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**Language Situation in Colonial Algeria:
Between the French Educational
Aggressiveness and the Algerian Resistance**

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Abstract:

During the colonial period, the Arabic language, which has constituted one of the cornerstones of the Algerian national identity, was targeted by the French colonial policy of Assimilation. The latter aggressively imposed the French language and attempted to eradicate the use of Arabic to complete its cultural invasion and make the Algerians French citizens. However, Algerian “Ulema” (intellectuals) and nationalists spread awareness among the population through the establishment of private schools, where teaching was in Arabic, and where the first seeds of resistance against the French invasion were planted to flourish later on, ultimately leading to the Liberation Revolution (1954–1962).

Keywords:

Colonial Algeria, Language, Education, French Colonial Policy, Cultural Invasion, Algerian Resistance, Liberation Revolution.

Introduction

French Imperialism in colonial Algeria controlled government, business, educational, and intellectual life for 132 years. It negatively affected the development of this North African Arab Muslim nation, which clung to its national identity despite the aggressiveness of the colonial power. For instance, Algerians fought fiercely, with great suffering, to resist the aggressive French Policy of Assimilation that did not mince any effort to eradicate what could jeopardize French interests and hamper colonial plans, namely the Arabic language and the Islamic religion, which together have constituted the Algerian national identity. Thus, the protection of the national language and the Islamic religion, through which cultural heritage could be preserved, became a preoccupation among other nationalists, the Algerian “Ulema” (intellectuals), and the November 1954 freedom fighters. The latter committed themselves to spreading awareness through the establishment of local private schools and institutions where Algerian children and youth were taught different subjects in Arabic.

The purpose of the present paper is to show how the Algerian population resisted the French colonial aggressive educational policy and struggled to preserve and protect the Arabic language and Islamic cultural heritage, which the colonizers wanted to eradicate to complete their colonization. To what extent was the French colonial aggressive policy efficient in preventing Algerians from teaching in Arabic? What was the November 1954 Revolution Leadership’s attitude?

I– Algerian Educational Situation During the Pre-Colonial Era

From its earlier history, Algeria has been part of the civilization of the Mediterranean countries. It also inherited an Arab culture promoted during the “Golden age of Islamic Civilization”. [1] Thus, the history of education in Algeria

cannot be said to have started with the events of 1880, as has been suggested by many historians, but has its roots in earlier centuries. In other words, Algeria had its own education before the French occupation. For instance, in official French documents, it is stated that the Arab-Islamic education was generally prosperous. It consisted of two levels of secondary and higher education, free of charge, while primary education was with an optional small fee, and in most cases, the fee was paid in kind. Besides, the Algerian state did not provide any assistance to any type of education, so it was a free education. In fact, the schools were often connected to mosques, supervised by religious affairs agents, and funded by charitable endowments. [2] However, since the occupation, the endowment funds became part of the French State's property, and Islamic schools were neglected.

Indeed, this North African country has had a great number of Madrassas (Koranic schools) because at that time, education was identified as a crucial public service. It was a religious education, taught in Arabic, and was in accordance with the religious tenet that dictates the learning from "the cradle to the grave". The madrassas (schools) opened their doors to learners regularly every day from early morning until evening. They were mainly concerned with giving religious instruction. In each mosque, there was a madrassa, and as each village had a mosque, there were schools throughout the country.

Another important type of Koranic school, named "Zawiyas", had the same role as madrassas, with a more advanced level: at the secondary cycle in the rural areas and taught a variety of subjects. French historians noticed, that even before the French occupation, teachers in Algiers (the capital of Algeria) were teaching in some institutions such subjects as jurisprudence, linguistics, theology, geometry, physics and astronomy. Other Algerian cities and regions like, for instance, Tlemcen, Bejaia, Constantine, Djurdjura and M'Zab had similar establishments. [3] In fact, the Algerian "Zawiyas" were strategic centres, from a geographical, cultural

awareness and revolutionist enthusiasm, that fought and resisted the French colonial invasion from its first to its last days in Algeria (1830–1962). [4]

