

The Ethnographic State: France and the Invention of Moroccan Islam

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In *The Ethnographic State: France and the Invention of Moroccan Islam*, Edmund Burke does the important work of historicizing colonial-era research on Morocco and Moroccans. Throughout the book Burke refers to his corpus of primary texts as the ‘Moroccan colonial archive’, meaning not any one physical archive, but rather all French writings, published and unpublished, about Morocco or Moroccans written between 1880 and 1930. By conducting a close reading of the descriptions French ethnographers wrote of Morocco and then connecting recurring themes with the needs of the French state at particular historical moments, Burke reveals this work to be the product of struggles within France much more so than the product of contact with Morocco. He borrows from Pierre Bourdieu the concept of political and intellectual ‘fields’ to explain how one framework would assert itself over another.

Too often literature produced on the colonies is read at a distance from the shifts and currents taking place in the metropole and, even as it has become assumed that the ethnographer is never a ‘neutral’ observer, there are still few books that do justice to the job of analyzing the producer of cultural knowledge in the manner that Burke has, although George Trumbull’s work on French knowledge production concerning Algeria is certainly an important example in this regard.⁽¹⁾ Burke is careful to emphasize that the way the Moroccan colonial archive produced and reproduced assumptions surrounding a reified and divided Morocco usually *coexisted* with the fact that the researchers had spent extensive time in the Maghreb and sometimes produced voluminous and detailed work. He also points out that nothing made either the direction these studies took or the colonization of Morocco in general preordained, and criticizes frameworks which portray them as such.

Thus Burke references Said frequently and, while he gives him his due as a scholar whose work revolutionized our understanding of European knowledge production on the Other, he finds Said's theories too simplistic to 'sufficiently historicize the discourse of orientalism' (p. 28). Burke explains, 'Said's Orientalism does not allow for the possibility of a temporary rupture in the discourse of orientalism, since the same essentialist stereotypes about colonial societies endlessly recirculate' (p. 66). He takes similar issue with postcolonial theory, stating that in the discipline's descriptions 'hegemony produces a world in which orientalism is essentially homogenous and devoid of struggle, politically saturated, yet curiously inert. Counterhegemonic discourses by definition cannot exist' (p. 73).

Burke skilfully traces the development of Moroccan Studies as a French genre (2), noting first that 19th- and early 20th-century Orientalists were not concerned with living languages or any other aspects of the living cultures of the Maghreb, but nonetheless this field contributed the idea that Islam could be an object of study in the first place. As a discipline oddly isolated from French social science fields, studies of Algeria, West Africa, and later Morocco developed in 'an intellectual ghetto', and were more strongly associated with politics than with academia. After a brief period in which French writings about Morocco (such as those by Aubin and Doutté) did not fall into hard categories or essentializing tropes, what Burke calls 'the colonial gospel' and its characteristic 'binaries' of urban/rural, Arab/Berber, and nomad/sedentary (or makhzen/ siba, i.e. the central government versus the tribes outside of its reign) took hold. The critical juncture was not an intellectual current or a new approach to ethnographic study, but rather that the *entente cordiale* made a choice between two competing approaches to colonization: the 'makhzen policy', whereby France would govern Morocco by introducing reforms behind the façade of the central government versus the 'tribes policy', in which Morocco would be conquered tribe-by-tribe. Burke describes:

'The emergence of the makhzen policy coincided with a sudden change in the way French ethnographers depicted Moroccan society. As we have seen above, before 1904, French ethnographers emphasized the openness, flexibility, and absence of sharp cleavages in Moroccan society' (pp. 158–9).

In an example of this open characterization, Doutté refuted the idea that Arabs and Berbers were somehow separate races or societies within Morocco, noting that it was mostly a linguistic difference but even then Arabic speakers often became Berber speakers and vice versa, and many groups and individuals were bilingual. Later ethnographers, however, portrayed Amazigh (Berber) groups as 'less' Muslim and 'less' Arab and thus closer to French than other Moroccans, and therefore better targets for assimilation or collaboration. Michaux-Bellaire put this binary to more explicit service of the colonial project in 1908 when his work divided Morocco into the 'berber organism' and the 'makhzen organism' and spoke of the latter's inability to absorb and benefit from the former without France uniting them. Alone, Morocco was divided and chaotic. Only through colonization could Morocco hope to progress or even have a semblance of order.

