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► To cite this version:

Gildas Bregain. Colonialism and Disability: The Situation of Blind people in Colonised Algeria. *Alter: European Journal of Disability Research / Revue européenne de recherche sur le handicap*, 2016, 10 (2), pp.148-167. 10.1016/j.alter.2016.03.007 . halshs-01695022

HAL Id: halshs-01695022

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01695022>

Submitted on 28 Jan 2018

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Colonialism and Disability: The Situation of Blind people in Colonised Algeria¹

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Our article analyses the mode of assistance to the blind in Algeria from the beginning of the 20th century until the Declaration of Independence of the country (1962). If Muslim blinds face discriminatory practices, all the blind - French citizens and subjects - are victims of unequal treatment because they are not entitled to the social measures granted to the blind in metropolitan France. Nevertheless, during the first decades of the 20th century many actors travel between metropolitan France and the Algerian colony and introduce on the Algerian territory innovating practices developed in France (Braille schools for the blind, eye clinics, promotion of manual work). They thus disrupt traditional practices of assistance to the blind, which are intrinsically related to Islam. Moreover, we want to underline the agency of the blind in the context of colonial Algeria, since blind association leaders take part in the colonial policy making of assistance to the blind. From the 1930's, they start to claim the equality of rights of the blind of Algeria with those of metropolitan France. This research allows to reflect on the construction of the citizenship of the blind in a colonial context.

Key words : colonialism, disability, Algeria, blind, rights, history

Notre article analyse le régime de prise en charge des aveugles en Algérie, du début du XX^e siècle jusqu'à la déclaration d'indépendance du pays (1962). Si les aveugles musulmans sont l'objet de pratiques discriminatoires, tous les aveugles - citoyens et sujets français - sont victimes d'un traitement inégalitaire car ils ne bénéficient pas des mesures de protection sociale accordées aux aveugles de la métropole. Néanmoins, de nombreux acteurs circulent entre la métropole et la colonie algérienne dès les premières décennies du XX^e siècle, et insèrent sur le territoire algérien des pratiques innovantes développées dans la métropole (écoles spécialisées d'enseignement du Braille, dispensaire ophtalmologique, promotion des activités professionnelles manuelles). Ils bouleversent ainsi des pratiques traditionnelles d'assistance aux aveugles, dont certaines sont intrinséquement liées à l'Islam. De plus, nous tenons à souligner la capacité d'action autonome des aveugles dans le contexte de l'Algérie colonisée, puisque les dirigeants associatifs aveugles participent largement à la construction de la politique coloniale d'assistance aux aveugles. Dès les années 1930, des revendications émergent en faveur de l'égalité des droits des aveugles d'Algérie avec ceux de la métropole française. Cette recherche permet de réfléchir à la construction de la citoyenneté des aveugles dans un contexte colonial.

Mots-clés : colonialisme, handicap, Algérie, aveugles, droits, histoire

¹ This present research forms part of post-doctoral research in the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences on assistance policies for the blind in the French Empire (Algeria-Morocco). I would sincerely like to thank Noëlle Roy, archivist of the Valentin Haüy association; Zoubeida Moufî, archivist of the National Institute for Blind Youth; Naïma Mehareb, manager of the department of National Archives in Algiers; as well as Father Henri, in charge of the archives of the Bishop's palace in Algiers and the archivists of the Overseas National Archives and the archives of the Wilaya of Algiers.

For more than a decade, Western sociologists have been interested in the life experience of disabled people in Southern countries and have shown an increasing interest in colonialism and its consequences. Shaun Grech attempts to analyse links between colonialism and disability using existing historical research in Latin America, Africa and Asia. In so doing, he standardizes colonial experiences and draws a uniform picture of the negative consequences of colonisation on disabled people (the role of the Christian mission in disparaging non-Christian beliefs; physical violence and mutilations as instruments of colonial punishment; monetary value attributed to the enslaved body; the role of Western medical professionals in imposing a new way of understanding the disabled body; the role of medical experiments on the body) (Grech, 2015). The author rightly points out that Western historians working on disability overlook the study of the colonial context and that it is absolutely necessary to understand how colonised people understood disability and dealt with disabled people. (Grech, 2015, p. 12).

Studies from first hand sources of information on disabled people during the colonial period are very rare. In his article on the Cyrene mission and the representation of physical disability in colonised Zimbabwe, Patrick Devlieger notes that in the colonial context, assistance to disabled people fit perfectly with the civilising mission put forward by Anglican religious figures. He also points out the importance of the Christian conversion of children assisted by the Anglican mission (Devlieger, 1998, p. 721). In their article on disability in the Belgian Congo, Pieter Verstraete, Evelyne Verhaegen and Marc Depaepe emphasise the mutilations inflicted on workers unable to bring back enough rubber, on the absence of educational policies for disabled people before independence and on the fact that in their speeches, colonists considered all black natives as mentally retarded people (Verstraete, Verhaegen, Depaepe, 2016).

The history of the blind in Africa and the Middle-East remains practically unexplored; only one article focuses on blind people's activism in Kenya (Gebrekidan, 2012), and one chapter of Sara Scalenghe's book is about blindness in the Arab Ottoman Empire (Scalenghe, 2014, p. 52-86).

Our intention here is to offer a more nuanced picture, based on empirical research in several archives, of the care provided to blind people in Algeria during the first half of the 20th century. It is necessary to do this from a colonial perspective, taking into account the multiple exchanges within the empire (actors, materials, ideas) between metropolitan France and Algeria. Algeria occupied a very special place within the French Empire, given that the Algerian territory had been legally integrated into the French territory since the first half of the 19th century. Even though Algeria was divided into three French administrative counties ("département" in French) of Oranie, Algérois, and Constantinois, it was nonetheless a colony with a different legal system from the one in metropolitan France. Moreover, French citizens in metropolitan France and in Algeria were not treated equally, since the latter did not immediately benefit from the achievements of social legislation adopted in metropolitan France (Lekeal, 2014).

The comparison of the colonies with the country that colonised them « raises questions about the specificity of the colonial context while shedding light on the contradictions and ambivalences of policies implemented in the colonising countries » (Singaravélou, 2013, p. 21). This comparison is all the more useful, since laws on assistance to the blind adopted in metropolitan France were not de facto applied in the Algerian colony.

Colonialism is defined as « a political system that encourages the development and use of territories in the interests of the colonising country »². Colonisation is above all a brutal process of expropriation and generalised impoverishment of the indigenous population. A

² « Colonialisme », in *Dictionnaire culturel en langue française*, sous la direction d'Alain Rey, Le Robert, p. 1662.

political, military and legal administration is established aimed at organising the exploitation of this territory. This administration tries to set up institutions inspired by the institutions of the colonising country, while adapting them to local cultural and economic specificities. In Algeria, the legal system differentiated between French citizens and colonial subjects (generally qualified as "natives" or "Muslims"), who had fewer rights because they were deprived of their citizenship and subject to indigenous law. This difference appeared primarily as the « practical consequence of the existence of legal systems peculiar to colonies » (Saada, 2003, p. 18). Therefore, French citizens living in Algeria, a demographic minority, dominated the political, economic and social spheres (Thénault, 2014, p. 165). The colonial subject remained « a French subject who was not a citizen » (Saada, 2003, p. 17). We should be careful, however, in considering the two groups (French citizens and subjects) as completely divided, since there was considerable heterogeneity within each group, frequent interactions between the two, and possibilities for some individuals to cross the boundary from one group to the other (Surun, 2012, p. 23). Moreover, there were many descendents of Spanish and Italian emigrants in Algeria, the majority of whom were French citizens. For convenience, we will use the term "French people living in Algeria" or "Algerian Europeans" in this article to describe French people of European origin, non-Muslims, living in Algeria (including Jews, who obtained French citizenship as a result of the Crémieux decree no. 136 in 1870) and the term "Algerian Muslims" to describe Muslim colonial subjects. Moreover, in May 1946, the Lamine Guèye law abolished the difference between subjects and citizens. From then on, Algerian Muslims were considered as citizens with full rights.

