

The Ambiguous Role of the Algerian Historical Society in the French Colonial Project in Algeria: Focus on Military Interpreters

الدور الغامض للجمعية التاريخية الجزائرية في المشروع الاستعماري الفرنسي في الجزائر:
المترجمين العسكريين في بؤرة الاهتمام

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Abstract:

During the French colonization of Algeria, the colonizers deliberately sought to appropriate Algerian cultural heritage. This campaign targeted both physical artifacts and intangible knowledge. Fascinated by the richness of this heritage, the colonizers employed orientalist methodologies and relied on military translators and interpreters to investigate and exploit resources that rightfully belonged to the indigenous population. This article aims to bring attention to the often-neglected role played by the 'Algerian Historical Society' through the *Revue Africaine*, during this historical period. By revisiting the history of this organization, we aim to restore historical accuracy and highlight its crucial role in the conflict that has shaped over a century of Algerian history.

Keywords: Algerian Historical Society, *Revue Africaine*, military interpreter, heritage.

ملخص:

خلال فترة الاستعمار الفرنسي للجزائر، تم تنفيذ حملة مدروسة للاستيلاء على التراث الثقافي الجزائري، بشكليه المادي وغير المادي. متحمسا لثراء هذا التراث، انتهج المستعمر سبيل الاستشراق واستعان بالمترجمين والترجم العسكريين لتسهيل استكشاف معارف السكان الأصليين واستغلالها. يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على الدور الذي لعبته "الجمعية التاريخية الجزائرية" من خلال "المجلة الإفريقية"، والتي غالباً ما تم تجاهلها في السرديات التاريخية. من خلال إعادة النظر في تاريخ هذه الجمعية، نسعى إلى استعادة الدقة التاريخية وإبراز دورها المحوري في الصراع الذي دام أكثر من قرن من تاريخ الجزائر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجمعية التاريخية الجزائرية، المجلة الإفريقية، الترجمان العسكري، التراث.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As France expanded its colonial reach into Africa in the early 19th century, the communication between European colonizers and indigenous African populations faced significant obstacles by language barriers. To overcome this challenge, the French colonial administration enlisted skilled intermediary agents who were fluent in both the language of the colonizers and that of the occupied territories. These intermediaries played a multifaceted role, going beyond mere translation to act as mediators, negotiators, and cultural intermediaries, shaping the complex dynamics of interaction between colonial powers and local populations. The administrative authorities recognized the strategic importance of interpreters in the colonial endeavor (Mopoho, 2001, p.616).

In this context, figures like Berbrugger emerged as key players, embodying the principles of colonial expansion and administration. They served as agents of the state, using military force both as a tool of coercion and as a means of establishing contact and rapport with indigenous communities. As highlighted by Berbrugger's observations (Glasser, 2020, p.85), they successfully balanced the advantages and disadvantages of military forces, strategically employing them to further colonial objectives while also bridging cultural worlds.

The establishment of contact between colonizers and indigenous populations depended on the creation of interpreter corps, which consisted of both civilian and military personnel. Within the French administration and armed forces, these interpreters had a range of responsibilities. They facilitated daily correspondence, gathered intelligence and facilitated cultural exchange. Their contributions went beyond administrative tasks; they also published articles to promote better understanding of local languages and dialects among European settlers.

In essence, the use of interpreters, particularly in military contexts, played a crucial role in bridging the communication gap in colonial encounters. These intermediary figures served as crucial conduits, ensuring the efficient functioning of colonial rule while also shaping the interaction and perception between different cultural groups within colonial societies. Through their roles as mediators and cultural intermediaries, they left a lasting impact on the fabric of colonial history, embodying the complexities and contradictions inherent in the colonial enterprise.

2. The Establishment of the Corps of Military Interpreters

Upon arriving in Algeria, France quickly realized the need for a proficient corps of interpreters to bridge the linguistic gap between colonial forces and the local population. It became essential to master Arabic, including its various dialects, in order to understand Algerian customs and navigate local knowledge. The first cohort of interpreters enlisted in France in 1830 comprised former diplomats, Mameluke officers, and graduates of the Royal School of Oriental Languages. (Féraud, 1876, p.51) Upon their arrival in Algeria, these skilled linguists formed a formidable corps, serving as indispensable auxiliaries to the Army of Algeria and the governing authority. (Morpho, p.618)

2.1. The Evolution of Interpreters in Algeria

Laurent-Charles Féraud, the esteemed Chief Interpreter of the French colonial army, and former French minister in Morocco (Forest, p.11) meticulously chronicled the saga of military interpreters in Algeria. In his seminal work, "Interpreters of the Army of Africa (Archives of the Corps)," published in 1876, Féraud detailed the genesis and organization of the interpreter corps established in 1830. He highlighted the urgent need for linguistic mediators, leading to the recruitment of indigenous interpreters to bridge communication gaps. However, this initial recourse was short-lived due to deficiencies, particularly in written communication, which prompted a change in strategy.

