

ALGERIAN SUFISM IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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This chapter¹ will explore some of the principal themes of Sufism in the colonial period, both from the point of view of the colonized and the colonizers. The most important point that needs to be stressed at the outset is that, however much the Sufis have been characterized as superstitious `marabouts` - by both orientalists and modernizing Muslims alike – it was largely thanks to the influence of Sufism that a basic piety and spirituality were sustained throughout the colonial period. Furthermore, if it be remembered that colonialism was, essentially, an assault on the traditional Islamic way of life and accompanying modes of thought, then one can conceive of no strategy of `resistance` more effective and fundamental than that pursued by the Sufis. Paradoxically, it was those whose concern was in essence `otherworldly` that proved the most successful in concretely thwarting the colonial designs of the French, thus proving the efficacy that flows from the practice of the Sufi ideal: `Be in the world, but not of it.`

Before addressing these themes directly, it may be helpful to provide a briefly sketched back-ground describing the overall institutional forms taken by Sufism at this time; and this means, essentially, giving a brief overview of the major Sufi orders and their leading shaykhs in Algeria under colonialism.

In the first third of the nineteenth century, when France embarked upon the colonial conquest of North Africa, Sufism was already organized in the form of religious orders. In their book entitled *Les confréries religieuses musulmanes*, Depont and Coppolani numbered twenty three of them throughout the country in 1879¹. Some of them originated from the East (Syria, Iran, and Turkey) and settled in North Africa as local branches, still connected to their eastern headquarters. Others became independent, no longer beholden to the shaykhs of the East; they were even named after their local founder or renovator.

One of the most prominent of these latter was the *Tijâniyya* order which was founded by shaykh Abu-l-Abbâs Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Sâlim al-Tijânî who was born in 1738 in Ain Mâdhî, some 72 km east of Laghouât (Algeria) and died in Fez in 1815, i.e. fifteen years before the conquest of Algeria by France. Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijânî was one of the greatest

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masters of Sufism that the Algerian land has ever given birth to during the last centuries. His teaching can be found in the *Jawâhir al-ma'ânî*, compiled by his disciple 'Ali b. Harâzim. Shaykh Ahmad Al-Tijânî was an exceptional figure who still commands respect and attention within Sufi circles as well as among the general seekers after the inner truths of religion. Before creating his own order which was destined to spread throughout Saharan Africa, he had been an affiliate of the *Khalwatiyya*, founded in Iran by Muhammad al-Khalwatî al-Khawârizmi (who died in 751 / 1350). His order was based in Ain Mâdhî, near Laghouât. But, after the attack of the Turks who feared the emergence of a rival power, he took refuge in Morocco in 1799, where he was warmly welcomed by Sultan Mulay Sliman. After his death, his successors returned to Ain Mâdhî and spread further the presence and influence of the order.

His second son, and also his successor, refused to give allegiance to Emir Abdelkader. The latter besieged the fort of Ain Mâdhî for six full months, from June to the end of November 1838. Abdelkader, surprised by the resistance of the besieged, was compelled to come to an agreement which allowed the Tijânî leader to leave the town, without recognizing the Emir's authority. After the French victory, the Tijâniyya was re-established in Ain Mâdhî, and gradually gained the confidence of the new masters of the country.

The Tijâniyya offers the most eloquent example of the orders' dynamism, even under the hard conditions of colonialism; it proved its spiritual efficacy in various ways, but particularly through its propagation of Islam in the African lands coveted by Christian missionaries. No less than thirty million Africans took up Islam, thanks to this order, according to Miftâh Abd al-Bâqi.² Even if the figure seems somewhat exaggerated, it does indicate that the colonial authorities were unable to inhibit the activity of this order. With the approach of independence in 1954, the Tijâniyya suffered an overall decline; and today, in numerical terms, it is the third largest order in the country and the largest in the Saharan regions.

Just before the Tijâniyya, another important order had been founded; this was the Rahmâniyya, which also stemmed from the Khalwatiyya, and which was to play a prominent role during the Kabyle resistance to the colonial onslaught. The Rahmâniyya was founded by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Rahmân al-Jarjarâ'î (who died in 1793-94), also named Bou Qabrayn, i.e, the double-tombed man.

Today, Sidi Muhammad is still the second patron saint of the Algerian capital, known as *Moul lebled*. Captain De Neveu wrote in 1845: “Ben Abd er-Rahman’s order is really the National Order of Algeria. It has been given birth within Algeria; it has been founded by native of Algiers. Who knows if this reason has not determined Mahi-ed-Din’s son (Emir Abdelkader) to prefer it to any other.”³

In 1897, it was the most widespread order with 177 *zâwiyas*, 140,596 male adepts and 13,186 female adepts; and these figures are certainly below the true number, according to Depont and Coppolani. The Rahmâniyya is not only regarded by many as the Algerian order *par excellence*, it is also seen as the “National Church of Kabylia”, to use Mouloud Mammeri’s expression, who also notes that “since independence, this order has undergone a real revival of activity.”⁴

In a short article published in 1961, one year before the independence of Algeria, the review *l’Afrique et l’Asie* wrote in the 55th issue: “Towards 1950, the orders as a whole numbered some 500,000 adepts divided into four main orders: the Qâdiriyya, the Khalwatiyya, the Shâdhiliyya and the Khâdhiriyya. Numerically, the Rahmâniyya, connected to the Khalwatīyya, comes first with nearly 230,000 adepts, most of them berbers.”

