The Invention and Demise of Kabyle Exceptionalism in the French and English Writings of the Second Half of the 19th Century.

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Abstract: In this paper I shall endeavour to examine narrative productions of racial differentiations of Algerians. I will focus on the mid-19th century Western textual canonisation of Kabyle exceptionalism in both French ethnographic literature and some selected English travel writings. This discursive continuity is based on contemporary notions of European racial superiority and civilising mission. The Kabyles who were thought, at the time, to be at least of Germanic origin were favoured over the Arabs. This favouring, which Charles Ageron terms the Kabyle Myth, is a Manichean depiction of Arabs as inherently bad and Kabyles as inherently good. It is interesting to note though that this Myth was short-lived. After 1871, with the advent of a civil type of government in colonial Algeria and the increasing numbers of European settlers, who were now the fuel of the agrarian based economy, and the adoption of the association policy, and after the Elmokrani insurrection where the Kabyles played a central role, the Kabyle Myth lost its raison d'être.

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1-Introduction:

The Kabyle, and his region, occupies a liminal narrative space in the writings of French ethnographers and English travel writers of the second half of the nineteenth century. He is relegated to an elusive space. Though he is never equated with the more "civilized" European, he is placed above the supposedly fanatical and savage Arab and his culture. Racial ideologies were mobilised in the nineteenth century; ethnographical anecdotes, isolated incidents and personal (dis)likes and preferences were used to construct a particular discursive device to reassert racialised subject positions and to reify myths about race. This does not mean that racial or cultural differences did not exist between Kabyles and Arabs. It simply means that European powers played on the natural social and cultural differences between native groups to further imperialist interests. Billie Melman (2002:259) argues that colonial powers did not simply import notions of race to rules colonial subjects. They negotiated between prejudice and a multifarious social and cultural structure found in colonised lands. A manifestation of this negotiation between prejudice and social and cultural realities in Algeria is Kabyle exceptionalism or what historians call the Kabyle Myth.

2- The Genesis of a Myth:

In her *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* which addresses ethnic identity formation in Algeria, Patricia Lorcin, discusses the concept of the Kabyle and writes (1995:2),

The Kabyle myth was that Kabyles were superior to the Arabs; it was not that they were different, which they were. The French used sociological differences and religious disparities between the twogroups to create an image of the Kabyle which was good and one of the Arab which was bad, and from this, to extrapolate that the former was more suited to assimilation than the latter.

Charles Ageron argues that the *Kabyle Myth* was mainly the work of French ethnographers and scholars like Maffre, Lapene, Daumas, Warnier, Aucapitaine and Tocqueville. British travellers to Algeria were well-aware of the existence of the Kabyle myth. They have acknowledged their reliance on French sources in forming their views on the colony and its inhabitants. Mrs Rogers relied, among others on Eugène Bodichon's writings, Mabel Sharman on General Daumas and Mrs Lloyd Evans on Prince Bibesco. In their excursions into the Kabyle region, these travellers were naturally escorted by French officials or native "Aghas" or guides working under French command.

In their narrative renderings of the Kabyle region and its inhabitants many British travellers, like Mrs Rogers, Mabel Sharman, Mrs Lloyd Evans and others, participate in a typical scheme of representation of imperialism. This representation does not break away from the French colonial ethnographic writings of the period which created the Kabyle Myth and posited Kabyles against Arabs. In this way, these writings not only conveyed a particular point of history of Algeria but they also contributed to creating it. Nineteenth century writings were not ideology free but were agents in their own ways of the idea that the West was superior. White

(2005:5) argues that almost any historical work produced during the nineteenth century, the classic age of historical narrative, was by default elitist and judgmental of events and people it describes.