An important endeavor followed, characterized by meticulous planning, to establish a hierarchical corps of interpreters. This stratified hierarchy included Chief Interpreters, first-class interpreters, and second-class interpreters, ensuring smooth linguistic exchange within colonial echelons. Over time, this organizational paradigm evolved to include auxiliary interpreters, which attests to the relentless pursuit of linguistic excellence within colonial administration.

2.2. Admission Examination for the Military Interpreter Corps

Laurent-Charles Féraud outlined a detailed examination program for each category of interpreter. First-class interpreters were required to complete oral interpretation exercises, oral reading as well as translation, and written translation. Second-class interpreters had to complete oral interpretation tasks, translation exercises, and general education questions. Third-class interpreters underwent similar tests, while auxiliary and temporary interpreters had oral exams. However, all candidates were allowed to use dictionaries during the examinations.

- For first-class interpreters, the examination included oral interpretation exercises (in either French or Arabic), oral reading and translation (from Arabic to French), and written translation (from French to Arabic).
- Second-class interpreters had to complete oral interpretation tasks (primarily related to orders and topography), translation of a letter and a passage of printed text (from Arabic to French), and translation into Arabic of an order.
- Third-class interpreters had to complete oral interpretation related to service points, followed by reading and translation of a written text (similar to what is now taught as "sight translation") and translation of a letter into Arabic.
- Auxiliary and temporary interpreters had to undergo the same oral tests as the previous category.

Upon successful completion, candidates took an oath in front of the General commanding their assigned division, pledging loyalty to the Constitution and Emperor and vowing to faithfully interpret documents and maintain secrecy.

It is important to note that candidates were given the documents for translation just fifteen minutes before the start of the one-hour examination, and the use of dictionaries was allowed. Upon successful completion, candidates took an oath before the General commanding their assigned division, or superior officer delegated by him for this purpose, the following oath: "I swear obedience to the Constitution and loyalty to the Emperor; I also swear to faithfully interpret the documents or speeches that I will be asked to translate, and to keep them secret". (JMO, 1851, p.104)

It should be noted that auxiliary interpreters may be dismissed when their services are no longer required, or for disciplinary reasons by the Governor General, with the approval of the Minister of War. (Sautayra, p.332)

2.3. Prominent Figures in French Military Interpreting in Algeria

During the era of French colonization in Algeria, several notable figures emerged in French military interpreting. They played significant roles in facilitating communication and understanding between colonial forces and the local population.

1. **Jean-Charles Cyrille Zaccar** (Damascus, 1793 - Algiers, 1852) was appointed as a first-class interpreter of the expeditionary corps in 1830. Zaccar's task to translate into Arabic the text of Pasha Hussein's capitulation into Arabic in Algiers. In 1839, he was promoted to chief interpreter and remained attached to the general government under Bugeaud. He also undertook several parliamentary missions to Abd-El-Kader. (Messaoudi, p.367)
2. **Marcellin Beaussier** (Paris, 1821 - Algiers, 1873) began his military career in Algeria in 1844 after studying in Tunis. Ten years later, he was appointed as chief interpreter and participated in various military campaigns led by Saint-Arnaud and Bugeaud. In 1871, he authored the "Practical Arabic-French dictionary" which processed around 30,000 words. (Larzul, 2010, p.95)
3. **Louis Elie Guin** (Marseille, 1838 - 1919) first-class interpreter, employed at the Orleansville subdivision, twenty years' actual service. (Bulletin des Lois, 1878, p.641)
4. **Abraham Daninos** (Algiers, 1797 - Algiers, 1872) was a member of the Asiatic Society of Paris. He was a sworn interpreter-translator at the Seine tribunal and authored a small dictionary in the vernacular language which was distributed to officers participating in the 1830 expedition to Algiers. In 1833, he accompanied Abdelkader's envoy to France. (Forest, p.11) From 1837, he served as a military and judicial interpreter at the Commercial and Peace Tribunal in Algiers.

