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## Recycling *Baraka*: Knowledge, Politics, and Religion in Contemporary Algeria

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### Abstract

Since the overwhelming electoral victory of Algeria's main Islamist party, the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), in 1990 and 1991, the annulment of the elections by the Algerian army in 1992, and a decade of apparently random killings that followed throughout the country, religion has been at stake in most contemporary debates on Algeria. Algeria has thereby entered the field of larger debates within the Western world about radical Islam, the rise of religion, the rejection of "Western models," and other expressions of the putative "clash of civilizations." At the same time, relatively little has been said about what "Islam" actually means in the Algerian context, even by more perspicacious authors and analysts who are keen to stress the economic and social causes for the success of political Islam in Algeria (e.g., Burgat 1988; 1995; Charef 1994; Martinez 1998). This is not to say that the variety of religious practices in Algeria has attracted no attention from researchers. Rather, it means that those writers who focus on 'local' religion, such as Andezian (1993; 2001) and Hadibi (1999; 2002), tend to produce local accounts of the veneration of saints and pilgrimages, without referring to broader cultural dynamics and political struggles, and without attempting to link their findings in more than superficial ways to the emergence of modern Islamism.

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**RECYCLING BARAKA: KNOWLEDGE, POLITICS AND RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY ALGERIA**

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Since the overwhelming electoral victory of Algeria's main Islamist party, the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in 1990 and 1991, and the annulment of the elections by the Algerian army in 1992, followed by a decade of apparently random killings throughout the country, religion has been at stake in most contemporary debates on Algeria.<sup>1</sup> Algeria has thereby entered the field of larger debates within the Western world about radical Islam, the rise of religion, the rejection of 'Western models', and other expressions of the putative 'clash of civilisations' that contemporary times are said to be made of. At the same time, however, relatively little has been said about what 'Islam' actually means in the Algerian context, even by the more perspicacious authors and analysts who are keen to stress the economic and social causes for the success of political Islam in Algeria, such as for example Burgat (1988, 1995), Charef (1994) and Martinez (1998). This is not to say that the variety of religious practices in Algeria has attracted no attention from researchers. Rather, it means that those writers who focus on 'local' religion, such as Andezian (1993, 2001) and Hadibi (1999, 2002), tend to produce local accounts of the veneration of saints and pilgrimages, without referring to broader cultural dynamics and political struggles, and without attempting to link their findings in more than superficial ways to the emergence of modern Islamism.<sup>2</sup>

This 'gap' in present analysis is not merely due to the carelessness of international observers, however. On the contrary, it also informs most local discourse and national scholarship, to the point where it seems in itself central to the self-definition of 'Algerian Islam'. It serves as a device to publicly situate any one part of the various Islamic 'traditions' in Algeria and to link them to similar developments and larger political and social conflicts



elsewhere, without, however, impeding their practical inter-relatedness and local collaboration. It thus provides a public discourse that links the complex Algerian realities to international conflicts and struggles that give them an internationally recognised moral meaning, without ‘unveiling’ the local ambiguities of Algerian society to outside observers. This is made possible by the fact that all questions relating to Islam are, and long have been, ‘close to the bone’ in France, where most scholarship on Algeria is still produced,<sup>3</sup> and where many of the ‘insurmountable oppositions’ in religious matters that tend to be projected upon Algerian realities – such as those between ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’, or ‘popular’ and ‘scriptural’, or even ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion<sup>4</sup> – are still seen as fundamental to national identity (Etienne 1989). The same is increasingly true for other parts of Western Europe, and, to a lesser extent, for North America.

To focus on the publicly declared ‘gap’ and on the practical articulation between these different ‘types’ of Islam is therefore not only necessary for anybody who wants to understand contemporary Algerian society. It also allows some more general insights into how local social and cultural complexities are articulated within an exclusive and inflexible ‘official’ discourse, and how this ‘official’ discourse might be used by local populations in their own interest. It thereby provides an ideal case study for recent debates about the tension between state-imposed categories and actual social complexities, as described by Scott (1998).<sup>5</sup> It shows that, at least in the Algerian case, the ‘reductionism’ and ‘simplification’ that Scott defines as fundamental characteristics of the state are neither the state’s prerogatives nor necessarily due to the latter’s naivety or wilful ignorance. Rather, they are part of local, national and international power struggles in which both state representatives and local populations take part, and in which discourses of mutual incompatibility and irredeemable oppositions are coupled with practical flexibility. While the exclusive categories established by the ‘official’ discourse often find their way into the academic analysis of

Algeria, local accommodations and flexible practices are frequently ignored both by outside and by local observers, as they are – to quote an Algerian government official (as he refused to prolong my research visa) – ‘*pas claires*’, and therefore not suitable for foreign consumption.

The present article focuses on several instances of this interplay between publicly proclaimed rigidity and practical flexibility in the case of ‘Algerian Islam’. Based on archival sources and on ethnographic material, it will first of all outline the historical development of the various religious institutions that compose ‘Algerian Islam’, ranging from a pronounced reformist tendency to saints’ tombs, Islamic educational institutes, hospices and Sufi centres or *zawāyā*,<sup>6</sup> while also describing the theories of mutual incompatibility that have developed around them, both in colonial and post-colonial times. The second half of the article is devoted to the analysis of a conference, held in 2004, which succeeded in uniting local academics, government officials and representatives of the various aspects of ‘Algerian Islam’ under one roof. I shall describe the conference at some length, as it provides an opportunity to show how the ‘problem’ of the co-existence of a large number of different ‘Islams’ is approached within an apparently rigidly monolithic ‘official’ discourse.

Most of what follows is based on fieldwork undertaken in Kabylia, a Berber-speaking area in north-eastern Algeria. The choice of area for this particular topic might at first seem odd, as Kabylia is known throughout the ethnographic literature for its ‘secularism’ rather than for its rich religious heritage. It is, however, anything but accidental. Despite French theories of the inherently ‘secular spirit’ of the Kabyles,<sup>7</sup> and despite the fact that many Kabyles themselves by now fully endorse these theories, Kabylia was long famous for the large number of Islamic teaching institutes, Sufi orders, and, later on, Islamic reformist schools within its boundaries.<sup>8</sup> Many popular religious practices such as the veneration of saints, clairvoyance, healing rituals and trance sessions are still – or even increasingly –



common among a large part of the population. Because of this variety of religious traditions that are forced to co-exist within a relatively small geographical and social space, and because of the real importance of secularism in Kabylia, without which the position of religion in contemporary Algeria cannot be understood properly, Kabylia appears as an ideal case study for the variety of religious practices and for the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary Algerian society.

### *The zawâyâ*

In 1860, the French army officer Henri Aucapitaine travelled across one of the highest passes of the recently conquered Kabyle mountains, in order to visit the *zâwiya* of the Ben Aly Chérif family at Chellata.<sup>9</sup> The trip across the snow-covered heights of the Djurdjura mountains along small winding mountain paths was arduous, but worth his while. He returned deeply impressed by the ‘venerated refuge of men of charity and sciences’ he had visited, ‘whose name’, as he noted, ‘was never pronounced in the whole of North Africa without a feeling of veneration’, and whose ‘religious society presented a spectacle in all respects worthy of the considerations of the civilised peoples’ (1860:21-2). According to Aucapitaine, the learned reputation of the *zâwiya* attracted up to three hundred students each summer, and eight hundred to one thousand students during the winter months, and extended as far as the Islamic universities in the Regency of Tunis.

