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

On his way through an airport in 1988, Professor Bilqasim Sa’adallah of the University of Algiers experienced a scholar’s worst nightmare. He lost a briefcase containing completely handwritten lecture notes, and documents difficult to replace. This disaster might be read as a metaphor for his object of study, Algerian cultural history. On a far grander scale, French colonialism posed a potentially irreversible disaster for the Arabic and Islamic cultural heritage of Algeria. With the initial French onslaught in the 1830s, a heritage of monuments, buildings, and manuscripts was destroyed or dispersed, and archives were carted off to France.

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

**Scope of the Work**

This work is encyclopedic in scope, covering the entire cultural range from Arabic and Islamic law, poetry, and music. Several sections reflect the Islamic tradition of scholars’ biographies. The first two volumes cover from 1500 to 1830, from the eve of the Ottoman era to the start of the French conquest. The next two volumes cover the colonial era, and the final volume consists of an exhaustive index.

The Tarikh al-thaphafi casts a wide net, covering not only major and minor Algerian Islamic scholars and religious leaders but also French educators, interpreters, and Orientalists, as well as French educated and bi-cultural Algerian Muslims. Its encyclopedic style, at once broadly comprehensive and narrowly focused, often displays his greatest enthusiasm when discussing individuals who defy easy categorization, who invite us to see the complexity of forces shaping the Algerian past.

**Launching Arabic journalism**

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

Sa’adallah contrasts Desrayaux to her contemporary, Isabelle Eberhart, a figure who has attracted much attention from Western academics, drawn to her image of swashbuckling adventure and lifestyle experimentation. Desrayaux receives scarcely a line in the major French language studies of Algeria. If her photograph is an accurate indication, she was prim and proper. She also appears to have been a figure of great influence in anchor and perhaps with family origins in the French West Indies. It may be that part of Jonnart’s intent in fostering her enterprise was to create a socially conservative alternative to al-Atchar, the paper run by French radical Victor Barrand, chief promoter of the Eberhart mystique.

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

**Islamic activist with a colonial medal**

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

Bin Hamana was in many ways a model colonial subject, decorated by the French for his zeal as an agricultural entrepreneur. But when the Italians invaded Libya in 1911, Bin Hamana, like many assimilated Algerians, became an ardent supporter of the rebels. He corresponded with Tripolitanian rebel leader Sulayman al Baruni. Not long after this Bin Hamana got caught up in the fray of cultural nationalism in Tebessa. He incurred the wrath of the local French mayor, who had him thrown in jail. But he also struck up an alliance with Charles Michel, an engineer posted in Tebessa to work on the nearby phosphate mines, and a passionate advocate of Al-Shari’a, de la Femme. As a result, Bin Hamana’s case was taken all the way to the Chamber of Deputies in Paris. In the following year he was murdered, ostensibly as a result of a local political vendetta.

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

**Traditional bard performing**

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

From El Oued to Minneapolis

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

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