

The Manifestation of the French “Kabyle/Arab Dichotomy” in English Travel Writings

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In browsing through most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century's western travelogues on Algeria one never fails to notice the persistent dichotomy between the Arab and the Kabyle (both male and female). This narrative forms a central part of western travel writing discourse on colonial Algerian society. The core of this narrative and its message centers around the depiction of the Kabyle as industrious, independent, loyal, attached to his land and amenable to civilization in its western form, while the Arab is lazy, despotic and antithetical to everything that is good and civilized. He is constantly vilified and presented as an eternal enemy and beyond any reform. In this present paper, I shall endeavor to examine the ways in which this dichotomy, which was part of the French colonial discourse, was reflected and represented in English travel books: *A Winter in Algeria* (1865) of Mrs. Ellen Rogers, *The Land of Veiled Women* (1911) of John Foster Fraser, *Through Algeria* (1863) of Mabel Sharman Crawford and *Last Winter in Algeria* (1869) of Mrs. Lloyd Evans. I will also demonstrate how the motifs such the good Kabyle and bad Arab, which were part of the French colonial discourse of the time, were reproduced and canonized in these travel writings. This dichotomy is also relevant for women. While the Arab women's subjugation was blamed on Islam, since it encourages polygamy and prescribes the veil, the Kabyle woman's relative freedom on the other hand was due to the Kabyles' indifference to religion or at best their loose religiosity. In fact, women's bodies (because they covered) were seen as foils for modernity, civilization and freedom. In other words, civilization in its western definition could not be spread and reach the masses till all the traditions and customs (including of course Islam) that hold these women back were removed and got rid of. But quite interestingly these pro-Kabyle feelings never materialized on the ground in any

pro-Kabyle legislation or measures; rather they were the very quintessence of “divide to rule”.

Terminology:

Before venturing further in our discussion of this dichotomy, a clarification about the use of the two terms, Kabyle and Arab, should be set. It should be kept in mind that the concept Kabyle was used in many mid-nineteenth century’s French manuscripts and Western travel writings to describe a population of a much broader geographical area than the present-day Kabylia. In fact, as Patricia Lorcin (1995) indicates, it was sometimes used to refer to all the Berber-speaking populations of the Algerian Tell. But generally speaking, in most travel writings it was the Kabylia of the Djurdjura which was mostly visited and described because it was considered the heart of Kabylia (stretching, according to a geographical card drawn by the *Bureau des Affaires arabes* from the mouth of Isser river, south to Sour-el-Ghozlane, east to Sétif and north to Béjaïa), and sometimes was used as a metaphor for the whole region.

The term Arab was used either to denote the Bedouin populations (or tent-dwellers) or the whole Algerian Arabic speaking population, including city dwellers who are generally referred to as the Moors. In this paper, the term Arab will be used in its broader usage to include both the Moors and the nomads. The term Kabyles will designate the population of modern-day Kabylia, and more specifically Djurdjura mountains inhabitants.

The Kabyle Myth :

The Manichean depiction of Arabs as inherently bad and Kabyles as inherently good resulted in what is referred to by historians as the Kabyle Myth. Patricia Lorcin elaborates on this concept,

The Kabyle myth was that Kabyles were superior to the Arabs; it was not that they were different, which they were. The French used sociological differences and religious disparities between the two groups to create an image of the Kabyle which was good and one of the Arab which was bad, and from this, to extrapolate that the former was more suited to assimilation than the latter. (1995:2).

This myth provided an ideological foundation for assimilating the Kabyles into French colonial society while excluding the Arabs

from such plans. A number of Kabyle specificities helped to create, nourish and sustain this myth. The political and social organization (like the uniquely Kabyle *Tajmaat*) of the Kabyle society, the alleged freedom and high status of the Kabyle woman within this society led the French to believe that it was better than the Arab one and closer to western ideals. Lorcin (*Ibid*, 3) maintains that the genuine religious differences between Arabs and Kabyles were interpreted by saying that these latter were indifferent to religion (thus becoming better candidates for conversion to Christianity) and that their society was inherently secular thus more akin to the French one. An important feature of this myth was its outright attack and negative and hostile stance to Islam as a religion and culture which was invariably linked to the Arabs, and detached, whenever possible from the Kabyles. Most travel writers took on this French outlook, at least partially, consequently in contrast to mostly positive depictions of the Kabyles and their culture and mode of life, their assessment of both Arab men and women did not deviate from the unflattering stereotypes common to the period.

