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Mapping Theories of Liberation: Anticolonial, Postcolonial, Decolonial

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Abstract

To begin this inquiry, I would like to propose a brief and schematic mapping of the debates within which we wish to situate ourselves in an attempt to reframe their terms. From this perspective, we must distinguish at least three currents of thought that constitute distinct stages of a trajectory through which the Third Worlds- what is today called the "Global South"-have created, if not a movement of thought, then at least a radical reorientation of knowledge which remains open-ended. While its forms are manifold, the primary goal of these movements is both to dismantle the Eurocentrism of dominant knowledge in the social sciences and philosophy and to rethink history from non-European sites, primarily in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Americas. This mapping is not intended to be static, much less exhaustive or definitive. Rather, it is a kind of methodological mapping that will then allow us to show how the theoretical contribution of Algeria and the Maghreb to these debates may lead to a disruption of the chronological order implied by this sequencing. I thus propose a new concept, imperiality, as a contribution to the critical thought of our time.

Keywords: Liberation - Anti-colonialism - Post-colonialism - Decolonialism - Maghreb

ملخص

في هذا البحث، أقترح رسم خريطة موجزة وتخطيطية للنقاشات التي نرغب في معالجتها، وذلك في محاولة لإعادة صياغة مصطلحاتها. من هذا المنظور، يجب أن نميز بين ثلاثة تيارات فكرية على الأقل تشكل مراحل متميزة لمسار قامت من خلاله بلدان "العالم الثالث" ما يُسمى اليوم بـ«الجنوب الكبير» - بخلق، إن لم يكن حركة فكرية، فعلى الأقل إعادة توجيه جذرية

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للمعرفة لا تزال مفتوحة. ورغم تنوع أشكالها، فإن الهدف الأساسي لهذه الحركات هو تفكيك المركزية الأوروبية للمعرفة السائدة في العلوم الاجتماعية والفلسفة، وإعادة التفكير في التاريخ من منظور غير أوروبي، لا سيما في أفريقيا وآسيا ومنطقة البحر الكاريبي والأمريكتين. ولا يُقصد بهذا التخطيط أن يكون ثابتًا، ناهيك عن أن يكون شاملاً أو نهائيًا. بل هو نوع من التخطيط المنهجي الذي سيسمح لنا بعد ذلك بإظهار كيف أن المساهمة النظرية للجزائر وبلدان المغرب في هذه النقاشات قد تؤدي إلى خرق الترتيب الزمني الذي ينطوي عليه هذا التسلسل. ولذلك أقترح مفهومًا جديدًا، هو "الإمبريالية"، كمساهمة في الفكر النقدي لعصرنا .

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحرير - مناهضة - ما بعد الاستعمار - إزالة الاستعمار - بلدان المغرب.

Résumé

Dans cet essai, je voudrais proposer une brève cartographie – inévitablement schématique – des débats dans lesquels nous souhaitons nous situer, afin de contribuer à redéfinir leurs termes. Trois courants de pensée peuvent être distingués. Ils constituent autant d'étapes distinctes d'un parcours à travers lequel les Tiers-Mondes – ou ce que l'on appelle aujourd'hui le « Sud global » – ont créé, sinon un mouvement de pensée, du moins un acte de réorientation radicale du savoir toujours ouvert. Bien que leurs formes soient multiples, l'objectif premier de ces mouvements est à la fois de démanteler l'eurocentrisme du savoir dominant en sciences sociales et en philosophie, et de repenser l'histoire à partir de sites et d'héritages non-européens, principalement en Afrique, en Asie, dans les Caraïbes et dans les Amériques. Cette cartographie ne se veut pas statique, et encore moins exhaustive ou définitive. Il s'agit plutôt d'une sorte de cartographie méthodologique qui nous permettra ensuite de montrer comment la contribution théorique de l'Algérie et du Maghreb à ces débats peut conduire à une rupture de l'ordre chronologique implicite dans cette séquence. Je propose donc, en conclusion, l'esquisse d'un nouveau concept, celui d'impérialité, comme contribution à la pensée critique de notre temps.

Mots-clés : Libération - Anticolonialisme - Postcolonialisme - Décolonialisme - Maghreb.

