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Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)

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Recommended Citation

Sharkey, H. J. (1998). Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904). *African Studies Review*, 41 (2), 173-174. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/524845>

Review of *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)* by Julia A. Clancy-Smith

At the time of publication, author Heather J. Sharkey was associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Comments

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Julia A. Clancy-Smith. *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xxiii + 370 pp. Bibliography. Chronology. Glossary. Maps. Index. \$16.95 paper.

In *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters*, Julia A. Clancy-Smith considers rural responses to French encroachment in the pre-Saharan borderlands of Algeria and Tunisia. Sufi notables figure prominently in her narrative, as the molders or in some cases followers of public opinion, who on specific occasions in the nineteenth century organized movements to protest French colonialism. Illustrating this trend is an uprising that occurred in eastern Algeria in 1849. On this occasion, a leader named Bu Ziyan declared himself to be the Mahdi, or "Rightly Guided One" according to Muslim messianic belief, and launched a popular uprising against French rule. Although the exact motives for protest, on this occasion as on others, differed among villages and indeed among individuals, many were influenced by a general anxiety that arose from French attempts to tighten central control, often through taxation.

Rebel and Saint lavishes attention on particular Sufi leaders and their followers, in a region of eastern Algeria and western Tunisia that has been historically linked through patterns of trade, pilgrimage, and migration. While providing a regionally focussed and detailed study, this work also addresses broad themes in colonial African history, including anti-colonial resistance and accommodation, rural-urban (or core-periphery) relations, and religious and economic change. Through its attention to the adaptation of Muslim faith and Sufism to anti-colonial activity, this work contributes substantially to the comparative study of African jihad movements and mahdism.

Moreover, taken as a whole, the episodes of populist protest that Clancy-Smith observes appear to be classic instances of the "primary resistance movements" that have figured so prominently in post-colonial studies of European colonialism in Africa.

Source limitations have led Clancy-Smith to concentrate on what she calls the "flamboyant expressions of collective grievances", including mahdist revolts. Yet she is careful to emphasize that political action at the time included responses ranging broadly from negotiation to combat. These responses, taken together, triggered social and political change. "The underlying assumption here," she explains, "is that various kinds of sociopolitical action -- bet hedging, revolt, shifting trade strategies, migration, withdrawal, or avoidance protests -- were in the aggregate the main motors of historical change during much of the past century rather than alternative forces, such as novel technologies, new economic systems, or new classes." (p. 4) Clancy-Smith is particularly interested in the role of rumor as a vehicle for political expression, particularly among the illiterate. (In developing this approach to modes of resistance among the relatively weak and powerful alike, the author draws inspiration from the anthropologist James C. Scott's work on Southeast Asian peasantries.

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This carefully-researched text comes equipped with a chronology and glossary, and these make the study more accessible to the non-specialist in Algerian and Tunisian history. However, *Rebel and Saint* is not (and does not purport to be) a general introduction to modern North African history. Those seeking an overview of colonialism in the Maghreb should first look at a more general study before plunging in here.

Scholars of the Middle East have already given *Rebel and Saint* an enthusiastic reception, and have applauded its fresh approach to the history of Sufi faith and popular politics among the rural societies of the Maghreb. *Rebel and Saint* deserves equal attention from scholars of Africa. This meditation on the Franco-Maghribi encounter in Algeria and Tunisia charts major trends in colonial African history, viewed through a series of local responses.

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