The major drawback of existing work on disability and colonialism is that it portrays disabled people as marginalised and passive, as potential beneficiaries of assistance policies created during the colonial period, but never as actors of these policies. Yet, minority studies have clearly demonstrated that in any colonial situation, subordinate populations always have

scope for autonomous political action (*agency*) and can therefore think and act differently from what is expected of them by colonial authorities and local elites (Merle, 2004, p. 141). It is thus important to study political action developed by the blind in Algeria, who had fewer rights than blind citizens in metropolitan France. The citizenship of these blind people needs to be examined because it was not dependent solely on their status and on decisions of the State. Indeed, it was the construction of multiple actors (the State, institutions, citizens and non-citizens), and had multiple forms (Neveu, 2005, p. 168). Therefore, it is also necessary to examine the claims and disputes related to citizenship, as well as all forms of social participation aimed at achieving more egalitarian social relationships.

Finally, we should not limit ourselves to writing the history of French institutions and of Muslim actors who are « acculturated in the context of French (Western) values³ » (Djerbal, 2014, p. 219). The historian should reconstruct as much as possible the way indigenous actors thought and acted, as well as the multiple ways they resisted. Moreover, it is necessary to go beyond the idea of a dichotomy between “French” and “traditional” ways by taking into account the new community and collective forms that appeared during the colonial period, which « were anything but the survival of tradition » (Djerbal, 2014, p. 228).

Our period of study stretches from the beginning of the 20th century, at a time when assistance policies to the blind in metropolitan France started to have an influence on policies of colonised Algeria, up until the Declaration of Independence of Algeria (1962). To carry out this study, we have used a large corpus of documents, including French colonial archives (Aix, Algiers), archives of the Valentin Haüy association, of the National Institute for Blind Youth in Paris and the colonial press. Nevertheless, these sources do not allow us to give a

³ The notion of “French (Western) values” deserves to be nuanced, because there are diverse assistance schemes in metropolitan France, which are partially interrelated to those developed abroad (especially in European countries and North America as far as blindness is concerned) and which change over time. Even though these “French” methods are heterogeneous, they share common elements (Braille teaching, manual trade education, etc.) and are different from assistance schemes that exist in Algeria and are strongly influenced by the Muslim religion.

complete picture of the situation of blind foreigners living in Algeria who chose not to apply for French citizenship.

1. The disruption of traditional practices of assistance to the blind (Beginning of the 20th century-1946).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Dr Edmond Bruch, honorary director of the Medical School of Algiers, coordinated an investigation on blindness in Algeria. It identified 9889 blind persons in the territory, the vast majority of whom (9308) were indigenous people, with 581 Europeans and an overrepresentation of men (83%)⁴. This doctor considered that the percentage of blind people was three times higher in Algeria than in metropolitan France. This situation was due in particular to the high number of eye diseases affecting the population (trachoma, conjunctivitis, etc.). A few decades later, administration and association leaders estimated there were 20,000 blind people in the territory in 1951⁵. The number of people identified as blinded in war was very small at that time (90).

As early as the first decades of the 20th century, many people travelled between metropolitan France and the Algerian colony, and they integrated innovative practices developed in France into the Algerian territory (Braille schools for the blind, eye clinics, promotion of manual trades). They disrupted the usual traditional practices of assistance to the blind, some of which were intrinsically related to Islam.

1. 1. Traditional Practices of Assistance to the Blind.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a variety of traditional perceptions of blindness in North African countries. Blindness was sometimes perceived as a family curse,

⁴ Edmond Bruch, *La Cécité et les aveugles en Algérie. Rapport sur les résultats de l'enquête effectuée par le Dr Edmond Bruch*, Algiers, Imprimerie algérienne, 1908, p. 36.

⁵ National archives, Algiers (DZ/AN), 17E1/1278. Advisory Committee for the Social Protection of Blind People, *Minutes of the meeting*, 27 February, 1951.

affecting a child because his parents had transgressed divine law. Popular beliefs placed the responsibility of the disability on the *djinn*, that is to say, on evil spirits, or on the evil eye (*ayn*). Anthropologists have recorded cases of exorcism, or of Imams who attempt to heal all types of disabilities with incantations of Koranic verses and with amulets, so as to remove the *djinn* from the body of the disabled person (Cheknoune-Amarouche, 2010, p. 267). However, blindness does not necessarily lead to marginal social status in the Muslim community, since many blind people are married and have children⁶.

Other people considered blindness as a state that brought people closer to Allah. Blind Muslims in North Africa did not necessarily consider their blindness as a tragedy. Indeed a blind person in rags in Tamerza said to an Orientalist travelling in Tunisia: « We are closer to Allah »⁷. Blind people could also have high social positions among believers: they could become an imam or marabout, and could be respected and venerated by believers. This was the case for the famous blind marabout Sidi Brahim de Kenatza, who preached both Islam (or Muslim Syncretism) and obedience to the colonial power⁸. This marabout prayed at the war memorial of the dead soldiers of the African army, where many Muslims are recorded. This marabout was an ascetic and considered a saint and wise man by local residents, who attended to his needs (food, drink, clothing).

Families and religious communities traditionally provided economic assistance to the blind. In the community, the *zakât* was a social tax with purifying virtues aimed at supporting the poor and those in need in the community, and blind people benefited from it. In Muslim countries of North Africa, blind people often got resources from a number of *Zaouïa* or *habous* (religious charity foundation). In the same way, blind Jews received the *tzedaka* (alms

⁶ This is the case for Makiouba Yahia, a blind man, married and father of a child of 11 years old, who comes to the Institute for the Working Blind (Institut des aveugles laborieux) in Algiers. « Procès verbal de la séance du 30 septembre 1938 », *Bulletin municipal officiel de la ville d'Alger*, Algiers, 1938, p. 390-391.

⁷ Archives of the Valentin Haüy Association, Paris (AAVH). « L'Orient aveugle », *L'Intransigeant*, Paris, 12 January 1929.

⁸ *L'écho d'Alger : journal républicain du matin*, Algiers, 28 October 1912, n°227.

to the poor), which could be given in different ways (money, loans, job offer, etc.). These forms of assistance inside the community were part of religious solidarity and continued to exist during the colonial period. One of the managers of the Valentin Haüy Association, Miss de Geyer d'Orth, noted in 1938 as she visited Algeria: « blind Jews are well taken care of by their community. We were told in Oran that they must be helped by the members of the community. They receive a share of the tax. We have seen a few close to the Synagogue; they came in groups and were standing one behind the other, one hand on the shoulder of the person before them. They were coming to collect what was owed them »⁹.

In the same way, a number of blind Muslim children traditionally benefited from oral teaching in Koranic schools and mosques. As a result they could then make a living teaching or reciting the Koran during ceremonies, celebrations or important events. As early as in the 12th century, oral teaching to blind students had become a common practice in mosques, especially in the University of the Al Azhâr mosque in Cairo (Weygand, 2009). The young blind Muslim man Mohammed Kazi Tani, born in January 1913 in Tlemcen, attended the Koranic school of the Sidi-Brahim El-Ghrib mosque for four years, where he learned to chant the verses of the Koran under the direction of Cheikh Ben Ali Merabet. He then attended the school of the Sidi Bouabdallah mosque for several years and later studied Muslim law, sciences and grammar in the Zawiya of Ben Yellès under the direction of Si Mohamed El Turki (Kazi Tani, 1950, p. 17-22).

At the beginning of the 20th century, health care for the blind was traditionally provided by doctors, marabouts, exorcists and healers. A number of Muslim believers considered that the marabouts could intercede with Allah for the healing of their sick children or their disabled family members (Cheknoune-Amarouche, 2010, p. 264). From the 1930s, mystical practices developed by marabouts were denounced by Muslim reformists of the

⁹ AAVH, ES DO2 17. Speech given by Mr Adjami, President of the Muslim Committee, Bône, 18 November 1938.

Nahda, because it gave colonisers « a picture of a society that was still unable to assume its full rights » (McDougall, 2014, p. 388). Since we have no available sources, we do not know to what extent this denunciation of the marabouts' practices led people to be less likely to ask for their help to heal blindness. Given the persistence of these beliefs at the start of the 21st century, it is certain that marabouts still enjoy significant credibility even though they fail to heal blindness.

1. 2. The Growth of Special Health and Educational Institutions, Inspired by Institutions in Metropolitan France (1920-1939).

From the beginning of the 20th century, new institutions (hospitals, eye clinics, special schools) inspired by institutional models in metropolitan France were built to assist the blind. These institutions were created and established by actors (doctors, blind people, religious people, association leaders) who travelled between France and the Algerian colony. Even though these actors developed numerous institutional projects, only a few of them came to fruition, due to the limited economic resources available. These institutions were founded by private associations, generally with the support of a number of public administrations (municipalities, General Government in Algiers). Therefore the development of these institutions was somewhat chaotic, even though they were seen to increase in number and in reception capacity over the long term. The first training workshop for the blind was created in 1902 in Algiers and from the 1920s the number of institutions increased and became more stable.