Aucapitaine was not the only colonial officer to be interested in the regional *zawâyâ*.<sup>10</sup> During the first decades after the conquest, the *zawâyâ* were to figure prominently in colonial records, not only as teaching institutes, but also as hospices, safe refuges for fugitives from all parts of the country, and, most importantly, as regional or even trans-regional seats of influence and power which sometimes even went as far as maintaining private armies (Hanoteau and Letourneux 1873), and whose income, derived from pious offerings, religious

taxes and land-holdings, was often considerable. Thus, in the vicinity of Chellata, the archives mention a small local *zāwiya* with a mere ten students, which, in 1912, disposed of an annual income of five thousand francs (the equivalent of fifteen thousand dollars at present value, according to INSEE 2005), drawn mainly from donations made by members of the village or the tribe who worked in mines in the country or elsewhere in North Africa, and from the revenues of its land-holdings. The question of who should have the right to control this fixed income, and in which way, led to never-ending conflicts, as the colonial records,<sup>11</sup> local oral history and still continuing conflicts among families and villages suggest. These conflicts involved the local population, local and regional religious families, as well as the French administration and its freshly recruited 'indigenous' representatives. They give an early example of the widespread 'confusion' between religious, political and economic influence in the area, and of the co-existence of an 'official' discourse, based on the separation of powers and that is espoused by government officials and the local population alike,<sup>12</sup> and an infinitively more complex social reality.

Another reason why the *zawāyā* quickly became the object of strict surveillance by the French administration was that they were active nodes in the networks and links of mutual obligation and common practice established by the numerous Sufi orders in the area. In Algeria, the *zawāyā* and the Sufi traditions have often been described as mutually incompatible and structurally opposed, as, at least according to their French observers, Sufi orders represented a more 'egalitarian' and 'popular' form of Islam which sprung up in opposition to the 'feudal' structures represented by regional saintly families.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, police reports of colonial times agree that almost all of the regional *zawāyā* were Sufi places of worship in addition to being centres of scriptural learning, libraries and venerated saints' tombs, whose 'owners' based their religious prestige both on their link with the original saint and with local Sufi leaders. Most of the regional saintly families still preserve manuscripts



and oral poetry that clearly witness their ancestors' dedication to Sufi thought and practices. By the late nineteenth century, more than a quarter of the male adult population in Kabylia were members of one of the ten regional Sufi orders (Rinn 1891). These orders were feared by the French for the unity and dedication of their members, for their efficient organisation - as several administrators noted, the brotherhoods' means of communication often seemed to be superior to those employed by the French army (Turin 1983) - and for their potential military power.

The French were thus keen to bring the *zawâya* under their administrative control. The first and probably most effective measure taken in this direction - albeit perhaps unintentionally - was the conversion of all religious endowments into state property in the second half of the nineteenth century (Ageron 1968, see also Nouschi 1961).<sup>14</sup> This measure deprived the *zawâya* of their material base, and forced many of them to close down, to the point where, as Turin (1983) notes, it became difficult for the French administration itself to find enough literate clerks to run the country. The second means of controlling the larger *zawâya* was through the involvement of their *shuyûkh* in the French administration, which for a time enhanced their political influence and wealth, but was in the long run detrimental to their spiritual prestige. Thus, the head of the *zâwiya* in Chellata described above accepted the rank of *bach-gha*, the highest rank open to indigenous administrators. This meant that he could draw on several, theoretically opposed sources of local influence, as a *shaykh*, a Sufi, a local land-owner and entrepreneur, and as a representative of the colonial administration.<sup>15</sup> By then, however, the demise of the *zawâya* seemed inevitable. In 1947, the French colonial archives note that Chellata had a mere seventy-six students, and that most of the larger surrounding *zawâya* had had to reduce their number of students to no more than forty. At the same time, more than twice as many students were enrolled in French schools.<sup>16</sup>

It proved to be more difficult to control the smaller *zawâya*, which were under the protection of local village communities - and it was virtually impossible to uproot the region-wide networks of Sufi brotherhoods, which had continued to exist independently of the *zawâya*. As late as 1959, the French army officer Carret remarked upon their wide influence, pointing out wryly that during the First World War, the command of the French army had seen the military hierarchy among Algerian recruits replaced by a religious one based on Sufi allegiances, and that recruits would follow the orders of their Sufi *shaykh* rather than those of their army commander. Similarly, complaints to the police about the 'noise and disruption' caused by newly opened Sufi centres in the towns of the valley become more rather than less frequent from the 1930s onwards.<sup>17</sup>

*Reformism, nationalism and the war of independence*

The complaints filed against Sufis from the 1930s onwards deserve further attention. They were generally drafted not by disgruntled European settlers, but by the freshly emerging indigenous bourgeoisie. They seem to indicate that Kabyle society had profoundly changed since Aucapitaine's assurance of unanimous veneration of the *zâwiya* tradition, and that the *zawâya* had not only lost their land and students, but also much of their prestige among the leading members of society, while maintaining or even increasing their popular support. As the Sufi orders had come under attack both from a growing Islamic reformist current which was striving for a more rational, text-based and 'orthodox' version of Islam,<sup>18</sup> and from an emerging Francophone intelligentsia with a similar abhorrence of 'superstition', to publicly criticise Sufi practices had become a sign of belonging to the 'enlightened middle classes', be they Islamic or secular.

In both cases, the main issue at stake was that of education. Kabylia is the one area in Algeria where French schooling started very early, and was very successful (Colonna 1975);



but parts of it, such as the Soummam Valley, where most of my research was based, had also been exceptionally receptive to the reformist message. The main tenet of Islamic reformism being the necessity for moral and social reform based on the original scriptures of Islam, widespread access to these scriptures, and therefore, widespread access to education in classical Arabic, became essential to its popular success. In Lesser Kabylia, more than thirty reformist primary schools were opened between the 1920s and the 1950s, teaching, in 1951, several hundred students. Many of these students also attended French primary schools, as three quarters of all reformist schools in Lesser Kabylia were constructed next to French schools, and as the reformists were careful not to teach during French school hours.<sup>19</sup>

Attendance of reformist schools and *zawâyâ*, however, was construed to be mutually exclusive, as reformists locally presented themselves as bitterly opposed to 'superstitious' religious practices, such as the influence of the local religious families, Sufi practices and the veneration of saints, which the reformists assimilated to *shirk* (idolatry) (Merad 1967). Although oppositions between 'literate' and 'ritual' Islam seem to have been common in the area ever since it started to be Islamised in the eighth century (Hodgson 1974, Colonna 1992), this seems to be the moment when the conceptual 'gap' between scriptural and 'folk' Islam as we know it today most forcefully entered local political and moral discourse. This was clearly in response to local conflicts, but also to international developments that emphasised the mutual incompatibility of 'folk' and 'reformed' Islam, such as the increasing popularity of reformism throughout the Muslim world, and growing French interest in 'folk' Islam as a representation of 'authentic' African, harmless, and, in other words, 'good' Islam.<sup>20</sup>

Locally, however, the installation of reformist schools was not only an episode in the secular struggle between 'scripturalism' and 'ritualism', but it was intrinsically part of the local socio-political context. The committees that established reformist schools were generally based on already existing political, economic, religious or family networks, and often

succeeded in co-opting local institutions such as village councils (Salhi 1999). They also tended to double up with local party offices, so that the conflict between religious families (or marabouts)<sup>21</sup> and reformists often dovetailed with struggles between the various nationalist parties that had sprung up in the area.<sup>22</sup> The growing success of the reformist movement meant that the local maraboutic families – unless they were themselves absorbed in the reformist movement – often felt personally attacked by reformist endeavours in their religious ‘fief’. During the struggles that ensued, several large maraboutic families succeeded in defending ‘their’ lands against reformist ‘encroachment’, whereas in other areas, less influential maraboutic families had to leave their home villages and settle elsewhere.