It is during the first decade of the French occupation (1830-1840) that the famous saint, shaykh Mohand ul-Hosin was born in Kabylia which was then still free. He died at the beginning of the present century and had belonged to this order before retiring.

In 1823, the Darqâwa was founded by Sidi al-‘Arabî al-Darqâwî in Morocco, but this *tarîqa*, stemming from the Shâdhiliyya, had an important ramification, especially in western Algeria. In 1845, De Neveu spoke about it in these words: “They are dangerous fanatics, always ready to seize any opportunity to raise peaceful peoples against the authorities. As a matter of fact, the Darqâwa is no more a religious sect; it has turned into a political faction that has constantly been hostile to the Turks”.⁵

After the French occupation, another local order, which will have a major influence in Libya, was given birth in the region of Mostaganem. It is the Sanūsiyya, founded in 1253/1837 by Sayyid Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Sanūsî (who was born in 1202/1783 and died in 1276/1859).

Another major order, perhaps the oldest to be established in the country and the one which was to manifest fierce resistance to the French invasion was the Qâdiriyya, which

spread, in the western Algeria, mainly in Oran and its surrounding, and to which belonged the famous Emir Abdelkader (‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Jazâ‘irî). The Qâdiriyya and the Khalwatiyya spread in Turkey, too, where they had many adepts, among the political and social elite as well as the ordinary folk.

To complete this brief table of the situation of Sufism, one must include some smaller orders, stemming from the Darqâwiyya, such as the Hebrîyya, also called Bu‘Azzawiyya, born in Morocco, but with a ramification in Algeria, and the ‘Alawiyya, well after the “pacification” of the country by the French, in the beginning of the 20th century. The Hebrîyya tarîqa, which Depont and Coppolani ignored, developed mainly in the north-west of Algeria and numbered 6,000 followers in 1953, according to General André.⁶ Such, then, were the major orders in Algeria; and, as can be seen from the number of their adherents alone, their influence on Algerian society could not be ignored.

The colonial elites rapidly addressed themselves to the task of investigating the orders, both in respect of their teaching and their organization. It was an urgent necessity for the effective management of the conquered territories. Exhaustive catalogues were progressively drawn up by colonial officers, anxious to collect information to be used immediately. Later on, the collected information was used by orientalists, some of whom, albeit working in France’s colonial interest, also attempted to carry out scientific work and scholarly research.

The first orientalists were officers in charge of collecting information likely to be useful for the general’s strategies; this they did on site, not from books. One might refer here to Captain De Neveu’s book entitled *Les Khouans, ordres religieux chez les musulmans de l’Algérie*, published in Paris in 1845 (Abdelkader’s resistance came to an end in 1847), the content of which consists of oral information collected directly from the adepts of the different religious orders under scrutiny.⁷

However, our focus here is not so much on the military and political aspects of the encounter between Sufism and colonialism, but on the light which a careful reading of the colonial authors and the orientalists work can shed on the underlying spiritual and cultural dynamics of this encounter.

Sufism during the colonial period can be approached from different angles; organization, legitimacy, teaching, doctrine, and so on. Our study of Sufism during colonial period will be an attempt to elucidate, through concrete examples, the relations that were

established both objectively and subjectively between the two parties, the Sufis and the Europeans.

We shall focus here on two aspects of Algerian Sufism during the one and half centuries of French colonization: first, Sufism as discovered and gradually studied by the occupiers, then Sufism such as it was capable of maintaining itself and surviving within a society which had materially lost everything, including even the semblance of its formal independence and liberty.

THE ORIENTALISTS

The study of Sufism and the religious orders by the orientalists is not merely descriptive. Certainly, there was a need to attend to the most urgent things, to meet the requirements of the new administration which sought to know the adversary. But some authors do not hesitate to propose theoretical explanations, to put forward hypotheses, founded on poor information obtained at the outset. They sought the reasons for the development of Sufism, or even the laws which govern it. They wondered about its educational efficacy, its strength, its organization, and its energy. And, it must be said, the result of their work is considerable. Some works still remain primary sources, both from the point of view of information and methodology. We are especially thinking of the works of L. Rinn, O. Depont and X. Coppolani, and E. Doutté, in France, of I. Goldziher in German orientalism and of many others.

In a famous article, headed *Le culte des saints chez les musulmans*, published in 1880 in **La Revue de l'Histoire des Religions**, I. Goldziher laid down, for the first time, the “scientific” foundations of the study of sanctity in Islam. Many of his observations deserve the careful attention of researchers. It must be said that Goldziher is not at all concerned about the “civilizing mission” so dear to the French. His research is not determined by administrative constraints.

