

Julia A. Clancy-Smith

[Rebel and Saint](#)

Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800 1904)



Introduction



Introduction

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, an Algerian female saint and sufi, residing in a small oasis on the Sahara's upper rim, composed a letter containing gentle rebukes to local French military officials: "I beg you to display solicitude and friendship by keeping away from me people who are unjust and disturb the peace and to examine attentively my case from the legal viewpoint since you are just and equitable."^[1] Why was an Algerian woman, Lalla Zaynab, reminding colonial authorities of their duties while simultaneously characterizing France's rule as "just" and "equitable"? Are Zaynab's words and the fact that she corresponded with Algeria's foreign masters to be interpreted as evidence of collaboration or of accommodation? Were her actions unusual or was Zaynab, a Muslim woman revered for her piety and erudition, merely acting as other religious notables did in the past century? And what do letters appealing to those ostensibly monopolizing certain kinds of power betray about the nature of relations between colonizer and colonized, about the cultures of colonialism?

The present study seeks to change the way we think about North African history during the turbulent nineteenth century.^[2] This perhaps immodest objective results from a decade of painstaking inquiry into the political behavior of a group of provincial, yet regionally powerful, Muslim notables and their clienteles. The complex responses of these notables, both individual and collective, to the imposition of the French colonial regime upon Algeria after 1830 shaped, indeed altered, the course of Maghribi history. That history and that century were fashioned by a succession of encounters between the peoples of North Africa on the one hand and the twin forces of European imperialism and the larger world economy on the other. In these multiple confrontations, inconclusive skirmishes, bet hedging, implicit pacts, and prudent retreats were as important to historical process as

violent clashes or heroic last stands. But first these encounters, involving religious notables and ordinary people alike, must be examined on three levels, all of them intertwined.

The first is the local level the world of Saharan religious figures and the tribal or village folk who constituted their followers. Seemingly remote due to geographical location from the century's prevailing currents of historical change, these peoples were in fact caught up in much wider, relentless processes. To varying degrees, they were painfully aware of the larger, often menacing forces around them. Their collective *mentalité* was in part constructed through a ceaseless filtering of information and news received from "outside." And that "outside" was itself continuously shifting. At times it could mean no more than the next oasis or a regional pilgrimage center; at others, the world beyond was comprised of a North African capital or the cities of the *Mashriq* (eastern Arab world) and Hijaz. As colonialism gained momentum in the Maghrib, the outside came to include places, people, and events in Europe.

The next level was that of the Islamic ecumene, which for North Africans stretched from the shores of the Atlantic and Mediterranean deep into the Sahara and eastward to the Mashriq-Hijaz complex, while also encompassing Istanbul, the imperial core for both Algeria and Tunisia. More or less direct and continuous links between the local community and *Dar al-Islam* (the Islamic world) nurtured socioreligious aspirations and political programs, while sharpening, particularly for the Algerians under French rule, the sense of moral loss and outrage. In the Islamic world, local communities often looked to local religious notables to explain, manage, or broker events and changes unleashed by triumphant European imperialism. From this perspective, the reactions of Saharan peoples to the deepening crises of the nineteenth century have a resonance with collective responses elsewhere in Africa or Asia.

Finally, the last tier relates to world history. World-system theory has tended to ignore peoples located on the margins of non-Western states.^[3] As will be argued, the inhabitants of the North African hinterland were neither the silent victims of imperial thrusts into their lands nor the passive subjects of Muslim rulers seeking to counter those thrusts through modernization programs. Not only did the provincial Muslim notables and common folk studied here confront and perhaps comprehend, if somewhat dimly the outside forces intervening in society but they also sought to manipulate them to their advantage, sometimes successfully, at other times less so. For the purposes of this study, *notables* refers to holy persons regarded by their communities as legitimately and simultaneously claiming the status of saint (*waliy*), sufi, and scholar (*'alim*).^[4] The collective

