

Augustin: The Dialect of African and Influences

Zemmouri Khedidja¹

1 Lecturer Class A, University of Badji Mokhtar Annaba, Department of History and Archeology, Specialization in Ancient History (Algeria).

The E-mail Author: khedidja.zemmouri@univ-annaba.dz

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Abstract:

Saint Augustine, one of the most prominent thinkers in the history of Christianity, serves as an important model for understanding the interaction between Latin and African cultures in antiquity. Although Augustine was born in North Africa, some associate him primarily with Latin culture, overlooking the influence of his African environment on his thought. Thus, the importance of this topic lies in reassessing his cultural and religious identity and examining the validity of classifying him solely as a Latin figure, while determining whether he can be considered an outstanding representative of Roman Africa. This question opens the door to exploring Augustine's role in the Church and in Christian thought, thereby enhancing our understanding of African heritage in religious and intellectual history. The methodology of this study is based on critical-analytical methods, analyzing historical and intellectual texts related to Saint Augustine, focusing on comparing the influences of Latin and African cultures in shaping his identity and ideas, with the aim of reconsidering his role and impact on the Church and Christian thought in North Africa.

Keywords:

Introduction:

Many people, when discussing Saint Augustine, perceive him as a Western Latin figure with no connection to Africa other than his birthplace. This view leads many to reject Augustine's African identity, which leads us to question:

To what extent can we judge a person deeply imbued with a culture different from that of his homeland as detached from his roots? How valid are the accusations made against Saint Augustine that he is Latin and cannot in any way be considered African? Can we consider him a distinguished representative of Roman Africa, given that he is one of the most

renowned Church Fathers and made a significant intellectual contribution, to the extent that it is said that no one can study all of his works comprehensively?

1. Birth and Early Life of Saint Augustine

Augustine was born in Tagaste on November 13, 354 CE, to a Christian mother named Monica and a pagan father named Patricius¹, who was lenient towards the Christian faith practiced by his wife. It seems he did not mind that his son learned the teachings and beliefs of Christianity from a young age.

Augustine enjoyed familial support that allowed him to pursue education from an early age², especially from his father, who made every effort to provide Augustine with the best upbringing. In contrast, his mother placed great importance on the religious and moral aspects of his upbringing, as it was her dream to see her son become a devout Christian.

At the age of six, Augustine, like his peers, entered school in his hometown of Tagaste³, where he received his initial lessons in writing, reading, and arithmetic. Around 365 CE⁴, he moved to Madaura⁵ to continue his education. After completing his studies there, he returned to Tagaste⁶ around 369 CE to spend a year with his family due to his father's inability to cover the costs of his education and the high expenses of travel. By 370 CE, he managed to reach Carthage to pursue higher studies⁷, where his skills began to shine compared to his peers. This led him to open a school for rhetoric, with the help and funding of a wealthy citizen from Tagaste named Romanianus⁸, who covered all his educational expenses after the death of his father in 371 CE⁹. He stated, "... I overcame my desires and rejoiced in studying rhetoric and selling this art..."¹⁰ However, the lack of discipline among students in Carthage prompted Augustine to consider traveling to Rome, hoping for a better living situation, a higher status, and more disciplined students¹¹.

In 383 A.D., Augustine arrived in Rome, but he did not stay long, for in 384 A.D.¹² he moved to Milan to take up the position of professor of rhetoric¹³. This stay would witness

¹- Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Father John Helo, 5th edition, Dar Damascus, 1996, Syria, p. 1.

²- Possidius, *Life of Saint Augustine*, Chapter I, translated by Herbert Theberath Weiskotten.

Download link: [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/possidius_life_of_augustine_02_text.htm#C1]

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³- Amand Biéchy, *Saint Augustine of Africa in the 5th Century*, 1st edition, Barbou Fereres Publisher, 1867, p. 56.

