

# Between Salafism, Colonialism and Nationalism: The making of an anti-Sufi discourse in Interwar Algeria

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## Abstract

This article examines the intricate dialectics between colonialism, Salafism, and the first glimpses of an Algerian nation throughout the interwar period. Founded in 1931, the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama (AMAU) embarked on defining the French dominated *ummah* [nation] on cultural and religious terms. By the same token, it aspired to reform the intellectual conditions of the Sunni populace via schools and weekly journals for the steadily growing Arabic-speaking readership. It is against such backdrop, that an old/new fault line was brought in the foreground of the Algerian *salafī/iṣlāhī* discourse: the “authenticity” of the scripts as opposed to the “heterodox” ritualism and superstitions of Sufism. By applying the lens of postcolonial theory, it is suggested that the anti-Sufi content of the Association’s journals reflected the cultural re-codifications of the French “Mission Civilisatrice,” albeit in the shape of a restored Islamic orthodoxy coupled with the ambitious ethnoreligious reconstruction of Algeria.

**Keywords:** Algeria, Colonialism, Salafism, Sufism, Ulama, Mission Civilisatrice.

## Introduction

In this study I revisit the encounters of the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama (AMAU) with French colonialism and its “civilizing” projects. My research aims at elucidating the ideological ramifications of such contacts in shaping the *iṣlāhī* [reformist] and early nationalist discourses of the local *Salafīyya* and, more significantly, their anti-Sufi manifestations during the 1930s.

Relevant literature covering Algeria’s political, religious, cultural, and ideological currents since the early twentieth century abound; to mention but a few studies, Ernest Gellner in his *Muslim Society* (1981) was among the first who commented on the supposed divide between the “scripturalist tradition” of the urban ‘*ulamā* and the “pastoralist, rural Islam” of the Sufi saints and their

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*murīd* [followers/disciples] from a historical and anthropological perspective (Lukens-Bull 1999, 5-12). Benjamin Stora's *Algeria 1830-2000: A short history* (2001) and Charles-Robert Ageron's *Modern Algeria* (1991) remain up to this day classical works of reference, while Aboul-Kassem Saadallah in his voluminous *Le Mouvement National Algerien* (1992) provides much information on the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama (AMAU) and its relations to the other social and political factions of that age. Another source that offers very interesting insights about the inevitable collaboration between the French rulers and the *'ulamā*, just before the period under question, is the essay of Allan Christelow, *Intellectual History in a Culture under Siege: Algerian Thought in the Last Half of the Nineteenth Century* (1982). Finally yet importantly, the work of James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (2009), constitutes an influential background research for our topic that should be taken into consideration.

The significance of the present study though lies in reviewing the Algerian print anti-Sufism throughout the 1930s, namely the well-known weekly journals *Ash-Sharia*, *As-Sounnah*, and *El-Bassair* in light of the postcolonial concepts of "hybridity" and "agency." The aforementioned have been analyzed at length by theorists such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1998, 18-22), Robert Young (2001, 344-45) and Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (2005, 267) in their seminal treatises *Remaking women: Feminism and modernity in the Middle East*, *Postcolonialism: a Historical Introduction*, and *Postcolonialisms, An anthology of cultural theory and criticism*, respectively.

In the sections that follow I intend to discuss whether and how the local *'ulamā*, who had been the loyal disciples of the French conquerors for many years, acted as the indigenous agents of colonial modernity. The main argument is that the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama translated culturally the project of "Mission Civilisatrice" into an already existing anti-Sufi discourse, which was an integral part of—to use Talal Asad's (1993 120; 2009, 20) breakthrough definition—Islam's "discursive tradition." Furthermore, the essay contends that apart from linking the reformist *'ulamā* to the puritanism of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) or 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), the refutation of Sufism in that specific historical conjuncture served as an embryonic nation-building project much to the dismay of Algeria's colonial rulers.

## Discussion

### The birth of *Salafi* anti-Sufism in Algeria

The AMAU saw the light of day during the so-called "reawakening period" (1919-1945) of modern Algerian history (McDougall 2009, 29). Its figurehead was 'Abd al-Hamid Bin Badis (1889-1940), a religious scholar who is considered Algeria's pioneer of *Islāh* [reform] and religio-cultural renaissance by and large. Notwithstanding his initial proximity to the *Tijāniyya* Sufi order,

he became later in his life one of the staunchest critics of Sufism by dint of his exposure to the reformist *Salafīyya* of the late nineteenth century Azharite theologian, Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) (Adams 1968, 13, 51, 60; Hourani 2009, 225-26). In that respect, the visit of the then Grand Mufti of Egypt (1899-1905) ‘Abduh to the French occupied Algeria in 1903 heralded an era of increased contacts between the local Muslim proponents of *Islāh* and the colonial preachers of “Mission Civilisatrice” (Gellner 1995, 154-58), who by that time held sway in much of North Africa.