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Third Worlds- what is today called the "Global South"-have created, if not a movement of thought, then at least a radical reorientation of knowledge which remains open-ended. While its forms are manifold, the primary goal of these movements is both to dismantle the Eurocentrism of dominant knowledge in the social sciences and philosophy and to rethink history from non-European sites, primarily in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Americas. This mapping is not intended to be static, much less exhaustive or definitive. Rather, it is a kind of methodological mapping that will then allow us to show how the theoretical contribution of Algeria and the Maghreb to these debates may lead to a disruption of the chronological order implied by this sequencing. I thus propose a new concept, imperiality, as a contribution to the critical thought of our time.

Anti-colonialism

A first sequence that can be distinguished is that of anti-colonialism, strongly marked by socialism and Marxism. It includes figures such as Frantz Fanon, Samir Amin, Kwame Nkrumah, and many others. Algeria contributed to this movement primarily through literature, with seminal figures such as Kateb Yacine. These authors are primarily focused on a critique of colonialism as it exists and the structures of neocolonialism as it is implemented. For the most part, they operate within a framework that identifies colonialism and capitalism on one side, and anti-imperialism and socialism on the other. By asserting the need for an anti-capitalist union of the countries of the South against imperialism -this is typically the position of Kwame Nkrumah- (Nkrumah, 1965) they mostly pursue a project of de-Westernizing Marxism and socialism beyond the boundaries of the West. At the heart of this discourse lies the idea that the revolutionary subject is no longer the Western working class but the colonized peoples who, by liberating themselves, would have the mission of liberating all of humanity. This is the move that gives full meaning to the very title of the book, *The Wretched of the Earth*: transferring to the Third World the role assigned by Marx and Engels to the European proletariat in the *Communist Manifesto.* Algeria plays a central role in this tradition, as it serves as a model of liberation, as evidenced by the unparalleled success of Fanon's book, which became a veritable manifesto of "Third Worldism."

The Wretched of the Earth is in truth a collective work, woven from a thousand voices of revolutionaries and *mujahideen* who speak within it without being named. Frantz Fanon thus dominates this sequence.

The "Postcolonial" Moment

The second phase is often referred to as postcolonial. It focuses on the critique of colonial knowledge and emerged during the 1970s. The most influential book is undoubtedly Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978 (Said, 1978). In the United States, the well-known "trinity" includes authors such as Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. But while these authors have become more canonical than others, primarily due to the influence of American universities worldwide, it should be noted that this mode of thought has many precursors. In the British world, figures such as Stuart Hall, a Jamaican author and founder of cultural studies, or Talal Asad, pioneered this kind of discourse. Asad developed a rigorous and groundbreaking critique -though known only to a few specialists- of the colonial aspect of anthropology.

The third phase is known as decolonial theory. Originating in South America, it aims to think from the perspective of the Global South and reconnect with Bandung in opposition to a postcolonialism championed by American universities. Decolonial thought draws its roots from Fanon, liberation theology, and its unique brand of Marxism, as well as from authors such as Levinas. It revolves around a critique of the coloniality of power, a concept coined by Aníbal Quijano that refers to an epistemology and ontology that has survived colonialism. Decolonial thought asserts that modernity and coloniality are reversible and that colonial modernity was born in 1492, with the conquest of the Americas.

This conventional framework most often overlooks the contributions of Maghreb thinkers. In the Francophone world, however, Abdelkebir Khatibi can be considered a precursor of both so-called "postcolonial" thought and decolonial thought. In many respects, Khatibi anticipated, in the wake of the Algerian revolution, most of the major issues within this tradition of thought. It was Khatibi who first raised the issue of the "decolonization of knowledge," as early as 1970, in an article specifically addressing the decolonization of sociology. While remaining faithful to Fanon's anti-colonialism, Khatibi consciously

set out to challenge the Hegelian and Marxist presuppositions of Fanon's discourse. Khatibi has never been rediscovered in France. While he was ignored by postcolonial scholars and Said, he was a fundamental and acknowledged influence on Mignolo, whose "border-thinking" is a direct reference to Khatibi's concept of "intractable difference" and "double critique" (Mignolo, 2000, pp. 65-84). When the decolonial gesture is defined as a rejection of Eurocentrism and "Third World" fundamentalisms, decolonial thinkers are merely taking up what Khatibi called "double critique." The matrix of "postcolonial" and "decolonial" studies is what Khatibi calls "other thought." Following in the footsteps of Fanon's anticolonialism, Khatibi is thus the first of the decolonial and postcolonial thinkers, at least in the Francophone world.

