

Trans-Saharan Trajectories: Muslim Education and Colonial Administration in Algeria and French West Africa

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Introduction

In this paper I take Islamic education as a significant part of the trans-Saharan exchanges we are exploring here. In particular I focus on Islamic education in the colonial period, through the institution of the medersa. I argue that by examining the processes through which the French colonial medersa was created, we can better understand French colonial approaches to Muslim societies in the Maghrib, the Sahara, and the Sahel, and we can also better understand the histories of those societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, I emphasize a process I call “domestication”, after the French term *apprivoisement*, which was used by some colonial administrators to describe their goals in North and West Africa.

I will give a brief sketch of the history of the medersa before outlining three components of this process of domestication.

Three medersas were founded in Algeria in 1850 (during the period of the Second Republic and only 20 years after the initial conquest of Algiers). They were located in the cities of Tlemcen, Constantine, and Médéa. The medersa of Médéa moved to Blida and then to Algiers in 1859. At first, these medersas offered the same curriculum as any other *madrasa* in the region, and in fact their entire staffs were drawn from local scholars and notables. Around 1880 (around the beginning of the Third Republic in France), the schools added a French curriculum and made Frenchmen the directors of the schools. I think we could call these two stages ‘two steps’ in the process of domestication. First, by replicating an existing model, the French brought the institution of the madrasa under their control on a purely economic level. Second, by instituting a European curriculum in addition to the

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Islamic one, the French sought to extend their presence in Algeria more deeply by integrating what they understood as two distinct civilizations in the students of the medersas. This dual curriculum persisted in the Algerian medersas from the 1880s until they closed in the 1950s.

The expansion of the institution of the medersa into l'Afrique Occidentale Française (French West Africa) suggests its success in Algeria, but did not replicate it. In 1906, the French opened a medersa in Djenné, in the colony known as Soudan Français. Over the next few years medersas also opened in Timbuktu and Saint-Louis du Sénégal. In a second wave, two decades later, in the 1930s, a series of medersas opened in several towns in Mauritania, including Boutilimit, Mederdra, Kiffa, and Atar. There were also proposals to build medersas in Dakar and in Fouta Djallon in Guinea, but both were rejected. None of these medersas in West Africa achieved the stability or prominence of their counterparts in Algeria. So, to paint a picture in broad strokes, the medersa was a specifically colonial institution formed in the Algerian context. It was successful in Algeria but less deeply imbedded in French West Africa, and thus less successful there. It was a truly trans-Saharan institution and so it can serve as a lens through which we can analyze the multi-sited, trans-Saharan nature of the French colonial enterprise.

I focus on three themes in particular. These are: the creation of colonial ethnographic and historical knowledge; the role of colonized intermediaries in the colonial bureaucracy; and the physical circulation of people along colonial networks. I will provide a brief outline of each.

Ethnographic knowledge and colonial power

Scholars have examined the relationships between knowledge and power for many years now. Those working in British South Asia identified several forms of knowledge that structured colonial power there, including such things as cartography, censuses, and the construction of museums. Two of the most powerful forms of knowledge in French Africa as well as British India were ethnography and history. Ethnography enabled colonizing powers to claim a deep, fundamental understanding of colonized populations in ways that seem antiquated now but were

powerful enough to structure colonial policies and practices in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historical knowledge enabled colonizing powers to insert themselves into the history of their colonies. These ethnographic and historical narratives combined in interesting ways: for example, Patricia Lorcin has written about the so-called “Kabyle Myth” in French Algeria. This idea was predicated on a sort of ethnographic notion of a deep, impermeable divide between the Berber and Arab populations of the Maghrib. The definitions of these categories called on multiple valences: According to Lorcin, for example, Berbers were former Christians, they were descendants of the Romans, they were natural allies of the French. Arabs, in contrast, were interlopers, avowed and fanatical Muslims, they were, as Diana Davis argues, poor stewards of the land that was the once and future breadbasket of Europe. These stereotypes, of course, had real weight in the construction of French policies and strategies in Algeria.

Another iteration of this ethnographic and historical knowledge, one that is specifically trans-Saharan in nature, is the concept of *islam noir*, or “black Islam”, that was most powerfully articulated by the colonial ethnographer Paul Marty. This idea retained a special significance, one perhaps more powerful than the Kabyle Myth, throughout the colonial period and across France’s African empire. In essence, this idea of *islam noir* held that only Arabs were practitioners of ‘pure’ Islam. Black Africans in West Africa were understood to have tainted the religion with animist practices, with their gri-gri and tam-tams. The racial science in vogue during this period contributed to this idea as well: Marty, who worked on both sides of the Sahara, argued (without evidence) that black Africans were physically incapable of true Islamic practice because of differences in their brains. The broad Islamization of West Africa that occurred in the nineteenth century was understood to be an aberration, something that went against the true nature of African populations. This idea of *islam noir* was thus constructed out of essentialist ethnographic and historical discourses. It had—and in some ways continues to have—a deep impact on French understandings of West African Muslim populations.

The medersas were important sites for the development of these historical and ethnographic forms of knowledge in two ways. First, they were the institutional homes for some of the most important French Orientalist scholars. This was especially true in Algeria, where Orientalists such as Alfred Bel and Georges, William, and Phillip Marçais all directed medersas (especially that of Tlemcen). In West Africa, this was less often the case. (As Brahim Benmoussa has shown, Algerians often served as medersa faculty in Mauritania.) Nevertheless, Paul Marty used the medersa of Saint-Louis as a sort of metonym for the whole of his study of Islam in Senegal. So in this way the medersas were places where these historical-ethnographic ideas were worked out and put into practice.