Algerian education at that time aimed at “spreading the Islamic culture... and preparing educated men to run the country’s affairs...” [5] Consequently, it was composed of three levels: primary and elementary, secondary or complementary, and higher education which was not provided in Algeria, but in other Arab countries like Tunisia, and Egypt. The first level was programmed to teach pupils how to memorize the whole Koran (60 chapters), grammar, arithmetic and some elements of theology. In the first year of primary education, the “Taleb” (teacher) had to teach the pupils how to recite the Koran, and also the skills of reading and writing the Arabic language. Besides, the second level was concerned with secondary education and was educated in special schools, particularly in the religious “Zawiyas” belonging to circles of the religious brotherhood. In this type of school, students received a deeper study of Koran and were taught history, mathematics, cosmography, astronomy, geography, Islamic law, philosophy, Koranic commentary and other subjects. [6] As to the third educational level, Higher Education, Algerian students who managed to pursue their university studies had to join Zitouna or Kairouan in Tunisia and Al-Azhar in Cairo. [7]

II– The French Occupation and Algerian Education

No one can deny the important role French missionaries played to pave the way for an efficient French cultural invasion in Algeria. Indeed, they used the school to target a radical change in the Algerian social building, starting from the family, by devoting enormous efforts to form and train an Algerian Christian generation whose individuals deny their Muslim past and Arabic belonging and mix spiritually with the French Christian culture. [8] The French considered Arabic a foreign language in Algeria, just as their French language the official language, that of sovereignty. This was also a clear position on the Islamic religion because Arabic is

the language of the Holy Koran, of civilization in which the heritage of the Islamic state was written. On the other hand, it was also an obvious political position because, during the Ottoman era, Arabic was the administrative, judicial and educational language of the country if we exclude the central apparatus in the capital, Algiers, where both Arabic and Turkish were used, the administration of regions, homelands, groups, schools, and courts was all in the Arabic language. Thus, making the French the official language was a denial of everything else, which meant sovereignty for France and a blow to the Islamic religion, its language and its civilization at its core. [9]

For instance, through the Law of 1883, France brought to Algeria the virtues of the new schooling system, which was adopted in France. Moreover, it forbade the Koranic schools to accept children during class hours. It also imposed French authorization, if these Koranic Schools were to receive children before their school hours. Besides, the teaching of Arabic in French public schools was officially reduced to two hours and a half per week, and in most cases, this was badly organized. [10] In other words, Algeria's own language was taught as a foreign one. In fact, this schooling system was obviously aimed at the complete destruction of the Algerian Identity. The French-imposed education was the main instrument French colonial ideology used to perfect the establishment of French cultural heritage, through the conquest of the minds.

Thus, education has stood as a major channel through which culture could be transmitted and thus, exert its influence. [11] Therefore, providing education for the majority of Algerians became a serious French preoccupation. In this context, Humbaraci stated that "it was only at the time of the First World War that the French began to think of education for the Algerians". [12] Yet, the French school in colonized Algeria aimed to "civilize" instead of favouring social mobility. It was meant to create a situation where French domination could grow and be guaranteed in the long term.

Indeed, after one century of French occupation, the educational policy became essentially urban-focused because it was economically expensive to expand education to country areas and it was particularly judged socially and politically to be dangerous for French interests. For instance, in 1929, the number of Algerian students in French secondary schools was 725, it raised to only 949 in 1932 out of a population that exceeded 4 million at that time. [13]

In fact, this Algerian-French elite, to whom the French education opened the door to modernisation, was subject to “acculturation”, a fact that alienated them from their native culture. They were unable to identify themselves with their environment. In this context, Y. Kateb, in his autobiographical novel: *Le Polygone Etoilé*, stated that his success in mastering the French language took him away from his environment and talks of a “second rupture of the umbilical cord”. [14] When this Algerian writer, who had always fluently used the French language to express himself, became unable to communicate with his family, asked himself: “Have I lost everything at once: my mother and her language, the only inalienable treasures and yet alienated”. [15]

Thus, it is obvious that the French imposed option was to have a good proficiency in French to be allowed to follow secondary and higher education, and then go back to Arabic. In fact, this French-imposed aggressive linguistic and cultural invasion provoked the dynamism of Algerian nationalist groups, with either political or cultural tendencies. These conscious individuals expressed their discontent with the French rule and decided to lead their legitimate struggle to protect the Algerian Arab Muslim cultural identity. For instance, the “Association of the Algerian Muslim Ulema” was one of the prominent nationalist groups that well served this honourable duty before, during, and after the Liberation Revolution.

