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Recycling *Baraka*: Knowledge, Politics, and Religion in Contemporary Algeria

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Since the overwhelming electoral victory of Algeria's main Islamist party, the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), in 1990 and 1991, the annulment of the elections by the Algerian army in 1992, and a decade of apparently random killings that followed throughout the country, religion has been at stake in most contemporary debates on Algeria.[1] Algeria has thereby entered the field of larger debates within the Western world about radical Islam, the rise of religion, the rejection of "Western models," and other expressions of the putative "clash of civilizations." At the same time, relatively little has been said about what "Islam" actually means in the Algerian context, even by more perspicacious authors and analysts who are keen to stress the economic and social causes for the success of political Islam in Algeria (e.g., Burgat 1988; 1995; Charef 1994; Martinez 1998). This is not to say that the variety of religious practices in Algeria has attracted no attention from researchers. Rather, it means that those writers who focus on 'local' religion, such as Andezian (1993; 2001) and Hadibi (1999; 2002), tend to produce local accounts of the veneration of saints and pilgrimages, without referring to broader cultural dynamics and

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[1] For more detailed and often controversial accounts of what has happened in Algeria since the late 1980s, see Charef (1994), Martinez (1998), Quandt (1998), Roberts (2003), and Aggoun and Rivoire (2004). The literature on Algeria, especially in French, is too vast to be contained in any footnote or short bibliography. Many of the recent writings, however, read more like political manifestoes than serious attempts to reconstruct the historical truth, which remains particularly evasive.

political struggles, and without attempting to link their findings in more than superficial ways to the emergence of modern Islamism.[2]

This gap in present analyses is not merely due to carelessness among international observers; it also informs most local discourse and national scholarship, to the point where it seems in itself central to the self-definition of 'Algerian Islam.' It serves as a device to publicly situate any one part of the various Islamic 'traditions' in Algeria and to link these traditions to similar developments and larger political and social conflicts elsewhere, without, however, impeding their practical inter-relatedness and local collaboration. It thus provides a public discourse that links the complex Algerian realities to international conflicts and struggles that give them an internationally recognized moral meaning, without unveiling the local ambiguities of Algerian society to outside observers. This is made possible by the fact that all questions relating to Islam have long been 'close to the bone' in France, where most scholarship on Algeria is still produced.[3] There, many of the 'insurmountable oppositions' in religious matters that tend to be projected upon Algerian realities—between 'religion' and 'secularism,' 'popular' and 'scriptural,' or even 'good' and 'bad' religion[4]—are still seen as fundamental to national identity (Etienne 1989). The same perspective is increasingly found in other parts of Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America.

A focus on the publicly declared "gap" and on the practical articulation between these different "types" of Islam is necessary not only for understanding contemporary Algerian society; it also allows more general insights into how local social and cultural complexities are articulated within an exclusive and inflexible official discourse, and how local populations might use this official discourse in their own interest. Algeria thus provides an ideal case for engaging recent debates about the tension between state-imposed categories and actual social complexities, as analyzed by Scott (1998).[5] It shows that, at least in Algeria, the "reductionism" and "simplification" that Scott defines as fundamental characteristics of the state are neither the state's prerogatives

[2] With perhaps the exception of Chachoua (2001), and two short articles by Hadj Ali (1992) and Babès (1992).

[3] Out of the 6,976 titles held by the United States Library of Congress that respond to the keyword search for 'Algeria,' roughly 4 percent were originally written in English, about 15 percent in Arabic, and the remaining 81 percent in French.

[4] The distinction between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims" runs through French colonial ethnography and policy towards Islam. "Good Muslims" tended to be those who accommodated themselves to colonial rule, and followed non-political, "traditional" (in the French terminology) practices; "bad Muslims" used religion to fight against French domination. This distinction is still alive in the French press, where "good Muslims" "assimilate" to French culture, are open and tolerant (and speak French), whereas "bad Muslims" refuse French "acculturation."

[5] "These state simplifications, the basic givens of modern statecraft, were . . . rather like abridged maps. They did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice of it that interested the official observer" (Scott 1998: 3).

nor necessarily due to its naivety or willful ignorance. Rather, they are part of local, national and international power struggles in which both state representatives and local populations take part, and in which discourses of mutual incompatibility and irredeemable oppositions are coupled with practical flexibility. While the exclusive categories established by the official discourse often find their way into academic analyses of Algeria, local accommodations and flexible practices are frequently ignored both by outside and local observers. They are—to quote an Algerian government official (as he refused to prolong my research visa)—"*pas claires*," and therefore not suitable for foreign consumption.

The present article draws upon archival sources and ethnographic material to examine several instances of the interplay between publicly proclaimed rigidity and practical flexibility in the case of 'Algerian Islam.' In the first half of the article I outline the historical development of the various religious institutions that compose 'Algerian Islam,' ranging from, saints' tombs, Islamic educational institutes, hospices, Sufi centers or *zawâyâ* (sing. *zâwiya*)[6] to Reformist schools. At the same time, I will describe the theories of mutual incompatibility that have developed around these institutions both in colonial and post-colonial times. The article's second half is devoted to analyzing a 2004 conference that succeeded in bringing together under one roof local academics, government officials, and representatives of the various aspects of 'Algerian Islam.' I shall describe the conference at some length since it provides an opportunity to show how the problem of the co-existence of a number of different 'Islams' is approached within an apparently rigid, monolithic 'official' discourse.

Most of what follows is based on fieldwork undertaken in Kabylia, a Berber-speaking area in northeastern Algeria. My choice of this area to study this particular topic might seem odd, since Kabylia is known throughout the ethnographic literature for its 'secularism' rather than its rich religious heritage. Yet, despite French theories of the inherently "secular spirit" of the Kabyles,[7] and though many Kabyles themselves now fully endorse these

[6] The term *zâwiya* literally means 'corner' (of a mosque). Throughout the Maghrib, the *zawâyâ* fulfilled a variety of functions in rural life: generally constructed around the tomb of a local saint, they served as teaching institutes of varying quality where the teachers of the village Qur'ânic schools would be educated, as sites of pilgrimages, institutes of charity, hostels, and meeting places for religious brotherhoods.

[7] During the nineteenth century, Kabylia became an area of predilection for French colonial ethnographers, who developed a large part of the image of the Kabyle as it is still popular today, and often endorsed by contemporary Kabyles themselves (Ageron 1968; Lorcin 1995; see also Lucas and Vatin 1975). The notion that the Kabyles had only ever been superficially Islamized was fundamental to this image, and was variously "proved" by their "materialistic spirit" (Carette 1848), their "Roman" or even "Christian" ancestry (Daumas 1864), or the "local democracy" that reigned in Kabyle villages (Hanoteau and Letourneux 1873), and that, according to the French observers, was incompatible with Islam (or, indeed, religion of any kind). Since then, not least due to French intervention, Kabylia has in fact become the only rural area of Algeria where 'secularism' has had any widespread popular success.

theories, Kabylia was long famous for its many Islamic teaching institutes, Sufi orders, and, later on, Islamic reformist schools.[8] Many popular religious practices such as the veneration of saints, clairvoyance, healing rituals, and trance sessions are still common, or even increasing, among large parts of the population. Because these many religious traditions are forced to co-exist within this relatively small geographical and social space, and because secularism is so important in Kabylia, Kabylia is an ideal place to study the variety of religious practices and the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary Algerian society.

