

Book Review

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On his way through an airport in 1988, Professor Bilqasim Sa'adallah of the University of Algiers experienced a scholar's worst nightmare. He lost a briefcase containing a partially completed manuscript, research notes, and documents difficult to replace. This disaster might be read as a metaphor for his object of study, Algerian cultural history. On a far larger scale, French colonialism posed a potentially irreversible disaster for the Arabic and Islamic cultural heritage of Algeria. With the initial French onslaught in the 1830s, many documents and manuscripts were destroyed; some for no better reason than that French soldiers found them convenient for lighting their pipes. French confiscation of Islamic endowment properties in urban areas left educational institutions dependent on meager allocations from colonial authorities. The prolonged upheaval of the revolution from 1954 to 1962 also took its toll as the militant settlers of the Secret Army Organization (OAS) used their incendiary skills on the National Library, and as private collections of books and periodicals were destroyed or dispersed, and archives were carted off to France.

The task of re-collecting the materials of Algeria's cultural heritage is, despite all that has occurred, by no means impossible. To Professor Sa'adallah it was a compelling task. He continued with his work and, some ten years after the briefcase disaster, published a nine-volume work, *Tarikh al-Jazai'ir al-thaqafi* (*The Cultural History of Algeria*) with Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, a Beirut publishing house specializing in works on the Maghrib.

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Traditional bard performing.

### Scope of the Work

This work is encyclopedic in scope, covering aspects of Algerian culture ranging from Quranic interpretation and Islamic law to decorative arts and music. Several sections reflect the Islamic tradition of scholars' biographies. The first two volumes cover from 1500 to 1830, from the eve of the Ottoman era to the start of the French conquest. The next six volumes cover the colonial era, and the final volume consists of an exhaustive index.

The *Tarikh al-thaqafi* casts a wide net, covering not only major and minor Algerian Islamic scholars and religious leaders but also French educators, interpreters, and Orientalists, as well as French educated and bi-cultural Algerian Muslims. Its encyclopaedic style, at once broadly comprehensive and narrowly segmented by topic, offers an alternative to the monograph, a Western scholarly format that has dominated the writing of Algerian history in the post-colonial era. It allows for the exploration of persons, events, and themes that escape the attention of scholars guided by narrow theoretical concerns.

The immediate purpose of the *Tarikh al-thaqafi* is to create a practical reference work. But it is hard to separate this practical task from larger issues. A product of the 1980s and 1990s, this work appears at a time when it has become evident that Algerians cannot simply retreat comfortably into their Arabic-Islamic tradition, and that Algeria is inextricably involved in a wider global society. In these decades, many Algerians, both of secular and Islamic orientation, have found themselves destined to live and raise their families in Europe or North America. An element in the evolving identity of these communities is the conviction that dialogue between Islamic and Western cultures is possible, and that Algerians, because of their long and intense exposure to the West, have an important role in spearheading such dialogue. In this context, an investigation of cultural interactions in the colonial period is highly relevant.

Second, the relation between religion – and, more broadly, culture – and the state has emerged as a central problem for Alge-

# Re-collecting Algerian Cultural History: The Work of Bilqasim Sa'adallah



PHOTO: ALLAN CHRISTELOW, EL OUED, SOUF OASIS, 1972.

ria. A reasoned discussion of the issue requires an examination of the three decades prior to the First World War (abundantly covered in these volumes), a period when Islamic policy was at the heart of France's *politique coloniale*. The colonial authorities then nurtured an orthodox religious establishment in Algeria but, as alliances between religious elites and governments often are, it was fragile.

Sa'adallah's work does not propose any simple, clear-cut thesis about the evolving relationship between Islam and the state. Rather, he provides examples that might serve as grist for discussion of the issue. He often displays his greatest enthusiasm when discussing individuals who defy easy categorization, who invite us to see the complexity of forces shaping the Algerian past.

### Launching Arabic journalism

Take for example Jeanne Desrayaux, daughter of an Algiers *lycée* professor, and herself recipient of a diploma in Arabic. In 1905, she was sent by the then Governor General Charles Jonnart, along with her father, on a mission to Tunisia and Egypt. There she studied girls' education and Arabic publications. Inspired by what she saw, she returned to Algeria to establish *al-Ihya* (*Revival*), the first Arabic-language magazine published in Algeria. Leading Algerian figures in the state-sponsored Islamic educational establishment collaborated on the publication. It published articles on the cultural and political ferment sweeping the Islamic world at the time. A key premise of *al-Ihya* was that assimilation had failed and the future well-being of Algeria depended upon moral and intellectual regeneration based on Arabic-Islamic tradition. Though it lasted less than two years, publishing some thirty-four bi-weekly issues, *al-Ihya* helped inspire a number of other Arabic newspapers in the years before the First World War.