The years 1908-1913 were constitutive of the young Ibn Badis’ thought and orientations. He completed his theological studies in *al-Zaytūna* Islamic University in Tunisia; thereafter he travelled to Medina and Cairo where he befriended Rashid Rida (1865-1935), another well-known Muslim reformist and disciple of ‘Abduh (Cheikh 2003, 11). Like his father al-Makki Bin Badis before him, who had been a judge in the *Sharī’a* court of his hometown Constantine and had been working with the French, while at times been at odds with them over the autonomy of the Islamic judiciary, ‘Abd al-Hamid Bin Badis’ educational work was sanctioned, ergo closely supervised by the colonial authorities (McDougall 2009, 70). By the mid-1920s, the popular preacher of *al-Akhdar* Mosque in Constantine had established his own network of reform-minded ‘*ulamā* and laid the ground for the emergence of their future *jam‘iyya* [association].

Since the inception of the AMAU, the ‘*ulamā* defined it as a *ḥaraka salafīyya – iṣlāhīyya* [Salafist-reformist movement] and a *jam‘iyya dīniyya tahdhībīyya* [association for religious guidance] (*El-Bassair*, vol. 38, October 9, 1936; *Es-Sirat*, vol. 2, September 18, 1933); thereby, their discourse set forth the Sunni Muslims’ obligation to abide by the teachings of the *Aslāf* [forefathers] as the only acceptable way to remedy their misfortunes and reverse the spiritual “stagnation” of that age (Arkoun 1996, 147; Saad 1993, 109). In a congress of the Association in 1937 they announced the goals of their *da‘wa* [preaching]: “we call people back to what Islam had originally taught them; to our Holy Book, the *Sunnah* and the guidance of our Righteous *Aslāf*” (*Da‘wa Jam‘iyyati-l-‘Ulama*, June 11, 1937, 177-79). In the same congress the ‘*ulamā* explicitly denounced the Sufi orders as novelties that did not exist in the age of the Prophet and that the only reason behind their creation was to safeguard the fortunes of their sheikhs, as well as of their children.

The Algerian Salafists’ views on Sufism echoed the *iṣlāhī* legacy of ‘Abduh and Rida coupled with the Wahhābī Salafism of the newly established (1932) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Vassiliev 1998, 64 – 174). The columnists of the AMAU journals commented on the “dubious” practices of their compatriots and coreligionists who allegedly believed in *jinn* [demons], worshipped trees or stones, and even exercised witchcraft (*Ash-Sharia*, vol. 2, July 24, 1933). Worse still, they held the Sufi orders accountable for the “tragic state of exploitation,

superstition and humiliation of our people that had to be reversed once and for all” (*Da‘wa Jam‘iyyati-l-‘Ulama*, June 11, 1937, 177-79).

It follows then that the “demonization” of Sufism is not a genuinely Algerian phenomenon. Contrariwise, anti-Sufism has been linked to a Salafist tradition that dates back to the thirteenth century AD; from Ibn Taymiyya’s (1992, 22-23, 33) treatise *Ziyarat al-qubur wa-l-istinjad bi-l-maqbur* [*Visiting the tombs and venerating the deceased*] to ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s *Kitab al-tawhid* [*The Book of God’s Oneness*] (around 1730) and later on to Muhammad ‘Abdu’s *Risalat al-tawhid* [*Essay on God’s Oneness*] that was published in the turn of the twentieth century. In the latter, the Egyptian Grand Mufti defended Islam as “the true religion of Reason” against the supposed ignorance of the illiterate villagers who were deceived by the Sufi sheikhs (Hourani 2009, 135). The generation of Arab *iṣlāhiyyīn* that followed, including ‘Abd al-Hamid Bin Badis, were deeply affected by that particular work (Al-‘Iraqi 1998, 193).

However, at least until the early twentieth century, the dividing lines between the *‘ulamā* and their Sufi counterparts had been rather blurred across the cities of North Africa. Most Tunisian *‘ulamā*, for instance, belonged to a Sufi *tarīqa* [order] such as *al-Qādiriyya*, *al-Tijāniyya*, or *al-Sādhiliyya*, whereas many Azharite sheikhs retained their connections to the order of *al-Khalwatiyya*, despite Muhammad ‘Abdu’s anti-Sufi campaigns (Bruinessen and Howell 2007, 23; Green 1978, 87, 113-16). In Algeria, as many as one hundred Sufi sheikhs attended the first session of the AMAU in 1931. More importantly, the Association’s founding members had never denied their attendance of religious classes in the Sufi lodges at the early stages of their theological training (Blasi 1990, 58).