biographies of these saints, sufis, and *'ulama'* (ulama) span not only the supple frontiers between eastern Algeria (the Constantine) and Tunisia but also bridge several generations of holy persons, male and female. For the most part, these holy persons resided within a specific ecological environment, the pre-Sahara, in both Algeria and Tunisia, although the adjacent mountains of the Awras (Aurès) also participated in the political and religious rhythms of the region. Their followings were tribespeople, villagers, and oasis peasants as well as "secular" elites tribal big men, desert princes, or the great families, allied first with the Turks and subsequently the colonial regime. The struggles of these elites, local and otherwise, to snatch the remnants of the partially toppled Turkish state after 1830, and thereby turn adversity to personal advantage, molded the political world in which the Muslim notables lived. Finally, while most of the notables studied here were members of one branch of the Rahmaniyya tariqa the Saharan Rahmaniyya other sufi orders and other types of religious leaders, principally rebellious *mahdis* (Muslim redeemers), also figure in the historical

narrative.

The common folk, too, play a not insignificant role as clients and disciples of privileged saintly lineages and sufi masters; on more than one occasion, ordinary people worked as pressure groups for or against specific kinds of political action. In several instances, they obliged reticent religious patrons to plunge into the uncertainties of populist protest.^[5] And it was the colonial regime's abiding fear of collective unrest which compelled French authorities to seek compromises with religious notables. In addition to acting as both followers and advocates, people of modest substance actively contributed to politics as bearers of news, information, and rumors. These rumors articulated a language of power which boldly defied France's divinely ordained civilizing mission. Thus, these rumors had an ideological dimension, and as such they constituted a form of implicit political discourse in a society of restricted literacy. Finally, due to the turmoil of the conquest era in North Africa, followers or disciples might be transformed into leaders.

Bu Ziyān (Abu Ziyān), the self-styled messianic leader of the 1849 Za'atsha (Zaatcha) revolt, originally came from the ranks of the humble. The mahdi of Warqala (Ouargla), Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah, who led a sequel rebellion between 1851 and 1855, was also of modest origins. Like Bu Ziyān, his uncommon acts of piety propelled him from the margins of the rural religious establishment onto the center stage of anticolonial resistance. Of course, for ordinary people, active participation even in religiously sanctioned jihad was not an "unalloyed impulse" for it offered the opportunity to best local rivals or settle outstanding scores.^[6]

4

But this is more than an investigation of the most dramatic manifestation of collective action and protest armed revolt. For it seeks to dredge up the subterranean sociocultural universe which made rebellion possible and imaginable or conversely impeded such. Thus the "how" of rebellion is as important as its causation; revolt serves as a vehicle for exploring other relationships, particularly how events from "outside" were experienced by those caught in their wake. Many of these forces have been buried under the debris of the upheavals associated with France's lengthy pacification of her unsubmitive African *département*. Moreover, all of the options available to religious notables, tribal elites, and ordinary people are explored as they strove to oppose and challenge, or merely cope and come to terms with, the devastating reality of foreign conquest.

The underlying assumption here is that various kinds of sociopolitical action bet hedging, revolt, shifting trade strategies, migration, withdrawal, or avoidance protest were in the aggregate the main motors of historical change during much of the past century rather than alternative forces, such as novel technologies, new economic systems, or new classes. Nevertheless, the narrative is perhaps unduly prejudiced toward the more flamboyant expressions of collective grievances movements led by mahdist rebels since these are the best documented for the nineteenth century.^[7]

What follows is an investigation of the political behavior of religious notables and other figures, or more accurately, of the implicit cultural norms governing that behavior. For just as there existed a moral economy of peasant rebellion, the political behavior of Muslim notables was dictated by shared and commonly accepted norms.^[8] In addition, it is argued that even as jihad was proclaimed or the millennium predicted, implicit pacts were being tentatively worked out between some religious notables and representatives of the colonial order. These unstated agreements were crucial

to modern Algerian history since they permitted the survival of her cultural patrimony in a society literally and figuratively under siege.

Political action thus is broadly defined to include not only participation in jihads or mahdist movements but also such things as moral persuasion, propaganda, *hijra* (emigration), evasion, withdrawal, and accommodation with the colonial regime. Indeed, many of these strategies were continually merged employed together or alternatively as North Africans, whether of notable status or humble station, sought to create a space where the impact of asymmetrical power could be attenuated. In this most failed, a few succeeded, and some achieved success in failure.