The main criticism leveled at postcolonialists is their epistemic dependence on French philosophy of the second half of 20th century, whose three most frequently cited authors are Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. This critique is likely the most significant contribution of decolonial thought from a theoretical perspective. It calls on intellectuals from the Global South to develop a mode of thought fully liberated from any dependence on theory produced in the Global North, even when that theory is, in fact, a critique of the West, Christianity, or modernity. The question that arises, then, is whether non-Western thought must align itself with the way the West has already critiqued itself, at least since Nietzsche. The problem is that decolonial thought is not exempt from what it criticizes in postcolonial theory. While it is less dependent on French poststructuralism, the decolonial movement is itself dependent on a number of metaphysical gestures and decisions that are European.

Philosophy of Liberation as a Key Moment

Take, for example, Enrique Dussel, whose *The Philosophy of Liberation* is arguably the seminal work of South American decolonial thought. This text is structured around the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers a radical critique of all ontology, which he contrasts with a phenomenology of the face as an experience of the Other. This conception of the Other's face as a break with ontology is the foundation of Dussel's thought, which is as indebted to French anti-Hegelianism as postcolonial theorists are.

Decolonial Scholars take it for granted that "coloniality" can be seen as the beating heart of a now globalized modernity and that the task of decolonization extends beyond the foundation of nation-states and the conquest of political independence. The concept of decoloniality refers to the unfinished but nevertheless necessary task of dismantling the hegemonic powers of European colonial modernity and not only of imperialism. Decoloniality is different from decolonization to the extent that it refers, for decolonial theorists, to the project of epistemic independence. This project stems from Enrique Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation*, initially published in 1977 (Dussel, 1977). It was later elaborated by Scholars based in the United States such as Walter Mignolo, among others. Coloniality, so decolonial thinkers argue, is different from colonialism if only because coloniality survives historical decolonization in the form of what has been described as neo-colonialism. But beyond the idea of a new form of colonialism in which economic and cultural domination is deployed through false political sovereignty, the concept of coloniality refers to the logic and the metaphysics that governs colonialism. As such, it remains irreducible to colonialism. Arguably, the concept corresponds to what Edward Said theorizes as colonial culture even though the idea of a colonial onto-logy does radicalize the notion (Said, 1994). Decolonial theory also asserts the reversibility of modernity and coloniality. It claims to be a critique of Christian, Eurocentric, and patriarchal hegemonies, all seen as defining features of coloniality. Decoloniality therefore refers to the way in which Eurocentric modernity and its universalism must be challenged through what South American decolonial thinkers call the "pluriversal" (Escobar, 2020). It presupposes points of exteriority from which colonial modernity can be engaged critically. As an act of epistemic resistance that challenges the coloniality of knowledge, decoloniality forces us to dismantle the legacies of postmodern thought and French theory in postcolonial theory. The "decolonial turn" aims at dismantling the theoretical dependency of postcolonial theorists on postmodern thought and the Eurocentric trinity of Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida. Hence, Frantz Fanon is described as a towering "non-Western" Caribbean thinker by decolonial theorists and references to his

work play a key role in the making of the so-called "decolonial turn".

Decolonial thinkers criticize the "post" in postmodern and postcolonial to the extent that the suffix itself presupposes a modern temporality of progress. The concept of a decolonial transmodernity, first formulated by Dussel, is therefore used as an alternative to post-modern temporality (2009, p. 499). But decoloniality is also a movement that theorizes and criticizes the coloniality of power, which structures modernity. Decoloniality, some Scholars argues, emerged during the Bandung Conference with the deployment of decolonization on the stage of global geopolitics (Mignolo, 2011). Others propose a different genealogy by tracing the beginning of decoloniality to the Haitian revolution, as the first successful movement against enslavement, racism and dehumanization (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Decoloniality therefore asserts itself as a tradition of thought that stems from a tradition of anti-colonial struggle while refusing its bourgeois comprador and neo-colonial dimensions.