Yet, the Association stated in its charter that it would confine its membership only to those *‘ulamā* who had sincerely repented for their old devotion to *al-murābiṭīn* [Marabouts] (*Da‘wa Jam‘iyyati-l-‘Ulama*, June 11, 1937, Article 12)! Sufi sheikhs had been dubbed by Ibn Badis and his group *ṭuruqīyyīn*; a pejorative term that derives from the plural of *ṭarīqa*, i.e. *ṭuruq* [roads or ways], for purportedly shattering the original faith into various, misleading paths. The *‘ulamā* called *al-murābiṭīn* and *al-ṭuruqīyyīn* in both Tunisia and Algeria “the real disaster for our people” (*El-Bassair*, vol. 35, 18 September 1936). Five years after the historic session of 1931, Ibn Badis felt compelled to explain publicly where his group’s misgivings stemmed from:

At first, many Sufi sheikhs signed our charter, making us believe in their sincere intentions for reform. However, just one year later, the same people abandoned our common cause and started attacking us. They were simply afraid of the power of our preaching; we [the AMAU] see ourselves responsible for fighting the ills of our *ummah*. These are exactly the same ills to which these people owe their spiritual and economic strength (*El-Bassair*, vol. 37, 2 October 1936).

Having presented at some length the Algerian Salafists' posture on Sufism within the framework of an inherited Salafist tradition, I will now focus on the Association's reception of the colonial project(s) in Algeria and the extent to which the French tutelage affected the ongoing anti-Sufi discourse.

### **“Mission Civilisatrice” in the Islamic Maghreb: Expectations and Limitations**

At the height of France's annexation of large swaths of land in Africa and Asia, Premier Jules Ferry (1880-1881, 1883-1885) praised “Mission Civilisatrice” as the cornerstone of the nation's Colonial Empire (Barrows 1986, 109-35; Sévilla 2003, 396). In fact, what is coined “République Coloniale” by some French intellectuals had been justified before the late nineteenth European audiences on humanistic grounds; the apostles of Reason construed their presence overseas as a teaching assignment imbued with a sense of “sacred duty” towards “Les Indigènes,” whether in Kabyle, Senegal or Indochina (Constantini 2008, 68-69; Shohat and Stam 2012, 92-93, 107). As far as the Arab-Islamic world is concerned, that diligent “civilizing” campaign could be traced back to the short-lived expedition of Napoleon to Egypt (1798-1801); the watershed moment, indeed, in the French Orientalists' intrinsic desires to “domesticate” the East (Said 1978, 81-84).

In like manner, the colonization of Algeria starting from the mid-nineteenth century demonstrated how “Mission Civilisatrice” might have been implemented in the Islamic Maghrebi settings as well. At the critical juncture of European colonial encroachment into their towns, villages, mosques, madrasas and *awqāf* lands, the graduates of the French-controlled local *madrasas* [schools] such as the *Médersa Supérieure* in Algiers or the prestigious institutions of *al-Azhar* and *al-Zaytūna* sought to advance the educational and scientific development propounded by their French tutors. ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Majjawi (1848-1914), who had been teaching in *Médersa Supérieure* in the 1890s, was such a Muslim thinker who was allowed to exercise his theological authority within the boundaries imposed by the existing colonial framework (Christelow 1982, 387-99). In the meantime, those learned men of religion had been always at pains to illustrate the Islamic spirit of the reforms under question. By virtue of their colonial and intra-Islamic experiences, Ibn Badis and the other co-founders of the AMAU fell within that new breed of intellectuals who were nurtured by both “Mission Civilisatrice” and *al-Salafīyya*.

However, on what terms were the colonized Muslims of North Africa granted access to the merits of French Republicanism, especially in the aftermath of the Third Republic's (1870-1940) inauguration? To quote Young (2001, 30) in his seminal *Postcolonialism*:

The French colonies offered the best educational and cultural facilities, while at the same time demanded that the colonized subject renounce his or her own culture and religion in order to benefit from them.

That said, the enthusiasm of the metropole for injecting the benefits of modern civilization into the lives of the indigenous Arabs and Berbers of Algeria ebbed and flowed due to the intransigent stance of the French and other European settlers. Not surprisingly, the latter cultivated the myth of their cultural superiority, seeking desperately to offset the ominous reality of being outnumbered year by year (Barclay, Chopin and Evans 2018, 115-30). Yielding to the settlers' fears of "unevenly" elevating the status of the Muslim subjects, the colonial administration at times suspended the very reforms that it promised to undertake or, even worse, enacted discriminatory laws and exception regimes. For instance, it is no coincidence that the infamous *Code de l'indigénat* had been initially deployed for the non-Europeans of Algeria in 1881, prior to its enforcement in other "less civilized" parts of the Empire (Mann 2009, 333, 340).