THE *ZAWÂYÂ*

In 1860, the French army officer Henri Aucapitaine travelled across one of the highest passes of the recently conquered Kabyle mountains in order to visit the *zâwiya* of the Ben Aly Chérif family at Chellata.[9] The trip across the snow-covered heights of the Djurdjura mountains along small winding mountain paths was arduous but worth his while. He returned deeply impressed by the "venerated refuge of men of charity and sciences" he had visited, "whose name," as he noted, "was never pronounced in the whole of North Africa without a feeling of veneration," and whose "religious society presented a spectacle in all respects worthy of the considerations of the civilised peoples" (1860: 21–22). According to Aucapitaine, the learned reputation of the *zâwiya* attracted up to three hundred students each summer, and eight hundred to one thousand during the winter months, and extended as far as the Islamic universities in the Regency of Tunis.

Aucapitaine was not the only colonial officer to be interested in the regional *zawâyâ*.[10] During the first decades after the conquest, the *zawâyâ* figured prominently in colonial records, not only as teaching institutes, but also as hospices, safe refuges for fugitives from all parts of the country, and, most importantly, as regional or even trans-regional seats of influence and power. They sometimes went so far as to maintain private armies (Hanoteau and Letourneux 1873), and often derived considerable income from pious offerings, religious taxes, and land-holdings. Thus, the archives mention a small local *zâwiya* in the vicinity of Chellata with a mere ten students, which in 1912 disposed of an annual income of five thousand francs (U.S.$15,000 at

[8] The regional capital of Lesser Kabylia, Béjaïa, experienced its most prosperous time as a center of Islamic learning in the thirteenth century. Sufi orders started to appeal to a large section of the population in the area in the seventeenth century. The first reformist schools in the area were opened in the 1930s; their number peaked in the 1950s.

[9] The French took Algiers in 1830, and their dominion was gradually extended to the fertile areas around Algiers and to the coastal cities. By 1847, the most organized and efficient indigenous resistance, led by the *amîr* 'Abd al-Qâdir, was defeated. The conquest of the Kabyle mountains, famous for their inaccessibility and their poverty, was accomplished by 1857.

[10] For more detailed descriptions of various *zawâyâ*, albeit tinged by colonial prejudice and fervent belief in France's "mission to civilize," see Hanoteau and Letourneux (1873), Trumelet (1881), and Rinn (1884).

present value, according to INSEE 2005). This was drawn mainly from donations made by members of the village or tribe who worked in mines in the country or elsewhere in North Africa, and from land-holding revenues. Colonial records,[11] local oral history, and still continuing conflicts among families and villages all point to endless disputes over how this fixed income should be controlled and by whom. These involved the resident population, local and regional religious families, and also the French administration and its freshly recruited 'indigenous' representatives. They give an early example of the widespread 'confusion' between religious, political, and economic influence in the area, and of the co-existence of an 'official' discourse—based on a separation of powers espoused by government officials and the local population alike[12]—and an infinitively more complex social reality.

Another reason why the *zawâyâ* quickly became the object of strict surveillance by the French administration was that they were active nodes in the networks and links of mutual obligation and common practice established by the numerous Sufi orders in the area. In Algeria, the *zawâyâ* and the Sufi traditions have often been described as mutually incompatible and structurally opposed. At least according to French observers, Sufi orders represented a more "egalitarian" and "popular" form of Islam which sprung up in opposition to the "feudal" structures represented by regional saintly families.[13] Nevertheless, police reports of colonial times agree that almost all of the regional *zawâyâ* were Sufi places of worship in addition to being centers of scriptural learning, libraries, and venerated saints' tombs, whose 'owners' based their religious prestige on their links with both the original saint and local Sufi leaders. Most of the regional saintly families still preserve manuscripts and oral poetry that clearly witness their ancestors' dedication to Sufi thought and practices. By the late nineteenth century, more than a quarter of the male adult population in Kabylia were members of one of the ten regional Sufi orders (Rinn 1891). The French feared these orders for the unity and dedication of their members, for their efficient organization—several administrators noted the brotherhoods' means of communication often seemed superior to those of the French army (Turin 1983)—and for their potential military power.

[11] The French colonial records on the various *zawâyâ* kept in the French colonial archives (*Archives d'outre-mer* (AOM) in Aix-en-Provence) are numerous, since every local administrator was compelled to report on the activities of the *zawâyâ* in his district on a monthly basis.

[12] This can be seen from petitions to the colonial government made by representatives of the local population, preserved in AOM B3 426.

[13] French colonial ethnography tended to identify the sway that regional religious families held over the local population as "feudalism" of the same kind as had been abolished in France during the French Revolution. Sufi orders, supposedly open to everybody without distinction of family origin, were seen as a step away from feudal Islam toward a more egalitarian form of religion, and thus also of society, although they maintained the "chains of superstition" that linked individual adepts to their masters (Masqueray 1983 [1886]. For a more recent appraisal of the "Sufi revolution," see Clancy-Smith 1990).

The French were thus keen to bring the *zawâyâ* under their administrative control. The first and probably most effective measure taken in this direction—albeit perhaps unintentionally—was the conversion of all religious endowments into state property in the second half of the nineteenth century (Ageron 1968; see also Nouschi 1961).[14] This measure deprived the *zawâyâ* of their material base, and forced many to close down, so many that, as Turin (1983) notes, it became difficult for the French administration to find enough literate clerks to run the country. The second means of controlling the larger *zawâyâ* was through the involvement of their heads (*shuyûkh*, sg. *shaykh*) in the French administration, which for a time enhanced their political influence and wealth, but in the longer run was detrimental to their spiritual prestige. Thus, the head of the *zâwiya* in Chellata, described above, accepted the rank of *bach-agha*, the highest open to indigenous administrators. This meant that he could draw on several, theoretically opposed sources of local influence—as a *shaykh*, a Sufi, a local landowner and entrepreneur, and a representative of the colonial administration.[15] By that time, however, the demise of the *zawâyâ* seemed inevitable. In 1947, the French colonial archives note, Chellata had a mere seventy-six students, and most of the larger surrounding *zawâyâ* had had to reduce their numbers of students to no more than forty. More than twice as many students were enrolled in French schools.[16]

It proved to be more difficult to control the smaller *zawâyâ*, which were under the protection of local village communities, and it was virtually impossible to uproot the region-wide networks of Sufi brotherhoods that had continued to exist independently of the *zawâyâ*. As late as 1959, the French army officer Carret remarked upon their wide influence. He pointed out wryly that during the First World War the command of the French army had seen the military hierarchy among Algerian recruits replaced by a religious one based on Sufi allegiances, and that recruits would follow the orders of their Sufi *shaykh* rather than those of their army commander. Similarly, complaints to the police about the "noise and disruption" caused by newly opened Sufi centers in the towns of the valley become more rather than less frequent from the 1930s onwards.[17]

[14] In 1863, the French army decided to put an end to the prevailing "confusion" over property and usufruct rights in tribal lands by applying a unified code to regulate private property and landholdings: the *sénatus-consulte*, which was gradually applied to all of northern Algeria in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *sénatus-consulte* institutionalized private property and provided a legal basis for the confiscation of all lands held in common and of all lands declared as *habûs* or religious endowments, thereby liberating a large proportion of land for incoming European settlers.

