

What education for the Algerians in Colonial Algeria ?

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Abstract :

In 1830 the French invaded Algeria and some years later the country became the first French colony in North Africa. The French colonization of Algeria was not merely political domination and economic exploitation only, but more importantly an inclusive annexation which aimed at suppressing the indigenous people's culture and values. To have their goals attained, the French adopted the so - called "assimilation strategy", a policy which intended to incorporate Algeria as an integral part of France. In the process of reinforcing such a colonial policy, the French suppressed Arabic and imposed the French language as a medium of instruction through the establishment of French schools which were to replace the Arabic and Quranic educational institutions and madrassas (schools) already in existence before colonial rule. Eventually, throughout this assimilationist policy, the French aimed at suppressing the Algerians' cultural identity to remold the society along the French lines.

By 1962, almost all the Algerian élites were French speaking. Algeria was, hence, subjected to a series of cultural problems related to its identity. In reaction to the French cultural and linguistic imperialism, the Algerian educated élites of the Algerian War for Independence (1954 - 1962) and post independence leaders committed themselves to retrieving their Arabic and Islamic cultural values in a society whose identity had been denied for over a hundred and thirty years. The challenge was, therefore, to be able to restore and revive the lost national identity and personality of their newly independent state.

In this light, the present paper examines the Algerians' cultural identity and personality during the French colonial rule. It also discusses the challenges that the Algerian educated elites were subjected to during the colonial and post colonial eras in order to retrieve and restore the true lost identity of Algeria.

Keywords : education - identity - Algeria - colonialism.

On 5 July 2012 Algeria celebrated its 50th anniversary from France following 132 years of colonisation and eight years of bloody revolutionary war that resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Algerian martyrs. During the long term occupation of Algeria, the French colonial ideology clearly stipulated that France was on 'a civilising mission'. Indeed, the French claimed that one of their main goals in colonising Algeria was what they referred to as mission civilatrice (civilising mission) that brought enlightenment and development to northern Africa as a whole and Algeria more particularly. It was directed to bringing the natives out of darkness to the lights of the French civilisation and culture. This ideology in fact, was based on the belief of the superiority of the French civilisation and the backwardness of non European cultures and civilisations. Part of the French mission civilatrice and what the latter considered to be a duty, was to civilise what they regarded as being "barbarian" and "savage" each time they were confronted to.

To this end and in its colonies, France established a host of political and administrative institutions in Algeria which had significant effects on how people worked, lived, what they learnt, and the way they interacted with each other. France further adopted a series of policies which were not only designed for economic exploitation and political domination, but further dispossessed the Algerian natives from their own identity and culture for over 132 years opening, hence, the country to European settlers and extracting substantial economic benefits. These policies which were systematically and violently implemented had devastating human, social, and economic consequences.

As part of its civilising mission, the French adopted 'the Assimilation Policy'. The latter was explicitly designed to integrate the natives into the French civilisation and culture. It is worth noting that assimilation valorised French norms and behaviours and undermined non European ways of life. It implied the colonised complete abandonment of their cultures in favour of assimilation to the French model. Indeed, the French have always valued their civilisation, language, and form of government and rejected non Western values and cultures.

The Africans were, in fact, perceived as morally regressive with little or no history. They have been described by Robert Delavignettes, a former colonial administrator, as naive, animal - like, and ignorant, people often struggling against each other; lacking discipline and logical and rational thinking. Undeniably, "the Africans were considered to be people without history" Historian Michael Crowder wrote :

[people] without any civilization worthy of the name, constantly at war with one another and fortunate to have been put in touch with the fruits of French civilization. Thus, French books describe the conquest of Africa as *la paix Française* [French peace] and her early administration as *l'oeuvre civilatrice* [civilizing work]...¹

Thus, for the French government civilizing meant assimilating the Africans in general and the Algerians more particularly to “a greater France through cultural assimilation and administrative centralization”²

The origins of this “assimilation” ideology goes back to the French Revolution of 1789³ and its principles of “equality, fraternity, and freedom”, which should apply to anyone who was French (citizen or subject) regardless of race, ethnicity, colour, or origin.

The combination of these egalitarian ideals together with the opposite colonial idea of the so - called superiority of the French civilization and culture gave birth to the French civilizing mission, historically referred to as *mission civilatrice*. Although this ideology stipulated a kind of equality that the Africans were able to become Frenchmen, it nevertheless, referred to Africa as a whole and Algeria more particularly as *Tabula Rasa*⁴ and that the Africans as a whole were people without history or civilization and had to be created and invented. This attitude was further reinforced through the adoption of *Le Code de L'indigenat* (the native code) in 1881 which deprived the Algerians of their civil and human rights and further dismissed the African identity and culture. For the majority of Africans the realities of the French colonial policy were far from the spirit of French egalitarianism and fraternity.

