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HAS THE FRENCH COLONIALISM IMPACTED SIGNIFICANTLY ON ALGERIAN CULTURE?

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Abstract

This article details what former French President François Hollande refers to as the ‘brutality and injustice’ afflicted on the Algerians at the hands of the French in the past, and examines how this has impacted their language, culture, and identity into the present day (cited in Pecastaing 2013). The French took Algeria in 1830 using genocide and ethnic cleansing under the guise of civilising those they considered inferior. Although they left in 1962 when Algeria gained independence, their influence can still be seen. The article explores the positive and negative impact of the removal of Arabic as a language and the revolution of the family complex. It examines the status and behaviour of the *Pieds noirs* (workers who migrated to Algeria from other areas of Europe and were given citizenship) and explores who seems to be entitled to be considered a national sensation (winning sports people) and who is not. The article concludes that the treatment of Algerians may be at least partially responsible for the creation of some extremists and terrorists.

WHEN FORMER FRENCH President François Hollande condemned the ‘brutality and injustice’ that was afflicted on the Algerians at the hands of the French during the imperial times, it really emphasised the evils of French colonialism in Algeria (Pecastaing 2013, 51).

Pecastaing (2013) described the relationship between the two countries as ‘inflammatory.’ This began when France forcefully took Algeria in 1830 where they asserted their dominance through genocides, torture, ethnic cleansing and discrimination. Compared to its neighbours, Morocco and Tunisia, who had just become protectorates (states controlled by France), Algeria was taken as a ‘territorial extension’ of France which meant the French culture and law was forcefully put upon the Algerian Nation (Benrabah 2013, x).

Benrabah (2013) argues that the French decided it was their mission to bring civilisation to those they considered 'inferior' and 'less civilised' and used unnecessary use of violence and force. This, according to Adamovsky (2005) displayed the French mentality of superiority and brought the idea of orientalism, a theory of Western propaganda that separated the non-French as the 'others.' The term 'Frenchification' started to be used in conjugation with 'assimilation.' The French essentially dismantled the native 'systems of education, law, property, religion and language' (Benrabah 2013, 25). Although the French eventually left in 1962 when Algeria gained its independence, the ties were never fully severed. To this day, Algeria has many remnants of its former occupier. From language to education, France's influence on post-independent Algeria can be seen.

According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the official languages of Algeria are Standard Arabic and Amazigh (Berber language) (Chanderli 2019). However, only a handful of the Algerian natives speak Standard Arabic regularly and the Amazigh language is broken down into six different branches of dialect: more than a quarter of the population are still speaking it. Pre-occupied Algeria had half of their population speaking Amazigh and almost half of its population speaking Arabic (Maamri 2009). When the French colonised Algeria, more than a million French citizens moved to the North African country, which began to shape Algerian linguistics and the Algerian dialect (Benrabah 2013). The French were eager to remove Arabic, as it was the classical language of the Qur'an and Muslims. As a result, Arabic was banned in all educational facilities as the French considered it a 'backward language' (*The Economist* 2017).

The Algerian society was essentially denied a right to its true identity for a hundred and thirty years which made it difficult to reassemble and restore the core of their culture, the Arabic language. This is where the creation of their daily spoken hybrid language began. However, according to Maamri (2009), this was heavily impacted by the occupiers since many of the loanwords in their Arabic dialect came from the French and the generalised use of their colonisers' language became the norm. The rise of Arab nationalism brought Arabic back during the twentieth century but, despite the fact that Standard Arabic returned to the schooling system, it was and still is rarely used. It is found almost exclusively in media, literature, and bureaucracy settings, although, French is it is used just as much in this context.

Although French is still widely used, it is on the decline. In the summer of 2019, the Algerian Minister of Higher Education, Tayeb Bouzid, announced that in all 77 Algerian universities and higher education institutes, French would be replaced with English (Ghanmi 2019). The minister said that 'the French language does not get us anywhere.' This transmits the message that Algeria is ready for full 'cultural independence' from the French nation as a consequence of the domination of French in all aspects, including business and education, which had pushed back the Arabic and Amazigh languages. This is considered a political tactic to erase the French hold on Algerian education and replace it with the competitor and the major international language of English. As Bensouiah (2019) explains, politicians previously tried to 'Arabise' the education system but failed as it was too difficult.