[15] *SLNA Dossier Famille Ben Aly Chérif*, AOM 93/4244. The Ben Aly Chérif family had to leave Algeria during the war of independence (1954–1962), leaving both the Algerian nationalists and the French in doubt as to their true allegiance.

[16] AOM GGA 14164. French primary schools had been established in Kabylia as early as the 1880s, but it was only in the 1920s and 1930s that they were widely accepted by the local population.

REFORMISM, NATIONALISM AND THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

These complaints filed against Sufis deserve further attention. They were generally drafted not by disgruntled European settlers, but by the freshly emerging indigenous bourgeoisie. They seem to indicate that Kabyle society had profoundly changed since Aucapitaine's assurance of unanimous veneration of the *zâwiya* tradition, and that the *zawâyâ* had lost not only their land and students, but also much of their prestige among the leading members of society, even while they maintained or gained popular support. At this time the Sufi orders had come under attack both from a growing Islamic reformist current which was striving for a more rational, text-based, and 'orthodox' version of Islam,[18] and from an emerging Francophone intelligentsia with a similar abhorrence of "superstition." Thus to publicly criticize Sufi practices had become a sign of belonging to the 'enlightened middle classes,' be their Islamic or secular.

In both cases, the main issue at stake was that of education. Kabylia is the one area in Algeria where French schooling started very early, and was very successful (Colonna 1975), but parts of it, such as the Soummam Valley, where most of my research was based, had also been exceptionally receptive to the reformist message. Because the main tenet of Islamic reformism was the necessity for moral and social reform based on the original scriptures of Islam, widespread access to these scriptures, and therefore, to education in classical Arabic, became essential to its popular success. In Lesser Kabylia, more than thirty reformist primary schools were opened between the 1920s and the 1950s, and in 1951 they taught several hundred students. Many of these students also attended French primary schools—three-quarters of all reformist schools in Lesser Kabylia were constructed next to French schools, and the reformists were careful not to teach during French school hours.[19]

Attending reformist schools and attending *zawâyâ*, however, were construed to be mutually exclusive, since reformists locally presented themselves as bitterly opposed to "superstitious" religious practices, such as the influence of the local religious families, Sufi practices, and the veneration of saints, which the

[17] AOM 93/4332.

[18] Islamic reformism had developed since the second half of the nineteenth century throughout the Islamic world as a reaction to the perceived state of decline within the Muslim community, and increasingly also as a reaction to Western political and economic supremacy. The main tenet of this movement was that the decline of "Islamic civilization" had to be remedied by profound moral reform of each individual Muslim as well as of the Islamic community. This could only be achieved by reference to the original sacred texts excluding latter day "additions" and specifically local practices.

[19] ADC *Associations*. See also the anonymous administrative report *L'enseignement privé reformiste et l'association des oulémas d'Algérie*, held in the *Archives du centre d'études diocésain* (ACED) in Algiers. On the development and impact of Islamic reformism in Algeria, see Merad (1967), and McDougall (2006).

reformists assimilated to *shirk* (idolatry) (Merad 1967). Although oppositions between 'literate' and 'ritual' Islam seem to have been common in the area since it started to be Islamized in the eighth century (Hodgson 1974; Colonna 1992), this seems to be the moment when the conceptual gap between scriptural and 'folk' Islam as we know it today most forcefully entered local political and moral discourse. This was clearly in response to local conflicts, but also to international developments that emphasized the mutual incompatibility of 'folk' and 'reformed' Islam, such as the increasing popularity of reformism throughout the Muslim world, and growing French interest in 'folk' Islam as a representation of 'authentic' African, harmless, and—in other words—'good' Islam.[20]

Locally, however, the installation of reformist schools was not just an episode in the secular struggle between 'scripturalism' and 'ritualism'; it was intrinsically part of the local socio-political context. The committees that established reformist schools were generally based on already existing political, economic, religious, or family networks, and they often succeeded in co-opting local institutions such as village councils (Salhi 1999). They also tended to double up with local party offices, so that the conflict between religious families (or marabouts)[21] and reformists often dovetailed with struggles between the various nationalist parties that had sprung up in the area.[22] The growing success of the reformist movement meant that the local maraboutic families—unless they were themselves absorbed in the reformist movement—often felt personally attacked by reformist endeavors in their religious 'fief.' During the struggles that ensued, several large maraboutic families succeeded in defending "their" lands against reformist "encroachment," whereas in other areas less influential maraboutic families had to leave their home villages and settle elsewhere.

Similarly, the ideological divide between the two currents seems to have been less clearly defined than suggested by official Algerian historiography and the many mutual public condemnations of "paganism" launched by marabouts and reformers. As both Salhi (1979) and Chachoua (2001) show, the Sufi order Rahmaniyya, which itself had started out with reformist aims two centuries earlier (Clancy-Smith 1990), in many areas prepared the way for the reformists' success, a pattern which was also observed by Colonna (1977) for the Aurès. In the 1930s, many *zawâyâ*, especially in Kabylia,

[20] Research on 'folk' religious practices in North Africa became increasingly popular in the first half of the twentieth century. See, for example, Doutté (1908), Bel (1938), and Dermenghem (1982 [1954]). For a discussion of similar developments in West Africa, see Brenner (2000).

[21] "Marabout" is the French version of the Kabyle *mrabit*, which in turn is derived from the eleventh-century al-Murâbitûn (Almoravids) movement of Islamic reform, of which it is said that the ancestors of present-day Kabyle marabouts were part. Today, the word is commonly used in Kabylia, both in Kabyle and in French, to refer to members of hereditary religious families.

[22] ANA Dossier PPA/UDMA.

