In Between and Nowhere at all: How an Autobiography Reveals Hybridity

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In Between and Nowhere at all: How an Autobiography Reveals Hybridity

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by

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In Between and Nowhere at all: How an Autobiography Reveals Hybridity

Francesca Maestas
The College of William and Mary
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To my very supportive family, friends, and academic advisors.
Patience and courage!
Everything runs its course,
And disappears from our sight,
Swept along in the river of eternity.

– Fadhma Amrouche

Fadhma Aït Mansour Amrouche was the illegitimate daughter of a rebellious woman from a Muslim Berber village located in the mountains of Algeria. She was born sometime between 1882 and 1883 in Greater Kabylia. Her mother had fallen in love with a young boy from her village after her husband’s death and became pregnant out of wedlock, a severe violation of social and religious norms and one that warrants execution for both the mother and the baby. Therefore, the desperate mother turned to the local French colonial magistrate for help. The magistrate enrolled the infant Fadhma in a Christian missionary school, where presumably she would be protected from bullying and harassment.

Yet she would always be a pariah, not just because of the circumstances of her birth, but also because she was a Kabyle woman who converted to Christianity during a time when the political discourse centered on the Christian French colonizer and the Muslim Arab colonized. She was a Christian convert by paper and a Muslim by heritage, yet she transcended the boundaries of both and pledged allegiance to neither. She was a woman from history who decided to preserve her stories in her autobiography, Histoire de ma vie. The autobiography is remarkable in its own right because it was written by a rural woman from a Muslim family who had converted to Christianity. The fact that an autobiography of this sort was left behind to tell
her story is both unusual and exciting. In addition, it provides an insight into the complexity of Algerian political identities that emerged out of the colonial period.

The Algerian colonial experience was largely chaotic. The French blockade of Algiers, a movement to reinforce patriotism, led to the colonization of Algeria, which ended in a complex and brutal revolutionary war for independence that ended in 1962 with the Evian Peace Accords.¹ The proximity of Algeria to France facilitated the implementation of systematic colonialism during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, the French colonists aspired to rule over Algeria (excluding the desert interior) as an extended branch of the metropole, but without the benefits of full representation for citizens, in some cases unless they renounced their Muslim heritage. Unlike Tunisia and Morocco, which were considered protectorates or territories of France, Algeria was deemed an actual province under the French Constitution of 1848.² The French government established a system that facilitated European settlement of Algeria early on, which increased tensions in the region. Although largely mixed, many “natives” lived in the infertile interior under military rule while most European colons (settlers later known as pied-noirs after the revolution) populated the coasts under civil governance.

Many of the colons were members of the working-class who were offered government grants to work the fertile land of Algeria, however, they were often in disagreement with the military which complicated the French colonial process. By demanding “greater incorporation of Algeria into the French metropolitan system for administration”³ the settlers hoped “to bypass

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military control and gain easier access to land." By 1870, the military government of Algeria was replaced by a civil government under the regime of the Third Republic, which restructured policies in colonial Algeria and further “highlighted the boundaries between them” and the “natives” of Algeria, which included Berbers and Jews.

This new colonial government aimed to assimilate, more socially than politically, the Algerian people into a French lifestyle and this resulted in a very divisive struggle for independence years later. At the dawn of the revolution, supporters of French Algeria, such as the French ethnologist and “ardent Gaulist,” Jacques Soustelle, denounced Algerian nationality, deeming it nonexistent since they were technically “French” under the Constitution of 1848. To them, the Mediterranean was merely a lake that separated the metropole from the province of Algérie, the land of Saint Augustine which had long been seized by the Arabs. Consistent with the colonialist ideology, France aspired to be the region’s liberator. This resulted in a repressive colonial experience which led to the violence that defined the Algerian Revolution. The war, which occurred roughly between 1954 and 1962, garnered extensive international attention because of both the widespread use of torture and the sheer divisiveness of the conflict. In fact, it was considered both a war for Algerian independence from France and a civil war between Algerian loyalists who defended French rule and Algerian nationalists who desired immediate decolonization.

Stuck between the Algerian Arab nationalists and the French colonizers were the Kabyles, a Berber group from the Djurjura Mountains in Kabylia, the only region that remained autonomous during the initial colonization efforts. The French invasion of Berber territories was

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4 Ibid.
initially very bloody and violent. For instance, in 1845 the French military officer, General Aimable Pélissier (whose first name in French ironically means “amicable”), set fire to a set of Berber caves located in the Dahra region as part of a military operation called an *enfumade* (smoking), killing 1,500 Berber men, women and children by burning them alive. Kabyles resisted for a long time before they were gradually suppressed by the French army.

Important to the colonization of Kabylia was “The Kabyle Myth,” a French colonial idea in which the Kabyles were “depicted as industrious, independent, loyal, attached to their land and amenable to civilization in its Western form,” in contrast to “the Arabs [who were depicted as] lazy, despotic and antithetical to everything that is good and civilized.” The point of the Kabyle Myth was to advance French colonial interests by starting with the assimilation of Kabyles into a French lifestyle. This notion will be further analyzed later on, but it already reveals a socially and culturally complex colonial setting.

Consequently, colonial Algeria cannot be described in the traditional binary terms of the Christian French colonizer and Muslim Arab colonized without inherently neglecting those who fall in between or nowhere at all. Fadhma Amrouche, a Kabyle woman and Christian convert who received a French education but chose to preserve her Kabyle songs and poetry for her family, was neither accepted into the Muslim Algerian nor the Christian French colonial identity. Yet, she retained many aspects of both sides and consciously adopted other aspects of her Berber heritage.

Unfortunately, since her story exists in the form of an autobiography, historians have often been quick to dismiss it, perhaps deeming it more appropriate for the realm of literature rather than history considering that most of the sources that do examine her story are from

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literary journals. This neglect of autobiographies in general is indicated by the lack of past historical research on autobiographies, particularly of those from marginalized communities. Today, this issue is gradually being addressed by scholars who do find value in examining autobiographical work. Indeed, autobiographies can and do present some obstacles to historical research, yet when studying the history of individuals living in regions that favor oral tradition over written tradition, an autobiography is quite valuable. It can reveal things that other sources cannot. This is especially the case for women, whose history is largely absent within conventional historical sources such as legal documents and government decrees. The history of women is often studied through diaries, letters and autobiographies in which aspects of the “private sphere,” the space which women in history were present, are revealed to us. However, there are ways to consolidate history and literature so as to reveal a historical narrative that would have otherwise been neglected and eventually forgotten. By placing the autobiography within the larger historical context, one can study the history while still respecting the individual’s unique thoughts and emotions.

Fadhma Amrouche’s autobiography, *Histoire de ma vie*, composed within a month in August 1946, provides insight into the individual experiences of those who have been silenced throughout history and who do not fit the binary models of historical research on colonialism. Her narrative is one that breaks the understanding of colonial archetypes such as the Christian colonial oppressor and Muslim “native” oppressed. Through it we learn what it was like to be a late convert in a religious society, an educated Kabyle in the Djurjura, and more broadly a woman in colonial Algeria. Fadhma’s autobiography reveals the complexity of identity by documenting her external and internal experience of colonialism and therefore is a priceless narrative for studying the neglected histories of those who do not fit the overgeneralized
framework of colonialism and nationalism. Reading life stories of women in the colonial period avoids the simplification of their histories. It reveals that they are neither “victims nor national standard bearers”\(^8\) and that their experiences were much more complex, consisting of multiple layers often unseen in conventional historical sources.

Furthermore, by comparing Fadhma’s experience with her own mother’s as well as that of her only daughter, Marie-Louise Taos Amrouche, we can trace the changes and continuities between the colonial and post-colonial experiences regarding religious belief, feminism, and ideas of national identity versus cultural identity. The story of Fadhma’s familial lineage is important to understanding how French colonial rule affected the colonized Algerians, in particular those whose voices have been suppressed, altered or influenced. These people are sometimes referred to as subalterns for their social status as “Other” or “Subject.” They are individuals who have been silenced and whose voice is often given by other people in privileged positions. Even academia, in particular Western academia, is guilty of “giving” subalterns a voice. This is because “the Western approach to the subaltern is either to speak for or to silently let them speak for themselves. Both strategies silence the subaltern because they ignore the positional relations of the dominant to the subaltern.”\(^9\)

Would Fadhma be considered a subaltern?\(^{10}\) This is not an easy question to answer. Even asking and dissecting this question is problematic because it is phrased in a Western academic setting. On the one hand, Fadhma is a colonized Berber woman from a pastoral background and with an unusual story. In addition, she experienced physical displacement when

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she left Algeria. Displaced groups are important in subaltern studies because they cannot or do not share their stories seeing that they are too busy trying to build a new life from scratch – they are in “survival-mode.” On the other hand, however, Fadhma was provided the opportunity to learn how to read and write in French. She received an education that allowed her to express her voice in the form of an autobiography. This education, the knowledge she received, also allowed her to move between and among different groups, mainly the Algerian colonized and the French colonizers. However, the ambiguity of her identity, the mere fact that it is difficult to pinpoint where she belongs, can quite possibly make her a subaltern. She cannot speak for the Algerians because she is a Roumis. She cannot speak for the French because she is an Algerian. She can only speak for herself.

My main concern regarding this paper and the research that I have done is that I would inherently be imposing my Western academic viewpoint onto Fadhma’s personal autobiography. Therefore, in order to respect Fadhma’s voice and her words about her own identity in the best way I see possible, I extract original excerpts from the autobiography itself. Naturally, I then break down the essential parts and provide context for the excerpts but I try to reiterate time and time again that she is the one telling her story. My goal is to give the historical context for it in order to reveal a narrative. I also try my best to go in the chronological and thematic order that is present in the original autobiography, respecting that aspect of her story as well. Overall, the main purpose of my research is to examine the importance of studying different identities and explore how they emerge and how they are constructed through the story of a rather remarkable Berber woman.

This paper first outlines the methodology of the research and the obstacles that arise when studying an autobiography. It aims to contextualize the autobiography in a historical
framework in order to avoid leaping into a completely literary one, which can sometimes be problematic to the historian. However, it is important to also study the literary elements present in the autobiographical writing because they bring the author to life. For instance, the tone of her writing or the symbolism in her poems may reveal things about the historical context that would otherwise go unnoticed. Studying history and literature together provides insight into unique aspects of the human experience. Fadhma’s poems, for instance, reflect on concepts such as motherhood, the death of her children, displacement and much more in ways that the historical narrative does not and cannot.

