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The Impact of the Scholarly Movement on the Cultural Landscape of Wadi Souf : During the War of Liberation, 1954–1962

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Abstract:

During the French occupation, numerous social ills, innovations, and superstitions spread throughout traditional Soufi society under colonial rule and amid the ignorance and illiteracy prevalent among the general population. Colonialism did not limit itself to this policy; it also fostered many social and moral afflictions among the members of a society known for its conservatism and religiosity. Vice and corrupt practices became widespread, including the consumption of alcohol, unlawful gain, usury, monopolisation, fraud, and bribery. This created an urgent need for positive change and the reform of corrupt conditions, in accordance with the tolerant Islamic law that enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong. Scholars and reformers were required to make considerable efforts to cleanse society of these impurities and restore it to the true essence of Islam. These circumstances also contributed to the fragmentation of society into conflicting tribes, clans, and competing factions. This was undoubtedly what colonialism sought through its policy of ‘divide and rule’: to divert the inhabitants’ attention towards secondary and marginal matters, thereby allowing it to impose its control over every sphere of life,¹ without encountering anyone who might disturb its tranquillity or obstruct its projects.

Graduates of various scholarly centres within the country and abroad therefore played a prominent role in stimulating the awareness-raising movement in Souf. They served as imams and preachers, teaching the Book of God in Qur’anic schools and instructing people in matters of religion and worldly life. They thus became living examples of how awareness could be disseminated among the general population. Who were the most prominent of these men? Where were they educated? What were the principal cultural transformations to which they contributed?

Keywords: Scholarly Movement, Wadi Souf, cultural transformations, Muslim Scholars, Algerian Revolution, French schools, French occupation.

1. The Most Influential Figures in the Cultural Landscape

A. Graduates of al-Zaytuna and the Institutes of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama

Before 1948, most students from Souf attended al-Zaytuna Mosque University or one of its branches in south-western Tunisia, such as Nefta and Tozeur, to continue their studies. The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, however, established the Abdelhamid Ben Badis Institute, which officially opened its doors to students on 1 December 1947.

In the year the Institute opened, Abdelaziz Belaabidi of Kouinine was the only student from El Oued to enrol. In subsequent years, however, the Institute attracted a considerable number of students, including Hafnaoui Boutaha, Laroussi Saoudi, Ahmed Moulati, Mohamed Bribech, and others.² The efforts of leading figures in Wadi Souf’s reform

¹ Ali Ghannabzia, *Society of Wadi Souf from the French Occupation to the Beginning of the War of Liberation, 1882–1954*, thesis submitted for the Doctor of Science degree in history, supervised by Omar Ben Kherouf, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Algiers, 2008–9, 109.

² Ibrahim Chouikh, *Scholarly Journeys and Their Impact on Cultural Life in the Wadi Souf Region, 1931–1969*, dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a master’s degree in modern and contemporary

movement, such as Shaykh Hamza Boukoucha and Shaykh Abdelkader al-Yajouri, who both taught at the Institute, should not be overlooked. Whenever circumstances allowed them to visit the region, they encouraged young people to enrol and, as far as possible, facilitated their admission. In this context, it is appropriate to cite several shaykhs who graduated from al-Zaytuna Mosque University to demonstrate the extent of their contributions and the active role they played in the scholarly movement and the cultural development of the Wadi Souf region in general. These included, but were not limited to, the following:

Shaykh Ahmed al-Obeidi, 1888–1977: After returning to Wadi Souf upon graduating from al-Zaytuna, he began teaching at both the Ouled Ahmed Mosque and the Sidi Messaoud Mosque in El Oued. In 1938, he moved to Touggourt and Djamaa, where he served as an imam and teacher. Following the outbreak of the War of Liberation, he returned to El Oued and continued his educational and awareness-raising work.³

Shaykh Hocine Hammadi, 1900–1982:⁴ He performed numerous duties, serving as an imam in prayer, a preacher and religious exhorter from the pulpit, and a teacher of the Qur'an and the various sciences and disciplines required for admission to centres of learning and al-Zaytuna Mosque University.⁵

Shaykh Larbi Ouinat, 1903–1974: After a scholarly journey at al-Zaytuna Mosque University in Tunis, the shaykh became imam and teacher at the mosque in the village of Souihla in Sidi Aoun, where he remained for nine years. Conscious of the heavy responsibility placed upon him by the region's deteriorating educational situation, he opened a Qur'anic school in his home in Hassi Khelifa. He was also known for his diligence in resolving questions concerning fatwas and inheritance.⁶

Shaykh Abderrahmane Maamri, 1904–1957: After receiving the *Certificate of Attainment* from the venerable al-Zaytuna Mosque University, he returned to his home town of Z'Goum and began his reformist and awareness-raising work by spreading learning and knowledge. He continued this activity until his martyrdom, following torture and abuse during the massacres of Ramadan 1957.⁷

They were joined by a group of educated and enlightened figures, including Hamza Chennouf, known as Boukoucha; Mohamed Tahar Tlili; Abdelkader al-Yajouri; the martyr Mohamed Lamine Lamoudi; and many others.