Similarly, the ideological divide between both currents seems to have been less clearly defined as ‘official’ Algerian historiography and the large number of mutual public condemnations of ‘paganism’ launched both by marabouts and reformers suggest. As both Salhi (1979) and Chachoua (2001) show, the Sufi order Rahmaniyya, which itself had started out with ‘reformist’ aims two centuries earlier (Clancy-Smith 1990), in many areas prepared the way for the reformists’ success, a pattern which was also observed by Colonna (1977) for the Aurès. In the 1930s, many *zawāyā*, especially in Kabylia, ‘converted’ to reformism, without, at least according to oral testimonies and still ongoing religious practices, losing their ability to dispense *baraka* or saintly blessing to the local population.<sup>23</sup> Practically, they thus proved, despite their officially and loudly proclaimed enmity to reformism, very flexible and adaptable to the new current.<sup>24</sup> The same seems to have been true for the reformists themselves: although their schools were striving to implement more ‘rational’ teaching methods modelled on French schools, their teaching staff was frequently under-qualified and themselves educated in traditional *zawāyā*, whose methods in practice they often copied.<sup>25</sup>

The war of independence from France (1954-1962) put an end to this period of relative accommodation. Not only did it physically destroy the *zawāyā*, bombed by the French army



as potential hideouts and burned by the nationalist fighters as potential centres of collaboration, but it also, with the triumph of the FLN government in 1962, turned Islamic reformist attitudes into 'state religion'. The very few *zawâya* that were reconstructed after independence were turned into state-run Islamic teaching institutes of a reformist and anti-maraboutic outlook, and the *zawâya*'s considerable confiscated land-holdings were not returned to their original 'owners', but transformed into state-run cooperatives, whence they gradually passed into private ownership from the 1980s onwards. The ruins of the *zawâya* became silent witnesses to a changed social order, and to a publicly declared revolutionary redefinition of truth and morality.

At the same time, the village imam, who used to be recruited among the local maraboutic families and paid by the local community, was gradually replaced by an imam paid for and chosen by the ministry of religious affairs. The most obvious prerogatives of saintly families were either abolished, or taken on by the *mujâhidîn* or nationalist fighters, the new 'founding saints' of the independent Algerian nation. The honorific title of 'Si', so far reserved for marabouts, was now used to refer to *mujâhidîn*, and intermarriage between maraboutic and ordinary families, which so far had been exceptional, became more frequent.<sup>26</sup> Many local maraboutic families, however, invested in modern education, and succeeded in 'converting' their cultural capital to new forms of social prestige. Until today, a relatively large percentage of doctors, lawyers, academics and government officials are from maraboutic families. Similarly, according to local accounts, many of the local religious practices associated with the *zâwiya* tradition continued, and even experienced an upsurge in popularity after the end of president Boumediène's reign in the late 1970s – with the tacit compliance or sometimes even the covert participation of local political dignitaries.<sup>27</sup>

These new arrangements did not always correspond to local notions of religious legitimacy and spirituality, and they failed to cater fully for the rapidly growing and rapidly

moving population's religious aspirations. The 'official' version of Islam, and its representative, the imam-civil servant, had come to be seen as coextensive with a state that increasingly met with distrust from its citizens. It could therefore neither survive the onslaught of radical political Islam in the cities from the late 1970s onwards (Burgat 1988),<sup>28</sup> nor defend its position against a growing consciousness of 'Berber identity' in Kabylia, which defined itself at the time against state-sponsored 'Arabo-Islamism'.<sup>29</sup> Despite attempts by the government to co-opt parts of the emerging Islamist movements in the early 1980s (Roberts 2003), it had lost most of its credibility in religious matters by the end of the decade, if not earlier. Where it apparently had succeeded, however, was in condemning the *zawâyâ* and all related religious traditions to the rubbish heap of history – at least if one believed the 'official' rhetoric.

#### *Recycling baraka in the 1990s*

In March 1991, Algeria was in the international headlines. The FIS, Algeria's main Islamist party, had successfully organised a general strike demonstrating that it was set to win the upcoming presidential elections, a year after its land-slide victory in local elections. According to international commentators, a 'second Iran' was threatening to emerge, a mere hour's flight away from Marseilles. One piece of news, however, was lost in the general panic: a few days before the strike was proclaimed, the hard-pressed national government organised with great pomp a conference on the *zâwiya* tradition at the prestigious *Club des Pins* in Algiers. To Algerian observers, the reasons for a sudden interest in the *zâwiya* tradition at this particular moment in history seemed obvious: although the *zawâyâ* represented everything 'official' religion condemned, it also represented everything that, according to decades of state discourse, 'Islamism' was not.



To appeal to the *zawâya* at such a moment of crisis was thus seen by most Algerians as a clearly political manoeuvre, as a last desperate attempt to ‘recapture’ religion, to ‘recycle’ its ‘traditional’ institutions in the state’s own image and to affirm its inherent links or rather its putative co-extensiveness with the Algerian national government and state. It was also a clear sign sent out by the government both to its national and international observers that the Algerian state was not willing to accommodate Islamist values and thought (although this is what it was actually doing at the time, cf. Roberts 2003), but that it had always aimed to promote ‘good’ – i.e. local, ‘African’, and tolerant – Islam.<sup>30</sup> The government’s attitude towards the *zawâya* remained nevertheless unclear, as the conference could be read either as a late acknowledgement of the *zawâya*’s lasting spiritual and political influence and an attempt to co-opt their influence to state strategies of self-preservation, or as a final proof that the *zawâya* had lost most of their power – after all, would any hard-pressed government really want to conjure up yet another potentially dangerous religious force at such a sensitive moment, if it believed that it might at all have a hold over local populations?<sup>31</sup>

Whatever his true motive, president Chadli was not the only person to show publicly an interest in the fate of the *zawâya*. In the aftermath of the 1991 conference, several groups of people, most of whom claimed a direct relationship with a particular *zâwiya*, as descendants of the founding saints or as former students, tried to rebuild ‘their’ *zâwiya*. These projects were not always free from political intentions or from tensions internally, as a member of one of the local saintly families explained:

For several years now, we have been trying to reconstruct the *zâwiya* like it used to be, following old drawings, the memories of former students, and old photos. The money and the initiative mainly come from former students, who today work for the government or have other important positions in Algiers. We thought: as long as we still had our *zawâya*, there weren’t any Islamists; as soon as our *zawâya* were destroyed, we started to have problems – that means that we have to rebuild at least one of them, and that’s what we are trying to do. But this turned out to be very difficult, we got into a lot of trouble, there is a lot at stake in the *zâwiya* and its landholdings, we had problems within the family.

As suggested by his statement, the conflicts over regional influence and over the *zâwiya*'s material and symbolic assets are still as acute as they were in the past – and, in this case, ultimately caused the whole project to be abandoned.