'converted' to reformism, without, at least according to oral testimonies and still ongoing religious practices, losing their ability to dispense *baraka* or saintly blessing to the local population.[23] In practice they thus proved flexible and adaptable to the new current, despite their officially and loudly proclaimed enmity to reformism.[24] The same seems to have been true for the reformists themselves: although their schools strove to implement more "rational" teaching methods modeled on French schools, their teaching staff was frequently under-qualified and themselves educated in traditional *zawâyâ*, whose methods in practice they often copied.[25]

The war of independence from France (1954–1962) put an end to this period of relative accommodation. Not only did it physically destroy the *zawâyâ*, which were bombed by the French army as potential hideouts and burned by the nationalist fighters as potential centers of collaboration, but it also, with the triumph of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN, the nationalist party that had won independence) government in 1962, turned Islamic reformist attitudes into 'state religion.' The very few *zawâyâ* that were reconstructed after independence were turned into state-run Islamic teaching institutes of a reformist and anti-maraboutic outlook. The *zawâyâ*'s considerable confiscated landholdings were not returned to their original 'owners,' but transformed into state-run cooperatives, whence they gradually passed into private ownership from the 1980s onwards. The ruins of the *zawâyâ* became silent witnesses to a changed social order, and to a publicly declared revolutionary redefinition of truth and morality.

At the same time, the village imam, formerly recruited from among the local maraboutic families and paid by the local community, was gradually replaced by an imam chosen and paid for by the ministry of religious affairs. The most obvious prerogatives of saintly families were either abolished or taken on by the *mujâhidîn* or nationalist fighters, the new 'founding saints' of the independent Algerian nation. The honorific title of 'Si,' previously reserved for marabouts, was now used to refer to *mujâhidîn*, and intermarriage between maraboutic and ordinary families, which had been exceptional, became more frequent.[26] Many local maraboutic families, however, invested in modern education, and succeeded in converting their cultural capital to new forms of social prestige. Until today, a relatively large percentage of doctors, lawyers,

[23] *Monographie de la commune mixte d'Akbou*, n.d., AOM Sidi Aïch//5.

[24] Outside Algeria, historians have long described the ease with which religious figures could accumulate various sources of religious legitimacy that might at first sight seem to be mutually exclusive (cf. the collection of essays in Keddie 1972, and Cornell 1998). Anthropologists have been less ready to accept this inherent flexibility, not least because local discourse often vehemently denies it.

[25] *L'enseignement privé réformiste et l'Association des oulémas d'Algérie*, ACED.

[26] *Registre des marriages*, *commune mixte d'Akbou* 1891–1963, ACA; and *Sijill al-zuwâj baladiyya shallâta* 1985–2003, ACC.

academics, and government officials are from maraboutic families. Similarly, according to local accounts, many of the local religious practices associated with the *zâwiya* tradition continued, and even surged in popularity after the end of president Boumediène's reign in the late 1970s, with the tacit compliance or sometimes even the covert participation of local political dignitaries.[27]

These new arrangements did not always correspond to local notions of religious legitimacy and spirituality, and they failed to cater fully to the rapidly growing and rapidly moving population's religious aspirations. The 'official' version of Islam, and its representative the imam-civil servant, had come to be seen as coextensive with a state that was increasingly distrusted by its citizens. It could therefore neither survive the onslaught of radical political Islam in the cities from the late 1970s onwards (Burgat 1988),[28] nor defend its position against a growing consciousness of "Berber identity" in Kabylia, which defined itself at the time against state-sponsored "Arabo-Islamism."[29] Despite government attempts to co-opt parts of the emerging Islamist movements in the early 1980s (Roberts 2003), it had lost most of its credibility in religious matters by the end of the decade, if not earlier. Where it apparently had succeeded, however, was in condemning the *zawâyâ* and all related religious traditions to the rubbish heap of history—at least if one believed official rhetoric.

RECYCLING *BARAKA* IN THE 1990S

In March 1991, Algeria was in the international headlines. The FIS, Algeria's main Islamist party, had successfully organized a general strike, demonstrating that it was set to win the upcoming presidential elections, a year after its landslide victory in local elections. According to international commentators, a "second Iran" was threatening to emerge, a mere hour's flight from Marseilles. One piece of news was lost in the general panic: a few days before the strike was proclaimed, the hard-pressed national government organized with great

[27] For an account of these practices in Kabylia and western Algeria, see Hadibi (2002) and Andezian (2001), respectively.

[28] It is common to trace the genealogy of the Algerian 'Islamists' of the 1990s to a radical fringe of the Islamic reformist movement of the 1930s. Disgruntled by the new national government and its publicly declared socialism (especially after the 1965 putsch against the Ben Bella government), they maintained close contacts with the Egyptian Muslim brothers and, after their first association, *Al-Qiyam* (The values) was declared illegal in 1965, secretly continued to develop more radical Islamic theories. 'Islamism' did thus not suddenly appear in the late 1970s, although it was then that it started to appeal to a new generation of potential activists.

[29] I borrow this term from in the proceedings of the *Séminaire de Yakouren* (1981), a central text for the Algerian Berber movement. The Berber movement demanded the official recognition of the various Algerian Berber languages and the "Berber component" of Algerian history and national identity. It began to emerge among Kabyle emigrants in France in the 1960s (Direche-Slimani 1997), became popular throughout Kabylia in the late 1970s, and led to series of strikes and demonstrations in 1980, providing an outlet for growing frustration with the central government. For more details on the Berber movement, see Chaker (1999) and Guenoun (1999).

pomp a conference on the *zâwiya* tradition at the prestigious *Club des Pins* in Algiers. To Algerian observers, the reasons for this sudden interest in the *zâwiya* tradition at this particular moment in history seemed obvious: although the *zawâyâ* represented everything 'official' religion condemned, it also represented everything that, according to decades of state discourse, 'Islamism' was not.

Most Algerians saw this appeal to the *zawâyâ* at such a moment of crisis as a clearly political maneuver, a last desperate attempt to recapture religion, to 'recycle' its 'traditional' institutions in the state's own image, and to affirm its inherent links, or rather its putative co-extensiveness, with the Algerian national government and state. The government was also sending a clear sign both to national and international observers that the Algerian state was not willing to accommodate Islamist values and thought (although it was actually doing so at the time; cf. Roberts 2003), but that it had always aimed to promote 'good'—that is, local, 'African,' and tolerant—Islam.[30] Nevertheless, the government's attitude towards the *zawâyâ* remained unclear, since the conference could be read either as a late acknowledgement of the *zawâyâ*'s lasting spiritual and political influence, and an attempt to co-opt their influence to state strategies of self-preservation, or as a final proof that the *zawâyâ* had lost most of their power. After all, would any hard-pressed government really want to conjure up yet another potentially dangerous religious force at such a sensitive moment if it believed that force might retain any hold over local populations?[31]

Whatever his true motive, president Chadli was not the only person to show publicly an interest in the fate of the *zawâyâ*. In the aftermath of the 1991 conference, several groups of people tried to rebuild "their" *zâwiya*. Most of them claimed a direct relationship with a particular *zâwiya* as descendants of the founding saints or as former students. These projects were not always free from political intentions or from internal tensions, as a member of one of the local saintly families explained to me:

> For several years now, we have been trying to reconstruct the *zâwiya* like it used to be, following old drawings, the memories of former students, and old photos. The money and the initiative mainly come from former students, who today work for the government or have other important positions in Algiers. We thought: as long as we still had

[30] For more details, see Hadj Ali (1992) and Salhi (1999). Although the Algerian government commonly uses conferences at the luxurious *Club de Pins* in Algiers to forge connections with potentially dissident parts of society, this conference was the first of its kind. It was followed by a second, similar one in autumn 2005. In the meantime, *zawâyâ* were used mainly as platforms for electoral campaigns.