Due to economic reasons, the Government of Algeria preferred to leave the responsibility of the creation and management of the schools for the blind and professional workshops to private associations, as in metropolitan France. Institutions created thanks to private funds could then receive public subsidies and scholarships from public authorities

(Government of Algeria, County Council, municipalities) in order to finance the education of children from poor families¹⁰.

A number of associations for the blind and blind people themselves thus created schools specialised in teaching Braille in Algiers (1920) and Oran (1941). The first boarding school specialised in teaching Braille was founded under the patronage of the Valentin Haüy Association at the beginning of the 1920s in a villa located in El Biar. The blind French man Albert Mahaut came there periodically. Until 1941, the Villa Scala was the only private school providing education to blind children. This school accommodated between 16 and 35 pupils. In 1941 another private school was created in Oran under the direction of the Federation of Blind People in North Africa and had about ten pupils. Association leaders had difficulty convincing parents to let their children go to a boarding school, because mothers did not want to be separated from their children¹¹.

Instead of creating institutions, the authorities preferred to give scholarships to a number of blind children so they could study in private institutions in Algeria or in schools in metropolitan France. Granting scholarships to study in France counterbalanced the lack of school and vocational training available in Algeria (massage, music, piano tuning). From 1902 to 1946, at least 30 young people from Algeria, almost all of whom had French nationality, did part of their training in an institution in metropolitan France (National Institute for Blind Youth in Paris, Institute for Blind Youth of the Charmettes, Massage school of the Valentin Haüy Association in Paris, Gallieni School in Villeurbanne, School for the Blind in Montluçon). As an example, André Balliste studied from the age of 12 in the National Institute for Blind Youth from November 1917 to July 1926. As a baby, he got diphtheria and became blind. He grew up in a modest family of French people living in Algeria and his father

¹⁰ National Archives of French Overseas Territories, Aix-Marseille (ANOM), 1K 493. Letter, Algiers, 16 November 1944, From the County inspector of Public Welfare to the Prefect, Algiers.

¹¹ Federal Union of the Blind in Algeria, *1st congress in Algiers on 8, 9, 10, 11 June 1933, under the high patronage of the Governor General in Algeria*, Algiers, Villeneuve printing house, 1933, p. 19.

was an employee in a hardware store. He learned to read and write in Braille with a blind private tutor, Adolphe Merle, and then the St Martin foundation gave him a scholarship to continue to study at the National Institute for Blind Youth thanks to relations developed by his father during his time in the army and thanks to the support of the Valentin Haüy Association¹². In total, less than 2% of blind children in Algeria received special education in Braille until the 1940s, while the school enrolment rate of children in Algeria was about 10% in 1937.

Several associations opened brush making, basketry and sewing workshops for the vocational training and employment of the blind. In 1926, the municipality of Algiers accepted to finance a vocational training institute called *Institut municipal d'aveugles laborieux* (Institute for the Working Blind), and delegated the management of the institute to the North African Association for the Education of the Blind. The municipality, the Government of Algeria and the County Council generally gave scholarships to blind apprentices of the institute. The Federation of Blind People in Algeria then created brush making workshops in Algiers and Oran (1940), and Ironwork shops in Oran (1941) which respectively employed 25, 16 and 7 workers¹³. In June 1940, the Society for the Blind in Oran celebrated the opening of brush making, basketry, knitting and sewing workshops in Oran, which employed more than thirty workers at the end of the 1940s.

In 1923 colonial authorities discovered trachoma and became alarmed at the size of the problem, when in each county several hundred indigenous conscripts had to be discharged because of trachoma¹⁴. Later, doctors and the authorities put forward multiples reasons for justifying actions to fight trachoma: fear that the disease would affect European conscripts ;

¹² Archives of National Institute for Blind Youth, Paris. Personal file of André Balliste, n°581 (period between 1902-1923). Questionnaire about André Balliste.

¹³ ANOM, 1K 493. Letter, Algiers, 16 November 1944, From the Council Inspector for Public Welfare to the Prefect, Algiers.

¹⁴ DZ/AN, 17E1/1403. Report by Dr Jasseron. Attached to the letter, From head of the 2nd office (Interior), 31 October 1923, to the Director of Native Affairs.

the obligation to maintain an indigenous workforce for agriculture and industry¹⁵; the necessity to « efficiently protect metropolitan France from the development and spread of Algerian trachoma in France » due to the emigration of workers affected by trachoma¹⁶. During the 1920s, only a few eye clinics worked effectively; in Algiers, the North African Association for the Education of the Blind owned a clinic, where one to two ophthalmologists assisted by five missionary sisters of Africa provided free treatment every day to more than fifty poor patients. Nevertheless, it was not until 1934 that the wider government put into place a systematic plan of action to fight against trachoma over the entire territory. This action plan was based on regular visits of schools by specialised doctors, on the organisation of healthcare services in about thirty anti-trachoma departments located in urban centres, and on the training of health assistants (nurses, indigenous auxiliaries, etc.) working under the guidance of a referring ophthalmologist in charge of the sector. The policy led to good results in large urban centres (Algiers, Constantine, Oran) where eye care services in public hospitals worked well, had trained personnel, surgery equipment and adapted treatments. It quickly allowed treating most of the persons affected by trachoma, without coming across serious cases of illness. Although substantial, the number of organized eye care services was largely insufficient to cover the needs, especially as the services established in the outlying cities regularly suffered from a lack of human and material resources. Besides, this policy was a complete failure in areas that were far from urban centres (M'Sila, Bou Saada, Grande Kabylie, Aurès), where trachoma and other eye diseases continued to affect people at the end of the 1940s¹⁷.

¹⁵ DZ/AN, 17E1/1403. Report to the financial delegations, « Trachome », undated (1928?).

¹⁶ DZ/AN, 17E1/1403. Professor Alleyre Chassevant, « Le trachome en Algérie », High Council for Public Hygiene in France, session of 19 December 1927.

¹⁷ DZ/AN, 17E1/2706. Document titled « L'organisation actuelle de la lutte contre le trachome en Algérie », undated (1951?).

During the colonial period in Algeria, no hospital was specifically dedicated to the blind, but many poor blind people were accommodated and shut up in homes for elderly people and the disabled, as in Douéra.

Until the end of the 1940s, because of the very limited involvement of public authorities, the number of institutions founded on the model of French institutions (special schools, professional workshops, eye clinics, hospitals) was still low compared to the needs. Association members, who had set up those institutions, sometimes described them as "modern" since they were based on French knowledge, methods and equipment.

However, a number of actors wondered about the necessity of adapting the model of French institutions to local Algerian realities. One of the French representatives of the Valentin Haüy Association (AVH in French), Miss De Geyer d'Orth, suggested adapting the Braille system to Arabic. She also proposed extending vocational training to jobs adapted to local economic prospects, upon hearing the recommendations of a blind masseur from Casablanca (carpet making, peanut peeling, collecting postage stamps, massages in Moorish baths for Muslims)¹⁸. She considered that « it is better if indigenous blind people can work in their own environment », advising them to learn to do massages to work in Moorish baths or to be musicians for weddings¹⁹.

At the same time, there was noticeable reinforcement of certain community systems of assistance, promoted by the French administration or French citizens who were members of the AVH. Thus, the State gave subsidies to Muslim charity offices, which were organisations created by the French administration to organise assistance to the Muslim population and composed of a majority of Muslims. These offices were responsible for providing direct aid and for managing the running of shelters, workrooms, infirmaries, and efficient stoves. In the

¹⁸ AAVH, ES DO2, 17. 3080. E. De Geyer, *Report on the trip to North Africa from 8 November to 30 December*, 29 March 1939, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

1910s there were 27 charity offices of this type in the Algerian territory (Mirante, 1930, p. 33). These offices gave material support to a number of blind Muslims known to the administration. The Relizane Muslim charity office thus gave support to Mr. Menaouer Miloud, president of the branch office for the blind in Relizane²⁰. However, the association leader Menaouer Miloud denounced the fact that the office did not provide support to all blind Muslims in need, and that the blind lived « in a state of physiological squalor and alarming nakedness » « utterly miserable and poor »²¹.

