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Colonial Mythologies: Algeria in the French Imagination

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In Carl Brown, *Franco Arabs Encounters*, American University of Beirut, 1996

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Texte intégral

To understand how Algeria appears to the French Imagination, we must call on history, for relationships between the two nations go far back in time. Two relatively stable images of Algeria persisted in France from 1830 to 1962. The first, held by the metropolitan French for whom Algeria was a faraway exotic colony, was nurtured by stories, personal reports, military correspondence and travel, describing either a hostile country, enemy populations, an inhuman climate and geography, or else a quaint Version of indigenous daily life, elements of fantasy, camels, the desert... The second image, forged by French settlers, posited irreducible adversaries, their hostility nurtured by the opposition of Islam to any French presence.

We shall focus on this second image because from it flows the colonial discourse and the rhetoric of colonialism—and their self-fulfilling quality—which the colonial lobby used to pressure Paris on questions of Algerian policy. For internal coherence, colonialist rhetoric had to create a complete mythological system in which France, land of human freedoms and rights, a European and Christian power, had the moral duty to enlighten peoples in decline, populations whose customs and beliefs had enslaved them. The words "civilization" and "mission" recur obsessively in the language of publicists and statesmen throughout the nineteenth Century.

France as colonial power

France's colonial past goes back as far as Richelieu, who first founded a colonial empire, including Acadia, the St. Lawrence estuary, the Antilles and Guyana, as well as the entrepôts along the west coast of Africa. After 1660, Colbert continued Richelieu's work, adding to die territory already annexed in Canada, occupying the Mississippi all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, und opening entrepôts in India.

In France not everyone was convinced of the value of such an empire; many believed that defending and administering such territories cost more than they could earn. Anticolonialist public opinion was already fairly strong before the Revolution of 1789. Some in authority

argued that migration to these new lands tended to depopulate France and weaken her in the face of European rivals. The strength of the anticolonial party is explained at least in part, historians say, by the ties that the French have to their native soil and by their reluctance to travel or migrate to uncivilized and distant lands.

In both 1713 and 1760, economic difficulties led France to surrender important parts of her empire to Britain. By 1814, French overseas possessions had dwindled in essence to Reunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique, part of Guyana, and one entrepôt in Senegal.[\[1\]](#)

After Trafalgar (1805) French leadership recognized that their principal European rival had gained control of the seas as well. On the basis of information that Britain intended to seize Algiers, Charles X decided to conquer the Algerian coasts to avoid France's entrapment by her principal European enemy. The reasons for the French conquest thus must be sought in her rivalry with Britain, ever seeking possessions on which to base political and economic power. By 1830 Britain already had an important empire and her navy was showing the British flag in oceans far from home.

By the beginning of the nineteenth Century, nationalist chauvinism had weakened the anticolonialist party and the idea of reconstituting the colonial empire was welcomed in various political, military, commercial and intellectual circles. Illustrating this change in climate, a week after the Algerian expedition, is the remark in the Paris daily *Le Constitutionnel* (11 July 1830): "The seizure of Algiers begins a new era for world civilization. If we are able to exploit it, part of Africa in a few years will be blessed with a hard-working population, like America, and the Mediterranean will no longer be a mere lake."

The capture of Algiers took place in a European context, one in which France had lost her military power. Algeria would serve to strengthen the feeling of national pride and make up for the loss of Empire. Ejected from North America by Great Britain, absent from Latin America, France was seeking a colonial empire to remake her image and to reaffirm her power in Europe. Describing Algeria in a tourist guide book at the end of the Century, one author wrote: "Losing America, we have regained Africa, to which Algeria is the gateway."

It was thus in the context of rivalry with Britain that the decision was reached to seize Algiers, not as a promising commercial venture but as part of a strategy of rebuilding the political power of France against European adversaries. Contemporary supporters of the move, whether in Parliament or the press, rarely evoked the economic factor. This suggests that the causes of colonization must be sought elsewhere than in economic realities. Obviously the colonies brought wealth to various social groups and minorities abroad and in Europe, and these became powerful pressure groups, defending their interests in public institutions and in the press. Yet even these pressure groups, in their attempt to influence public opinion on national colonial policy, refer only rarely to economic factors. And when they do they limit themselves to pointing out that colonies contribute to the material prosperity of the mother-country by providing raw materials and agricultural products at competitive prices, forgetting to mention that, whatever their price, such products when purchased by mainland consumers are subsidized by the nation and compete unfairly with local production.