B. Scholarly Missions to Universities in the Arab East

With the outbreak of the War of Liberation, and in addition to the efforts of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, the National Liberation Front, through its representatives in the General Union of Algerian Muslim Students, sought to open the doors of institutes and universities in Arab countries, and even in European states sympathetic to the Algerian Revolution, to Algerian students, particularly following the strike of 19 May 1956.⁸

Students holding the *Certificate of Competence* were enrolled in the second year of secondary education, whereas holders of the *Certificate of Attainment* entered various universities.⁹

Student missions to Egypt: Among these students was Aboul-Kacem Saadallah, who entered an Egyptian university in 1955 and graduated with a *licence* degree in Arabic language. Aboul-Kacem Djebali studied in the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University. Mesbah Mesbahi and Youcef Djedid enrolled in the Department of Sociology at Cairo University, the

Maghreb history, supervised by Professor Ali Ghannabzia, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Echahid Hamma Lakhdar University, El Oued, Algeria, academic year 2017–18, 39–40.

³ Achouri Gamoun, *The Two Brothers Shaykh Tahar al-Obeidi, 1886–1968, and Shaykh Ahmed al-Obeidi, 1888–1977*, 1st ed. (El Oued: Mazouar Press, 2010), 65–126.

⁴ Mohamed Salah Ben Ali, *Shaykh Hocine Hammadi: A Life of Learning and Struggle*, 1st ed. (El Oued: Sakhri Press, 2012), 37.

⁵ Saad Ben Bachir Amamra and Ahmed Ben Tahar Mansouri, *Prominent Figures from Souf in Jurisprudence, Culture, and Literature* (El Oued: Mazouar Printing, Publishing, Advertising, and Distribution Company, 2006), 62.

⁶ Mohamed Rachid Tama, *Hassi Khelifa: History, Culture, and Society* (El Oued: Sakhri Press, 2012), 191.

⁷ Amamra and Mansouri, *Prominent Figures from Souf*, 73.

⁸ Kheireddine Chetara, *Algerian Students at al-Zaytuna Mosque University, 1900–1956*, special ed., vol. 1 (Algiers: Dar al-Basa'ir), 299–300.

⁹ Abdallah Besriani, *The Activities of Algerian Students in Kuwait* (Algiers: Publications of the High Islamic Council, December 2007), 42.

former at the beginning of the 1959 academic year and the latter in the following year. Salah Bousbia began studying history at Cairo University in 1959,¹⁰ while Abdelkrim Aouadi entered a secondary school in Cairo in the same year.¹¹

Student missions to Iraq: The students from Wadi Souf included Ali Atallah and Bachir Chabi, who studied Arabic literature there in 1960, and Mohamed Ben Khalifa Rebibe, who studied history in 1961.¹²

Student missions to Kuwait: Students from Souf who studied at Shuwaikh Secondary School included Ibrahim Saadallah, Abdallah Besriani, and many others.¹³

These scholarly missions had a profound impact on the local environment and generated a cultural and scholarly effervescence within and beyond the region, extending to several parts of the country. Examples include the efforts of Abdelkader al-Yajouri in Constantine and Tlemcen; Hamza Boukoucha and Lamine Lamoudi in Biskra, Constantine, and Algiers; the Belaabidi brothers in Aïn Beïda and eastern Constantine; the brothers Laagraa Tayeb and Mohamed Dhaif, who were martyred in Tizi Ouzou in 1957; Mohamed Tahar Tlili in Béjaïa and Biskra; and the generation of Abdelaziz Chikiri, Khalifa Djounaidi, Bachir Rezgui, Bachir Ben Nasser, Aboul-Kacem Saadallah, and many others whose contributions extended beyond the boundaries of Wadi Souf.

2. The Contribution of the Scholarly Movement to Cultural Activity in Wadi Souf

The role of students from Souf was not confined to staffing mosques, zawiyas, Qur'anic schools, and kuttab, where they delivered sermons and lessons to raise public awareness and teach pupils the Qur'an, the religious sciences, and other subjects. Rather, they led a genuine intellectual transformation in Souf. The effects of that transformation necessarily lead us to consider their role in authorship, as they found newspapers and periodicals to be fertile ground for publishing their various ideas and opinions. This was accompanied by contributions to the acquisition of books and magazines and the establishment of private home libraries.

A. Contribution to the Press Movement: The leading figures of Wadi Souf's scholarly and intellectual renaissance made a significant contribution to the national press by editing and writing intellectual, literary, social, and even political articles. Some also took the initiative to establish their own newspapers, which played an effective role in serving the national cause. Foremost among them were Lamine Lamoudi, Hamza Boukoucha, and Ali Ben Saad.

