دراسات فنية
مخبر الفنون والدراسات الثقافية
جامعة أبو بكر بلقايد تلمسان
Algerian Scientific Journal Platform

Volume:06/ N°: 02(2022) p 123/130

Algerian Arts, Culture and Identity during French Colonisation

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Received: 29may2022 Accepted: 07june2022

Abstract

A deep insight at historical incidents may/can help people acquire a detailed observation of the present, past and future upshots of times of crisis; a case in point the independence war in Algeria is an example of how art and literature help, rather assist, Algerians handle suffering and feeling during the harsh period of colonialism. The present article tries to reflect some of the measures that have become the mirror of a distressed human condition, where changes occurred. The researchers aim at having a holistic view of the colonial period with all its manifestations: politically, economically and/or culturally. However, a more detailed view is concerned with the artistic and linguistic states of the arts. This atomistic view will scrutinize the concern of 'language and literature' during the colonial era, and relatedly some outcomes after independence.

Article info

Received 29/05./2022
Accepted 07./06../2022

Keyword:
- *Culture and identity*
- *implications and outcomes of war,*
- *times of crisis*
- *educated elite*

1. *Introduction*

In the present article, there is a general feeling that French colonization has greatly shaped many aspects of life in Algeria where a deep sensation of deprivation of the national/patrimonial representations of the local inhabitants in their everyday interactions and life manifestations. There is no doubt, therefore, to state that, the colonial political authorities had forcibly inhibited all signs of artistic exhibitions by severe instructions to institute rather a western view of culture, arts and linguistic-related issues. The historical hegemony longly attested by the colonial rulers reached its utmost objective through the various attempt to replace all sorts of cultural signs or arty social functions in different formal and informal contexts. Nevertheless, as genuine supports for legitimacy, culture, art(s), language and rituals were used naturally as the main opponents of the widespread of the French culture and language.

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In parallel with the indigenous rebellion, the new generation of post-1900's writers showed a clear success through its engaged aspect in writing, high-quality literary essays and articles, perfect mastery of French and evidently a great desire for liberation. Evidently, the Algerian writers, at that time, used the language of the invader with complete success. It is simply proof that the acquired and learned language through many decades has given birth to a generation of writers of acceptable linguistic proficiency. It also reveals a high-aesthetic and literary-value writings bringing change into the language itself not only in content but in form as well. Those writings were characterized by a will to explain, describe, witness and inform about the Algerian misery and suffering from the inside. Those writers were genuine witnesses and authentic ethnographers, denouncing the colonial exploitation and linguistic deprivation leading the population to poverty and cultural alienation. The cultural and linguistic conflict between two different nations was apparent in the clear-cut difference between extremely opposed civilizations, ways of life, and identity traits.

Therefore, it may be assumed that the main reasons which have led to the actual francophone-oriented situation in speech behaviour and other cultural aspects of life in Algeria were colonialism. Nevertheless, this historical factor is, apparently, the main but not the only reason behind such an established situation. Clearly noticeable, other linguistic, social and psychological factors were behind the widespread of these aspects of behaviour and conduct among citizens and the elite particularly.

2. Policy of Expropriation and Deprivation of Cultural Heritage

Language, culture and arts are largely considered not only means of communication, and interaction among the members of the same community, but they support strongly the motto of legitimacy. The legitimacy of change and access to modernity though imposed through the sole medium of the French culture and language during colonisation, has failed to reach its objectives due to deeply-rooted ritual, beliefs, and artistic expression. Paradoxically, the policy of '*Arabization'* has always been an attempt to transfer this legitimacy to Arabic and Islamic values.

As far as Algeria is concerned, it all started in July 1830. France invaded the land and spread its control throughout the country through systematic destruction of both personality and culture. To strengthen its existence, the colonists expropriated the lands from their owners and gave them to new settlers, called 'Colons', coming from France and other European countries. Further in terrible circumstances, the educational system presented specificity in the colonial policies of the conqueror.

In effect, of all once colonised countries, education in Algeria fared worse under occupation than before it and witnessed a dramatic decline in literacy rate amongst the Algerian population from the beginning of the French domination up to independence. It is this enforced and well-planned history of domination, systematic illiteracy, linguistic and cultural alienation and socio-economic deprivation that is bound to have had a determinant and significant impact on the form, pace, direction and purpose of the educational and strategy options in Algeria. As a case to the point, the utmost priority consisted, in the first place, to replace French in economic and administrative domains, and urgently re-introduce Arabic to most socio-professional spheres and activities.