⁴- Brown (Peter), *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵- Mador: Mador was established in the 3rd century B.C. to become, in the time of Masinissa, one of the most important centers for guarding the southern borders on the fringes of Gaetulia. After the Roman conquest and during the Flavian family period, it was chosen as a site for settling a group of veteran Roman soldiers, tasked with monitoring the movements of the Musulamii tribe. This area merged with its settlements into the African social milieu and produced Apuleius, who was educated in a comprehensive Latin and Greek culture fully aligned with Roman civilization, despite his pride and appreciation for his Numidian and Gaetulian heritage. See: Al-Mahjoubi Ammar, *Apuleius*, 1st edition, House of Wisdom, Tunisia, 1998, p. 8.

⁶- Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 31.

⁷- Brown (Peter), *La vie de Saint-Augustin*, translated by Jeanne Marou, Éditions du Seuil, France, 2001, p. 16

⁸- Amand Biéchy, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁹- Brown (Peter), *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁰- Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 58

¹¹- Same source, p. 87.

¹²- Same source, p. 86

¹³- Same source, p. 91.

profound changes in Augustine's life, especially his encounter with Saint Ambrose, who would completely change Augustine's perspective on Christianity¹⁴ and lead him to abandon the various sects and heresies that had previously attracted him, such as Manichaeism, to which he had remained loyal for nine years, and Neoplatonism.

Unbeknownst to him, Ambrose was able to correct Augustine's misconceptions about the Scriptures¹⁵, providing explanations and interpretations that Augustine had previously struggled to understand due to his lack of knowledge of Greek. This eventually led Augustine to embrace Christianity and receive baptism from Bishop Ambrose in 387 AD¹⁶. After Augustine returned to his hometown, he was appointed as the bishop of the Church of Hippo, a position he held for 38 years. During this time, he dedicated all his efforts to serving the Church and Christianity, with his primary goal being the salvation of the Christian people. Once focused on fame and high office, he renounced his elevated position and devoted everything he had to addressing the problems of human existence. Nevertheless, he did not neglect intellectual production; this period was rich and fruitful, marked by his theological and philosophical writings that left a significant impact on the Catholic Church and laid the foundation for theological organization in the Middle Ages.

2. The African Roots of Saint Augustine

The first aspect to consider in order to clarify the ambiguity surrounding this issue is Augustine's origin: was he of Numidian or Italian descent, given that Numidia had seen an influx of Italians in the past? According to Serge Lancel, the latter hypothesis is unlikely and difficult to confirm.

The situation is quite different when we discuss Augustine's maternal lineage. We can touch upon and affirm his African identity and Numidian descent through his mother's name, "Monica," which is derived from the name of a Numidian goddess, "Muna."¹⁷ This suggests that Augustine was of African descent, at least on his mother's side.

Augustine was raised in an African environment. Language is usually the first thing a person learns from his environment, and Augustine is no exception. Although he was born into a community that spoke Punic - a language introduced by the Phoenicians six or seven centuries earlier that persisted until Augustine's time - he learned Latin because it was the language of the environment in which he was raised. According to his work *Confessions*, he mentions that he learned Latin easily from an early age because it was the language of his family and caregivers, and it was also the official language in schools.

Despite Augustine's limited knowledge of Punic, he used God's Word in his sermons in three languages: Latin, Greek, and Punic¹⁸. This trilingual use invites reflection, as Lancel suggests that it represents a form of equality between the Punic language and the two

¹⁴- Bertrand De Margerie, *Introduction to the History of Exegesis III Saint Augustine*, Edition CERF, Paris, 1983, p. 21.

¹⁵- Augustine, *Confessions*, p.

¹⁶- Alan Fitzgerald, *Augustine Through the Ages*, translated by Hakim Michael and others, vol. 1, 1st edition, House of Wisdom Center, 2010, D.M, p. 76.

¹⁷- Sarge Lancel, *Between Africa and Rome: Augustine and His Path to Universality*, translated by Mohamed Henad, *Proceedings of the Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africanity and Universality*, Publications of the Higher Islamic Council, Algeria, 2003, p. 66.'

¹⁸- Sarge Lancel, *Between Africa and Rome*, op. cit., p. 67.

dominant cultural languages, Latin and Greek. Thus, Augustine did not disregard this local language, nor did he overlook its speakers among the Africans. He made a concerted effort to reach them by incorporating Punic terms into his preaching and teaching¹⁹.