III- The Algerian Intellectuals' Resistance to French Educational Policy

Algerian national position towards the French colonial education had to play a decisive role in the success or failure of the French educational policy because it was the cornerstone of this policy. In addition to the obstacles that hindered the educational process in Algeria, such as the anti-colonial stance and the hesitant stance of the then Paris Government and the Republicans regarding the type of education that would be appropriate in Algeria, the Algerian national stance had its impact on educational policy. For instance, some influential French politicians like Jules Ferry, Augustin Bordeaux, Alfred Rambo, and others used their power to serve the cultural emancipation of Algerians; they wanted the French school to be the basic school for civilization. [16] However, the Algerian refusal of such plan was national.

Indeed, the Algerians manifested some reservations about sending their children to French schools after it became clear to them that they played a role in destroying their personalities. Their stance towards education intensified as the French intensified their arbitrary measures against the native Arab-Islamic education and the Arabic language. They saw the attempt to educate them as a kind of conspiracy aimed at eradicating their religion, and even some who did not believe in this idea were convinced that their children did not benefit at all from going to French schools that kept distorting their glorious past and history and manifesting the superiority of all that was French. [17]

In fact, the Algerians did not reject the French education as a cultural factor, but rather because it was a political act through which the French authorities aimed in their own way, to transform Algerians into French subjects serving European interests without granting them the right to French citizenship, with all the rights that this word includes, such as the right to vote and others. [18]

This Algerian resistance to the French implementation of schools similar to those existing in France and the restoration of the traditional school in Arabic under the French Army's control as well as the establishment of the so-called Arab-French schools, was further emphasized and embodied in the formation of organized groups who devoted themselves to spread awareness among the native population to protect the Algerian Arab-Muslim national identity. In this context, the Algerian thinker, A. Ben Badis stated that the link that connects Algeria's glorious past, its proud present, and its happy future is the language of religion, nationality, and ethnicity, and the language of ingrained patriotism. [19]

In 1931, Sheikh A. Ben Badis established the "Association of the Algerian Muslim Ulema" to activate in the cultural and religious spheres. [20] They attempted to restore the Islamic community by creating a distinct group of Muslim Algerians and by Arabizing the country, which was threatened by the Francization of the French government. In this respect, one of the "Ulema", Sheikh A. T. El-Madani, published the patriotic history "Kitab El-Djazair" (the book of Algeria) whose cover contained the motto of the "Ulema": "Islam is our religion; Algeria is our homeland; Arabic is our language". Thus, the promotion of the use of the Arabic language became prerequisite to counteract the French tremendous efforts to eradicate the Algerian national identity. Indeed, the efforts of this nationalist association to promote and defend the Arab education were significant and fruitful in the whole country, a fact that threatened the colonial power. [21] Consequently, new laws were enacted to handicap and restrict the "Ulema" 's dynamism. [22]

Indeed, one of the major objectives of the "Ulema" remained the spread of the use of the Arabic language through a continual opening of free schools where elementary and religious teaching was provided. Besides, in the big centres, courses in philosophy, theology, law, literature, and history were taught. In fact, the establishment of private primary and secondary schools helped the teaching of Arabic. For instance, while in 1935, there were 70, which received 70,000 boys

and girls, in 1954, there were 181, of which 58 were madrassas. Among the most famous of these madrassas, one can cite the School of Education in Constantine, the Islamic Youth School in Algiers. To finish their studies, the students had to join one of the famous Arab institutes either Zitouna (it trained 100 Algerian students at the time) or Kairouan (120 students) in Tunisia; or El-Azhar in Egypt (150 students). [23]

This remarkable effort of the “Ulema” provoked the French denial of the Algerian nation, as claimed not to be French. Consequently, in June 1936, Ben Badis published in “El-Chihab” newspaper an article in which he insisted on and emphasized the fact that the Algerian and Muslim nation has constituted itself and exists, and that it has its own history, linguistic unity, culture and tradition. It is not France, cannot be France, and does not want to be France. [24]

This “Ulema” ’s dynamism in the linguistic and cultural field was, in fact, political because it fiercely fought against the French big lie: Algeria was part of France. This manifested nationalist attitude urged the French colonial government to close “Ulema” ’s schools and to arrest many teachers. Thus, it became obvious that a direct action against France was the only solution left to the Algerian nationalists to put an end to this imposed linguistic and cultural invasion. Accordingly, Algerian freedom-fighters started their armed struggle in November 1954, without neglecting the cultural resistance.

