



PROJECT MUSE®

---

The Shabiba Islamiyya of Algiers: Education, Authority, and  
Colonial Control, 1921-57

James McDougall

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume  
24, Number 1, 2004, pp. 147-154 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/181216>

# The *Shabiba Islamiyya* of Algiers: Education, Authority, and Colonial Control, 1921-57

JAMES MCDUGALL

Ronald Robinson's "excentric" theory of imperial rule apparently applied most strongly at either end of what might be seen as a spectrum of modalities of colonial control. At one extreme, collaborative mediation was crucial in those territories where fewest metropolitan resources were deployed—in coastal enclaves or rural peripheries incorporated into the informal empire by handfuls of administrators or agents working through indigenous political systems whose societies had not (or not yet) experienced the disarticulation and dispossession of military conquest, or large-scale settlement and colonization. (Examples would be India in the early-mid eighteenth century, the Persian Gulf in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,<sup>1</sup> and most of West Africa throughout the colonial period). At the other extreme, in the pure-settlement colonies established in supposedly *terrae nullius* like Australia, where indigenous populations were either exterminated or confined to hinterland reservations, the white settler assumed the role of "ideal prefabricated collaborator." In territories of the first type—most of Asia and Africa—cooperative systems, Robinson suggests, "remained comparatively ineffective and unstable," leading by degrees to more far-reaching penetration, conquest and the imposition of more direct domination, whereas in the second, "collaboration proved both stable and effective," so much so that colonial rule in these areas (he is obviously thinking primarily of the "white Commonwealth") gradually receded and gave place to local self-rule by the colonial community. In both types of territory, at every point in the imperial process from the onset of influence to decolonization, the role of collaboration is seen to be crucial for the establishment, maintenance, and transfer of rule.<sup>2</sup>

Robinson has less to say about colonial territories which might be seen as falling somewhere around the midpoint of this spectrum—that is, those where substantial European immigration led to the formation of distinct colonial societies with direct political ties to the metropole and a local economy thoroughly integrated

into the imperial network, but where a more substantial local population remained, dispossessed, disenfranchised, and dominated, but nonetheless a demographic majority. In such cases, where the "European inputs" (Robinson's term)—economic and military power, settler numbers, and metropolitan political commitments—were comparatively great but could not, by contrast to the so-called *terrae nullius*, create the new homelands of emerging, exclusively white-settler societies, indigenous collaboration, says Robinson, was relatively unimportant. In these areas, the metropole's principal interlocutor in the colony was the settler, whose presence and interests "strangled native politics," and so in, for example, Algeria, Kenya, and the Rhodesias, at least before the 1950s, "imperial control could ... dispense with native cooperation to a great extent." Robinson also points out, however, that "even in these special cases, native mediators later became more necessary to colonial rule as African nationalist organization grew."<sup>3</sup>

This paper addresses one of Robinson's "special cases," taking as its focus an altogether atypical history within the history of colonial Algeria, which is itself in many respects a colonial case *sui generis*, in order to explore further the position of collaborative mediation in a context where, precisely, such collaboration was neither instrumental to the maintenance of colonial control and nor, correspondingly, was its breakdown a crucial step in the process of decolonization. The case at hand, in fact, might be seen as an inverse history of that presented by Robinson and also as an inverted history of nationalism. Its interest is thus partly that of an exception that proves the rule, although it might also be seen to modify the "rule" in certain important respects...

## The Context: Education and Social Authority in Colonial Algeria

It is not possible in the space available here to give anything like an adequate account of the complex politics of education in colonial Algeria.<sup>4</sup> Three elementary points should, however, be made to clear the ground.

First, at no time was French educational policy a single, coherent, much less a single, coherently, and systematically *implemented*, doctrine. Like other aspects of European colonial rule (and of domination generally<sup>5</sup>), education was a site of multiple, contradictory discourses and demands articulated by different groups with competing intentions and agenda within colonial hierarchies. To reduce these complex, inconsistent, intractably factional struggles to a monolithic grand design, whether as would-be enlightening “civilisational mission” or as actually Machiavellian “depersonalising project,” is simplistic in the extreme. If anything, such reductions (and I labor the point only because they are encountered so frequently in the literature on Algeria) naïvely take the pronouncements of colonial ideologies far too seriously, retroactively according them a power and integrity which in reality they never possessed—the undoubted severity of the catastrophic effects of actually-occurring, however incoherent and contradictory, colonial practices notwithstanding.