To the extent that the sources permit, the story or rather collection of stories is told from the perspective of the North African population. To the indigenous inhabitants of the desert or mountains, the worlds of

5

military and civilian authorities as well as of the European *colons* (settlers) appeared as distant, strange, and hostile; this was true for much of the nineteenth century. The brutal suppression of uprisings aside, the colonial regime's authority was remote, experienced unevenly, and in some cases mediated through familiar intermediaries, among them, sufi *shaykhs* (masters). Nevertheless, information and rumors about the curious, if repellent, foreigners reached the village and tribe, contributing to a local worldview of a social order overturned. Therefore, I have attempted to portray events, transformations, and the daily flow of life from the peculiar vantage point of those concerned. And most of these stories have not been told or have enjoyed only a partial hearing.

Until now two constructs, one colonial and the other indigenous, regarding the political behavior of religious leaders, particularly sufi shaykhs, during the conquest era have prevailed. Moreover, the periodization of modern North African history has been informed in large measure by these two competing models of the political behavior of Muslim notables. The colonial model held that certain sufi orders, especially the Rahmaniyya and its leaders, were inherently political, thus resolutely opposed to Algeria's French masters throughout the past century: "Everywhere, the leaders of the Rahmaniyya order exhort their followers to revolt against French domination."^[9] However, embedded within the colonial canon and in colonial sources and largely adopted uncritically by postcolonial authors, is another, more ambiguous, nuanced account of how religious notables reacted to and contended with foreign domination. Many were in fact risk avoiders more than last-ditch resisters.

Rather than enthusiastically enlisting in militant programs to expel the intruding Europeans, local Muslim notables found to their dismay that politics intruded, cruelly at times, more subtly at others, into their spiritual bailiwicks or mundane affairs. For many saints and sufis, had politics not come to find them the preferred mode of coping would have surely been to ignore the presence of the infidels and thereby come to terms with it.^[10] This risk avoidance on the part of religious figures is seen in both the uprisings studied here, the 1849 Za'atsha revolt and the rebellion inspired by the self-proclaimed mahdi Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah. Simply stated, I have employed a biographical case study approach to debunk the myth that Muslim notables, especially the Rahmaniyya, were invariably the causative agents in anticolonial resistance in the rebellious half century stretching from 1830 to 1871 only to subsequently become compliant collaborators in the French imperial

experiment.

Moreover, some of the Rahmaniyya erudites of the pre-Sahara challenge characterizations of the North African holy man as a "warrior saint" or "martial marabout" who fused "strong-man politics with holy-man

6

piety."^[11] In fact many of the most puissant saints were reluctant to take up the cudgels of violent protest even when participation in revolt held forth the promise of deliverance from infidel rule. This diffidence had many causes the personality of the religious notable in question, the spiritual politics then in force between sufi-saintly lineages and their holy rivals, the demands and needs of followers, and how different events were perceived and lived. It was rather the mahdi, and the collective will of popular followings, that together forced some hesitant religious leaders into the tumult of the political arena, often with disastrous consequences.

The second paradigm of saintly behavior the indigenous is found in the writings of the Algerian scholar, Muhammad al-Hafnawi, and to a lesser extent, in those of the Tunisian chronicler, Ahmad ibn Abi al-Diyaf.^[12] Both of these writers' works offer invaluable biographical sketches of sufis, saints, ulama, and other notables residing both in the cities and countryside. If the colonial literature portrayed sufi activists, such as Shaykh Mustafa b. 'Azzuz (c. 1800 1866), as scheming behind-the-scenes foes of France's grand design for North Africa, indigenous accounts from the period usually omit any mention of overtly political acts by religious figures. Thus was the nature and social uses of hagiography in this period.^[13] But the silence of traditional sources should not be construed as some sort of subterfuge. Rather the silence itself speaks loudly about hidden cultural norms defining the supple boundaries between the realms of the political and the religious.

One thesis is that an underground yet momentous transformation unfolded quietly sometime during the tumultuous era of Algeria's conquest (1830 1871) and the century's close. This transformation involved the establishment of unstated, although compelling, pacts between prominent religious figures, such as Muhammad b. Abi al-Qasim (c. 1823 1897) and his daughter, Lalla Zaynab (c. 1850 1904), and colonial officials. The elaboration of these unwritten contracts and their observance by both parties meant that Algerian Muslim culture survived and in some cases was able to flourish modestly under the less than favorable circumstances of the period. Moreover, by taking the historical narrative down to 1904, the date of Lalla Zaynab's death, I suggest the existence of unsuspected continuities between the early conquest epoch and later periods; some of the transformations normally associated with the Third Republic were already incipient or well under way prior to the Muqrani (Mokrani) revolt of 1871.