This statement also shows how the distinction between 'traditional' and 'Islamist' Islam as propagated by 'official' discourse is used locally. The instigators of the project were clearly aware that their project could too easily – and perhaps justly so – be seen as an attempt by the saintly family to reclaim their formerly vast land-holdings. It could also be read as a late 'colonialist' undertaking, due to the unclear relationship between the *zâwiya* in question and the French colonial government. To try to rebuild the *zâwiya* meant in fact to question several national and regional founding myths, and to open up debates that had long been silenced. In order to prevent these questions, the instigators of the project felt it necessary to stress both their links with state representatives, and the fundamental and internationally recognised opposition of 'their' *zâwiya* to 'Islamism'. Again, practices that were clearly ambiguous from a local point of view had to be shrouded in a discourse of neat oppositions and moral absolutes. Despite the family's conspicuous emphasis on historical accuracy, the project thus aimed less at the faithful reconstruction of the *zâwiya* than at the 'recycling' of some – not all - notions associated with the '*zâwiya* tradition' as represented in national and international scholarship in accordance with contemporary political struggles.

This use of 'official' or 'international' categories as a means of local justification also became apparent in a related case: in the mid-1990s, a group of local academics working at the nearby university of Béjaïa instigated a project to reopen the *zâwiya* of Chellata described above. In their eyes, the *zâwiya* was primarily a teaching and research institution. As such, it was the last trace of a vivid scientific tradition, which had, through the centuries, produced a series of intellectuals of international reputation, whom they liked to classify as 'mathematicians' and 'astronomers'.<sup>32</sup> From their point of view, to reopen the *zâwiya* in



Chellata meant to prove that the region as a whole was and always had been part of a larger, Mediterranean rather than purely Islamic intellectual tradition, and that this intellectual tradition was compatible with Islam, or rather, with a certain kind of ‘traditional’ and therefore ‘tolerant’ and ‘truly Algerian’ Islam (a notion similar to that which had, in the first half of the twentieth century, provided the theoretical background to French writings on North African Islam). For many members of the association, this was clearly more than just an abstract historical cause, as it directly concerned their own position within Algerian society, both as intellectuals and, for many among them, also as descendants of one of the numerous regional maraboutic families.

Although the association succeeded in mobilising a relatively large number of local groups in their favour, their project failed due to the refusal of the elders of the village concerned. The latter clearly did not see the *zâwiya* as a historical proof of scientific greatness, but as a potentially dangerous vestige of colonial or ‘feudal’ domination – and as a practical reminder that the Ben Aly Chérif family, former ‘owners’ of the *zâwiya*, still threaten to reclaim the land they once called their own.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, outside intervention both in local history and in current village affairs – ‘*pas clairs*’ by definition, and thus not destined for any exposition to the public gaze – was clearly resented.

Despite these failures, the number of renovated, reconstructed or newly built *zawâya* in Kabylia grows every day. Most of these successful building projects are instigated either by village councils or by several, non-maraboutic members of a particular village, who aim to reconstruct the village *zâwiya* and who often seem to redefine it as a sign of local and regional pride and tradition. In some cases, these projects have partly been funded by the local or regional town halls, for similar motives. The reconstructed *zawâya* are frequently decorated with Berber symbols,<sup>34</sup> which, in any other context, appear as clearly secular or even anti-Islamic, as the more radical fringe of the Berber movement has a tendency to define any kind

of Islam as alien to ‘true’ Berber culture. In the case of the rural *zawâya* in Kabylia, however, both the ‘Berber’ and the *zâwiya* tradition seem to have been co-opted as a general expression of regional pride, legitimate control over the area, and resistance to ‘outside encroachment’ – be it by ‘Islamists’ or the central state. Yet again, this alliance between local religious tradition and Berberism is only possible if the notional ‘gap’ between Islamism and ‘local Islam’ is maintained, at least in public discourse.

Alongside the renovated *zawâya*, an altogether different kind of *zâwiya* has recently started to make its appearance. These are built by non-maraboutic men or women – mainly women – who, during the second half of their lives, have discovered a spiritual gift or calling, and who use the new *zawâya* as a place of teaching, ritual, clairvoyance, and healing.<sup>35</sup> These new *zawâya* function in a similar way to their ‘predecessors’: they attract ‘pilgrims’ who generally know each other, and assemble, men and women apart, on fixed dates; and they follow a pre-established ritual, which includes communal eating, praying and dancing, but always also leaves time for the pilgrims to talk among themselves. These new *zawâya*, however, are not necessarily centred on a saint’s tomb, and their main emphasis is set on trance experience and capacities to heal illnesses and exorcise ‘spirits’ that take possession of bodies and souls. The distinction between these ‘new’ and the ‘old’ *zawâya* is nevertheless flexible, and, according to people’s judgements, depend more on the moral reputation and the social alliances of the participants than on the ritual proper. The local ‘Islamists’ publicly condemn them, but are practically often compelled to tolerate them – the first trance session I ever witnessed was conducted by the mother of a locally known ‘Islamist’, whose ‘Islamist’ conviction is tacitly recognised to be the result of his mother’s ‘unorthodox’ religious activities.

At the beginning of the 2000s in Kabylia, ‘religion’ could thus be used to refer to Sufi trance session, saint worship, intellectual history, the defence of regional identity – and



‘Islamism’. In public discourse, the former elements were described as incompatible with the latter, not least in order to enhance the moral legitimacy and prestige of the former, and to make them compatible with Berberist – and French - discourses of local identity. In actual fact, however, the boundaries between these various traditions were and always had been rather flexible, and they allowed for – and were inherently dependent on – compromises on a day-to-day basis. Religious oppositions were part of larger social oppositions, and dovetailed with conflicts over land-rights, political influence, and notions of legitimate influence, power and knowledge. Meanwhile, publicly declared rigid and therefore ‘legible’ oppositions allowed for the tacit compliance with ‘messy’ local situations. This is the environment in which, in October 2004 in the regional capital, Béjaïa, the conference took place described in the remaining pages. It had for its theme the life and works of a regional saint and ‘*âlim*, ‘Abd al-Rahmân al-Waghlîsî.

### *The saint and his conference*

‘Abd al-Rahmân al-Waghlîsî was born towards the beginning of the fourteenth century AD (eighth century AH) in one of the many villages of the local tribe Aït Waghlis, known for the high density both of *zawâyâ* and, later on, also of French schools on their territory. At the time, although its most glorious period had passed, the region and its main town, Béjaïa, counted itself among the great centres of Islamic learning, and maintained exchanges with the universities of North Africa and the cities of the Mashriq.<sup>36</sup> Al-Waghlîsî is said to have studied in various regional *zawâyâ*, and to have maintained close contact with many of the great thinkers of his time, without ever having left his home valley. For most of his life, he acted as mufti and imam in Béjaïa. He produced a well-known and widely read pedagogic text on Islamic jurisprudence, known as the *Waghlîsiyya*. He also became the focal point of a group of regional students, several of whom achieved some fame later on.<sup>37</sup> He died at an

unknown but apparently venerable age in 1384 AD (786 AH) in the town of Béjaïa. He was buried in Béjaïa, where a *qubba* (a tomb topped by a dome) was erected in his memory.<sup>38</sup> Until today, his *qubba* is visited by local pilgrims, and the oral tradition of Béjaïa – and that of his home village – remembers him in several popular songs, invocations, holy sites and rituals.

