Illustration by Gambinus, *Le Siroco,* May 7, 1870. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, BIB AOM 30745.

Can the Indigenous Speak? The Speech of the Colonized in the Colonial Press in Algeria in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: Looking into the expression of an indigenous speech in the colonial press published in Algeria in the nineteenth century is not without its difficulties. One might think that *a priori* these newspapers would not permit the native populations to speak, for practical reasons as much as political and social ones. This article rests on a few cases taken from colonial newspapers and aims at examining the words that the colonizers stole to those who had become "indigenous" in the colonial lexicon: for which texts were they credited? How did they emerge and what literary ethos was being built? In these texts targeted at colonizers, the fact that indigenous people were expressing themselves was being questioned as it revealed the ideological foundations of colonization through that particular type of literature. Arabian poetry was one axis to apprehend native discourse, that is, an idealized speech that was still connected to orientalism and the thirst for "local color." Historical texts also provided a second access to this discourse, this time from a scholarly perspective, which turned colonial words into dominant discourse even when it came to historical truth. Finally, on a different level, caricatures highlighted the representation of the spoken word by the indigenous. These three types of texts, considered as a whole and illustrated here by precise examples, share a common presentation of a colonial voice that relays the voice of the colonized. What remains is to observe the rare cases of texts claiming a native signature, which deserve our attention given their unusual character.

Keywords: Indigenous speech – colonial press – Algeria – nineteenth century – subaltern – Oriental poetry – *Moniteur algérien* – caricature – irony – Arabic language

Looking into the expression of indigenous speech in the colonial press published in Algeria in the nineteenth century is not without its difficulties. One might think *a priori* that these newspapers would not permit the native populations to speak, for practical reasons as much as political and social ones—these newspapers are in French, and it would be necessary to wait for French to become widespread, or Arabic to be recognized, for real indigenous speech to emerge in the press.[1] Furthermore, the press was part of the colonial structure, and it thus appears unlikely that the point of view of the indigenous person could be expressed or taken into account within it, since the latter was not considered a citizen or a fully-fledged subject. It is in this sense that we have borrowed our title from the wording Gayatri C. Spivak chose for her study of "subalterns" and their problematic speech.[2] For more terminological precision, in our study we are replacing "subaltern" with "indigenous": Indigenous peoples in colonized countries are de facto placed in a subaltern position, symbolically. But indigenous is the term employed legally[3] in the colonial context and indicates more specifically the reality within it. Nevertheless, the question remains fundamentally the same: the possibility given to a minority to express itself and the escorting discourses that accompany this potential speech. The possibility of reformulating indigenous with "colonized" implies the same semantic work: through colonized we are implicitly evoking the Other, that is, the colonizer. It is in fact the mix of these two speeches that we are aiming at and the interactions between two social groups.

Even in 1974, after the decolonization processes had been completed, Louis-Jean Calvet evoked the definition that the French standard *Robert* dictionary gives of colonization and from it draws the conclusion, "this article presents a remarkable absence: that of the colonized. The colonies are thus empty countries,"[4] and this image would be necessary to justify colonization. But it is in starting out from this supposed absence that one can initiate a genuine reflection on the meaning of indigenous speech in the non-metropolitan French press, even if it is rare. This essay focuses on the official press—*Le Moniteur algérien* (The Algerian Monitor)—as much as private periodicals. These publications are all written, published, and read on Algerian territory. I will examine indigenous expression on the basis of specific examples and according to different columns, not for the purpose of being exhaustive, but rather to offer an account of what was available in such publications: poetry, history, caricature, and the possibilities of an assumed expression without an escorting discourse.

Indigenous Speech Authorized: Poetry

The connection between the indigenous populations and poetry appears to be predominant in the media imagination of the Algerian colony. The first manifestations of indigenous speech in the press occur through the medium of poetry, in a perspective marked by Orientalism and its representation of a fantasized Orient.