Lamoudi is regarded as one of Algeria's best-known journalists. His command of both Arabic and French gave him an active presence in most national newspapers. He supervised and participated in the establishment of several newspapers, including *Sada al-Sahra* and *Al-Islah* in Biskra, followed by *Al-Jahim* in Constantine, which was dispatched clandestinely to the capital. He distinguished himself from the pioneers of Wadi Souf's renaissance by entering the French-language press through the establishment of his newspaper *La Défense*, which defended national rights among the French-educated elite and countered the campaigns of the French-language colonial press. Known for his patriotism and belief in freedom and justice, he struggled for reform in every field. He possessed penetrating political insight and demonstrated a rare journalistic ability. The Red Hand, however, did not forgive his courage in speaking the truth or his nationalist positions, and treacherously assassinated him on 10 October 1957.¹⁴

Shaykh Hamza Boukoucha also had a prominent presence in the national press as both a writer and a founder. He was multitalented: a social commentator, a lyrical poet, a perceptive critic, and an Islamic jurist. Most of his activity was divided between education and journalism. He began writing for the press at an early age, and his was among the most distinguished literary and critical pens. He wrote for numerous Algerian and Tunisian newspapers, including *Al-Wazir*, and took the initiative to establish and supervise the editing of several newspapers. One of these was *Al-Maghrib al-Arabi*, founded in Oran as the voice of Muslim youth. It opposed administrative and social corruption and attacked the caids, bachaghas, and deputies who acted against the interests of the inhabitants. It should be noted that the director and proprietor of *Al-Maghrib al-Arabi*, Mahmoud Bella, was also from Kouinine in Wadi Souf. His nationalist positions, forthright defence of the truth, and defence of Algerians' rights in the face of the arrogance and intransigence of the colonial authorities led to his imprisonment from 1957 until independence.¹⁵

Shaykh Ali Ben Saad was another prominent Soufi figure in education and journalism. He founded the newspaper *Al-Layali*, which was distinguished by its exceptional boldness and its criticism of the conditions endured by the inhabitants.

¹⁰ Chouikh, *Scholarly Journeys*, 50.

¹¹ Interview with Youcef Ben Lakhdar Djedid and Mesbah Mesbahi at their homes, 10:00 a.m., 17 and 18 December 2017.

¹² Bachir Chabi, *Memoirs of Bachir Chabi, 1934–1994*, MS, annotated by Samir Aouadi, 2.

¹³ Chouikh, *Scholarly Journeys*, 52.

¹⁴ Hafnawi Gassir, *Professor Lamine Lamoudi: His Life and Various Activities*, Prominent Figures of Souf series, 2008, 19.

¹⁵ Achouri Gamoun, *The Encyclopaedic Scholar Hamza Boukoucha, Hamza Chennouf, 1907–1994*, 1st ed. (El Oued: Sakhri Press, 2012), 117.

It also openly demanded Algerian independence, exposing it to repeated harassment and prosecution by the colonial authorities and resulting in his own imprisonment on several occasions.¹⁶

Newspapers also had a considerable resonance within Souf. Interest in them grew markedly as people sought to read, learn, and follow the Revolution's various events and global repercussions; the solidarity and support offered by sister and friendly countries and the statements of their leaders; and developments concerning the Algerian question before the United Nations. Newspapers that reached Souf after the outbreak of the blessed War of Liberation included *Al-Basa'ir*, *Al-Muqawama al-Jaza'iriyya*, and *El Moudjahid*. They were joined by several Tunisian newspapers, such as *Al-Sabah*, which followed the course of the Revolution from its beginning.¹⁷ *Al-Amal*, the organ of the Tunisian Neo Destour Party, was among the most prominent newspapers to play a distinctive role in supporting the Algerian Revolution.¹⁸ The magazine *Al-Fikr* also played a major role in introducing readers to Algeria and the Algerian Revolution; its pages featured numerous studies, poems, novels, and plays that glorified the Revolution and the sacrifices of the Algerian people.¹⁹

Newspapers with a nationalist orientation were brought in covertly and in complete secrecy; bringing them in through ordinary channels did not always end well. Before joining the ranks of the mujahidin after the student strike of 19 May 1956, the student Sadek Deggachi recalled that, when visiting Wadi Souf, he would avoid suspicion by wrapping his books and notebooks in newspapers containing news of the Revolution so that he could show them to his friends and circulate them among them, since such newspapers were unavailable in El Oued.²⁰

The smuggling of these books and magazines constituted a form of political resistance because it defied the wishes and authority of the colonial administration. Smuggling, distribution, and reading therefore took place secretly, although they remained limited to a small number of intellectuals and educated people.

The archives of the Moudjahid Museum in the Wilaya of El Oued have also preserved several issues of colonial newspapers received by the annex, notably *Le Monde* and *La Dépêche de Constantine*.²¹

B. The Emergence of Private Libraries: For a long period, the Wadi Souf region had no home libraries containing collections of books, volumes, and periodicals. This may have resulted from the limited number of educated or cultured people interested in such scholarly treasures. With the emergence of an enlightened group that had acquired some learning and familiarity with scholarly and cultural books in various fields, particularly the religious sciences, history, literature, and other disciplines, necessity and intellectual appetite prompted students and interested individuals to acquire essential primary and secondary sources. This led to the emergence of home libraries in Souf.

One example was the library of Shaykh Hocine Hammadi, which contained books from several disciplines that he had acquired while studying in Tunisia. The titles included *Manhaj al-Tahqiq wa-l-Tawdih*; a book by Mohamed Djait, the Mufti of Tunisia; a volume containing, in its margins, al-Qarafi's *Sharh al-Fusul*; *Al-Risala* by the scholar Abdallah ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani; and the five-volume *Majma al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Shaykh Abu Ali al-Fadl ibn al-Husayn al-Tabrisi, published by Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi in 1959, among many others.²²

From time to time, *Al-Basa'ir* also published advertisements for books sold by subscription, including an advertisement for Shaykh Ahmed Tawfik al-Madani's *Geography of Algeria*. Wishing to obtain a copy, Shaykh Mohamed Tahar Tlili sent his subscription as soon as the advertisement appeared, even before the book had left the press. On 22 August 1962, he was also able to purchase Ibn Manzur's *Lisan al-Arab* in twenty newly bound volumes, which he regarded as a valuable acquisition.²³

Students who graduated from various scholarly institutions brought back several important works on religion, language, history, and other subjects.