In addition, Augustine made sure that the priests in his dioceses knew the language of their parishes, which was Punic. He could have chosen to ignore this language, seeing it merely as a local dialect, representing only a segment of the population, and not as an official language reflecting Roman authority. On the contrary, Augustine saw the Punic language not only as a necessity imposed by circumstance, but also as a manifestation of cultural diversity within the Roman Empire and an important tool for preserving African identity and consciousness²⁰.

On the other hand, Augustine frequently praised the cultural intellectual output of the Punic language, referring to the works housed in the library of Carthage that were written in Punic. He notably highlighted Apuleius of Madaura, who was of African descent, as an example. Apuleius is recognized as the first to establish the writing of the novel in history, and Augustine acknowledged the greatness and significance of his works. This reflects Augustine's pride in his African heritage and legacy²¹.

Despite Augustine's high level of proficiency in Latin, he mentioned the difficulties he faced during his time in Milan. Although he gained notable rhetorical fame, his accent betrayed him and could not conceal his African origins. Augustine recounts how his African accent in pronouncing Latin made him a subject of observation and criticism, and he was also astonished by the pronunciation he encountered in Milan. He states in this regard: "Even though I was the one who had to learn all those things (i.e., rhetoric) with patience and perseverance, people in Italy mocked me because of the way I pronounced individual words, which was the same thing I criticized them for."²²

Augustine's statement can be compared to that of an Algerian who speaks French or English; no matter how well he speaks the language, the influence of his mother tongue is evident when compared to a native speaker of French or English. This was the case with Saint Augustine, whose accent revealed his African identity. Augustine was indeed African, and while he displayed great skill in Latin, his lack of proficiency in Punic highlighted this distinction. Many saw him as a first-rate Roman, a perspective we can only accept from a cultural standpoint. This cultural achievement may be due to his different living conditions and the cultural environment around him. While the majority of the neighboring population in Tagaste spoke Punic, Augustine's immediate environment-both at home and at school with his friends-was predominantly Latin-speaking²³.

¹⁹- Same source, p. 67.

²⁰- Same source, p. 67.

²¹- Same source, p. 68.

²²- Dorothea Keber, Reflections on the Literary Backgrounds and the Ongoing Debate about Julian's Critiques of Augustine, translated by Mohamed Henad, vol. 1, Proceedings of the Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africanity and Universality, Publications of M.E.A, 2003, p. 94.

The Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africanity and Universality, Publications of M.E.A, 2003, p. 94

²³- The Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africanity and Universality, Publications of M.E.A, 2003, p. 94

Augustine's African identity is further illustrated in one of his letters to a Tagaste grammarian named Maximianus. He expressed concern that, after Augustine's travels to Rome and Milan, he might be influenced by these famous cities, dazzled by their architecture, personalities, and civilization, and forget his simple homeland²⁴. Augustine's response to this concern was clear: "I am an African; I write for Africans, since we both live in Africa"²⁵.

Augustine was unwavering in his response to anyone who dared to mock or belittle Africans. He often spoke with a strong tone, as in his response to another letter from the Madagascan Maximianus, who mocked Punic names. Augustine asserted that an African cannot address fellow Africans in a tone of ridicule, since they are the bearers of a language that has transmitted treasures of knowledge and wisdom²⁶.

Augustine also expressed his pride in his African heritage in direct response to another bishop, the young "Julian Declan," who referred to Augustine as the "African disputant. Augustine replied, "Do not underestimate this Punic who reproaches you; do not think that because you were born in Pouilles (Italy), you have any superiority by birth over these Punic, while you are incapable of surpassing them in intellect"²⁷.

This clearly demonstrates Augustine's refusal to deny or be ashamed of his African origins, especially before a Roman bishop who represented those who claimed civilization and culture.