Thus, in 1840 already, we discover in *Le Moniteur algérien* "a free translation of some Oriental poetry"[5] on the third page, where several short extracts of translated Arab poems follow one after another without comment. But gradually, as colonization intensified, the translations, which are offered at regular intervals in the newspapers, are more often than not accompanied by explanatory notes that frame source texts and explain them. Thus, in 1864, Augustin Marquand writes a *Variétés* (Varieties) column entitled "Les Poètes du Sa'hara" (The Poets of the Sahara), featuring "Pindares du douar ou de la tente"[6] (Pindars of the *Douar* or of the Tent), which he acknowledges as the source of inspiration for the French Orientalist poets. He then mixes up quotations and commentaries, as in this extract, in which two lines of poetry are accompanied by a contextualizing sentence and a concurrent paragraph brimming over with images:

> Another nomad appeals for a kiss from the living houri of his dreams:
>
> To Djemila
>
> Djemila! My glances are sown with roses on your cheeks.
>
> The law of the Prophet permits he who sows to harvest.
>
> Usually, these poems are sung in the bluish vales where the wadis illuminate with reflections of silver the fragile branches of the Mauritanian jujube tree, where the euphorbia of Sudan blossom at the foot of heaped dunes, and where the gazelles lose their way in the distance in an Asiatic *salem*.[7]

The indigenous viewpoint, even in a poetic and amorous domain, thus only seems roughly outlined. The voice of the commentator, of the translator, of the colonizer, emerges and demonstrates his ability not only to comment upon but also to appropriate what is seen as the essence of the Arab style, visible here in the ternary rhythm, the choice of alien linguistic terms that had become commonplace (wadi, *salem*), and the scope of the sentence. By framing these translated Arabic lines of poetry, the colonizer, as it were, steals the voice of the colonized. This rather habitual mimetism, which we find in particular among the authors of the Enlightenment, develops an image of the Arabic language.

Let us add that while Arab poetry is published and commented on in the newspapers, it is clear that it is because the colonial journalist can highlight its primitive and naive beauty. It was unthinkable that Romantic poetry

and its codes could serve to express an indigenous point of view. Thus, in 1846, the *Moniteur algérien* published a Romantic-seeming poem, supposedly written by a native, but which the journalist—whose speech frames the text—analyses as a fake poem precisely because of its similarity to a French aesthetic norm.[8]

Indigenous Speech Questioned: History and Sources

The history common to the colonized and the colonizers is also favorable to the expression of an indigenous point of view. But the translation of the indigenous perspective is once again carried out with a framing colonial discourse, without anyone being surprised about it. In the 1850s particularly, translations of historical texts by scholars such as Auguste Cherbonneau,[9] a university professor of Arabic, and Adrien Berbrugger, an archaeologist and custodian of the Algiers library-museum and editor-in-chief of the *Moniteur algérien,*[10] flourished in newspapers. In the April 20, 1849 edition of the *Moniteur algérien*, we can find, for example, an article published on the second page titled, "Dernière expédition et mort de Saint-Louis. Chapitre inédit de l'histoire des dynasties musulmanes et des tribus arabes et berbères de l'Afrique septentrionale, d'Ibn-Khaldoun"[11] ("The Last Expedition and Death of Saint Louis. An Unpublished Chapter of the History of the Muslim Dynasties and of the Arab and Berber Tribes of North Africa, by Ibn Khaldun"). This article is drawn from the work of a scholar, the Baron of Slane, which guides the text with no less than twenty-six correcting footnotes. The critical apparatus is habitual for a scholarly text, but its publication in the press could have allowed for a few adjustments, because the layout itself becomes a hybrid form that complicates the reading. The reasons for doing this must be questioned.

The notes here play the role of an overarching discourse. In this relatively short extract, the translator picks up on four errors, presented with the following turns of phrase: "our author is mistaken" (concerning the dates given); "the author's grandfather is mistaken" (concerning the presence of the queen of France); "this is an error" (concerning the sons of Saint Louis), and, further on, "another error: we have already said that the queen had remained in France," a phrasing which allowed for a kind of dialogue between author and translator, if not a history lesson given by a fastidious professor. If one can here talk of ethos[12] to describe the personality of the author, which the text constructs, it indeed seems that this ethos is in effect that of a scholar using notes to correct the words of a not very rigorous author.

It should also be noted that the image of the French is tarnished by means of one of the major figures in the country's history. Saint Louis is described as a perfidious sovereign, motivated exclusively by money. The author recounts how the sultan of Tunis tried to dissuade Saint Louis, and the scene described here is remarkable for several reasons:

> To support their negotiations, these emissaries, it is said, brought with them a sum of eighty thousand pieces of gold. The king accepted the money and then announced to them that the expedition would be led against their country. When they demanded the return of their money, the king replied that he had not received it. While they were with him, there arrived an ambassador sent by the sovereign of Egypt. He was presented to the king of France, who invited him to be seated. The ambassador refused, and, stood as he was, he recited the following lines of verse, by Ibn Matroub, the poet of the sultan of Egypt:
>
> "Go and tell the French the words of a sincere monitor:
>
> May God remunerate you for having killed so many Christians, worshippers of the Messiah!"[13]