This considerable work achieved by men with the double purpose of serving colonization and science, can be considered, now, as a literature showing the French the way to the gradual discovery of Islam. A textual analysis may give us evidence that this struggle of the French against Islam was in fact a struggle of the French against themselves, against a certain state of mind, in order to overcome their own complex towards Islam.

So, the question will be asked, what did the French think of Sufism? We will base our answer on three examples, corresponding to three types of reaction: the reaction of the European in favour of colonialism, that of the scientist, and that of the common citizen meeting Muslims and represented here by a doctor.

In their endeavour to understand Sufism, the orientalist are often contradictory. When they deal with religious orders, they cannot help emphasising their hostility to France and depict them as fanatic forces opposed to progress. They even blame the orders for not being in accordance with Islamic orthodoxy. The Prophet, it was argued, had never wanted intermediaries to stand between believers and God; but the “marabouts” seemed to constitute a surrogate priesthood, a clergy who have no place within a Muslim society. Like a parasitic priesthood, they also imposed taxes on peasants who were already heavily taxed by the French.

In other words, the French employed a series of arguments used by “orthodox” adversaries of Sufism from within Islam itself. But the French also employed a different argument, assuming the legitimacy of intercession: for one sees the colonialist contending with the Sufi shaykhs about the right to be intermediaries between believers and God, and implying that this role falls to them.

In an article entitled *Les confréries musulmanes nord-africaines* published in 1923, P. Bruzon argues first, that “the Prophet of Islam had a genius for preserving his doctrine from the evils which were ravaging Christianity and Judaism”, that is to say, the clergy’s pride and the doctors’ arrogance and vanity. He drew the conclusion that “maraboutism” is condemned by Islam. Then, he demonstrates that this phenomenon and its superstitions have originated from the Berber genius which, like the Persian genius, was anthropomorphist and could not sustain itself without guides and miracles. The Arab conqueror’s mind allowed itself, unwittingly, to be “contaminated” by the mind of the peoples it had conquered. We find here the kind of racial explanation that characterized social and anthropological theories of the 19th century.

After listing the orders, Bruzon proffers some recommendations as to how to behave towards the *sherifs* (that is, the descendants of the Prophet, also known as *sayyids*) and the marabouts: “whether he is a sheriff or a marabout, the man who aims at playing any religious role to the prejudice of Muslim orthodoxy, should always arouse suspicion. There is every chance that such a man is just an ambitious one... We must not let him believe that he is the

essential servant for our policy. We would be wise to receive his most vehement protestations of friendship with some scepticism... By definition, a religious order, a sect, is far too exclusive a social element to be relied upon. Its purpose must inevitably differ from ours. Why should it yield to us? ...Whenever one of their leaders is in favour of us, we must be convinced that is because he sees it as serving his own interests to be so.”

However, the author notes, ‘Fortunately there exists another strong lever which can help us set the North African Muslim world on the way to a better destiny. This lever is, simply, orthodoxy.’ Thereupon he mentions the name of Muammad °Abduh who ‘admits the principles of evolution and proclaims the necessity of progress’. This last remark and those before it show clearly that the ‘*ālim* is perceived by this author as being better disposed towards France than the *shaykh*.

Another – more intelligent – attitude is evinced in an article of Augustin Berque, the father of J. Berque – another famous French orientalist who died in 1995. He writes: “The invasion of maraboutism, since the French conquest, and particularly between 1860 and 1900, can be explained by the diminution of the opposing forces which had contained it before... [those forces] whose decline has been hastened by the higher purpose of our civilizing action...”

The influence of the *zaouia*, he continues, has suddenly increased for it has an open field: “it remains the only attractive centre in the Arab country. And this results in a new polarization of influences which, for centuries, had been neutralising each in the direction of the indigenous masses.”⁸

Now while it is no doubt true that the exoteric ‘*ulamā*’ have often inveighed against some of the excesses committed by Sufis, this should not be exaggerated and presented as all-out rivalry, or, still less, a permanent underlying conflict. But Berque and others like him did not want to admit that the more intensive mobilization of Sufi orders was simply the expression of a community’s will to eject the colonialist. He preferred to look for another cause, in longer-term historical trends. However, as regards the fact that French influence diminished greatly of the institutional influence of the ‘*ulamā*’ to the benefit of the less formal influence of the Sufis, his remark remains basically true.

It is also true that, even during the colonization, the ‘*ulamā*’ continued to criticize the actions and practices of certain orders, and tried to eradicate the “maraboutism” which was

regarded as the main obstacle to modernization. Atatürk was considered as a great renovator of Islam, even though he had not only shut the doors of the *tekkes* (equivalent in Turkey to the Maghrebi *zâwiyas* and the Iranian *khâneqahs*) of the countless orders which had hived off in Anatolia, but he also deprived the ‘*ulamâ*’ themselves of all their powers. The diminution of the exoteric authorities does not necessarily result from the increase of Sufi influence, just as the development of Sufism cannot simply be adduced as a consequence of the weakness of its alleged adversary. The fact that two phenomena take place simultaneously does not mean that one is the cause of the other.