Second, the one overriding characteristic of the colonial educational system was, as is well known, its extremely limited scope. Even if the total number of Algerian children in colonial schools (the figures concern mainly boys between six and thirteen years of age) almost quintupled between 1890 and 1918, rising from 10,577 to 49,071, these figures represented only about 1.7 per cent and 5.7 per cent, respectively, of the estimated total school-age population. 1918, too, was a record year in the development of schooling—attendance numbers fell in 1919 and only began to rise again after 1923.<sup>6</sup> In 1961, there were still only some 300,000 children out of an estimated school-age population of 1.8 million in classes<sup>7</sup>—and this despite the substantial multiplication of educational provision undertaken by the Fifth Republic’s last-ditch rafts of reform measures, administrative reinforcements, and the work of the army’s *Sections Administratives Spécialisées* in the countryside, alongside the increased willingness of many Algerian families to acquire the education thus offered, eager as many doubtless were to get ahead in anticipation of independence and the improved opportunities it would bring.

Third, outside the purview of the French Ministry of Public Instruction and the Government General, and despite what is said and repeated about the “depersonalization” of Algerians by supposed procedures of “assimilation,” there remained, throughout the colonial period, provision of independent Islamic education centered on the Qur’an and dispensed in Arabic. Certainly, the forty-years’ war of conquest, the confiscation of land and particularly of *hubus* (i.e., property endowed for the maintenance of religious institutions) and of mosque and school buildings, the catastrophic mortality rates, massive dispossession, and pauperization of the

population, the flight of significant numbers of religious notables and lettered families out of Algeria, and the repressive measures taken against a religious infrastructure considered the prime fomenter of revolt in the countryside, all contributed to a cultural impoverishment which is impossible to quantify. To get a sense of the significance of these events for the people who experienced them, we have to look to the popular songs and oral literature from the conquest period which speak cataclysmically of the end of the world, of a startling undoing of the natural order of things. However, in the very idioms of this literature we can see Algerians encoding and narrating the calamity which had befallen them within the logic of a recognizable cultural system, whether as the judgment of the saints on the community or their flight from, and abandonment of, it.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, despite the extreme adversity of their situation, Algerians and their cultural creativity nonetheless survived under colonialism, found new ways of *coping* with the situation, of safeguarding their considerable patrimony, including a venerable scriptural tradition.<sup>9</sup> Far from simply disappearing under the shock of “depersonalization,” or, alternatively, regressing into some sort of inviolable, primitive societal cocoon, untouched and untouchable by Europe and its “progress,” Algerians created means and strategies for “working the system to their least disadvantage.”<sup>10</sup> Education was one of the most visible sites where this took place, and independent schools, among them the *Shabiba Islamiyya* of Algiers, were notable examples of such a strategy.

After World War I, and throughout the period up to the outbreak of the revolution in 1954, the school provided a key site in which a complex field of contest over social authority was crystallized. The actors in this contest all sought to establish and to extend their claimed authority through educational apparatuses—both the physical institutions and their personnel, and particular pedagogic programs—aimed at the “enlightenment and improvement” of Muslim Algerian children. Needless to say, the “progress” which each professed to bring about was conceived by each in quite different, though subtly interlinked, ways. For its part, the official educational establishment spoke of opening minds to modern civilization and of creating the conditions for the ever-anticipated “*évolution dans le cadre français*,” the evolution of Algerian society within the French orbit, while itself remaining the hostage of an intractable system of—after 1945—increasingly repressive minority rule whose first reflex remained “the instinctive prevention of the colonist towards the *indigène* whose revolt he fears,” as a report on public instruction in Algeria had put it in 1886.<sup>11</sup>