Subsequently, in Chapter One, I will outline the story of Fadhma’s conception, the circumstances of her birth and what it reveals about the setting in which she was born. Chapter Two narrates Fadhma’s educational experience, which played a huge role in her life in terms of employment, marriage and, eventually, writing her autobiography. Chapter Three chronicles the story of conversion and examines what it meant, to Fadhma, to be a convert in colonial Algeria and how it was intrinsically connected to her experience with education. This section also analyzes the role of religion in Fadhma’s life and in the greater colonial context. In Chapter Four I explore Fadhma’s own maternal experience, having lost all but two children. A mother’s pain caused by the death of her own children can be one of the greatest forces of change in a woman’s life and, in particular, it is important to understanding why Fadhma wrote her autobiography. Lastly, the story ends in Chapter Five in which I outline Fadhma’s exile and the role it played in inspiring her to write Berber songs and poems and eventually the autobiography. This is where she solidifies her identity as “a Kabyle woman,” in her own terms.

I. Methodology and Framework
Very little has been written about Fadhma Amrouche and her autobiography. Most of the existing treatments come from the realm of francophone studies or within a literary framework rather than a historical one. To historians, the primary issue often cited when studying an autobiography is its representativeness. As such, an important question to ask is what we can learn about the historical setting by studying Fadhma’s experience. Unlike many women studied in history, she was neither notable nor heroic in the conventional sense. She did not fight in the revolutionary war like many well-known Algerian women. She was neither a prominent government official nor did she deliver any memorable public speeches.

Yet, we must ask whether heroic women are representative of most women at all? And if not, we then must ask “who are the women missing from history?” Who are the women that history has neglected, either because there is an absence of a historical record or because scholars have ignored potential sources? The latter is more likely the case because history has been widely male-oriented and inherently upper-class oriented, which means that in the past scholars have tended to focus on sources created and written by men who came from the upper socioeconomic level and had access to a well-rounded education. For this reason, historians who study women’s history, in particular ordinary women’s history, must be creative and must be willing to analyze other forms of evidence. “The… history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in a male-defined world, on their own terms,” and it “leads one to the use of women’s letters, diaries, autobiographies and oral history sources.” As a result, Fadhma’s autobiography is also valuable to historians merely because of its existence as a source that directly conveys the voice of an underprivileged woman in history. “What is most compelling

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12 Ibid., 6.
13 Ibid., 10.
about *Histoire de ma vie* is the way it refuses easy categorization as a life narrative of ‘the colonial woman,’”¹⁴ and therefore provides a new way of re-imagining the colonial and postcolonial experience of Algeria.

The methodology adopted in this paper is centered on contextualizing Fadhma’s story within the greater historical picture by examining the construction of her Berber identity, and its relationship with her Algerian and Christian identities. The key to doing this is to ask “how different Berber-speaking people imagine the communities relevant to them,”¹⁵ and what is their perspective on their own identity, history, surroundings, and feelings? In other words, it is a way of understanding the whole community by understanding its parts through that community’s own definitions. History is compiled one experience at a time, in this case by analyzing Fadhma’s experience as well as her maternal lineage through her mother and her daughter.

However, before delving into Fadhma’s story, it is important to ask questions about the autobiography itself in order to best understand the historical context. We must ask for whom did she write it, why did she write it, and why did she write it in the language she did. Fadhma had asked her children to leave her autobiography, which she began and finished in August 1946, for the family and that if it were to become a novel or if it were to be published, she asked that all the names should be changed.¹⁶ Evidently, her children did not adhere to her request and the autobiography was published in its original format. Her son, Jean Amrouche, had been the first to approach Fadhma about preserving her story in the first place so she dedicated it to him although she did dedicate the epilogue, written in June 1962 (five years before her death), to her daughter Taos Amrouche.

¹⁴ Duffey, “Berber Dreams, Colonialism, and Couscous,” 78.
¹⁶ Duffey, “Berber Dreams, Colonialism, and Couscous,” 68.
Autobiographical writing is generally considered a Western art. However, over time “autobiographical discursive practices have been at the critical crossroads of the theoretical, cultural and historic implications”\textsuperscript{17} of subaltern and postcolonial writing. It provides a voice to those who are silenced. However, autobiographies in the West were originally written by men who felt some sense of entitlement because of a sudden epiphany or observation they had, some meaning they had found in their own lives that was worthy of putting on paper.\textsuperscript{18} Eventually we see a rise in autobiographical writing from women in Europe and in North America.

Yet the Western representation of the autobiographical genre is different from its “Oriental” and “Other” counterparts: autobiographies written by people of color, by women or by indigenous peoples are unique because their consciousness, identity and self-representation emerge in different ways.\textsuperscript{19} Whereas in the Western male-dominated tradition an autobiography is a primarily literary form, for Kabyle women like Fadhma it is merely a representation, or perhaps even an extension, of their storytelling tradition.\textsuperscript{20} In other words, Fadhma’s autobiography is the story she wants to pass down to her descendants, which in another historical context she would have narrated orally. Instead, she passed it down textually because she was living in a Western context, which generally favors the written word over the spoken word. As such, in order to understand her story, we must view the autobiographical medium as a written manifestation of orality, particularly in regards to cultural transmission. In fact, at the very end of her account Fadhma states that she wrote down her story for her son Jean, “so that he may know what [my] mother and [I] suffered and labored, in order that, one day, the Berber poet Jean

\textsuperscript{20} Duffey, “Berber Dreams, Colonialism, and Couscous,” 70.
Amrouche could be born.”

This is the essence of orality – to pass down a story about ancestral roots in order to inspire the descendants.

However, to pass her story on to her children, Fadhma was required to write in what some would call “the colonizer’s language.” Many writers from colonial and post-colonial societies chose to write in the European language imposed on them, usually because that was the form of education they had received. For instance, Assia Djebar, the famous Algerian woman writer, wrote in French to circulate her story, make it more accessible but also in order “to become the subject of her own discourse, narrator of her own story,”

which is the essence of an autobiography.

Trained as a historian, Djebar collected women’s oral histories and wrote them into her semi-autobiographical stories. Therefore, “by interweaving autobiographical fragments with historical accounts... and oral history... Djebar [contextualized] her own life story within the framework of her nation’s history.” However, like Fadhma, she always returned to her maternal and cultural legacy of oral tradition, song, legend and tales.

For Djebar, as for Fadhma, “autobiography became the way back to the cherished maternal world of her past, where she [sought] healing and reconciliation for a self that is fragmented by the colonial experience.”

This also reveals their bi-culturality, direct evidence of the influence that colonialism had on their personal and social lives. Thus, Fadhma’s choice of language shows how she worked the systems of politics around her and how she embraced the bilingual, bicultural world that she had

24 Ibid., 103.
25 Ibid.
been hurled into. This idea of cultural hybridity will be the premise of this paper and will be examined throughout the following chapters.

In conclusion, the Algerian colonial experience created deep-seated issues regarding political identities that made it difficult for people like Fadhma to formulate their own personal identity in a clear-cut way. Both the Algerian and the French people debated over who was considered “French” and who was considered “Algerian” and “these terms were at one moment defined by citizenship status, place of residence, or familial descent, and at another by language, religion and political commitment.”26 To further complicate the matter, at times the colons declared themselves Algerian and at other times they claimed to be French. Lizbeth Zack notes that “a settler may have been ‘French’ when requesting aid at the public assistance office in central Algiers, a ‘Valencian’ at the cafe in his local Bab-el-Oued neighborhood, and an ‘Algerian’ around election time.”27 These complex political identities that emerged strongly during the years before the war were embedded in Algerian society. To understand them, it is important to see how French colonialism affected certain individuals and how it complicated their personal, religious and political identities. Fadhma’s autobiography offers clues that could help detect the extent to which colonialism shaped people’s experiences.

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Chapter One: The Story of Conception

Fadhma Amrouche was born either in 1882 or in 1883 in the town of Tizi-Hibel in Greater Kabylia. In her autobiography, Fadhma narrates the story of her birth:

“On the night of my birth, my mother was all alone with her two small children: there was no one at hand to assist her or to go for help. She delivered herself and bit through the umbilical cord. The next day one old woman brought her a little food.”28 Her mother had refused to follow the Kabyle tradition of moving into her husband’s family’s house and then became pregnant by a boy who refused to take responsibility of her child, Fadhma. Her brother-in-law threatened to kill her and her baby, as is warranted by Kabyle custom, forcing Fadhma’s mother to turn to the French magistrate who granted her permission to keep her children, save her life, and keep her house and land.29 Fadhma’s mother therefore became the sole head of the household, the matriarch in a largely patriarchal society.30

The involvement of the French magistrate was not unusual. “Before the French rule, summary justice was practiced: the relatives took the offender out into the fields, killed her and buried her under an embankment. But at that time [of Fadhma’s birth], the French legal system was struggling to wipe out these brutal customs and this was [her] mother’s salvation.”31 In fact, the magistrate, whose wife was childless, even offered to adopt Fadhma but her mother refused.32 Greater Kabylia, the mountainous yet largely fertile region where Fadhma was born, was considered the most important region in colonial Algeria by many administrators because of

28 Amrouche, My Life Story, 5.
29 Ibid., 4.
31 Amrouche, My Life Story, 5.
32 Moreau and Schaar, Subversives and Mavericks in the Muslim Mediterranean, 173-174.
many social and political reasons. Therefore, this is where France decided to put most of its colonial efforts.