Here we find poetry as the defining speech of the Other, and as proof of a historic grandeur. We also see how positive values are on the side of the Other. In a press read by the colonizers this change of perspective is fundamental. It varies the perception in order to offer an image of an impartial colonization at the same time as making clear the shrewd ambition of this colonization. But the interest of this passage also lies in the footnote added by the translator. In it he writes that "Ibn Khaldun reports this anecdote as hearsay, proof, on his part, that he found it hard to believe."[14] The French commentator thus disapproves of the oral speech, and notes the honesty of the written speech. Thus, he positions himself as an arbiter and an attentive reader of the Arab text, in an attitude common to scholars who contribute to Algerian periodicals and offer the readers an insight into history as seen by the indigenous peoples.[15]

Indigenous Speech in Situation: Caricature and Devaluation

When it comes to broaching the political question and the daily voice of the indigenous—what emerges not from texts but from the street—it is noticeable that poetry and history have become out of place. Above all it is the caricature, published in satirical newspapers emerging in the 1870s, that enables us to see how the indigenous point of view can be expressed and discredited at one and the same time. For caricatures developed after the 1870s, we might take the example of *Siroco,*[16] an "Arab scene" in which can be found an incompetent translator, an indigenous person who can in fact express himself in poor French, and an administrator ruled by prejudices. Here, political claims are replaced by the image of the cunning and thieving Arab ("he

admits to cheating a Frenchman at cards"). This caricature reveals a political situation in which the indigenous figure, mocked for his command of French, is not even listened to. Misinterpreted by the translator, viewed according to a negative stereotype, his speech is of secondary importance because of his language. The equivalent of this expression can be found in written form, without an illustration this time, but with the same satirical impact, in the transcription of accents. In 1881, for example, the *Courrier d'Oran*[17] published a letter to its director, signed "Z., *fils di* Dennoun,"[18] which plays the same belittling role by presenting a form of French discredited by the accent ("*di*" should be pronounced "*de*"). These texts are not often found during the first years of Algerian media output, for reasons that are as much down to the real use of French by the indigenous peoples as to a general colonial attitude, which seems to have evolved. This comical and racist remit, which an already well-established colonization asserts in the 1870s, is reinforced in the following decade, and moves onto another level: it no longer represents but shows an illusion of reality.

Indigenous Free Speech: Two Isolated Examples

If the majority of discourses are framed and commented on no matter the newspaper or its political hue over the course of time, we nevertheless find traces of indigenous speech that is not commented on immediately. In August 1851, three "indigenous columns" appeared in the *Akhbar,*[19] supplemented by two regular articles and signed by Ismael ben Mohammed Khodja, who within them questions the functioning of the French colony while affirming his indigenous identity. We find this passage at the beginning of the column:

> Around three years ago, there was written all over Algiers, above the doors of the houses of the *beylik*, a short inscription, always the same one. I asked a Frenchman to explain it to me; and I believe I more or less understood it, apart from the second word, about which I believe I was mistaken. Because, in the end, these inscriptions, on which can be read *Equality*, between Liberty and Fraternity, are some painted in black tempera and others engraved in golden letters on marble slabs. . . .
>
> But let us move on from the sign to the thing signified; you forbid us to bury our dead in the Sidi Abd-er-Rahman-el-Tsaalebi cemetery because, according to your laws, burials must not take place within the city walls. And yet you permit to be placed there a member of the family of pasha Moustafa, a relative of Ben-Mrabet and very recently Bey Ahmed; only the poor are strictly excluded. . . . Have your transcendent notions, extending across all the sciences, led you to recognize that the emanations of the body of a pauper are more dangerous for public health than the others?[20]

An ironically ignorant posture is here used to show the errors of colonization and the betrayal of the republican maxim. This fusing of discourse with assertive rhetoric is strengthened by its structured argument. On this occasion, unlike with the poetry examples, the French "discursive mold" is recognized for an indigenous speaker. This use of an accusatory rhetorical attitude is explained by the policy of the *Akbhar*, at that time a rival newspaper to the official *Moniteur algérien*, and which could allow itself acts of audacity the government would not dare to perform, precisely in order to comment on official positions. Alas, after three columns, two regular articles are necessary to develop certain themes that should have been addressed in the column. This disruption enables Chandellier, the newspaper's editor, to take the floor once again with the heading, "A Shoulder Barge," to point out that the "author of the *indigenous column* of this newspaper is ignorant of or scorns our literary customs: he is not in the slightest concerned about maintaining appropriate proportions between a parenthetical narration and the main subject."[21] In the end, the indigenous point of view is commented upon for its form, not its content. It is treated as resistant to the literary order, to organization, and thus to the colonial order. By using the banner "Shoulder Barge" Chandellier seems to show that the paradigm of violence makes it possible to reprimand the indigenous rebelling against the media order. The ability to speak out is thus but a fleeting one, before an escorting discourse is again at the forefront. The *Akbhar* did not keep its promise, then, to be more liberal than the official press.