Almost half a century afterwards, the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama backed the *Blum-Viollette* plan (Stora 2001, 18) of the Front Populaire leftist government (1936-1938) that opened the door for the political equality of French and a portion of educated Algerians:

What we the Muslims of Algeria are calling for is the acquisition of our political rights like all the other sons of France, without sacrificing our Islamic character though (*El-Bassair*, vol. 22, June 5, 1936).

As expected, that bold initiative infuriated the settlers and finally did not pass as a law. Nevertheless, even when the colons blatantly rejected the *Blum-Viollette* plan, the *'ulamā* acknowledged that common ground could be still reached between them and those French who remained wholeheartedly dedicated to "Mission Civilisatrice." Speaking of the necessity of a fruitful cooperation between the AMAU and its colonial interlocutors, educational reform was by far the most promising field for achieving mutual understanding, not without difficulties though.

Indeed, besides the usual Salafist statements to fight every *āfa ijtimā' iyya* [social ill], such as the impoverishment of Algerians or their consumption of alcohol and their subjection to prostitution and all kinds of vulgarity (Shiban 2008, 22), combatting illiteracy lay at the core of the Association's *iṣlāḥī* endeavor (Ageron 1991, 91, 94-95). Just to mention a few figures, until 1954 the *'ulamā* had been running at least two hundred *kuttāb* [Quranic schools] in addition to fifty-eight *madrāsas* modelled after the French primary schools (Blasi 1990, 67, 104). Unquestionably, the spread of those schools would have been inconceivable without the permission of the colonialists who were searching for partners among the *iṣlāḥī* religious scholars to share with them the

burden of educational and administrative concessions to “Les Indigènes.” Still, some schools and mosques were shut down temporarily, whenever the authorities suspected the AMAU of acting like the “Trojan horse” of Algerian nationalism (*El-Bassair*, vol. 50, January 8, 1937). In a similar vein, the director of the colonial police in Algiers accused the ‘*ulamā*’ of spreading subversive ideas under the influence of the patriotic *Destur* party in Tunisia and the *Wahhābī* fanatics of Arabia (*El-Bassair*, vol. 31, August 7, 1936).

In response, Ibn Badis intervened to the metropole complaining that *al-wilāyāya al-‘amma* [colonial administration] deliberately neglected its “civilizing” duties towards the colonial subjects. Furthermore, he reassured the government in Paris that the Association’s moderate preaching did not pose a threat to France, nor had anything in common with nationalist extremism, Wahhabism, or the Bolsheviks; he stressed his group’s natural alliance with France in promoting its “Mission Civilisatrice” in the colony instead:

We are neither enemies of France nor we work against its interests. On the contrary, we assist it in educating our people and developing our nation. These, indeed, are the stated goals of our reformist mission (*As-Sounnah*, vol. 2, April 17, 1933).

The unhindered functioning of its schools was of vital importance to the Association’s very existence (*Es-Sirat*, vol. 2, September 18, 1933; vol. 16, January 1, 1934). Wherefore the ‘*ulamā*’ did not mince their words, warning the authorities that marginalizing Algeria’s youth by disrupting their education could cost France politically in the foreseeable future:

Whoever seeks to harm us and slander the Association, in fact works against the French interests in Algeria and against all the progress made so far for the people of this nation (*El-Bassair*, vol. 1, December 27, 1935).

In late 1936, the Association went so far as to proclaim that their program in fact fulfilled what the French had been long waiting for in Algeria (*El-Bassair*, vol. 40, November 20, 1936). However, as McDougall (2009, 65, 74) puts it, Ibn Badis did not accept the discourse of “Mission Civilisatrice,” but rather “appreciated its potential value as a terrain of contest on which Algerians, too, could claim stakes.”

### **Reclaiming Algeria: The Convergent Geographies of “Mission Civilisatrice” and *al-Salafiyya***

By the early twentieth century Algeria had been divided into three departments (Devereaux 1912, 133-35). The coastal zone was considered the most “civilized” among the three [*Commune de plein exercice*] thanks to its large urban centers wherein most French settlers lived and European cultural influences had been omnipresent for almost a century.