Alleged Christian Origins of the Kabyles:

The Arabs were viewed as religious fanatics who manifested a blind obedience to their religious leaders. They accept the precepts of the Koran, which are immutable, without questioning. “The very genius of their character being radically opposed to European civilization”, (Evans, 1869:132) and as such they were seen as being beyond any improvement, at least in the foreseeable future. Georges Elie (in Maurice Barrès, 1923:25) claims,

Ce qui caractérise [the Koran] c’est qu’étant immuable, elle s’écarte davantage de nos mœurs et de nos lois qui évoluent sans cesse, et les Arabes qui l’acceptent intégralement et lui sont servilement attachés, semblent, pour bien longtemps encore, sinon pour toujours, fermés à civilisation.

The Kabyles, on the other hand, presented better prospects and were regarded as amenable to the benefits of European progress. And as such the French believed that it was possible to use the Kabyles as agents for advancing French colonial interests and implementing western civilization in Algeria. “[though] they are Mohammaden in

faith, [they are] not strict, for custom has sovereignty over the law of the Koran.”(John Foster Fraser, 1911:179). This alleged lukewarm religiosity of the Kabyles was seen as an indication of their convertibility to Christianity. Converting to Christianity was the first step towards a successful assimilation and embracing of western culture and civilization. In fact the French believed that the Kabyles were former Christians who, the Arabs did not succeed in completely bringing to Islam.

This belief reverberates , for instance, in Mabel Sharman Crawford’s *Through Algeria*(1864)who observes that each Kabyle woman she encountered “showed a small cross on cheek or forehead”, which was “probably a relic of the forsaken creed of their forefathers”. (1864:253). Crawford even went further by in her suppositions about a Christian past of the Kabyles when she tracked the origin of Kabyle Zaouia to Christian origins and specifically the monasteries:

Governed and superintended by maraboos who live there at public cost, the Zaouia presents a strong resemblance to the ancient monastic institution, and may possibly indeed have originated in Christian times. The ascetic practices adopted by one of the religious orders in great Kabylia afford also a striking analogy with those that prevailed in amongst the Christian fanatics of an early day...the known derivation of this sect from Egypt strengthens the likelihood of a Christian origin.(Ibid, 242-3)

The Democratic Kabyle vs. the Despotic Arab?

The unique political organization of the Kabyles called Tajmaat drew the attention and admiration of the French and westerners in general and brought to their minds reminiscences and vivid images, no doubt, of democracy in its early stages in Greece. This system was consistent with their spirit of independence and love of freedom. A spirit so eloquently captured by the words of the celebrated French essayist and politician Alexis de Tocqueville,

[they are] as free as the individual who enjoys his savage independence in the heart of the woods; men who are neither rich nor poor, neither servant nor masters, who name their own leaders, and hardly notice that they have leaders. (Quoted in Algis Valiunas’

Encountering Islam in http://www.claremont.org/publications/crb/id.1336/article_detail.asp

For the French, this was proof enough that the Kabyles were egalitarians. In his *Annales Algériennes* (which were first published in 1836) French historian Pellissier de Raynaud praised the democratic spirit and organization of the Kabyles which was unique and even superior to the French democracy. He noted that, in each Kabyle village, leaders were elected by every male adult and that these elections were held at regular intervals. Kabyle society was a strong confederation of tribes (each e ruled by a democratically elected government), and the citizens themselves were active participants in the running of their own affairs. They were voters, judges, councilors at the same time. In short this was the very personification of the egalitarian regime. (Lorcin, 1995:95-7).

It was believed that, because of such striking similarities between the Kabyle mode of government and French republicanism, Kabyle absorption into French colonial society was only a matter of time. Mrs. Lloyd Evans certainly believed this when she wrote,

[the Kabyles have exhibited] wonderful powers of assimilation , being prepared by the very nature of their laws ,customs, and qualities , to receive the higher civilization of the European . For their own mode of government , handed down for ages, which under certain necessary control has been left to them, is singularly like the French municipal organization of the present day- more republican in its mode of election , but nearly identical in its functions. Each village has its maire, “Amin”, and its municipal council, “Djema”-consisting of the adult male inhabitants.(Lloyd Evans, 1868:129-30).

While the Kabyle was thus applauded for his republican spirit and his compatibility with Western value system, the Arab was portrayed as being inherently despotic. The Arab tribe was described as hierarchical with a hereditary nobility that played a crucial role in the running of political and social affairs. Compared to the egalitarian and class-free Kabyle society, the Arab one had a very distinct class-consciousness where the nobility comprised the nobility of birth, the military nobility and the religious nobility. The lower classes had little say, if any, in the political decisions of their own tribes. For the

French, the superiority of the former (Kabyle society) over the latter (Arab one) was one of political progression, in that the French and westerners in general have cast off feudalism (which the Arabs still embraced) and opted for a more democratic form of government (like the Kabyles). (Lorcin, 1995:17-68).