Be this as it may, Berque’s position does have the advantage of showing that it is wrong to affirm *a priori* that the religious orders are pacifist and can easily be reconciled with any governing political power. They had taken up arms against corrupt Ottoman governors, even though they were Muslims; certain shaykh in fact ordered uprising against the *Beys* (Turkish governors) who were blamed for not acting according to the Sharî‘a. And, in Algeria, Shaykh were put under house arrest, or exiled, as was the case with Shaykh Ahmed al-Tijânî, despite the fact he had requested his adepts to be patient and restrained. The Oran *Bey* had prevented the father of the future Emir Abdelkader to go on the pilgrimage. Such facts as these should have suggested to Berque that these religious orders would have all the more reason to rise up against the French who, after all, were not even Muslims.

The political powers always knew instinctively to what extent they could control the orders, and the latter knew too how to set a limit to their ambition. However, on both sides, there had often been an attempt to dominate, if not to eliminate the others.⁹

Nevertheless, even if Berque’s observation is quite original, it remains only partially true, and needs to be complemented and deepened by the realization that, Sufism represented the last energy, the ultimate resource, the most deeply rooted dimension of Muslim society; for, in any society, the form taken by its final recourse reveals most clearly the authentic soul of that society. Algerian society defended itself by progressively mobilizing its energies because “men feel that to unusual challenges we must give original answers.¹⁰ Naturally, Berque, and those orientalist who believed in the “civilizing mission” of France, could not have seen things so sympathetically.

The last example to illustrate the way Sufism was perceived by the French, comes from the testament of certain doctor, Marcel Carret, who relates in his *Souvenirs* – some

excerpts of which are published in the biography by Martin Lings¹¹ – his meeting with Shaykh Ahmed al-‘Alawî whom he visited while he was sick:

*The first thing that struck me was his likeness to the usual representations of Christ. His clothes, so nearly if not exactly the same as those which Jesus must have worn, the fine lawn head-cloth which framed his face, his whole attitude, everything conspired to reinforce the likeness. It occurred to me that such must have been the appearance of Christ when he received his disciples at the time when he was staying with Martha and Mary.*¹²

This was written by a man who was a civilian and a doctor, but it is as an echo of another European testimony to Muslim sanctity; testimony given through a profound observation by a military man, Marshal Bugeaud, the “pacifier” of Algeria. He depicts Emir Abdelkader, whom he had just met for the first time, to the prime Minister, count Molé, as follows: “He is pale and is fairly like what has often been portrayed about Jesus.” The famous Algerian “rebel” was still under forty years of age when he surrendered and had not yet reached full spiritual maturity. Michel Chodkiewicz, who mentions the fact in his introduction to the *Ecrits spirituels*, adds: “This strong feeling is not produced only by the physical appearance of the personage. Bugeaud recognizes in the Emir a greatness which is beyond the reach of his soldierly categories, and attempts to define it in a letter of January 1st, 1846: “He is a sort of prophet, the hope of all Muslim devotees”.¹³

Another famous Frenchman, the unfortunate Leon Roche who pretended to embrace Islam in order to gain proximity to the Emir, witnessed in 1838 a nocturnal prayer by the Emir and his experience of a *hâl*, a mystical state. He notes: “As I was sometimes favoured with the honour of spending the night in Abdelkader’s tent, I could see him praying and I was struck by his mystical enthusiasm, but that night, he showed me the most striking expression of faith. That is the way the great saints of Christianity must have said their prayers”.¹⁴

It is surprising to see that, separated by a century, French Christians could discern in two figures of Islam, the Emir Abdelkader and the Shaykh al-‘Alawî – two representatives of their “faithless” adversaries – features which they do not hesitate to compare to those of Christ, their most sacrosanct figure and one to whom nobody would dare to compare supposedly faithless men. Other Christians were struck by the “Christic” qualities of Muslim saints. Asîm Palacios did not hesitate to entitle his work about Ibn ‘Arabî *El Islam Cristianizado*, and Louis Massignon was rightly struck by the likeness of Hallâj to Christ both in his life and the manner of his death: for, like Christ, Hallaj died on the cross.

Turning our attention now to the question of what the Shaykhs were in fact doing during the colonial period, we shall present for consideration two concrete examples. Because of the Turkish debacle, the Algerians had grave difficulties in organizing a united resistance against the new invader. The country was not at all prepared to assume its own destiny, too trusting as it was in the Ottoman power, but most of all, too attached to a post-almohadian vision of the world: everything was done and decided within the limits of a tribe or the local shaykh. Official Islam, that of the *‘ulamâ* and their formal structures, was entirely dependent on the other capitals of Islam (Cairo, Damascus, and Istanbul). It was through the Sufi orders that Islam was able to acquire its local colour and integrate the masses more effectively.

The role of organizing the resistance of the French fell, therefore, to the Shaykhs. Almost all the great masters of the orders went to the East before or after the French occupation. They all had at least the feeling of belonging to a community that transcended parochial frontiers, frontiers that would presently be rigidified by the colonial powers. Indeed, the temptation to leave everything and go to the elusive *Shâm* (Syria) presented itself to many, including the Shaykh al-‘Alawî and Shaykh Mohand.