In Bône, the local committee of the AVH created a Muslim sub-committee in order to organise an assistance policy in their favour. The emissaries of the Association considered this sub-committee as a good solution: « since it is impossible to provide help to indigenous people in the same way and to the same extent as Europeans, a Muslim sub-committee with a special budget seemed a good idea, all the more so as it was the only way to urge rich Muslims to offer their contribution »²². Setting up a different type of assistance for blind Muslims was therefore necessary, given that there was no plan to provide equal assistance to blind "Europeans" and "Muslims" in the future. It allowed maintaining a good relationship between the different faiths, by giving Muslim elites an important role to play and by encouraging them to demonstrate charity and to organise the assistance for their co-religionists.

1. 3. The Legitimisation of New Actors in the Field of Blindness.

Setting up assistance policies for the blind based on French institutional models was accompanied by the legitimisation of new actors in the field of blindness in Algeria. Some of

²⁰ DZ/AN, 17E1/1278. Letter, Algiers, 6 December 1950, From the Secretary General of the Gouvernement of Algeria to the Minister of Home Affairs.

²¹ DZ/AN, 17E1/1278. Letter, Relizane, 1 September 1950, From Menaouer Miloud to the Minister of Health and Population.

²² AAVH, ES DO2, 17. 3080. E. De Geyer, *Report on a trip to North Africa from 8 November to 30 December 1938*, 29 March 1939.

them derived prestige from professional skills (special education teachers, ophthalmologists, Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa) and others from their dedication to a common good (association leaders, Missionary Fathers and Sisters of Charity) or from their generosity (benefactresses). They represented a small number of people and were mainly French people living in Algeria. A number of Muslim medical auxiliaries placed under the supervision of colonisation doctors also helped with eye care treatments (Fredj, 2014, p. 288), but it was not their main activity.

Across Algeria during the 1940s there were no more than 6 teachers specialised in teaching Braille, a number of whom did not have the required diplomas, as well as about twenty ophthalmologists. In Algiers, Lucie Ros, a blind French woman from de Larnay, taught Braille in Villa Scala. In Oran, from 1941, Françoise Sanchez, a blind Spanish Republican exile, gave classes of Braille in a school. The ophthalmologist Dellemonde de la Clergerie ran the eye clinic of the North African Association from 1924 until 1942, where various Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa worked as nurses. There was therefore a tremendous shortage of professionals throughout the territory.

The Missionary Fathers and Sisters of Charity provided care to the poor and sick in their district and they participated in the evangelisation of these people. The brothers of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society visited the sick in the Mustapha Hospital and the sick living in their area²³. The Sisters of Charity also visited the poor and gave assistance to the sick, mainly in the hospitals in Algiers. In 1955, the Sisters thus paid the rent for a family from Douéra, composed of a blind woman and her disabled daughter²⁴.

The benefactresses played an important role as they ran various associations and collected financial resources. Indeed, these wives of French people living in Algeria,

²³ Archives of the Archbishop's palace, Algiers (AAA), 85. Saint Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Saint Philippe conference from 1 December 1938 to 30 November 1939*, p. 4.

²⁴ AAA, 114. « Assemblée annuelle des Dames de charité », Extract from *La Semaine religieuse d'Alger*, Algiers, undated, (end of Nov?) 1955, p. 470.

belonging to the aristocracy or bourgeoisie and close to colonial authorities, were in charge of organising balls and concerts, the benefits of which were given to associations. Homage was regularly paid to these benefactresses. In Algiers, the Federation of Blind People in Algeria organised a grand ball in the rooms of the Saint George Hotel on 13 April 1935. This grand ball, under the patronage of the wife of the Governor General of Algeria, Mrs. Carde, enabled collecting funds and raising awareness of the Federation among members of the public²⁵.

All these European actors committed to the field of blindness considered that their actions contributed to the French civilising mission in Algeria. They were particularly proud to help blind French people living in Algeria – and to a lesser extent, blind Muslims – benefit from the advances of European civilisation (Braille teaching, eye care, vocational training and manual work programmes adapted to the blind). Access to school and work were thus considered as fundamental dimensions of the French civilising mission in its Empire (Fredj, De Suremain, 2013, p. 263). Education and vocational training allowed a number of blind people to get out of poverty and begging and thus restored their social dignity, that of good and respectable craftsmen or musicians.

Doctors and association leaders introduced a new way of thinking about blindness. Several associations repeated and defended the message disseminated by the AVH, that blindness was the most serious disability of all. In 1921, during a concert in the Opera of Algiers, the Algiers local committee of the AVH spread the idea that « blindness is the saddest thing in the world »²⁶. Other associations argued in favour of a different idea of blindness, considered as a disability that could be overcome through adapted educational and vocational training. The leaders of the Municipal Institute for the Working Blind in Algiers said that blindness was « not a defect despite its difficulties and limitations. Even when blindness is

²⁵ « La typhlophilie nouvelle », *L'Afrique du Nord Illustré*, Algiers, Saturday 13 April 1935.

²⁶ AAVH, ES TP2 17. 2689. "Le festival Valentin Haüy. Pour les aveugles", *L'Afrique du Nord Illustrée*, Algiers, 19 March 1921.

total and definitive, it does not at all affect the physical and intellectual abilities of the person who is stricken(...). In front of their workbench (...), they don't give the impression of being impaired »²⁷.

The actions of these European actors also changed the attributes used by blind people in identifying themselves as blind to local society in order to access a variety of symbolic goods (Cavalheiro, 2012). Indeed, from the 1930s a number of associations with connections in metropolitan France began distributing white canes and black glasses to blind people. Beginning in 1931, the Union of the Blind of the County of Algiers obtained a subsidy of 2000 Francs from the County Council to distribute white canes to blind people²⁸. This distribution of white canes continued and grew to reach the whole Algerian territory in 1947, following the adoption of a new law which authorized the use of white canes. The blind who received them used these new attributes of blindness (white canes, black glasses) to ask for charitable donations in the streets or to obtain other benefits (priority in public transport, etc.). But other blind people quickly gave them up, preferring the large shepherd's crook they normally used²⁹, or the help of a child to guide them.

1. 4. A Service Intended Primarily for Europeans?

The primary objective of medical care and educational services supported by colonial authorities was to help Europeans. It was possible to notice a high number of educational and health institutions for the blind in large cities (Algiers, Oran, Constantine, Bône, Philippeville) where Europeans living in Algeria still represented the majority of the inhabitants during the first decade of the 20th century (Thénault, 2014, p. 179). The residual services offered to "Muslims" represented a "civilising mission" which legitimated the colonial power.

²⁷ AAVH, ESTP8 51. 3003. "Pour nos aveugles", *Dépêche Algérienne*, Algiers, 30 December 1931.

²⁸ ANOM, 81 F 1654. Document « Union des Aveugles du Département d'Alger », 1934, p. 8.

²⁹ AAVH, ES DO2, 17. 3080. E. De Geyer, *Report on the trip to North Africa from 8 November to 30 December 1938*, 29 March 1939.

In line with policies of schooling for sighted children, education was primarily intended for blind European children, due to the opposition of the French in Algeria to extend schooling to Muslim children. Until 1946, nearly all children going to school in the INJA in Paris were French citizens. The vast majority of the children going to school in Villa Scala were Catholics, but the school also received some Jews and Muslims pupils. The number of Muslim pupils increased slightly at the beginning of the 1940s. Out of 34 pupils in the 1941 to 1942 school year, only 7 were referred to as "indigenous", 5 boys and 2 girls³⁰. These Muslim children were strongly encouraged to learn French, respect European customs and convert to Christianity. The very low number of Muslim girls going to school was due to multiple factors such as the absence of a legal obligation to send them to school, the fact that some Muslim parents were reluctant to send their children to a French school and the poverty of some families (Seferdjeli, 2014, p. 362).

Homes for the elderly and disabled, including blind people, primarily accommodated French people living in Algeria. Even at the end of the colonial period (1957), in the home for the elderly and incurable patients in Douéra « there was a majority of Europeans »³¹. The presence of a majority of Algerian French people can be explained by the fact that they were given priority by the hospitalisation funding institution (the County Council of Algiers) and also because blind Muslims of Algeria often refused the offer of colonial authorities to stay in such homes and preferred to stay with their relatives or their community³².

However, as regards eye care and vocational training, the situation was not discriminatory. Thus, Muslims represented more than 85% of patients at the eye clinic run by the North African Association in Algiers. Eye treatments were, with other types of treatments, better accepted by indigenous peoples because they were impressively effective. Moreover,

³⁰ ANOM, 1K 493. Letter, Algiers, 16 November 1944, From the Country Inspector of Public Welfare to the Prefect, Algiers.