The French attempt to control Algeria through the assimilation of the Algerians into the French culture was clearly visible in the field of education. Undeniably, colonial education was explicitly designed to “civilize” the natives. It exclusively served to meet the French needs and to perpetuate European cultural patterns and values. The French language was hence, imposed as a medium of instruction through the establishment of French schools that were to replace the old primary Arabic and Quranic based systems of education already in existence before 1830.

It is worth noting that the Algerians knew how to read and write long before the French occupation of Algeria as a Muslim has to know how to read and write the Quran. Indeed, communal lands (*hubus*) were primarily responsible for literacy in Algeria. They funded Quranic education and cared about the maintenance of schools as reading and writing meant to be able to

read the Quran. However, the French conquest of Algeria in 1830 almost completely demolished the tribal education system, hence interrupting its evolution and advancement. Only very few indigenous schools could survive and were under the supervision of the French colonizers.

The French prioritized education as a cornerstone for their economic growth. Education for the French was also and above all an integral part of France's mission civilatrice. It was strongly supported by Jules Ferry (1832 - 1893), France's prime minister and minister of public instruction in the 1880's, who in a parliamentary debate on March 30 1885 explained his colonial policies in terms of France's civilising mission. In his own words :

There is a second point I wish to refer to. It is the humanitarian and civilising question [...] the superior races have a right in relation to the inferior races. I say they have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilise the inferior races⁵

Ferry was convinced that the school was the most pacific and effective tool for the accomplishment of France's civilising mission. This could only be achieved through the reconstruction of the Algerian schools along French lines and the use of French as the medium of instruction, and the eradication of Arabic and Islamic values that were responsible for the natives' backwardness and inferiority.

Henceforth, the French language was imposed as a powerful force for cultural "re - engineering" of the Algerians to the detriment of more national and local languages. It is true that dialectal Arabic remained the language of everyday life among the great bulk of the Algerian population, yet, except schools teaching the Quran, tuition was only in French. Indeed, advanced education in literary Arabic declined drastically and was inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of the Algerian children.

At the beginning of the French colonial rule, education in Algeria was reserved almost exclusively for the children of the colonists with a limited number of places made available for sons of Algerian notables attending French schools at secondary and even university levels. Hence, by 1870, illiteracy rate in Algeria was very high, and fewer than 5 per cent of the Algerian children were attending school. It was only after the 1870's, forty years after the beginning of La mission civilatrice that the Algerian children were invited to attend French schools. Nevertheless, Algerian families were reluctant to send their children to the school of the colonizer which was, as they claimed, against their Islamic values and principles. It was only after the 1890's that the natives

realized that France was not going to leave and that their children had to be educated in order to improve their status and get better job opportunities. Henceforth, resistance to French education had seized and there had been a growing demand for the construction and the enhancement of schools.

Ironically and despite the France's claims of "civilizing", the French never built enough schools in Algeria and worked to limit the quality and the content of the Algerian education. They taught the Algerian children in special and separate crowded classes with lowered standard. They implemented a practical not theoretical education to avoid academic subjects that might politicize the natives. To sum up the motto of French education in Algeria was oriented to best serve the French own interests usually at the expense of the natives. On the eve of independence less than one third of school aged Muslim children were enrolled in schools and only about 10 per cent of the whole population was literate.

By 1962, almost all the Algerian elite were French speaking. To retrieve their cultural identity and values, the Algerian policy makers of the post independent Algeria started immediately after independence their fight through the promotion of the Arabic language as the basis of their reconstruction struggle. As stated by Frantz Fanon, speaking one's language : "means to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization [...] a man who has language [...] possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. Mastery of language allows remarkable power"⁶

The implementation of Arabic as the official language of the country was hence officially put into practice immediately after independence throughout "the Arabization policy" whereby the promotion of Arabic in the bureaucracy and in the schools and a complete arabization were to be an ultimate national goal. In doing so, the Algerian policy makers strove to retrieve indigenous Arabic and Islamic values to ultimately recover from the French linguistic, cultural, and historical influence. Their goal was the restoration if not the creation of a national identity purely Algerian free from colonial domination and alienation.

End notes

1. M. Crowder, *Senegal : A Study in French Assimilation Policy*, (London : Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1962), p. 12.
2. Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics : An Introduction*, (Madison : WI University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p.21.
3. The French Revolution began in 1789 and ended in 1799 under the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769 - 1821) against the absolute monarchy and the feudal system. [www. Britanica.org](http://www.Britanica.org)
4. Tabula Rasa is an expression that is derived from Latin to refer to “blank slate”. It is used to describe the mind in its early stages. According to some scientists, the minds of human beings are born “blank” and that their knowledge is gradually acquired through experience. During the colonial era, the Europeans used the expression to refer to the African as having the mind of a newly born with featureless mind and in need to start from the right beginning. [www. Britanica.org](http://www.Britanica.org)
5. C. F.M Chaulanges, A - G Manry, and R, Sèves (eds) (1978), *Textes Historiques 1871 - 1914 : La fin du XIX ème Siecle*, De La Grave, 1979, p. 140.
6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York : Grove P, 1967), p. 178.

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