Limits of Postcolonialism

There is little doubt that Anglophone and North American postcolonial theory have often worshipped the unholy trinity of "Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault." But we often forget that this trinity is anti-Hegelian in orientation, for structural reasons. These three figures are more or less indebted to Martin Heidegger, a consciously anti-dialectical philosopher who attempts to formulate an alternative to Hegel by drawing in part on Hegel's rival: Schelling. Schelling is the first anti-Hegelian, and his philosophy of Revelation paves the way for existentialism (Kierkegaard, after all, was among the students attending Schelling's lectures on the *Philosophy of Revelation*, taught in Berlin beginning in 1841). This dependence on Heidegger - and thus on Western anti-Hegelianism - is all the more pronounced in Derrida, since he borrows the very concept of deconstruction from Heidegger himself. Deleuze and Foucault, for their part, lean toward Nietzschean thought, albeit in very different ways. Deleuze devotes a book to Nietzsche, whom he blends with other pre-Hegelian or anti-dialectical thinkers – notably Spinoza, Hume, and Bergson – to construct a philosophy of becoming liberated from Hegelian negativity. By rightly criticizing this dependence on "French Theory", decolonial thought often unwittingly pits one Western philosophical tradition against another: Hegel against Nietzsche, Marx against Heidegger, and vice versa. The centrality of Hegel – and thus of anti-Hegelianism – in contemporary thought has often been underestimated. It is on this that postcolonial and decolonial thinkers still depend, against their will. As for Dussel, he never rejected Marx but, on the contrary, reinterpreted him in a humanist sense, inspired by liberation theology, which already draws on Marx. Quijano conceives of the world-system through Marxist categories of analysis.

Khatibi was fully aware of these webs of systematicity when he wrote that the philosophy of difference was an intra-Western insurrection against the West that was to serve as an instrument for the decolonization of knowledge, like a sort of theoretical war machine. Khatibi criticizes Fanon by diagnosing in him remnants of Hegelianism and Marxism that he identifies as theological formations. Fanon owes much to Hegelian dialectics and to Marx, at least as much as to Freud and Nietzsche. It is possible to see in his dialectics a way of articulating these two traditions – dialectic

and anti-dialectic – together, as Ato Sekyi-Otu points out (Sekyi-Otu, 1997).

Despite the genuine complexity of the discourse, it can easily be argued that English-speaking postcolonial theorists have cited Derrida without citing Khatibi, who has remained overlooked. In doing so, they have perpetuated a Eurocentric exclusion of authors from the margins of the Francophone world and staged a dismissal of "French Theory" that effectively canonizes French thought. It is one thing, like the decolonials, to critique this gesture from the southern part of the *American* continent and its Hispanic and Portuguese-speaking worlds. It is quite another to critique this act of erasure from within Francophone theoretical production itself, by exposing French *philosophical* thought to its theoretical provincialism and its participation in a French- and Euro-centric hegemony where the Maghreb - and more broadly the African continent - are regarded as the margins of theory. Postcolonial studies have not dismantled the Western canon because they have reproduced it. When compared to theorists writing in French but hailing from the African continent and the Caribbean, most major postcolonial authors appear to reproduce exclusions of which they are unaware and fall into the Eurocentric pitfalls they claim to criticize. Thus, theoretical thought emerging from *Middle East Studies* critiques modernity while often remaining thoroughly Foucauldian, and does so without ever citing Francophone Maghreb authors, who are frequently disparaged for having the misfortune of not being sufficiently Arabic-speaking. Postcolonial or decolonial thought often obscures Algeria's central role in the formation of critical concepts-those of Fanon and Sartre, but also, more generally, in the emergence of *French Theory*. French theorists such as Bourdieu and Derrida were themselves shaped by the event of Algeria's decolonization. Until Algeria's status is clarified not only in history but in theory, neither the Fanonian gesture nor the postmodern and postcolonial sequence can be fully grasped and transcended. It is not enough to cite Maghreb predecessors or precursors of "decolonial" thought, however illustrious they may be, to revitalize their theoretical legacy. We must, guided by a keen awareness of the existence of this Maghreb tradition of thought, transform the terms of the debate surrounding decolonization as it exists today.

