



Assessment of the Association of Algerian Muslim scholars Contribution in the Promotion of Education

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Abstract

French colonial educational designs in Algeria were geared toward the hampering of Arabic as a medium of Islamic propagation and enlightenment. This is why they promoted the proliferation of superstition. However, the efforts of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars (AAMS) counteracted those plans, and launched an educational system that strove for the education of Algerians. The intent of this paper is to explore the nature of this system and canvass the extent of its success, specifically in instituting a schooling system. A descriptive analytical method is used to scrutinize both primary and secondary sources. The investigation tackles three elements, namely colonial education in Algeria before the advent of the AAMS, the birth of the Association, and the educational system of the AAMS. The findings invoke the AAMS's leaning on a modern free educational system, through the medium of Arabic, that made emulation, evaluation, communication, and gender equity in educational opportunities its prime concern.

Keywords:

Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars; educational system, Arabic language, emulation, evaluation

1.Introduction

French colonial rule in Algeria undermined, deeply, the country and its people by a two-sided assault on its economic wealth and its socio-cultural institutions. A great destructive campaign was launched against the latter. The zaouias, which were centers of educational and religious diffusion, were summoned to adapt their teaching programs to fit the colonial designs. In fact, French colonial educational policy was geared toward the hampering of Arabic as a medium of Islamic propagation, enlightenment, and civilization. This is why they promoted the proliferation of superstition so that the Algerians would remain obedient and ignorant individuals. It was against this background that the Association of the Algerian Muslim Scholars (AAMS) was founded by Abelhamid Ibn Badis and later promoted by El Bachir El Ibrahimi to counteract those plans, and launch an educational system that would strive for the education of Algerians.

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2.Colonial education in Algeria before the advent of the AAMS

Prior to the French establishment in Algeria, the colonizer destroyed about 1000 schools where 150,000 students were taught, expelling the teachers (Courreya, 2014). This act signified their disdain of the Arabic language, and the fear associated with Arabic-based non-controlled schools. To subdue the people, they preached their assimilation policy and their 'mission civilisatrice' (civilizing mission). This belief was grounded in racism and the superiority of the European race, which entailed the disdain of the non-European races, specifically the Africans. This policy meant the renunciation of Algerian norms and values and their substitution with French ones. In fact, the French perception of Africans revealed a glaring marginalization of those people. In this context, Crowder said:

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* and her early administration as *l'oeuvre civilatrice* (12).

Historian Emannuelle Saada (2014), interpreting the Indigenous code (Code de l'indigénat), commented that the Code revealed a dissociation between nationality and citizenship as the indigenous people were French subjects without civic rights (p.50). Worse still was the fact that the Algerians had to renounce their identity.

The French built their own schools to provide the natives with Western instruction, replacing thereby the long-established Quranic schools that taught Quran and religious principles through Arabic. French colonial education was, evidently, carried out by means of the French language, which valued French history and Western civilization to counteract the Arabo-Islamic civilization, marginalize the natives' culture, and reinforce subordination. In fact, the French considered Arabic as a foreign language. To illustrate the importance of one's native language, Frantz Fanon (1968) asserted that the fact of speaking one's language: "means to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization [...] a man who has a language [...] possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. Mastery of language allows remarkable power" (p.178). This policy seriously impacted the old educational Algerian system by confiscating lands, and closing the schools that propagated ideas against the French. Yet at the same time, they maintained some old primary schools by controlling their system of instruction. In the process, secondary education in literary Arabic ceased to exist.

Hinging now on the description and evaluation of the colonial educational system, not all the Algerians could benefit from it at the beginning. Only the colonists' children

and some sons of the notable Algerian families could get access to French primary and secondary schools, and even attend higher education. It is therefore not astonishing to see that the illiteracy rate of the Algerians prior to 1870 did not exceed 5%. Beyond that year, the French made some steps towards schooling the Algerian children in compliance with the civilizing mission. Yet, even that initiative failed to score high results as the Algerians refused to send their children to those schools lest they would lose their religious principles and values. Within the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Algerians realized the importance of French education as a passport to a better life and for jobs within the French administration services. Therefore, they claimed the building of those schools.

The French never implemented seriously their civilizing mission in the educational field. The number of schools remained very small, with the natives being confined to separate large-size classes, reaching 50 pupils per class (Bosaid, p.5). The nature of instruction was much more inclined towards vocational training and slender theoretical teaching so as to prevent the encounter with political trends of taught and the burgeoning of political claims. Everything was designed to smash Algerian history. Educational schools (A) as opposed to educational schools (B). This was, clearly, epitomized by obliging Algerian pupils to sing "Our ancestors were the Ghaliyine, and our country was in the past called Ghiya" (Ibn Badis, *El Chihab*, 1937, p.1).