Nevertheless, the reasons why he should be exhumed from the depths of history in 2004 can hardly be found in his lasting theoretical influence or in his work as such. Although his main work, the *Waghliyya*, was frequently copied and widely distributed throughout the Western part of the Islamic world, it certainly cannot be seen as a great work of Islamic jurisprudence, and even in his home region, al-Waghliṣī himself was quickly eclipsed by his successors, not least his students. Rather, his surprising return to the limelight in 2004 stems from his ambivalent status, and from the fact that relatively little is actually known about him. This means that he can all at once be seen as a local Kabyle saint, whose tomb is still venerated by local pilgrims, and as part of a unique Kabyle tradition of learning; he can also be understood to be a great intellectual whose manuscript was circulated throughout the known world, to the greater glory of Kabylia or of Algeria, depending on the point of view adopted. Again, he can be taken to be a proof of the thorough Islamisation of Kabylia, and therefore of the Algerian nation as such. He therefore appears as an ideal subject to be ‘recycled’ and reconstructed by various contemporary actors in their own image and according to their own reading of local religious tradition, and, implicitly, of present legitimate religious, political and social authority.

Consequently, the conference organised in his name appealed to a large variety of speakers, who in any other context would consider each other as potentially their worst enemies. They can roughly be divided into four groups: firstly, secular intellectuals, for whom the conference was mainly about local intellectual history and ‘Berber culture’. Most of these



were affiliated to the university, and especially to the recently opened department of Berber Studies. They were therefore associated with the region-wide 'Berber movement', which demands the acknowledgement of the 'Berber component' of Algerian culture, and which is often – not always rightly – represented as radically secularist, or even as anti-Islamic. Secondly, there were lecturers and students from the numerous Algerian Islamic universities. One of the latter, the immediate successor of the Egyptian Muslim brother and well-known intellectual al-Ghazâli at the head of the Islamic institute in Constantine, is one of the best-known moderate Islamists in the country, as he broadcasts the daily *hadîth* (saying of the Prophet) on Algerian national radio. Other people in this group had been closely associated with the FIS, the main Algerian Islamist party, before it was declared illegal. Others were representatives of the large number of Islamist parties that have sprung up since then.

The third group was composed of the representatives of the rural *zawâya* on the one hand, and of the Sufi order 'Alawiyya on the other. The former were mainly elderly *shuyûkh*, with long white beards and kindly faces. The latter divided into white-bearded *shuyûkh* on the one hand, and young men who sported tailor-made suits, sunglasses and mobile phones, and very carefully gave the impression of being extremely well organised.<sup>39</sup> Fourthly came the representatives of the villages of the Aït Waghliis, who were less involved in the academic than in the organisational aspect of the conference, but who nevertheless took care to be very visible during the entire event. They themselves were divided into several groups, along either village or family lines. They all had a strong tendency to claim the exclusive right to represent their area and 'their' saint. This claim led to a series of intra- or inter-village conflicts before the conference even started.

These divisions were made obvious from the start through carefully differentiated dress-codes, modes of interaction, age, language and eating (or rather, drinking) habits. Throughout the conference, they steadily became more pronounced. The conference lasted

three days, two of which were taken up by papers about various aspects of al-Waghlîsî's life and work, while the third was reserved for an excursion to the sites of his life and his teaching. The papers were given in Arabic, Berber and French, according to the language the speaker had been educated in, but, most importantly, according to his or her openly displayed attitudes both towards the 'Berber heritage' and Arabic, the language of Islam. As is common in Algeria, no translator was provided.<sup>40</sup> As the conference went on, levels of concentration and mutual respect were sinking, and it increasingly became a sign of belonging to a certain group to look bored and leave the room during a communication in a 'foreign' language.

This linguistic 'problem' was further enhanced by the publicly displayed allegiance to several intellectual traditions that, although not mutually exclusive, were increasingly construed as such. Thus, as the conference went on, the Francophone speakers voiced more and more complaints about the length and the 'scholasticism' of the Arabic communications, which never 'got to the point' and in any case, 'did not have much to say' and 'were incapable of independent thought'; whereas the Arabophone speakers severely criticised their Francophone colleagues for a lack of textual knowledge and respect, and even questioned the legitimacy of their claims to intellectual authority in matters of religion. Knowledge as derived from Francophone academic study and based on faith in the Sorbonne and French scholarship, and knowledge acquired as part of religion, based on the faith in God and His contemporary interpreters, were thereby portrayed as mutually incomprehensible and fundamentally at odds – yet again, the 'gap' was made to reappear. Ultimately, what was at stake was not a question of language, but the definition of al-Waghlîsî and, by extension, that of 'Islam' itself: should it be treated as a sociological fact or as a coherent body of knowledge? Was it transcendental or local? Universal or specific? And who had the right to talk about it, and in the name of whom or what?



Within this unspoken conflict, the most ambivalent but also the most vital part was played by those who remained silent during most of the conference: the local *shuyûkh*. From the 'Francophone' point of view, they were indispensable to the conference, as representatives of local culture and heritage ('good Islam'), and therefore as prime sources of legitimacy for the Francophone enlightened discourse about the inherent tolerance of truly 'authentic' local traditions. At the same time, practical interaction between the Francophone intellectuals and the *shuyûkh* proved difficult, as the latter were embarrassingly religious, hardly interested in 'Berberist' arguments, and much preferred to sit next to the 'Islamists', whom they recognised as fellow men of religion. The 'Islamists', in turn, were flattered by this sign of affection and recognition – did it not prove their own unquestionable legitimacy, and that they had been right about 'Algerian identity' all the way through? They, however, were also embarrassed by it: after all, the *shuyûkh* stood for everything the 'Islamists' condemned as 'unorthodox', namely the veneration of saints and Sufism. What was worse, the *shuyûkh* did not hesitate to show this preference through their embarrassing habit of humming mystic chants and of falling into trance wherever they thought it was appropriate.

While, once up in the pulpit, the speakers continued to violently condemn each other, on the floor, this general embarrassment resulted in a lot of kissing of heads and shoulders among black and white beards, and a considerable shyness among cleanly shaven faces. Greetings tended to be elaborate, and, so as not to offend anybody by omission, often amounted to a full '*al-salâm 'alaykum* (Islamic) *wa al-sabah al-khayr* (Arabic and Kabyle) *azul flawen* (neo-Berber) *bonjour tout le monde* (French)'. The only group of people who seemed to be at ease were the 'Alawiyya, who had quickly re-styled themselves as true representatives of the *shuyûkh*, and kissed and hugged and, wherever they could, exchanged bilingual business cards and French texts about the achievement of eternal bliss through the Sufi way. Their constant activity and all-encompassing cordiality were only matched by those

of the representatives of the villages concerned, who were busy convincing the Francophone intellectuals, who they clearly felt were much more accessible and efficient than the ‘bearded ones’, to organise a whole series of prestigious international conferences in their respective villages.