While Augustine's African origin was an unavoidable reality, his identity as an African was also a matter of choice. At a time when he had attained considerable maturity and wisdom, along with the fame and esteemed status he had long sought - culminating in his appointment as professor of rhetoric in Milan, with the help of Simachus, and his interactions with the most distinguished and influential figures of power - he remained rooted in his African identity. Even after being converted to Christianity by one of the most famous church figures in Rome, Ambrose showed great love and appreciation for Augustine and, as Augustine states in his "Confessions," acted as a nurturing father figure to him.

In the midst of all these events, Augustine chose to return to his hometown, although he did not clarify the reasons for his decision. As Serge Lancel suggests, this return may have been an instinctive choice that did not require elaboration. Augustine himself, in his "Confessions,"²⁸ says on the subject: "We were looking for a place where we could be of greater service to you, so we returned to Africa"²⁹.

Upon Augustine's return to Africa, he assumed the role of priest of the Church of Hippo and later became its bishop, a position he held for 38 years. During this time he spared no effort to help the followers of his expanding church and worked diligently to defend the

²⁴- Rouba Dodaro, Proceedings of the Conference, p. 77.

²⁵- Quoted from François Prevlot et al., Roman Africa 69-439, Editions Philippe Lemarchand and Michel Mirroir, France, 2006, p. 319.

²⁶- Sarge Lansal, Between Africa and Rome, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

²⁷- Quoted from Munir Bouchnaqi, Augustine and Africa Based on Historical Writings and Studies on the Site of Tagaste, translated by Mohamed Henad, vol. 1, in the Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africanity and Universality, Publications of M.E.A, Algeria, 2003, p. 170.

²⁸- Sarge Lansal, Between Africa and Rome, op. cit., p. 69.

²⁹- Sarge Lansal, Between Africa and Rome, op. cit., p. 69.

views of the African Church, aided by his fellow bishops, especially “Bishop Thagaste,” “Alypius”³⁰.

It can be said that Augustine’s African identity was on a par with the Roman culture imposed by his immediate family environment and the broader context of his education. In his “Confessions,” he mentions that he learned Latin through playful interactions with his caregivers and from his teachers³¹.

3- Background of the Augustine-Donatist Conflict

The Augustine-Donatist conflict has often been viewed as a symbol of Augustine’s alienation from his fellow countrymen. This struggle took on political, social, and economic dimensions, reflecting the realities faced by Africans at that time. While this perspective has been widely accepted among both the general public and scholars, it may require cautious consideration if we delve deeper into the specifics of the issue and seek the true causes behind the Augustine-Donatist conflict.

Initially, the idea of ecclesiastical schism arose from purely doctrinal reasons, centering on the sanctity of the Church and its ministers, who were believed to be incapable of committing sin; otherwise, they would be subject to exclusion. This notion was rooted in the case of Caecilianus in 312 AD, who was deemed a traitor for surrendering the sacred texts to Roman authorities during persecution. The Donatist Church rejected the idea of absolving Caecilianus, perpetuating the belief that all subsequent generations within the Catholic Church were the offspring of traitors and apostates. Consequently, for over a century, they refused to engage or associate with their Catholic opponents.

Beyond the schism affecting the Church in Africa, other conflicts emerged between Augustine and the bishops of the Donatist Church, primarily revolving around two ideas. The first was the agreement that the Church was Catholic; however, the sanctity of the Church was a matter of contention. The Donatists believed that the Church and its ministers were sacred and should not commit sins, and that those who did deserved the punishment of exclusion, referring specifically to Caecilianus. In contrast, Augustine argued that all humans are inherently sinful, asserting that the Church’s role should be one of guidance and correction, emphasizing that only God has the authority to punish on the Day of Judgment. From this, we conclude that the conflict between Augustine and the Donatists was not fundamentally ethnic. Augustine did not view the Donatist churchmen as merely Africans, contrary to popular belief. Instead, the basis of the conflict between the two churches was doctrinal. Evidence of this is Augustine’s consistent effort to unite the church under the banner of Catholic unity rather than seeking to eliminate his Donatist opponents entirely. From the moment he arrived at the Church of Hippo, he aimed to reconcile and unify the Church rather than to drive a wedge between its factions.