These travel writings were in line with French ethnographers and writers' Cultural Racism. They, along with French ethnographic literature, contributed to the remapping of Kabyle physical and human geography and the creation of a real or imaginary Kabyle cultural and social singularity. Through modes of repetition they have impressed upon the Kabyles', and other Algerians', consciousness the singularity of this region and the idiosyncrasy of their geographical location. These travellers' assertions about the difference between Kabyles and Arabs are carbon copies of a number of French ethnographers and writers: Tocqueville, Aucapitaine, Warnier and Daumas who wrote mainly in the 1840s, 1850s and early 1860s a period which corresponds to the time when these travellers sojourned in Algeria. What comes from a close readings of these travel writings and the writings of these ethnographers is the similitude which would certainly exclude telepathy. This is a characteristic of most travel writings of the period which relied on in what Edward Said calls the citational mode of travel writing or citational discourse.

3-A European Origin and a Christian Past of the Kabyles?

A major factor that created and nourished this myth was the supposed, at least partial, European origin of the Kabyles. In order to account for the singularity of the Kabyle's character and his supposed perfectibility and possible assimilation into the French culture, French writers such as

Tocqueville, Daumas, Warnier and Guillaume-Thomas Raynal have all alluded to, at least a partial, "Germanic" origin and a Christian past of the Kabyles. This meant, according to the racial theories of the time that it was impossible for the Arabs, who were of Semitic origin, to be assimilated because their culture was supposedly static and organically opposed to European cultures. In his *Inequality of Human Races* In his *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, Ernest Renan (1855:4-5)writes,

Je suis donc le premier à reconnaître que la race sémitique, comparée à la race indo-européenne, représente réellement une combinaison inférieure de la nature humaine. Elle n'a ni cette hauteur de spiritualisme que l'Inde et la Germanie seules ont connue, ni ce sentiment de la mesure et de la parfaite beauté que la Grèce a légué aux nations néo-latines, ni cette sensibilité délicate et profonde qui est le trait dominant des-peuples celtique.

On the other hand, the Kabyles had, at least, a partial Germanic descent. Daumas writes « On reconnaît alors que le peuple kabyle, en partie autochtone, en partie germain d'origine, autrefois chrétien tout entier, ne s'est pas complètement transfiguré dans sa religion nouvelle." Following on the footsteps of these French writers, Mabel Sharman writes that it was very evident that the Kabyles were far advanced beyond the Arabs in civilisation. Echoing Ernest Renan, Sharman speaks of supposed inherent defects in the Arab character, defects which would render any progress or assimilation difficult if not impossible. In overly racist undertones she writes (1863:360),

Left in [the] possession [of Arabs], Algeria would remain, as it has now done for centuries, a hotbed of malaria...And if the Arab

dies off under the rule of the conquering race, it is only fair to the French to say that he will owe that doom, not to oppression, but to his own inherent defects of character.

Referring to the physical similarities between the English and the Kabyles, Mrs Rogers(1865:252) tells us that just like the English, the Kabyle, with his "round, almost German, face, with thicker lips, and a well-knit and thoroughly well-proportioned frame" (Ibid,252) is hardworking and industrious. "Unlike the lazy Arabs, the Kabyles have an inherent love of industry. Idleness is with them a sin, and they train up their children to every branch of trade. They have their own manufactures, especially of fire-arms, and for working metals, in iron, copper, and brass." Hinting at the capitalist mind of the Kabyle as opposed to the lazy nature and unbusinesslike mind of the Arab Sharman (1863:240) writes "if the Arab has more money than suffices for his present wants, he hides it in the ground, whilst the Kabyle lends at interest, or buys cheap to sell again at a higher rate."

This constant reference to the industriousness of the Kabyle is one of significant desorientalising techniques of the Kabyle as it clearly sets him apart from the "Myth of the Lazy Native/Oriental" rampant in Orientalist writings. The Kabyle man's love for industry is shared by his wife who, Mabel Sharman (1863:56) writes, shares "in his industrial tastes, she spins and weaves; the burnous he wears has been altogether fashioned by her hands". Sharman (Ibid, 361) further argues that the Kabyle marriage is not very far from the egalitarian marriage English women enjoy. Contrary to other Muslim women, the Kabyle woman is supposedly respected, cherished and enjoys the same freedom of speech and movement as a Christian woman. These privileges would aid the Kabyle community's rise on the

ladder of civilisation and would render it a beacon of light in a sea of darkness and ignorance.