The planned objectives of both policies were to regain identity, ensure personality growth of the young generations and lay the ground for the learning of modern technology in order to, eventually, cope with the economic demands of the modern world. In the Algerian context, education is legitimately regarded as the key to a definite removal of century-long domination and subservience. Its importance lies in the paramount role it plays in any type of progress, be it human, social or material. A major issue that confronts the Algerian nation, like many other nations, is 'language'. Being intimately linked to identity, political power and social mobility, language has become a controversial question and a bitter battlefield for competing ideologies and vested interests. This controversy has taken different forms, but with specific focus on the language of instruction. To better represent and unravel the complexities of language hegemony in the Algerian context, let's consider the two main forms: the first form is related to identity formation of post-independence generations; the second one conjures up the issues of gaining power and achieving upward mobility.

At present, the socio-economic situation in Algeria is ideologically conceived through instituting progressively Arabic and displacing French. However, this planned objective which is highly desirable by policymakers and decision holders needs to be based on empirical verification, down-to-earth observation and measured evaluation. Otherwise, it may become a far-reaching goal due to multiple contextual variables that have marked the Algerian speech community individually and collectively.

The colonial domination was explicitly purveying in the expropriation of many of the Algerian properties (public & private). Among public ones called '*Habous*', there were those religious institutions and Koranic schools, hence '*Medersas'*. The fact resulted in the closing of those schools in a gradual process of scaffolding the targeted policy. At first, the French proposals were to finance the field of education which was obviously suspicious in the eyes of the Algerians. Clearly, the offer had backward strategies; either to Christianize the learning population or, as a perennial target, spread the French culture and language to achieve a complete control. As a case to the point, between 1830 abd1850 half of the already established schools disappeared. In brief, Benrabah (1999:49) states that: "there were more than 2000 schools in 1863 and only 750 in1880's. At the level of Higher Education; 142 students in 1876, 129 in 1877, 84 in 1879 , 79 in 1884 and 57 in1887" . From 1870, traditional teaching, exclusively in '*Medersas,*' was confronted to hostility on the behalf of the colonists who considered it as a rebellion against the foreign ruler. The traumatic experience caused by the conquerors created a strong opposition of the native populations against the colonial imposed policy conceived as a threat to their own cultural and identity values. That felt cultural roughness conducted to a systematic refusal of the parents to send their children to French schools. In the same way of thought, the Governor of Algeria (1832-33) declared explicitly what follows "I see the widespread of instruction and of our language as the most efficient means to make progress to our domination in this country" (Benrabah, 1999).

3. The Ethnocentric Strategy of the Colonist

The French authorities adopted another strategy *vis-à-vis* their rude linguistic, cultural/artistic and educational policy of marginalisation of the local cultural heritage, hence Arabic and Islam. Afterwards, it also altered to a moreorless flexible policy of tolerance. In other words, they took

the non-significant number of Algerian children registered in colonial schools into account on one hand, and the urgent need to profit from the educated elite as mediators between the French military authorities and the local populations on the other hand. For the training and formation of that group of educated elite (preachers of mosques, judges of law courts and teachers), the military authorities, in 1850, reintroduced the pre-colonial model of '*Medersas'*. However, the colonists instituted an innovative aspect within the imposed instruction; the introduction of the French language and inclusively many western cultural and ideological life aspects. At that time, there were three '*Medersas*' in the towns of Constantine, Tlemcen and Algiers under the colonial control.

The colonial motto was to instruct in order to control. That was carried out systematically by the institution of bilingual schools; hence, Arabic/French colleges. Such colleges were 36 between 1850/1870. Therefore, the public schools (Medersas) turned out to be ruled by civilians in 1876 with close control over for fear of awareness in concerns like equality and freedom. Because of such a fear, the General Governor of Algeria in 1876, Tirman estimates that "the hostility of the indigenous population is measured to the degree of their instruction" *(*Benrabah, 1999:51).

For probing deeply into the issue of expanding the French culture and ideolology, a colonial decree of 1895 made compulsory for all candidates to the function of preachers, judges and teachers to pursue training at the newly settled '*Medersas*' wherein the French language learning was reinforced. The purpose of such endeavour is to prepare and train mediators. It resulted, gradually, to the creation of bilingual institutions which increased in number year after year.