The second day, which would take us out of the relatively neutral space of the city to several rural sites of saint veneration was therefore dreaded by some, and looked forward to by others with barely hidden curiosity. What would happen if you put black beards, white beards and cleanly shaven faces, and *hijâbî* women and those in tight T-shirts together into small minibuses and drove them for more than an hour across the mountains? What would happen if you took declared Islamists to a saint’s tomb that used to be notorious for its night-long dancing, trance and healing sessions, and that in these and all other aspects clearly resembled those that the Islamists’ ‘colleagues’ elsewhere had burned down (Babès 1992)? What would happen in the villages where a sudden outside interest in the local holy sites might unearth age-old conflicts, and lead, in the words of one of the speakers, to ‘civil war’ among villagers?<sup>41</sup>

Not terribly much, it turned out, apart from somewhat too lengthy speeches by somewhat too many villagers, *shuyûkh*, Sufis and Islamists trying to put things ‘right’. Much of the reason why little ‘happened’ can be found in the Algerian *status quo* which forces people to compromise on a daily basis. This *status quo* has taught people to deal with tensions by shifting open confrontation to abstract categories, while at the same time ignoring the living representatives of these abstract categories, because they might be their next-door neighbours, or even their cousins, if not their brothers.<sup>42</sup> Most Algerians are tired of conflict, and try to avoid it. They are also extremely suspicious of all kinds of religious and political motives, to the point where it is difficult to voice any idea without being suspected of hiding a lie or being ‘corrupted’ (*récupéré*) by the government.<sup>43</sup>



Important as it is for any understanding of contemporary Algeria, this *modus vivendi* is only half the reason for the relative success of the conference. The full explanation can only be found if we take a closer look at the categories I established provisionally in the preceding paragraphs. This will tell us that their divisions were not as simple, clear and obvious as I – and most conference participants – made them out to be. Thus, the most radical and serious-looking representative of the ‘Islamist’ faction, who had come from Algiers, was first presented to me by one of the most radical local Berberist and secularist as one of his old school-friends. It gradually became clear to me that most of the ‘Arabo-Islamists’ invited to the conference were actually from the immediate neighbourhood, spoke Kabyle as well as Arabic (and many among them also French),<sup>44</sup> and had probably been to the saints’ tombs many a time before – if only to accompany their mothers when they were young. One of the two women wearing *hijâb* was presenting a paper on the oral tradition on al-Waghlîsî in Béjaïa, in Berber. The ‘Islamist faction’ appeared deeply impressed by the capacity to recite the Qur’ân displayed by the wife of the current leader of the ‘Alawiyya, who had come to the conference sparsely clad, heavily made up, and with a token piece of transparent cloth attached to the top of her head. Once more, a very legible public discourse of irreconcilable oppositions was accompanied by informal connections that were, if anything, *pas claires*.

The president of the association that had organised the conference – the same association that was mentioned above for their efforts to re-open the *zâwiya* in Chellata – was himself difficult to classify in any of the above categories. An internationally renowned mathematician,<sup>45</sup> he is the oldest son of an important religious family in the area, who still have considerable landholdings in the valley. He is proud to mention that his father was one of the first French primary school teachers in the valley, and equally proud to be a member of his tribe, the Aït Waghlis. In the appropriate circumstances, he can count many a *mujâhid* (a nationalist fighter in the war of independence) in his extended family, and he maintains

excellent relationships with the local government and public institutions. He has studied in the Soviet Union, from whence he came back with a solid grounding in Marxism and with the glory of having been president of the Algerian students union in the Ukraine ('a lot of speeches on Arab solidarity to the Palestinian committee!' as he recalls). He brings up his children in French. He refuses all offers to work abroad or even in the capital because he wants to 'do things' in his home region, and he identifies with the more thoughtful fringe of the Berber movement in the region.

His attempts to revalorise local religious tradition seem partly motivated by his interest in local history, especially, as he calls it, the 'history of science'. They are also, it seems, dictated by his desire to reassert the value of his own family history. His grandfather was a Sufi, an important one, as he likes to stress. He also likes to represent his ancestors – and by extension all religious families in the area – as 'scientists' according to contemporary norms: thus his past interest in the reconstruction of the *zâwiya* in Chellata described above, and in the 'scientific' value of local religious manuscript collections (Aïssani and Mechehed 1998). Rather than being detrimental to his career, the very ambiguity of his role, combined with his high status in all domains and from all possible points of view, seem to be what has so far allowed him to successfully organise conferences and exhibitions on various aspects of regional history that have so far not had their place in the 'official' history of Algeria. It clearly contributed to the success of the conference.

These seemingly unrelated aspects of the principal organiser's career, and the living contradictions represented by most of the conference participants were as crucial for the success of the conference as the ambiguous position of al-Waghlîsî himself. As seen above, the latter was an ideal theme for a 'pluralist' conference, because he could be seen as an '*âlim*' as well as a saint and Sufi. In much the same way, the multiplicity of possible readings of the speakers' social position created a space where communication – if only very limited



communication – could take place among people who usually strive to ignore each other, but who, if needs must and not too many people are listening, succeed in finding common ground, if only for a short time. Thus, secular intellectuals might find themselves side by side with radical Islamists in rejecting the veneration of saints as superstition, and mathematicians looking for scientific truths might end up endorsing the cause of Sufi *shuyûkh* who prove through numerological techniques that the end of the world is soon to come.

Although the conference described here was certainly an extraordinary event and owed much to a unique concurrence of circumstances, this coexistence of theoretically exclusive ‘identities’ within every single speaker is common among Algerians, despite its vehement denial by Algerian public discourse. It influences social interactions on a daily basis. In the Soummam Valley, ‘Islamists’ and ‘Berberists’ are often siblings, cousins, or even one and the same person, much as ‘marabouts’, ‘Sufis’ and ‘reformists’ have been before them. Although this ‘overlap’ does not necessarily diminish mutual hostility, it allows for precisely those local accommodations that the Algerian government official mentioned at the outset of this article qualified as ‘*pas claires*’ and therefore as needing protection from outside curiosity. Publicly assumed and internationally endorsed ‘legibility’ affords some such protection, although - or because - it is constantly undermined by the complexity of local practice.

### *Conclusion*

Religion is indeed a key term for the comprehension of contemporary Algerian society, not least because it is widely used by locals themselves. In order to be of any use as a conceptual category for analysis, however, it has to be understood within a complex context of various religious, social and political practices. Thus, struggles between Sufis and Islamists, secularists and Islamists, and villagers and academics, exceed the domain of the religious, and have social and political ramifications. The re-evaluation of the local saintly heritage is a

religious matter, but also part of an ongoing discussion about national and regional history. It asks questions about rightful religious practices, but also about what kind of relationship Algeria as a nation should maintain with its heterogeneous local history, and who should have a right to produce this local history. At the same time, it feeds into conflicts about 'rightful' landownership that go back to the French colonial period. Debates over the legitimacy of al-Waghlîsî (as a saint, as a religious scholar, as a historical figure) and over the proper form of academic argument are a reflection of debates over the nature of intellectual, spiritual and moral legitimacy, and over the rightful production of history and knowledge of any kind.

The ways in which the distinction between 'folk religion' and reformed Islam or 'Islamism' is employed locally similarly can only be understood as part of wider social and cultural processes, dependencies and oppositions. Throughout the preceding paragraphs, I have shown how the 'official' Algerian discourse on religion that is based on this distinction takes much of its efficacy not from *how* it distinguishes, but from the very fact *that* it distinguishes, and that it allows connecting local realities to internationally recognised categories. The 'official' discourse thereby emerges less as an attempt to impose a simple and 'legible' truth on complex social realities, but as a framework within which these social complexities can be renegotiated on a daily basis without exposing local social complexities to public scrutiny. As a generally accepted framework, then, the 'official' discourse is not only developed by the state and for the state, as argued by Scott (1998). Rather, it is the result of the interplay between international categories and governmental and local strategies that strive for the accumulation of various sources of religious, political and social legitimacy even though these might be 'officially' declared to be mutually incompatible. In the preceding paragraphs, I have given some examples of how this is done by various agents within Algerian society. I hope that I have thereby provided a case study that might help us to rethink similar cases elsewhere, while allowing us to see Algeria not as bitterly divided into mutually



exclusive groups and categories, but as a heterogeneous society that thrives on its ambiguities, while violently denying them in public.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed – and often controversial – accounts of what has happened in Algeria since the late 1980s, see Charef (1994), Martinez (1998), Quandt (1998), Roberts (2003) and Aggoun and Rivoire (2004). The literature on Algeria, especially in French, is too vast to be contained in any footnote or short bibliography. Many of the recent writings, however, read like political manifestoes rather than like serious attempts to reconstruct the historical truth, which remains particularly evasive.

