



## The origins and functions of the first translators during the French occupation of Algeria

**BENHADDI Zine Elabidine \***

University of Hassiba Ben Bouali Chlef (Algeria) , [benhaddifuture@yahoo.fr](mailto:benhaddifuture@yahoo.fr)

*Received: 18/07/2023*

*Accepted: 01/10/2023*

*Published: 31/12/2023*

DOI: 10.53284/2120-010-004-002

### **Abstract:**

The French colonial policy sought to diversify its means in order to extend and tighten its control over Algeria and Algerians, employing French and Algerian translators for many purposes, holding them in various positions in departments and institutions and assigning them translation tasks in order to dominate the Algerian people educationally, politically, commercially, militarily and even financially. Colonial France also exploited the qualifications of Algerian translators in particular and their knowledge of the linguistic and ideological aspects of the Algerian people to carry out its non-innocent purposes in an effort to contain the Algerian people culturally and civilly. France made use of translators in order to communicate access and control the general public. Based on the above, this paper aims at identifying the origins of these first translators, who were appointed by France, and to highlight the functions assigned to them in various military, political and commercial institutions and departments.

**Keywords:** Translators - first - origins - Jobs - occupation.

\* Corresponding author



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Translation has been, and continues to be, a tool for communication between nations and peoples of different ages, cultures and civilizations, as well as their historical and geographical affiliations; it is considered a human activity in line with the pace of human social growth and development. Translation has also contributed to the development of human activities, facilitating economic, military, cultural, scientific and even religious communication between peoples, making nations interact with each other despite their divergent geographical boundaries. Translation is an effective tool for communication between tribes and human communities, both in peace time, commercial activities, wartime treaties and conventions. Throughout history, translators and interpreters have played a vital role in transmitting the cultural and human heritage of peoples from one language to another and from one generation to another with the intention of communicating, reporting and benefiting. It is undeniable that translation, as an effective means of communication, is present in every field and domain of knowledge, whether scientific, artistic, cultural, technical, religious, political or military.

Throughout history, the noble goals of translation have been to facilitate communication among peoples, spread cultures, exchange of scientific and technical expertise and knowledge, and enrich human scientific and knowledge, but some have used this vital means to carry out innocent purposes, especially the unjust colonial campaigns, which sought by all means, to conquest peoples culturally and attempts to contain them civilly, erase their identity and obliterate their cultural and historical features by employing translators and assigning them various sensitive jobs to enable them to communicate with and control peoples. Algeria, like many countries of the world, has witnessed periods that shaped its history, and the Algerian people, despite their different dialects, remained steadfast in the face of the policy of separation adopted by the French colonial brute.

In light of the unjust policy pursued by the French occupation, we realized early that translation is the only way and the fastest and easiest way to run its affairs and implement it in the Algerian community, and thanks to the translation increase its knowledge and experience of the secrets, components and orientations of the Algerian people, which makes it easier for the French colonialism to reach it and interact with the environment in which they live. As Abou Al-Gassem Saadallah's fifth book on the Cultural History of Algeria says, "whatever the genius of a French official in a foreign country, he has to rely on his secretary, i.e the translator, who is characterized<sup>†</sup> by intelligence, talent, experience and national feeling." The translation process quickly shifted



from being an oral translation carried out with the general public in markets, offices and others to a process of written translation of official documents in institutions and departments and was the beginning of official control in the regions and areas of Algerian territory.

## **2-Role of translators and interpreters in expanding French occupation:**

Upon their arrival, the French military columns found a country whose social composition, administrative organization and traditions they were unaware of. First of all, their leaders immediately tried to impose on the country a repressive military administrative organization. Subsequently, they implemented an organization modelled on that of the metropolis, which also proved ineffective. Finally they adopted in turn, a management of the country in the manner of the Turks then that applied by Emir Abdelkader. These unsuccessful attempts to bring the situation under control prompted the colonial authorities to give military and civilian interpreters a leading role in the country's administrative and social structures.