There also existed the three officially-sanctioned institutes of Islamic secondary education, the *médersas* (Gallicized from Arabic *madrasa*) of Tlemcen in the

west, Algiers, and Constantine in the east, reconstituted on the ruins of their pre-colonial predecessors by a decree of September 1850 in an attempt to remedy a critical lack of competent Muslim juridical personnel. These schools, often criticized in some of the literature, nonetheless dispensed an excellent level of instruction in French and Arabic and they were all at certain times the centers of activity for very accomplished and notable men of learning. These were the schools where the functionaries of the Muslim branch of the civic judiciary, as well as the officially-appointed personnel of mosques, were trained. Beyond the administration's own system, there remained the *ṣawāyā* (more or less, "lodges") of the Sufi brotherhoods, the most notably flourishing of which remained, at least into the late 1940s, that of al-Hamel in the southern Algérois.

The most vocal competitor for all of these, as for both the colonial establishment's presumed right to guide the Algerians' "moral and material progress" and the older prerogative of the established forms of Islam in Algerian culture to express their sacred faith and worldview, was the movement of Islamic reformism, incipient in Algiers and Constantine since the last decade of the nineteenth century, and rapidly coalescing both intellectually and institutionally after 1920. A proselytizing movement of pedagogy and doctrinal reform (*islāb*) aiming both at the "purification" of Islam by a return to the supposedly uncorrupted fundamentals of the "pious ancestors" (*al-salaf al-sālih*, whence the movement's Arabic appellation, *al-salafiyya*) and Islam's rational articulation in the modern world, reformism was conceived by its protagonists as a sacred "revolution against ignorance" (*thawra dīd al-jābil*); its vocation was educational above all else.<sup>12</sup> The reformists' modernism decried what they, no less than the colonial ideologues, considered the backwardness, stagnation and degeneracy of Algerian culture, and sought to recover what to them seemed the lost vigour of Islam through its austere puritanical and "scientifically" rational application to the modern world.

### Modernism and Auto-Emancipation:

#### Tayyib al-'Oqbi and the Algiers Progress Club

Among the leading figures of the Algerian *salafiyya* was *shaykh* al-Tayyib al-'Oqbi, born in the pre-Saharan oasis of Sidi 'Oqba in or around 1890 and brought up largely in the Hijaz (the western coastal region of the Arabian peninsula where Mecca and Medina lie), where he became an *'ālim* (pl. *'ulamā*, learned juridical-religious scholar of Islam). He was an early enthusiast for the "party of religious reform," as he called it, and a founding member of the reformists' organization, the Association of Algerian Muslim *'ulamā*, (AUMA) founded in Algiers in May, 1931. In July of that same year, al-'Oqbi moved from the desert to Algiers, settling

with his family in Kouba, a pleasant and largely European suburb of the city on the heights to the southeast of Algiers.

Fifty minutes' tram ride from Kouba was the center of the colonial capital, the Place du Gouvernement (after independence renamed Place des Martyrs / *sābat al-shuhadā*), on the southern side of which stood a rather grand building which had, since July 1927, housed the *Cercle du Progrès* / *al-nadī al-tarraqī*, the Algiers "Progress Club." It was this institution that al-'Oqbi had come to Algiers to direct. The Progress Club was established, so its statutes declared, "to assist the civilizing action of France through the pursuit of the intellectual, economic and social education of the Muslims of Algeria."<sup>13</sup> The language of this declaration is thoroughly conventional—we shall shortly try to evaluate to what degree it was also perfectly sincere. The principal feature to note about the Club is that it was established by Algerians as an institution of auto-emancipation; that is, as a meeting place for discussion, debate, and learning where the "leading elements" of indigenous society would come together with enlightened Europeans—as in the meetings of Monotheist Believers with leading rabbis and members of the Catholic community, a development influenced by the great French Orientalist, Louis Massignon—to further the education of Muslim Algerians and to develop understanding, sympathy, and partnership among the different communities of the colony.