When the anticolonialists, reminding national leaders of all this, maintained that colonies cost more than they brought in commercially, colonial proponents advanced new counterarguments: national prestige, France's grandeur, the diffusion of French language,

civilization and ideals. In the Chamber of Deputies, the great liberal Lamartine responded thus to those who doubted the rightness of the total occupation of Algeria:

What? Nations have nothing more to do than add up columns of figures? Have we descended to such a degree of social materialism that arithmetic alone shall preside over the councils of the Chamber and the government and alone determine the resolutions of this noble nation? If gold has its weight, then do not politics, national honor, the disinterested protection of the weak, humanity—do they not also have theirs? Are we then to abandon these waters to their pirates?... (3 May 1834).

This concern for the colonial vocation of France came not only from politicians and publicists of the Right. Leftist figures as well, developing early socialist ideas, echoed these thoughts, calling on the government to make France a beacon among nations in propagating Western civilization by occupying and administering backward countries. Victor Considerant, a politician representative of the Democratic Socialists, wrote in this regard: "As for ourselves, we have long urged France to take up again, with grandeur, its civilizing mission, and we call upon Europe to organize in a fraternal way its work of expansion and civilization in the unlettered and barbarian countries."[\[2\]](#)

The Principal Colonial Myths in Algeria

The colonial discourse was not built solely around economic interests but turned on Symbols mined deep in the imagination and in the general culture of the ordinary citizen of metropolitan France. Concerning Algeria, the colonialist rhetoric forged myths evoking national pride, the glory of belonging to French civilization, the humanism of Western culture, the superiority of Christianity over Islam, etc. Colonialist rhetoric constructed an ethnocentric set of myths claiming that autochthonous populations have no culture, no civilization. Colonization, rather than being the domination of one country by another, was an extension of civilization to regions inhabited by primitive or semi-primitive peoples who ultimately will get great advantages from being colonized. For example, the *Dictionnaire politique* by Garnier Pages describes colonization as "The most praiseworthy form of conquest, the most direct means of propagating civilization."

Three Myths Justifying the Conquest

The first of the founding myths is that which presented the conquest as a response to the Dey's discourteous slapping of the French consul with his fly-whisk. Charles X undertook to cleanse French honor after the Dey refused to proffer official apologies. Historians of colonization note even so that the seizure of Algiers was not unanimously supported by France's political class: to justify the act, a campaign was launched to influence public opinion and demonstrate the necessity for military action. Some historians believe indeed that the seizure was dictated by domestic politics. But even the beginnings of the conquest of Algiers could not stave off the disturbances of July 1830 and the fall of Charles X.



The famous 1827 "fly-whisk incident."

The second justifying myth was France's duty to end the activities of the principal Barbary State whose fleet was despoiling European ships and selling their human cargo in the slave markets of Algiers and Tunis. France thus took upon itself the duty of securing the Mediterranean for all of Europe, and this only a decade after the military defeat of the Empire and the death of Napoleon. It is significant that a French parliamentary figure in the 1980s, himself a former colonial administrator, was still drawing on the rhetoric of 1830 to explain the conquest:

Just before the Revolution of July 1830 drove him from the throne, Charles X launched the Algerian expedition and seized this pirate lair. Manifestly, he lacked the willpower to stay. The essential purpose of the enterprise was to avenge an outrage to France and to end Barbary piracy, securing navigation in the Mediterranean. Charles's successors, Louis-Philippe, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, were led by a chain of circumstances into occupying a land that is not even a country. France conquered Algeria without intending to.^[3]

Colonial rhetoric often gave a third justification for the conquest: the need to liberate the Algerians from Turkish domination. This myth is an aftermath of the Enlightenment and the idea that France has the right and duty to free any people suffering from foreign oppression. But this myth was short-lived, falling victim to the fact that local populations received French troops not as liberators but as hostile forces. The further the French advanced into Algeria, the more the tribes increased their resistance.