To do this and to act effectively, the interpreters recur as a result of training in all fields: mastery of the Arabic language and dialectal, contact and monitoring of citizens and tribes through the Arab offices, activities and responsibility in the institutions of justice. As for the relationship between the interpreters and Emir Abdelkader, it illustrates the involvement of the latter in providing information on his war strategy, as well as information on the tribes fighting alongside him. In the light of what has been reported on the contribution of interpreters in military and civilian institutions, it can be said that their activities were more than indispensable to the process of colonization of Algeria.

But despite all the military arsenal deployed and imposed on the country through time and the psychological means employed to erase the cultural memory of Algerian society, despite the misuse of the legal arsenal, the people finally managed to break the chains of fear and rose up as one against the unbearable yoke of colonization. It happened on November 1, 1954, as the Tunisian poet Aboul-Kacem-Chabi wrote, "If one day the people wanted to live, he will have to respond to its determination, the night will have to fade and the chains will have to break."

The training of interpreters in various sectors, by the French government and the army during the successive stages of the conquest of Algiers, then of Algeria, allowed the administrative and military institutions, to be able to manage the country according to the political conceptions and choices of the time. This to say that many Europeans and even Algerians (in small numbers), who had benefited from this training and who consequently rendered more than appreciable services to the French authorities, whether by military acts, by translation operations, or by judicial activities. In terms of teaching, the colonial authorities' policy had done everything possible to prevent Islamic institutions such as mosques and Zaias from continuing to dispense the precepts of Islam. It is



appropriate in this sense to recall that de Bourmont said to his soldiers: "You have reconnected with the crusaders". Then the latter, forgetting the promises of their leader to respect as he had declared the Muslim religion, desecrated the Muslim places of worship. Persuaded to be at home in the land of St. Augustine, St. Donatus, Tertullian, St. Cyprian, they forgot that the country they came to conquer was won over 13 centuries ago by Islam(...) they were recruited from among Europeans as well as Jews and Arabs, as we said. All, therefore, have withdrawn formations which are ready to occupy positions and responsibilities of great importance, in order to achieve the objectives outlined by colonial policy, the integration and assimilation of Algerians to ultimately transform them into subjects submitted to the French authorities of the time. **(Féraud, 1876)**

The interpreters were therefore indispensable agents for the army and the colonial administration, used to fully grasp all the data on the Algerian population, with all its tribal components, its dialects, its way of life, its strengths and weaknesses, its culture, its morals, with the proven aim of subjugating it, of breaking its combativity, and in order to fully exploit all its riches. All established institutions, achievements, such as hospitals, schools, bridges, roads, various administrations, were intended.

Thus at the beginning of the embarkation of the French troops at Toulon, Levantines were recruited from around the eastern Mediterranean; subsequently, as the national territory was occupied, interpreters arrived in all colonial institutions. They held posts in the army, in Arab offices, in embassies and consulates. As for their origins, they came from various backgrounds, French certainly, but also Egyptian Copts, Syrians, Jews from Marseilles or Algiers. **(Féraud, 1876)**

All these executives were dedicated to their mission of serving colonization. Their tasks were to provide useful information, to bring European settlers closer to Algerian natives, to impose the policy of assimilation on Algerians, to minimize the impact of the literal Arabic language, to annihilate the personality of young Algerians of Arab-Amazigh descent. Moreover, it was thanks to their activities that the French troops were able to penetrate the fiefdoms of the tribes both in the north and in the south of the country.

We emphasize that not only in the East, but especially in Africa or Algeria, the interpreters were essential actors. Colonial military and civilian authorities could not divest themselves of their services.

Thus the military interpreters played a leading role, not only in the preliminary conquest of Algeria, but also through their interactions and interventions in the colonial administration. If at the beginning of the expedition the interpreter profile did not require any particular skill for some of them, it was from 1846 that the body became hierarchical and subjected to regular examinations. Scientific recognition of Algeria required interpreters, scientific knowledge for the country's modernization projects. The modernization of the country must be taken into account: the creation

## The origins and functions of the first translators during the French occupation of Algeria

---



of administrative, social and economic infrastructures for the benefit especially of the European Community.