The club's physical location was itself telling. Its chandeliered and oak-paneled rooms opened onto the central square, created for military reviews, which had been carved out of the old lower Casbah by the earliest colonial refiguring of the city, near the buildings of the Government General and its directorates (which later moved to more modern premises about ten minutes' walk away to the south) and between the Ottoman New Mosque (in French called the *Mosquée de la Pêcherie* for its waterfront situation) on the eastern side, and the cathedral (originally, and again after independence, the Ketchaoua mosque) which stood at the foot of the Casbah and on the old intersection of the principal arteries of Ottoman Algiers, on the western side. The Club was thus a space at the heart of colonial Algeria, mediating its different and antagonistic social powers at the point where they met, and hoping to serve as a forum for their development in complementarity rather than in conflict.

The Progress Club had taken under its wing, in pursuit of these goals, two other important institutions of Algerian auto-emancipation. The *jam'iya al-khayriyya*, the Algiers Benevolent Society, was the social charity arm of the Club, founded by al-'Oqbi in 1933 "to provide material and financial aid for Muslims finding themselves without resources of their own."<sup>14</sup> It provided food and shelter to the needy at premises in the place Randon.

The other institution dependent on the Progress Club had in fact pre-existed it, having been originally founded on 25 November 1921—this was the *madrasat al-shabiba 'islamiyya* or School for Islamic Youth, universally known as “the *Shabiba* school.” The earliest history of the *Shabiba* is somewhat obscure, but its official registration on 11 January 1922 makes it one of the very first, if not actually *the* first,<sup>15</sup> independent modernist-reformist Islamic school in Algeria. After 1930, the school occupied a building, let to it rent-free by a philanthropically minded association of Algerian petits-bourgeois dealing in real estate, at number seventeen Rampe Valée, at the northern edge of the Casbah opposite the Marengo gardens. The separate girls’ section would later have premises at number twenty, rue des Abderames in the Casbah itself.

The school became one of the largest and best-known such establishments, recognized for the quality of its teaching staff and the education they provided, committed to a bilingual instruction which was intended to equip its students for life in, and progressive emancipation through, their hoped-for reformed and more liberal, multicultural, and multilingual Algeria. The particular originality of the *Shabiba*, however, besides its precocious foundation at the very earliest moment of the interwar Algerian “revival,” and its notable success, lies in its durable *independence* from the nationalist movement which was beginning to emerge at the same time—most particularly in the radical-populist politics of the Algerian émigré workers in France, but also in the ethno-cultural interventions of the reformist *'ulama*—and which would gradually take over the development of Algerian society, and Algerian schemes of emancipation, in the subsequent three decades.

In the competition over the symbolic goods of civilizing education, the reformists initially established the Progress Club as their flagship institution. It was there that the Association of *'ulama* was founded in 1931, and there that it was officially registered with the colonial authorities. A report of 1938 considered that “the *Cercle du Progrès* has become synonymous with the reformist movement.”<sup>16</sup> But in fact, the relationship of the Progress Club and its guiding spirit, al-'Oqbi, to the wider reformist movement was already at that date under some strain.

Al-'Oqbi made his presence felt in Algiers from the moment of his arrival. Already a noted orator and journalist, celebrated both for his eloquent handling of classical written Arabic and for his ability to hold an audience, whether intellectual or illiterate, in thrall for hours on end, his preaching at the *Cercle du Progrès* drew capacity crowds, inflamed vibrant polemics with the Sufi leaders whose practice and belief, along with the politicking of the populist nationalists, he vilified, and (needless to say) attracted systematic and diligent atten-

tion from the informers of the local political police, (for whose assiduity in following his courses, and writing up their notes, cultural historians of Algeria must be forever guiltily grateful...).

Immensely popular and impenitently controversial, al-'Oqbi was a natural focus for the suspicions, and a target for the plots, of the colonial police. When on 4 August 1936 the mufti of Algiers, Mahmud ben Dali, known as “al-Kahhul,” was stabbed to death in the rue de la Lyre, one of the self-confessed assassins, after his arrest, named al-'Oqbi as having inspired the attack. Kahhoul had been one of the prominent signatories of a telegram sent to Paris, protesting against the presumed competence of the delegation of that summer's Algerian Muslim Congress, of which al-'Oqbi was a member, to represent the demands and aspirations of Algerians to the metropolitan government. Such was the supposed motive for the mufti's elimination. The statement implicating al-'Oqbi was eventually retracted, his name cleared, but not before he had been arrested and obliged to endure three years of legal proceedings. The true facts of the Kahhul affair remain uncertain, but it seems most likely that the implication of al-'Oqbi, at the very least, was a maneuver of the colonial police.