English Travel writers never failed to point out to this opposition between the two groups. For them it was another testimony to the basic difference between them and the ascendancy of the Kabyle over the Arab, and of the fallibility of Islam as a source of jurisdiction,

The difference between the two races extends to the government and organization of their respective tribes. The Arab's code of law, founded on the Koran, is administered by a despotic chief, to whom the land occupied by the tribe belongs; but the Kabyle, the secure possessor of the soil he labours, is governed by a chief, who, elected by universal suffrage, can be deposed, if he fail in administering justice according to the traditional laws which have been handed down by father to son from a remote generation. (Mabel Crawford, 1864:241).

The Industrious Kabyle vs. the Lazy Arab:

The concept of the "lazy native" is common in most 19th century travel writings. This concept is especially apparent in the French relationship with the Arab population in Algeria. French colonist Georges Elie speaks in these terms of the supposed laziness of the Arab:

Essentiellement fataliste, l'Arabe est indolent, dépourvu de toute initiative, imprévoyant. A quoi bon s'agiter ? Ce qui est écrit ne doit-il pas s'accomplir en dépit de tous nos efforts ? Comptant sur la Providence et sur la fertilité du sol, il a le dédain de l'action ; ce qu'il a fait hier, il se contentera de l'accomplir demain. Son terrain est-il envahi par les lentisques ou les jujubiers épineux, il les respecte, les contourne avec sa charrue ; peu à peu la superficie utilisable de son champ diminue, il n'en a cure. (Maurice Barrés, 1923 :17).

Of the Kabyle on the other hand he says,

Le Kabyle, au contraire, obligé d'arracher à une terre ingrate sa subsistance est travailleur. L'effort ne le rebute point, non plus que la

médiocrité du résultat : « le piège où se prend un rouge-gorge, dit un des proverbes, n'a pas été tendu en vain ».il n'a pas de pente si abrupte qu'il ne cultive ; là où son araire biblique et ses maigres bœufs à l'échine de chèvre ne peuvent grimper, à genoux, péniblement, il gratte la terre avec un croc. Il ne laisse improductif ni une anfractuosité, ni un coin, ni un repli, pour peu qu'ils recèlent d'humus et, pour les irriguer, utilise avec une admirable ingéniosité les moindres filets d'eau. Il a multiplié oliviers et figuiers sur les versants les plus raides et les orangers sur les rives encaissés de ses torrents. (Ibid. :17-8).

The above citations summarize the French position concerning the economic utility of the two groups. The French observed a total lack of merchants and artisans in the Arab society. Industry was nonexistent, and Arabs loathed engaging in any type of manual work. (Lorcin, 1995: 68). The Kabyles, besides being excellent and diligent farmers, engaged in all sorts of crafts and trades. They were weavers, jewellers, blacksmiths, gunsmith, etc.

The Kabyle's unwavering commitment to work as opposed to the innate laziness of the Arab accentuated the already strong belief of the fundamental differences between the two groups. Mabel Sharman Crawford devotes a whole chapter to contrast between them. The conclusion she draws is quite plain, the Kabyle and Arab are thoroughly dissimilar in character. While the former takes pride in his work, "applies himself to various branches of industry" and considers "idleness a shame", the latter "looks on [labour] as a degrading action and only works from the stimulus of necessity. (1863:239).

This "proverbial industry", to borrow an expression from Mrs. Evans, drew the respect of almost everyone who visited the region. John Foster Fraser, though he was repelled by some details of the Kabyle life (he calls the Kabyle "one of the dirtiest creatures on earth" (179:1911), could not hide his admiration for the Kabyle, for "he can make vegetation grow where another man could rear nothing but red sand and pebbles". He can make use of every tiny piece of land he has in possession, "on a patch ten yards by twelve he can grow vegetables for himself, his wife and several children" (Ibid, 183).

The categorization of the natives into useful industrious individuals and useless lazy others stemmed, no doubt, from economic motives. While the work-shy Arab was not deemed reliable in any economic action, France hoped to profit from this Kabyle attachment to his land and work to boost and increase the riches of its colony. The following passage, sums up this attitude,

[...] whereas three hectares a head are computed to support the Kabyle nation, the Arabs complain that the seven hectares a head which they possess are insufficient for their wants . Of course the riches and prosperity of a country are not likely to be much increased by the agency of such a people. (Evans, 132-3).