[31] The literature on how states or other interest groups recuperate or even invent lifeless 'traditions' and use them to their own ends is now vast. See, for example, Chapman (1978), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), and McDonald (1989). What is interesting in this case is less the manipulation of 'tradition' by the state than the clearly ambiguous position the state itself, or at least many of its representatives, occupies in practice vis-à-vis these 'traditions,' despite clear-cut rhetoric of condemnation or praise.

our *zawâyâ*, there weren't any Islamists; as soon as our *zawâyâ* were destroyed, we started to have problems—that means that we have to rebuild at least one of them, and that's what we are trying to do. But this turned out to be very difficult, we got into a lot of trouble, there is a lot at stake in the *zâwiya* and its landholdings, we had problems within the family.

As suggested by this statement, the conflicts over regional influence and over the *zâwiya*'s material and symbolic assets are still as acute as they were in the past, and in this case they ultimately caused the whole project to be abandoned.

This statement also shows how the distinction between 'traditional' and 'Islamist' Islam as propagated by official discourse is used locally. The instigators of the project were clearly aware that it could all too easily—and perhaps justly so—be seen as an attempt by the saintly family to reclaim their formerly vast land-holdings. It could also be read as a late 'colonialist' undertaking, due to the unclear relationship between the *zâwiya* in question and the French colonial government. To try to rebuild the *zâwiya* meant in fact to question several national and regional founding myths, and to open up debates that had long been silenced. In order to avoid raising these issues, the project's instigators felt it necessary to stress both their links with state representatives, and the fundamental and internationally recognized opposition of "their" *zâwiya* to "Islamism." Again, practices clearly ambiguous from a local point of view had to be shrouded in a discourse of neat oppositions and moral absolutes. Despite the family's conspicuous emphasis on historical accuracy, the project thus aimed less at the faithful reconstruction of the *zâwiya* than at the 'recycling' of some—not all—notions associated with the "*zâwiya* tradition" as represented in national and international scholarship in accordance with contemporary political struggles.

This use of 'official' or 'international' categories as a means of local justification also became apparent in a related case: In the mid-1990s, a group of local academics working at the nearby university of Béjaïa instigated a project to reopen the *zâwiya* of Chellata described above. In their eyes, the *zâwiya* was primarily a teaching and research institution. As such, it was the last trace of a vivid scientific tradition, which had, through the centuries, produced a series of intellectuals of international reputation, whom they liked to classify as "mathematicians" and "astronomers."[32] From their perspective, to reopen the *zâwiya* in Chellata meant to prove that the region as a whole was and always had been part of a larger, Mediterranean rather than purely Islamic intellectual tradition. It would prove that this intellectual tradition was compatible with Islam, or rather, with a certain kind of "traditional," and therefore "tolerant" and "truly Algerian" Islam (a notion similar to that which had, in the first half of the twentieth century, provided the theoretical background to French

[32] For an example of such a reading of the role of the *zawâyâ* in Lesser Kabylia, see Aïssani (2002) and Aïssani and Mechehed (1998).

writings on North African Islam). For many members of the association this was clearly more than just an abstract historical cause, since it directly concerned their own position within Algerian society, both as intellectuals and, for many among them, as descendants of one of the numerous regional maraboutic families.

Although the association succeeded in mobilizing a relatively large number of local groups in their favor, their project failed due to the refusal of the elders of the village concerned. The latter clearly did not see the *zâwiya* as a historical proof of scientific greatness, but as a potentially dangerous vestige of colonial or "feudal" domination, and as a practical reminder that the Ben Aly Chérif family, former 'owners' of the *zâwiya*, still reclaim the land they once called their own.[33] Furthermore, they clearly resented outside intervention in either local history or current village affairs, which were "*pas claires*" by definition, and thus not destined for any exposition to the public gaze.

Despite these failures, the number of renovated, reconstructed, or newly built *zawâyâ* in Kabylia grows every day. Most of these successful building projects are instigated either by village councils or by several, non-maraboutic members of a particular village, who aim to reconstruct the village *zâwiya* and who often seem to redefine it as a sign of local and regional pride and tradition. In some cases, these projects have been funded in part by the local or regional town halls, for similar motives. The reconstructed *zawâyâ* are frequently decorated with Berber symbols,[34] which in any other context appear as clearly secular or even anti-Islamic, since the more radical fringe of the Berber movement has a tendency to define any kind of Islam as alien to "true" Berber culture. In the case of the rural *zawâyâ* in Kabylia, however, both the 'Berber' and the *zâwiya* traditions seem to have been co-opted as a general expression of regional pride, legitimate control over the area, and resistance to "outside encroachment"—be it by 'Islamists' or the central state. Yet again, this alliance between local religious tradition and Berberism is only possible if the notional gap between Islamism and local Islam is maintained, at least in public discourse.

Alongside the renovated *zawâyâ*, an altogether different kind of *zâwiya* has recently started to make its appearance. These are built by non-maraboutic men or women—mainly women—who during the second half of their lives have discovered a spiritual gift or calling, and who use the new *zawâyâ* as a place

[33] Claims to land-holdings by religious families who had to leave their villages or even the country, and now feel that the moment of their return has come, are increasingly voiced. For a detailed description of the Ben Aly Chérif successful family's claim to land they formerly owned, see Oulebsir (2004).

[34] The most common of these is writing in *tifinaγ*, an ancient Tuareg script. The words written in *tifinaγ*, however, conform to those found elsewhere on Islamic tombs: they record the *zâwiya*'s name, and emphasize the sacred and protected nature of the place.

of teaching, ritual, clairvoyance, and healing.[35] These new *zawâyâ* function in a similar way to their 'predecessors': they attract "pilgrims" who generally know each other and assemble, men and women apart, on fixed dates. They follow a pre-established ritual, which includes communal eating, praying, and dancing, but always also leaves time for the pilgrims to talk among themselves. These new *zawâyâ*, however, are not necessarily centered on a saint's tomb, and their main emphasis is set on trance experiences and capacities to heal illnesses and exorcise "spirits" that take possession of bodies and souls. The distinction between these 'new' and the 'old' *zawâyâ* is nevertheless flexible, and, according to people's judgments, depends more on the moral reputation and the social alliances of the participants than on the ritual proper. The local 'Islamists' publicly condemn them, but in practice they are often compelled to tolerate them—the first trance session I ever witnessed was conducted by the mother of a locally known 'Islamist,' whose Islamist conviction is tacitly recognized to be the result of his mother's 'unorthodox' religious activities.