³¹ AAA, 114/13. Letter, Douéra, 3 October 1957, From Sr. Guitton to the Secretary General.

³² DZ/AN, 17E1/2372. Letter, Algiers, 13 August 1928, From the Prefect of the County of Algiers to the Governor General of Algiers.

Algerian Muslims largely benefited from vocational training opportunities, because association leaders wanted to help them give up their "humiliating" begging situation. In the Municipal Institute for the Working Blind there were about thirty workers, mainly blind Muslim men. A number of associations apparently developed a non-discriminatory policy. Thus, the Society for the Blind in Oran was proud to announce they welcomed the blind, « regardless of race and religion » – Jews, Christians and Muslims – with equal consideration³³.

The unequal provision of educational services could be explained in part by prejudices held by a number of civil servants in municipalities, county councils and the governorate, some doctors and to a lesser extent a few association leaders, concerning the inadequate professional abilities of blind Muslims. It is difficult to evaluate the extent of these prejudices, since they were rarely mentioned in written sources. They were noticeable in the confidences made by some colonial officials working within councils and the governorate of Algeria to French delegates from AVH (Albert Mahaut and Miss De Geyer Orth) when the latter visited Algeria in 1938. Indeed one civil servant told them « for Europeans, no doubt the work will be useful and possible (...) but you should be very careful with Arabs. Incidentally, you would rapidly be overwhelmed »³⁴. Moreover, when M. Viala, the leader of an association for the blind in Oran, asked the city hall if blind Muslims could benefit from the mandatory assistance scheme, « one of his friends, a civil servant, replied to him: "the day it's created, Arabs would put out the eyes of their relatives in order to have a pension" »³⁵. Mr. Albert Mahaut and Miss Geyer added in their report that Mr Viala « has to admit that it would be so... ». Following their visit to educational institutions for the blind in Algeria, Miss De Geyer d'Orth and Albert Mahaut stated:

³³ AAVH, ES BR1 6. Blind People Society in Oran, *Pour les yeux clos... La société des aveugles d'Oran. Son but... Ses réalisations... Ses projets*, Oran, Imprimeries L. Fouque, undated (1945?), p. 24.

³⁴ AAVH, ES DO2, 17. 3080. E. De Geyer, *Report on the trip to North Africa from 8 November to 30 December 1938*, 29 March 1939.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

« Europeans should be helped first and as much as possible a number of natives who have the requisite qualifications to make the most of this re-education. A number of Kabyle people are skillful, intelligent, some Moroccans or others would be capable of receiving instruction. But we should be cautious, especially when we need to mix them with Europeans and take them out of their living environment. (...) Only a small elite could benefit from instruction in our schools »³⁶.

This explicitly describes the mechanisms of educational policy pursued by associations for the blind in Algeria, and which generally conformed to the desires of colonial authorities. We note that during the colonial period, some blind Muslims commonly begged and this reinforced the perception of blind Muslims as incompetent persons. However, the Algerian indigenous code forbade the disabled, under penalty of a breach of regulations, to beg outside the douar (village), unless it was authorised (LeCour Grandmaison, 2010).

1. 5. The Cautious Development of the Rights of Blind People in Algeria in a Repressive Colonial Context (1920-1946).

In Algeria, the war blind were given a disability pension equal to the pension of the war blind in metropolitan France (art. 73 of the law of 31 March 1919). In contrast, all blind civilians in Algeria were subject to unequal treatment, because French social legislation on assistance to the blind was not applied in the Algerian territory. On 14 July 1905 *a law on the mandatory assistance of elderly people, the disabled and incurable people with no resources* was passed and granted them the right to a monthly benefit allowance or to a place in a home for people without resources or in a specialised institution. This law did not apply to blind foreign people living on French territory unless a bilateral agreement was reached, however

³⁶ *Ibid.*

blind French subjects living in metropolitan France could apparently benefit from it. As early as 1907, the Ministry of Home Affairs planned to enforce this law in the Algerian territory but it was then cancelled by the Senate in 1911, because of the financial consequences it would engender. Nevertheless, assistance measures to elderly people and poor disabled people were put in place in the Algerian territory from the first decade of the 20th century by means of home assistance of a very small amount or hospitalisation in a home for people without resources. This aid was left to the generosity of the municipalities and they generally decided to limit the number of beneficiaries of this assistance for economic reasons. Therefore, there was no “right” to benefit from it, including for French citizens, but it was given to many people. In 1911, 3167 Europeans were given home assistance and 980 were placed in homes for people without resources³⁷.

In April 1930, article 173 of the Finance law [called Lambert law] added an article (20bis) to the law of 1905 that introduced a major increase in the allowance of people who needed constant help from a third party because of their disability³⁸.

Following the example of social law in general, legislation on assistance to blind people was only applicable de facto in metropolitan France. For this reason, blind French citizens found themselves in a similar situation to blind colonial subjects: they were not "entitled" to public welfare and consequently could not benefit from the allowance increase mentioned in the Lambert Law. The similarity of their condition and destiny led them to overcome segregation in the French community and to develop relationships of solidarity with blind Muslims within a number of associations, in order to fight together for their rights and for the development of social policies. Many associations of blind people therefore united blind Europeans living in Algeria and blind Algerian Muslims members, a situation seen by

³⁷ DZ/AN, IBA/ASP-038. Letter, 15 May 1911, the Department of Internal Affairs, Report to the Governor General.

³⁸ *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 17 April 1930, p. 4231.

colonial authorities as a threat to the social order since it tended to erase the distinction between citizens and colonial subjects. Associations were nevertheless generally dominated by French people living in Algeria. Until 1946, the Federation of Blind People in Algeria was run by 9 council members, all of whom were French people living in Algeria. These association leaders had often spent time in France or had studied there in a school for a period of time, and when they came back to Algiers they promoted blind people's rights, a topic which had been largely discussed in France after the First World War. André Balliste was one of them. He had been trained at the INJA in Paris, had worked as a switchboard operator for the road authorities in Algiers and had several times held the positions of director of the Union of the Blind of the county of Algiers between 1933 and 1937, and of president of the Federation of Blind People in Algeria between 1934 and 1946.

Associations had differing opinions regarding the strategies that needed to be adopted in order to make and develop policies of assistance to the blind in the Algerian territory. In a repressive colonial context, these association had variable relationships with the colonial State, which Algerian nationalists (Algerian People's Party- Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties, Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto, and the Algerian Communist Party) saw as a hostile State and even increasingly as a foreign State (Gallissot, 1999). It is consequently useful to look at the different types of « protests in a coercive context », at self-censorship related to protests (Siméant, 2013) and at the alliance strategies implemented to promote their claims.

Colonial authorities expected the associations to thank them for their support and generosity even though the amount of the subsidy they gave was small. Some associations showed much respect for public authorities and did not criticise their lack of action on the subject. One of them was the North-African Association for the Education of the Blind, a charity organisation connected to the AVH network. The members of the administrative board

of the North-African Association were nearly all sighted French people living in Algeria. The association was presided over by Rodolphe Rey (1927-1943), President of the Bar, famous lawyer, member of the Council of the Government of Algeria, and, from 1943 to 1948, by Eugène Leclerc, Paymaster, and an Algiers city councillor. Since many members of this association were military representatives and representatives of the colonial State, the association had considerable support from public institutions, from which they received numerous large subsidies during the 1920s and 1930s. The president noted that there were thousands of blind children, that the association had insufficient resources and considered that it survived only « thanks to the constant and benevolent support of the Governor General and senior administrators »³⁹. He complained especially about the fact that « people are not yet accustomed to give generous amounts of money to the underprivileged ».

Only a few associations showed more concern about the rights of the blind, such as the Federal and Interprofessional Union of the Blind in Algeria (Union Fédérale des Aveugles Interprofessionnels de l'Algérie), a branch of the National Federation of Civilian Blind People (FNAC in French) created in Algiers in November 1930 by blind French people living in Algeria, Joseph Cerdan and Noel Dubois. In its statutes, the Federal Union stated that its aim was to « to defend the interests of blind people in Algeria, to ask for the implementation of laws concerning assistance currently in force in metropolitan France (sic) »⁴⁰. The Lambert law had just been passed, making the unequal treatment between the blind in metropolitan France and those in Algeria all the more glaring. During the second congress of blind people in Algeria organised in Oran in 1934, the Federal Union became the Federation of Blind People in Algeria (FAA in French). The association brought together more than 600 activists and continued campaigning for better treatment of all the blind in Algeria through legislative

³⁹ AAVH, BP 3, Fonds michel robin. « A la villa Scala. L'arbre de Noël des enfants aveugles », *Dépêche Algérienne*, Algiers, 27 December 1929.