I. The Kabyle Myth and the French civilizing mission

As examined previously, Kabyles were considered better prospects for assimilation compared to Arabs because they could be “used as agents to advance French colonial interests and implement Western civilization in Algeria.” To spread this notion, French administrators used sociological and religious differences between Arabs and Kabyles to make the latter look superior. As a result, Kabylia was placed at the center of French colonial efforts. Various ethnographic studies were published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to locate historical connections that the Kabyles might have had with Europe and in the process make Arabs seem inferior or uncivilized. These ethnographies about the Kabyle Myth spread far and wide, as indicated in the following travel account by the American author and clergyman Dr. Henry M. Field:

They [Kabyles] take naturally to the labors of the field, in which they are a perfect contrast to the Arabs, who look upon such labor as a degradation, and even hire Kabyles to do work which they are too lazy to do themselves. The Arab is at home on his steed, scouring the desert, while the Kabyle is never seen on horseback. He is content to go on foot, and is not ashamed of honest labor; he earns his money in the sweat of his brow, and, what is better, he knows how to keep it. They are a thrifty folk, living on little and saving every hard-earned penny.

The comparison between Kabyles and Arabs in this description is clear. The Kabyles were seen as industrious while the Arabs were depicted as indolent and arrogant. Such renditions were used as a way to justify the colonial idea that Kabyles were easier to colonize than Arabs. For instance, another such idea emerged in which the Kabyles were reported to be a long lost

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33 Sadia and Bouteldja, “The Manifestation of the French ‘Kabyle/Arab Dichotomy,’” 3.
Christian group from the Roman period. This was a popular belief amongst colonial administrators and one that they could use to divide Arabs and Berbers. This notion was called the “Kabyle Vulgate” and it conveyed that “Kabyle Berbers were European in origin and only marginally connected to Islam, but would return to the Christian European realm through a civilizing mission.”\textsuperscript{35} In this way, French colonists constructed a history for the Kabyles and for themselves. “History became, with the establishment of the civilian regime, an important means by which to build a colonial state,”\textsuperscript{36} and they reinforced this by recounting the history of North Africa as a struggle between the domineering Arabs and the subordinate Berbers and thus positioning themselves as liberators rather than colonizers.

Part of the justification behind the Kabyle Vulgate and the expansion of colonialism centered on certain institutions in Kabyle society. One such structure was the \textit{tajmat} (\textit{tajmaet}), the Kabyle village assembly that produced customary laws. To the colonial administrators, “the \textit{tajmat} thereby became a symbol for Kabyle democracy, seen not as a functioning political system whose legitimacy remains partly independent of state jurisdiction, but rather as a sign of ‘cultural’ affinity and disposition easy to integrate into the colonial, and later the independent, Algerian state, or even to adopt as an ideal model for the latter.”\textsuperscript{37} Thus, the Kabyle \textit{tajmat} resembled Western democracy because it was secular, which was in contrast to the Muslim Arab legal structures that upheld Islamic law. In fact, often times village laws were admixed with Islamic laws, or at the very least influenced by them.\textsuperscript{38} Still the French aimed to justify their

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\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 900.
colonial interests by spreading the idea that the Kabyle justice system, unlike the Arab Muslim one, was parallel to French democratic systems and therefore the Kabyles were superior to Arabs.

Yet the paradox lies in the actual application of the Kabyle myth. In the eyes of the French, there had to be a process of “deorientalization” and that meant they had to adopt a process of taming the land and the people. The flexibility of the secular Kabyle codes was ideal to the colonization of Kabyle peoples and to counter Arab customs yet the French still attempted to modify the codes of law so as to advance their own colonizing missions. Legal expropriation and banishment were prohibited by French law so instead the Kabyles adopted the use of social ostracism in order to ban those who were accused of committing a crime. This is exactly what happened to Fadhma’s mother. The village customary laws dealing with illegitimate births had been restricted by the French magistrate so instead they shunned her and her children, particularly Fadhma. Thus, Fadhma’s story began as an outcast of her own village. Meanwhile in the larger historical context, the French colonial government, intent on subduing rebellious Arab and Kabyle tribes, implemented structures that would benefit French colonial interests.

II. Colonial Government and the Focus on Kabyle Women

In particular, the colonial administrators focused on Kabyle women. The French felt as if they had a responsibility to not neglect the Kabyle female population. This concentration manifested in different ways. According to the French colonizers, the “Kabyle woman’s relative freedom... was due to the Kabyles’ indifference to religion or at best their loose religiosity,” which explains how the depictions of bad Arabs and good Kabyles came to be in regards to

women. From a European perspective, Kabyle women were equated to French women in their freedom and their more secular tendencies. In fact, by describing Kabyles as “strong and independent” and equating Kabyle women to French women, they were appealing to similar ideas existing in contemporary French feminist movements. This was not an unusual dynamic in nineteenth century societies where often feminist movements were dependent on male-oriented ideas of “feminism,” equality and what it meant to be a “good woman.”

Feminism in the nineteenth century was different from the feminism that emerged in the twentieth century, which is more comparable to our current understanding of the movement. In nineteenth century Europe, feminist movements had only barely materialized and only under the banner of other political movements. The Middle East also had feminist movements that emerged in a similar fashion. This prohibited these movements from progressing beyond the confines of male-oriented political movements like nationalism, liberalism and, in the European case, imperialism, until the twentieth centuries. Therefore, feminism in the nineteenth century advocated mostly for the diffusion of liberal middle-class values, such as maternity, morality and hard-work. French women saw Kabyle women as potential candidates for these kinds of notions since they were considered as one step ahead of their Arab counterparts.

Arab women, on the other hand, were seen from the perspective of French woman as oppressed by Islam and their Arab society. Polygamy, separate social spheres and wearing the veil were considered as primitive and humiliating to women. Colonialists used these customs as a way to measure the stage of development in a society. Later, during the interwar period, French feminist movements would declare that “the problem of Arab and Berber women’s inferior status

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41 Sadia and Bouteldja, “The Manifestation of the French ‘Kabyle/Arab Dichotomy.’”
was seen as a consequence of the colonial government’s failure to fully apply French law, thus turning the tables in the French feminist discourse within the context of their colonies. Therefore, the French feminists demanded a solution: modernization in the French style by providing citizenship opportunities and secular education which would incite many French feminists to visit Algeria and build schools and hospitals. These “civilizing” efforts maintained through education shaped Fadhma’s story and those of many other women, both in positive and negative ways.

Yet they also presented other issues regarding ideas of ‘French-ness’ and French citizenship for those who obtained a European-style education. The tensions surrounding education during the colonial period would define the course of Algerian history. The emergence of conflicting political identities, and political loyalties, as in who was considered “Algerian” and who was considered “French” during the Algerian Revolution, was rooted in colonial education and the advancement of the French “civilizing mission,” as will be examined in the next chapter. Consequently, Fadhma’s autobiography is a condensed manifestation of these precise issues and it provides the perspective of an ordinary Berber woman who was directly affected by colonialist efforts.

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Chapter Two: The Story of Education

Throughout her entire childhood Fadhma Amrouche was an outcast, often subjected to threats, harassment and violence because of her status as the illegitimate daughter from a Muslim Kabyle village. Fadhma describes her experience:

The world is a cruel place and ‘the child of sin’ becomes the scapegoat of society, especially in Kabylia. I cannot count the blows I received. What endless bullying I suffered! If I ventured into the street, I would risk being knocked down or trampled on... I had followed my brother who as driving the oxen to the drinking trough and a vicious boy had pushed me into the hedge of prickly pears. My mother took fright. What was she to do with me? How was she to protect me from people’s cruelty? She could not keep me shut up, but she was afraid that if I went out I would be killed and, in the eyes of the law, the blame would fall on her.43

Presumably, Fadhma spent a lot of time in the safety of her own home.44 Eventually, her mother reluctantly handed her off to a French missionary group called the Order of the White Sisters, which will be examined later in Chapter Three. However, her mother disapproved of the White Sisters, who had brutally punished Fadhma because she had pulled a harmless prank on the school, so she took her away and enrolled her in an orphanage in the village of Taddert-ou-Fella. At first, the Administrator of the school had offered to take Fadhma into his home as his own and provide for her but Fadhma’s mother, a determined woman who was rightfully quite attached to her vulnerable daughter, had refused for as long as she could. Finally, she agreed to board Fadhma at the school. As such, Fadhma was one of the first Kabyle girls to receive an education.

During the colonial period, education was the medium upon which to advance the civilizing mission. There were three groups of French colonialists who were given the

43 Amrouche, My Life Story, 6.
44 Duffey, “Berber Dreams, Colonialism, and Couscous,” 73.
responsibility of educating Algerian “natives”: teachers, priests, and doctors.⁴⁵ This chapter examines predominantly the role of teachers in education.

I. The Civilizing Mission and Secular Education

The orphanage turned boarding school Taddert-ou-Fella at Fort National was established between 1882 and 1884. The main administrator, Monsieur Sabatier, had “summoned all the kaïds [commanders or judges], cavalrymen and rural police in his area and asked them to ride through the douars [villages] and collect as many girls as possible.”⁴⁶ Taddert-ou-Fella, like many other colonial schools, was put on display by the colonial administrators. Various members of the French government would visit and in fact Fadhma recalled that Jules Ferry, a fervent imperialist, once visited her school as well as the Grand Duke George of Russia.⁴⁷ At enrollment, the schoolgirls were automatically given French names and Fadhma was renamed Marguerite. The students sang French songs and read European books such as those authored by Victor Hugo and Jean de La Fontaine. They learned European geography and French history. In fact, Fadhma had memorized the history of the French monarchs, when they ruled, whom they married, and when they died. The school’s objective was to educate young girls so that they could become certified primary school teachers.

These schools for girls were common in French Algeria. They were secularized educational institutions that aspired “to change native morals, prejudices and habits, as quickly and as surely as possible, by introducing the greatest possible number of young Muslim girls to the benefits of a European education.”⁴⁸ This was part of the French civilizing mission, which

⁴⁶ Amrouche, My Life Story, 11.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.
hoped to raise virtuous young women who would in turn raise hard-working Algerian subjects. This scheme was consistent with nineteenth century ideas on education and morality in which women, generally those from the upper and middle classes, were brought up as decent young ladies in the hopes that they would become righteous home-makers who would then raise moral, law-abiding citizens. The same idea was applied in Algeria, but instead of raising moral citizens, they hoped to produce and train diligent laborers. Strangely enough, the French colonial administration never built enough schools to educate the majority of the Algerian population. This is because the focus was to teach basic skills that only suffice for building a future in an underdeveloped industrial society. The purpose was simply Westphalian: to create a labor force that would continue to supply France with crude products and in turn consume manufactured goods.