At the beginning of the 2000s in Kabylia, "religion" could thus be used to refer to Sufi trance session, the veneration of saints, intellectual history, the defense of regional identity, and Islamism. In public discourse, the former elements were described as incompatible with Islamism, not least in order to enhance their moral legitimacy and prestige, and to make them compatible with Berberist—and French—discourses of local identity. In actual fact, however, the boundaries between these various traditions were and always had been rather flexible, and they allowed for—and were inherently dependent on—compromises on a day-to-day basis. Religious oppositions were part of larger social oppositions, and dovetailed with conflicts over land-rights, political influence, and notions of legitimate influence, power, and knowledge. Meanwhile, publicly declared rigid and therefore 'legible' oppositions allowed for the tacit compliance with messy local situations. This is the environment in which, in October 2004 in the regional capital of Béjaïa, a conference took place that will be described in the remaining pages. Its theme was the life and works of a regional saint and *'âlim*, 'Abd al-Raḥmân al-Waghlîsî.

THE SAINT AND HIS CONFERENCE

'Abd al-Raḥmân al-Waghlîsî was born toward the beginning of the fourteenth century A.D. (eighth century A.H.) in one of the many villages of the local tribe Aït Waghlis, known for the high density both of *zawâyâ* and, later on, French schools on their territory. At the time, although its most glorious period had passed, the region and its main town, Béjaïa, counted themselves among the

[35] For descriptions of a similar development in western Algeria and in Tunis see Andezian (2001) and Ferchiou (1993), respectively.

great centers of Islamic learning, and maintained exchanges with the universities of North Africa and the cities of the Mashriq.[36] Al-Waghlîsî is said to have studied in various regional *zawâyâ*, and to have maintained close contact with many of the great thinkers of his time, without ever having left his home valley. For most of his life, he acted as mufti and imam in Béjaïa. He produced a well known and widely read pedagogic text on Islamic jurisprudence known as the *Waghlîsiyya*. He also became the focal point of a group of regional students, several of whom achieved fame later on.[37] He died at an unknown but apparently venerable age in 1384 A.D. (786 A.H.) in the town of Béjaïa. He was buried in Béjaïa, where a *qubba* (a tomb topped by a dome) was erected in his memory.[38] His *qubba* is still visited by local pilgrims, and the oral tradition of Béjaïa, and that of his home village, remembers him in several popular songs, invocations, holy sites, and rituals.

Nevertheless, the reasons why he should be exhumed from the depths of history in 2004 can hardly be found in his lasting theoretical influence or in his work as such. Although his main work, the *Waghlîsiyya*, was frequently copied and widely distributed throughout the western part of the Islamic world, it certainly cannot be seen as a great work of Islamic jurisprudence, and even in his home region al-Waghlîsî was quickly eclipsed by his successors, not least his students. Rather, his surprising return to the limelight in 2004 stems from his ambivalent status, and from the fact that relatively little is actually known about him. This means that he can at once be seen as a local Kabyle saint, whose tomb is still venerated by local pilgrims, and as part of a unique Kabyle tradition of learning, but also as a great intellectual whose manuscript was circulated throughout the known world, to the greater glory of Kabylia or of Algeria, depending on the point of view adopted. Again, he can be taken to be a proof of the thorough Islamization of Kabylia, and therefore of the Algerian nation as such. He therefore appears as an ideal subject to be 'recycled' and reconstructed by various contemporary actors in their own image and according to their own reading of local religious tradition, and, implicitly, of present legitimate religious, political, and social authority.

[36] For a description of the history of Béjaïa and its region, see the relevant sections in Brunschvig (1940–1947) and Boulifa (1925). For an examination of the intellectual atmosphere in Béjaïa half-a-century after al-Waghlîsî's death, see Katz (1996).

[37] The most famous of his students were Sidi Ahmad al-Zarrûq, who also wrote a commentary on the *Waghlîsiyya*, and al-Sabbâgh, who came to fame in West Africa (Hiskett 1984). Several copies and smaller pieces of the *Waghlîsiyya* are held by libraries throughout the world. The most important collections are conserved in Algiers, Tunis, Rabat, Madrid, and Paris (Belmihoub 1998).

[38] The original *qubba* was destroyed during the French conquest of the town in 1833, and rebuilt by the French twenty years later (AWB 1754). Villagers from al-Waghlîsî's native village claim that he was buried in the village, and have recently excavated a tomb that might have contained his remains.

Consequently, the conference organized in his name appealed to a large variety of speakers, who in any other context would consider each other as potential worst enemies. They can roughly be divided into four groups. The first are secular intellectuals, for whom the conference was mainly about local intellectual history and 'Berber culture.' Most of these were affiliated to the university, and especially to the recently opened department of Berber Studies. They were therefore associated with the region-wide Berber movement, which demands the acknowledgement of the "Berber component" of Algerian culture, and which is often—not always rightly—represented as radically secularist, or even as anti-Islamic. The second group was lecturers and students from the numerous Algerian Islamic universities. One of the latter, the immediate successor of the Egyptian Muslim brother and well-known intellectual al-Ghazâli at the head of the Islamic institute in Constantine, is one of the best-known moderate Islamists in the country, as he broadcasts the daily *hadîth* (saying of the Prophet) on Algerian national radio. Other people in this group had been closely associated with the FIS before it was declared illegal. Others belonged to the numerous Islamist parties that have sprung up since then.

A third group was composed of the representatives of the rural *zawâyâ*, and the Sufi order 'Alawiyya. The former were mainly elderly *shuyûkh* with long white beards and kindly faces. The latter divided into white-bearded *shuyûkh*, and young men who sported tailor-made suits, sunglasses, and mobile phones, and carefully gave the impression of being extremely well organized.[39] The fourth group was representatives of the villages of the Aït Waghlis. They were involved less in the conference's academic side than in its organization, but they nevertheless took care to remain visible throughout the event. They themselves divided into several groups along either village or family lines. All had a strong tendency to claim the exclusive right to represent their area and "their" saint. These claims sparked a series of intra- and inter-village conflicts before the conference even started.

These four divisions were made obvious from the start through carefully differentiated dress codes, modes of interaction, ages, languages, and eating (or rather, drinking) habits. These became more pronounced as the three-day conference progressed. Two days were taken up by papers about various aspects of al-Waghlîsî's life and work, while the third was reserved for an excursion to sites of his life and his teaching. The papers were given in Arabic, Berber, and French, partly according to the language the speaker had been

[39] The founding saint of the 'Alawiyya, the Algerian Ahmad al-'Alawî, was born in 1869 and died in 1934 (Berque 1936; Lings 1961). Since then, the order has thrived, and in addition to the large home *zâwiya* in Mostaganem it has opened branches in all North African countries, in Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Ethiopia, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. It strives to represent itself as a resolutely modern order, and, according to some Algerians, the order has succeeded in controlling important business assets and local politics in Algeria and abroad.

educated in, but more importantly according to his or her openly displayed attitudes both toward the 'Berber heritage' and Arabic, the language of Islam. As is common in Algeria, no translator was provided.[40] As the conference went on levels of concentration and mutual respect began to sink, and it became a display of belonging to a certain group to look bored and leave the room during a communication in a "foreign" language.