The interpreters, by their abilities, their skills in the mastery of languages, as part of their activities and their familiarity with different ethnic groups, played a leading role in the exchanges between colonized and colonizers. They also helped create a documentary background on the conquered country

They were translators, teachers and scientists, members of learned societies and had to publish several works, such as the celebrated William Mac-Guckin de Slane (1801-1878). In fact, as we mentioned, the body of interpreters has evolved in its organization and capacities, according to the moments and events of Algeria's colonial history. **(Féraud, 1876)**

Indeed, from the moment the trio: Antoine Silvestre de Sacy, Xavier Bianchi and Charles Zaccar, drafted the proclamation to the Arabs, signed by General de Bourmont, in the spring of 1830, the body has evolved in its organization, by the recruitment of many personalities, from various origins: Coptic Egyptians, Maronite Syrians, North Africans. This institution, of which he is the subject, has gradually evolved, in terms of its legislation and regulations, as well as its logistical organization through the ages. **(Vincennes)**

However, if the activities of the military interpreters and what they had undertaken or written about the colonial period and about the aspects of Algerian society of the time, were deciphered by the French authors, it remains that the views of Algerian authors on this subject are still in their infancy. May their future work shed additional and more realistic light on this question which touches on the history of the country. But despite the armada of military means, the sending of explorers, interpreters, religious, spies, notwithstanding all the strategies put in place.

From 1830 to 1847, a merciless struggle was engaged to bring down men who, according to the conquerors, did not have the notion of homeland. But every ounce of land was acquired by blood. The conquest of towns, villages and douars was carried out at the cost of priceless sacrifices. The Arab and Kabyle tribes, jealous of their independence, had a blatant hatred for foreign domination. It took the French army to undertake terrible raids by looting houses, property, or burning crops. The unfortunate inhabitants were massacred or left to all the horrors of brutality.

The training of interpreters in various sectors, by the French government and the army during the successive stages of the conquest of Algiers, then of Algeria, allowed the administrative and military institutions, to be able to manage the country according to the political conceptions and choices of the time. This to say that many Europeans and even Algerians (in small numbers), who had benefited from this training and who consequently rendered more than appreciable services to the French authorities, whether by military acts, by translation operations, or by judicial activities.



In terms of teaching, the colonial authorities' policy had done everything possible to prevent Islamic institutions such as mosques and Zaïas from continuing to dispense the precepts of Islam.

It is appropriate in this sense to recall that de Bourmont said to his soldiers: "You have reconnected with the crusaders". Then the latter, forgetting the promises of their leader to respect as he had declared the Muslim religion, desecrated the Muslim places of worship. Persuaded to be at home in the land of St. Augustine, St. Donatus, Tertullian, St. Cyprian, they forgot that the country they came to conquer was won over 13 centuries ago by Islam(...) they were recruited from among Europeans as well as Jews and Arabs, as we said. All, therefore, have withdrawn formations which are ready to occupy positions and responsibilities of great importance, in order to achieve the objectives outlined by colonial policy, the integration and assimilation of Algerians to ultimately transform them into subjects submitted to the French authorities of the time. **(Féraud, 1876)**

The interpreters were therefore indispensable agents for the army and the colonial administration, used to fully grasp all the data on the Algerian population, with all its tribal components, its dialects, its way of life, its strengths and weaknesses, its culture, its morals, with the proven aim of subjugating it, of breaking its combativity, and in order to fully exploit all its riches. All established institutions, achievements, such as hospitals, schools, bridges, roads, various administrations, were intended.

The aim was not only to attract and recruit translators who were fluent in French and Arabic, but also to form a cadre of administrators who combined knowledge of French laws and Arab customs and laws. Port health and other sectors, the translator Dubene News (d'Aubignoseleas general (Lieutenant general) was installed at the head of the police, Gerard (Gerardin) headed an important interest in the interest of the two State Domaines de l'Etat), while the task of studying the resources and revenues of the Oseep de Eusebe de Salesnet was entrusted as the translator as John Messrant) (By Jean Mirante)

Director of People ' s Affairs in the General Government of Algeria. For colonial and strategic reasons, this movement has moved more toward moving from Arabic to French in an attempt to identify the " other" and find ways to control it. A number of translators, who were mostly Arabs of the Levant or Jews and some French Orientalists, participated in this task, the most important of which are George Groui (G.Gaoue) (Syrian), Jean Charles Zaccar (J.CH Zaccar) (Syrian), Abraham Deninos (Adaninos) (Algerian with French nationality), Janie Pharaoh (J.Pharaon) and many others). In general, they are translators whose social, political and military rank and status vary, some being a judge, some being a doctor and others being promoted

It can be said that the task of ethnographic translators was twofold: On the one hand, they worked to prepare the ground for the colonial invasion and to provide the necessary field data for the success of the colonial project, and on the other hand, they collected important scientific knowledge about





the Maghreb countries and published many of them in the form of books and books bearing modern projects.