The second zone [*Commune du Territoire du commandement*] was the undisputable engine of the colony's economic growth owing to its vast cultivable lands; agricultural production had to be intensified in favor of specific profitable crops, whereas the land of the Muslim peasants had been expropriated and handed over to settlers (Devereaux 1912, 152)<sup>2</sup>. As a result, the former landowners ended up working side by side with agricultural workers from Malta, Sicily and Spain who had taken advantage of the 1889 naturalization laws to enhance their status in the colony vis-à-vis "Les Indigènes" (Barclay, Chopin and Evans 2018, 117-18; Issawi 2007, 82).

As for the third zone [*Commune Indigene*], it was reserved for the pastoralist populations of the south who had been venerating their saints and pledging allegiance to the local chiefs long before the arrival of the French (Gordon Lady Duff 1855, 51; Smith 1997, 15, 92-96). In spite of their perceived "savagery" the administration abstained from "taming" them, on condition that they supplied the Republic with men ready to fight alongside its troops in the battlefields (Casserly, n.d., 190).

The fact that 'Abd al-Hamid Bin Badis and his group reclaimed the Algerian *ummah* within the same artificial zones and boundaries that the French had been molding over the years should not elude our notice. In 1936 the Association disclosed for the first time information on its missionary activities across the colony. According to *El-Bassair*, twenty-six branches had been operating already in the *Commune de plein exercice* and its outskirts; meanwhile in the villages and provincial towns of *Commune du Territoire du commandement* their number hardly exceeded five (*El-Bassair*, vol. 37, October 2, 1936). Therefore, by initiating their *da'wa* from the neighborhoods of Algiers, Oran and Constantine, which were actually looking more European than Arab or Muslim (Ageron 1991, 62, 69)<sup>3</sup>, Algeria's newborn Salafists reached out to the landless peasants and the dislocated immigrants from the other zones; since the early 1930s those impoverished masses were gradually settling in the suburbia and threatened to upset the existing demographic balances (*El-Bassair*, vol. 28, July 17, 1936).

The case of the most remote of the three districts, i.e. *Commune Indigene*, is even more interesting in terms of the colonial geography's interplay with the objectives of the *Salafiyya* missionaries. There is a very important differentiation though; in sharp contrast to its exemption from the enforcement of modern civilization on the colonial authorities' part, infiltrating that "sanctuary" would become the *raison d'être* of every Salafist zealot and Algerian nationalist during the interwar years and beyond (*Ash-Sharia*, vol. 4,

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2. It is estimated that in the first decade of the twentieth century 1.007.417 out of 3.512.635 acres of land belonged to the Europeans.

3. During the 1930s, seventy-two percent of Algeria's European population compared to only eleven percent of the total Muslim population were residing in those cities.



August 7, 1933). It is no wonder that from the very beginning, the *'ulamā* declared the country's south in a state of *spiritual emergency*:

Backwardness and ignorance remain rampant in the south, where *al-murābitūn* [Marabouts]<sup>4</sup> feel free to deliver their false teachings. They believe that they will prevail on the Judgment Day, although they have nothing to do with true religion as it was revealed to Muslims in our holy scripts. They insist on their visits to the tombs, their gatherings and other un-Islamic festivities (*As-Sounnah*, vol. 1, April 10, 1933).

As already mentioned, the missionary activity of the AMAU emanated from the most – by the colonialists' standards – “civilized” zone of the coastal cities. Therewith it was consistent with the Manichaistic view held by the first Europeans who visited and studied the region, i.e. an urban Islamic tradition of the literate *'alīm* [religious scholar] perennially confronting the “backward” rural societies that followed the local *sayyīd* [holy man] (Hon Mrs. Greville-Nugent 1894, 79). That orientalist binary prevailed throughout the twentieth century if we take into consideration Ernest Gellner's accounts on Islam in North Africa in his very famous *Muslim Society*.

All things considered, it becomes obvious that the colonial geographies of “Mission Civilisatrice” overlapped with the Salafist and the early nationalist re-imaginings of Algeria and its religion(s). Emulating their colonial tutors who had been lecturing the civil servants, teachers, judges, and the like in Africa and Asia on the Western Enlightenment's contribution to humanity since the late nineteenth century, the *'ulamā* behaved as the indigenous agents of “Mission Civilisatrice”:

We reiterate to the government of France and its nation, which is the tutor of the other nations that our Association has been founded in conformity to your just laws and regulations and its priority is to assist your government in its civilizing mission in Algeria (...) a nation that is tied to France for better or for worse (*Ash-Sharia*, vol. 6, August 24, 1933).

The aforementioned passage further illuminates the main argument of this study. Algeria's Salafists acknowledged their position as disciples who should act under the auspices of the French Republic. What is more, they outspokenly demonstrated their commitment to the continuation of “Mission Civilisatrice” southwards given their tutors' little interest in “civilizing” “Les Indigènes” of that distant department.