The French attempted to control the native population primarily in the education field (Maamri 2009). They decided to transform society through the method of teaching only French to the Berbers and Arabs as it would eradicate the Arabic and Islamic heritage and

create a 'radical division' (ibid, 79). Qur'anic schools that taught children how to read and write in Arabic were forcefully shut down due to sanctions; the French viewed this as a conquest and crusade against Islam. Maamri (2009) argues that the colonialist policy was exposed in its most destructive form when it denied the Algerians their cultural identity through restrictions on language and education. This demonstrates the toxic ideology of the French and their plans for ethnic cleansing since language holds cultures together and without it, Algeria would be pushed a step closer to cultural genocide. Language and religion were important to Algerians so to take those away left them vulnerable and easy targets to assimilate, which majorly impacted their daily lives.

A major incident that impacted Algeria significantly, and shaped its future, was the Algerian war which was considered 'the greatest and the most dramatic of colonial war' (Paul et al. 2013, 75). The war began in November of 1954 when the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) started a 'guerrilla war' against the French (Campbell 2016) through a series of bombings by, roughly, three hundred of their members (Paul et al. 2013). This wasn't the first time that Algeria tried to become an independent state. The independence movement started during the First World War and 'gained momentum' after the Second World War when the promises of a self-governing Algeria were broken. The FLN gathered Algerians together, and with military assistance from the Soviet Union, they were able to gain independence in March 1962 but at a great loss. Horne (1978) estimates that more than one million and five-hundred thousand Algerians and around twenty-six thousand French lost their lives in this eight-year war.

Due to FLNs' struggle for independence, the Algerian family complex underwent a revolution. Fanon (1959) explains that the changes were in a positive direction, especially for women. Women were generally supposed to marry as soon as they reached the adolescent age but due to the fight for liberation, women were compelled to aid in the fight as important individuals for their country's future. The traditional duties as mothers and wives were no longer a priority.

Many French citizens, particularly the older generations, still romanticise the idea of living in a colonised Algeria as many believe it is their birthright (Kimmelman, 2009). This may be because of the first-class citizenship treatment they obtained compared to the dehumanised treatment that the native Algerians were subjected to. As Benrabah (2013) argues, Algerians were third-class in their own land, and it was common to see a French soldier take the land of an Algerian farmer and give it to a colonist without compensation.

Although the origins of the term are unknown, *pieds noirs*, the literal translation meaning *black feet*, were workers who mostly migrated from the Iberian Peninsula, Mediterranean Europe and Germany to Algeria. Once they migrated, they obtained French Citizenship – something the local Algerians had no rights to. When the Colonial war ended and Algeria gained its independence, over a million *pieds noirs* fled to France but those who stayed were massacred or disappeared (Kimmelman, 2009). Some *pieds noirs* prefer the term 'French Algerian,' which seems like a last grasp at holding onto their colonial history.

Whether the *Pieds noirs* were occupiers or victims depends on one's perspective. Many *Pieds noirs* blame the hostility between the French military and the Algerian Nationalists for their

fall. This view completely dismisses the Algerians who suffered under the *Pieds noirs*. Some of the realities that were faced by the natives during the French occupation were, 'that a vote by a single European counted for 10 by Muslims, or that only fourteen per cent of Muslim children went to school, or that there was an income imbalance of five to one' (Kimmelman, 2009). This demonstrates further the superiority and Islamophobic sentiments that French colonisers held. They had no intentions of living in harmony with the natives; they wanted to eradicate them indirectly and physically in the hopes of a complete ethnic cleansing. It can be argued that modern-day France still holds these immoral views because they have not denounced these atrocities and because they still allow perpetrators such as the former General Paul Aussaresses, who tortured and killed many Algerians, to have freedom on the basis of 'free speech' (Kimmelman, 2009). This, plus the fact that no compensation was given to them highlights that, to the French, Algerians do not deserve to have legal justice for what happened to them.