⁴⁰ Archives of the wilaya of Algiers, Algiers (AWA). 1Z114/1688. Union fédérale des aveugles interprofessionnels de l'Algérie, « Statuts », Algiers, 28 November 1930.

action, without distinction between Europeans living in Algeria and Algerian Muslims. This political struggle thus transcended colonial divisions. Unlike the North-African Association, the Federal and Interprofessional Union of the Blind of Algeria (then FAA) was run only by blind people and its action aimed at freeing blind people from the supervision of sighted people. There was therefore an open conflict with the North-African Association⁴¹.

Once the Federal and Interprofessional Union of the Blind of Algeria was created, it developed a number of initiatives for the recognition of blind people's rights in Algeria. The leaders of the Union initially used their connections with Algerian doctors, parliamentary representatives of the three Algerian counties in the National Assembly and a number of County councillors. They also requested the support of the FNAC leaders, who had for a number of years undertaken actions so that blind people in several counties (Oran, Constantine, Algiers, Alsace, Lorraine) would be treated equally with other blind people in metropolitan France, « through assimilation »⁴².

In November 1930, following an appeal from blind Algerian people, Jean Morinaud, a radical MP from Constantine and deputy secretary of State in charge of physical education within the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, informed the president of the Council of Ministers « of the desire of blind Algerian people to know under what conditions the law of 14 July 1905 regarding an increase in the amount of assistance to the blind could be extended to the colony »⁴³. Two years later during their session of 21 April 1932, the County Council of Oran similarly advocated the implementation of the law in favour of blind people in force in metropolitan France⁴⁴. In 1933, during the first national congress of blind people in Algeria, André Balliste endeavoured to attribute responsibility for blind people's care to the State by

⁴¹ ANOM, 1K 493. Letter, Algiers, 16 November 1944, From the County inspector of Public Welfare to the Prefect, Algiers.

⁴² DZ/AN, 17E1/2370. Letter, 2 August 1930, Paris, From the Federal Secretary of the FNAC to Mr Pouvreau.

⁴³ DZ/AN, 17E1/2370. Draft letter, 24 November 1930, From the General Secretary of the Government to the President of the Council.

⁴⁴ DZ/AN, 17E1/2372. Document entitled « Conseil général, séance du 21 avril 1932 ».

invoking the republican and social tradition of Lamartine and Jean Jaurés⁴⁵. A number of speakers demanded the application of metropolitan France's law of assistance to the blind to Algeria. The participants at the congress recognised that there was positive participation by public institutions in assistance to blind people, « both to blind Algerian natives and to blind French people living in Algeria », but they expressly requested that it manifest itself « with more authority »⁴⁶. They recommended that the General Government of Algeria supervise the development of an assistance project that included schools, workshops, and clinics. Paul Guinot, president of the FNAC and who attended the congress, promised to support the demands of blind people of Algiers⁴⁷. But none of the requests of these different actors during this period succeeded because authorities feared the financial consequences of such decisions. Mr Lasnet, General Government Commissioner, explained that « the implementation of the Lambert Law in Algeria will lead to (...) serious financial consequences because in Algeria the principle of assistance is that there is to be no difference made between Europeans and natives », meaning it would have applied to 15 000 blind people in all⁴⁸. The Federal Union continued its actions after that, but their struggle was covered less and less by the media and gave practically no results until 1946.

Over a forty year period, from the beginning of the 20th century until the 1940s, institutions in charge of assisting the blind, modelled on French institutions, were created and became permanent in the Algerian territory. Even though their actions were very low-keyed, they disrupted traditional practices of aid to the blind, because they represented “modern” practices of assistance. The other element to consider was the very unequal treatment of blind people in Algeria, since assistance policies developed in France were not immediately applied

⁴⁵ Federal Union of the Blind of Algeria, *1st Congress held in Algiers, 8, 9, 10, 11 June 1933, under the high patronage of the Governor General of Algeria*, Algiers, Villeneuve printing house, p. 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁸ General Government of Algeria, *Algerian Financial Delegations. Ordinary session of May-June 1934. Delegation of non-settlers*, Algiers, Victor Heintz old printing house, 1934, p. 433.

there. The associations of blind people which were created during this period cautiously and sporadically promoted the rights of blind people in Algeria.

2. "Ostracised" by the French Republic, Blind People in Algeria Fought for Equal Rights (1946-1958).

On 7 May 1946 the National Constitutional Assembly approved law n°46-940 recognizing all nationals in overseas territories (including Algeria) as French citizens. Muslim people in Algeria therefore became French citizens with full rights. That year, the question of equality of rights became more important with the considerable increase of Algerian representation (30 representatives) and that of other colonies, within the newly formed French National Assembly. Numerous debates on colonial citizenship emerged during the period between 1946 and 1960 (Burbank and Cooper, 2008, p. 528). The extension of social and economic citizenship to all the territories of the Empire raised the question for France of the cost of « an empire of citizens in the era of the Welfare State » (*Ibid.*, p. 526).

On 20 September 1947, the National Assembly adopted law n°47-1853 as the governing law of Algeria, which confirmed the French citizenship of Algerian Muslims. Article 2 stated that « All French nationals of the counties of Algeria, without distinction as to origin, race, language or religion, enjoy the rights ascribed to French citizenship and are subject to the same obligations »⁴⁹. Article 3 stated that Algerian Muslims « living in metropolitan France, enjoy all rights of French citizenship and are subject to the same obligations ».

The new legislation adopted in 1946 and 1947 generated much debate on the equality of rights of all the citizens of the French Union. The discussion and approval of these laws opened new political opportunities that were seized upon by association actors who put

⁴⁹ *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 21 September 1947, p. 9470.

the issue of the equality of rights of blind people in Algeria and France on their agenda. In order to meet their objectives, these association actors changed their strategies according to their experience, their aspirations and their perception (true or false) of the possibilities offered by this new institutional organisation (Cefai, 2007, p. 276). Their aspirations were all the greater because new laws on assistance to the blind had just been adopted in metropolitan France. Indeed, ordinance n°45-1463 of 3 July 1945 on the protection of blind people provided for several measures in favour of the blind, such as the creation of a disability card and regulation pertaining to the use of the white cane. One of the objectives of this ordinance was also to compensate for one of the failings of the legislation of 14 July 1905, which did not apply to the working blind. This ordinance aimed at encouraging the working blind and provided for two essential measures: on the one hand, the placement of blind people in institutions of assistance through work so as to give them vocational training and, on the other hand, an annual allowance replacing the special increase of their allowance mentioned in article 20 bis. The objective of this allowance for blind workers was to « compensate for the burdens and inequality resulting from blindness »⁵⁰. Article 11 stated that « the application of the measures in the present ordinance to Algeria and to territories under the responsibility of the Minister of Colonies will be determined by decree ». Four years later, law n°49-1094 of 2 August 1949 provided for the granting of a relatively high pension (equal to the amount of benefits granted to elderly salaried workers) to a number of categories of blind people and severely disabled civilians (certified 80 % permanent disability). Moreover, « for those who need the constant help of another person », an increase was added in article 20 bis of the law of 14 July 1905, which had been modified. It also obliged all administrative institutions and national companies to contact the central committee for the working blind when they wanted

⁵⁰ Ordinance n°45-1463 of 3 July 1945 on the social protection of blind people.

to buy large articles for brush making (art. 8). And finally, it included right of access to reserved seats in trains, the metropolitan and in public transportation.

Moreover, the new status of blind Muslims led to changes in the way administrative committees of associations were formed, as they progressively opened their doors to blind Muslims. The latter could attain management positions (vice-president, etc.). At the end of the 1940s, blind Muslims were board members of many associations. The president of the County Union of the Blind in Algiers was the Frenchman Jean D'Urso and the two vice-presidents were Abdelkader Ali Nouna (shopkeeper) and Mohamed Bourouba (brushmaker). Even though most of the national relief association leaders were French people living in Algeria, a number of local branches were run by blind Muslims. As an example, at the end of the 1940s, the Association for the Blind in Relizane, a branch of the Union of Blind workers in the County of Oran, was run by Menaouer Miloud, a Muslim.