### **Anti-Sufism and the “Agency” of the *'Ulamā***

Having discussed the exposure of the *'ulamā* to “Mission Civilisatrice,” our attention is shifted once again towards the Salafists' mostly verbal attacks on Sufism. By resorting to the – pivotal in postcolonial theory – concept of “agency,”

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4. In the AMAU Press both *Murābitūn* and *Shuyyūkh* are in use.

it has been argued that the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama did not passively imitate the colonial technologies of the metropole, but rather adapted “Mission Civilisatrice” to a religious formula that pertained to the Salafist leanings of Ibn Badis and his colleagues. Therefore, when the ‘*ulamā* asserted that the south was in dire need for *Iṣlāḥ* [reform], they were actually proposing an Islamic equivalent to “Mission Civilisatrice.” In short, *Iṣlāḥ* involved, first and foremost, the religious rehabilitation of the mainland’s rural and pastoralist communities and their redirection towards the path of *al-Aslāf* [forefathers]. Judging by the unprecedented increase of anti-Sufi references in the AMAU journals during the 1930s, it is assumed that the acculturation of “Mission Civilisatrice” on the terms of *al-Salafīyya* was enunciated in the renunciation of Islamic Maghreb’s diverse and centuries-old Sufi heritage. It is within such context that the eagerness of Ibn Badis to rupture spiritual ties with his erstwhile teachers from the Sufi *zāwiyya* [monastery] makes sense (al-Jazar 1999, 46).

At this point some parallels might be drawn between the reformist ‘*ulamā* of Egypt and Algeria and their encounters with Western hegemony. The same way the *Sharī‘a* had been reinstated in 1897 as Personal Status Law in response to the judicial reforms proposed by ‘Abduh in consultation with the British masters of Egypt (Asad 2003, 205-35), the emergence of an aggressive print anti-Sufism in late colonial Algeria may be interpreted as a byproduct of inscribing the French secularized perceptions of religion into the Salafist repertoires and discursive tradition(s) (Desai and Nair 2005, 267; Rahman 1982, 26-27, 45).

Just like the Azharites under the influence of the British, Algerian Salafists were taught by “Mission Civilisatrice” to selectively invoke their religious tradition through its reconciliation with certain Western educational or scientific contributions to humanity, while, a priori, castigating others as “improper” and therefore “un-Islamic” (*El-Bassair*, vol. 40, 23 October 1936). Speaking from the point of view of historical anthropology, the evolution of anti-Sufism in colonial Algeria lies within Talal Asad’s interpretation of Islam as a discursive tradition wherein religious authorities are constantly contested and aspirant newcomers fill their void (Scott and Hirschkind 2006, 29, 43-44, 55-56).

Hence, the ‘*ulamā* acted as indigenous agents of “Mission Civilisatrice” because they had embraced at first the French essentialistic views on religion in the wake of the 1905 law on the Separation of the Church and the State (Sowerwine 2001, 41, 46). According to José Casanova (1994, 212), a leading scholar in religious studies, the “privatization” of religion does not, a fortiori, entail its confinement, but rather the renegotiation of its role(s) and functions in the public realm. In the end, it was the ‘*ulamā* and not the Sufi dervishes who assumed the role of the [native] “Church” in its negotiations with the [colonial] “State”:

We ask for the complete separation of our [Islamic] religion from the state in accordance with French legislation and we call the colonial administration to yield its control on the mosques and other religious institutions and hand it

over to the Islamic *jam 'iyyāt* of our country that have been founded to handle the Muslims' affairs (*El-Bassair*, vol. 30, 31 July 1936).

The Association's demands for applying the 1905 Law in Algeria were not satisfied before 1947 though (Larkin 1997, 227). Nonetheless, by negotiating with the French over all those years the reconstruction of the colony's religious domain along the lines of the public-private divide, the '*ulamā* did not simply want to safeguard Islam from the interventions of the "infidel" secular state. On top of that, the metropole bestowed upon them the authority to speak on behalf of their re-imagined *ummah* and represent the colony's Muslim subjects. That was apparent during the sessions of the Islamic Conference that was held in 1936: "the new French government [the Popular Front's ruling coalition] should know that our concerns are the concerns of the whole Algerian *ummah!*" (*El-Bassair*, vol. 37, October 2, 1936).