It is not just Algerians in Algeria that were impacted but also those living in France. Around 7 million Algerians live in France and in French universities, eight per cent of the international students come from Algeria (Ghanmi, 2019). This, according to Hargreaves (2010), makes them the largest and longest minority to live in France. Sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad explained that the mass migration of Algerians to France happened in three stages (cited in Saada, 2000). The first stage was during the early twentieth century when many migrant workers moved to work in the industrial sector; at this time they were considered French subjects but not citizens. The second stage took place after World War II when Algerian men were sent to France to help rebuild the country. They were given menial jobs and lived in 'shanty towns' on the city outskirts; these men were eventually granted French citizenship.

The third stage was established around the family reunification policy as a follow-up to Algeria's independence (Saada, 2009). This policy allowed the children and wives of the migrant workers to also situate themselves in France.

Alsaafin (2019) mentions that many Algerians living in France still hold their Algerian identity above their French – 'Algerian with a French nationality.' A major reason for this is that they feel like their white counterparts still only view them as minorities and not fellow Frenchmen. This is particularly evident in the sports world: 'Look at Zinedine Zidane [a famous Algerian-French footballer]. In 1998, he became a world champion [and] becomes France's biggest pride. [...] In 2006, he headbutts an Italian player in the final and he becomes the suburb's Arab.' This is an issue many minorities across European countries face. When they do something considered positive, they are a national sensation: but as soon as something negative happens, they are a 'good-for-nothing' immigrant and minority. This creates tension between both communities and relays the message that they will never be seen as equals: 'Even if you feel like you are part of this nation, there is always someone to make you remember that you are not' (Alsaafin 2019). This conveys the idea that to be a true French citizen, you must be white European because otherwise you are not fully accepted. This can be very mentally draining on Algerians although the younger generation does not lose hope for a brighter future.

It matters where Algerians live in France. The majority live within a large North African community so they don't lose their Algerian culture or language and it isn't gentrified. This helps them keep a strong Algerian identity. As Newton-Small (2015) states: 'Freedom of religion is a constitutional right [...] Not quite so in France.' The majority of Algerians in France

are Muslim and are therefore targets of France's practised assimilation that stemmed from colonial days. This not only eliminates part of the identity of Algerians but also sends the message that to be French you cannot be diverse, and that France has no room for other cultures. They hide their assimilation behind the umbrella term '*integration*.' This has allowed animosity to build up where many feel like they are being 'robbed' of their roots (Newton-Small 2015). It can be argued that this is what led so many youths in France and North Africa (where there still remains the aftermath of assimilation from colonisation) to join extremist groups and perform such appalling terrorist attacks across the world, including in Europe.

In conclusion, French colonialism significantly impacted Algerian culture, primarily in a negative form. The forceful removal of the Algerians' native tongue has remodelled the Algerian language altogether. The French removed Standard Arabic almost completely and cut the population of Amazigh speakers in half. However, in a positive way, this allowed for the creation of Algeria's unique spoken language – the Algerian dialect. Algerians also have strong French language backgrounds which allow them to travel to French-speaking countries, mainly France, for further education and work opportunities. But this could be disturbed by the rise of English as a language.

The French deprived the Algerians of their rights, their land, their culture and even their lives during the colonial times, yet, they still have the brazenness to complain when the Algerians refuse their forced assimilation. This toxic ideology has created tension between the government and the minorities of France, including Algerians. It can be seen as a sequel to the colonialist past since there is still a drive to remove their unique identity. The philosophy of forcing everyone under the same label does not allow people to express themselves. In the

Algerians' case, in France, they were not allowed under occupation, and still are not allowed, to practise their religious beliefs freely. This can fuel a person's rage and anger which can create extremism; this was seen during the imperial rule in the form of Islamists and can be seen in modern times in the form of extremists and potential terrorists.

The majority of these impacts cannot be undone but over time the deep wounds caused by the French on the Algerians will heal and they will be able to fully prosper independently as a country and as a culture.

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