For this reason, French colonial education was in direct contradiction to the Algerian identity because it was specifically designed that way through measures of controlling language, teaching methods, religious instruction and changing the overall curriculum, among other structural changes. In this way, education became a weapon of mass cultural destruction.

II. Feminism and Secular Education

European women in the nineteenth century were responsive to gender relations and gender equality. The first waves of feminism sprang up in Europe and the West and the movement spread across their empire, reaching the colonies that were closest to Europe first. French women, such as Eugénie Luce, a French schoolteacher who “argued powerfully for the need to include women in the French civilizing mission,” were convinced that schooling would

49 Heggoy, “Education in French Algeria,” 180.
50 Ibid., 185.
51 Ibid., 180.
Maestas, 25

teach “indigenous” girls morals and values which could then be disseminated across the land. Luce’s familiarity with Algerian culture and language allowed her to convince the colonial government that educating girls would help advance the process of colonization and she was given the authority to build her schools and their programs. In spite of this, the authorities continued to “explicitly prohibit religious proselytism... to relay French cultural superiority through Christianity”\(^{53}\) in the colonial school systems. Still, individual schoolteachers conveyed their religious and moral ideas to their students through secular subjects such as history and grammar.

The school supervisors attempted to remain secular and fair in their programs, but this proved to be difficult as more European women were applying to become schoolteachers in the colonies as a national and moral duty to advance the French empire. Usually the schoolteachers were native women themselves, which pleased the girls’ families, with one or two European administrators to supervise. Yet the educational content was often colonial, always gendered, and sometimes subtly religious. Although schools closed for Muslim holidays in order to respect the local religions, they required the students to celebrate the French ones, according to Fadhma’s autobiography. As mentioned earlier, Fadhma learned about “all the kings of France, who married whom, who succeeded whom, and all about the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era.”\(^{54}\) She even had a headmistress that would teach the girls patriotic songs. According to Fadhma, this headmistress “only cared passionately about two things: France and her school, as this was all she had after both her husband and her son died on Algerian soil.”\(^{55}\)


\(^{54}\) Amrouche, *My Life Story*, 17.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 23.
Whereas boys were taught about national pride and serving the *patrie*, the fatherland, and how to become good French citizens, girls were indoctrinated with lessons on righteousness, as was common in nineteenth century European culture.\(^{56}\) The hope was that these schoolgirls would grow up to be virtuous women who would then raise virtuous children. Photographs taken by Félix-Jacques Antoine Moulin, a French photographer, captured these French schools for native Algerian girls. For instance, one of Moulin’s photographs depicts a typical nineteenth century classroom in Algeria. Written on the blackboard is some Arabic writing that is barely legible and below there is a quote that says, “Le principe de la sagesse est la crainte de Dieu,” meaning, “the beginning [or principle] of wisdom is the fear of God.”\(^{57}\) In the classroom are two Algerian teacher assistants and one French schoolteacher pointing at a map of Northern Africa.

The aforementioned patriotic headmistress at Fadhma’s school was also a very devout Christian. She “had received a solid education at the best convent in Rodez, from where her former teacher, Sister Saint-Charles, still wrote to her...she was a sincere believer, but she never mentioned her religion to us as the school was supposed to be non-sectarian.”\(^{58}\) Although this headmistress stayed true to the idea of secularization according to Fadhma, it is easy to recognize how the religion could be interweaved in the programs by individual schoolteachers whose educational background was rooted in ecclesiastical teachings, as revealed in Moulin’s photographs. Evidently, moral lessons were often transmitted through religious messaging, however subtle, in spite of the government’s efforts to promote the spread of secular education in the colonies.


Consequently, many Algerians, particularly orthodox Muslims, both Kabyles and Arabs, resisted colonial education. Although the French secular schools “flourished… and served as a showcase for the French efforts with respect to indigenous women... [they] clearly left a lingering concern about the potential danger of providing French education to Muslim girls.”

These schools often had to close due to resistance by locals. Fadhma experienced this firsthand as she recalls the time the schoolgirls at Taddert-ou-Fella went to Algiers to take the test that would allow them to become teachers:

We became a Normal School in 1893. To ensure the future of our establishment, we had to have primary schools, but the Kabyles were more adamant than ever in their refusal to send their daughters to school. In 1895 four or five of us took the examination for the elementary diploma. To travel to Algiers for the exam, we had dressed in regional costume that is worn for important feast days, that is, a silk fouta with sash and headscarf. We were too conspicuous: the Kabyles and all the orthodox Muslims made a scandal. The school was closed once more.

The complaints forced the colonial government to constantly supervise schools and reexamine their funding and even the extent of their purpose in the colonization process. Some French women, many of whom were involved in French feminist movements in Europe, resisted any efforts to close down schools for girls. Their greatest obstacle was the struggle against traditional gender roles that affected women globally. In Algeria specifically, women associated with feminist movements were persecuted and ostracized. The Algerian wife of a colonial administrator, Marie Bugéja, writing from Paris, discussed the relationship between inequality, Islam and feminism in Berber communities. She was convinced that Algerian women were content to be submissive in a patriarchal society and that the central problem was that “women failed to modernize.”

French women reading her writings, which had been published in various homes of the Kabyles and the orthodox Muslims.
women’s journals that had gained popularity such as *La Française*, were deeply influenced by Bugéja’s ideas to modernize Algeria through French-style education, secularity and citizenship.

Madame Malaval, Fadhma’s beloved teacher and director of the school, took a similar route in her campaigns. She was originally from the Averyron region and was forced to move to Algeria after disease wiped out her husband’s vineyards. After her husband and their only child died, she accepted an offer in 1884 to become the director of the school at Fort National. Later, in 1893, after Fort National had closed, she opened her own primary schools in Algeria although Kabyle families only sent their sons to her schools. However, she was able to serve as inspector to these schools, a post that was prohibited for women in France. It was not uncommon for the colonies to attract many French and European women for the sole reason of obtaining opportunities that they were barred from in the imperial metropole.

In addition, Madame Malaval fought tirelessly to oppose the closing of Taddert-ou-Fella, one of the few remaining schools for “native” girls. The colonial administrators first threatened to close the school, which at the time was an orphanage, because of the high costs of maintaining it. According to Fadhma, Mme Malaval instead continued to run the orphanage out of her own pocket and fought to maintain it. In 1893, she won the battle on the condition that Taddert-ou-Fella would be nationalized and converted to the Normal School. It is important to note that Fadhma was neither blind to nor ignorant of emerging ideas of feminism in Algeria. In this excerpt, she discusses her thoughts on gender and education:

> People were beginning to demand the emancipation of Muslim women. At that time, school was compulsory for boys; if a pupil played truant, the father and son were sentenced to three days in prison and a fine of fifteen francs. So boys attended school regularly. But alas! nothing similar was enforced for girls. There was no secular teaching for them, with the exception of our school which unfortunately soon had to close.

62 Moreau and Schaar, *Subversives and Mavericks in the Muslim Mediterranean*, 175.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 176.
[Monsieur Masselot] (The Administrator) said to the pupils, ‘I can’t help you. If you were men, I’d issue you with a burnouse and give you a job in the police or the horse regiment, but you are girls...’ And he added casually, ‘They’re pretty, they’ll get married...!’ By saying this, the Administrator ignored the stigma surrounding educated Kabyle women, particularly for those who had received a colonial education. Simply put, most Kabyle men did not want to marry educated women for traditional reasons. Under a new headmistress, since Mme Malaval was forced to resign, Taddert-ou-Fella was transformed into a Normal School.

The instructions from the colonial administrators were to no longer train the girls to become primary school teachers. Fadhma disliked the new program and she “was bitterly resentful of the French authorities, who had sacrificed Mme Malaval to a political cabal and had opened a door for herself only to slam it in her face.” At one point, in 1895, the girls traveled to Algiers to take an exam that would provide them with a certificate of study that would open new doors in terms of job opportunities. In spite of being very well prepared, every single girl failed, most likely on purpose, according to Fadhma. Additionally, their trip resulted in a scandal: Kabyle girls wearing “native” costumes in the city to take an academic exam.

Eventually, the school closed permanently for political reasons and Fadhma was forced to move back to her village and “rid [herself] of the veneer of civilization that [she] had acquired... since the Roumis had rejected [them]... and resolve to become a Kabyle again.” Many of the school girls protested and even wrote letters to the “English women” to fund their education although they received no response. While she was back in her village, she had what she called “a

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65 Amrouche, My Life Story, 18.
67 Dorothy S. Blair, Commentary in My Life Story, 19.
68 Amrouche, My Life Story, 30.
69 Amrouche, My Life Story, 20.
prophetic dream” that led her to the Saint Eugénie Michelet Hospital where she met her husband and eventually converted to Christianity.

Consequently, “the imposition of French educational norms and the denial to the Algerian of his legitimate cultural identity through controls of language, curriculum and methods of instruction revealed the colonialist policy in its most destructive aspect.” Colonial education was the gallows upon which the colonized “natives” met their spiritual and cultural deaths.

Fadhma, who was forced to learn the French language, French history and French culture at a young age, gradually experienced the destruction of her own culture and her own heritage and therefore her identity as a Kabyle woman. At this point, it is clear that her identity was profoundly shaped by France’s colonial efforts in Algeria. The clash between Western education and Kabyle culture, in which Western education emerged victorious for the time being, caused her maternal, pastoral roots to wither. At this point she had been gradually taught to drain the folkloric tradition from her soul and replace it with knowledge of a country she had no connections to and one that considered her as merely a subject in need of civilizing.

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70 Heggoy, “Education in French Algeria,” 181.
Chapter Three: The Story of Conversion

I. Tensions between the Catholic Church and the Colonial State

In 1867 Charles Lavigerie was appointed the new archbishop of Algiers and founded the Order of the White Fathers and White Sisters. After 1871, the year the Kabyle rebellion against the French colonizers was subdued, the “White Fathers and Sisters set up stations in Kabylia which offered both schooling and medical aid,” while attempting to convert them in the process. As noted before, the Kabyle myth depicted the Kabyles as prime subjects for conversion to Christianity. In particular, the main focus was on orphans, adopted by the Catholic Church following terrible famines and plagues. The orphans’ “trajectories give some complex answers, showing... the primacy of religion in anti-Arab racism, the relative racial indifference existing in France itself and the rise of republican forms of racism.” From the lens of French missionaries, the main goal was to produce hybridity in order to facilitate the assimilation process and further advance the missionary programs of the Church. Converted Algerians could help advance conversion and assimilation programs in their own country or villages with more legitimacy than European missionaries themselves.