¹⁶ Amamra and Mansouri, *Prominent Figures from Souf*, 79.

¹⁷ Habib Hassan Louleb, *Tunisians and the Algerian Revolution*, vol. 1 (Algiers: Dar al-Sabil for Publishing and Distribution, 2009), 488.

¹⁸ Louleb, *Tunisians and the Algerian Revolution*, 593.

¹⁹ Ministry of Mujahidin, *Arab Support for the Algerian Revolution*, Publications of the National Centre for Studies and Research on the National Movement and the 1954 Liberation Revolution (Algiers: Diwan Press, 2007), 50.

²⁰ Sadek Deggachi, *Memoirs of a Mujahid* (El Oued: Sami Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, May 2021), 38.

²¹ Archives of the Moudjahid Museum in the Wilaya of El Oued, unclassified.

²² Mohamed Laïd Gadaa, *Shaykh Hocine Hammadi and His Social Role and Scholarly and Educational Activity in Tunisia and Wadi Souf, 1902–1982*, 1st ed. (El Oued: Dhoub Press, 2013), 160.

²³ Mohamed Tahar Tlili, *This Is My Life*, MS, 86.

This practice contributed particularly to the formation and growth of home libraries, which came to contain major works of jurisprudence, literature, and history. The value of these private libraries varied according to their owners' social standing, and most were characterised by their simplicity and the small number of books on their shelves.²⁴

In addition to the libraries of Shaykh Hammadi and Shaykh Tlili, there were those of Shaykh Mesbah Houdheh, Shaykh Larbi Ouinat,²⁵ the martyred Shaykh Miloudi Laroussi, Shaykh Aboul-Kacem Saadallah, and others.

C. Theatrical Performances: Wadi Souf suffered from a severe cultural void for a long period, during which no prominent cultural activity was recorded apart from certain rituals commemorating religious occasions, such as the Prophet's Birthday or Ashura, and certain manifestations of custom and tradition, such as annual collective visits to the shrines of holy men or celebrations such as weddings.

The scholarly and national movement in Wadi Souf, however, believed that theatre was an instrument of propaganda and a means of reaching the popular masses through its educational character. Thus, although the plays staged on various occasions were simple and improvised, they consistently possessed a cultural dimension and political resonance. They created, so to speak, a theatre of struggle whose message was to guide public opinion, glorify national sentiment, and venerate freedom and independence. Certain plays were selected and certain texts adapted because their content was rich in evocative images intended to reach audiences and make their meaning understood. Their purpose was to educate the young, instil in them many meanings of patriotism, and stir the resolve of adults without arousing the suspicions of the colonial authorities, whose watchful eyes, at this sensitive juncture, monitored every act that might incite the inhabitants against France.

From 1947 onwards, particularly after the establishment of the *Al-Rimal* Group of the Algerian Muslim Scouts, various plays appeared across the villages of Wadi Souf. A group of al-Zaytuna students, supported by other young people eager for cultural advancement, volunteered to organise several theatrical events. These included performances of *Bilal ibn Rabah*, *The Misers*, and *The History of the Caliphs*, among others, at the home of the activist Saad Houga.²⁶ They were performed by a group of young people from Guemar, including Sadek El-Ouassif, Hadi Redjil, Omar Nouar, and Tahar Ben Aïcha.²⁷

Several al-Zaytuna students also submitted an application in the name of the 'Association of Soufi Students' to the French military administrator of the El Oued annex, requesting permission to undertake cultural activity. Approval was granted, and a play entitled *Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz* was staged in a house in the Messaaba quarter of El Oued. Its cast comprised a group of young men burning with patriotism and overflowing enthusiasm, all of whom later joined the ranks of the War of Liberation: Mohamed Ounissi, Cherif Limam, Abdelghani Noubli, Tahar Ben Moussa, Djilani Aounallah, Mohamed Ali Keram, and others. The play was presented in exemplary form and met with the audience's approval.²⁸

The mujahid and student Djilani Aounallah, one of Shaykh Mesbah Houdheh's pupils, also recalled participating in the organisation of plays in Trifaoui and Z'Goum, where *Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi* and *Bilal ibn Rabah* were performed. Djilani played the leading role in both, alongside Ali Aoun, Mouldi Ben Mohamed, Houidi Hachemi, and others. The performances took place on a wooden stage in a splendid atmosphere dominated by religious themes and nationalist fervour.²⁹ Several parts of Wadi Souf witnessed similar activities, although their intensity varied from one area to another depending on the circumstances.

Mohamed Laïd Al Khalifa wrote *Bilal ibn Rabah* in 1938, although it was not published until 1950. It may be classified as the first artistically mature Algerian verse drama and as an example of the political use of a religious figure.³⁰

When placed within its historical context, the play reveals a wealth of meanings related to patience. It does not merely portray the condition of the Algerian people under the colonial yoke; it also draws upon Bilal's patience and steadfast adherence to his faith as an incitement for Algerians to remain steadfast in the face of the colonial policy of uprooting and

²⁴ Chouikh, *Scholarly Journeys*, 88.