The issue had other interpretations. As a justification proving the superiority of French over Arabic, the colonial administration called upon specialists of pedagogy. As a well-known specialist of the time, William Marçais (a specialist in dialectology of the Maghreb Arab and a colonial administrator in Algeria in the 1900s) presented the symbolic aspect of ethnocentric belief of powerful nations in the nineteenth century. His argument pledged in favour of colonial nations, their cultures and languages. In this respect, he argues that:

> *When a language is that of the rulers, that makes access to a great modern civilisation, that is comprehensible, that the spoken and written forms are identical; and that the other language is that of the governed, that expresses in its best written forms a medieval ideal, that is ambiguous, that its written and spoken forms are characterized by complete separate aspects, the issue is really unequal: the first must predominantly pushes back the second.* (Benrabah, 1999:53)

4. Resistance and Rejection of Assimilation

The cultural colonial model was still faced with resistance by the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the honourable families expressed their resistance by exile to the Middle East and the remaining majority of families opted for a complete refusal of the colonial policy system preferring illiteracy rather than cultural alienation. The Algerian educated elite of the time conducted a harsh struggle against the colonial system in the field of education, schooling and cultural awareness. As an inclusive fact, the majority of those elite had followed their instruction, even in the pre-colonial era in Koranic schools and '*Medersas*'. So, they were deeply embedded with Arabic and Islamic values. '*Zawiyat'* and '*Medersas'*, played a major role to protect and

preserve Islam and the Arabic language against the huge wave of colonialism which affected the Algerian society culturally and linguistically (Lamri & Hamzaoui: 2018).The result was rather a constant resistance against the colonial system. Consequently, the colonial system urged willingly to encourage generalisation of schooling, offering guarantees of job only for those who receive instruction in the colonial institutions. Eventhough the offer seemed so ambitious, the local inhabitants still considered that the colonial schooling system not only threatens their cultural values and ethnic belonging but certainly provides neither a future job nor social promotion.

Another historical crucial factor which in return enhanced the spread of French among Algerians was the participation of many of them as soldiers in the French army during the World War I and II. They were approximately 173,000; and 25000 died in the battlefields. A considerable number (about 120,000) immigrated to France to replace the mobilised French employees in the war. Whence, immigration and war were two significant factors rendering the contact of Algerians with the French language (and culture) very common and natural. From their experience, those Algerians discovered many benefits of modern instruction and education, hence through French. Once returning to their country, the Algerian soldiers and workers who were inculcated with new ideas, knowledge and impregnated with the French culture, contested the teaching of French to their children so as to enable them have access to modernity and mainly social status to lead a decent life. Be it consciously or not, some Algerians started appreciate the French language by means of certain cultural and economic capital. Though the rate of schooling remained very low, many Algerians refused to register their children in the French schools. Unprecedently, the bad economic situation and low individual income, later on, obliged many families to accept register in that colonial schooling system and consequently learn the French language and surely its culture and ideology.

Undeniably, the colonial educational system and the French language were compulsory and evidently imposed on that oppressed society as a necessity for survival. Facing that strong pressure, the Algerian national movements of liberation emerged as a mere consequence for re-establishing the Arab identity through a double process: '*Algeraninzation*' of the population and '*Arabization'* of the daily interactions and social manifestations of the country. The objective was purely contrasting the policy of the colonist in concerns of '*Frenchifying*' (i.e. conducting all life manifestations into the French language). In fact, from 1830, Algerians feared the cultural and educational programmes of the colonizer and found shelter under their religion-Islam- within the Koranic schools and '*Medersas*' as usual. The role of such institutions led by '*The Algerian Muslim Scholars Association'* was to inculcate in the Algerian educated elite an urge to reconsider their prestigious past and belonging and by the way keeping them away from assimilation. Those national movements strived in recommending the Arabic language as an official one having, at least, the same status as the French language. It was, then, creating rival standards between two languages: Arabic Vs French. Nevertheless, the longing of Algerians to their language (language of Koran) incited the colonial system to repair such injustice by remediating, unless in theory, in giving a (pseudo)status to the Arabic language through an official article in 1947 stating what follows: 'Constituting one of the languages of the French Union, […] the teaching of the Arabic language will be organised (Benrabah 1999:59).

Yet, the national movements gained certain acknowledgement on the behalf of the colonial administration, though the French language remained outstandingly the main outcome of a long-established colonial system of education. As a matter of fact, many of the Algerian writers took profit from the French language and delivered their denouncements in that language.