The result of these machinations was al-'Oqbi's partial retirement from the public stage. Disappointed at the paucity of the support he received from his colleagues in the AUMA—although publicly the Association had emphatically defended his innocence—the shaykh broke with the reformist organization in 1939. He would thereafter pursue his doctrinal and educational vocation independently of the Association, and the institutions which remained under his patronage—the Progress Club, the Kheiria Society and the *Shabiba*—would also remain independent of the organized reformist movement and the nationalism which, after 1938, it increasingly espoused. Although this partial eclipsing of al-'Oqbi was doubtless the objective of the suspicious spirits at the Government General, the Kahhul incident and its repercussions are highly ironic when al-'Oqbi's own political positions are considered.

Within the tendency of Algerian Islamic reformism, al-'Oqbi was the one voice who most consistently and intransigently insisted, from the moment of his journalistic entrance onto the scene in the mid-1920s, on the strictly apolitical nature of the sociocultural work to be undertaken. The regeneration of what, to him, appeared a weak and decadent Algerian society depended on a recovery of religious integrity and a regeneration of Arabic pedagogy through which a “modern, moral Islamic education” might be given the people.<sup>17</sup> Of course, in describing such a project as “apolitical,” al-'Oqbi was espousing a perfectly political position—what he meant by the refusal of “politics” was a refusal, which he would maintain to the end of his life, to be

drawn into the dangerous and undignified position necessarily taken up by any Algerian who, however moderate and “loyal,” in demanding explicitly “political” change was, by the very fact of “getting involved in politics,” immediately identified as an enemy of the state. The “salvation” of colonized Algeria could, he thought, best be achieved in *partnership* with France, whose own powerful modernity was to be harnessed by Algerians for their own emancipation in a wished-for *appropriation* of the colonial project. “Politics,” he declared as early as December 1925, meaning that arena of public debate which was forbidden to Algerians by the ruling order, was a corrupting force of division which never failed to “turn what is good into evil.”<sup>18</sup> Explaining what he meant by “reform” (*islah*), al-‘Oqbi wrote in 1939:

Reform encompasses all labours in the service of Good, of which the best kind is that which accords with what is both rational and legal....In our writings we will consider the improvement of our religious, social, economic, and even political situation, but we will never address that politics which is identified, in the language of the Administration, with hostility against the government and action against its interests. We are not among those who preach the duty of throwing the foreigner into the sea....Our opinion, which accords with reality, is that the Algerian nation ... is, in its moral and material deprivation, the nation which [of all] has most need of a powerful, enlightened and civilised state to care for her, protect and educate her so as to guide her towards progress, happiness, civilisation and perfection....This Power [i.e., France] can be assured of, and rejoice at, the friendship and devotion of the Algerians. May she only think of them as her children who address to her their just demands and who seek refuge in her when they are victims of injustice. The French government should know that those who are most anxious that France should remain in Algeria for Algeria’s greater benefit are the learned scholars, the reformist writers who recognise only what is right and who bow only to its truth. They have never been, and will never be, enemies of France or of French civilisation. But they are enemies of injustice and arbitrary rule, of despotism and tyranny, of iniquity and inequality of rights—enemies, in a word, of all that is repugnant to human nature, to science and to reason.<sup>19</sup>

The textual strategy here is dense but perfectly apparent. Such invocations of the ideal, democratic, rational, and egalitarian France against the colonial reality of a seemingly capricious, inconsistent, oppressive, and despotic France, were ubiquitous in the earlier literature of the reformist tendency. Only al-‘Oqbi, though, would maintain this line beyond the late 1930s. Speaking to the committee of the *Kheiria* Society in March 1945—two

months before the bloody repression of a half-cocked insurrection in eastern Algeria—the shaykh repeated the same convictions, and declared that he would leave “to the mad and the brainless the ridiculous object of pursuing mirages.”<sup>20</sup>