### **Beyond "Mission Civilisatrice": Print Anti-Sufism as a Nation-Building Project**

Overall, the far reaching repercussions of "Mission Civilisatrice" for the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama may be summarized as follows: on the one hand, it unintentionally ignited its re-imaginings of a nation that had to be reclaimed at least at the level of culture and language and on the other, it ameliorated its subtle anti-colonial rhetoric by blending it with anti-Sufism. This is what Albert Hourani (1981, 101) had called "a premature anti-colonial movement of Salafist leanings."

The reformist mission that the AMAU aspired to accomplish in colonial Algeria was part and parcel of the ethnoreligious reconstruction that swept metropolitan Europe since at least the seventeenth century onwards and most of its colonies during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries (Gellner 1987, 39-44). Large non-European populations in the various dependencies were affected by political and technological upheavals in the metropolises. The colonized were destined to fight a battle at two fronts; they undermined colonial grip over their lands and lives by assimilating the European ideological and cognitive mechanisms per se and simultaneously they re-invented their own sacred spaces, narratives and symbols (Anderson 2006, 132-40; Chatterjee 1986, 19-25; Said 1993, 209-10). In the long run, the members of the still nascent national communities pursued ethnocultural cohesion and homogenization at the expense of the linguistically, ethnically, and religiously "heterodox" groups (Cohen 1985, 76). In the case of Algeria those groups were the Amazigh-speaking Berbers and the Sufi brotherhoods (Dagorn 2015, 2-5).

The anti-Sufi discourse of the AMAU fits perfectly into the abovementioned religio-cultural integrative paradigm. The Association blended its *salafī/iṣlāhī* ideas with the – borrowed from the colonizers –

concept of national consciousness and homeland. That was apparent in its banners depicting the crescent and the star together with the *Qur'ān*, not to mention the motto “Islam is our Religion, Algeria our Nation, Arabic our Language” (Saadallah 1992, 89).

Despite some reports on the use of the colloquial vernaculars of Algeria or even the Berber languages as to approach diverse and largely illiterate audiences (Courreya 2016, 494-531), the AMAU endorsed the use of *al-Fuṣḥa* [Classical Arabic] when teaching the modern curricula in its *madrasa* or disseminating the *iṣlāhī* views of the *'ulamā* via its buoyant Press. The predominance of *al-Fuṣḥa* in the eve of the WWII should be viewed in tandem with the coordinated Salafist-nationalist attempts to superimpose a Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic attire upon the idea of “Algerianess” that had been gaining ground since the early 1920s (Buhus 1997, 247; Shiban 2008, 59). Indeed, Salafists “rediscovered” Algeria’s Arab-Islamic soul through the great regional causes, not least the Palestinian issue. The *'ulamā* outspokenly expressed their support for the Arab Revolt (1936-1939) against the Zionists and the British, although they had been cautious enough to refrain from inflammatory anti-colonial rhetoric against the French in their respective *ummah* (*El-Bassair*, vol. 39, 16 October 1936; vol. 24, 19 June 1936).

By invoking “Islam” in its historic motto, the AMAU referred to Algeria’s only “true” and undivided religion that cannot be attributed neither to the numerous Sufi orders nor to their sheikhs; more than once, the Salafist Press called for the nation’s re-attachment to Islam as the only prerequisite to regain its “Algerianess,” thus becoming “*al-ummah al-jazā'iriyya al-islamiyya*” (*El-Bassair*, vol. 23, June 12, 1936; vol. 24, June 19, 1936; and vol. 30, July 31, 1936). According to that narrative French colonialism would have never taken root in Algeria, if it had not found conditions of “moral and spiritual decay.” In the same line, independence would have remained insufficient as long as “the soul of the nation was not healed from the false teachings of Marabutism” (*El-Bassair*, vol. 31, 7 August 1936). We may assume that the anti-Sufi rhetoric bore a two-fold warning towards the “charlatan” sheikhs and the French occupiers alike. To put it differently, Algerian Islam’s purification from the “excesses” and “backward” practices of Sufism would have paved the way for an all-encompassing national emancipation; at first religious and cultural and ultimately political (Chatterjee 1993, 3-13).

Indeed, the anti-Sufism of the *'ulamā* went a long way towards their experimentation with nation-building many years before the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in 1954. Moreover, they even had a say in other Arab countries’ affairs; they overtly criticized the Egyptian government for being lenient with the Sufi brotherhoods and too slack in preventing the veneration of the sheikhs in the rural areas, whereas Saudi Arabia was exalted for its vehemently anti-Sufi stance (*As-Sounnah*, vol. 6, 15 May 1933).