Consequently, the Catholic Church was in constant tension with colonial administrators. In Algeria, “the colonial government explicitly prohibited religious proselytism... and repeatedly warned religious officials, missionaries and religious congregations that they must direct their attention to settlers in order not to inflame further the opposition of a predominantly Islamic

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 243
population.” In fact, various Islamic revivalist movements sprang up across the colonies in the Middle East and North Africa in response to European colonialism. Many local families and relatives would pick up their children from schools and denounce their colonial efforts. This also resulted in many litigations and lawsuits.

However, the Archbishop Lavigerie, in founding the Order of the White Fathers and Sisters, made converting Algerians his primary quest in Algeria against the wishes of the colonial administrators. Like many of his contemporaries, he focused on Kabyles, who were seen as easier targets for conversion to Catholicism compared to Arabs and he used the Kabyle Vulgate idea to justify it. He was determined to save the Kabyles from Arab Muslims and revive the legacy of Saint Augustine of Hippo, who was born in Algeria and “whose theological importance and wide range of texts were central to the scholarly revival of Catholic theology in the nineteenth century,” and were particularly influential to the colonial civilizing objective. To launch his project, Lavigerie “focused primarily on mission education and orphanages, because working with children allowed [him] to begin with a tabula rasa, without the ‘deleterious’ influence of Islam or local customs.” The fear, from the perspective of people like Lavigerie, was for those who wished to return to their traditional lifestyles. They feared that the orphans would relapse into Islam again and forget their moral lessons.

Although Fadhma was not an orphan, she was one metaphorically in the sense that she had always been isolated in her infancy because of the circumstances of her birth and the fact that her mother, a hard-working agrarian woman, was unable to always care for her. However,

78 Ibid.
79 Darcie Fontaine, Decolonizing Christianity, 16.
Fadhma’s experience in the Ouadhias mission was bleak. When her mother found her, Fadhma was “covered with filth, dressed in a sack-cloth,” and had been flogged repeatedly until she bled. Fadhma’s mother angrily took her away from the Order of the White Sisters mission and instead enrolled her in the Taddert-ou-Fella Orphanage, where, as examined previously, she received a secular French education.

II. Diverse Experiences with Christianity

Although Lavigerie’s Order of the White Sisters introduced Fadhma to Christianity, she did not officially convert until she started working at a hospital also run by the Order of the White Fathers. The school at Taddert-ou-Fella had taught her some hymns and songs influenced by Christianity, such as *Ave María*, but for the most part her education had been secular. However, it wasn’t until she was employed at the Michelet hospital as a caretaker when she began to observe what it meant to be a Christian subject in French Algeria. Fadhma recalls her first experience: “when I was asked what my name was, and replied, ‘Marguerite,’ I was told that I had no right to a Christian name as I hadn’t been baptized and so I became ‘Fadhma from Tagmount.’ That already put a damper on my spirits.” She was also forced to wait outside during mass although, being the audiophile that she was, she enjoyed listening to the hymns that were sung. In fact, it was the singing that piqued her interest in Christianity, and not the religious doctrine. In her autobiography Fadhma recorded her personal thoughts on religion during her time at the Michelet Hospital:

> I still have a confused and painful impression of that period of my life. Everyone kept talking about God, everything had to be done for the love of God, but you felt you were being spied upon, everything you said was judged and reported to the Mother Superior... when I mentioned that there was some good to be found in all religions, it was considered blasphemous. When the Fathers declared that only those who had been baptized would

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82 Ibid., 45.
Maestas, 34

go to heaven, I didn’t believe them. I thought of my mother, of all that she had suffered, the three months a year she spent fasting (for besides Ramadan, she imposed supplementary fasts on herself), of the heavy loads of water she took it upon herself to carry to the mosque in all weathers and I thought, ‘Is it possible that my mother will not go to heaven?\textsuperscript{84}

In this passage it is clear that Fadhma, although drawn by certain Christian practices, was not a fully devout Christian. The ideology did not appeal to her, although she believed in God, but in many ways, as noted in the previous passage, her faith emerged out of her own mother’s piety. In her own words Fadhma explicitly states, “I liked the Holy Week services because of the liturgical chants and the organ music. As for the Catholic religion, I don’t think I was ever truly convinced. But I believe sincerely in God.”\textsuperscript{85}

At this point in her life, Fadhma realized that having been raised by Christians, having received a colonial education, and having to deal with the circumstances of her birth set her apart from the other girls in her mother’s village. As a woman of marital age (as per Kabyle custom) Fadhma faced uncertainty about her future because of the stigma that surrounded her in the village. It was around this time, and with the aforementioned thoughts in mind, that her curiosity of Christianity peaked. Fadhma recounts that “there were a number of conversions at that time that mature men and women were becoming Christians and the people who worked at the hospital, including the janitor, wanted to abandon Islam.”\textsuperscript{86}

This was not uncommon, as many of the orphans adopted by the Order of the White Fathers and Sisters, whether or not they had converted, would lead difficult lives later because it was difficult to find a spouse back in their Muslim villages.\textsuperscript{87} Their only hope was to marry other converts or other orphans dealing with similar issues. Missionary groups, such as the Order of

\textsuperscript{84} Amrouche, \textit{My Life Story}, 48.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{87} Taithe, “Algerian Orphans and Colonial Christianity in Algeria,” 253.
the White Fathers, were conscious of this matter and arranged for their marriages with other Christian converts. It was not until Fadhma married Belkacem Amrouche, with the help of the Father, that she was baptized and officially became a Christian.

Conversion in the colonial period was often advertised to subjects as a way of achieving “Frenchness” and eventually French citizenship, although this was not entirely true. “Kabyles” and “Arabs” remained as political identities from the perspective of the French. The complexity caused by conversion in Algeria would affect Fadhma at the dawn of the Algerian Revolution when she and her family would be labeled as Roumis, a derogatory word used to describe those who supported the French and also used for those who converted to Christianity. In other words, “the history of the Christian colonization in Algeria is thus one of failed master plans and complex life histories,” and individuals such as Fadhma were the ones directly affected by it. Due to the advent of Arabist and Islamist movements in Algeria, Christian converts were left with one option: relocation. Thus, “many converts simply vanished and, beyond a few letters over the years, their lives seem to have followed not one but many paths,” which is yet another reason as to why Fadhma’s autobiography is priceless for the reconstruction of the experiences of those who fell in the gray areas of Algerian identity. As such, Fadhma’s story provides a voice to the converts and outcasts who relocated before, during and after the Algerian Revolution and virtually disappeared from the historical record.

III. Realities of Colonialism, Gender Inequality, Religious Tensions

Fadhma’s experience at the Michelet hospital was varied because, although that was where she fulfilled her destiny, in her own words, that was also where she experienced the realities of colonialism. The hospital was where she became aware of many things that had not

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89 Ibid., 257.
crossed her mind before, including ideas about colonialism, gender inequality and the religious tensions emerging in Algeria at the time. Consequently, this was also where Fadhma develops a tint of the rebellious nature that she may have adopted from her mother, respecting her maternal lineage.

Colonialism requires a form of social hierarchy in which the colonizer reigns over the “native colonized.” Often times there are rules that prevent any form of social mobilization or progress up the hierarchy and historically these rules were based on race, ethnicity or even religion. As such, missionaries were considered physical representations of colonialism in many ways. For instance in the Caribbean, like in Algeria, Christian missions were established to balance emerging Indo-Trinidadian religions, such as Hinduism and Islam, resulting in the submergence of the natives into Christianity and therefore into Western society. “These missionary endeavors, like the colonial enterprise to which it was so closely linked, was definitely a male project (even patriarchal), but it provided real opportunities for some women, albeit in subordinate roles,” and Fadhma’s experience in the Michelet hospital clearly represents this. The benefit she gained from being employed was also in a constant struggle against the realities of colonialism and the realization that, as long as the French ruled Algeria, she would be considered equal to European missionaries. For this reason, Fadhma’s experience at the hospital is important.

Furthermore, the connection between medicine and history in general, particularly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reveal that medicine shifted from the familial domain to the more public sphere and therefore changed the way that society viewed health and medicine. The increasing construction of hospitals and specialized medical fields, both in Europe

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and in the empires abroad, is evidence that health was a central focus at that time. As a result, colonial medicine was an increasingly popular field and it incorporated new ideas of race and ethnicity, ideas that categorized people and labeled their identities using scientific methods.

These concepts permeated the medical field and led to the emergence of academic spheres such as physical anthropology, where race became a way of categorizing people based on characteristics that revealed levels of superiority or inferiority. These concepts were generally applied in the colonies where the colonial subjects were stereotyped, contrasting with the positive image of French society, culture and civilization. Colonial medicine arose out of these racist ideologies. For the French, it served two purposes: “as an affirmation of the success of colonial rule or presence, and also as a tool of continued colonialism.” Fadhma’s descriptions of her experience in the Michelet Hospital hints at the relationship between health and colonialism and how colonial subjects were affected by it.

For instance, at one point in her autobiography Fadhma briefly recounts that “the hardest thing about the hospital was the way the sick and the healthy had to live cheek by jowl. The nuns didn’t hesitate to send [the workers] to nurse a tuberculous woman, without any regard for the danger of infection to which [they] were exposed.” The colonial hierarchy is clearly demonstrated in the aforementioned quote. Consequently, Fadhma questioned the missionaries’ way of running the hospital. Although eventually she converted, Fadhma still questioned why “everything was cheerless, why everything had to be done for God and offered to God,” why the workers were prohibited from any secular form of entertainment, and why the nuns

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93 Amrouche, My Life Story, 47.
94 Ibid., 52.
confiscated the pile of educational magazines that Fadhma read. She questioned these things and often defied the nuns but her experience still left her “with a taste of ashes.”