IV– The Algerian Revolution Leadership's Cultural Resistance

Once the November 1954 Liberation Revolution started, the French colonial power used this as a pretext to stifle the Arab – Muslim culture and eliminate the Arabic language more than ever before. [25] Under the pretext that the Holy Koran and the Arabic language were a means of revolution against colonialism, the French colonial power closed any known place, mainly schools and mosques, where teaching in Arabic could be provided. Moreover, put teachers and

imams in jail. This, in fact, led to the deterioration of education and the spread of illiteracy among Algerians, a fact that provoked the discontent of every nationalist and the Leadership of the Liberation Revolution, in a more particular way. Indeed, the majority of them studied in Koranic schools, religious lodges, schools of the Association of Muslim Scholars, and other institutions that expressed their rejection of the French aggressive policy. Thus, we witness the interest of the Revolution's Leadership in Islamic education and culture manifested in the November 1st, 1954 statement, which spoke of national identity and France's attempt to make Algeria French despite history, geography, language, religion, and customs. The statement also mentioned the phrase "Our Arab and Muslim Brothers", referring to their Arab and Muslim affiliation. [26]

In addition, the Soummam Congress, organized by the Algerian Freedom Fighters in August 1956, manifested their commitment to defend their national identity and spread awareness among the population. The attendees referred to the colonizers' well-calculated attempt to stifle the national language, spoken by the overwhelming majority of the population, and discussed the fundamental elements of the nation, including history, language, religion, and customs, and insisted on the Algerian people's Arab – Muslim cultural affiliation. [27] Their opinions derived from their educational background, those who studied in the greatest centres of Islamic learning and institutes, starting with the great mosques of Kairouan, the Zitouna and El- Azhar. It is worth noting that the establishment of the Endowments Administration, consisting of a council whose mission was appointing teachers to schools and imams to mosques; preparing curricula and textbooks for different levels; managing schools affairs; assigning to teachers, in addition to teaching the task of registering various administrative documents such as birth and contracts, and resolving different disputes, stemmed from the Soummam Congress. Moreover, the Liberation Revolution's Leadership welcomed the joining of the Algerian intellectuals and students to the Liberation Revolution.

It is worth mentioning that the National Liberation Front's policy led to a large number of students joining the revolution after the general strike of May 1956. This strike gained respect and admiration worldwide, demonstrating the solidarity of the Algerian students with their people and their blessed revolution. Besides the students, the Revolution's Leadership also focused on art and literature, and writers and artists participated in the revolution, each one in his way. Thus, the word became the bullet and the artwork a bomb that exploded to shake the enemies of life. [28]

Conclusion

Despite the French aggressive policy of assimilation that did not mince any effort in an attempt to pull the Algerians from their past and deprive them from the most important components of their national identity, namely their language and religion, the Algerian nationalists succeeded to spread awareness among the Algerians to protect their dignity, history and cultural heritage. Thus, their cultivation of the nationalist feeling and promotion of the use of the Arabic language and Islamic education paved the way for Algerian freedom-fighters to resist with courage the French colonial imperialists and led their country to independence after a bloody war (1954–1962) that paved the way for other oppressed nations to believe that injustice and exploitation could have an end despite the superiority of the enemy. Yet, if Algeria succeeded to obtain its independence from France in 1962, its post-colonial era was full of challenges that required the multiplication of enormous efforts to face the disasters, particularly in the educational field, as the majority of the population was left to ignorance and many other social evils, brought about by the French aggressive colonial policies. Indeed, after several decades of hard work, Algeria succeeded to detach politically and economically from France, but culturally, it is to take a very longer time to dismantle what was built during 132 years of colonialism in general and cultural invasion in particular.

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