

Mustafa Benyakhlef

1942-2011

MUSTAFA BENYAKHLEF, THE FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE National Institute for Statistics and Applied Economics (INSEA) and former professor at Muhammad V University in Morocco, was a leader in higher education, the Arabization of the natural sciences, and a tireless supporter of human rights. Born to an old Fez family, he followed his undergraduate education in Paris with graduate work in the United States. Living in Chicago in the early 1960s, he taught colloquial Moroccan Arabic to Clifford and Hildred Geertz (and later to me) who were just beginning fieldwork in Morocco. He subsequently transferred to the University of California at Berkeley where he completed his Ph.D. in statistics in record time. It was a sign of his commitment to building science education in his homeland that he turned down a position on the faculty at Berkeley to return to Morocco.

As a professor and administrator Benyakhlef was responsible for building one of the premier institutes in the Arab and African world, an institute that adhered to the highest academic and moral standards. When Morocco and other countries in the region began to contemplate Arabizing higher education it was Benyakhlef, working for a time with the Arab League as well as local institutions, who composed and published a number of works in mathematics and statistics for use by students. In the process, he had to create appropriate terminologies that would simultaneously translate into the international scientific nomenclature and adapt concepts whose resonance would convey the sought-for sense of authentic Arabic overtones. His fascination with translation also led him to found a translation service and, in the course of that work, to help many people negotiate the worlds of national and international law. He was a founder of the High Technology School of Morocco, a highly advanced school of science which was the first of its kind in the country. As the students at his university became increasingly religious in later years, Benyakhlef also devoted himself to finding a basis for common discourse among the members of a diverse student body.

Benyakhlef's own research and interests led him to bridge the mathematical and social sciences in a unique fashion. With his experience in studying economic development in a number of Third World countries he was able to bring together demographic, financial, and ecological data to

understand the realities of national planning. He twice served as a visiting professor of anthropology at Princeton University where he delighted students with his courses on development economics and the uses of statistical studies in the planification process. In subsequent years he was enormously helpful to Princeton graduate students who were pursuing research in Morocco. He also brought his own mathematical skills to bear on some of the thorny issues that have concerned Islamicists, most particularly his publication of an analysis of Islamic inheritance law as having been based in part on a duodecimal, rather than decimal, system.

Although a close relative has long served as a major figure in Morocco's socialist party, Benyakhlef was not attached to one political party. Rather, as a founder of the Moroccan Human Rights Organization his concern was with human rights and their implementation in Morocco and elsewhere. Like many such figures, his work in this regard was not always welcomed by those in power, but Benyakhlef stood firm against any intimidation, even preventing security forces from entering INSEA to arrest protesting students, thus constituting it one of the few safe havens available for academic pursuits.

It was characteristic of Benyakhlef that, in his final illness, he was intrigued by his doctors' devotion to their science and their patients' needs, and he delighted in discussing in detail what he was learning from them in both capacities. Throughout, he thereby reflected his own deepest attachments: to logic, humanism, and the joy of family and friends. He lived to see the "Arab Spring" bring revitalized hope to representative democracy in the Middle East, and here too he believed that the twinned aspects of reason and human rights would be essential to lasting benefits. Benyakhlef embodied the Qur'anic injunction that one should "pursue knowledge even unto China," and in doing so he set the example of a scientist/humanist devoted to the betterment of his country and our world. ✧

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