This linguistic problem was enhanced by public displays of allegiance to several intellectual traditions that, although not mutually exclusive, were increasingly construed as such. As the conference went on the Francophone speakers voiced more and more complaints about the length and "scholasticism" of the Arabic communications, which never "got to the point," and in any case "did not have much to say" and "were incapable of independent thought," The Arabophone speakers, for their part, severely criticized their Francophone colleagues for a lack of textual knowledge and respect, and even questioned the legitimacy of their claims to intellectual authority in matters of religion. Knowledge as derived from Francophone academic study and based on faith in the Sorbonne and French scholarship was thereby portrayed as fundamentally at odds with knowledge acquired as part of religion, based on the faith in God and His contemporary interpreters—yet again, the 'gap' was made to reappear. What was ultimately at stake was not a question of language, but the definition of al-Waghlîsî and, by extension, that of 'Islam' itself: should it be treated as a sociological fact or as a coherent body of knowledge? Was it transcendental or local, universal or specific? And who had the right to talk about it, and in the name of whom or what?

Within this unspoken conflict, the most ambivalent but also the most vital part was played by those who remained silent during most of the conference: the local *shuyûkh*. From the Francophone perspective, they were indispensable to the conference, as representatives of local culture and heritage ('good Islam'), and therefore as prime sources of legitimacy for the Francophone enlightened discourse about the inherent tolerance of truly 'authentic' local traditions. At the same time, practical interactions between the Francophone intellectuals and the *shuyûkh* proved difficult, since the latter were embarrassingly religious, hardly interested in Berberist arguments, and much preferred to sit next to the Islamists, whom they recognized as fellow men of religion. The Islamists,

[40] When Algeria achieved independence in 1962, the state apparatus and the educational system functioned exclusively in French. Schools were gradually Arabized during the 1960s and 1970s, generally with the help of (often second-rate) teachers from Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Higher education remained bilingual, however, with the more prestigious subjects—natural science—being taught in French. The state administration and most state-run companies similarly resisted Arabization. This meant that by the 1980s a large number of Arabic-educated university graduates were entering a job-market that did not offer them any real opportunities, while most well-paid and influential jobs remained in the hands of the French-speaking elites, who could afford to educate their children privately. This still leads to social tensions that are often described as caused by "cultural," thus insurmountable, differences (Grandguillaume 1983).

in turn, were flattered by this sign of affection and recognition—did it not prove their own unquestionable legitimacy, and that they had been right about 'Algerian identity' all the way through? However, they were also discomfited by it: after all, the *shuyûkh* stood for everything the Islamists condemned as "unorthodox," namely the veneration of saints and Sufism. What was worse, the *shuyûkh* did not hesitate to show this preference through their embarrassing habits of humming mystic chants and falling into trance wherever they thought it appropriate.

In the pulpit the speakers continued to violently condemn each other, but on the floor the general embarrassment resulted in a lot of kissing of heads and shoulders among black and white beards, and a considerable shyness among cleanly shaven faces. Greetings tended to be elaborate, and, so as not to offend anybody by omission, often amounted to a full *al-salâm 'alaykum* (Islamic) *wa ṣabâḥ al-khayr* (Arabic and Kabyle) *azul flawen* (neo-Berber) *bonjour tout le monde* (French). The only group who seemed to be at ease were the 'Alawiyya, who had quickly restyled themselves as true representatives of the *shuyûkh*, and kissed and hugged and, wherever they could, exchanged bilingual business cards and French texts about the achievement of eternal bliss through the Sufi way. Their constant activity and all-encompassing cordiality were only matched by the representatives of the villages concerned, who were busy convincing the Francophone intellectuals—who they clearly felt were much more accessible and efficient than the "bearded ones"—to organize a series of prestigious international conferences in their respective villages.

The second day would take us out of the relatively neutral space of the city to several rural sites of saint veneration, and was therefore dreaded by some but looked forward to by others with barely hidden curiosity. What would happen if you put black beards, white beards, and cleanly shaven faces, and *ḥijâbî* women and those in tight T-shirts all together into small minibuses and drove them for more than an hour across the mountains? What would happen if you took declared Islamists to a saint's tomb once notorious for night-long dancing, trance, and healing sessions, and that in these and all other aspects clearly resembled those the Islamists' 'colleagues' elsewhere had burned down (Babès 1992)? What would happen in the villages where a sudden outside interest in the local holy sites might unearth age-old conflicts, and lead, in the words of one of the speakers, to "civil war" among villagers?[41]

[41] Much of the potential for conflict comes from the fact that the exact locations of many holy sites are unknown, and that therefore several villages can claim the honor of having within their boundaries the burial or teaching site of a well-known saint. Again, we see how local ambiguities become troublesome as soon as they are brought to public attention and are thereby submitted to a process of official definition.

Not terribly much, it turned out, apart from somewhat too lengthy speeches by somewhat too many villagers, *shuyûkh*, Sufis, and Islamists trying to put things "right." Much of the reason why little happened can be found in the Algerian *status quo*, which forces people to compromise on a daily basis. This has taught people to deal with tensions by shifting open confrontation to abstract categories, while at the same time ignoring the living representatives of these abstract categories because they might be one's next-door neighbors, cousins, or even brothers.[42] Most Algerians are tired of conflict and try to avoid it. They are also extremely suspicious of all kinds of religious and political motives, to the point were it is difficult to voice any idea without being suspected of hiding a lie or being "corrupted" (*récupéré*) by the government.[43]

This *modus vivendi*, important as it is for any understanding of contemporary Algeria, is only half the reason for the relative success of the conference. The full explanation can only be found if we take a closer look at the categories I established provisionally in the preceding paragraphs. This will tell us that their divisions were not as simple, clear, or obvious as I—and most conference participants—made them out to be. Thus, the most radical and serious-looking representative of the Islamists, who had come from Algiers, was first presented to me by one of the most radical local Berberists and secularists as one of his old school friends. It gradually became clear to me that most of the "Arabo-Islamists" invited to the conference were actually from the immediate neighborhood, spoke Kabyle as well as Arabic (and many among them also French),[44] and had probably been to the saints' tombs many a time before—if only to accompany their mothers when they were young. One of the two women wearing *hijâb* presented a paper on the oral tradition on al-Waghlîsî in Béjaïa, in Berber. The Islamists appeared deeply impressed by the capacity to recite the Qur'ân displayed by the wife of the current leader of the 'Alawiyya, who had come to the conference sparsely clad, heavily made up, and with a token piece of transparent cloth attached to the top of her head.