Another expression of indigenous speech is found in the December 4, 1868, issue of the *Est algérien* (East Algerian),[22] in which the eye is drawn to, on the first page, an unusual title. Indeed, one notices a "Monologue du dernier des Arabes" (Monologue of the Last of the Arabs) on one column, a text in which the immediate structure appears broken up and marked by numerous new paragraphs. Nevertheless, one can discover in the title a reference to Chateaubriand's *Les Aventures du dernier Abencérage* (published in English as *The Adventures of the Last Abencerrajes*) and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*.[23] A Romantic attitude is adopted here, which builds on the individual to bring out a whole people. The article, which is unsigned (except by an enigmatic dash), allows a litany, remarkable in its power, to develop. Here are the opening lines: "Here are the scattered remains of the last Muslims! "There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his prophet." And not to be able to die like them. . . . Death is the good fortune of the vanquished.[24]

In an aesthetic of interrupted speech, recalling the speech of a dying person (but one could also talk of the aesthetic of scraps), the text develops a

reminder of the arrival of the French: it is indeed the voice of an indigenous person that is supposed to emanate from this text, a voice that draws attention to itself in the following lines by an "us," by elaborate apostrophes ("Oh vanished race, extinct tribe, brave sons of Islam whom destitution has scythed down"[25]), by a downgrading of the expressions used to refer to oneself. The "troop of cavalrymen" thus becomes the "frightened tribes" and the "famished gangs." The Ouled-Sliman, a name mentioned at the beginning of the text, are represented as being on the decline.

The text also expresses the confrontation between a positive image of the colonized people and a negative image of the colonizers. "Christians" are referred to for the "cunning and depravity of their race,"[26] and colonization is then described in a few words: the sketch of the lawyers is reinforced by a ternary rhythm showing that they know neither "values, nor religion, nor language," and also evokes "prisons without sunlight"[27] into which the colonized people are thrown. The reversed axiology found here, in relation to the expected discourse, is supported by a strong rhetoric that legitimizes the denunciation and gives it credibility for the reader, as in the indigenous column I quoted earlier. Thus, there remains the question of the intention hidden behind this text. Why publish it on the first page? Concerning this point we remain at the stage of hypotheses: a critique of colonization, a battle to have Arab culture taken into account, a provocation? It seems unlikely that this text was actually written by an indigenous person, for symbolic reasons as much as practical ones. The text would thus have been signed, and doubtless the style would not have been so Romantic. It is probably a literary exercise in liberal perspective written by one of the newspaper's contributors. And since this article was published among the first issues of the newspaper, one might wager that it is an attempt to make a striking statement, to leave a mark on a readership that already had periodicals at its disposal, and to clearly position the editorial policy of this newcomer in the world of the "battles of the major Algerian press"[28] from which it did not wish to be excluded. The voice of the indigenous thus also represents a strong political issue that, above all, concerns the editorial policy of a newspaper and the image of its position in colonial life it wishes to project.

Conclusion

Out of the vast corpus that the colonial press in Algeria represents at the beginning of the conquest in the 1880s, texts either written by indigenous people, or supposedly written to make their voices heard, are rare. That was to be expected. The examples I have chosen give an account of the trends that shape this corpus. The speech of the colonized in the colonial press is, in

effect, hardly audible. When this speech does find space for expression, it is almost systematically taken over and framed, or even distorted by the colonizing speech. The few texts that set themselves apart are remarkable because they crystallize certain issues inherent to this act of speaking out. It is also to be noted that these texts, with a carefully polished rhetoric, boast a style that borrows from the French literary canons of their epoch, proof that the colonizer can only listen to the colonized when he takes on his discursive mold.