Muslim intermediaries and imperial rule

The second major theme that I argue was located in the medersas is less specifically trans-Saharan but is important nonetheless to this story: that is, the role of the medersas in training the colonial intermediary class. France, like all colonial powers, relied on so-called “native informants” for information and for interpretations of colonized societies. Recent scholarship in colonial historiography has emphasized the role of this class of people and explored the ways that these intermediaries were able to shape the colonial system. These processes occurred in the medersas very explicitly: students there were trained for three careers in particular – as judges in “domesticated” Muslim courts, the *tribunaux musulmans*, as interpreters for the colonial administration or the military, and as professors in the medersas themselves. As scholars including Richard Roberts and Jean-Hervé Jezequel have convincingly demonstrated, intermediaries in roles such as these had profound, if often hidden, roles in shaping the colonial state through these institutions. One of the questions I hope to pursue further as I proceed with this project is the extent to which West African and Maghribi graduates of the medersas shared professional trajectories across the desert.

Trans-Saharan circulation

Which leads me to the third and final theme of this paper, which is the physical movement, the circulation of people along

imperial networks through and across the Sahara. I would argue that the trans-Saharan nature of institutions such as the medersa was in part constituted by the movement of different people along several “webs of empire”, to use a term coined in 2002 by Tony Ballantyne, a scholar of British New Zealand. This notion of a web is particularly applicable here because it suggests a more complicated colonial relationship than the bi-nodal colony-metropole relationship that is usually the focus of colonial historiography. In the case of the medersas, for example, the relationship between the administrations of Algeria and French West Africa was much more important than the link between either of those colonies and France.

Paul Marty is one example of the importance of intra-colonial circulation in the construction of the institution of the medersa. He was born in Algeria in 1882 and spoke Arabic well, studying and working for the Algerian administration. From 1912 to 1921, so a total of nine years, he worked as an advisor on Muslim affairs in French West Africa, and as I mentioned before, he published a series of long studies of Islam in each of the West African colonies where he focused on the medersa of Saint-Louis and the idea of *islam noir*. His ethnographic understanding of West African Islam was thus directly related to the comparisons he drew between French West Africa and Algeria, based on his own experience but also those of other scholars such as Maurice Delafosse and Robert Arnaud. This worked both ways, however: after his tenure in AOF, Marty moved on to Morocco, where he was instrumental in constructing the racial policies, or *politique des races*, enacted there. He was of course not the only administrator with this experience: Louis Faidherbe created the *tirailleurs sénégalais* based on similar recruitment practices for Algerian soldiers he saw while in serving in Algeria; Louis Hubert Lyautey is famous for drawing on his experience administering French Indochina and Madagascar while drawing up the structures of the French protectorate in Morocco; Xavier Coppolani brought his Orientalist expertise, gained in Algeria, to his campaign of “pacification” in Mauritania. French administrators often had empire-spanning careers. With regard to the *politique musulmane*, or Muslim policy, of the administration, it is clear that Algeria was the primary testing ground for the application of Orientalist, ethnographic, and historical learning to administrative goals. The circulation of

colonial administrators around the empire, as expressed in the institution of the medersa in particular, demonstrates this pattern.

But it was not the only form of circulation along these imperial networks or 'webs'. Though it may be harder to perceive in the colonial archive, many colonized Africans moved around as well. Of course, Africans from both sides of the Sahara, as well as those who lived in the desert itself, had long practiced forms of circulation through trade, warfare, and intellectual exchange. However, in undergoing the process of "domestication", the medersa played a role in facilitating this movement. Another contribution to this conference concerns Algerians who were employed in the medersas of Mauritania, so I'll just give a brief example of the reverse.

In April 1899, a set of correspondence now housed in the French colonial archive in Aix-en-Provence reveals that the French sought to initiate, or imitate, a form of educational circulation across the Sahara. At this point, seven years before the first West African medersa was opened in Djenné, several colonial administrators debated sending young students from West Africa to study at the medersa of Algiers. Octave Houdas, the inspector of Algerian medersas based in Constantine, wrote to the Minister of Colonies in Paris and the governors-general of Algeria, Senegal, Soudan, and Guinea, that "for several months now I have thought about bringing several young Soudanais to the medersa of Algiers who will find there an education that will be as useful for us as for them when they return to their country of origin". He went on to specify that this project "could have happy consequences for the protection of our Sudanese possessions from dangerous agitations". Though he did not go in to great detail, I think this idea serves as evidence that "domesticating" Muslim scholars was seen as an important strategy to secure French interests in the African colonies. And 'circulation', in this case from Timbuktu to Algiers, was a crucial process for the French.

Houdas's proposal was not enthusiastically adopted by other colonial administrators. Only a small number of West African students traveled to study in the Algerian médersas at the turn of the twentieth century. But the inclusion in this correspondence of administrators from across French West Africa suggests that such a circulation would have been within the realm of possibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have outlined here three colonial processes of knowledge production, the training of intermediaries, and circulation. I group these under the umbrella term of “domestication”, which indicates the role of colonized societies in the structures and ideologies of French colonial rule in northwest Africa and elsewhere. I situate the institution of the medersa and the Islamic education it provided at the center of these processes. This example demonstrates the trans-Saharan nature of French colonial approaches to Muslims, and illustrates why our understanding of colonial rule and colonized societies in northwest Africa are incomplete without acknowledging the importance of these trans-Saharan intellectual, institutional, and personal trajectories.

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