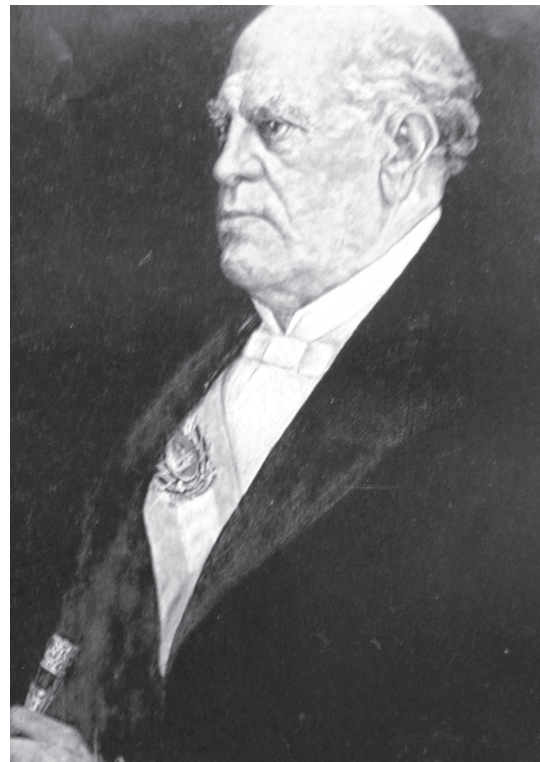
of the young Sarmiento. The Indian woman did a great job educating the boy in the pure knowledge of the unknown and the superstitious through fairy tales. Ña Cleme was so efficient in touching the mind of young Sarmiento that Paula Zoila Albarracín had to intervene “*para disipar con su buen sentido los gérmenes de superstición que hubiesen podido abrigarse en nuestras almas*” [in order to dissipate with her good sense the germs of superstition that were being planted in our souls] (Ibid, p. 42). In light of these accounts, one may say that Sarmiento’s early ages were formed with African wisdom and superstitious traditions that normally live within the cosmic tapestry of the African / Indian mind. That “uncivilized” knowledge sewn within his young psyche would stand later as the first lessons on barbarism he had ever received at that point.

Sarmiento was born half-African in a land that knew Africans only as slaves. His “mothers”, Toribia and Ña Cleme crafted in him the early lessons of otherness, of being a non-European. His father, José Clemente Sarmiento, a soldier in the army of General José de San Martín (1778-1850) gave them a home in which “*se practicaba la noble virtud de la pobreza*” [one lived with the noble virtue of poverty] (p. 137). The many slaves that lived and worked in that home have surely left a significant impression on Sarmiento who started to despise the Negroes many years later when he was faced with the reality of the distress being that Argentina used to be under dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas.

The other mother (land) that captivated Sarmiento’s life was the well-being of Argentina. He joined writers and activists like José Mármol, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Vicente Fidel López, Miguel Cané, and Esteban Echeverría to create a think-tank determined to find ways to bring civilization to the country. They gave themselves to writing, adopting the ideas of Auguste Comte, Charles Darwin and Count de

Gobineau among other thinkers and writers of the time. They adored reading nineteenth century French writers; they applauded French romanticism and ended up creating a generation known as the Generation of 1837. That generation, profoundly convinced of its role as the bearer of civilization, fought against Rosas and his alleged link to barbarism in order to restore law. Positivists all the way, they saw Argentina like a mother who needed rescue from the hands of “uncivilized barbarians”, namely from Blacks, gauchos, and Indians.

The two locations of memory –mother and motherland– gave Sarmiento a sense of *distanciation* or *detachment* that was clearly seen while dealing with non-Europeans in Argentina and also when he was observing the Arabs in Africa in 1847. On one hand, he saw the Arabs through the prism of his own mother’s Arabic heritage but on the other hand such heritage was unacceptable as it did not fit the parameters of the kind of civilization that he, Sarmiento, was trying to achieve



in Argentina. The memory of the years as a young man nurtured by Paula, Toribia and Ña Cleme did not fit the teaching of the positivist ideology he learned through Auguste Comte, or the social Darwinism instilled in him by the writings of Gobineau. The reverse thinking of such behavior was seen within the Generation of 37, where he assembled all strengths

necessary to present himself as a guarantor of a new way of using positivism to build a nation; first with words, like in *Facundo*, and with concrete acts like la "Conquista del Desierto". This last phrase refers to the years in the 1870s when Sarmiento sent General Julio Argentino Roca to conquer Patagonia and get rid of the Indians.