Al-‘Oqbi’s “loyal opposition,” his gradualist rationalism, his horror of populist demagoguery (and, let it be said, popular culture) and his frank disdain for what he saw as an absurd independentist radicalism, might have made him a profitable interlocutor for the colonial establishment. But the colonial system, at its height in these years, could dispense with Algerian mediators—moreover, any such attempts at self-expression, at the establishment of independently minded figures and projects seeking to draw the shabby behavior of imperial France up to the heights of her own self-proclaimed civilizational grandeur, were immediately marked down as suspect, subversive, and subject to repression. This applied even to the “apolitical” al-‘Oqbi; for all his desire to avoid the trap of “being involved in politics” which might serve to set him up as a target, he became the system’s most prominent victim of the interwar period.

### “Sociological Cell” of Nationalism or Site of Colonial Control? The Singular Trajectory of the *Shabiba*

What are we to make, then, of al-‘Oqbi’s school, the *Shabiba*? It was unquestionably part of the shaykh’s strategy for a renewal of Muslim Algeria through a partnership of purified Islamic morality and rational modernity, as a means to the mediation of colonial power into Algerian society and culture for the emancipation of Algerians from their own “backwardness” and frailty. But in the absence of a partnership to this end with the colonial state, the school paradoxically became, during the 1930s, a major source of energies that would be directed, instead, via the promotion of an Arab-Islamic renaissance, into the nationalist movement.

Itself institutionally independent of the political parties and the Association of *‘ulama*, all of which (and most notably the AUMA) proceeded to establish small independent primary schools of one sort or another throughout Algeria from the early 1930s onwards, in the interwar period the *Shabiba* was nonetheless a place frequented by some of the leading creative intellectuals of Algerian nationalism. The leading Algerian poet, Muhammad al-‘Aid Al-Khalifa, whose unabashedly nationalist verses appeared in the Arabic-language press and who counts as one of the first outstanding figures of contemporary Algerian Arabic literature, was for a while the school’s director. History classes were taught by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jilali, a noted member of the AUMA whose *Ta’rikh al-jazā’ir al-‘amm* (*A General History of Algeria*), published in 1954 and reprinted several times

since in Algiers and Beirut, counts as the last notable pre-revolutionary work of Algerian history in Arabic, succeeding the earlier works of Mubarak al-Mili and Tawfiq al-Madani in the 1920s - 1940s.

Mostefa Lacheraf, later to become perhaps the most notable intellectual of the FLN, a member of the National Council of the Revolution and then a distinguished diplomat who participated in drawing up both the Tripoli platform in 1962 and the National Charter of 1976 and who would be briefly (and unhappily) Minister of Education in 1977, attended Thursday and Sunday classes at the Shabiba while a student at the nearby Algiers *lycée*. Among his contemporaries were the poet Tahar Bouchouchi, and the musicians and singers 'Abd al-Rahman Aziz, "who would become a great singer of the religious and patriotic repertoire,"<sup>21</sup> and 'Abd al-Hamid ibn Muhammad Ababsa, who was also a student of Mahieddine Bachetarzi, one of the founding fathers of the Algerian theater, and who drew attention to himself in the late 1930s by undertaking tours of the interior towns in the course of which he performed "works of a subversive tendency."<sup>22</sup> Lacheraf writes of the Shabiba in his memoirs that it was

a kind of sociological cell in full cultural bloom and [where] the contrasting currents of nationalism in the Algeria of those days awoke together...; [where] men, young and not-so-young, met...guided only by the desire to learn their literary language. Each of them would choose a different political orientation without ever losing an *Algérianité* which they held in common ....<sup>23</sup>

The emancipatory aims of the school, however, still seemed best served by working with and through the system. By 1951, the Shabiba was regarded by the administration as one of the most significant independent schools for Algerians in the country, one of only seven such schools in the Department of Algiers considered "real schools" dispensing a primary education (as opposed to those where teaching appeared to be essentially limited to the Qur'an and elements of Arabic), and of those it was the largest, with 300 pupils (225 boys and seventy-five girls) and twelve teachers. Of the latter, eight taught in French and four in Arabic. Of the francophones, three were paid entirely by the school's own funds, the other five being regular employees of the French *rectorat* detached from the public system to assist at the Shabiba at the request of the school's directors.<sup>24</sup> By the autumn of 1956, the school reportedly taught some 600 children (400 boys and 200 girls), and was in receipt of financial assistance as well as personnel from the colonial administration.