<sup>2</sup> With perhaps the exception of Chachoua (2001) and two short articles by Hadj Ali (1992) and Babès (1992).

<sup>3</sup> Out of the 6,976 titles held by the Library of Congress (USA) that respond to the search by keyword ‘Algeria’, roughly 4% were originally written in English, about 15% in Arabic, while the remaining 81% were in French.

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims’ runs through French colonial ethnography and policy towards Islam. ‘Good Muslims’ tended to be those who accommodated themselves to colonial rule, and followed non-political, ‘traditional’ (in the French terminology) practices; ‘bad Muslims’ were those who used religion to fight against French domination. This distinction is still alive in the French press, where ‘good Muslims’ ‘assimilate’ to French culture, are open and tolerant (and speak French), whereas ‘bad Muslims’ refuse French ‘acculturation’.

<sup>5</sup> ‘These state simplifications, the basic givens of modern statecraft, were... rather like abridged maps. They did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice of it that interested the official observer’ (Scott 1998:3).

<sup>6</sup> Sing. *zāwiya*. The term *zāwiya* literally means ‘corner’ (of a mosque). Throughout the Maghreb, the *zawāyā* fulfilled a variety of functions in rural life: generally constructed around the tomb of a local saint, they served as teaching institutes of varying quality, where the teachers of the village Qur’ānic schools would be educated, as sites of pilgrimages, institutes of charity, hostels, and meeting places for religious brotherhoods.

<sup>7</sup> During the nineteenth century, Kabylia became an area of predilection for French colonial ethnographers, who developed a large part of the image of the Kabyle as it is still popular today, and often endorsed by contemporary Kabyles themselves (Ageron 1968, Lorcin 1995, see also Lucas and Vatin 1975). The notion that the Kabyles had only ever been superficially Islamised was fundamental to this image, and was variously ‘proved’ by their ‘materialistic spirit’ (Carette 1848), their ‘Roman’ or even ‘Christian’ ancestry (Daumas 1864), or the ‘local democracy’ that reigned in Kabyle villages (Hanoteau and Letourneux 1873), and that according to the French observers was incompatible with Islam (or, indeed, religion of any kind). Since then, not least due to French intervention, Kabylia has indeed become the only rural area of Algeria where ‘secularism’ has had any widespread popular success.

<sup>8</sup> The regional capital of Lesser Kabylia, Béjaïa, experienced its most prosperous time as a centre of Islamic learning in the thirteenth century. Sufi orders started to appeal to a large section of the population in the area in the seventeenth century. The first reformist schools in the area were opened in the 1930s; their number peaked in the 1950s.

<sup>9</sup> Algiers was taken by the French in 1830. French dominion was gradually extended to the fertile areas around Algiers, and to the coastal cities. By 1847, the most organised and efficient indigenous resistance, led by the *amir* ‘Abd al-Qādir, was defeated. The conquest of the Kabyle mountains, famous for their inaccessibility and their poverty, was accomplished by 1857.

<sup>10</sup> For more detailed descriptions of various *zawāyā*, albeit tinged by colonial prejudice and fervent belief in France’s ‘mission to civilise’, see Hanoteau and Letourneux (1873), Trumelet (1881) and Rinn (1884).

<sup>11</sup> The French colonial records on the various *zawāyā* kept in the French colonial archives (*Archives d’outre-mer* (AOM), in Aix-en-Provence) are numerous, as every local administrator was compelled to report on the activities of the *zawāyā* in his district on a monthly basis.



<sup>12</sup> As can be seen from the petitions to the colonial government by representatives of the local population, preserved in AOM B3 426.

<sup>13</sup> French colonial ethnography tended to identify the sway the regional religious families held over the local population as 'feudalism' of the same kind as what had been abolished in France during the French Revolution. Sufi orders, (supposedly) open to everybody without distinction of family origin were seen as a step away from feudal Islam to a more egalitarian form of religion, and thus also of society, although they maintained the 'chains of superstition' that linked individual adepts to their masters (Masqueray 1983 [1886], for a more recent appraisal of the 'Sufi revolution', see Clancy-Smith 1990).

<sup>14</sup> In 1863, the French army decided to put an end to the prevailing 'confusion' over property and usufruct rights in tribal lands by the application of a unified code regulating private property and landholdings: the *sénatus-consulte*, which was gradually applied to all of Algeria in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *sénatus-consulte* institutionalized private property and provided a legal basis for the confiscation of all lands held in common and of all lands declared as *habûs* or religious endowments, thereby liberating a large proportion of land for incoming European settlers.

<sup>15</sup> *SLNA Dossier Famille Ben Aly Chérif* AOM 93/4244. The Ben Aly Chérif family had to leave Algeria during the war of independence (1954-1962), leaving both the Algerian nationalists and the French in doubt as to their true allegiance.

<sup>16</sup> AOM GGA 14164. French primary schools had been established in Kabylia as early as the 1880s, but it was only in the 1920s and 1930s that they were widely accepted by the local population. In 1947, a local administrator noted that 'we can assert that by now there is not one indigenous community in our region left that does not aspire to have a school and to see their sons and daughters benefit from our teaching' (*Plan d'Action Communale*, 1947, *ibid.*).

<sup>17</sup> AOM 93/4332.

<sup>18</sup> Islamic reformism had developed since the second half of the nineteenth century throughout the Islamic world, as a reaction to the perceived state of decline within the Muslim community, and increasingly also as a reaction to Western political and economic supremacy. The main tenet of this movement was that the decline of 'Islamic civilisation' had to be remedied by profound moral reform of the individual Muslim as well as of the Islamic community. This could only be achieved by reference to the original sacred texts excluding latter day 'additions' and specifically local practices.

<sup>19</sup> ADC *Associations*. See also the anonymous administrative report *L'enseignement privé réformiste et l'association des oulémas d'Algérie*, held in the *Archives du centre d'études diocésain* (ACED) in Algiers. On the development and impact of Islamic reformism in Algeria, see Merad (1967) and McDougall (2002).

<sup>20</sup> Research on 'folk' religious practices in North Africa became increasingly popular in the first half of the twentieth century, see for example Doutté (1908), Bel (1938) and Dermenghem (1982 [fourth edition in 1954]). For a discussion of similar developments in West Africa, see Brenner (2000).

<sup>21</sup> 'Marabout' is the French version of the kabyle *mrabit*, which in turn is derived from the eleventh-century al-Murâbitûn (Almoravids) movement of Islamic reform, of which it is said that the ancestors of present-day Kabyle marabouts were part. Today, the word is commonly used in Kabylia, both in Kabyle and in French, to refer to members of hereditary religious families.

<sup>22</sup> ANA Dossier PPA/UDMA.

<sup>23</sup> *Monographie de la commune mixte d'Akbou*, n.d. AOM Sidi Aïch//5.

<sup>24</sup> Outside Algeria, historians have long described the ease with which religious figures could accumulate various sources of religious legitimacy that might at first sight seem to be mutually exclusive (cf. the collection of essays in Keddie 1972, Cornell 1998). Anthropologists have been less ready to accept this inherent flexibility, not least because local discourse often vehemently denies it.