SHAYKH MOHAND UL-HOSIN

During the armed resistance to the colonial occupation, the role of the shaykhs was to save that which could still be saved; but after the definitive victory of France, their role was to act as if the French colonial “fact” were to last for centuries. Such was the attitude of Shaykh Mohand. Former *murîd* of Shaykh Mohand-Ameziane Ahaddad, leader of the *Rahmâniyya tarîqa*, he gradually separated from him. Shaykh Ahaddad, in spite of his age (he was 80), took the decision of supporting the 1871 anti-French revolt, and put 100,000 of his adepts and followers at the disposal of the Kabyle al-Moqrânî, who wanted to take advantage of the French defeat by Germany (Sedan), and make a bid for independence. The Kabyles lost and Shaykh Ahaddad was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. To the judge who pronounced the sentence he answered: “You have sentenced me to five years, but God has sentenced me to five days.” One of his companions asked him: “Since you knew that we were going to lose, why did you call for the mobilization?” The Shaykh answered: “I wanted to set a definite gap between our children and France, so that they would not mix with French children and become like them. If there was no blood feud between us, a time would come when we would be unable to distinguish between a Muslim and a Christian. I have planted the tree of

bitterness, the laurel, (*ilîlî* in Berber), so keep watering it and don't let it dry up.”¹⁵ The Shaykh Ahaddad died in Constantine five days after he had been sentenced.

Shaykh Mohand left his adepts free to choose whether to take part or not in the revolt, adding that as far as he was concerned, he would not interfere. He was to spend most of his life in his village of Ait Ahmed in the region of Ain al-Hammâm. When he first entered Sufism, he was an itinerant dervish, wandering about with a group of companions, like the Persian *qalandars* of the 13th and 14th century. The most important personage of this group was Shaykh Mohand Wa‘Alî who employed him as a shepherd. Towards 1871, during the French-German war, Shaykh Mohand became an accomplished master in his own right, initiating his own disciples into the spiritual path. He was typically coenobitic saint, devoting his time to farming, cattle-breeding, and masonry.

Shaykh Mohand had definitely set aside, both in his thoughts and in his actions, any idea of an uprising against France. When asked on the matter he answered: “France will not leave this country unless it is unfair”, that is to say in expiation of its own injustice. He knew all too painfully how much the Kabyles—actually the Muslims as a whole – were divided, he knew how much they were consumed by vice, imperfection, injustice, all of which he witnesses every day.¹⁶ He was indeed a witness of a sick society, one which had lost its unity, and which was unable to act as a single man. Nevertheless he remained close to the people; caring for them, comforting them, and re-establishing concord among them. When requested for a mediation, to settle a dispute, he would do so, and gave material assistance whenever he could afford it. Tradition relates that he was able to perform charismata, extraordinary feats; such as rescuing a drifting ship in which one of his *murîds* had invoked him, intervening from great distances to pre-empt the attempted killing of another disciple. But these actions were not performed with the aim of simply amazing people. All of his charismata are full of the mountaineer’s sense of usefulness; they are of an eminently social nature.

People came to see him to obtain his blessing, his *baraka*, or to ask his advice on a project, on their work, or on family problems. His role as an arbitrator was such that the French conciliation magistrate in Michelet (Ain al-Hammâm) would visit him and ask how it was that he managed to solve disputes that he, the magistrate, could not. Indeed the Kabyles preferred the quick justice dispensed by a saint to a long drawn-out affair, ruinous for the ordinary man and, above all, presided over by a non-Muslim. This French magistrate also sought the shaykh’s *baraka*.

He had nothing different from other men, he once answered to one of his *murîds*, except that he conformed more seriously to the will of God. Dermenghem evokes the social dimension of Shaykh Mohand's personality in the following terms:

The social role of these cults for the tribe and the fraction....is obvious. There has been, indeed, much abuse but also great service rendered, such as preaching, instructing and setting quarrels. I have collected these Kabyle isefra (poems) which give an idea of the conception of a saint in this country. It is about a saint who died in 1901. He asks his khouans (brothers) about the awliya (saints) and his disciples answer in these verses:

"Where are the awliya?

The awliya are on the mountains.

They are keeping guard.

They are watching over the country with their eyes,

Without treading its ground.

As soon as they see an injustice, they try to repair it".

And Shaykh Mohand answers to emphasize the practical usefulness of marabouts as well as their mystical value.

"And I say:

Where are the awliya?

They are in their houses.

They are busy with the greater holy war [against egoism].

They are ploughing, they are providing for the need of their families.

Oh God the merciful! I ask your help!"¹⁷

The shaykh was a man of action and a contemplative, one who could not easily contain his mystical states, a poetry that fed, educated, and developed minds, a poetry easy to memorize, so much so that his verses are still recited to this day in Kabylia. It is in these verses that we can discover the Shaykh's metaphysical doctrine.