Polygamy and the Seclusion of Muslim Women:

Travellers's entire project of addressing cultural differences between the West and Islam revolves around presentations of Muslim women's veiling, polygamy and the system of segregation and seclusion that these women underwent. According to Lorcin (1995:67) this obsession with Muslim women's status in society and the issue of polygamy could be attributed to the then growing belief that the stage of development of any given society could be measured by the status its women occupied. Polygamy was one of the criteria used to gauge this evolution. While Polygamy, on the whole, was considered a very primitive and immoral practice which denoted an abhorred primitive sexual promiscuity, monogamy was considered as the only moral matrimonial institution. Georges Elie (1923 :17), describes the Arab man as follows, "L'Arabe est presque toujours polygame ; seuls se contentent d'une unique épouse les miséreux qui n'ont pas le moyen d'en acquérir davantage."

Islam was blamed for this "abhorred" practice which kept women in shackles. As long as the precepts of this religion were strictly followed, women to were never going to considered full human beings,

As long as [they] accept the Koran as a rule of faith, [they] will unhesitatingly acquiesce in the mutilated life to which by it [they are] condemned ... degraded by [their] religion into a toy or slave, a toy and slave [they] will continue, as long as the name of Mohammed is revered by [their] race. (Crawford, 55-6).

The mode of dressing of the local women was also scrutinized. The veil, which made these women an irresistible subject of curiosity, also draws the contempt of westerns as something degrading and humiliating for them,

One of the most singular sights here is that of the Moslem veiled women, who are to be seen in every direction. They never leave their homes without a sort of handkerchief across the face fastened below the eyes, called *cudjar*, and a large white woollen or muslin cloak, which they call *khaki el telhhil*, veiling the entire person. The eyes and painted eyebrows are alone visible. (Rogers, 1865:40).

Mabel Sharman Crawford devotes a chapter entitled *The Moresque at Home – Her Hopeless Degradation*, to the conditions of the Moorish women. The chapter, as is her book, possesses christian overtones and calls upon christian rhetoric to support and vindicate Muslim women's rights. Despite the seemingly happy lives they led, these confined women lacked any real enjoyment in their empty lives. They were also denied education which prevented them from fully developing their minds,

As might be expected from her secluded life, the mature Moresque is in tastes and faculties but a grown-up child. The reason which she is barred from exercising, remains totally undeveloped, and her bright intelligence might well give rise to the idea that she was an irresponsible being destitute of soul. (54).

No wonder, then, that the situation of the Muslim women is deemed quite hopeless, for in addition to her miserable life in complete seclusion, her morality is far from perfect. In a moralizing tone, so characteristic of imperial writers, Mrs. Roger declares that "[a]mongst the richer Moslms the degradation of the women is mental and moral". (Rogers, 58). Among the poorer class the situation is far worse since,

The husband lays upon the shoulders of his wife, every conceivable burden. As far as possible, he lives in the most perfect idleness, as one of the lords of creation. To the of the Arab woman it falls, to till the ground, to reap the harvest, to grind the corn, to knead the bread. If garments are wanted, it is she who must weave the cloth from the fibrous tissues of the aloe and palm. (ibid, 58-9).

Not everyone seems to think that Muslim men were so devoid of compassion and consideration though. Referring, no doubt, to the degrading and inhumane conditions under which women toiled in industrial countries, John Foster Fraser writes,

The Moslim does not send his girl to ill-ventilated and over-heated workrooms to become wan, crook-faced and anaemic .he never lets her drudge her life out behind drapery counters for miserable wages. He does not turn his young wife at six o'clock on a gnawing winter morning to toil long hours in cotton and woollen factories. His ideal of womanhood is not the same as that of a Christian; but in no Mohammedan countries do you see slouching, unkempt, slobbering mothers hanging round the shops of gin shops. (1911:45).

In fact, it is incredible how most of these writers seem to pass over the unflattering conditions of Victorian women back at home. For whether married or not, these women were expected to be weak and incapable of taking decisions affecting their lives. Their personal property was owned by the husband. And while the Muslim woman had the right for divorce and inheritance, their Victorian counterparts were denied these rights. Jutta Gisela Sperling (220:2010) notes that there were many western misunderstandings about Islam and Muslim women, who in many ways were enjoying more rights than their western counterparts. she goes on to say that, “[w]hen considering the clear advantages of property rights for women under Islamic law, the image of Muslim women in [...] European writings were generally inconsistent with the realities of most women’s lives.”