4- The Social Role of Saint Augustine

A. Defense of the Poor: In the midst of Augustine’s conflict with the Donatists through his rhetorical debates and theological writings, he did not forget his duty to his parishioners in

³⁰- Sarge Lansal, *Between Africa and Rome*, op. cit., p. 69.

³¹- Same source, p. 69.

the region of Numidia, especially the poor. This vast region, which stretched forty kilometers to the south and west, was home to numerous towns and villages populated by people living in misery and poverty³².

Augustine witnessed the daily lives of these people, called “colons” not in the modern sense of the word, but in its original meaning of “peasants. They lived on large estates owned by large landowners who forced them to pay an annual tax to the landowner, either in cash or in kind³³, according to a feudal system. While this arrangement may seem normal, the manipulations of the landowners or their managers significantly worsened the lives of these peasants. They faced an excessive tax burden imposed by the authorities, and instead of bearing these burdens themselves, the large landowners evaded their responsibilities and sought to extract these costs from the pockets of the impoverished peasants³⁴.

In addition, the legislation of the fourth century exacerbated the suffering of the peasants. This legislation mandated the hereditary inheritance of land in order to bind the peasant to his land rather than leave it fallow. However, this law fundamentally undermined the freedom of the peasants and placed them in a perpetual state of dependence on the landowners, who did not hesitate to overburden them with taxes.

Augustine’s awareness of these social issues motivated him to advocate for the rights and dignity of the poor, demonstrating his commitment to social justice and his role as shepherd of his flock.

In this atmosphere filled with the exploitation of the weak by the strong, Augustine endeavored daily, with all his strength, to curb such behaviors. He leveraged his position, which allowed him to form significant relationships with large landholders and high-ranking officials. He seized every opportunity to persuade them to mitigate these injustices. One notable instance is found in Letter 247, which Augustine sent to a man named Romulus, who owned lands in Hippo and had entrusted their management to agents. However, these agents were characterized by their oppression and injustice towards the farmers under their care, forcing them to pay the annual tax twice instead of once. The misappropriated funds benefited these agents unlawfully³⁵.

In response to the farmers’ outcry, Augustine intervened by sending a letter to Romulus, detailing the plight of the farmers and expressing his strong condemnation of such inhumane actions. He stated, “They suffer today, but the unjust rich must fear God’s wrath on the Day of Judgment, where God rewards each according to their deeds.³⁶” He further noted, “This unjust rich man considers his sins trivial, yet if he could overcome his greed, he would water the earth with his tears until he obtains God’s mercy.³⁷”

³²- Claude Lopley, *The Struggle for the Poor: Notes on Saint Augustine's Social Work in the Region of Hippo*, translated by Mohamed Henad, vol. 1, *Proceedings of the First International Symposium on the Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africanity and Universality*, Al-Quds Augustine, Publications of M.E.A, Algeria, 2003, p. 118.

³³- Same source, p. 118.

³⁴- Same source, p. 119.

³⁵- Claude Lopley, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

³⁶- Same source, p. 120.

³⁷- Same source, p. 120.

In another instance, Augustine expressed his deep concern in Letter 251 regarding a group of farmers working on an estate embroiled in a dispute between two parties. He feared that this conflict would adversely affect the farmers and their situation.

Augustine regarded himself as particularly responsible for the poor among his flock. In a letter to a man named Felix, he emphasized that the role of the Church and the bishops is to defend everyone, especially orphans, stating: “Your faith teaches well that the Church and the bishops are obligated to defend all, and especially the orphans.”³⁸

Accordingly, Augustine committed himself to providing aid and charity, utilizing the church's revenues. He created a list of the poor whom the church would support, including widows and orphans, leaving only a minimal amount for the daily needs of the Church of Hippo. He expressed to them: "It is not permitted for us to have anything in the treasury; it is not right for a bishop to hoard gold while turning away the hand of the beggar. Every day, a number of the needy come to us, and we are deeply saddened when we find ourselves unable to give to all those who approach us, as we have no reserves in the treasury."³⁹

Augustine's position as bishop allowed him to form relationships with high-ranking officials, wealthy individuals, and large landowners. He took every opportunity to leverage these connections to urge them to care for their dependents—slaves, freedmen, farmers, and tenants—and to be generous towards them. Augustine likened these wealthy individuals to large trees, such as cedar trees in Lebanon, which provide shelter for many birds. Here, the 'birds' represent the poor and needy who seek sustenance from these trees, just as the poor rely on the rich.

