

The Impact of the French Colonisation on the Ksours of the Region of Bechar

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Abstract:

Bechar is now a big city, a pearl of the Algerian South. South Algerian territories were created by the law of December, 24th, 1904, in the circle of Colomb-Bechar. Going through the historical origins of the region no one can deny the role of the Ksours in the building of the society, the ancient Ksar of Bechar and its region, which survived from agriculture and trade they entertained with the nomads saw its social and economic structures transformed by the French occupation.

Key words: Bechar- ksours/ksar- trade- agriculture- Walis-French occupation

Introduction

When describing Bechar, General Colomb wrote in 1862: « ...Kenadsa; theoued which comes down from mountainous region, where Mougheul, Lahmar, Boukais, Sfisifa and Bechar are situated, . The Ksar of Bechar is among others and nothing differentiates it from them.”

In fact, Bechar is the name of the city, as it is that of the mountain which closes the horizon. The fact that the Ksar gave its name to the mountain which dominates it led researchers to suppose that at a given moment, the Ksar of Bechar had more importance than the other Ksours. This hypothesis is supported by the great number of “Walis” that surround the region, as that meant an important sedentary life¹.

Béchar is relatively a newly created city. Before the French occupation, the small Ksar of Bechar was among those of Mougheul, Lahmar, Boukais and others, however the Ksar of Kenadsa where the prestigious ZaouiaZiania is located and which was the glorious cultural centre of the region since the seventeenth century².

The Geographical Area:

Bechar has become since its creation the metropolis of the western-south region in Algeria. The region is a crossroad of communication and a very important trade centre including the region of Northern Ksours, Tafilalt heiress of the famous Sidjilmassa³ and the region of Feguig in the North- West, Guir Valley in the Western –South and the region of TouatGourara in the Eastern- South.

1 Hani Abdelkader, Bechar et sa région entre histoire et légende, Edition Dar El Gharb, 2002.P 93

2 Daumas, Le Sarah Algérien, Paris, 1945,p58

3 Sijilmassa was a medieval Berber city and a trade entrepot at the Northern edge of the Saharan desert in Morocco. Capital of a Berber Kingdom founded in 757 AD, it was a very florescent city in the time of gold and slave trades.

The region is limited to the North by the heights of Saharan Atlas Ksours, and the high Moroccan Atlas, in the West by the Hamada of Draa, in the East by the oasis of Tidiklet plunging to the south in Tanezrouft.

From the mountain chains which border the north come down many oueds: Bechar- Zouzfana and Guir which meet to form the corridor of Oued El Saoura, which plunge in the Sahara then drying step by step. It disappears totally at its entrance to Touat, where it gives birth to many prosperous oasis at the doors of the dreadful Tanezrouft.

Tanezrouft is a vast plain, where water misses ?, starting from Reggan to the borders of Mali. It is a region always avoided by caravans which can't cross without a guide. In 1909, the mummified remains of a caravan were found, composed of 1,800 camels and 1,500 humans lost nearly a century before. The road of Tanezrouft is marked by huge cans, from which Bidon V became a reference printed in all the geographical cards¹.

Along the palm forest gallery which cross the sahara from the North to the South, a series of ksours has formed a road by which all the human migration has crossed, and so did also all the colonisers and commercial exchanges.

That's why the Moroccan kings have always been tempted to impose their authority upon the region, in order to control the commercial movement towards tropical Africa. However, the nomad tribes, who lived in the ksours along this road constituted nearly small independent communities.

The Etymology of "Bechar":

There are nearly no documents written about the subject, all that is known about the name of the region is from the legends which gave some information about the origins of the ancient ksar of Bechar. There are two versions known about the attribution of the name of "Bechar" to the region: The first one is that all the letters and mail from the neighbouring regions came to the old ksar of Bechar to collect news, that's why the qualifier " bechar" meaning the 'one who bring good news'. That's what led those interested in writing about the history of the region to deduce that the old ksar was an important stage in the very frequented road by travellers or caravans bringing news.

The second legend says that a Muslim explorer sent by a Turkish Sultan to explore the region by the fifteenth century brought a goatskin bottle of limpid water?, and so the adjective "bechar" from the root "bechara" was attributed to the explorer and the region he came from².

The Coming of the French and its Impact on the Ksours of the Region:

French colonization gave to the Ksar of Bechar another role, the military French occupation opted for that site to create the military post it needed in order to "protect" and supervise the south western region from attacks.

The needs of the great important military garrison or quarters attracted merchants and traders, who came to settle around the quarters. The railways also

¹ Daumas, op. cit., p 102

² Ibid, p 117

contributed to a great extent to the enrichment of the caravans which found a florescent market, and consequently Bechar became a beaming city on the whole south western Algerian region and the Moroccan Southern East, despite its remote location from the north¹.