It is possible that the rapid increase in attendance at this date was due, at least in part, to an influx of Muslim children who had previously attended the regular public school system, but who in October 1956 followed the

instructions of the FLN (engaged since November 1954 in an armed insurrection) to boycott all French institutions, as of the beginning of the new school year, and were sent by their families to the Shabiba, the only independent Muslim school to open on 1 October 1956, instead.<sup>25</sup> Although only forty boys turned up for classes on the first morning of school, seventy-three attended that afternoon and the next day 200 pupils arrived. On that same day, 2 October 1956, the director of the school, Ahmed Benhoura, one of whose colleagues had already been assassinated (presumably by the FLN) in June, received an anonymous note warning him that "the teaching of French at the Arab Shabiba must be broken off and the French teachers on its staff dismissed," and noting that once he had substituted "your brother teachers of Arabic for those who are unclean, God will have satisfied the believers who are fighting" (*wa 'awdatum dhawi al-aqdam al-qadhira bi-mu'allimi al-'arabiyya ikhwānikum fa-qad kafā allah al-mu'minīn al-qitāl*).<sup>26</sup> That evening, parents of the school's pupils were reportedly threatened, and the next day the school was practically empty. Benhoura and al-'Oqbi pragmatically decided to prolong the vacation until 1 November. The school eventually reopened in March 1957 and continued to function, tied more tightly than ever to the administration, throughout the war. Al-'Oqbi refused to terminate the teaching of French; on the contrary, in the summer of 1957, Benhoura wrote to the administration to request its reinforcement: the Minister for Algeria wrote to the official in charge of the colony's education that "desiring the generalisation of the teaching of French in his establishment, [Monsieur Benhoura asks] you to envisage the possibility of detaching a greater number of teachers or instructors in October."<sup>27</sup> The school was attended in May 1957, by 635 pupils,<sup>28</sup> and in December of that year, reportedly, by some 800.<sup>29</sup> That winter, Benhoura, who was a veteran of World War I and had been a *qadi* before becoming al-'Oqbi's private secretary and interpreter, requested a subsidy so that the Kheiria might establish a canteen at the school. Noting that "a large number of these children belong to needy families," the office responsible for psychological warfare in the capital approved the request with the observation that "this form of psycho-social action would considerably assist the Kheiria society, and its counterpart the Shabiba, whose pro-French activities are well known in the area."<sup>30</sup> The school's "teaching and good conduct," the head of that office had previously noted, "contribute very efficaciously to the improvement of Franco-Muslim relations"<sup>31</sup> [sic]. The latter comment was penned only four days after the first bombs of the Battle of Algiers had exploded in the center of the city.

## Conclusion

The collaborative enterprise examined here, the *ma-*

*drasat al-shabiba 'l-islamiyya* or School for Islamic Youth, and the associated enterprises of Tayyib al-'Oqbi in Algiers, came into being at precisely the moment when, it appeared, colonial control and imperial authority could most safely dispense with "native collaboration," that is, at the high-water mark of self-confidence in the colonies and colonial enthusiasm in metropolitan France, at the beginning of the interwar period. Its relationship to the administration was at its most ambivalent in these early years. In the final phase of its existence, however, when, with the growth and increasingly successful imposition of an insurgent, nationalist counter-order and counter-authority, such sites of mediation suddenly appeared necessary to colonial rule—only to be found wanting in most cases—this institution became tied and identified more closely than ever with the system. Despite the superficial appearance of its remarkably flourishing student numbers and the extension of its activities, however, the Shabiba was an exceptional, isolated and marginal institution in a society profoundly worked upon by powerful currents of contest. It could thus no longer serve as any kind of effective support for the colonial control which had believed for too long that it could survive indefinitely on the strength of its own univocal authority.