5. French as a Tool of Salvation for the Algerian Elite

Art and culture stood as the first representations of the localThe end of the nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of the first publications of Algerian-origin writers in the French language. These were mainly in form of essays and descriptions of reality, far from rebellion and opposition. Then, the content which was written in the tongue of the coloniser called for equality. Between the years 1920 and 1949, thirteen novels and three short stories were published by Algerian writers in French. However, from 1945 and on, the pacific tendency in writing changed and then the political awareness attained a level of complete maturity. That was principally due to the slaughter committed by the colonial army in the eastern part of Algeria (Setif, Guelma, and Kherrata) on 8th May, 1945. In contrast to the previous generation of writers, that generation of post-45's revealed a clear success through its engaged aspect in high quality literary writing, perfect mastery of French and evidently a great desire for liberation shown deliberately and explicitly through their writings. The Algerian writers used the language of the invader with complete success. It is simply a proof that the language had been deeply-rooted through many decades to sort out with a generation of writers of acceptable linguistic proficiency. It also reveals a high aesthetic and literary value of such writings bringing change into the language itself not only in content but in form as well. Those writings were characterized by a will to explain, describe, witness and inform about the Algerian society from inside. Those writers were genuine witnesses and authentic ethnographers, denouncing the colonial exploitation and the linguistic deprivation leading the population to poverty and cultural alienation.

The cultural and linguistic conflict between two different nations was apparent in the clear cut difference of extremely opposed civilizations, ways of life and identity traits. In fact, the French language could serve as a means of denouncing injustice, acquiring knowledge and information and a tool for salvation. They felt necessary that for facing the French colonial system, it was of perennial importance to acquire the attributes of that system (language and culture) to be in complete readiness for combating it . That awareness of the role of the French language towards liberation was the utmost motto. It embedded the legitimate themes of many Algerian writers from 1956. The serious matter of revolution and independence was partly conducted through a French expression. In the eyes of those Algerian writers, it was the nearest way and the clearest manner, in the colonial context, to convey the national recommendations. In the same way of thought, Kateb Yacine - one of the prominent Algerian literary men of French expression argues: "At that time, I felt that it was necessary to speak French even better than the French themselves in order to convince them that we were not French" (Kateb Yacine, cited in Benrabah, 1999:67).

The leitmotiv had a further objective of acquiring tools for defending the nation and clarifying the needs rather than accepting a mere alienation and undertaking a complete

assimilation through the culture and especially the language of the coloniser. That language, at that time, constituted a means for denouncing and a tool for salvation.

6. Conclusion

In sum, culture and arts have remained the unavoidable community attribute for the newly-independent Algeria. Yet, in an indeterminable fight for the search of authenticity and identity, a state policy in concerns of historical heritage, artistic pecularity and cultural belonging has always been the central concern. There has been strong determination to eradicate the French language, culture and any western civilisation trait and impose the Arabic language; Muslim identity and African belonging features. Independent Algeria strongly advocated the administration of the Arabic language as the pillar foundation of an Arab-Muslim nation. It was, then, the revival of arts in different regions of the country where local and regional prints have survived to resettle Arab-Muslim dimension. The undertaken endeavour that was carried out for a more practical social control was ideologically and politically strengthening the value of art in all its manifestations. Due to the relentlessness witnessed against the French language in the post-independence era, many political decisions willingly administrated new instructions in the field of education, culture and arts in general to mark down that period of colonialism.

There is no doubt; therefore, that French is embedded in the spirit, soul, personality and daily life of the Algerian citizens. That is why significant attempts were carried out by post-independent Algeria to devalue the French language through a process called “linguistic cleansing”. That process of purification had as a thorough objective; to alter, whenever possible, French terms, cultural aspects and any sort of western belonging to the colonial period. In spite of the great efforts expended by the Algerian government to Arabise education and other institutions (by the way eradicate the French language), French language persists being a language of special status among the Algerians. This language which has acquired high prestige is, in fact, regarded by the people as a means of advancement, modernity and intellectual distinction.

Yet, it is true that the long-span establishment of the coloniser greatly helped the expansion of French; however, it is not the only factor. French language has shifted from its historical/cultural context to a purely linguistic/educational consideration through which distances to knowledge are collapsed and time is erased. It should be clearly stated that considering the widespread use of French in everyday conversations and the availability of a large number of newspapers, books, TV programmes and commercials written in French, make of the French language a needed tool.

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