2. 1. The Actions and Speeches of the Federation of Blind People in Algeria Became More Radical.

In February 1946, the leader of the FAA denounced « the scandalous injustice of the ostracism of blind Algerians in light of French social legislation » to the Minister of Home Affairs André Le Troquer⁵¹. He chose to call out to this political leader in a vindictive way because Algeria was under the authority of the Ministry of Home Affairs and because of the particular sensitivity of this Minister, who was a former member of the French section of the Second International and had a disabled arm from the First World War. In the name of the « spirit of justice and social security », André Balliste requested equal treatment with regards to the rights of the blind in metropolitan France and in Algeria. He therefore requested the immediate application of all laws concerning assistance to the blind in Algeria. A few months

⁵¹ DZ/AN, 17E1/1598. Letter, Algiers, 10 February 1946, From André Balliste to the Minister of Home Affairs.

later in 1946, the Federation of Blind People in Algeria decided to change its name to the Federation of Blind People in North-Africa (FAAN in French), since they extended their actions to Tunisia and Morocco.

Over the next decade, some community representatives continued to invoke membership in France – and sometimes French citizenship – to demand the implementation of metropolitan social legislation in Algeria. Thus, the president of the blind in Relizane asked the Minister of Public Health to intervene on behalf of blind Muslims, as « we blind people are all children of France »⁵². André Balliste as president of the FAAN sometimes mentioned French citizenship (to legitimate the implementation of the law in Algeria) and at other times colonial citizenship (of the French Union) when it came to the implementation of social laws in all the territories of North-Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia). In a 1947 document, the president of the FAAN thus denounced « the scandalous injustice of the unequal treatment of the different categories of citizens of the French Union »⁵³. In a telegram, he also called upon the Minister of Home Affairs to take action to adopt a law, saying that it was the only way « blind Algerian people could finally be certain of being considered as French citizens »⁵⁴.

The president of the FAA also used administrative harassment. He regularly sent letters to all the political leaders (Minister of Home Affairs, President of the Council of Ministers, Director in charge of Health and Family Issues, General Director in charge of Finance, Governor General of Algeria, Prefect of the County of Algiers, Secretary General of the Government, Minister of Public Health) and he obtained meetings with them to take the cause of the equality of rights further. In his letters, he always asked for explanations and clarification so as to understand why the transposition of the laws of assistance to the blind

⁵² DZ/AN, 17E1/1278. Letter, Relizane, 22 August 1950, From Menaouer Miloud to the Minister of Public Health.

⁵³ DZ/AN, 17E1/1598. Note, Algiers, undated (March 1947?), From André Balliste to the Minister of Home Affairs.

⁵⁴ ANOM, FR 81F1654. Telegram, Algiers, 12 March 1952, From André Balliste to the Minister of Home Affairs.

was so delayed and why some elements were dropped. He wanted to know among other things, who was responsible, that is whether the draft legislation « has been postponed by the administration in metropolitan France or if the Algerian administration renounced it »⁵⁵. This oral and epistolary harassment worked because from 1946 the Algerian administration put the subject on its agenda and accelerated its processing on several occasions.

During their fight for equality of rights with blind metropolitan French people, André Balliste and other blind association leaders obtained the support of the communist MPs of Algeria (Ghalemallah Laribi, Pierre Fayet) and of a number of councillors of the French Union (Jean Lapart, Jean Scelles), who questioned public authorities in France on the subject, as well as of some members of the Algerian Assembly created in 1948 (Hadj Tabani). André Balliste was close to the communist network in Algeria, which probably helped obtain the support of the MPs of this party. During a public meeting in 1951, the communist MP Pierre Fayet thus recalled the injustice suffered by blind people in Algeria and introduced an amendment so that the ordinance of 3 July 1945 was fully applied to blind people in Algeria and their rights finally recognised⁵⁶.

From 1946, the Algerian administration envisaged drafting a social law in favour of blind people but continually postponed approval of economic measures in their favour. Therefore, in 1951 the president André Balliste angrily and openly criticized the colonial administration. During a meeting between civil servants and association leaders organised on 20 January, he pointed out the unwillingness of the administration to adopt a law on the rights of blind people and « strongly denounced the inertia of senior managers », which deeply annoyed the colonial civil servants and senior administrators⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ DZ/AN, 17E1/1598. Copy of a letter, Algiers, 7 April 1948, From André Balliste to the Governor General of Algeria.

⁵⁶ *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 5 December 1951, p. 8782.

⁵⁷ DZ/AN, 17E1/1278. Advisory committee for the social protection of blind people, *Minutes of the meeting*, 27 February 1951.

Therefore the strategy for action of the Federal Union of Blind People in Algeria (then the FAA, and the FAAN) changed considerably during the colonial period. It started with a cautious formulation of a claim for equality of rights at the beginning of the 1930s, then continued with epistolary harassment and sharp criticism of administrative inertia and denunciation of unequal treatment, from the end of the 1940s. In 1955, the leader André Balliste even played on colonial authorities' fears of the extension of the war of independence begun by the National Liberation Front on 1 November 1954 (Stora, 2004), by using the vocabulary of rebellion. He pointed out to the president of the Council of Ministers that « [his] silence on such a vital subject for them is generally understood by blind Algerian people as a pessimistic and even an unfavourable sign (...). Already so deeply and so justifiably revolted by the huge existing gap between the assistance they ought to receive (which they do not yet get) and the assistance provided to blind metropolitan French people, most of them believe that the absence of a response from the head of this government shows a lack of interest by the French Government in their cause (...) »⁵⁸.

2. 2. Arguments in Favour of and Against Equality of Rights.

The FAAN and a number of communist MPs put forward arguments such as justice and equality of rights on French territories. Until the end of the 1950s, André Balliste denounced the unequal treatment of blind people in Algeria and invoked the holding of French citizenship and the notion of social justice as arguments in favour of equality of rights, despite the rise of nationalism in Algeria and the defence of Algerian citizenship that went with it. Humanitarian arguments were also frequently put forward, as well as the risk faced by

⁵⁸ ANOM, 91/1K 493. Letter, Algiers, 23 November 1955, From André Balliste to Edgar Faure.

the French administration of being obliged to cover greater expenses since blind people could come to France and receive much higher disability pensions⁵⁹.

On multiple occasions, colonial civil servants were challenged by MPs and political leaders supporting the cause of blind people in Algeria and had to provide convoluted arguments to justify the inequality of French social policy. The first reason mentioned in administrative documents was the absence of financial resources to face such an expense, given the high number of blind people in need of support. Among an estimated 20 000 blind persons living in the territory in 1950, almost all of them were likely to qualify for a basic pension, but only some of them (whose numbers were a subject of intense debate) could benefit from the assistance of a third party, and more than a thousand blind workers were likely to receive an additional allowance allocated to the working blind. In total, the administration estimated that the annual expenditure related to the implementation of the laws (article 20 bis of the amended law of 1905, 1945 ordinance, law of 2 August 1949) would be between 500 million and 1 billion Francs.

Taking into account the financial consequences of this law, the administration therefore noted that the implementation of the provisions of the law of 2 August 1949 should be done « in stages in order to match assistance expenses to resources »⁶⁰. This way, it would follow the general guidelines relating to metropolitan France's social laws as applied to the Algerian territory, that is to say, laws should not be fully and immediately implemented in the Algerian territory but on the contrary this transposition should be done in stages (Lekeal, 2014, p. 259).

The financial consequences of the legislative provisions relating to blind people were such that until 1952, the colonial administration had to reject the draft decrees calling for the

⁵⁹ ANOM, 81 F/1654. Letter, Paris, 17 June 1959, From Pierre Laffont to the Prime Minister.

⁶⁰ ANOM, 81 F/1654. Letter, Algiers, 6 December 1950, From the Governor General of Algeria to the Minister of Home Affairs.

implementation of the laws of 1945 and 1949. However, if metropolitan France accepted to financially compensate for this policy, the Algerian colonial administration was ready to adopt measures that were similar to those existing in France⁶¹. While the implementation of the law of 2 August 1949 could have led to legislation in favour of both blind people and seriously disabled persons, the colonial administration quickly chose to limit implementation of the draft law to blind people, in accordance with the wishes of the FAAN and also in order to save money.