²⁵ Tama, *Hassi Khelifa*, 191.

²⁶ Chouikh, *Scholarly Journeys*, 90.

²⁷ Mohamed Abbas, *Intellectuals in the Ranks of the Revolution* (Algiers: Houma Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, 2004), 72.

²⁸ Interview with the mujahid Djilani Aounallah at the Omar ibn al-Khattab Mosque in the Ouled Ahmed quarter, municipality of El Oued, after the afternoon prayer, 14 November 2019. Several radio episodes were also recorded with him on Radio Souf concerning his militant career in the national movement and his struggle during the War of Liberation in Algeria and France.

²⁹ Mujahid Djilani Aounallah, preceding interview.

³⁰ Ahcen Thlilani, *The Use of Heritage in Algerian Theatre*, doctoral thesis in Arabic literature, Faculty of Arts, Constantine, 2009–10, 58.

eradication. Bilal ibn Rabah, committed to his faith and aspiring to freedom and emancipation, represents the colonised and enslaved Algerian people, while Umayya ibn Khalaf represents colonialism intent on usurping Algeria's land and identity. The similarity between the two situations is clear: Muslims confronting the oppression of the polytheists, and the mujahidin confronting the power of France.

The selection of particular themes was evidently neither arbitrary nor accidental, nor was it intended solely for amusement and entertainment. Rather, it was carefully considered and directed towards defined objectives, aims, and purposes to be achieved sooner or later.

Amid the confusion caused in French circles by the sudden outbreak of the War of Liberation, the authorities decided to change their policy towards Algerians by improving their social, economic, and cultural conditions. This was what Jacques Soustelle, the new Governor-General of Algeria, sought to realise after assuming office on 15 February 1955, when he presented his pacification programme founded upon a policy of the carrot and the stick.

3. The Educational System

In addition to the punitive and deterrent measures contained in the programme he introduced on 27 December 1955, Jacques Soustelle had a cultural plan based on accelerating school construction, increasing the number of schools, opening vocational training centres, and providing adult education.³¹ Its purpose was to incorporate the greatest possible number of Algerians into the French cultural sphere, to have them believe in the civilising mission of the French nation, and, in the words of the French authorities, to have them condemn the various acts of terrorism carried out by the mujahidin throughout the country. This would deprive the National Liberation Front of the popular support base that supplied it with men, funds, and everything necessary to sustain revolutionary action. Charles de Gaulle introduced essentially the same plan, with almost identical content and objectives, in his programme known as the Constantine Plan in October 1958.³²

In pursuit of the declared and concealed objectives contained in the various French plans and programmes to improve the condition of the inhabitants, Wadi Souf witnessed a radical transformation in the number of school buildings and educational facilities, as well as in pupil enrolment, from the outbreak of the War of Liberation on 1 November 1954.

A. The French School

For a more comprehensive and detailed treatment of the subject, the figures and statistics have been summarised in the following table:

YEAR	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF CLASSES	NUMBER OF PUPILS	AVERAGE NUMBER OF PUPILS PER CLASS
1948	10	33	780	23.63
1954	14	40	1,896	25.37
1959	20	76	2,123	27.93
1960	/	86	3,087	35.89
1961	/	104	4,000	38.46
1962	31	123	5,037	40.95

Table 1. Evolution of the number of schools, classes, and pupils, 1948–1962³³

The table reveals the severe shortage of school facilities. Despite the rapid pace of school construction the number of schools more than doubled between 1954 and 1962, rising from fourteen in 1954 to thirty-one in 1962, while the number of classrooms increased more than three and a half times the rapid rate of demographic growth rendered these facilities insufficient and unable to meet actual needs. In fewer than four years, the average number of pupils per class rose from approximately twenty-eight in 1959 to approximately forty-one in 1962. This overcrowding undoubtedly reflected, on the one hand, the inhabitants' desire to enrol their children in French schools and, on the other, the growing proportion of children reaching school age. In 1962, such children accounted for approximately 20 per cent of Souf's total population: more than 25,000 children between the ages of six and fourteen. Only 5,000 of them were able to attend school, representing just 20 per cent of school-age children.³⁴ The remaining 20,000, or 80 per cent, were outside the classroom. Accommodating these children at a rate of forty pupils per class would have required the creation of 500 new classes.

These percentages and figures speak for themselves and refute any claim by the French administrative authorities in Souf boasting of their achievements and efforts to educate children in El Oued. What was accomplished was a mere drop in the ocean and could not possibly bring about the desired transformation so vigorously pursued by the colonial authorities unless they acknowledged that the pressure of the War of Liberation, and the financial and economic depletion

³¹ AOM, 81 F 24, *Programme de réformes Soustelle, prises de position de Jacques Soustelle sur la situation en Algérie*, 63.

³² SHDDE, 1H1106, dossier 3, *Le plan de Constantine dans l'évolution économique et sociale de l'Algérie*, 57–98.

³³ Table prepared by the researcher on the basis of archival documents of which the researcher possesses copies.