Thanks to their contributions in various fields of history, geography ... Etc) in Algeria, thanks to the Arab Office, forty volumes were produced and published between 1844 and 1867, and in Morocco, The "Moroccan cities and tribes Series" (1915-1932) was published, and the Italians also did so in Libya, but to a lesser extent, which is paradoxically referring to the re-reading of the knowledge of military translators according to the different historical contexts that created this form of knowledge and re-analyzing it in that context.

This first generation of interpreters has been severely criticized for their incompetence or dishonesty. In 1863 Maréchal Pélissier distinguished three categories: "1° one who spoke French but not Arabic (the sons of a family); 2° the other who spoke Arabic but not French (the Jews); and the last composed of adventurers, knew neither French nor Arabic." The line, forced, is not based on a direct observation<sup>20</sup>, but it synthesizes judgments made by contemporaries. According to Eusebius de Salles, himself an interpreter of the expedition, a third of the interpreters, recruited for their proximity to the ultra government, would have been ignorant «of the idioms that are spoken in Algiers»<sup>21</sup>. The interpreter testifies to the difficulties he himself encountered, the Arabic in use in Algiers being sufficiently different from the usual Arabic that he learned in Paris from Orientaux so that it took him «a month before he heard and spoke fluently»: he was not "attached only to cabinet work"<sup>22</sup> – his fictional alter ego highlights the difficulties encountered in deciphering manuscripts<sup>23</sup>. The specificity of the Maghreb customs thus hindered the action of the first performers, whether they were trained in Paris, Marseille, Egypt or Syria.

The action of the interpreters is twofold: it does not consist only in a collection of knowledge about Algeria, its languages, its populations, its history and their availability to a French audience. It is also a question of spreading in Algeria what the French elites consider as «progress» and of putting in place means to access it, whether through French (which interpreters often teach to the natives, in addition to their service) or Arabic (by working on the publication of new works conveying the civilizing project). Before becoming an interpreter, Prudent Vignard taught Arabic at the College of Algiers, Alfred Clerc (1829-1876), director of an Arab-French school, and, for the next generation, Fernand Philippe (1843-1899) and Auguste de Latour (1850-1885), repeaters at the Imperial Arabic-French College in Algiers and directors of Arab-French schools. Between 1868 and 1872 Pilard taught arithmetic, French, and notions of history and geography at the Tlemcen Madrasa, which he directed, at least in 1874<sup>64</sup>. The *Mobacher*, a bilingual official newspaper founded in Algiers in 1847, in 1855 praised the success of the French language course for children, which was opened at the Batna mosque by the interpreter of the Arab office, himself indigenous.



### 3-The origins and functions of the first Translators:

#### 3-1-French and Orientalist translators:

In this section we will present the origins of these first translators who were involved in the military campaign against Algeria, as well as the origins of other translators who practiced translation during the colonial era.

**-George Garone:** Its origins: Syrian origin.

His job: He joined the mission from Toulon with the rank of interpreter guide, who considered himself the right man, protected by joining the territory of Algeria to try to change the prevailing misconceptions about the French mission and try to convince the inhabitants of the capital that France was the savior who came to liberate them from the brutality and cruelty of the unjust Turkish rule, which oppressed their rights. It is funny that this protective hero has in turn become an unjust and tyrannical colonizer. **(Vincennes)**

Because of his Syrian accent, which is completely alien to the Algerian dialect, he was soon arrested by the Turks and was the first interpreter to go as a sacrifice to the Franco-Turkish cause, where he was beheaded by the order of the Turkish pasha and displayed in the Kasbah Square.