The Kabyle Myth is a very symbolic act. It was France's attempt to reclaim North Africa's Latin and Christian past, from the one hand, and an attempt to undermine Islam's role in indigenous societies from the other hand. Echoing French writers, Mrs. Rogers (1865:28) tells her readers that "No Christian edifice can boast great antiquity as such, in Algeria". The Kabyle region was seen as the least "polluted" in Algeria with Islamic fanaticism and the closest one can get to the supposed Christian original Berber society. Sharman (1863:237) writes that the Kabyles, who converted to Christianity in the early ages of the Church, are nominal and lukewarm Muslims. They neglect to conform to most of the of the injunctions of the Ouran.

Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, one of the most adamant supporters of regaining Algeria's Roman heritage, had a role in extolling the Kabyle Myth. His *Peres Blancs* order was most active in the Kabyle region. He was convinced that proselytisation activities among the Kabyles would be successful due to their Christian past and their superficial Islamisation. These ideas are expressed in his "Lettre Pastorale Pour la Prise De Possession Du Diocèse D'Alger" (1867). He writes,

La haine invétérée de l'Arabe conquérant, le souvenir et l'image sacrée de la croix, le mariage chrétien, le code, ou, comme ils disent, le *canon* de leurs lois civils, tout cela est la trace indélébile d'un passé dont ils n'ont plus l'intelligence, mais que l'observateur découvre encore sous ses ruines; de même qu'en fouillant les

débris amoncelés sous les cités modernes de l'Afrique, au-dessous des temples de l'islamisme, on retrouve encore souvent les restes sacrés des vieilles basiliques, témoignages muets de l'antique foi.

Using the trope of textual repetition in the texts of British travellers, the Christian past of the Kabyles is impressed in the reader's mind. Sharman(1863:261-2) writes that "not unlikely...the faith which he forsook in bygone years will claim him yet again as a discipline... that cross with which the Kabyle woman marks her face may readily come to be, not the memento of an abandoned creed, but a symbol of its acceptance and dominion." Sharman(Ibid) writes that she was eagerly anticipating the bright future when Algeria would rid and purify itself from Islamic fanaticism and reclaim it glorious Christian past.

Paul Silverstein (2017) writes that from the onset of its colonisation of Algeria, France deployed an exceptional academic apparatus which consisted of research centres, archives, journals and highbrow scholars to carry thorough scholar and fieldwork. This apparatus was devoted to the scientific study of local ethnic groups and languages and "to fix the ethnic boundary between the [Kabyles and Arabs] and to use such a division to justify economic and social policy". This armada of scholars and researchers produced countless ethnological and military reports. As a general rule, these reports cast the Kabyles in a more positive light than the Arabs. Though considered less civilised than Europeans, the Kabyles were viewed as fierce warriors who heroically defended their land against invaders. Whereas the Arabs accepted the tutelage of Islamic caliphs, the fiercely independent Berbers abhorred the idea of central authority and were prepared to defend their liberty to the death. One of the earliest French writers to draw attention

to the Kabyles' fierce independence was the French priest Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, who as early as as the 1760s wrote "Ils doivent à la disposition de leur terrain de n'avoir pas été subjugués. Leur liberté est toujours restée entière et elle l'est encore." (12:1826)

The myth was part of the French colonial ideological apparatus which was deployed to strengthen French presence in Algeria. The French colonial authorities' hope that the Kabyles would play an important role in the frenchification of the Algerian society was highlighted by a number of French writers and ethnographers. Sabatier, for instance, was optimistic about this possible role when he wrote "Qu'on le sache bien, par eux l'avenir réserve à la France un grand rôle en Afrique, de même que par la France il réserve aux Kabyles un grand rôle dans l'humanité » (essai p442).