"Entre los europeos i los árabes en África, no hai i nunca habrá amalgama ni asimilación posible; el uno o el otro pueblo tendrá que desaparecer, retirarse o disolverse, i amo demasiado la civilización para no desear ahora el triunfo definitivo en África de los pueblos civilizados".

Selective culture

As a premier witness to the colonization of northern Africa by the Europeans, Sarmiento was elated to see that such land far away from his native Argentina was being populated, turned over and transformed into a new, civilized, and Christian land. In spite of his Arabic heritage, Sarmiento had no problem applauding the *dislocation* and marginalization of the Arabic culture. By dislocation I mean the *displacement* of the Arabic culture from the center to the outskirts of the land, into the peripheral realm of the new colony and away from the implantation of the European (French particularly) culture. In *Viajes*, after arriving in Oran, Sarmiento writes to his friend Juan Thompson: "*en lugar de las numerosas mezquitas i minaretas que el viajero espera encontrar entre los compatriotas del Profeta, al subir la Plaza de Orleans, la Europa se presenta de golpe en el plantel del futuro París africano...*" (p. 34) [instead of the many mosques and minarets any traveler would hope to see, once we go up the Plaza of Orleans, Europe stands tall suddenly in this future African Paris]. The selective culture in place in Algeria at this time is the Christian culture, as religion has taken over the alien

land, in a way that the Orient was dreamed about but always seen and possessed through the eyes and deeds of Europe. Sarmiento confesses that "*nuestro oriente es la Europa y si alguna luz brilla más allá, nuestros ojos no están preparados para recibirla sino al través del prisma europeo*" (p. 173) [our Orient is Europe and if a light were to shine beyond its border, our eyes can only see it through the eyes of an European prism]. Once Europe "turned the Orient from alien to a colonial space" it ceased to be "an idea that has a history and tradition of thought; imagery and a vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (Said, *Orientalism*, p. 211).

Sarmiento's oriental space is an Arabian space in Africa taken over by Christianity. It is the Prophet Mohammed taken over by a host of intruders, infidels, greed-stricken colonialists who see the other, the non-European as a being to be brought to civilization. Sarmiento's civilization is nothing short of an evangelization campaign carried out by France in Algeria or other European countries in Africa. In *Viajes*, Sarmiento states clearly:

Para comprender los acontecimientos actuales del África, no basta, a mi juicio, abrir el Koran, que no daría sino una imperfecta idea del carácter, creencias i preocupaciones árabes. En la Biblia sólo puede encontrarse el tipo imperecedero de esta imperecedera raza patriarcal [...] Del mismo tronco ha salido el Evangelio y el Koran; el primero preparando los progresos de la especie humana i continuando las puras tradiciones primitivas; el segundo, como una protesta de las razas pastoras, inmovilizando la inteligencia i estereotipando las costumbres bárbaras de las primeras edades del mundo (p. 177) [In order to understand the current affairs in Africa, it is not sufficient to open the Koran as this book will give an imperfect idea of the beliefs and mores of the Arabs. Only in the Bible is where one can find the everlasting type of this everlasting patriarchal race. The Gospel and the Koran came from the same root; the former prepares the progress of the human beings, the latter is like the wandering races with frozen intelligence and stereotypical and barbaric mores still frozen in the infancy of humanity].

Sarmiento was clear in his ideas. “*Entre los europeos i los árabes en África, no hai i nunca*

habrá amalgama ni asimilación posible; el uno o el otro pueblo tendrá que desaparecer, retirarse o disolverse, i amo demasiado la civilización para no desear ahora el triunfo definitivo en África de los pueblos civilizados” (Viajes, p. 202) [Between the Europeans and the Arabs there will never be any assimilation; either one or the other will have to disappear or be dissolved. And I love civilization so much that I root for the complete triumph of the civilized people in Africa]. Here one can see the celebration of Charles Darwin’s evolution theory. Sarmiento is a social Darwinist who lies in wait for the triumph of the White race over the others.

In conclusion, the *displacement* of Sarmiento’s Orient is a way to recuperate a world that he abhors while he, paradoxically, reveres such a far away world. Such a contradiction was expressed when he said: “*No sé qué sentimiento mezclado de pavor i admiración me causa la vista de este pueblo árabe.*” (p. 176) [I can’t explain this mixed feeling of dread and admiration that the presence of these Arab people causes]. Sarmiento was so determined to carry on his civilization agenda that he completely contradicted his own figure as an enlightened man and a great defender of the social and human environment.

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