During this time, Fadhma also reflected on gender issues surrounding the missionaries. She briefly recounted an incident in the following passage:

> What surprised me the most about the world I now found myself in, was the enormous prestige enjoyed by representatives of the male sex, even the most unpossessing. One morning as we were coming back from mass, the nun in charge of us said, ‘You mustn’t go through the gallery any more. You must leave the chapel by the door at the back.’ I looked up surprised and asked, ‘Why, Sister?’ ‘Because there are men there,” she replied.

It was around this time that the rebellious nature of her mother becomes present in Fadhma’s character and begins to flourish. At this point also Fadhma’s mother had gotten older and weaker and Fadhma became more aware of this. She was desperate to help her mother and therefore she began to seek new employment opportunities, asking a nun to find her work in France or as a teacher. Yet when one of the Fathers offered her a job as the Deputy Administrator's servant, Fadhma replied, “I’ll never be anyone’s servant... especially in the Kabyle region,” again openly expressing the rebellious nature she had inherited from her mother. Therefore, in order to pacify her anxiety, the missionaries tried to offer her suitors to marry. She refused all but one. Belkacem Amrouche became her husband, having never met him before, on August 15, 1899, when Fadhma was sixteen and he was eighteen.

Furthermore, Fadhma continued to work at the hospital while she was married as neither she nor her husband had many savings or possessions. She paid for the groceries out of her own earnings. In her autobiography, Fadhma admits to never having learned to cook, a very rare case

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95 Amrouche, My Life Story, 52.
96 Ibid., 50.
97 Ibid., 54.
98 Ibid.
for a Kabyle woman, but she mastered it quickly by having watched her mother cook when she
was younger. Evidently, she was comfortable transcending the borders that confined the
traditional gender roles of that time, a trait that she again clearly inherited from her tough, defiant
mother. Her only daughter, Marie-Louise Taos, would also embody this strong female persona
albeit in a different way, becoming one of the first Algerian female published authors and
leading Berberist movements in France through her song and poetry. Given that she was
primarily raised in France, she had a different perspective on Algeria, one that emphasized the
folkloric tradition of Berber Algerian communities. This is evident by studying her songs, which
are in her maternal Berber language but within Western classical rhythms. Still, the strong
maternal ties are evident and, from a historical perspective, seeing a unique characteristic appear
among multiple generations provides a new way of looking at history as it changes over time.
Family history is revealed through the inherited personality traits of one individual and her
lineage.

As such, women’s history is very much based on experiential material and therefore
personal forms of self-representation are important for revealing the narrative. Marie Taos’s
project to record her mother’s songs and poems and preserve them is important for this exact
reason. Likewise, Fadhma’s project to preserve her own mother’s traditions by recording them in
her autobiography is equally valuable. In societies where oral tradition is the primary form of
self-expression and can therefore also be considered a family heirloom, preservation becomes
key because it is the principal method of familiarizing one with the personal lives, including the
thoughts and emotions, of ancestors and thereby brings them to life.

Regarding women’s history, their “testimonies are often focused on personal and familial
relationships, which help a historian put the pieces together to reconstruct what this more
“private sphere” would have looked like, although usually in these testimonies, there is no ‘sharp rift’ between women’s public and private lives.” Consequently, through these testimonies historians can look into experiences that men of that time may not have had access to and certainly did not experience personally. In other words, information that is often concealed or completely omitted from classical historical documents can thus be found in autobiographies, diaries, letters and other forms of literature. Through them we learn about affairs such as childbirth, child-rearing, diseases, domestic life, arranged or early marriages and motherhood.

Through these testimonies, historians can also sort out which Western values seeped into the traditional lifestyles which is helpful for parceling out the extent of the colonial influence on the colonized. In the context of Fadhma’s experience, her conversion to Christianity, and the religious tensions that emerged because of it, played a substantial role in the construction of her identity. In order to marry, Fadhma had to become Christian, so she was baptized on the same day of her wedding. Fadhma recounts her wedding: “The marriage was performed by Father Ben Mira, one of the two Arabs amongs the White Fathers, who had been converted by Cardinal Lavigerie,” the same Lavigerie who founded the Order of the White Fathers. Belkacem, her husband, was a very devout Christian. He had been entrusted to the White Fathers at the age of five where he was indoctrinated, baptized, and eventually became a dedicated religious pupil. This contrasts with Fadhma’s more skeptical attitude towards Christianity.

Fadhma’s married life was difficult particularly because Kabyle customs required her to live in her husband’s family’s home in a village called Ighil-Ali in Little Kabylia. Fadhma recounts an episode with her new relatives:

The first unpleasant scene I was involved in was caused by our religion: my husband and I had to go to mass on Sunday mornings. According to the customs of Little Kabylia, young women were not allowed to leave their homes and be seen by men. As I was not

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aware of this, I had prepared clean clothes to go to mass. My mother-in-law saw them laid out over the back of a chair. She rushed out of the room and went to fetch Taïdhelt, whose word was law for the whole house-hold. ‘It’s not proper for a young woman from the Amrouche family to go out in broad daylight and be seen by people in the village... we’d be the laughing stock of everyone and our family is very powerful and of high-standing. You’ll have to get up before the men are at their early-morning prayers and not return till it’s dark, so that nobody in the village will be able to say you’ve been seen going to the Roumis.¹⁰⁰

Fadhma’s new family was Muslim and she was Christian, which caused a lot of tension in her marriage but also within the village. Fadhma noted that she was often received with ‘hostile glances’ by her own husband’s family because she “was the renegade who had denied her religion and cast a spell on their favorite son [Belkacem].”¹⁰¹

Her husband’s family was convinced that she had converted him to Christianity and persuaded him to deny Islam even though it was Belkacem’s grand-father and patriarch of the family, Hacène-ou-Amrouche, who had sent his grandson to the missionary schools. Hacène did this for a very significant social reason. Quite simply, he knew that Belkacem would obtain better opportunities if he received a French education. Being the son of a widow, Hacène was forced to enroll in the French army in order to survive. In 1854, he fought in the Crimean War and survived the bloody siege of Sebastopol.¹⁰² This allowed him to learn French, which he introduced to the family and, upon his return to Algeria, was rewarded with a high-paying job.¹⁰³ Thus Hacène understood, and played, the systems that would allow his family to mobilize socially in spite of his personal thoughts on colonial education. In spite of this, and ironically, his Muslim wives (this was a polygamous family), daughters and daughters-in-law made it difficult

¹⁰⁰ Amrouche, My Life Story, 75.
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Moreau and Schaar, Subversives and Mavericks in the Muslim Mediterranean, 178.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
for Fadhma to integrate comfortably into the family because of her religion and proximity to the French.

Fadhma had to manage issues like these because of her hybridity. She was always seen as the traitor by Muslims but she would never be accepted as a true Christian (in French colonial terms) because of her “native” background. Evidently, Fadhma’s varying experiences with religion and religious tensions made her life much more complex than those who knew exactly where to place their allegiances. These issues would become exacerbated during the Algerian revolution, in which loyalty was based primarily on categories of political identity, including religion, language, race and ethnicity. As such, “even though neither mass conversions nor a politics of assimilation occurred [officially], these exceptional destinies [of Christian converts] present some fascinating insights into the multicultural society that France [and Algeria] has since become.”104

The political identities that emerged during the Algerian revolution would complicate the lives of many Algerians who converted to Christianity, including Fadhma and her family. To the Arab Algerians, they were traitors to their heritage and their nation, once nationalism became part of the political discourse. However, to the French, they were still considered natives and colonized subjects. Thus, they would belong to neither group, merely floating in between two worlds, struggling to find their identity and hoping to find a place to call home.

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Chapter Five: War, Displacement and Poetry

Conflict regarding political identities flared during the World War I era and matured during World War II. Nationalism, which became a growing concept in the 19th century, escalated in many different parts of the world in the 20th century and Algeria was not an exception. Large-scale emigration of North African and Middle Eastern male labor force in the years leading up to World War I and especially during the Interwar period further exacerbated debates about political identity and nationalism. In addition, at this point many colonies obtained independence from their respective colonizers. Overall, these socio-historical events gave rise to questions about citizenship and belonging, which were further complicated by hegemonic institutional practices such as military conscription.

Many colonial subjects enlisted in the French army in the hopes of affirming their “French-ness.” In contradiction to this, many intellectual Muslim Algerians, having gained access to international networks, began to mobilize and bolstered their movement by embracing Islamization and Arabization movements. They even created their own motto: “Islam is our religion, Algeria is our country, Arabic is our language.”105 This was the beginning of Algeria being regarded as a separate, independent nation for Algerians, but this would cause problems for minorities in Algeria. Berbers and Jews were not given a voice during the nation-building process. In fact, it wasn’t until the Berber movement (Uprising) of 1980 that Berbers in Algeria were allowed more linguistic and political representation in the country.

In 1914, while Fadhma’s family was in Tunis (they had moved sometime between 1908 and 1910 to escape economic decline, war broke out and life for the Amrouche family became unstable. Belkacem had to enroll in the army for a few days, but later returned to his job with the

railways. They had to wait in long lines to receive their designated rations of essentials including bread and oil. In addition, that same year Fadhma became very ill and miscarried. Lastly, her eldest son Paul, who was eighteen at the time, enlisted in the North African Light Cavalry, and had to travel to the Moroccan-Algerian border to complete his service.\textsuperscript{106} He would be the first son to leave the home and move to France. Almost every one of Fadhma’s sons completed military service both in North Africa and in Europe. Eventually the Amrouche family, including Fadhma, would move to France as well. In spite of their improving economic situation, she termed this period away from Algeria her “exile.”