³⁴ SHDDE, 1 H 2106, *Note générale no. 2, Étude de population du Souf: scolarisation*, 2 March 1962, 11.

it caused, prevented them from attaining those aims and objectives. It is particularly significant that, under the force of successive attacks by the revolutionaries, the military authorities in El Oued were compelled in 1957 to close the schools in Trifaoui, Hassi Khelifa, Drimini, and Reguiba and convert them into barracks for Foreign Legion troops. The schools did not return to service until after 1959.³⁵

The figures and percentages also expose the inadequacy of the flimsy French development plans and projects in education, which proved effective only on paper. Or was this the proportion that the inhabitants were not permitted to exceed because it was deemed sufficient to meet the coloniser's need for skilled labour in the service of its interests and to create a new group capable of mediating between the colonial administration and the local population?

B. The National, or Indigenous, School

The scale of the transformation experienced by traditional education in kuttabs and mosque-based Qur'anic schools throughout Wadi Souf during the period under study cannot easily be measured, whether in terms of the distribution network of these schools and kuttabs, their number, their teachers and pupils, or the roles they performed and the expanding scope of their cultural and social influence. These institutions were no longer confined to Qur'anic memorisation or to lessons intended to foster religious awareness and encourage adherence to values and symbols of identity. Rather, they moved from silent or passive resistance, so to speak, to active resistance, and from reaction to action. Most became centres at the Revolution's disposal: stations for secret communication; collection points for financial contributions and clothing intended for the mujahidin; and recruitment offices for young men ready to join the Revolution and for encouraging those who remained hesitant. They assumed a precise and sensitive mission in difficult circumstances, particularly after the bureaux arabes had spread throughout the region, and the eyes of colonialism were watching every suspicious movement. To provide a simple numerical comparison between the French administration's educational efforts and those undertaken independently by the inhabitants, the following summary table was prepared:

No.	Location	Number of Qur'anic schools	Number of pupils	Number of Qur'an teachers
01	Laachache	31	962	31
02	Messaaba	18	581	18
03	Ouled Saoud	22	652	22
04	Guemar	16	450	16
05	Debila and Behima	17	562	17
06	Reguiba	12	254	12
Total		116	3,461	116

Table 2. Numerical survey of Qur'anic schools in the El Oued annex in 1957³⁶

All these figures relate to 1957, the year in which traditional education suffered disaster. By contrast, the French school system did not reach 104 classrooms until 1961. Even assuming that every Qur'anic school or kuttab had only one room, the total would be 116, 12 more classrooms than the French system. Similarly, while there were 116 Qur'an teachers in 1957, the French school system did not attain the same number of educators until 1961. The difference between the two efforts is therefore evident, and the Qur'anic school maintained its clear superiority and distinction until independence. Despite this marked superiority, however, the school enrolment rate remained approximately the same in both systems and did not exceed 5 per cent. This raises questions, particularly because virtually the same pupils attended both types of school simultaneously. A logical and realistic explanation for the low rate in French schools, as explained above, may be found, but the pressing question remains: what underlies the low proportion of local children attending Qur'anic schools in Wadi Souf during the period under study?

A definitive answer requires further serious research and investigation. One or both of two possible causes may nevertheless be considered likely. The first may have been the movement of displacement experienced by Wadi Souf at this stage and the migration of many families towards northern Algeria, the towns of southern Tunisia, and Tunis. The second may have been the prevailing poverty in the region, which prompted parents to direct their children towards the

³⁵ AOM, 81 F 1711, *Notes de synthèse sur la situation de l'enseignement*, Le Commandant militaire du territoire de Touggourt, rapport de l'Administrateur des services civils, chef de la Commune mixte d'El Oued, 15 November 1959, 6.

³⁶ Table prepared by the researcher on the basis of archival documents of which the researcher possesses copies.

labour market rather than education, in the hope of earning additional income to help the family cope with its deteriorating material circumstances. The same causes may also have applied to the French school.

4. The Transformation of the Themes of Popular Poetry

Popular poetry is among the most prominent and widespread forms of oral heritage to have enriched the folk culture of Wadi Souf. It forms one component of collective consciousness and has been adopted as a fundamental element of orally transmitted heritage: *rajaz* verses, *zajal* poems, and women's incantations for their sons and daughters, whether to lull them, wish them well, or seek protection for them from evil; camel-driving songs; elegies for the dead; extemporised verses sung during construction or agricultural work; poems recited at weddings to praise women's beauty or express the anguish of distance or separation; poems recited on religious occasions to glorify the Divine or invoke blessings upon the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him; poems recounting the virtues and miracles of holy men; and poems composed by a creative poet to express personal experiences and then performed on a social occasion, such as a wedding, where they win the admiration of listeners, who learn and memorise them according to their individual abilities and perform them according to their own style and purpose. All these forms of poetic expression, created orally and transmitted from mouth to ear, may be termed popular *zajal* or popular poetry.³⁷