**-Ayas Leon:** Origins: French, born in Marseille on October 18, 1807.

His job: He began as a translator guide in 1830, then was promoted to the rank of interpreter of the third degree in 1840 and of the second degree in 1845, receiving the order of the Knight of the Legion of Honour in 1846. Ayas was known for his courage and successful initiatives, the most important of which was his mission in Oran, and contributed to the arrest of Prince Abdul Qadir, wounded in his battle against Boumaizza, died in 1846.

**-Louis de Bracevich :** Origins: French, born in 1772. **(Merle, 1850)**

His job: He previously served in the French army in his campaign against Egypt as a former interpreter of Emperor Bonaparte, who translated the official meeting between Commander Bounonton and the first Secretary of the Pasha Hussein, Sidi Mustafa sent to the Pasha Hussein as a last attempt to avoid war. He died in Algiers on July 19, 1830, and was buried in the Bab al-Oued cemetery.

**-Jean Charles Zaccar :** His origins: Zakar or Father Zakar, Syrian



## The origins and functions of the first translators during the French occupation of Algeria

---



He was born in Syria on January 19, 1789, a priest who studied in a monastery in Lebanon, took refuge in Marseille to escape the political differences that brought his country into the maze.

His job: He worked as a priest in the Church of Saint Nicolas, summoned to Paris in 1830 to write the Manifesto for the inhabitants of Algiers.

**-Jacob Habaibya:** Origin: French, born in Egypt. (**Vincennes**)

Former colonel of the Royal Guard and officer of the Legion of honor, appointed as a first-class translator in 1830, after the invasion of Algeria, he returned to France with his two sons Habaib Daoud, Joseph

**-Henry Remust :** Origins: French, born on March 26, 1798 in Aleppo, Syria.

His job: He joined the mission army as a translator and guide, where he was assigned to conclude peace treaties in both Bouna and Béjaïa in 1835, and Mostaganem in 1836 with Bey Ibrahim in 1839 was appointed Director of Arab Affairs in Algiers, and received his first promotion and became a second-class interpreter on April 1, 1840. Then a first-class translator on August 1, 1843, drawing many books, the most important of which is the " History of Africa" of Kerouani, received the Medal of honor in 1848, and died in Algiers on April 12, 1874.

**-Eusèbe Salle:** Origins : French, student of the Royal School of Oriental Languages in Paris and doctor.

His job : He was appointed a second-class interpreter in 1830 after the capture of Algiers, charged with the completion of a report on the economic revenues and profits of Algiers and its suburbs, this work was printed and published for the accuracy and importance of the information he provided, resigned from his post and returned to France where he was appointed professor at the School of Arabic in Marseille. He has published many books about Algeria.

**-Thomas Brahmscha:** Origins: Syrian, born Aleppo Syria in July 1805. (**Féraud, 1876**)

His job: A priest in a Lebanese church who joined the mission army with his friend Father Zakar, was appointed as a third-degree interpreter on 5 April 1830, then to the second degree on 14 October 1831, and the first degree on 17 April 1839, on 13 March 1845, promoted to the rank of chief interpreter, He received the Medal of honor on August 17, 1841, retired and died in Oran in 1963.



**-Xavier Dumont:** Origins: French, born March 24, 1813 in France.

His job: He joined the translation body directed to Algeria as a third-degree interpreter on December 31, 1840, and was promoted to second-degree on January 21, 1842, author of " the first Guide to Reading Arabic Manuscripts."

**-Auguste Martin :** Origins: French, born in Syria to a French family on August 21, 1817.

His job: He moved to Bonn to work as a translator on January 24, 1834; he became a third-rate translator in the second campaign of Constantine in 1837; he remained under the service of General Negriere until 1841, where he resigned. However, he was re-installed in the province of Constantine with the rank of second-class interpreter on July 11, 1844, and first-class on March 13, 1845, and then appointed at his will as first-class Drogaan tram in the province of Constantine. On August 12, 1846, he joined the Directorate of Arab Affairs as a principal translator on January 24, 1865, wrote many books and translated many works, 38% of which were " History of France", and received the Medal of honor on December 20, 1843. **(Féraud, 1876)**

**-Laurent Charles Fraud :**

Origins: Born in France on February 5, 1820.