3. Integration of Military Interpreters into Learned Societies

The inclusion of interpreters in learned societies such as the Asiatic Society of Paris, founded in 1822 to advance Oriental studies and local societies like the Archaeological Society of the Province of Constantine

and the Algerian Historical Society, established in 1852 and 1856, respectively, highlights their involvement in scholarly endeavors related to Algeria. By actively engaging with these societies, military interpreters not only facilitated communication between diverse linguistic and cultural groups but also enriched academic research and discourse on Algerian history and culture. Their participation emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of scholarly inquiry in colonial contexts and underscores the importance of linguistic and cultural mediation in understanding complex historical narratives. (Messaoudi, 2010, p.106)

3.1. The Algerian Historical Society

The Algerian Historical Society was founded on April 7, 1856, by Mr Berbrugger, under the patronage of Marshal Randon, the General Governor of Algeria.

The society's initial programs were as follows: "The Algerian Historical Society is established with the aim of collecting, studying, and disseminating, through special publications, all facts pertaining to the history of Africa, especially those concerning Algeria."

According to "The Interpreters of the Army of Africa," the majority of the founding members of this scholarly society were selected from the military interpreters' group (Féraud, p.141), including Bonneman, Clerc, De Slane, and Schousboe. However, Berbrugger stand out as the one who left a profound impact on the history of this organization.

3.2. Adrien Berbrugger: The Initiator of the SHA

Adrien Berbrugger (1801-1869) was a French archivist, palaeographer, archaeologist, collector and philologist specializing in Algeria. According to Raymund F. Wood, he wrote around two dozen scholarly and popular books, as well as nearly two hundred and fifty journal articles. (1970, p.237) In 1835, Berbrugger was appointed as the personal secretary to General Governor Clausel in Algiers. He accompanied Clausel on expeditions to Mascara, Tlemcen, and Constantine, where he returned with thousands of Arabic manuscripts that formed the initial collection of the Algiers Library (Boyer, 1960, p.106). Berbrugger became the first curator of the Algiers Library, and he strongly opposed the establishment of an Algerian museum in Paris, fearing it would strip the Algiers museum of its masterpieces. Benjamin Claude Brower even referred to him as « the influential savant » (2009, p.818). In addition to his work at the Algiers Library, Berbrugger edited the *Moniteur algérien*, the official organ of the administration. He incorporated articles on archaeology and Algerian history alongside regulatory texts and announcements. At the request of Marshal Randon, the Governor General of Algeria, Berbrugger founded the Algerian Historical Society, and became its honorary president. He authored several works on Algeria, including "Nouveau Dictionnaire de poche français-espagnol et espagnol-français" (1829), "Relation de l'expédition de Mascara" (1836), "Voyage au Camp d'Abd-el-Kader, à Hamzah et aux Montagnes de Wannourhah" (1839), and "Le Pégnon d'Alger ou les origines du gouvernement turc en Algérie" (1860). In 1856, Berbrugger initiated the publication of the Algerian Historical Society's periodical, the *Revue Africaine*, and continued to contribute numerous articles and notes until his death in 1869.

4. The Revue Africaine

The *Revue Africaine* was established in 1856 and published in Algiers from September 1856 until the second quarter of 1962. It had the subtitle "Bulletin des Travaux de la Algerian Historical Society" and aimed to address an academic gap, as stated in the preface of its first edition. However, there was a four-year suspension of publication during the First World War. The titular members of the *Revue Africaine* included several military interpreters: Arnaud (Chief Military Interpreter at the General Government of Algiers), Guin (Chief Military Interpreter of Oran), Motylinski (Military Interpreter of Constantine), Martin (Military Interpreter in El-Koléa), and Raymond (Military Interpreter at the Arab Bureau of Sidi Aissa) (SHA, p.6).

4.1. Nature of Articles Published in the Revue Africaine

In the preface to the first issue of the *Revue Africaine*, published in 1856, Berbrugger stated that by joining the Algerian press, the magazine would primarily publish unpublished material, facts, and authentic documents (1856, p.10). In fact, the *Revue Africaine* had published a hundred articles covering a range of topics throughout its century-long existence. These articles cover military reports, archaeological bulletins, correspondences, and miscellaneous notes (Zerik, 2015, p.156). The articles cover a wide array of topics, including sociology, ethnology, topography, geography, archaeology, religion, linguistics, literature, and poetry. Additionally, as highlighted by Benhamel Salim, they delve into areas such as history, geography, travel, philosophy, jurisprudence, music, medicine, ethnography, and folklore (2018, p.252). The *Revue*