While Fadhma was in exile, she only got to see her mother once: when Fadhma was presented with the opportunity to return to her village one last time. The village, according to Fadhma, was practically desolate as the men, including her own brother, had moved to France or left because of war. Additionally, her mother was suffering from great emotional pain as “she had been cut off from her family for ever [sic.]”\textsuperscript{107} because of Fadhma’s illegitimate birth. For this reason, Fadhma often blamed God for “pardoning the wrong [her] father had done.”\textsuperscript{108} Sadly, this reunion was the last time she ever saw her mother because she later passed away. Not surprisingly, it was during this time that Fadhma had begun to read many books and write many poems. It was also during this time that she had begun to write her autobiography at the request of her son, Jean “El Mouhoub” Amrouche. In her own words: “It was from that day that I started to recall all the poems and songs of exile of my native country.”\textsuperscript{109} The following poem describes her emotions during this period of exile:

\textsuperscript{106} Amrouche, \textit{My Life Story}, 134. 
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 119. 
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{109} Amrouche, \textit{My Life Story}, 134.
The eagle wounded between the wings
All her children have flown away
And she does not stop crying
Pity, O master of the winds
Come to rescue those who suffer
I am like the mountain eagle
On the highest rocky peak
She passes the night watching the sky
Hoping to discover among the stars
The faces of those who have flown away
I pray to God and the friends of God
That they appear in a dream
The children that have left
So that she could see them in another life
And then, maybe she will know peace.

In the poem she describes herself as a wounded, exhausted eagle that has lost her children. When studying communities in which oral tradition is a primary form of expression, it is important to recognize that poetry and song can reveal aspects of the historical narrative that conventional historical sources cannot. Indeed, this is especially the case when studying women.

Youssef Nacib, in *Elements sur la tradition orale*, maintains that in the Aures, another Berber region of Algeria, “oral poetry embraces all sectors of life, it includes the structure of the society which produces it… it expresses the feelings of an individual, but it also encompasses the feelings of the group.”¹¹⁰ In addition, the trauma of the Algerian Revolution resulted in an increase in the production of poems among Berbers as well as Arabs because of the heavy

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emotional impact it had on these communities.\textsuperscript{111} Grief, pain and death are some topics commonly found in Algerian poetry at this time.

Generally, traditional Berber poetry employs the usage of concepts of spirituality, hard-work, God, and nature. In fact, the imagery of nature and all its beauties is very common in Berber artwork because of the importance of the concept of the land and its fruits, considered divine gifts from God himself. Additionally, Berber poems describe aspects of daily life such as, but not limited to, “weaving, or grinding corn, or [working] in their home.”\textsuperscript{112} However, there are occasions in which it is proper to orate poetry about exile, death, and sorrow in Berber tradition.

As depicted in the poem, Fadhma’s greatest pain was losing her children, to disease and to France. Fadhma had already miscarried twice, lost eight out of ten children, battled brutal diseases and survived numerous epidemics. At one point, when Fadhma got jaundice and had to go to the hospital, the Welfare system refused to look after her children since they were not officially French citizens. She had to take them to a mission instead where they were restrained with rope to the point that they had infected sores around their wrists, which resulted in the death of one of them. This was particularly difficult for Fadhma since she never forgave herself.

Later, her eldest son Paul died in June 1940 during the Exodus from Paris, the mass departure of Parisian residents that occurred after the German occupation. Over two million people left Paris by any means possible to escape death or capture.\textsuperscript{113} It is unclear exactly how Paul died but what is known is that he had committed suicide. He was supposedly planning to return to Algeria to bring back his brother Louis’s body, who had died of tuberculosis, but never

\textsuperscript{112} Hamouda, “Rural Women in the Aures,” 46.
got to it. About a month later, Fadhma’s other son, Noel, who was also in the French army, died in a hospital.

For a while, the Amrouche family lived in peace. However, in 1954, the Algerian War broke out. The local White Fathers advised Christian families to evacuate, “as they ran the risk of being massacred by the Muslims.” Fadhma mentions hearing about typical stories from the Algerian War: harassment by the French army inflicted on local Algerian populations, sabotage at night, starvation and illnesses. In fact, her husband Belkacem was rounded up by the army while he was buying bread and forced to stand outside in the hot sun all day while they investigated everybody. On the other hand, to the Kabyles they were considered Roumis. Fadhma recalls “fearing the army as much as the Kabyles.”

Her sorrow led her to sing songs to her family about exile and loss, songs that conveyed her life story, her emotions, her struggle, to her children. As mentioned before, this was common in Kabyle custom, as it is in many cultures that rely on oral tradition to record history. Folklore is created in this way and is then passed down multiple generations. Thus, Fadhma’s autobiography is a medium of iconography, self-representation and storytelling (none of which are unusual in non-Western cultures) that would normally have been transmitted orally but, given that Fadhma had received a Western education, was instead transmitted textually in the form of *Histoire de ma Vie*.

For the listener/reader, storytelling helps transport the listener to another historical time while maintaining a certain level of emotional connection important to creating strong kinship ties. In fact, storytelling can be found in almost every culture, even those that preserved a written

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116 Ibid., 167.
record, and is an important feature of familial history. What is passed down from one generation to another, whether it is an object (i.e., a photograph of your grandmother as a child) or a tale (i.e., the day your grandmother gave birth to your mother), is just as much a part of history and deserves the utmost undivided attention. This is because “oral tradition distills the essences of human experiences, shaping them into rememberable readily retrievable images of broad applicability with an extraordinary potential for eliciting emotional responses,”\(^{117}\) and this is the foundation of humanity. By taking the individual stories and placing them within the larger context, the historical narrative is revealed to us in the way that Fadhma wished to convey it.

In fact, Fadhma’s autobiography records some very human emotions that are relatable to many people, especially those living on the margins: the loss of her children, the hardships that come with physical (and cultural) dislocation, the isolation of being a social outcast, and the pain she caused for her own mother. These are feelings that would have otherwise gone unrecorded but are still important for understanding how the historical context in which she found herself affected her life and those around her. In time, these sentiments would have been buried and lost, as historical moments often are, undermining the narrative of those like Fadhma who found themselves between two worlds. Fadhma’s autobiography is a textual window into not just her life but also those of her family and those around her. Autobiographical writing can help the author reconnect with lost memories of culture and heritage that had been eradicated or forgotten.

Chapter Six: The Story of Exile

Fadhma’s exile, which lasted for more than twenty-two years, officially began after a family tragedy. Belkacem Amrouche’s grandfather had passed away and the rest of the family was divided. Fadhma, afraid that her family would be left homeless because of the designated inferiority status they held for being Christians in a Muslim family, convinced Belkacem to look into their options. By chance Belkacem found a job, but it required him to move to Tunisia.

In Tunisia, they settled in a Muslim quarter, which was difficult for Fadhma as she neither spoke Arabic nor was she accustomed to covering her head whenever she went out in public. She was told by other Muslim women that she was “an unbeliever… who’d abandoned her religion and went out with her face uncovered.” This is the first time she describes her experience outside of Algeria as an “exile.” Six months later, they were forced to move again, this time to an Italian quarter. The Italian residents, mostly wives of bricklayers and workingmen, were described as very kind by Fadhma, although she was referred to as ‘the Kabyle woman.’ Her husband had acquired a job working for a railway company, in spite of having only barely passed a medical examination because of an eye he had “lost” to smallpox. This job provided their family with many benefits such as railroad travel passes, free medical assistance, and better prices for rationed items. In spite of these economic services, Fadhma still struggled due to her religion, her class status, and her gender.

She had been refused access to the French Welfare system because her family did not have French citizenship, leading to the death of one of her children, as explained in the previous chapter. Eventually, she was allowed to register, but “at Christmas, the children were given shoes

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118 Amrouche, My Life Story, 139.
119 Ibid., 109.
with cardboard soles that they never wore" and Fadhma never asked for anything from the Welfare again. To her, it was an insult. In addition, she often had to force her children to change schools because of high costs that were constantly increasing.

However, what is important is that even in exile Fadhma continued to celebrate her Kabyle heritage. She dressed in Kabyle clothes, cooked Kabyle food and commemorated Kabyle holidays. At one point Fadhma writes that she read a book by Myriam Harry called *Tunis la Blanche* (White Tunis) which described a Jewish family where the grandmother wore traditional Jewish costume, the mother wore Italian outfits and the daughter dressed in Parisian fashion. She was shocked at how similar this was to her own family: her mother-in-law in “Arab-style” clothing, herself in an Italian smock and her daughter Taos in “Paris fashions.” However, many Arab children picked on Fadhma’s children for being Catholics who wore traditional North African clothes. They were often called *Roumis*, the derogatory word associated with Europeans or also any converted Algerian. The word *Roumis* was also often used during the Algerian Revolution as a form of labeling those who supported the French against the Arabs.

The reality of the situation in revolutionary Algeria was that “only by migration to France could converts disappear among the mass of the faithful, among practicing Catholics,” and Fadhma and her family experienced this very reality. Relocation, displacement, the experience that Fadhma would call her “exile,” was the only way they could escape the divided and increasingly violent society that they found themselves in. And indeed, Fadhma’s autobiography was the medium she used to reconnect with her heritage during her period of exile. Tzvi Howard Adelman explains autobiographical writing through what she calls a “conversion experience:"

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121 Ibid., 139.
The “conversion experience” involves major changes, radical events, and emotional traumas of some sort. Not always in the realm of religion, but sometimes. Sometimes it includes moving to a new country or getting married, acquiring knowledge, losing something. Looking for clues as to what prompted the narrator to write their autobiography and identifying the conversion point is important because one can see the impact. This is a very positivistic way of researching historical information about the autobiography.\textsuperscript{123}

One can say that Fadhma had numerous conversion experiences: religious conversion, arranged marriage, losing her children. However, I argue that Fadhma’s primary conversion experience was her exile, her family’s displacement out of Algeria. As mentioned before, this was the moment when Fadhma began singing songs, writing poetry, and in turn solidifying her Kabyle identity, which was continuously challenged because of her extensive contact with the French colonialists. This is also when she began writing her autobiography at the request of her two surviving children.

According to Abelman, “the autobiographical moment consists not in reporting the functioning of the self within the confines of the community, but, rather, in the realization of the self through experiencing some kind of separation from religion, community or family.”\textsuperscript{124}

Although Fadhma experienced separation from all three throughout her life, the ultimate separation was when she had to leave her home, the mountains of Kabylia. In exile, her identity as the Kabyle woman was therefore in peril, even more so than when she was receiving a French colonial education, and she compensated by embracing her culture even stronger than before through poetry and storytelling. The autobiography is the physical, written representation of this period in Fadhma’s life when “the self becomes conscious of the self by leaving it.”\textsuperscript{125}


\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 120.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 117.
Similar to Fadhma’s dislocation experience, although on a different plane, was that of the pied-noirs (former settlers), who were forced to relocate and a fraction of them moved to Malta after the Algerian Revolution. This group of former settlers had been repatriated to France but were rejected because their existence opened up wounds of an embarrassing and violent past. However, the Arab Algerians associated them with the colonial legacy of France and the brutal French-Algerian War and therefore they could not stay in Algeria either. As such, during their exile they yearned for French Algeria because to them it was an imaginary landscape, a mere memory. In their own autobiographies, they discuss “being physically in France, but mentally in Algeria.”