Isabelle Eberhardt, who visited the region by the end of the nineteenth century till 1904, reported Bechar : “Sur la rive derrière les grands cimetières où le vent et les pas de chameaux effacent peu à peu les tombes, le vieux Ksar de Taagda, flanqué de tours carrées, ceinturé de hautes murailles grises sans une brèche, où l’on pénètre par des basses portes voutées, Taagda a des aires farouches de citadelle.....Béchar. Un embryon de village dominant l’oued. Des maisons en toub, des chantiers. Quelques boutiques déjà dans une grande cour de caravansérail.”². When she visited the Ksar in 1903, it was already experiencing the effects of the French colonization, and all the activities held there slowly faded and agonized to disappear later.

Twelve Koubbas of Walis are counted in the region of Bechar. Those supposed saints are buried under funerary monuments called “Koubbas”; a few of them are known just from some legends and stories told by old people. The architecture of the ksours is very attractive; it is in the form of domes. Many studies have been realized about those funerary monuments, among those Walis in Bechar we name just a few: -SidiAissa Haddad Eloued and SidiBarrady situated in the interior of the ancient old cemetery in front of the KsarSidiM’hammedBenammar; - Sidi Mohammed Benali, - SidiAbdallahBensaleh, -SidiOthmaneBoudjenaneLakhdar a Djneiene and MoulaBechar, the latter, a Wali, a native of the region venerated by the Jews and Muslims, too. It is situated in the Jewish cemetery in Bechar in the southern side of the Ksar on the left shore of the Oued³.

The French occupation of Bechar took place on November, 12th, 1903, in order to contain Algerian resistance in the South. The first task to undertake was the building of a permanent French site to make communication with the northern colonized territories secure. and to link it with sub-Saharan Africa⁴.

The area chosen for the future French city was the region of Tagdain front of the old Ksar of Bechar, some kilometers far from the one of Ouakda; both Ksars have a very ancient history.

The motivations for that geographic choice were both strategic and military: First geography provided very open scenery from this plateau, and we can perceive all the surrounding areas in all the directions apart from the western one limited by a series of heights bordering the “Hamada of OumSbàa”. For military

1 Gautier Emile, *Le Passé de l’Afrique du Nord. Les siècles obscurs*. Paris Payot, 1952, p139

2 Hani Abdelkader, *op.cit.*, p 98

3 Ibid., 103

4 Cheyson Claude, *Le Sahara en Algérie nouvelle*. In *Revue Tiers Monde*. Numéro spécial. Paris. 1963, p62

motives, the plateau, with its 784 meters in height could afford a good climate and pure air for the military effective who were not accustomed to Saharan climate.

The site or centre created was first called Tagda according to the name of the area itself, but later and by a decision of the Governor General, on January, 12th, 1904, the name of Colomb was officially attributed to the centre as recognition to the dead officer, who directed the first French expedition in those regions. That's why during all the period of the French occupation of the region the name Colomb was associated with the name of the city and it was called Colomb-Bechar.

Table 01: Population of Ksours between 1906 and 1911:

Ksours	Population in 1906	Population in 1911
Bechar	300	452
Ouakda	125	312
Lahmar	-	138
Sfissifa	-	24
Mougheul	-	278
Boukais	-	154
BeniGoumi. ZaouiaFougania	400	388
BeniGoumi. ZaouiaTahtania	220	250
BeniGoumi. Taghit	577	627
BeniGoumi. Berrebi	795	809
BeniGoumi. Bekhti	184	152
Colomb (Marocains)	-	304
Benni Abbes	608	625
Igli	1057	1082
Mazzer	182	188
Aghdal	237	240
Guerzim	148	150
BeniIkhlef	470	480
Kerzaz	1100	1090
OuledRaffa	459	450
Ksabi	-	250
Total	6862	8985

Source:Hani Abdelkader, Bechar et sa région entre histoire et légende, Edition Dar El Gharb, 2002.P 106

Conclusion:

Bechar is situated on the caravan route between from Feguig to Touat. Bechar is located at the top of the Saoura which permits the access to Touat and Gourara, and from there to sub-Saharan Africa. The caravans could travel for just fourteen days from Feguig to Bouda, passing through some villages and oasis, and they could find water at every stop.

The French occupation of the region of Bechar altered to a great extent the economic system of the region and devastated the social structure and activities held in the Ksours. Before what?, the economy of the region was based on

caravan's traffic and animal breeding practiced by the nomads, besides agriculturist and craftsmen working in the Ksours .

Later and because of French intervention, Moroccans and Sudanese moved far away from the region, as all the water sources were destroyed, and the fear of the traders from the seizure of their commodities by the colonial forces (traders feared expropriation by colonial forces).

The settlement of the colonial forces in the North of the country also contributed in great part to the decreasing of animal breeding which represented a basic activity in the region, the fact which resulted in a great decrease of the livestock and the down fall of the tribes.

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