The society of Wadi Souf had engaged in various forms of struggle ever since its profound encounter with the culture of the Other, a culture foreign to Soufi identity, which society rejected as a body rejects a foreign organ. Although the shock of colonial invasion and occupation dismantled official institutions and imposed alternative institutions and an imported culture, society took refuge in its cultural heritage and drew from it a spirit of resistance and struggle. Forms of expression therefore represented virtually the only means available to the people under French occupation to express their reality, their developing collective consciousness, and their cultural identity in relation to the Other. This occurred despite the colonial social machinery's attempts to instil passivity, submission, and acquiescence to God's decree and destiny, and to disseminate a series of proverbs that discouraged determination and weakened resolve, such as 'If a bad companion tramples your wing, cut it off', 'Lower your head and it will pass you by', 'He who fears remains safe', 'An unjust ruler is better than sedition and scandal', 'Flies do not enter a closed mouth', and 'The coward's mother neither grieves nor fears'. These and other defeatist proverbs called for submission to a system of injustice and tyranny, acceptance of humiliation and degradation, silence in the face of truth, and preference for standing with injustice and oppression rather than with truth and justice, confronting fear, and resisting oppression.

Before the outbreak of the War of Liberation, popular poets in Wadi Souf expressed the poor social and economic conditions and the life of humiliation, oppression, and servitude endured by Algerians generally and by the people of Souf in particular. Fearing the brutality of the colonial authorities and their agents, the furthest poets could go was to attribute that destitution to political corruption and the injustice of rulers. They rarely used terms explicitly referring to the colonisers, such as infidels or Christians. They were, however, bolder in criticising the colonisers' local agents, *caids*, judges, and notaries, who exploited their influence to increase pressure upon the people and burden them with levies, bribes, and other injustices imposed upon a powerless population. Some poets even regarded the destitution and drought as divine punishment for the ascendancy of falsehood and the loss of truth, which had fallen into the hands of those who did not fear God. Thus, the poet Ibrahim Ben Smina said:

Falsehood rose high, stretching its arm over truth;
People who did not fear God lent it strength.
Caids remained greedy throughout their lives;
Wherever evil words were spoken, there they were.

Elsewhere, the same poet stated that the affliction befalling the land and its inhabitants was caused by senior officials who habitually engaged in political corruption.³⁸ He said:

³⁷ Ahmed Zeghab, *Prominent Figures of Melhoun Poetry in the Souf Region*, vol. 3, 1st ed. (El Oued: Mazouar Press, 2010), 23.

³⁸ Ahmed Zeghab, 'The Role of Oral Poetry in the National Struggle and the War of Liberation in the Wadi Souf Region', *Journal of Research and Studies*, Echahid Hamma Lakhdar University, no. 1 (April 2004): 180.

The great men of state ordained the causes;
 Falsehood rose, and where did truth disappear?
 The caids and the judge, together with his notaries,
 Turn every door and every matter upside down.
 The man with money has his need fulfilled;
 They affirm his right without justification.
 The word of him who gives nothing is dismissed;
 They call him a liar when he brings nothing.
 The word of truth is no longer accepted;
 Where is truth? A crow has flown away with it.

After the Second World War, political awareness spread among the people through the national movement, producing deeper and more comprehensive visions. This can be seen clearly in the poetry of Hadi Jaballah,³⁹ who, on the establishment of the *Al-Rimal* Scout Group in 1947,⁴⁰ did not merely identify the source of the wound division and superstition but looked towards the ascendancy of the Arabic language, liberation, and the establishment of an Algerian state. He said:

The Algerian people shall recover
 From this superstition
 And the division at its edges.
 Long live the Scouts Association
 And the people who love freedom.
 Long live the Arabic language,
 And may the covenant of the Caliphate be renewed.
 Long live Algeria, made beautiful,
 Becoming a state
 With an Islamic flag and acclamation.

As soon as gunfire resounded on the blessed night of 1 November, the position of the popular poet in Wadi Souf changed by 180 degrees. The poet who had experienced poverty, ignorance, underdevelopment, oppression, deprivation, and misery stood alongside the Revolution and the revolutionaries. He had nothing to lose by taking that position: his existence was one of loss, his life was meaningless, and his remaining hope was to realise himself through the Revolution and find himself in the new reality.⁴¹

The poet therefore did not remain behind the crowds joining the armed Revolution. He urged young people to join the ranks of the mujahidin in the mountains and extolled the heroic feats of the courageous fighters.

The poet and mujahid Sassi Hammadi⁴² said:

³⁹ Hadi Jaballah Ben Ali Ben Abdelkader was born in 1882 in the Sidi Abdallah Zawiya in El Oued. Raised in a poor family, he memorised the Qur'an under his father's instruction. Harsh circumstances compelled the young Hadi to leave home and undertake various forms of arduous work to earn a living. Once his financial circumstances had stabilised, he entered commerce. He supported the reform movement and celebrated it in his poetry. He lived through the War of Liberation, recorded its events, and inflamed the enthusiasm of revolutionary youth. He died in 1978.

⁴⁰ Abdelhamid Besr, *The Algerian Scout Movement in Wadi Souf, 1947–1989* (El Oued: Sami Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, January 2022), 71.

⁴¹ Telli Ben Cheikh, *Starting Points for Thinking about Popular Literature* (Algiers: National Book Foundation, 1990), 11.