The Shaykh belonged to a tradition of sanctity quite different from that of the Shaykh al-‘Alawî, who was a saint of the city, and whose approach to spirituality was fundamentally intellectual: he discussed *wahdat al-wujūd* (unicity of existence), the esoteric meaning of the prayer and the *hajj* (pilgrimage), and other philosophical doctrines, as we shall see later. Shaykh Mohand did not, strictly speaking, teach any doctrine. Neither the questions posed to him by his adepts, nor the answers he gave, dealt with any abstract or doctrinal developments on the nature of the Divine Being or any esoteric interpretations. He taught by means of his actions, an example which served to re-orient the hearts and minds of those around him, causing them to turn towards God, make them repent, and calm their passions. Like all other true Sufis, he had an innate sense of the essential in religion. The letter of the law was only referred to when he felt that his interlocutor needed it; otherwise, he always preferred to give priority to faith over actions: “*ifghir win itswahiden Rabbi win itsabaden*”: he who practises *tawhîd* (i.e. he who, in all his actions, is never heedless of God’s unique reality), is better than he who worships, who offers up but an external mode of prayer.

Among the Shaykh’s *murîds*, there were many women, indeed, almost as many women as men, one would think; the most famous was his sister, another saint, named Lalla Fadhma. They are still often invoked together by old persons in Kabylia.

As regards the presence of France, he did not seem to take it into consideration. For him, the colonial fact was destined to be, and was thus the expression of the will of God; it was assimilated as the logical consequence of the actions of the Algerian people themselves, actions which had earned them such a decline. The solution to the problem was simple: the Muslims themselves had to change, to improve, so that God might grant them a better fate. This same spiritual logic held true also for the French: if they act in all fairness, they would keep the country; otherwise God would drive them out. On the plane of inter-personal relations, the same view of causality was evident, as for example in the following story.

A certain man who had been in prison came to see the Shaykh. “Where do you come from?”, the Shaykh asked him. “From the prison where you put me.” The man explained that, having betrayed one of the Shaykh’s *murîds*, he thought that it was the Shaykh himself who had wished him to be sent to prison. Thereupon, the Shaykh answered: “It is you who put yourself in prison.”

The mountain people of Kabylia believe in this way of looking at things, and they even think that the *awliyâ* are in fact the real leaders of the country, the real, albeit hidden, hierarchy through which authority flows.

SHAYKH AHMED AL-^cALAWI

While France was celebrating the hundredth anniversary of its presence in Algeria, the reformists, led by Ben Bâdîs (who died in 1924) and the Association of Algerian ‘Ulamâ, contaminated by the false hopes raised both by Wahhabism and Kemalism, also attempted to fight “maraboutism” which, according to them, was spreading superstitions and keeping the people steeped in ignorance; in thus opposing Sufism in the name of Muslim orthodoxy they were playing the very role formulated for them by the colonialists.

And yet the latter, through one of their most informed intellectuals, gives evidence that flatly contradicts the notion that Sufis are ignorant and their influence regressive. In an article written two years after the death of the Shaykh Ahmed al-‘Alawî (July 14th 1934), A. Berque wrote in *La Revue Africaine*:

The biography of Shaykh Ben `Aliwa (Ahmed would Mostefa) can be summarized in a few words. It essentially consists of ideas. He teaches an upsetting doctrine which is for many people a modern Gospel. For, just as he has a mass of ignorant affiliated people, he also has highly cultured European followers. His propaganda, nourished with a singular eloquence, an extensive knowledge, is tireless and fruitful...We have known shaykh ben `Aliwa from 1921 to 1934. We have seen him slowly grow old. His intellectual enquiringness seemed to become sharper each day, and to his last breath, he remained a lover of metaphysical investigation. There are few problems which he had not broached, scarcely any philosophies whose essence he had not extracted.

In fact, this great figure, as described in the biography by Martin Lings, is first and foremost that of a man seeking knowledge. In the first years of his search, he took a wrong turn. He was initiated into the ‘*Isawiyya*, an order that had by that time degenerated to such an extent that its practices were dominated by tricks such as knife-swallowing and snake-charming. When he met the Shaykh al-Büzîdî, who was affiliated to the *Darqâwiyya*, he was earnestly in search of an authentic spiritual master. After charming a snake in front of the

shaykh, he was asked whether he could take a larger one; he replied that the size made no difference. The Shaykh al-Būzīdī then said to him:

*I will show you one that is bigger than this and far more venomous, and if you can take hold of it you are a real sage...I mean your soul... Go and do with that little snake whatever you usually do with them, and never go back to such practices again.*¹⁸

It might be thought that the Sufi masters, deep in their meditation, did not pay much attention to worldly life, and that they lacked any real commitment to it. Certainly the case of Shaykh Mohand already shows the contrary, but one can also wonder whether this attitude of apparent other-worldliness is not in fact deeply concerned with the fundamental problems of the world; for the leitmotif of their teaching, the mainspring of all their action, is the deep conviction that, whatever the temporal circumstances may be, that real problem in life always remains that of the soul. An action which is not guided by a consciousness fixed on Transcendent will come to nothing, according to this perspective and it is bound to fail.