Movement and Thought

In what follows, I would like to raise questions rather than impose "decolonial" answers that are often merely variations on themes of European critical thought. We must explore the act of decolonization in theory without presupposing a fixed and ossified so-called decolonial framework, which corresponds to the way most scholars tend to think about and practice decoloniality. Decolonization is a movement and a mode of thought. Irreducible to a doctrine or a series of arguments, its strength lies in its systemic unpredictability. This is why we propose prioritizing liberation over decolonization, which remains a negative signifier of opposition to colonialism. "Decolonization" is a movement of liberation. As such, it must remain unstable and unpredictable. Thought proceeds along the lines of a movement. If it transforms into a doctrine or a framework, it always runs the risk of stagnating and being reappropriated by Eurocentric forces. Thus, the current state of decoloniality cannot stabilize into a decolonial orthodoxy without immediately becoming dogmatic and freezing into an ossified mode of thought that would merely reproduce the very mode of colonial thought. There is neither a decolonial turning point nor a decolonial paradigm, only a liberation movement resonating in both practice and theory. A framework that must be simply *applied* to different regions of the world is not "decolonial." We must pluralize the thought of liberation based on the plurality of worlds.

Decolonization is a movement aimed at dismantling the colonial machine. The better we understand the colonial machine, the more effective our strategies for decolonizing knowledge will be. Since the colonial machine is a totalizing system whose ramifications are like tentacles, the thinking that de-imperializes must also be counter-systemic. Dismantling a system requires deploying a strategy that operates at a systematic level, which does not necessarily mean that a system must be constructed. The decolonization of history is a crucial task, just as is the decolonization of anthropology and the humanities as a whole. But this endeavor will never achieve any satisfactory results if it fails to dismantle *the conceptual apparatus* of Western thought, whose matrix lies in modern and contemporary European philosophy, from Descartes to Freud via Hegel and Marx. Most debates between postcolonial and decolonial thinkers stumble on this very

point. Neither anti-colonialism nor postcolonial and decolonial theories have fully freed themselves from the yoke of European philosophy. It is this act of liberation that we must continue. Another starting point, another beginning, must be found.

The concept of Maghreb

The project of "decolonizing knowledge" has been formulated by Maghrebi thinkers before the emergence of either postcolonial or decolonial theory. As early as 1947, Kateb Yacine attempted to "decolonize history," notably by rewriting the history of *amīr* Abdelkader al-Jazaïri (Kateb, 1999, pp. 11-40).[1] Another reference is Mohamed Cherif Sahli who published *Décoloniser l'histoire* in the 1960's, which also contains a reflection on the very status of the archives concerning Abdelkader (Sahli, 1953 ; 1965, p. 25). The question posed by both predates the beginning of the liberation movements in the Maghreb: how can history be rewritten when colonialism appropriated it and even falsified the archives? How else can knowledge, and particularly history, be practiced? These questions are still ours, and remain open, led bare before our eyes.

The adjective "decolonial" is used by Abdelkebir Khatibi, as early as the late 70's, as testified by his book *Maghreb Pluriel* (Khatibi, 1983/2018, chap. 1). Before Khatibi publishes his first book -*Tattooed Memory: Autobiography of a Decolonized*- he formulates the necessity of a "decolonization of sociology" and, more generally, of the humanities, by confronting Ibn Khaldun and Marx in an original and groundbreaking way.[2] From the outset, the question of the unity of the Maghreb constitutes a horizon of decolonial thought for these thinkers. One must never forget that Frantz Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* between Tunis and Algiers, in the Maghreb, and that this book should be read as a collective work. It is a liberation movement written through a diasporic pen, the wandering pen of a *gharib*. Today, groups of

[1] The lecture was delivered on May 24, 1947, at the Salle des Sociétés Savantes in Paris. It was first published in 1948 by the Algerian publishing house En-Nahda, located at 12 rue Pompée in Algiers.