This myth provided an ideological foundation for assimilating the Kabyles into French colonial society while excluding the Arabs from such plans. A number of Kabyle specificities helped to create, nourish and sustain this myth. The political and social organization (like Kabyle Tajmaat) of the Kabyle society, the supposed freedom and high status that Kabyle women enjoyed led the French to believe that it was closer than the Arab one to Western ideals and thus infinitely more perfectible. This myth started to circulate in the 1840s. In 1841 General Duvivier(1960) wrote "La fixité kabaïle et l'amour de cette race pour le travail devront être les plus forts pivots de notre politique pour nous établir en Afrique." This possibility for assimilation is reproduced subsequently in British travel writings on Algeria. Mrs. Lloyd Evans (1868:129), for instance, writes that the Kabyles exhibited,

wonderful powers of assimilation, being prepared by the very nature of their laws, customs and qualities, to receive the higher civilization of the European. for their own mode of government, handed down for ages, which under certain necessary control has been left to them, is singularly like the French municipal organization of the present day-more republican in its mode of election, but nearly identical in its functions.

4-Kabyle Women Exceptionalism:

A central component of this Kabyle exceptionalism or Kabyle myth is women's status. The Kabyle woman is an interesting case for both French ethnographers and English travellers because she, at least on the surface, does not fit any of the readymade moulds crafted by Orientalists for Muslim women whose depiction in the nineteenth century took two forms; "they were either portrayed as downtrodden victims who were imprisoned, secluded, shrouded, and treated as beasts of burden or they appeared in a sensual world of excessive sexuality-as slaves in harems and the subjects of the gaze of lascivious and violent men" (Lila Abu-Lughod, 88).

The themes of polygamy, veil and free movement outside the house were used as tropes for Kabyle women's supposed liberation and freedom compared to other Algerian women. While the Arab woman's subjugation was blamed on Islam, the Kabyle woman's relative freedom on the other hand was due to the Kabyles' indifference to religion. "Il a accepté le Coran, mais ne l'a point embrassé," writes Daumas in his *La Grande Kabylie: études historiques*(1847:77). By the same token Aucapitaine refers

to the Kabyle as someone indifferent to religion in general. For him "Le Kabyle est un tiède sectateur de Mahomet ; chez lui le besoin de liberté étouffe tout d'abord les idées d'une religion qui repose sur un despotisme aveugle et sans borne." Other French ethnographers of the mid-nineteenth century held the same view.

This superficial islamisation of the Kabyles meant, according to French ethnographers that their women were held in higher esteem than their Arab sisters. Eugène Daumas(1847 : 35, 75-77)writes "La femme arabe ne mange pas avec son mari, encore moins avec ses hôtes. La femme kabyle prend ses repas avec la famille; [...] Contrairement aux résultats universels de la foi islamite [sic], en Kabylie nous découvrons la sainte loi du travail obéie, la femme à peu près réhabilitée, nombre d'usages où respirent l'égalité, la commisération chrétiennes. "Such views are literally reproduced in most English travel narratives. Mrs Evans writes for instance that the Kabyle woman eats with her husband and sees his friends while the Arab woman eats alone. For her part, Mrs Rogers(165:56) writes that the Muslim husband lays upon his wife's shoulders "every conceivable burden". For "To the lot of the Arab woman it falls, to till the ground, to reap the harvest, to grind the com, to knead the bread. If garments are wanted, it is she who must weave the cloth from the fibrous tissues of the aloe and the palm".

Parallels were drawn between the position of Muslim women and that of Western women. Whereas the subordination of the former was blamed on the unchanging, static and despotic nature of their societies and religion, the latter's secondary status was seen as accidental and destined to disappear in due time as it went against the spirit of a progressive and enlightened civilisation. The English feminist and traveller Barbara Bodichon (1857:37), for instance, writes that women in the liberal West have, at least in theory, rights. "Women are God's children equally with men. In Britain this is admitted; because it is a Christian country; in Mahommedan countries this is denied," she boasts.