Sa'adallah contrasts Desrayaux to her contemporary, Isabelle Eberhart, a figure who has attracted much attention from Western academics, drawn to her image of swash-buckling adventure and lifestyle experimentation. Desrayaux receives scarcely a line in

the major French language studies of Algeria. If her photograph is an accurate indication, she was prim and proper. She also appears to have been at least partly of African ancestry, perhaps with family origins in the French West Indies. It may be that part of Jonnart's intent in fostering her enterprise was to create a socially conservative alternative to *al-Akhbar*, the paper run by French radical Victor Barrucand, chief promoter of the Eberhart mystique.

Jonnart's efforts to create a sort of Franco-Algerian synthesis in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Algeria soon broke down, and for many reasons. It was an imperial cultural synthesis, built from the top down, opposed from the outset by French settler politicians, supported by diverse individuals who, because of their education or disposition, identified with the effort to promote what we would now call a multi-cultural society. The effort was also crippled by the French law on separation of state from religion, passed in 1905.

### Islamic activist with a colonial medal

As the imperial synthesis crumbled, new expressions of Islam in Algeria took on a more popular and political character. Symptomatic of this transformation was 'Abbas Bin Hamana, who was instrumental in establishing the first community-supported modern Islamic school in Algeria, in Tebessa, a town near the Tunisian frontier, some 200 kilometres south of the Mediterranean. Tebessa was remote in location, yet situated so that it was exposed to new winds blowing in from Tunis and Tripoli.

Bin Hamana was in many ways a model colonial subject, decorated by the French for his zeal as an agricultural entrepreneur. But when the Italians invaded Libya in 1911, Bin Hamana, like many assimilated Algerians, became an ardent supporter of the rebels. He corresponded with Tripolitanian rebel leader Sulayman al-Baruni.

Not long after this Bin Hamana got caught up in the fray of municipal politics in Tebessa. He incurred the wrath of the local French mayor, who had him thrown in jail. But he also struck up an alliance with Charles

Michel, an engineer posted in Tebessa to work on the nearby phosphate mines, and a partisan of the Société des Droits de l'Homme. As a result, Bin Hamana's case was taken all the way to the Chamber of Deputies in Paris where he was vindicated in 1913. The following year he was murdered, ostensibly as a result of a local political vendetta.

Bin Hamana's career, while obscure, might be seen as a microcosm of themes that continued to weigh heavily on Algerian political life: links with international Islamic and anti-imperialist causes; human rights activism; Islam as a factor in popular mobilization; and factional violence, perhaps manipulated by higher authorities, but with a dynamic of its own, and the potential for undermining projects to build a stable political hierarchy.

### A reformer in the *zawiya*

Another complex figure that captured Sa'adallah's attention is 'Abd al-'Aziz Bin al-Hashimi Bin Ibrahim. Though he was head of a Qadiriyya Sufi lodge, or *zawiya*, in the oasis community of El Oued, his father had sent him to study at the Zaytuna Islamic university in Tunis where he absorbed *salafi* critiques of Sufism. In 1937 he joined the Association of Algerian 'Ulama, who supported modern Islamic education with a strong *salafi* orientation. He opened a school under the aegis of this association in the family lodge in El Oued. But soon thereafter he fell victim to a combination of local rivalries and international tensions. He was accused of supporting German and Italian plots and incarcerated in the notorious Kudiyit Aty prison in Constantine.

### From El Oued to Minneapolis

The story is of particular relevance to Professor Sa'adallah, for he was growing up in El Oued when the above events occurred. With the support of the Association of 'Ulama, he pursued his education first in Tunis, then in Cairo. His educational career took a novel turn in 1962 when he went to the University of Minnesota on a Fulbright grant to prepare a PhD in history. Some three decades later, he was to conduct much of the work for the present volume in the quiet stacks of the University of Minnesota library, with the aid of its interlibrary loan staff, who helped him pull together some of the dispersed fragments of Algerian cultural history that the winds of fortune had transported to North America. ◆

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