<sup>25</sup> *L'enseignement privé réformiste et l'Association des oulémas d'Algérie*, ACED.

<sup>26</sup> *Registre des mariages, commune mixte d'Akbou 1891-1963*, ACA and *Sijill al-zûâj baladiyya shallâta 1985-2003*, ACC.

<sup>27</sup> For an account of these practices in Kabylia see Hadibi (2002); in Western Algeria, see Andezian (2001).

<sup>28</sup> It is common to trace the 'genealogy' of the Algerian 'Islamists' of the 1990s to a radical fringe of the Islamic reformist movement of the 1930s, who, disgruntled by the new national government and its publicly declared socialism (especially after the putsch against the Ben Bella government in 1965), maintained close contacts with the Egyptian Muslim brothers and secretly continued to develop more radical Islamic theories, after their first association, *Al-Qiyam* (the Values) was declared illegal in 1965. 'Islamism' did thus not suddenly appear in the late 1970s, although it was then that it started to appeal to a new generation of potential activists.

<sup>29</sup> To borrow the term used in the proceedings of the *Séminaire de Yakouren* (1981), a central text for the Algerian Berber movement. The Berber movement demanded the official recognition of the various Algerian Berber languages and the 'Berber component' of Algerian history and national identity. It had started to emerge among Kabyle emigrants in France from the 1960s onwards (Direche-Slimani 1997), became popular throughout



Kabylia in the late 1970s, and led to series of strikes and demonstrations in 1980, providing an outlet for the growing frustration with the central government. For more details on the Berber movement, see Chaker (1999) and Guenoun (1999).

<sup>30</sup> For more details, see Hadj Ali (1992) and Salhi (1999). Although conferences at the luxurious *Club de Pins* in Algiers are commonly used by the Algerian government to forge 'connections' with potentially dissident parts of society, this conference was the first of this kind. It was followed by a second, similar one in autumn 2005. In the meantime, *zawāyā* were mainly used as platforms for electoral campaigns.

<sup>31</sup> The literature on how states or other interest groups recuperate or even invent lifeless 'traditions' and use them to their own ends is by now vast, see for example Chapman (1978), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and McDonald (1989). What is interesting in this case is less the manipulation of 'tradition' by the state than the clearly ambiguous position the state itself – as represented by numerous individuals who are themselves part of the complex fabric of Algerian society – in practice occupies vis-à-vis these 'traditions', despite its clear-cut rhetoric of condemnation or praise.

<sup>32</sup> For an example of such a reading of the role of the *zawāyā* in Lesser Kabylia, see Aïssani (2002) and Aïssani and Mechehed (1998).

<sup>33</sup> Claims to land-holdings by religious families who had to leave their villages or even the country, and now feel that the moment of their return has come, are increasingly voiced. For a detailed description of the Ben Aly Chérif family's claim to land they formerly owned, see Oulebsir (2004).

<sup>34</sup> The most common of these is writing in *tifnaw*, an ancient Tuareg script. The words written in *tifnaw*, however, conform to those found elsewhere on Islamic tombs: they record the *zāwiya*'s name, and emphasise the sacred and protected nature of the place.

<sup>35</sup> For the description of a similar development in Western Algeria and in Tunis see Andezian (2001) and Ferchiou (1993) respectively.

<sup>36</sup> For a description of the history of Béjaïa and its region, see the relevant sections in Brunschvig (1940, 1947) and Boulifa (1925). For a description of the intellectual atmosphere in Béjaïa half a century after al-Waghîsi's death, see Katz (1996).

<sup>37</sup> The most famous of his students were Sidi Ahmad al-Zarrûq, who also wrote a commentary on the *Waghlisiyya*, and al-Sabbâgh, who came to fame in West Africa (Hiskett 1984). Several copies of the *Waghlisiyya* and of smaller pieces are held by libraries throughout the world. The most important funds are conserved in Algiers, Tunis, Rabat, Madrid and Paris (Belmioub 1998).

<sup>38</sup> The original *qubba* was destroyed during the French conquest of the town in 1833, and rebuilt by the French twenty years later (AWB 1754). Villagers from al-Waghîsi's native village claim that he was buried there, and have recently excavated a tomb that might have contained his remains.

<sup>39</sup> The founding saint of the 'Alawiyya, the Algerian Ahmad al-'Alawî, was born in 1869, and died in 1934 (Berque 1936, Lings 1961). Since then, the order has been thriving, and has, in addition to the large home *zāwiya* in Mostaganem, opened branches in all North African countries, in Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Ethiopia, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Great Britain. It strives to represent itself as a resolutely modern order, and, according to some Algerians, the order has succeeded in controlling important business assets and local politics in Algeria and abroad.

<sup>40</sup> When Algeria achieved independence in 1962, the state apparatus and the educational system functioned exclusively in French. Schools were gradually Arabised during the 1960s and 1970s, generally with the help of (often second-rate) teachers from Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Higher education remained bilingual, however, with the more prestigious natural science being taught in French. The state administration and most state-run companies similarly resisted Arabisation. This meant that by the 1980s a large number of Arabic-educated university graduates pushed onto a job-market that did not offer them any real opportunities, while most well-paid and influential jobs remained in the hands of the French-speaking elites, who could afford to educate their children privately. This led and still leads to social tensions that are often described as caused by 'cultural', thus insurmountable, differences (Grandguillaume 1983).

<sup>41</sup> Much of the potential for conflict is due to the fact that the exact location of many holy sites is unknown, and that therefore several villages can claim the honour of having within their boundaries the burial or teaching site of a well-known saint. Again, we see how local ambiguities become troublesome as soon as they are brought to public attention and are thereby submitted to a process of 'official' definition.

<sup>42</sup> This *status quo* has only attracted relatively little attention in the available literature on contemporary Algeria, which tends instead to focus on oppositions that appear as truly insurmountable, and that make one wonder how any kind of daily life could take place in a country so divided. This omission seems to be largely due on the one hand to Euro-American conceptions of inflexible moral oppositions that are said to be at work in Algeria, and on the other hand, to the difficulty of conducting fieldwork in Algeria, and to the relatively little space that is therefore given to daily practices rather than to public and political discourse.



<sup>43</sup> This suspicion of political or religious motives runs through the history of Algeria, but it has become especially prominent in writings on and by Algerians since the series of 'revelations' about the true nature of the Algerian civil war in the 2000s. For examples of these, see Souaïdia (2001) and Samraoui (2003); for a full bibliography, see Aggoun and Rivoire (2004).

<sup>44</sup> Throughout the 1970s, political Islam was mainly 'bred' at university, and especially in the faculties of natural sciences and engineering, where, until today, all teaching is conducted in French. The first wave of Islamists were thus frequently French- rather than Arabic-speaking (Aggoun and Rivoire 2004).

<sup>45</sup> He has established collaborations with universities, research institutes and industry in the United States, Russia and Europe, and frequently travels abroad, without ever losing touch with his 'home base' in Béjaïa.

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ACC: Archives de la Commune de Chellata, Chellata, Wilâya de Béjaïa, Algeria

ACED: Archives du Centre d'Etudes Diocésain d'Alger, Algeria

ADC: Archives du Département de Constantine, Constantine, Algeria.

ANA: Archives Nationales d'Alger, Algiers, Algeria.

AOM: Archives d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

AWB: Archives de la Wilâya de Béjaïa, Béjaïa, Algeria

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