Kabyle women's visibility is a recurrent discursive strategy that travellers use to stress these women's alleged high status. Sharman (1863:241) writes that the Kabyle woman "goes unattended, with an unveiled face" outside her house. The Kabyle woman was, it is true, able to go outside her houses, but the spaces into which she was admitted (the fountain and agricultural fields) could not be defined as public spaces. The fountain though physically situated outside the house is functionally part of the domestic sphere and has a very symbolic place in the Kabyle village. There was an unspoken agreement that this visibility had its price. Visibility is, as Foucault argues, a trap. The Kabyle women were constantly surveilled and any violation of the code of family or tribal honour was punished by death. This is referred to for instance by John Fraser (1911:137) who writes "When a Kabyle woman forgets her virtue the whole village takes her to a waste spot on the mountain side. Then a grave is dug."

Belying the reductionist discourse of the period and the overly idealised image Mrs. Rogers paints of her the Kabyle women and her fellow countrywomen, John Fraser writes about the degrading and inhumane conditions under which endless numbers of women toiled in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. He (1911:45) posits,

The Moslim does not send his girl to ill-ventilated and overheated workrooms to become wan, crook-faced and anaemic. He never lets her drudge her life out behind drapery counters for miserable wages. He does not turn his young wife at six o'clock on a gnawing winter morning to toil long hours in cotton and woollen factories. His ideal of womanhood is not the same as that of a Christian; but in no Mohammedan countries do you see slouching, unkempt, slobbering mothers hanging round the shops of gin shops.

Fraser's narrative about the Kabyles, although on the whole laudatory, seems to be more cognizant of the hardships Kabyle women faced in their daily lives. He writes "The women are unveiled. There is no polygamy, but the Kabyle has no scruples in getting rid of a woman when she is scraggy and withered and taking to himself another wife who is younger and plumper." In this sense Fraser's narrative "reveals a respect for h[is] subject matter and a narratological sophistication that place h[im] ahead of many of h[is] contemporaries, both male and female" (Eva-Marie Kroller, 1990).

5-The Demise of a Myth:

Kabyle exceptionalism and the promotion of the assimilation policy were advocated when colonial Algeria was under military rule. But after 1871 with the advent of a civil type of government in colonial Algeria and the increasing numbers of European settlers, who were now the fuel of the agrarian based economy, the adoption of the association policy, and after the Elmokrani insurrection where the Kabyles played a central role, the Kabyle

Myth lost its *raison d'être*. The Kabyles were after all like the fanatical Arabs and were not willing to concede their mountains to the French as Pascal Duprat lamented (1845:306). After the Kabyles' insurrection of 1871, the French accused religious brotherhoods of radicalising the Kabyles who would have, otherwise, accepted and welcomed French rule. This is why many like Renan objected to the military suppression arguing that it would further alienate the Kabyle population whom it was better to gain to the French side.

Setting the Kabyles as the vassals of France was the rationale behind the creation and promulgating Kabyle exceptionalism. Mrs Lloyd Evans (1868:123) refers to the Kabyles as potential vassals for Europeans in Algeria when she writes if "the question is, which race [among the Kabyles and Arabs] is most amenable to civilization? Which will follow their European pioneers in spreading cultivation, prosperity, and consequent peace over the shores of Algeria? The only answer can be...the Kabyles, who are already half-way on the road of civilization." As Goldberg (1996: 184) notes, "Materially colonialism seeks to strengthen domination for the sake of human and economic exploitation. Representationally, it seeks to sustain the identity of the ideological or discursive image it has created of the colonized."The Kabyles provided the French with the opportunity to put into practice many principles of the "mission civilisatrice" which was at core a racist ideology which stipulated the superiority of the West and its "universalist" values. In his famous discourse on France's civilising mission, Jules Ferry defended France's racial policies. He argued that it had a moral obligation towards the less fortunate colonised inferiors. The problem with this doctrine is that these inferiors were doomed to an eternal state of inferiority and as such they will always need the benevolent supervision of the French. Jules Ferry wrote,