Such a perspective evidently informed the teachings of the Shaykh al-‘Alawī, who hardly ever refers, in his writings, to the fact that his country is under French occupation. Even when, in his autobiography, he speaks of applying for a travel permit he does not mention the authority to which he had applied. Just back from journey to the East which took him to Istanbul, he had the feeling that “*my return was sufficient as fruit of my travels, even if I had gained nothing else; and truly I had no peace of soul until the day when I set foot on Algerian soil, and I praised God for the ways of my people and their remaining in the faith of their fathers and grandfathers and following in the footsteps of the pious.*”¹⁹ It is obvious that, in the eyes of the Shaykh al-‘Alawī, Kemalism was much more dangerous than colonialism. Shaykh Mohand very likely had the same attitude.

As for the reformist ‘*ulamā*’, the Shaykh al-‘Alawī did not hesitate to put pen to paper and give them the stinging answers that their baseless criticisms called for. The weekly paper *al-Shihâb*, organ of the reformists, mounted repeated attacks on Sufism. To one such attack the Shaykh wrote the reply which was published in *al-Balâgh al-Jazâ’iri*. This was spirited defence of Sufism, formulated in terms of Islamic orthodoxy, which argued that Sufism, as inner spiritual dimension of Islam, had always been respected in the Islamic tradition. He supported his argument with an anthology of quotations, mostly from renowned exoteric authorities.

There is no religious authority or man of learning in Islam who has not a due respect for the path of the Folk [a term designating the Sufis], either through direct experience of it in spiritual realization, or else through firm belief in it, except those who suffer from chronic short-sightedness and remissness and lack of aspiration... God says: “Whoso striveth after Us, verily We shall lead them upon Our paths,” [Qur’ân, XXIX: 69] and indeed the true believer looks unceasingly for one who will take him to God, or at the very least he looks for the spiritual gifts which lie hidden within him, that is, for the primordial human nature which he has lost sight of and in virtue of which he is human.

The Shaykh did not claim that the Sufis of his day were entirely blameless, however, and accepted that there were abuses, and that there were so-called Sufis – “only too many” – who deserved censure. But he concludes, “What offended us was your vilification of the way of the Folk altogether, and your speaking ill of its men without making any exceptions, and this is what prompted me to put before you these quotations from some of the highest religious authorities. At the very least they should impel you to consider your brothers the Sufis as members of the community of true believers, every individual of whom both we and you are bound to respect.”

The Shaykh’s role was not restricted to a select elite, abstracted from society at large; rather, the spiritual message he proclaimed radiated throughout the land manner that is difficult to quantify. A spiritual re-orientation of even one person in any milieu has potentially far-reaching repercussions; but it is clear that the Shaykh touched the lives of thousands. One disciple of the Shaykh, after describing the kind of spiritual method that one would adopt under the Shaykh’s guidance, makes the following important point: ‘...a complete break had been made between him [the disciple] and his former life. Some of them for example had been to all appearances just ordinary manual labourers for whom, apart from their work, life had meant no more than begetting children and sitting in cafés. But now their interests were all centred upon God, and their great joy was to perform the *dhikr* [the invocation of the name of God].’²⁰

Accounts of other disciples reveal that the Shaykh not only initiated thousands of people directly into the *tarîqa*, but also dispensed the “oath of blessing”, a secondary degree of initiation, to thousands more, as well as preaching to all those who gathered around him

whenever he travelled in the country: “You would find sitting in front of him hundreds, nay, thousands, with heads bowed as if birds were hovering around them and hearts full of awe and eyes wet with tears, in silent understanding of what they heard him say.”²¹

Through his *muqaddams* or representatives, also, his positive influence radiated throughout the country. One such representative wrote that he received into the *tarīqa* more than six thousand people, among whom many were in turn given permission to guide others. Another wrote that he was part of a group sent by the Shaykh to travel from tribe to tribe in the deserts, with instructions to accept nothing from the tribe other than that which was absolutely necessary. When asked about this, the *muqaddam* would reply: “We have only come to you so that you may take guidance from us upon the path or at least that you may give us your oaths always to perform the prayers at the right time with as much piety as you can muster.”²²

The encouragement to pray should be carefully noted here: it was not just the subtleties of metaphysics or the meaning of the greater holy war against the soul that these Sufis were imparting. They were concerned both with enhancing simple piety for the majority and with offering, to those that thirsted for it, the inner aspect of the religion. In thus following the letter of the exoteric Law while plumbing its esoteric spirit, they contributed to the maintenance of a pious ambience throughout society. This piety, it must be remembered, was the best form of the defence against the more insidious, because less visible, forces of the secularization that underlay the French *mission civilisatrice*; colonialism, as stressed at the outset, was not just an assault on external liberty, it was, much more, an attack on the traditional Muslim mentality and way of life. Judged in this light, now ‘political’ strategy aiming at independence could be more ‘effective’ and ‘useful’ than this fidelity to the spirit of Islam.