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, and the elite were French-speaking.

Adding to this scene of deprivation and marginalization was a great instance of backwardness and ignorance that was largely vehiculed by the Sufi zaouia. The latter exercised their magic spell on the common people through the propagation of wrong religious practices. To epitomize the power of those Sufi congregations, one could simply invoke their number in the nineteenth century, which approximated 349 with 295000 adepts (Mouridine) (Talbi, 1968, p.18). Those religious institutions contributed to the spread of myths that made the Algerians zombies, unable to reflect on their plot, and simply nodded to the instructions and orders of those who had authority (the French and the Sufi Shuyukh). The famous saying at the time was "nakoul elkout wnetsena fi elmout" which means that the individual's life was limited barely to eating and the waiting of death.

3.The birth of the Association

The creation of the AAMS came as a reaction to the offense directed against the Algerians with the French prideful celebration of the hundredth year of successful colonization (Algeria centenary), which lasted from January till July 15, 1930. Yet, the turning point was the desolating state of the Algerians, whose lives had become devoid of any sense. The outstanding figure behind the foundation of the AAMS was Abdelhamid Ibn Badis. Before exploring the rise of the association, it is worth highlighting the social background of this leader.

Ibn Badis was born in Constantine in December 1889 into a wealthy, prominent family with a long history of learning and political leadership. His ancestors, Bologhine Ibn ziri and El Moi'ze Ibn Badis, were prominent in combating Sufi wrong practices. These were, in fact, a great source of inspiration and a spark of zeal. His father also had an impact on his reformist orientation as he was himself a devoted Muslim, and he encouraged him to learn the Quran by heart. He learned Quran at the age of thirteen and served as Imam for three years for the El Tarawih prayer in Ramadan. Afterwards, he learned the basic principles of Arabic and Islam at the hands of his teacher, Hamdane Lounissi. He married at the age of fifteen. In 1908, he travelled to Tunisia to further his studies at El Zeitouna University, where he got the 'Universal Certificate' in 1912. In 1913, he travelled to El Madina, in Saudi Arabia, where he taught at the Prophet's mosque for three months. There, he paid a visit to his teacher, Lounissi, and met El Ibrahimy, with whom he discussed the necessity of creating an association for Algerian Muslim scholars. Afterwards, he visited many Arab countries, like Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. In 1935, he was granted the Universal Certificate by El Azhar.

Besides his family, Ibn Badis was largely impressed by his teachers, notably Hamdane Lounissi, who had migrated to El Madina El Mounawara (the enlightening city) and died there, his teacher at Jamie El Zeytouna, Mohamed El Nakhli, his teacher Ibn Achour, who taught him Arabic, El Cheikh Tahar El Djazairi, who impressed his taught, El Cheikh Djamel Eddine El Afghani, Cheikh Mohamed Abdou, and Cheikh Rachid Reda. He also wrote articles in newspapers, which he created in the period 1925–1939, given their great momentum in the propaganda of ideas, such as *El Mountakid*, *El Chihab* (1925), *El Souna El Nabawia*, *El Charia El Moutahara*, *El Sirat El Sawiye* (1933), and *El Bassair* (1935).

His philosophy was "knowledge before work" (practice)", and the success of reforming others should come from setting examples. Ibn Badisse' reformist ideas and

educational endeavors were impacted by religious revival in the Middle East and the sweeping consciousness-raising press created during the first decades of the twentieth century, such as *El Jazair* in 1908, *El Hak* in 1911, and *El Farouk* in 1913, whose principle was "قَلَمِي لِسَانِي ثَلَاثَةٌ بِفُؤَادِي ... دِينِي وَوُجْدَانِي وَحُبُّ بِلَادِي . (my pen is my language...three things are precious for me: my religion, my feelings, and my sense of patriotism). Ibn Badis was not simply thinking about the creation of a reformist movement but also about the avenues that would guarantee its success for a long time, such as organization, discipline, and collaboration (as cited in Mohamed Saleh Ramdane, 1964).

The AAMS was founded on May 5 1931, in a meeting at Nadi El Taraki in Algiers where 70 scholars from different parts of Algeria were convened. The attendees represented disparate religious convictions such as Malekkite, Ibaddite, and Zaouias adepts. The gathering unfolded into the creation of an administrative council that comprised thirteen members, with the election of Ibn Badisse as president in spite of his absence. The Association formed its branches all over the country, whose management was to be relegated to three large provinces: Algiers, Tlemcen, and Constantine, presided over respectively by Cheikh Tayeb El Ogbi, El Bachir El Ibrahimi, and Ibn Badis. The branches of the Association increased from 38 in 1936 to 58 in 1938. The AAMS witnessed two periods; the 1931-1940 era under Ibn Badis's chairmanship, and the 1941-1956 period under El Ibrahimi's chairmanship. The Association was largely established in urban centers but not in rural areas, except in Algiers. The reason for that was probably the opposition of the people, on one hand, and the strong impress of the Zaouias on the peoples' minds in those places. The AAMS evolved over two time periods: 1931–1940 and 1941–1956, with the first depicting the birth of the Association and the construction of schools and the second depicting the expansion of its activities.