In the end, from January 1950, the leader of the FAAN, André Balliste, accepted to scale down his demands and to waive his claim to equality of rights between blind people in Algeria and those in metropolitan France. After several years of confronting the outright refusal of the administration to approve measures that had huge financial consequences, he agreed that the economic possibilities of Algeria were poor and that the amount of aid paid to blind people in Algeria should consequently be lower. Furthermore, the same view was adopted by the Assembly of the French Union in May 1951. Following the proposal of Jean Lapart, councillor, the Assembly invited the Government to table a draft decision before the Algerian Assembly related to the social protection of blind civilians in Algeria. Even though the Assembly of the French Union solemnly affirmed the right of blind Algerians to receive equal treatment with blind people in metropolitan France, it recommended « as a transitional measure » to give a pension to blind people in Algeria equal to 1/6 of the pension given to elderly salaried persons, and an additional allowance to blind people in need of the constant help of a third party equal to half of the pension given to elderly salaried persons⁶². The aid provided to blind people in Algeria would therefore be 3 to 6 times lower than the aid

⁶¹ ANOM, 91/1K493. Letter, Algiers, 5 June 1947, From the Governor General of Algeria to the Minister of Home Affairs.

⁶² *Journal Officiel de la République Française. Débats de l'Assemblée de l'Union française*, 11 May 1951, p. 524-530.

provided to blind people in France and would then correspond to the financial circumstances of Algeria.

After 1952 additional reasons were mentioned to give considerably lower pensions to blind people compared to pensions in metropolitan France, such as the fact that the pensions given were above the average salary of rural populations of North Africa, that the gap between the pensions of blind people and the pensions of the physically disabled was too wide, and that it was consequently better to increase the disability pensions of the latter⁶³. Equal treatment for all categories of disability (blind people, the physically disabled, deaf people, etc.) was therefore put forward to counter the principle of equal treatment between blind people in metropolitan France and in Algeria.

2. 3. The Belated Acquisition of New Economic and Professional Rights.

Thanks to an intense mobilisation, the FAAN managed to obtain a partial transposition of legislative provisions granted to blind people in metropolitan France. The president of the Council of Ministers issued a decree on 8 September 1947 on the social protection of blind people in Algeria, in order to adapt the ordinance of 3 July 1945 to the situation of the Algerian counties⁶⁴. The scope of this decree was much more limited than that of the circular of July 1945; it related solely to the issue of a disability and blindness card (articles 1 and 2), the regulation of the use of white canes (article 3) and the creation of an advisory committee in the General Government on questions related to the protection of blind people and the prevention of blindness.

Blind association leaders in general, and André Balliste in particular, were very unhappy with the limited extent of the decree of 8 September. For several years they

⁶³ ANOM, 81 F/1654. Telegram, Algiers 20 mai 1959, From the General Directorate for Social Action to the Secretary General of Algerian Affairs, Paris.

⁶⁴ Decree n°47-1751 of 8 September 1947 on the social projection of blind people in Algeria.

demanding the adoption of broader social legislation from the Algerian administration and other political leaders, including measures supporting the work of the blind and the payment of a pension. From 1948 on, associations managed to participate in the process of developing legislative provisions that affected them, a process that already involved a large number of actors in metropolitan France and in Algeria, including the Algerian Assembly, the Assembly of the French Union, the Minister of Home Affairs, the Secretariat in charge of the Budget, the French Parliamentary Assembly and the Prefects. Political pressure from the FAAN and from the MPs of the French Union helped to overcome resistance by the colonial administration and legitimize, once and for all, the payment of a pension to blind people.

On 2 July 1952, after numerous negotiations, the Algerian Assembly finally adopted decision n°52-038 on the social protection of blind people, later enforced by the order of 26 August 1952 and by the decree of 22 August 1953. Decision n°52-038 made legal the payment of a pension to blind people who did not work and the payment of a compensatory allowance to blind workers. This measure regulated the employment of blind people by defining the responsibilities in the organisation of the work of blind people and by securing markets for their craft and industrial output. Thanks to this decision, blind civilians with a disability and blindness card could receive a pension « the amount of which is equal to 1/6 of the allowance given to elderly salaried persons from the non-agricultural sector in Algeria »⁶⁵. This pension was substantially increased (150%) « when the disabled person needed the constant help of a third party ». The Governor General was in charge of the certification of the institutions and associations dealing with the organisation of blind people's work, while public services in charge of the general organisation of the work force were encouraged to organise the work of blind people. Blind working people received a compensatory monthly allowance equal to the amount of the allocation paid to elderly salaried persons from the non-agricultural

⁶⁵ Decision n°52-038 enforced by order of 26 August 1952, aimed at complementing the decree n°47-1750 of 8 September 1947 on the social protection of blind people in Algeria.

sector. Article 8 stated that all public services and administrations should give priority to associations and institutions for the blind when obtaining their supplies. Finally, article 9 repealed the provisions of the decree of 1 July 1942 that forbade blind people to hold teaching positions in public educational institutions. Disability and blindness card holders were also entitled to the same reserved seats in the train and in public transportation as the war-disabled. Algeria covered 60% of expenses, counties had to finance 30% and municipalities paid the remaining 10%. In the implementing decree, in view of limiting expenses, the General Government reduced the number of beneficiaries of this measure by giving allowances only to blind French civilians aged over 12 with low incomes and excluding blind people who already received a pension (war-disabled or work-disabled).

The conditions and time scales for the issuance of disability and blindness cards and the payment of pensions differed from one county to another. The county of Algiers was slow to process applications for disability and blindness cards, unlike the other two counties. In total, between 1950 and 1957 more than 9 000 disability and blindness cards were distributed in the three counties. This had an impact on the identification of blind people who were henceforth required to use these documents (and therefore this identification) to obtain pensions on a regular basis as well as other benefits (white canes, pensions, reserved seats in public transport). From the end of 1955, several thousand blind people regularly received pensions, with an effect retroactive to 1953.

CONCLUSION :

At the beginning of the 20th century, the colonisation of the Algerian territory went hand in hand with changes in methods of assistance to the blind and in the attributes defining blindness. Actors travelled between metropolitan France and the Algerian colony and set up special schools, vocational training workshops and eye clinics, but the development of such

institutions remained limited due to minimal investments. Blind French people living in Algeria were given priority for educational services, but this was not the case for eye clinics which primarily treated Muslims. Whereas the introduction of European practices gradually disrupted traditional modes of assistance to the blind (marabouts, oral teaching in Koranic schools, etc.), a majority of people kept using them throughout the colonial period. Furthermore, French involvement often came up against hostile or indifferent attitudes of Muslims who wished to preserve their own customs.

While blind Muslims faced racial prejudice from a number of doctors and civil servants, all the blind, that is to say blind French people living in Algeria and Algerian Muslims, were victims of unequal treatment because they didn't benefit from the social protection granted to blind people in metropolitan France. From the 1930s, a number of blind people invoked the fact they belonged to the "French homeland" and their French citizenship in order to demand that blind people in Algeria should have equal rights with blind people in France. Despite their full-fledged French citizenship, blind French people living in Algeria were often excluded from a number of social benefits because they resided in one of the Algerian counties. Many of them subjectively considered themselves as second-class French citizens, abandoned by the French powers. Blind Algerian Muslims became French citizens only in 1946. And it was only in 1952 that recognition of the economic and social rights of all the blind in Algeria became effective, after several years of intense struggle by the Federation of blind people in North Africa. The objective of this legislation was to partly satisfy the claims of the associations and therefore reduce social protests in a context of rising Algerian nationalism. Nevertheless, compared to France, this very unequal legislation stirred up the anger of association leaders, who demanded an increase of their pensions to meet the standards of pensions granted in metropolitan France.

Within the French Empire, the social achievements obtained by blind people in Algeria appeared to be exceptional and ahead of their time. Later, blind association leaders in Tunisia used these achievements, with the help of the head of the FAAN, to claim the implementation of similar measures in their country⁶⁶. Even though the exchanges (Braille material, information on rights, students, etc.) taking place between metropolitan France and the Algerian colony played an important role in the development of assistance policies to the blind, we should not underestimate the role of other exchanges within the Empire (with Tunisia and Morocco), with other Empires (particularly with Egypt) and on the international level (in connection with actions by NGOs such as the American Foundation for Overseas Blind, the Universal Association of Blind Esperantists). These exchanges were barely noticeable in our sources.

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⁶⁶ AWA, 1Z53/2190. Union des Aveugles de Tunisie, *Assemblée statutaire de 1955* (undated).

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