[2] Khatibi Abdelkader was both a literary critic and a sociologist. This offers Khatibi a broad scope of intervention, both in the humanities and the social sciences, as testified by his early publications. His dissertation was published in 1968 under the title: *Le roman maghrébin*, Paris, Maspero, 1968. The same year he also published *Bilan de la sociologie au Maroc* followed by *Études sociologiques sur le Maroc* in 1971.

researchers are forming between the three countries - in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia - to continue this tradition. This essay contributes to this collective effort in its own way. What remains for us to do, I argue, is to reconstruct our heritage and teach it, but also to clarify how this heritage can make us think differently about the world. Thinking differently, creating a new way of thinking - and even a "new civilization" if that is possible - will not happen in a single language, even if that language happens to be that of some of our ancestors. The tradition of thought that Kateb, Sahli and Khatibi inaugurated should be actualized. We should refuse to simply "borrow" from South or North American Scholars but think from the perspective of our theorical and revolutionary legacies.

Towards a Theory of Imperiality

I have argued elsewhere that the birth of capitalism is determined by state violence and thus by the imperial secularization not of Christianity but of Western Roman Christendom (Amer Meziane, 2021/2024). The resulting form of violence is what I call imperiality, from which colonialism and capitalism both emerged. The most important aspect of imperiality as accumulation is not that it explains the distant origins of capital. It is rather that it describes the ways in which political violence is permanently at stake as capitalism unfolds and mutates. I thus propose to rename so-called primitive accumulation as follows: *the initial and ongoing appropriation not only of land but of celestial, terrestrial and subterranean worlds by three institutions, the Church, the modern State and capital.* Imperiality is claimed by each institution without being reducible to one of them.

In *The States of the Earth*, I argue that the imperialization of the Roman Church began during the Crusades and led to conflicts between the Pope and the Holy Empire during the so-called Middle Ages. The *Roman* Church – unlike other Chruches – is involved in a process of imperialization since the Crusades. Secular powers – first monarchies then nation-States – have challenged this ecclesial hegemony only by imperializing their own power against the Church. The phrase "This realm is an Empire" is typical of this logic of imperiality which connects the metropoles and the colonies. These conflicting processes of imperialization fuel modern sovereignty and capitalism within Europe as much

as they dispossess people from their language, cultures, and their forms of knowledge, leading to both genocide and epistemicide outside Europe. Imperiality shapes how the Reconquista and the Conquest of the Americas work hand in hand, connecting the law of the purity of blood waged against Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity with the genocide of indigenous Americans and the transatlantic slave trade. Imperiality sustains modern violence. It enacts a secularization of empire whose most spectacular index is the Napoleonic sentence, uttered during the Expedition to Egypt in 1798: "We are true Muslim". Imperiality thus structures how the French State was built by Napoleon not as a Republic but as an Empire, in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1789. The colonization of Algeria is later organized through the institutions inherited from the Napoleonic Empire (*Premier Empire*) which marginalizes Catholic missionary activities in the country.

The critique of imperiality might allow us to deploy a philosophical history that is independent from Wallerstein's theory of capital. This historical work is necessary if one wants to move beyond the decolonial turn and break its dependency to Western authors, such as Wallerstein and Levinas. This de-linking is a path towards not only a philosophy of liberation but a practice of the social sciences that moves beyond its indebtedness to the Western canon. To enact this work of de-linking (*déliaison*) – a Khatibian notion that decolonial Scholars translated from French and borrowed – one needs to practice theory otherwise, thus reframing the interplay between philosophy and social sciences. The "new human" requires new human *sciences*. We must find something else: *De-imperialize knowledge and practice, dismantle imperiality*. This might be what *amīr* 'Abd al-Qādir was calling for when he compared, during the time of his insurrection against French invasion, the colonization of Algeria with the destruction of al-Andalus.[3]

[3] I refer here to his *Risāla* written in 1843: *Ḥusām al-Dīn li-Qaṭʿ Shubah al-Murtaddīn* (حسام الدين لقطع شبه المرتدين, The Sort of Religion for Cutting of the Apostates).

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