The myth of liberation did not endure as part of colonialist rhetoric. Of course it was never intended for indigenous populations, but aimed at metropolitan France, where the Algerians virtually disappear behind generic formulations—they are barbarians, savages, backward peoples, fanatics. The rhetoric was designed for Europeans. For the metropolitan French, the idea was to elicit the political and material support implicit in the idea of extending a civilization; for the colonizers, it was to ease any guilt about expropriating the land they exploited, or about the violence which they either caused or observed.

The Myth of Christianity's Moral Superiority over Islam

The myth of liberation having lost much of its credibility, the colonial discourse fed on the religious imagery inherited from the Crusades. In this vision, Islam was seen as a permanent danger for Christianity and Europe. The image of the Saracen burning harvests, killing men and kidnapping women, was kept alive in order to assert that the conquest of Algeria was a factor in the security of Europe and Christendom, haunted by the Turkish peril. Held at bay in Eastern Europe by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, this peril might well awaken in the south and threaten the western Mediterranean. The occupation of Algeria protected Europe from an Islam perceived as an enemy of reason and humanism. A publicist in 1841 wrote: "The final days of the Islamic movement have come; our century is doubtless destined to watch it leave the shores of Europe, not only of that old Europe which it once invaded and so long threatened, but of that new and greater Europe which has grown up wherever the former Europe has borne the Cross. Attacked from all sides, the Crescent is breaking up and fading away."[\[4\]](#)

The native populations were accused of religious fanaticism, of waging holy war at the call of holy men and marabouts. The colonialist rhetoric denied to the colonized any right to revolt or resist. If the native rebelled, it was because of his fanaticism, his opposition to European humanism and rationality. André Servier, an ideologue at the turn of the Century, saw it this way. "All these revolts have the same roots: some ambitious or neurotic man, out of his own predispositions, fanaticizes other members of his faith and turns them against the infidel., [they are] outbursts of mystic madness, sudden explosions of fanaticism, storms which explode unexpectedly, out of a clear sky, yet which because of their improvised nature do not last."[\[5\]](#)

The colonial discourse, needing to justify repression and violence, devalued the Muslim and the Arab, who was presented as a liar, a thief, as lazy and fatalistic. He respected only force and strength, he feared God only because he saw him as an omnipresent and supernatural power whose role is to punish. Thus, Captain Richard, head of the Arab Bureau in Ténès in the 1850s, asserted: "The Arab professes an exaggerated respect for the power which subjugates him, and as soon as he believes he has been conquered, there is no adulation, no servile bowing and scraping which he fails to lavish on his conqueror."[\[6\]](#)

Finally, the colonialist rhetoric had a religious dimension, despite its apparent secular character. It referred obsessively to a destructive Islam and a civilizing Christianity. The Muslim was a nomad taking no interest in stable goods and real estate; he lived as a predator, he degraded the environment. His nomadic way of life gave him no cause to invest in work, he was the very opposite of the Christian who was sedentarized, a builder of villages centered around the Church. The colon invested in the earth, to which he gave value through his work and his sweat, planting trees, fertilizing and watering dry lands, installing irrigation-systems and so forth. The difference between these two ways of life, in the colonial rhetoric, lay in religion.

The Myth of France's Civilizing Mission

The myth of the *mission civilisatrice* has two sources, religious and lay, extending back to the eighteenth Century. It was the philosophers of the Enlightenment who took a paradox from Montaigne and talked about assimilating the Noble Savage to Western culture. Civilizing "Man in Nature" in faraway and exotic places was a lay Version of the Christian missionary mandate, long practiced by France's Jesuits as an unofficial arm of French diplomacy. "After the second half of the eighteenth Century," Charles-Robert Ageron has observed, "philosophers and philanthropists understood themselves to be taking up the missionary torch of Christian evangelism, carrying it out far better by laicizing it. The idea was to civilize natural man without bringing him to the Christian religion. The civilizing mission—the phrase is borrowed from the language of Enlightenment and remained until our own time that of Freemasonry as well—became the Central theme of colonial France from 1789 forward. The Great Nation had been given the double mandate of education and revolution: its role was to liberate peoples and propagate Enlightenment."[\[7\]](#)