He was consistently concerned about the fate of many freed slaves after their emancipation. Augustine encouraged the wealthy to consider their future before granting freedom to ensure that they would not lead lives of misery. He criticized Saint Melania, a woman with vast estates in Africa, whose religious zeal drove her to donate all her possessions to the church, including a farm near Thagaste. This decision did not please Augustine; rather, he questioned the fate of the farmers and slaves associated with that estate.

Additionally, Augustine opposed the growing wealth of the church, as this prosperity could create animosity with the poor, who might view the church as just another landowner. Furthermore, such wealth could tempt church leaders, distracting them from their pastoral duties, much like the case of Antoninus in Fausala⁴⁰.

³⁸ - <http://www.abbaye-saint-benoit.ch/saints/augustin/lettres/s004/1252.htm>(<http://www.abbaye-saint-benoit.ch/saints/augustin/lettres/s004/1252.htm>)

³⁹- André Mendouz, *The Predecessor of a Genius: Augustine of Hippo*, vol. 2, translated by Mohamed Henad, Proceedings of the First International Symposium on the Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africanity and Universality, Publications of M.E.A, Algeria, 2003, p. 275.

The city of Vossala is located 50 km south of the city of Hippo Regius, where Bishop Antonius was appointed to lead the church, with Augustine's assistance, who saw in him a degree of intelligence and piety, as well as his mastery of the Punic language, which was an important tool for dealing with the congregation that spoke that language. However, this bishop was not trustworthy, engaging in various acts of extortion and fraud, leading to his removal in 422-423 A.D. by a judgment from the episcopal court. This scandal greatly affected Augustine's psyche, as he considered himself responsible for it, believing it tarnished the church's reputation. See: same source, pp. 123-124

⁴⁰- also Chal Monier, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-145.

Augustine's understanding of Africa came to fruition only after his return, beginning with Hippo and its environs. However, the purpose of these visits was not to explore the regions, but to visit the local churches in order to assess the religious and local conditions. He never overlooked the situation of the inhabitants of his diocese and urged his followers to be more generous to their bishop and to contribute financially to the construction of the churches they saw being built. He remarked:

"There may be a church being built or some useful work being done in the House of God. He expects you to be alert to what may be needed and to recognize your obligations to the poor and needy. Do you not see your priest without means? Surely you see the houses of God being built for your prayers-surely it is obvious to you."⁴¹

B. Defense of the Imprisoned and Oppressed

Augustine positioned himself as a lawyer or advocate for prisoners, striving to ensure that imprisonment would not be a source of abuse, injustice, or mistreatment. Despite the one-sided relationship between the church and the authorities during this period, Augustine was adamant about distinguishing between being an instrument of the state in achieving a just and stable society and being a mere tool in the hands of the authorities to serve their interests. He worked diligently to infuse a sense of humanity into the judicial system⁴².

Augustine sharply criticized judges who condemned people without ensuring the truth of their guilt or innocence. He questioned how they could pass judgment without verifying the actual crimes committed. Augustine also condemned the use of torture by judges to extract confessions, which often involved many innocent people in cases that had nothing to do with them. Such torture could lead defendants to confess to crimes they had not committed, simply to escape the agony or to avoid further suffering⁴³.

He emphasized that the psychological torment experienced by these wronged individuals was often worse than the physical torture. They endured unjust suffering for an unproven crime, through no fault of their own other than the judges' inability to uncover the truth⁴⁴. In general, judges resorted to such sentences not because they discovered the true perpetrator, but because they did not know who had committed the offense⁴⁵. Augustine warned that this ignorance could dangerously culminate in the imposition of the death penalty, and he sought to distinguish between the theoretical application of such a punishment and its practical execution.