Another group with a similar narrative are North African Jews, who also had been displaced multiple times throughout history and whose autobiographies have been pretty thoroughly studied by historians. It is important to understand that each individual describes their migration experiences differently, depending on the individual. Some view it as liberating, others see it as temporary and still others forever remain nostalgic, like Fadhma. However, what connects Fadhma, the Berber community, with these two other displaced groups, is that they were all silenced in the nation-building process. Muslim Berbers as well as North African Jews, both groups that had been in Algeria for centuries and had also struggled and resisted colonialism, were regarded by the rising Arab-Islamic Algerian government as foreigners. This was especially the case for Christian Berbers and therefore they were often equated with the settlers whom they had resisted and fought before, during, and after the Algerian Revolution. As such, the process of nation-building in Algeria at this time had insufficient room for

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127 Ibid., 340.
multiculturalism and much less cultural hybridity, which has been historically unaccepted and unwelcomed in all nationalist movements.

However, Algeria’s multiculturalism does date back a long way, making it intrinsically a part of Algerian history and society. Its colonial history further added to a cultural brew that already existed and this affected many individuals both in North Africa and in Europe. Algeria’s geographical proximity to France allowed it to develop a unique relationship based on cultural exchange (mostly forced through traumatic colonial institutions) that many other colonies did not have with their colonizers. In other words, “more than a classic problem of colonialism, the conflict between France and North Africa was a specifically Mediterranean one. A key particularity of the Mediterranean region is the interconnectedness of its histories,” and therefore its cultures. 128 In recent years, thousands of North Africans have migrated to France in search of new opportunities and this has caused a lot of political and social tension. Much of the rhetoric expressed by French politicians today echoes that which emerged at the dawn of the Algerian Revolution because it often refers to questions of citizenship, social status and religion. French-born Muslim Algerians are sometimes doubted because of their religion and extremist groups such as ISIS further complicate the matter. Those who converted to Christianity were barely accepted as “French” because of their ethnicity and still encountered obstacles to social acceptance. In the 1980s, Berbers in France and in Algeria protested to include Berber languages at schools.

The history of Algeria is the history of the Mediterranean. Cultures of the Mediterranean share many histories and they often tell similar stories and refer to the same symbols. 129 Yet, as Fadhma’s personal experiences demonstrate, the political identities that emerged out of the

129 Ibid., 274.
colonial period in North Africa affected many people individually and on very profound levels. For many colonial subjects, their culture had been gradually annihilated, their religion was undermined, and free access to their homeland was denied. Colonialism had slowly destroyed the solidity of identities that had been previously formed in the pre-colonial era and instead new hybrid identities were created. Fadhma’s autobiography illustrates the process of cultural hybridity in colonial Algeria and how this resulted in the fact that she could not be affixed to a single group. Her story, her identity, is not one that fits the overgeneralized archetypes of colonialism in modern discourse. As a subaltern, she challenges both the colonial hegemonic structure as well as our own academic structure, arguably a component of hegemony, and does it using her own voice through her autobiography.
Conclusion

These we shall leave to our heirs,
And we shall go with empty hands
From this ephemeral earth,
For naught is eternal save the face of God.

-Fadhma Amrouche

Fadhma’s two surviving children, Jean and Taos Amrouche, spent their lives collecting poetry and writing songs in order to express their Kabyle heritage. Jean Amrouche expressed his and his mother’s identity in very bleak terms: “I am a cultural hybrid. Cultural hybrids are monsters. Very interesting monsters, but monsters without any future. I therefore consider myself condemned by history.”¹³⁰ They were primarily raised in Tunisia as Christians by an Algerian convert, received a French education and later moved to France permanently, evidently making it difficult to categorize their identity as one or another, which contrasted with the modern West’s embrace of the clarity of nationalism.¹³¹ Their mixed heritage is represented by the ambiguity of their religion, their nation (son patrie), their native language and their history, in particular their family history. Some scholars have referred to the Amrouche family as “cultural hyphens” as well, that is, belonging in between or nowhere.¹³² Jean also expresses their struggle as cultural hybrids, of having no future, and of being unwanted by nations and easily forgotten by history. In other words, they are the physical embodiments of Fadhma’s original

¹³² Moreau and Schaar, Subversives and Mavericks in the Muslim Mediterranean, 179.
legacy of hybridity, which can be traced through the three generations addressed in this paper: Fadhma’s mother, Fadhma herself, and Fadhma’s children.

Important to understanding hybridity is acknowledging that poetry, a component of folklore, is a form of expression as well as a form of resistance. Poetry is a way for subaltern groups to re-appropriate their place within the larger global context that had, and always has, subjugated them. In addition, folklore is art and art is a form of cultural expression for marginalized groups; it is a way to make clearer, on their own terms, what has always been deemed muddy, confusing, or abnormal by a dominant culture. In the 1930s and 1940s, celebrating culture and folklore was a way of validating anti-colonial sentiments. For the Amrouche family, collecting and preserving traditional Kabyle poetry was a means of separating themselves from the European society in which they found themselves. Fadhma’s last few words in her autobiography state as such: “my countryfolk are so long-suffering in adversity, so obedient to the will of God, but this can only be fully understood if one can penetrate the language which was such a comfort to me during all my long periods of exile.” She asserts this in regards to the beauty of the Berber language and how perfectly poetic it is. There is even a road in Bretagne, France, dedicated to Fadhma that describes her solely as a “poétesse.” In addition, given that Jean became a teacher of French literature and Taos became a singer, a writer and an ethnomusicology enthusiast, it is not surprising then that they decided together to collect their mother’s poems and songs. The purpose was to translate them into French, type them out and transform them into literature so that they could be distributed primarily, but not exclusively, in Europe.

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133 Amrouche, My Life Story, 172.
Taos Amrouche, the only child to outlive Fadhma, was the first female Algerian novelist, publishing her own semi-autobiographical work, *Jacinthe Noir* (1935) among other masterpieces. She was most famous, however, for her singing and featured in many multicultural concerts and festivals. In fact, she performed at the *Premier Festival mondial des Arts nègres*, a festival of the arts that took place in Dakar, Senegal, and was organized by the poet, intellectual and Pan-Africanist, Leopold Sedar Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal.\(^{134}\) She had received a scholarship to study at a school at the Villa Velasquez in Spain between 1940 and 1942 where she learned to perform some songs in Spanish as well.\(^ {135}\) However, her fame really came with her album *Chants berbères de Kabyle* in which she performed songs that she had collected from her mother. Taos sings the songs in their original language, Berber, but with a Western European twist, making the album another interesting piece of evidence of the Amrouche family’s hybridity.

The existence of personal emotion, inherent bias, individual experiences and generalizations about life and about society can be problematic to the historian studying autobiographies, but these features also bring people from the past alive. Subaltern voices have been silenced in the records of the past making it difficult for historians, who are always dependent on available sources, to reveal the historical narrative from the perspective of subaltern groups themselves. Fadhma’s autobiography then proves to be valuable to historical research. It is her own voice, or at the very least, as close as we can get to her original voice.

Although she is but one unique individual with an exceptional story, she also in many ways represents her community, or rather different communities, through her identity. She is a Berber, a Christian, an Algerian, a woman, a mother, an outcast, and so much more. In an

\(^{134}\) Hélène Bouvard, “Pour Taos Amrouche,” *Présence Africaine, Nouvelle série*, No. 102 (3e Trimestre, 1977) : 177

\(^{135}\) Ibid., 178.
extraordinary convergence of historical events, all these identities collided with one another and we have the process of that collusion in writing, in the form of her autobiography. In other words, it is important to recognize that, “autobiographies, as well as letters and diaries, bring to life a single moment in history, a moment which cannot be recreated in any other way and therefore may be invaluable.”136 Indeed, studying personal documents requires more empathy and humanism than conventional historical sources in order to be fully appreciated, but these sources can also be refreshing to the academy because they challenge it.

As noted by Edward Said: “if at the outset we acknowledge the massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences -- of women, of Westerners, of Blacks, of national states and cultures -- there is no particular intellectual reason for granting each and all of them an ideal and essentially separate status.”137 Said saw the importance of considering identities not as distinct categories, but rather as amalgamations of different cultures, religions, languages, genders and experiences. This is particularly relevant today for understanding French-Algerian relationships regarding immigration and refugee status. Hybrid identities, constructed and solidified during the colonial and postcolonial era, is relevant to some extent for understanding the state of affairs in the Mediterranean today. Fadhma’s autobiography sheds light onto the experiences of people who are or have been displaced, physically, maybe culturally, and of people with hybrid identities. Fadhma was neither Christian nor Muslim, French nor Algerian. And yet she was. But most importantly, to herself she was and always would be the Kabyle woman. And through the examination of her autobiography the complex histories, and the identities, of those who belong in between and nowhere can be revealed. She wrote:

I always remained the “Kabyle woman;” never, in spite of the forty years I have spent in Tunisia, in spite of my basically French education, never have I been able to become a close friend of any French people, nor of Arabs. I remained forever the eternal exile, the women who has never felt at home anywhere.138

Fadhma Amrouche passed away in 1967, a few years after she added an epilogue to her autobiography to memorialize her son’s death. She is currently buried in Bretagne, France. Once a year, Kabyles and French Europeans alike travel hundreds of miles on a pilgrimage to her tomb to commemorate her courage and her remarkable life in general. Additionally, she is seen as a symbol of resistance and of hope for many Kabyle exiles and Algerian migrants in Europe. During this pilgrimage, it is not uncommon to see children carrying two flags on their backs: The French “tricolore” and Kabyle pennants or “fanions.”

Be not of unquiet spirit
For God is at hand.

- Fadhma Amrouche

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Fadhma Ait Mansour Amrouche, Paris, 1965 (photo Nicolas Treatt)


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