In a more general sense, the colonial archive post-1904 became a chorus of 'evidence' for Morocco's divided and reified nature and its need for governance by France which, through displaying this knowledge of Morocco, could demonstrate to both a sceptical French public weary of more troublesome colonies and to its European competitors that France alone understood Morocco and thus was fit to rule it. By perpetuating the idea that the makhzen (central government) and the tribes were in perpetual conflict, and that this was the timeless, unchanging 'nature' of Morocco, France could also effectively characterize any resistance to colonization as a continuation of the seba/ makhzen conflict instead of evidence that its policies were failing. So entrenched was this conceptualization of a fundamentally divided and dysfunctional Morocco that French 'experts' failed to see the economic ties between Fez and the rural areas even after the rural tribes' involvement in the uprisings of 1907–8 and 1911. That the supposed French mastery of Morocco and Moroccans through their ethnographic knowledge failed to predict the uprisings of 1912 also did not take the wind out of scientific imperialism's sails. The rebellions were instead explained in terms of Moroccans' supposed xenophobia and tendency towards chaos. After 1912 the effectiveness of scientific imperialism

became a moot point, as French military superiority erased the need for any form of Moroccan cooperation. However, the concept of Moroccan Islam never left.

The idea of there being a 'Moroccan Islam' or, indeed, a fundamental Moroccan character has its roots in French social and political needs, especially those related to the rise of the Third Republic. However, this concept has proven surprisingly hardy. If the most striking point Burke makes is that discourse on Moroccan Islam *did not exist* prior to colonialism, perhaps the most important point is that this discourse has refused to die. It has slipped by unnoticed as a dredge of the colonial past even as drastic social and intellectual paradigm shifts have taken place. Burke makes the case that these studies continue to affect postcolonial studies as well as native and non-native observers' perceptions of Morocco, and shows how British and American academics perpetuated the myth of 'Moroccan Islam' in the post-colonial period. It has even been co-opted by the Moroccan monarchy.

Burke is methodical in placing colonial texts and tropes against the backdrop of French political concerns and events and demonstrating how the former grew out of the latter. In terms of giving the reader an understanding of the characters, affiliations, and organizations which created and shaped this field, *The Ethnographic State* is a clear and detailed guide. However, when Burke asserts that 'the shape of intellectual fields was determined by personal and political rivalries' in addition to the political context and the binaries that came to characterize this field, this aspect of his argument seems underdeveloped. One has to wonder how much impact these rivalries actually had on knowledge production. Based on the information presented, the colonial researchers and organizations who won battles for access or funding did not have substantially different approaches than those who lost.

Another aspect which could use elaboration is Burke's allusion to the colonial archive's depiction of Morocco as isolated and cut off from the outside world. The book states this early on, yet later Burke mentions French anxieties about pan-Sufi and pan-Islamic conspiracies, which would imply that there was at least some recognition that Morocco was in contact with other Islamic cultures. There are also examples of colonial officials applying research and experience from West Africa to the ruling of Morocco. As there are not examples from the primary texts included, it would be beneficial for Burke to elaborate on this point more: how exactly did the corpus at hand portray Morocco as unconnected and immune to movements elsewhere in the world, and how did the authors in question reconcile (or fail to reconcile) this view with rumours concerning millenarian movements and pan-Islamic conspiracies?

Burke claims that previous historians have ignored the way in which General Hubert Lyautey, who governed from 1912–25 as Morocco's first French Resident-General, tried to fashion Morocco into a completely different French colonial regime through grounding policy in social research relying on 'a trained corps of native affairs personnel'. However, aspects of French Morocco's departure from other systems of colonial rule were explored by Spencer Segalla in *The Moroccan Soul*. Segalla also describes Lyautey's dreams of restoring the monarchy and social conservatism in France and how this influenced his romanticized view of Morocco as immune to the changes of the time. Segalla similarly illustrates how Georges Hardy implemented the divisions between urban/rural and Arab/Berber in the French education system in Morocco, starting in the 1920s.

Burke shows how Lyautey's infatuation with the British archive of India influenced the colonial archive, as the resident-general set about establishing the 'bureau politique' where colonial officials would be trained in knowledge related to Morocco. The cross-colonial connection is an intriguing factor in the creation of these myths and, while it is by no means a shortcoming that *The Ethnographic State* devoted limited space to this aspect, it would be interesting to hear if Burke found any other salient information regarding contact between British ethnographers and French ethnographers from the period, or any evidence that the ethnographers themselves were familiar with the British archive of India.

That Burke is able to so effectively demonstrate the legacy of the colonial archive and the role its essentializing tropes still play in solidifying authoritarian rule in Morocco makes this an important work.

However, beyond its importance in understanding the history of France and of Morocco, beyond its importance in revealing both the contrived and uncertain nature of colonial discourse, the story of the French colonial archive shows many revealing and disturbing aspects of knowledge production. Perhaps the most important and widely applicable aspect of *The Ethnographic State* is how effectively it demonstrates that detailed and carefully-gathered information can still be knowledge that is warped, distorted, and ultimately distorting.

Notes

1. George Trumball, *An Empire of Facts: Colonial Power, Cultural Knowledge, and Islam in Algeria, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Here I am borrowing Trumball’s description: ‘ethnography itself represents not a discipline, and assuredly not a “science”, but a genre, a specific kind of non-fiction writing with attendant narrative conventions and set pieces in prose’ [Back to \(2\)](#)

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