The myth of the French civilizing mission depicted pre-colonial Algeria as a country populated not so much by savages, as the eighteenth Century described them, but by fanatical barbarians. The myth can be fitted into the earlier antireligious views of Voltaire. With no means of communication, without cities, with a deforested landscape, Algeria would suffer at the hands of bellicose tribes obedient only to chiefs whose religiosity would be no different from the bigotry against which Voltaire launched his famous formula "*écrasez l'infâme*."

This negative vision of the Algerian people was deliberately exaggerated so as to stress the need for French assistance to the new colony, now become a new France built by the blood and sweat of its soldier-workers. The Mitidja was literally wrenched out of the swamps, former breeding grounds for malaria and dysentery, and cleared of the thousands of dwarf-palms which overran it. Reclaiming this land, the colonist labored with his rifle slung over his shoulder, ready to fight off Arab bandits who prowled the area or to protect himself from wild animals infesting the region.

In a hostile environment, faced with the animosity of the Arabs, *the colon*, armed only with the spirit of self-sacrifice, his love of the land, and his faith in progress, overcame all obstacles to cultivate, plant, drill weirs, dig Irrigation ditches, lay out roads, and build the houses which, taken together, became villages. The schools and the dispensaries of these many villages brought benefits to the children of those Arabs who renounced nomadism and banditry and who came to learn from the *colon* how to hoe, to plant, to plow, to reap the benefits of the progress to which he could now accede, thanks to the generosity of France.

The French civilizing mission consisted in leading out of their childhood those populations which had only known the life of barbarism. Thanks to France, these people were enabled to discover the virtue of work, to quit nomadic life, to build solid houses and to associate with the colonists, and these were all part of their honestly-earned wages. In a few decades, Algeria became a prosperous country, its ports stacked with agricultural and mineral products destined for European markets, with an important road and rail network, major cities, modern agriculture. Peace reigned over the entire country, and the Muslim populations took advantage of this peace to lift their spiritual and moral sights, to educate their children in the respect for others' property and in the love of hard work. Muslim women, though still attached to their religion, learned enough Hygiene to bestow its benefits on their children, which led of course to an unexpected demographic growth, showing in itself the benefits of colonization for Muslim populations.

The Myth of Ethnic Diversity

The other strong myth present in the colonial discourse is that of the ethnic diversity of the Algerian people. This myth served to show that there was no homogeneous society around which to build a nation and constitute a State.

It is interesting to see how this myth divided up the autochthonous population. Social divisions between urban and rural elements and between sedentarized and nomadic peoples were considered structural ethnic divisions inherited from some distant past. On occasion, ethnic singularity was attributed to dwellers in a city: thus the "Bisknis," those living in Biskra, are distinct from other categories of the population, listed neither as Arabs, Moors or Berbers. Let us examine this colonial classification of the Algerians.

First, there are the Berbers, the first occupants of the country. Resisting the Arab invasion, losing their chiefs, Kusayla and the Kahina, in the struggle, they took refuge in the mountainous areas where they were able to preserve their language and customs. The Muslim invader, in control of the plains, failed to Arabize the mountainous regions occupied by the Kabyles (the Djurdjura) and the Chaouis (the Aures).

Next come the Moors, city-dwellers working either as artisans or tradesmen, the descendants of the Muslims expelled from Spain. Then the kulughlis, the result of intermarriage between Turks and Moors, who live in the cities and are close to the Moors whose lifestyle they share. The Arabs are next, living in tents and organized in tribal units. They are nomads, disinclined to sedentary agricultural activity.

Finally there are two other minorities: the blacks, former slaves brought from central Africa, and the Jews, whose language and way of life are those of the Moors. Other classifications add the Mozabites, sometimes lumped with the sedentary Berbers living in the desert, sometimes with sedentarized Arabs.