She maintains that, in most travel writings and memoirs, seclusion and the veil served as signifiers of the low status of women even though only the very wealthy practised female seclusion and the full veil,

Polygamy was [not widespread] and practiced mainly by the elite and the very wealthy. Only the wealthy could afford to keep the women in their households economically inactive, and only they could offer the large homes with separate family quarters to entertain their guests, and men not related to them could not enter.(Ibid).

The Status of Kabyle Women in Society:

Most of these travellers commented favourably on the relative freedom accorded to Kabyle women and maintained that their circumstances and status in their households and society were far superior to those of their Arab sisters. While Arab women were “victimized” and represented as “poor veiled creatures-veiled alike in mind and body-[and]bound in shackles” (Rogers, 1865:58), these women(Kabyle) were depicted as strong, capable, autonomous and even having a leading role in Kabyle insurrections and the running of the affairs of their tribes. The heroic role that some Kabyle women, like Lalla Fatma N’soumer, have taken in the battlefield has won them the respect and admiration of the French administration. The French women very low profile in public life and politics, contributed, no doubt, to this fascination since they were unused to seeing women taking leading roles in traditional male domains.

They were more fortunate than their Arab counterparts since , in sharp contrast with the misogynist and polygamous Arab, “[t]he Kabyle not infrequently contents himself with only one wife, to whom he is faithful and attached, and who, therefore, is considerably above the level of the Arab woman.” (Rogers, 1865: 41).

In their different excursions into Kabylia, travel writers notice that Kabyle women did not cover their faces and had the freedom of movement and were not confined to the walls of their households, “groups of women stood gazing at us unveiled, [they were] far happier than [Moorish women], not mere slaves of their husbands, but on nearly the same social level and admitted to the companionship of the other sex.”(Evans, 145). Contrary to Moorish women who are confined to their private quarters without mixing with the other sex, “the Kabyle wife eats with her husband , goes unattended , with unveiled face, to market, to buy and sell, and sings and dances in the company of his friends.”(Crawford, 241).

Despite the rosy picture that the French and these writers tried to paint about Kabyle women’s reality, we should not forget that they had their own problems. Whereas other Muslim women were entitled to the *right of inheritance*, the Kabyle woman was deprived of this right in 1769 by a decree of the general assembly of the notables of

Kabylia. John Foster Fraser, though acknowledging some privileges Kabyle women had, was not unaware of their ordeals,

The women are unveiled, and hold a higher place than Islam gives to females. There is no polygamy, but the Kabyle has no scruples in getting rid of a woman when she is scraggy and withered and taking to himself another wife who is younger and plumper. (1913:179).

The French hoped that women could play a role in the process of colonization and westernization of Algeria. Because Kabyle women were said to enjoy greater freedom and respect in their communities, it was thought “they could, by the proximity of their living habits, raise Arab women out of the terrible situation in which polygamy had placed them.”(Lorcin, 1995:66).

Education was also seen as a key factor in the emancipation of these women and the progress of the natives as a whole. One of the first and most famous girls’ schools was Mme Allix Luce School. The school was opened in Algiers in 1845. Mme Allix Luce was intent on this project because she realized the weight women had in the success of any absorption of the natives into the French culture. The school offered French elementary education in reading, writing and mathematics. Lessons in Arabic, religion, sewing and embroidery were also offered. Most English travellers to Algeria, especially women, visited her school and were profuse in their admiration for the work she did. Mrs. Ellen Rogers observed that the lower class Moorish women walked about the street closely veiled, and the upper class women rarely went out except to the , cemetery or to visit friends.

These women were held in total ignorance because of the religious and social tyranny. They could neither write nor read and were not taught any manual art by which they could gain their daily bread. So these were the unfavourable circumstances ,

Out of which Madame Luce ventured to hope she might elevate Moorish womanhood, to a condition approaching that of her European sisters. She set to work, firmly persuaded that, until some change had penetrated to the interiors of Moorish dwellings , no true amalgamation with the conquering race ever take place. (1865:197).

Not everyone seems to share Mrs. Rogers enthusiasm though. Rebecca Rogers reports that most Muslim families resisted sending their girls to a European school, consequently Mme Luce attracted students by offering families the sum of two francs per day. This meant that the survival of the school depended on the financial support of the government. But the government was reluctant to provide this support because many administrators feared the Muslim reaction to such education would undermine French rule. In fact many reports noted that Muslim families accused French schools of working as recruiting boards for the colonial army or brothels (in the case of girls). This opposition to the principle of assimilation through Arab-French education had repercussions on this school; in 1861 the financial support for the school ended.

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