Within this particular corpus, which does not renounce knowing the colonized but constructs that knowledge, indigenous speech cannot emerge without the overarching speech of the colonizer—who is thus the man of letters, the journalist. This is not surprising, and it is what Edward Said broached in his seminal work.[29] But the press has its own imperatives—rhythm of publication, layout, and the personality of contributors—that give rise to variations in the assumption of speech, and thus an image of the speech of the indigenous as an issue of a colonial situation that reveals itself to better define itself. Between the expectations of the colonial situation and the surprises of scattered texts, the nonmetropolitan colonial press thus makes it possible to show a literary space that is freer than the works found in the bookshops, and in which the ties between colonizer and colonized can be read as variable knots.

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Notes

1. See Zahir Ihaddaden's thesis, *Histoire de la presse indigène en Algérie des origines jusqu'à 1930* (Paris: Ihaddaden, 2003), in particular page 8: "The period from 1852 to 1881, which is rather important because it contains decisive events, will never deliver the hidden face of these events because the 'indigenous' peoples of this period have left no written testimony."

2. Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

3. See the works of Laure Blévis for precise details concerning this legal status, for example, "La citoyenneté française au miroir de la colonisation: étude de des demandes de naturalisation des 'sujets français' en Algérie coloniale," *Genèses* 53 (2003/4), 25–47, http://www.cairn.info/revue-geneses-2003-4-page-25.htm.

4. Louis-Jean Calvet, *Linguistique et colonialisme* (Paris: Payot, 1974), 12.

5. These translations can be found in *Annales maritimes et coloniales*, vol. 1 (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1840).

6. Augustin Marquand, "Les Poètes du Sa'hara," *Moniteur algérien,* November 13, 1864.

7. Ibid.

8. "On nous communique les vers suivants. . . .," *Moniteur algérien,* March 18, 1846.

9. One could for example cite Auguste Cherbonneau, "Voyage du Cheikh Ibn-Batoutah, à travers l'Afrique septentrionale, au commencement du XVIe siècle, traduit d'un manuscrit arabe de Si-Hamoudaèben-Lefgoun," *Le Moniteur algérien,* April 20, 1856.

10. Alphonse Rousseau trans., "Chroniques du Beylik d'Oran, par un secrétaire du bey Hassan," introduction by A. Berbrugger, *Moniteur algérien*, March 30, 1855 to April 15, 1855.

11. Baron de Slane, "Dernière expédition et mort de Saint-Louis. Chapitre inédit de l'histoire des dynasties musulmanes et des tribus arabes et berbères de l'Afrique septentrionale, d'Ibn-Khaldoun," *Moniteur algérien*, April 20, 1849.

12. We are borrowing the idea of ethos here from Dominique Maingueneau, who picks up and adapts this old rhetorical notion to a modern literary framework.

13. Augustin Marquand, "Poètes du Sa'hara."

14. Ibid.

15. This mediating position would be particularly highlighted by Albert Devoulx, a custodian of Arab archives and a contributor to the *Moniteur algérien* in the 1860s. His texts problematize the question of indigenous sources in their introductions.

16.The *Siroco*, a journal of trivia founded in 1866, was produced at the printing plant of the *Courrier de l'Algérie*, and was run by J. Asnard.

17. The *Courrier d'Oran*, a journal founded in 1861 by a certain Gauché, takes over a title already used in the Algerian press.

18. Z., son of Dennoun, "A M'Siou li director di courrier di Oran," *Courrier d'Oran,* April 8, 1881.

19. *Akhbar*, a journal founded in 1839 by Auguste Bourget, is one of the colony's oldest private publications.

20. Ismael ben Mohammed Khodja, "Chronique indigène," *Akhbar*, September 16, 1851.

21. Chandellier, "Un coup d'épaule!," *Akhbar*, October 5, 1851.

22. The *Est algérien*, an Annaba journal founded by Carle in 1868, is one of the private publications, which flourished after the bill of May 11, 1868; it makes clear its liberal intentions in its first issues. Its editor was also the publisher of the periodical *La Seybouse.*

23. *Les Aventures du dernier Abencérage* was published in 1826, just like *The Last of the Mohicans*, by Fenimore Cooper, which is read and commented on by George Sand in the *Journal pour tous* in 1856. Sand also published a story, "Le Dernier sauvage" (The Last Savage) in the *Artiste* periodical, which enacts, on the island of Mauritius, the end of a precolonial civilization through the character of an old warrior.

24. "Monologue du dernier des arabes," *Est algérien*, December 4, 1868.

25. Ibid.

26. "Monologue du dernier des arabes."

27. Ibid.

28. Carle, "Aux lecteurs," *L'Est algérien*, November 13, 1868.

29. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).