[42] This *status quo* has attracted relatively little attention in the available literature on contemporary Algeria, which tends instead to focus on oppositions that appear to be truly insurmountable, and that make one wonder how any kind of daily life could take place in a country so divided. This omission seems to be largely due to two factors: One is Euro-American conceptions of inflexible moral oppositions said to be at work in Algeria. The other is that it is difficult to conduct fieldwork in Algeria, and consequently little space is given to daily practices, relative to public and political discourse.

[43] This suspicion of political or religious motives runs through the history of Algeria, but it has become especially prominent in writings on and by Algerians since a series of "revelations" about the true nature of the Algerian civil war in the 2000s. For examples of these, see Souaïdia (2001) and Samraoui (2003); for a full bibliography see Aggoun and Rivoire (2004).

[44] Throughout the 1970s, political Islam was mainly 'bred' at universities, especially in the faculties of natural sciences and engineering, where, still today, all teaching is conducted in French. Therefore, those in the first wave of Islamists were frequently French- rather than Arabic-speakers (Aggoun and Rivoire 2004).

Once more, a very legible public discourse of irreconcilable oppositions was accompanied by informal connections that were, if anything, *pas claires*.

The president of the association that had organized the conference—the same association mentioned above for their efforts to re-open the *zâwiya* in Chellata—was himself difficult to classify in any of the above categories. An internationally renowned mathematician,[45] he is the oldest son of an important religious family in the area, who still have considerable landholdings in the valley. He is proud to mention that his father was one of the first French primary school teachers in the valley, and equally proud to be a member of his tribe, the Aït Waghlis. In the appropriate circumstances, he can count many a *mujâhid* (nationalist fighters in the war of independence) in his extended family, and he maintains excellent relationships with the local government and public institutions. He has studied in the Soviet Union, from whence he came back with a solid grounding in Marxism and with the glory of having been president of the Algerian students union in the Ukraine ("a lot of speeches on Arab solidarity to the Palestinian committee!" he recalls). He brings up his children in French. He refuses all offers to work abroad or even in the capital because he wants to "do things" in his home region, and he identifies with the more thoughtful fringe of the Berber movement in the region.

His attempts to revalorize local religious tradition seem partly motivated by his interest in local history, especially, as he calls it, the "history of science." They are also, it seems, dictated by his desire to reassert the value of his own family history. His grandfather was a Sufi, an important one, as he likes to stress. He also likes to represent his ancestors—and by extension all religious families in the area—as "scientists" according to contemporary norms; thus his past interest in the reconstruction of the *zâwiya* in Chellata described above, and in the "scientific" value of local religious manuscript collections (cf. Aïssani and Mechehed 1998). Rather than being detrimental to his career, the very ambiguity of his role, combined with his high status in all domains and from all possible points of view, seem to be what has so far allowed him to successfully organize conferences and exhibitions on various aspects of regional history that have so far not had their place in the official history of Algeria. It clearly contributed to the success of the conference.

These seemingly unrelated aspects of the principal organizer's career, and the living contradictions represented by most of the conference participants were as crucial for the conference's success as was the ambiguous position of al-Waghlîsî himself. As seen above, the latter was an ideal theme for a 'pluralist' conference because he could be seen as an *'âlim* as well as a saint and Sufi. In much the same way, the multiplicity of possible readings of

[45] He has established collaborations with universities, research institutes, and industry in the United States, Russia, and Europe, and frequently travels abroad, without ever losing touch with his home base in Béjaïa.

the speakers' social positions created a space where communication—if only very limited—could take place among people who usually strive to ignore each other, but who, if needs must and not too many people are listening, succeed in finding common ground, if only for a short time. Thus, secular intellectuals might find themselves side by side with radical Islamists in rejecting the veneration of saints as superstition, and mathematicians looking for scientific truths might end up endorsing the cause of Sufi *shuyûkh* who prove through numerological techniques that the end of the world is nigh. Yet again, notionally insurmountable opposition gave way to practical accommodation.

Although the conference described here was certainly an extraordinary event and owed much to a unique concurrence of circumstances, this coexistence of theoretically exclusive 'identities' within every speaker is common among Algerians, despite its vehement denial by Algerian public discourse. It influences social interactions on a daily basis. In the Soummam Valley, 'Islamists' and 'Berberists' are often siblings, cousins, or even one-and-the-same person, much as 'marabouts,' 'Sufis,' and 'reformists' have been before them. Although this overlap does not necessarily diminish mutual hostility, it allows for precisely those local accommodations that the Algerian government official mentioned at the outset of this article qualified as "*pas claires*" and therefore as needing protection from outside curiosity. Publicly assumed and internationally endorsed legibility affords some such protection, although—or because—it is constantly undermined by the complexity of local practice.

CONCLUSION

"Religion" is indeed a key term for comprehending contemporary Algerian society, not least because it is widely used by locals themselves. In order to be of any use as a conceptual category for analysis, however, it has to be understood within a complex context of various religious, social, and political practices. Thus, struggles between Sufis and Islamists, secularists and Islamists, and villagers and academics exceed the domain of the religious, and have social and political ramifications. The re-evaluation of the local saintly heritage is a religious matter, but also part of an ongoing discussion about national and regional history. It asks questions about rightful religious practices, but also about what kind of relationship Algeria as a nation should maintain with its heterogeneous local history, and who should have a right to produce this local history. At the same time, it feeds into conflicts over rightful landownership that date from the French colonial period. Debates over the legitimacy of al-Waghlîsî (as a saint, religious scholar, and historical figure) and over the proper form of academic argument reflect debates over the nature of intellectual, spiritual, and moral legitimacy, and over the rightful production of history and knowledge of any kind.

The ways in which the distinction between 'folk religion' and reformed Islam or 'Islamism' is employed locally, similarly, can only be understood as

part of wider social and cultural processes, dependencies, and oppositions. Throughout the preceding paragraphs, I have shown how the official Algerian discourse on religion that is based on this distinction takes much of its efficacy not from *how* it distinguishes, but from the very fact *that* it distinguishes, and that it allows local realities to be connected to internationally recognized categories. The official discourse thereby emerges less as an attempt to impose a simple and legible truth on complex social realities, and more as a framework within which these social complexities can be renegotiated on a daily basis without exposing local social complexities to public scrutiny. As a generally accepted framework, then, the official discourse is not only developed by the state and for the state, as argued by Scott (1998). Rather, it is the result of the interplay between international categories and governmental and local strategies that strive for the accumulation of various sources of religious, political, and social legitimacy, even though these might be publicly declared mutually incompatible. I have given some examples of how this is done by various agents within Algerian society. I hope that I have thereby provided a case study that might help us to rethink similar cases elsewhere, while allowing us to see Algeria not as bitterly divided into mutually exclusive groups and categories, but as a heterogeneous society that thrives on its ambiguities, while violently denying them in public.

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