On a par with modern fundamentalist discourses elsewhere (Weismann 2011, 154, 160), the Salafist calls for reform were not exhausted by the better representation of Muslims, e.g. the *Blum-Viollette* plan, the separation of the local Islamic institutions from the [colonial] state and/or combating illiteracy; the principal cause was no other than Algeria's salvation from the "national plague" of Sufism. The literate Algerians who could read the Association's Press were acquainted with the efforts of the *'ulamā* to proselytize the villagers and the tribesmen. Incidents like the one with the members of *al-ḥaḍrā'* tribe who "*converted*" back to Islam (italics mine) had been celebrated as an act of "national liberation" (*El-Bassair*, vol. 29, 24 July 1936). Normally, after every successful campaign, a new branch was established, accompanied by a school and the *'ulamā* could not miss the opportunity to boast about the successful conclusion of their "civilizing mission": "every branch of the Association that is founded in the countryside is an additional victory for Islam over ignorance" (*El-Bassair*, vol. 33, 4 September 1936).

The *'ulamā* challenged Sufism almost everywhere, juxtaposing their numerous schools, mosques and charities (*Ash-Sharia*, vol. 2, 24 July 1933) with the "deceitful" practices of the "charlatans" and the "opportunists":

Our people have spent millions so far during their visits to the tombs of the sheikhs. Contrary to this situation of exploitation, Muslims now see their money invested in services for the sake of the ummah (*El-Bassair*, vol. 37, 2 October 1936).

It goes without saying that Ibn Badis was particularly proud of their transparent administration of funds. According to the data provided by the Association, its missionary work was subsidized by the donations of pious merchants and the circulation of the AMAU journals in addition to the subscriptions of its members; the latter fluctuated as follows: the active members, i.e. the *'ulamā* themselves, were paying ten francs, the associated members five francs and the friends of the Association twenty francs per year (*El-Bassair*, vol. 21, 22 May 1936).

Taking all the above into consideration, it seems that the Sufi orders had enough good reasons to seek the colonial administrations' protection; this is what their Salafist denigrators argued at least. In this regard, the Association's journals even circulated "reports" implying the sheikhs' complicity with the settlers and the administration against the national reform efforts:

The calls of the *'ulamā* for Islam's purification pose a direct threat to the sheikhs and at the same time we should not underestimate their potential intentions against French interests in Algeria. It is no secret that most of the sheikhs are satisfied with our dominance, and as they did many times in the past, they once again ask for our protection from the *'ulamā*, whose members grow day by day and their madrasas open one after another (*El-Bassair*, vol. 31, 7 August 1936).

All the possible propaganda aside, the print anti-Sufism of the interwar period went through a new phase of politicization that eventually contributed to the convergence of Salafist and nationalist discourses, by the early to mid-1950s—a critical period for Algeria. Henceforward, the Association’s missionary activities and anti-Sufi rhetoric prepared the ground for the postcolonial state’s Arab-Islamic identity in the years that followed the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), even if the Sufi and Berber culture(s) of the local societies had to be deliberately sidelined, if not suppressed.

In fact, since the 1930s the *‘ulamā* were drawing the discernible boundaries of a “state religion,” whenever an independent state would have been ready to succeed the French. In other words, even though an Algerian state had not existed yet, its “official religion” had already been established (Stora 2001, 143)! Nonetheless, far from *betraying the national cause*, Sufi sheikhs and their followers were simply trying to adjust to the realities of a rapidly changing order, where the structures and mechanisms of the national schools, the modern party politics and the employed imams of the Algerian nation-state were fighting for the hearts and the minds of the new Muslim Algerian citizens (Tibi 1997, 49).

## Conclusion

This essay concluded that the making of an anti-Sufi discourse in colonial Algeria might be examined against a historical, Islamic theological, and postcolonial theoretical background. In that sense, the print anti-Sufism of the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulama cannot be explained irrespectively of that group’s appropriation of “Mission Civisatrice” and its eventual incorporation into a Sunni fundamentalist tradition that existed in the Muslim lands long before the arrival of the colonialists. In my view, the anti-Sufism of the AMAU illustrates clearly Talal Asad’s discussion of Islam as a “discursive tradition,” as well as the postcolonial ‘agency’ of the colonized subject. The *‘ulamā* had been given a free hand to reposition themselves as the sole religious institution vis-à-vis the French, whereas the Sufi sheikhs had to readjust to the ongoing *salafī/iṣlāhī* recreation of Algerian Islam. Furthermore, the essay pinpointed the inevitable political repercussions of the Salafists’ print anti-Sufism in the interwar. By attacking the sheikhs in its Press the group of Ibn Badis did not only seek to enlighten the literate Arabic-speaking public of the Sufi theological fallacies, but rather to hint at their moral and cultural “responsibility” for the continuous occupation of the *ummah* and—in response—to propose an ethnoreligiously homogeneous definition of “Algerianess.”

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