Africaine has also published numerous translations, such as those by Mr. Gorguon in 1858 (Expedition of Mohammed el-Kebir) and Marc Antoine's in 1887 (Study on Sufism by Sheikh Abd al Hadi b. Ridwan). Furthermore, studying and analysing the content of the hundreds of articles published in this journal would be a form of "reappropriation" of the national heritage that will serve all generations of Algerian intellectuals. (Ouled Hadar, 2014, p.264) The historical significance of the Revue Africaine is undeniable, with its rare archives serving as an invaluable wellspring of knowledge and information for researchers and historians. In particular, it provides insight into Arabic manuscripts authored by Algerian scholars and translated by translators and military interpreters such as Marcel Bodin and General Faure Biguet, who did so not out of love for scholars and their works, but to shed light on the inner workings of Algerian society (Zerik, 2015, p.167). The historical significance of the Revue Africaine is indisputable. Its rare archives are an invaluable source of knowledge and information for researchers and historians. In particular, it provides insight into Arabic manuscripts authored by Algerian scholars and translated by translators and military interpreters such as Marcel Bodin and General Faure Biguet, who did so not out of love for scholars and their works, but to shed light on the inner workings of Algerian society (Zerik, 2015, p.167)."

4.2. French Military Interpreters Published in the Revue

French military interpreters played multiple roles in the Revue Africaine, such as founding members, correspondents, and authors. It is worth mentioning the recognition and treatment they received.

- ARNAUD, Antoine (known as Marc Antoine) (Algiers, 1835 – Algiers, 1910) A military interpreter, he was a diligent collaborator of the Revue Africaine, where he regularly published translations of contemporary texts of high literary quality, such as a poem by Abd el-Kader and a commentary by Abū Rās an-Naṣrī. He also published a bilingual edition of "Les Roueries de Dalila. Conte traduit des Mille et une nuits" (Alger, 1879). (Messaoudi, p.34)
- GUIN, Louis Elie (Marseille, 1838 – Oran, 1919) An auxiliary interpreter of the 2nd class in March 1858, he steadily progressed in his career and participated in military expeditions. As a corresponding member of the Algerian Historical Society, he provided notices on various topics, including the Nezhiaou, Bey Mohamed, the Robrini family of Cherchell, and the Adouara tribe of Aumale in 1876. He was a principal interpreter in Miliana when he published the annotated text and translation of an "Improvisation de l'Emir Abd el-Kader." He later collaborated with Gaëtan Delphin on the publication of an "Arab Complaint about the rupture of the Saint-Denis-du-Sig dam. (Messaoudi, p.188)
- MERCIER, Jean Ernest (La Rochelle, 1840 – Constantine, 1907) A military interpreter then a judicial interpreter. Essentially an Arabist, his main works were devoted to the study of the language, history and civilisation of North Africa (...) "L'Histoire de Constantine" published in 1903 was perhaps his favourite work. (Zeiller, p.167)
- FÉRAUD, Laurent Charles (Nice, 1829 – Tangier, 1888) A chief interpreter, whose career was all mapped out. Indeed, at nineteen, he was secretary-interpreter at the civil police station, the forerunner of the prefecture. A year later, he was appointed "2nd class auxiliary military interpreter" (Lalmi, p.7) in August 1850. He succeeded Vignard as the interpreter of the commander of the province of Constantine. Féraud was an active member of the Archaeological Society of Constantine and the Algerian Historical Society, he published "Kitab el Adouani, ou le Sahara de Constantine et de Tunis" (1868) and "Notices historiques sur les tribus de la province de Constantine" (1869) (Messaoudi, p.171) in their journals. In 1884, he was appointed Consul in Tangier. He left behind a remarkable and highly detailed work titled, "Les interprètes de l'armée d'Afrique (archives du corps)", which became a valuable resource for interpreters worldwide.

5. Conclusion :

In our exploration of French colonization in Algeria, we have highlighted the significant role played by various individuals in expanding colonial forces on Algerian soil. Military interpreters, with their intelligence, thirst for knowledge and language skills, acted as crucial intermediaries, bridging cultural gaps and facilitating communication among different groups. While the "Algerian Historical Society" contributed to the appreciation of Algeria's cultural heritage, its affiliation with French authorities raises questions about

its true intentions and impact on Algerian history. To fully understand Algeria's colonial history, it is essential to grasp the complex role of this organization.

To comprehend the society's role in Algerian history, it is necessary to consider it as a whole, taking into account both its positive contributions and its questionable actions. On one hand, the society did contribute to the preservation and promotion of the country's cultural and historical heritage. However, it is clear that many, if not the majority, of its members maintained regular contact with French authorities, providing them with information on the territories controlled by different tribes in Algeria, thereby aiding colonial authorities in their military campaigns. This double game can be attributed to the fact that the Algerian Historical Society was funded and controlled by the colonial authorities. It would have been unrealistic to expect any other outcome, considering that the organization was under the influence of an opposing force.

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