The objectives of the AAMS were as follows: first guaranteeing an Islamic education for both boys and girls with a view to safeguarding their religion, language, and identity, second initiating cognitive development and vocational training, third sensibilizing people to volunteer; and four striving for the aggrandizement of the Association. The third clause of the Association's chart clarified its means as: the setting up of an education board, an orphans' house, a club for conferences, a hand-made workshop, and the granting of scholarships (Talbi, 1968, p.114). The AAMS created schools in the department of Constantine as follows: five in Constantine, nine in Annaba, eight in Jijel, four in Skikda, three in Oum El Bouaghi, and two in Sétif (Merdaci, 2007, 105).

Ibn Badis's efforts in awakening the Algerians were not the first to find light. They were preceded by other initiatives which could not survive because they were individual or semi-individual enterprises. Yet even his endeavors were gradual. He first created a small board (bureau) for primary education in Sidi Boumaaza mosque, then he created the Islamic Benevolent Association in 1917, which later, in 1930, became the Islamic Association of Education. This body comprised ten members.

4. The Educational system of the AAMS

Ibn Badis's basic principle, whether in religious or educational reform, was the Quranic verse "God does not alter a people's plot till they undergo change by themselves". Thus, the Association built schools through the local reform associations (Jamiat el Tarbia wa Taalim) which were financed by the members themselves, the well-to-do donators, the rich parents of the students, and the fees collected from the seasonal or annual festivals (Torki, 1969) with free education for the poor and the girls. The schools were run by one or many teachers, presided by a director. The schools secured three types of instruction: religious education, preliminary instruction in Arabic culture, and basic notions of sciences (Makhloufi, 2009). As to the cycles of education, they were structured as follows: primary, secondary, and advanced education. On the momentum of schools, El Ibrahimy stated: "the school is the path to life, the path to rescue, the path to happiness" (*El Bassair*, 1952, p.3).

Primary education lasted six years and included three classes: a preparatory class for two years, a primary class for two years, and a middle class for two years. The syllabus of the preparatory class comprised nine subjects and was realized within 29,5 hours per week, with each session limited to 30 minutes (see table 1). The program of the primary class was achieved within two years, and included the same subjects with the addition of history/geography, and a course of observation. The total range of hours was 29,5 hours per week (see table 2). The middle class was also dispensed over two years, and encompassed the same courses, but in a more detailed way. Those courses display, conspicuously, the fir-sightedness of the AAMS, not only in conceiving appropriate subjects that complied with the needs of students (as religious education, Arabic, arithmetic, history geography, reading, and natural sciences), but also in consecrating time for practice as drawing and hand-made works, as well as sport. Reading was given due consideration since it allowed the development of students' cognition (*El Chihab*, 1935). Ibn Badis's educational reform charted theory and practice as a basis for the success of education.

In the field of higher education, the Association assisted advanced education through the granting of scholarships to its graduates in different universities, notably Jamie El Zeitouna in Tunisia, El Karawiyine in Morocco, and El Azhar in Egypt, since these were considered outstanding centers of tertiary education in the Muslim Arab world. In fact, El Karawiyine is said to be among the first universities in the world. Once qualified, the students would return to Algeria either to work as teachers, or to open schools in their hometowns.

The Association equally made room for adults' education, which took place from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. This type of education was intended to sensitize them to their identity, which consisted primarily of the Arabic language, Islam, and their nation. Frequently, those who were instructed in French joined the AAMS classes. The basic characteristic of those classes was the engagement of hot debates around the Algerian plot, alarming the colonial administrators as to the dangers of such education.

The Association also laid down the duties of teachers as the participation in the design of exams, the dissemination of values amongst learners, the collection of fees, and the institution of order and discipline. Furthermore, they were restricted from dealing with other institutions in matters of education except the director of the school and the committee, as well as exercising other jobs. This reveals the rate of organization and the high importance given to education. With regard to students, the age of entry to schools was six years, and could be extended to eleven, subject, of course, to good health. They carried on their studies till fifteen years old.