Socio-ethnic diversity then is the source of Algeria's permanent instability: Berbers oppose Moors and Arabs, who are themselves divided into tribes in a perpetual state of war. Over time, however, the classification was reduced to the Berber-Arab division, which gave rise to the myth of the Kabyle. In the 1840s two writers already saw the question in these terms: "The Kabyle people, partly Germanic in origin, after having known Christianity, did not completely change under their new religion. They accepted the Qur'an, but they did not embrace it.. In contrast to the universal results of the Islamic faith elsewhere, we discover in the Kabyle an obedience to the sacred law of work, a near-rehabilitation of women, and a number of customs which breathe the spirit of equality, of Christian commiseration..." [8]

The Kabyle myth, whose origins go back well before 1830, was carefully nurtured to show that Algeria was not Arab and that the truly indigenous population, the Kabyles, were only superficially Muslim. Abbe Raynal, in 1826, stressed Kabyle exceptionalism, depicting a sedentarized mountain people, fierce lovers of freedom, Nordic in origin and only superficially Muslim.[9] Having been in contact with Roman civilization, traces of which might be seen in the functioning of their villages, the Kabyles would be predisposed to Western rationality, which would facilitate their assimilation to the French nation and perhaps even their conversion to Christianity.[10] Similarly the colonists, irritated by Napoleon III's policy of preventing them from expropriating the lands of the plains tribes, imagined a

republican and secular Berber nation in response to Napoleon III's dream of an Arab kingdom.

It is true that the Kabyles, living in the mountains and thus owning no great land areas, did little to impede the extension of agricultural colonialism. But this did not stop them from participating in the 1871 revolt led by al-Muqrani, no more than it protected them from becoming the victims of French expropriations. Still the Kabyle myth has been hardy enough to survive Algerian independence—with the rise of political Islam in the 1980s the French media continue to present Kabylia as a democratic bastion of secular thought.

Conclusion

The myths of colonialism indirectly gave rise to a mirror-image mythology, developed by the nationalist movement and, in Algeria, coloring the political ideology of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). In point of fact, the representation of the Algerian in the colonialist rhetoric clearly overstressed the religious factor, to such a point that in the reactive response religion became the principal political identification. The nationalist movement, born as a reaction to colonial rhetoric, thus claimed Islam as its identifying factor and used it as a mobilizing resource.

The Association of Algerian *Ulama* (AUMA), created in 1930 by Shaykh 'Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis, took as its goal the refutation of colonialist discourse regarding Islam and the Arabic language. In carrying out this mandate, the AUMA spelled out an ideology that finally imposed itself on all factions of the Rationalist movement. The National Liberation Front (FLN) itself adopted the national ideology worked out by the *Ulama*, to which it added at the beginning of independence a Marxist economic rhetoric, only to throw it aside a few years later.

The nationalist doctrine, fabricated by the *Ulama* and adopted by the FLN, then set loose an Islamic dynamic in the eighties which follows almost obsessively the very colonialist rhetoric which it aims to refute—and for which Francophone intellectuals are accused of being the spokesmen.

Notes

[1] See Yves Benot, Diderot, *de l'Athéisme à l'Anti-colonialisme* (Paris, 1972); and *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris, 1989).

[2] *La Democratie pacifique*, 2 January 1848.

[3] R. Dronne, *Vie et mort d'un Empire* (Paris, 1988) p. 30.

[4] Louis Veuillot, *Les Français en Algérie* (Paris, 1841).

[5] Cited in P. Lucas and J. C. Vatin, eds., *L'Algérie des Anthropologues* (Paris, 1973) pp. 151-152

[6] *Ibid.*, f. 117

[7] *France coloniale ou parti colonial?* (Paris, 1978) p. 62.

[8] Colonel Dumas and Captain Fabar, as cited in Charles-Robert Ageron, *L'Algérie algérienne de Napoléon III à de Gaulle* (Paris, 1980) p. 38

[9] *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans l'Afrique septentrionale* (Paris, 1826)

[10] In an interview which caused a considerable stir in 1887 (*Le Temps*, 17 March) Monseigneur Lavignerie criticized the colonial authorities for impeding the missionaries in carrying out their work: "If we had not been interfered with," he charged, "Kabylia would now be Christian."