Il y a un droit des races supérieures vis-à-vis des races inférieures ... Si nous avons le droit d'aller chez ces barbares, c'est parce que nous avons le devoir de les civiliser. (...) Il faut non pas les traiter en égaux, mais se placer au point de vue d'une race supérieure qui conquiert... Les nations ne sont grandes que par l'activité qu'elles développent ; ce n'est pas le rayonnement pacifique qu'elles sont grandes à l'heure qu'il est.... Nous devons nous mettre en mesure de faire ce que font les autres nations et, puisque la politique d'expansion coloniale est le mouvement général des puissances européennes, nous devons en prendre notre part....La France ne veut pas être seulement un pays libre, mais un grand pays, exerçant son influence sur les destinées du monde et répandant, partout où il peut les porter, ses mœurs, sa langue, ses armes, son drapeau, son génie.

In order to implement these principles, France did not refrain from using brutal methods to subdue the indigenous populations in Algeria. Alexis Tocqueville (2001:122).believed that "the barbarism of the Algerians imposes certain obligations on the French associated with their superior level of civilization. They are to serve as a mediating force and a civilizing influence on these peoples." His support of Marshal Bugeaud's use of brutal force seems at odds with his liberal ideals and defence of freedom and human rights. He believed that "M. Bugeaud has rendered a great service to his country on the soil of Africa, and here is the service. He is the first to have applied, everywhere at once, the type of war that in my eyes, as in his, is the

only type of war applicable in Africa. He has practiced this system of war with an unequalled energy and vigor."(Ibid) The Kabyle Myth did not prevent France from using unrestrained force and violence to thwart the Kabyles' insurrections. After the El Mokrani Insurrection of 1871, punitive measures were taken against the Kabyles to subdue and pacify them. Expropriation and seizure of land and levying of heavy taxes was followed.

The Saint-Simonist Dr Eugène Bodichon advocated playing on the existing rivalries between the Arabs and the Kabyles to create real antagonisms between the two groups. In his *Considérations sur l'Algérie*(1845:98) Eugène Bodichon writes, 'Depuis l'arrivée des arabes en Afrique, un levain d'hostilité, une séparation infranchissable, ont toujours existe entre eux et les Kabyles. La religion et les autres points de contact ne les ont pas fait disparaitre. Cela durera longtemps encore; car les haines nationales ne se s'éteignent pas, quand elles dérivent, comme celle-ci, d'une différence d'origine, de mœurs, de besoin et de caractère. " A real antagonism, Mrs Rogers (1865:253) says, which resulted from unbridgeable differences of character. This antagonism, Mrs Rogers writes, was especially proved in 1839, when the Kabyles defended the persons and property of the Europeans against the Arabs, before whom their conduct has always stood in strong contrast.

Eugène Bodichon goes as a far as to write "Afin d'assurer sa domination La France doit développer cet instinct antipathique entre Arabes et Kabyles et mettre à sa convenance les deux races aux prises l'une contre l'autre." This Machiavellian policy was, according to Bodichon, necessary for France to expand its rule and thwart any possible rebellion. He argues that using one group against the other was amply justified. In the following quotation we can notice the use of the word enemy for both groups and not only the Arabs,

par ce système, nous contenons nos ennemis les uns par les autres. Notre appui fait pencher la balance vers qui nous voulons; nous pouvons punir qui bon nous semble, nous évitons de nombreux embarras, nous faisons agir ans agir nous-mêmes, si nous trouvons de l'inconvénient. (Eugène Bodichon, 98-9)

6-Conclusion:

Travelling at a time when the Kabyle Myth was no longer *en vogue*, British author Simon Henry Leeder qualifies the Kabyles as barbarous. He writes (1910:18) "the caravans journeying thither across the Sahara were often the prey of those barbarous mountaineers of the Kabyle race who demanded toll." Edward Said argues that the Orient only lives and exists in the Western imagination. In his introduction Said (1978:1) writes that "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." Likewise, Kabyle exceptionalism was invented, mobilized and ended for the purposes of imperial consumption. The differences between the two groups were not drastic and as the uprising of the Kabyles would convince many Westerners that the Kabyles were like the Arabs.

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