Movement and Movements

This is also a story about various kinds of movement physical displacements such as travel, migration, pilgrimage, flight and social or spiritual journeys from one status to another. And movement of whatever sort

7

implies borders and boundaries, implicating those who either bridged frontiers or conversely kept them in place. By adhering to the nascent Rahmaniyya movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, clans of somewhat parochial saints in the Kabylia, Awras, and pre-Sahara achieved a remarkable degree of social mobility. Tariqa membership, along with popular cults celebrating the special piety of living and deceased holy persons, represented a lever for sociospiritual advancement.

If local saints served as the hinges of daily life between the natural and supernatural, saintly-sufi lineages also served as mediators between Islam as locally received and the wider Islamic ecumene. This mediation in turn was related to the kinds of movement associated with *hajj*, or pilgrimage, which is both physical and interior or spiritual. For Shaykh Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Rahman (c. 1715-1793/1794), founder of the Rahmaniyya order, the hajj to Mecca in 1740 brought an altered sense of Islamic community and, upon his return to Algeria, an utterly changed social standing vis-à-vis his own people. Sidi 'Abd al-Rahman's labors to effect reform and renewal in the Algerian Kabylia, his native land, ultimately gave birth to a new sufi order which by 1850 had expanded outward from its original nucleus to encompass followers in the Constantine, the Sahara, and neighboring Tunisia. After 1830 in Algeria, hajj to the East and permanent migration out of French-held lands were frequently combined as strategies for personal salvation or collective redemption. As significant as hijra, or migration, from the colony was *inkimash*, a form of inward religiospiritual movement or withdrawal employed by those Muslims who lacked the will or the means to depart from their homeland.

The movements of political or religious émigrés from Algeria to adjacent Islamic states a form of self-imposed exile were also critical to the construction of wider historical processes. I have deliberately chosen to cross back and forth between the shifting political limits separating Algeria from adjacent states because of their immense importance. In the course of the nineteenth century, the frontiers between the North African states were transformed into zones of exchange, compromise, and contest. Sufi shaykhs and their followers, merchants, recalcitrant tribes, and rebels ignored those borders, manipulating them to advantage as long as possible. In doing so, they inadvertently caused the borders to be ever more rigidly defined and carefully policed as frantic colonial officials sought to close Algeria off from external influences.

Paradoxically, the geospiritual hinterlands of some activist sufis, such as the Rahmaniyya Shaykh Mustafa b. 'Azzuz, may have been initially extended by the French inroads into the Algerian pre-Sahara. Driven into

southwestern Tunisia in 1844, 'Azzuz's relocation in the Jarid brought the turbulent frontier up to the beylik's borders. From the safety of his large, prosperous zawiya in Nafta, Sidi 'Azzuz sent out spiritual runners far and wide. By the eve of his death in 1866, he had become the focal point of a smaller movement, within the larger Rahmaniyya idiom, whose members referred to themselves as "'Azzuziyya." Functioning as a political haven and cultural redoubt for Algerians during much of the century, Tunisia (and Morocco) continued to serve as a religious and intellectual sanctuary for fellow Muslims even after 1881. Tunisia's open-door policy toward Algerian émigrés was one element, among several, that eventually brought its forced incorporation into France's expanding African empire.

Over-the-border migrations were intimately connected to the movement of information conveyed from place to place by myriad bearers and go-betweens. Access to news and rumors conferred a certain degree of mastery over events and their interpretation, even if those rumors deepened the collective sense of a topsy-turvy world. The endless cycle of rumors about revolt and imminent deliverance from the degradation of foreign rule may have contributed to outbursts of rebellious behavior in nineteenth-century North Africa. Yet they also betrayed a sense of injustice and moral uncertainty as North Africans strove to comprehend the incomprehensible.