Table 1: Syllabus of the preparatory class

Subjects	Time
Religious education	2 hours
Arabic	7,5 hours
Oral expression	2 hours
Arabic script	5 hours
Rote memorization and religious songs (Anachid)	Half an hour
Mental arithmetic	5 hours
Drawing	1,5 hour

Hand-made objects	1 hour
Sport	5 hours

Source: Djamel, Makhlufi. 2009. p. 31

Table 2: Syllabus of the primary class

Subjects	Time
Religious education	2 hours
Reading	3 hours
Arabic (grammar, oral expression, written expression, dictation)	7,5 hours
History	5 hours
Geography	1 hour
Natural sciences	2 hours
Arithmetic, geometry	5 hours
Drawing	1,5 hour
Hand-made works	1,5 hour
Sport	1 hour
Total	29,50 hours

Source: Djamel, Makhlufi. 2009. p, 32

Table 3: Syllabus of the middle class

Subjects	Time
Religious education	2 hours
Reading	3 hours
Arabic (grammar, oral expression, written expression, dictation)	7,5 hours

History	5 hours
Geography	1 hour
Natural sciences	2 hours
Arithmetic, geometry	5 hours
Drawing	1,5 hour
Hand-made works	1,5 hour
Sport	1 hour
Total	29, 5 hours

Source: Djamel, Makhluhi. 2009. p, 33

The leaders of the AAMS viewed the education of Algerians as a national duty, as revealed in *El Chihab* (1934, p.23). This reflected their deep influence by the Turkish example that fostered the promotion of skills and competences instead of rote memorization. The Turkish educational design emphasized the importance of practical teaching as a means of stimulating creativity and emphasized the role of teachers in achieving those goals. The insistence of the AAMS' leaders on the teaching of Arabic was considered as a means of rescuing the people and the nation, using the Finland example as a glaring portrayal of how the restoration of one's language was to entail blessing effects on its native people. (*El Chihab*, 1937, p.27).

The core of the Association's national educational program was the bolstering of Arabo-Islamic identity. Its educational concept was that any educational enterprise ought to take into consideration pedagogy, learners' needs, and the appropriate teaching approaches. The latter requires the importance of in-service training and didactics.

In terms of the educational achievements of the association, there was the clinching of universal education for all, without a distinction either between genders or socio-economic backgrounds. Secondly, one can mention the creation of a common program that would be used both by the AAMA schools and the schools run by the zaouias. For that sake, the members of the Association convened a colloquium called the Free Teachers Colloquium on September 22 and 23, 1937 in Algiers in order to discuss that issue. In 1947, the Association unified the annual exams all over its schools.

The sensibilization discourse used by the AAMS through its different agencies (schools, mosques, clubs, theatre, poetry sequences) was undertaken in many languages such as classical Arabic, Tamazight (Baaziz Ben Amar's speech in El Taraki Club), dialectal Arabic (speech of El Ibrahimy in Meliana) and French.

The Association set up the Committee of High Education, whose role was the enhancement of the didactics of teaching, which resulted in the change of the educational approach from the traditional Salafi, approach implemented in the thirties, to modern pedagogy used by the German, French, and British schools (Zeggour, 2018). Further, the AAMS relied on regional and local inspection of schools with a view to seeing the extent of advancement made. Constant reports were, thus, issued in *El Chihab*, permitting, thereby, the acknowledgement of problems. In addition to that, the Association discussed in the 1940's the necessity for a national curriculum which would supplant the Egyptian one given its unsuitability for the Algerian context. Thus, in 1949, two teachers' textbooks were elaborated, namely: *The Teachers' Guide* and *The Teacher's Approach*. The Association also founded clubs such as Nadi El Taraki and Nadi El Islah.

The strict control of the schools of the AAMS and its activities by the French were, no doubt, signs of their weariness about the effects of this association on the Algerians 'minds. Thus, prior to 1952, many teachers of the Associations' schools were imprisoned. In certain cases, the schools were closed to stop their influence. Therefore, the French reaction hindered the progress of the Association.

5. Conclusion

The pioneering endeavors of the AAMS in clinching within the youth's minds the need for cherishing one's nation cannot be ignored. The sentence 'the nation before anything' was thus coined by the Association at a time when no one used it or deciphered its meaning given the great rate of ignorance and illiteracy of the Algerians. The Association made strenuous efforts to combat ignorance for all categories of people males/females, small/adults. Its different organs and institutions, such as the schools, the press, the clubs, feasts where poetry and songs were made, and the theatre, produced a cataclysmic change with the revitalization of Arabic, and Islamic principles that reinstated the Arabo-Islamic identity for the Algerians. The AAMS' policy under Ibn Badis and his followers, notably El Bachir El Ibrahimy, emphasized the combination of cultural, religious, social, and political aspects, contributing, hence, to the breeding of national sentiments and the opening of new horizons for learners. Those endeavors stood as a bar against French colonial designs

in Algeria, i.e., the dislocation of the Algerian identity through the eradication of Islam and Arabic. Indeed, though the Association did not clearly involve itself in political life, it nevertheless provided the ground for the Algerian liberation war.

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