⁴² Sassi Ben Ibrahim Ben Ali Hammadi was born in the summer of 1930 in the border region of Douar El Ma. He belonged to a Bedouin family originally from the Nakhla region, which practised farming and date-palm cultivation in settled areas and livestock husbandry in the steppe. Sassi Hammadi's family had inherited the tradition of teaching and Qur'anic memorisation. The poet began his militant life by taking an interest in the national movement and following its activities, and became a member of the National Liberation Army and National Liberation Front following the outbreak of the War of Liberation. The Qur'an was the source of his culture. He died on Friday, 25 July 1997.

The people as one are resolved upon war;
 War has become an obligation beyond the Sunna.
 War has become a duty.
 For everyone capable of going to fight.
 Mobilise our young men and our elders,
 And arm yourselves so that the land returns to us.
 We offer our wealth,
 And could never withhold our lives.
 We shall not relinquish sovereignty;
 Our independence must return to us.
 The victims' blood guarantees it;
 Those martyred dwell in the vastness of Paradise.⁴³

One of the mujahid poets also portrayed the successive victories of the army of Taleb Larbi in the epic battle of Jebel Oum el-Kemakem on the Algerian–Tunisian border and described the enemy casualties in the following words:

Oum el-Kemakem stands firm and renowned;
 There, the revolutionaries always have their abode.
 Every five days a battle is fought;
 The valleys flow laden with blood.
 How many corpses lie there,
 And how many foreign servants have died.
 The heads of French soldiers are split,
 As numerous as the stones and solid rocks.
 The wolf has gorged itself upon them,
 Lingering for nearly a year as it devours.⁴⁴

The poet Fatima Mansouri al-Alwaniya began composing poetry with the outbreak of the Revolution and ceased after independence. Because her poems encouraged young people to rebel and glorified the heroic deeds of the revolutionaries, she was arrested and imprisoned at Lambèse, now Tazoult, in Batna, before being released in 1957.⁴⁵ Fatima Mansouri praised the heroic deeds of Hamma Lakhdar and his fellow mujahidin, saying:

The sons of Algeria rose high;
 In the homeland, they bore the hardship.
 They neither fear nor submit;
 No distant trial can thwart them.
 Among them is the son of a renowned hero,
 Raising iron for the war.
 His men, celebrated by name,
 Came from its hidden Zarouq.
 Blood forms pools upon the earth;
 Valleys carry it in torrents.
 May God grant you victory over the infidels;
 May God increase your awe.

Threatening the traitors among the Harkis and Goumiers who followed the trail of the mujahidin in the town of Ourmes and describing them as treacherous dogs, the poet Belkacem Ben Mahmoud Hachani⁴⁶ said:

⁴³ Mohamed Salah Ben Ali and Mohamed Nafea Hammadi, *The Popular Poet Sassi Hammadi: His Life and Selected Poems*, 1st ed. (El Oued: Mohamed Lamine Lamoudi House of Culture, 2006), 23.

⁴⁴ Interview with the mujahid Mouldi Gharbi, a member of the National Liberation Army, at his home in the Aouachir quarter, municipality of Robbah, 10:00 a.m., 1 May 2021.

⁴⁵ Ahmed Hamdi, *Collected Popular Poetry: Poetry of the Armed Revolution* (Algiers: Publications of the National Moudjahid Museum, 1996), 51.

⁴⁶ Belkacem Ben Mahmoud Hachani was born in Kouinine in 1908. He memorised part of the Qur'an, worked in farming and construction, and was also known for his knowledge of agricultural custom, *qaddam*. He began composing poetry in childhood and memorised the works of panegyric poets. He died in 1996.

I grieved when they passed through Ourmes;
 The treacherous dogs caught up with them.
 Deryas followed the trail,
 Scorched by the brazier's fire.
 They begin by whetting the diamond,
 And make him taste bitter salt.

At the same time, he extolled what God had prepared for the mujahidin and martyrs on the Day of Resurrection:
 For every mujahid steadfast in his faith,
 They built his dwelling in Paradise,
 Inlaid with silver and gold,
 With houris of the fairest beauty,
 Streams of honey and milk that never cease,
 And gardens abundant with fruit.⁴⁷

When the first signs of victory appeared, Hadi Jaballah sang:
 Algeria, your sorrow has passed;
 In your name, we raised the flag.
 We raised your banner;
 What joy is mine, whoever may blame you.
 Behold your bounties before you:
 Camels, cattle, and sheep;
 Your hills, deserts, and boundaries,
 And your name at the United Nations.⁴⁸

In this way, popular poetry in Wadi Souf moved alongside the nation's causes, reflecting the people's conditions and their discontent with injustice and oppression, and preparing the ground for the need to change reality. It underwent a radical transformation at the beginning of the War of Liberation, embracing the Revolution in word and deed from its outset, announcing the end of an era of submission and acquiescence and the beginning of an age of struggle for freedom and independence. It accompanied the various events of the Revolution, supported it, and celebrated its glories and victories. The Revolution, in turn, was an important factor in broadening the poets' horizons, enriching their poetry, and deepening their view of national questions.

⁴⁷ Ahmed Zeghab, *Prominent Figures of Melhoun Poetry in the Souf Region*, vol. 4, 1st ed. (El Oued: Mazouar Press, 2013), 37.

⁴⁸ Ahmed Zeghab, *Algerian Popular Poetry from Reform to Revolution: Hadi Jaballah as a Model, 1882–1978*, 1st ed. (El Oued: Mazouar Press, May 2009), 101.