On another front, Augustine attempted to propose solutions to disputes between the church and individuals over inheritances and to address delays in legal proceedings against debtors. He often succeeded in obtaining extensions of time for repayment, backed by the guarantee of the church.

⁴¹- André Mendouz, Predecessor of a Genius for Algeria: Augustine of Hippo, translated by Mohamed Henad, vol. 2, Proceedings of the First International Symposium on the Algerian Philosopher Saint Augustine: His Africinity and Universality, Publications of M.E.A, Algeria, 2003, p. 275.

⁴²- André Mendouz, A Predecessor of Genius for Algeria, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 274.

⁴³- Augustine, City of God, translated by John Helo, 2nd edition, Dar Al-Mashriq, Lebanon, pp. 122, 123, 124.

⁴⁴- Proceedings of the Conference, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 131.

⁴⁵- Same source, p131

The letters of Augustine document his intervention in numerous legal disputes, as permitted by law. For instance, in Letter 24 to Deivax, Augustine advocated for a group of rural slaves who were to be reclassified as property because their father had been a steward for wealthy landowners. This case was brought before a prominent judge named Ostiucius, who was part of the elder class. Augustine urged the judge to reject such inhumane actions, regardless of the information presented to him, as they severely limited the individuals' freedom, effectively reducing them to slavery. He called for the formulation of all legal arguments necessary to counteract this greed and dismiss the case⁴⁶.

Augustine was a staunch protector of the weak and the poor, even if he could not always assist them directly. In Sermon 302, he spoke about an official or military man who resorted to extortion, leading many victims to lives of misery and bankruptcy, ultimately resulting in one victim's assassination. Augustine's stance was that it was inappropriate to seek personal revenge for this act; rather, the matter should be addressed by the official courts, not by individuals⁴⁷. Consequently, those murderers were considered among the greatest criminals, and Augustine's pleas did not reach the ears of the governor, who was a pagan, regarding their pardon.

Augustine attributed the judgments made by judges, whether intentional or not, not to malicious intent, but to sheer ignorance first and foremost, and to the compelling necessities of a human society that had elevated them to the ranks of judges⁴⁸.

Augustine's charitable work was not limited to his diocese of Hippo, but extended to all the regions he could reach, as he sought to intervene in various disputes. He achieved considerable success, as Martroy points out in a series of articles published between 1908 and 1919, in which he discusses the role Augustine played in influencing the legislation of his time through the issues he addressed. He successfully advocated for the right to political asylum and the rights of suspects during pre-trial detention, asserting that a suspect is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

Despite his efforts, Augustine faced criticism from his congregation regarding his rulings in the cases in which he intervened. He remarked, "I must decide in favor of one party over another, and the judgment is final. If the rich benefit, the poor will claim that the bishop must have received a gift from him. Conversely, if the poor benefit, some will say that he only did so to avoid being accused of being against the poor."⁴⁹

This illustrates the complex dynamics Augustine navigated as he sought to uphold justice and help the vulnerable while managing the perceptions and criticisms of those he served.

Conclusion:

Based on the above, we conclude that Augustine was of African birth and origin, a fact he was not ashamed of, which he openly asserted against his Roman adversaries. However, he was of Latin culture. Regarding his loyalty to Roman authority, it must be accepted with

⁴⁶- Claude Lopley, op. cit., p. 121.

⁴⁷- Same source, p. 122.

⁴⁸- Augustine, City of God, vol. 2, pp. 123, 124.

⁴⁹- Proceedings of the Conference, vol. 2, pp. 276-277.

considerable caution, as Augustine's positions were primarily founded on religious grounds. His reliance on Roman power aimed fundamentally at achieving ecclesiastical unity under the banner of Catholic unity, especially after his attempts to unify the church through theological debates over nearly 29 years had failed.

Thus, his ongoing conflict with the Donatist Church, which could be seen as encapsulating the history of North Africa, remains rooted in religious backgrounds rather than any affiliation with African identity, contrary to what many opinions have suggested.

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