His job: He worked as a translator in the police in 1848, joined the military translators as a second-class assistant translator on August 31, 1850, and then as a first-class assistant translator on January 24, 1853, then moved to the rank of primary translator of the third class in 1853, and to the second class in 1857. First class in 1867.

### **3-2-The Algerian translators:**

**-Ahmed Ben Rouila:** Origins: Born in Algiers in 1830, son of Si Kaddour Ben Ruila, Amir Abdelkader and his private advisor, was captured at an early age and sent to France in 1843 where he was educated at the French school of Saint Louis Paris, in 1850. **(Abulkasim Saadallah, 1998)**

His job: He participated in the interpreter competition and was appointed as a second-class assistant translator, and in 1852 he moved to the first class, he served as a deputy lieutenant in the Bureau of Arab Affairs, killed in his hometown of Tekuen, western Algeria.

**-Cherif Ali :** Origins: Born in Algiers in 1829, son of Haj Ahmed Al-Sharif.



He was appointed as a second-class assistant translator in June 1850, and then moved to the first class on January 16, 1852, receiving the Medal of honor in 1863, after retiring as a general councilor in the province of Algiers.

**-Khatiri Ahmed:** Born in Béjaïa in 1826, he has dealt with the French authority since its existence on the territory of Algeria.

**His job:** He joined the Bureau of Arab Affairs in Bejaia as a guide in April 1847, then was appointed as a temporary interpreter of Berber-Amazigh on May 18, 1853, became an assistant interpreter of the second degree on May 6, 1854, but in fact he was best known for his work as the head of the movement as a translator. He provided many information and assistance that helped France in its various campaigns against the tribes, most notably the Battle of Bejaia in 1851, and the Babur Mountains Jirgarh in 1853, receiving the Medal of honor on June 7, 1865. He resigned from the ordeal of translation on 20 May 1868 and joined a volunteer in the French army to participate with him in extinguishing the revolt of Sheikh Aziz ibn Haddad Ali Bejaia in 1871.

**-Ahmed Ben Brimat:** Born in December 1852 in Algiers, a high school student in Algiers. (Abulkasim Saadallah, 1998)

He joined the interpreters as a second-class assistant translator on March 18, 1873, and moved to first-class on June 3, 1875.

**-Moussa El Chergui:** Born in Algiers on April 20, 1820, he obtained French citizenship on December 5, 1866.

He joined the interpreters as a temporary translator on February 19, 1846, moved to the rank of Second Class Assistant Translator on March 6, 1854, and received the Medal of honor on December 7, 1875.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

After the occupation, the French authorities were forced to place interpreters in administrative positions for the conduct of the country ' s affairs; Such as the management of state property and public lands, the gendarmerie, health and the navy, translation was used in the administrations, press and judiciary, and work was done to combat the Arabic language. Therefore, translation has played a vital role in the exploitation of lands and minds and thus the transfer and enrichment of the Islamic heritage to the French language. Unfortunately, the translation from French has been dormant for a long time if not non-existent, even if it exists, it is more political media than educational literature.



It is also undeniable that Algerian and French translators participated in the translation of some legal, military and political texts at the beginning of the campaign, and cooperated in the completion of dictionaries and educational books in bilingual languages, which later covered the scientific, doctrinal and other fields.

## 5. Bibliography List:

- Abulkasim Saadallah, 1998 Cultural History of Algeria, Part V, 1830/1954, Arab Islamic Publishing House, Algeria
- Charles Féraud, 1876, Les Interprètes de l'Armée d'Afriques.( Archives du Corps) suivi d'une notice sur les interprètes civils et judiciaires, Alger.
- M. Merle, 1850, : Anecdotes historiques sur les conquêtes c'Alger en 1830.
- Archive of the Ministry of War in Vincent, Paris, France.
- Charles Ferro, interpreters of the African Army, Archives of the Ministry of War in Fansane, Paris, France.
- Abulkasim Saadallah, 1998, Cultural History of Algeria, Part V, 180-1854, Dar Al Gharb Islamic
- Abulkasim Saadallah, 1998, Cultural History of Algeria, Part VIII, 180-1854, Dar Al Gharb Islamic