CONCLUSION

Simply to dismiss out of hand the role of Sufism in the colonial period is not tenable. Many modern Muslims view Sufis as having been either the lackeys of imperialism or the standard-bearers of the obscurantism to which Islam was reduced prior to the advent of colonialism. The two examples on which we have drawn show amply, however, that in the unfavourable circumstances of the time, Sufis played an important, perhaps indispensable, part in upholding the basic ethos of Islam in society as a whole; and that they did so in the service of what constitutes the spiritual quintessence of Islam. In playing this double role, they may said to

have offered the most effective resistance both to French colonialism as such and to the underlying cultural and psychological threat posed by French rule.

The elimination of the religious orders, wished by some ‘*ulamâ*’ and the colonial administration was not, then, the condition for the “renaissance” of Algerian society. All the components of Muslim society showed passivity, inefficiency, and degeneration; but we can assert confidently that, among these components, the Sufi orders offered the strongest resistance to the triumphant military forces of colonialism and showed more vitality in combating, and more lucidity in understanding, its pernicious cultural influence. Just as the orders fought against the initial material onslaught of the French, so they were the most tenacious fighters against the cultural imperialism that came in the wake of the French victory; and in so doing the Sufis taught a key dimension of true independence, which is not just freedom from colonial rule but liberation from the false ideals of the secular, western worldview on which that rule was predicated. The message of Sufism can be summed up, then, in a few words: to be formally free but inwardly enslaved is far worse than being outwardly constrained but inwardly free; and true freedom lies in submission on the One that is the source of absolute freedom.

NOTES

1. Octave, Depont and Xavier, Coppolani, *Les confréries religieuses musulmanes*, Algiers, 1897.
2. In an unpublished manuscript, folio.219.
3. Captain E. DE Neveu – *Les Khouans, ordres religieux chez les musulmans de l’Algérie* – Paris, 1845, p.64.
4. Mammeri, Mouloud, *Inna-yâs Shaykh Mohand*, French and Kabyle introductions, notes and transcription of Shaykh Mohand’s kabyle saying in Latin script, Algiers, 1990, p. 34, French text.
5. De Neveu. op. cit., p103.
6. General P.J. André – *Contribution à l’étude des confréries religieuses musulmanes* – Algiers: La Maison des Livres, 1956, p. 251.

7. See for example Ignace Goldziher, *Le culte des saints chez les musulmans*, in *Revue d'histoire des religions*, Paris 1880 ; Edmond Doutté, *Magie et religion dans l'Afrique du Nord*, (Re-issue of the 1908 Algiers edition) Paris, 1984 ; P. Bruzon, *les confréries musulmanes nord-africaines*, in *Orient et Occident*, vol. 2, 1923; A. Berque, *Essai d'une bibliographie critique des confréries musulmanes algériennes*, in *Bulletin de la Société des Géographie d'Oran*, 1918; *Un mystique moderniste : le Cheikh Benalioua*, in *Revue Africaine*, N°79, 1936.
8. A. Berque, *Essai d'une bibliographie critique*, op. cit. p. 164
9. In fact, a cursory glance at the history of Islam shows that Sufism had already manifested resistance to non-Muslim invasion. In the 13th century Sufism organized an efficient resistance against the Mongols and managed to convert them and then to integrate them within Muslim society. Certainly they could not drive them out of the classical frontiers of Islam, but the Shaykhs who remained inside the domain conquered and governed by the Mongols, worked steadily to convert their conquerors, while in Syria an 'ālim as brilliant as Ibn Taymiyya denounced the false conversion of the Mongols and ordered Muslims to fight them tirelessly with the hope of creating a new Arab caliphate.
10. M. Mammeri, *Inna-yās*, op. cit., p.36.
11. Martin Lings, -- *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century, Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawī. His spiritual heritage and legacy*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971, CH.1.
12. Ibid., p.14.
13. Emir Abd el-Kader, *Ecrits spirituels* (excerpts from *Kitâb al-mawâqif*), presented and translated from the Arabic by Michel Chodkiewicz, Paris, Seuil, 1982.
14. Ibid., p.18.
15. M. Mammeri, *Inna-yās*, op. cit., p.50.
16. In this connection, it is interesting to note the predications of Sufi Shaykhs announcing to their people a calamity sent by God because of their own sins. Sometimes, this prediction is in the form of a saint's prayer asking God to punish men who no longer deserve the divine protection. Such was the case in Kabylia which, until 1857, had not

been subjected to French colonization. The previous year, a local saint, Shaykh Ben ‘Isâ, witnessing the corruption that was gaining ground around him, invoked divine punishment upon the wicked: “Oh God! The country is completely neglected, injustice grows in it, send it a tyrant of any nature!”

17.E. Dermenghem, *Le culte des saints dans l’Islam maghrébin*, Paris : Gallimard, 1954, p 18 ; and Mammeri, *Inna-yā’s*, op.cit., pp.75-7.

18.M. Lings, op. cit., p52.

19.Ibid., p. 78.

20.Ibid., p.105

21.Ibid., p.102

22.Ibid., p.104