Moreover, if improvised news and hearsay circulated far and wide among the humble and mighty alike, the information circuits came to include the doings of the French masters of Algeria or even events in Europe. 'Abd al-Qadir, the leader of initial Algerian Muslim resistance from 1832 to 1847, not only had an elaborate network of informants but also perused French newspapers to keep abreast of parliamentary debates in Paris. And Shaykh Mustafa b. 'Azzuz pressed the French explorer, Henri Duveyrier, during their 1860 meeting in the Tunisian Jarid to provide him with details about Western technology. The point is that information like spiritual authority or political legitimacy became, as will be argued, a commodity to be fought over and negotiated for. And in an age of intense uncertainty for both colonizer and colonized, access to news and information represented a contested arena for the powerless and empowered alike.

The biographies collected here demonstrate how people participated either willingly or unwittingly in, were buffeted by, or in some cases forged larger social processes. Indigenous political elites, religious notables, and simple folk were ensnared in translocal forces which at times gradually filtered down to the village, town, or tribe and at others burst precipitously upon them. Conversely, defiant groups on the margins of the state or just beyond the colonial state's grasp lured France into campaigns and conquests

which did not figure in imperial agendas haphazardly constructed in Paris. Thus, the European conquerors were frequently ensnared as well in regions and struggles for which they were ill prepared and for which they hastily devised solutions.

If policies and decisions made in the Métropole suffered endless permutations before reaching Algiers, grand schemes hammered out by governors-general in the capital of *Algérie Française* were deformed by the time they reached communities situated on the edges of the turbulent frontiers. And small-scale actions and hidden as well as explicit forms of contention contributed as much to the configurations of the colonial enterprise in the Maghrib as did large-scale movements or the decrees of those at the pinnacle of the imperial hierarchy.

My conclusions point to the need for rethinking or reimagining the constantly fluctuating dialogue between the local and the translocal; new borders and markers for recasting North African history during the past century are needed. For certain questions and certain periods, the nationstate as a unit of analysis does not suffice. Rather it camouflages or overlooks many of the significant forces and transformations occurring at the perimeters of the state or just beyond its unforeseen limits.

A Word on Sources

This study does not pretend to be a full-blown "history from below." The relative dearth of evidence from the past written by ordinary people whose extraordinary deeds catapulted them momentarily into history's mainstream precludes such. The protagonists did not keep diaries or daily accounts of their endeavors. Nor would rebels like Bu Ziyān had he survived set about writing memoirs or autobiographies, genres largely unknown to that society in that age. In large part, documentation for rebellious activity is drawn from colonial observers and actors military leaders, Bureaux Arabes officers, explorers, adventurers, and travelers many of whom, although not all, had a stake in narrating events and conditions as accurately as possible. The richest source by far are the archives of the Bureaux Arabes, whose meticulous accounts from "on the scene" resemble "whodunit" detective tales or police reports. The principal aim of the literature of surveillance was to ascertain the causes and motives underlying insurrection as well as to identify prime movers. In addition, there was a prophylactic dimension to these minute investigative inquiries; the ultimate intent was to learn from the past to better control the still unpredictable political future.

Moreover, some of the sources are akin to court records or legal transcripts. While the accused were often absent from the proceedings, having perished during revolts or fled the country, they were no less indicted, put

on trial, and usually condemned. If the record of the 1849 rebellion led by Bu Ziyān reads like a novel with a beginning, climax, and dramatic end it also represents the text of a trial. Those who wrote about Bu Ziyān and his followers were not only judging him and North African society but also the colonial regime itself, its potential flaws and political soft spots. An element of the inquisitorial undergirds the documents in their assessment of what went "wrong" and thus why events transpired as they did. Zaynab's story also reads like a court case, although she was not on trial for classic insurrectionary behavior. Zaynab stood accused of being a "fille insoumise" (a "disobedient woman"). Her indocility toward those in authority male military officers and their indigenous Muslim allies provoked panic in Algiers in an era celebrated as the apogee of French Algeria. Letters and gentle rebukes were perceived as threatening the fragile edifice of colonial control. Ironically or perhaps tragically these stories, or fragments of such, are about people who altered unintentionally the direction of North African history even as they struggled against changes deemed undesirable to their vision of a desirable social order.