Caught between revolutionary nationalism and the colonial establishment, the Shabiba illustrates both the persistent effort to establish, and the ultimate impossibility of, "collaborative compromise," or meaningful mediation, in colonial Algeria. It was not so much, as Robinson thought, that the system "could dispense with native cooperation"—in the long term, of course, it could not, although officials only began to realize as much when the bombs had already begun to explode. What the regime, suicidally, did manage to do was to outlaw any form of indigenous initiative, any potential mediator between itself and the Algerian population, even the avowedly "apolitical," which did not abide strictly by the rule of obeisance.<sup>32</sup> The only kind of "collaboration" possible was the kind practiced, not by al-'Oqbi and his wished-for partnership in development, but by the police spies who informed on him, or the *beni oui-oui*, the "administration's candidates" in local elections who represented no interests but their own.<sup>33</sup> By strangling, not "native politics" as a whole, which would prove irrepressible, but loyal opposition and reform-minded emancipation, the colonial regime drove itself and its subjects inexorably to violence (with the logical culmination of this suicidal tendency in the settler community eventually finding its nihilistic expression in the OAS).

One of the most remarkable aspects of al-'Oqbi's combination of educational, spiritual, and welfare mission was the extent to which it reinvented, in the heart of the modern urban capital of the colony, the older,

and more particularly rural, form of the Islamic *zawiya*. His modernist, auto-emancipatory initiative, building on this locally-established associational and educational form, and intended to create a space where the conflicting populations of colonial Algeria might come together in partnership and mutual recognition in pursuit of a gradual overcoming of "injustice and arbitrary rule, despotism and tyranny, iniquity, and inequality of rights," was pursued to the end in defiance of its own impossibility, and at the risk, ultimately, of becoming the tool of colonialist psychological warfare. Refused the possibility of assuming a mediating authority of its own, its historical significance could only be as a conduit of colonial control, or as a school of future nationalists. That it became both, while wishing to be neither, is a striking illustration of the way in which, in Algeria at least, colonialism drove a logic of extremes, obliterating the possibility of meaningful, moderate mediation.

#### NOTES

Archive material cited is held at the Centre des Archives d'outre mer, Aix-en-Provence, France. References follow the usual form: *fonds/série/carton/dossier*. (ADA—Fonds des Archives du Département d'Alger. AGGA—Fonds des Archives du Gouvernement Général de l'Algérie.) All unattributed translations are my own.

<sup>1</sup>Onley, "Britain's Native Agents in Arabia and Persia in the Nineteenth Century," this volume.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration" reprinted in Wm. Roger Louis ed., *Imperialism. The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1976), 128-48.

<sup>3</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism," 133.

<sup>4</sup>See, for the early period, Yvonne Turin, *Affrontements culturels en Algérie coloniale—Écoles, Médecine, Religion, 1830-1880*, (Paris: Maspéro, 1971) and for the crucial first phase of the Third Republic, Ch-R Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France, 1870-1919* (2 vols., Paris: PUF, 1968), chs. 12 and 33; also Fanny Colonna, "Le Système d'Enseignement de l'Algérie Coloniale," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 13 (1972), 195-220 and her pathbreaking *Instituteurs algériens, 1883-1939* (Paris: FNSP, 1975).

<sup>5</sup>See Philip Abrams' brilliant and unjustly little-known text, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1:1 (March 1988): 58-89.

<sup>6</sup>Ageron, *Algériens Musulmans*, 2: 949-50.

<sup>7</sup>John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 226.

<sup>8</sup>I discuss this at greater length in my book, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), ch. 4.

<sup>9</sup>On this, see Julia Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint. Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).



<sup>10</sup>To paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1 (1973-4): 3-22.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Turin, *Affrontements culturels*, 414.

<sup>12</sup>A detailed discussion is presented in my *History and the Culture of Nationalism* (note 8). For the reformists "revolution against ignorance," see Fanny Colonna, *Les Versets de l'Invincibilité. Permanence et changements religieux en Algérie contemporaine* (Paris, FNSP, 1995), ch.9.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in "L'Activité des cercles créés par les ulémas," unsigned [CIE, Prefecture], Algiers, 10 Feb. 1938, (7 pages), 3. ADA/4I/13/2; statutes of the school (3 pages, typed), in ADA/4I/88/10.

<sup>14</sup>"L'Activité des cercles" (note 13), 4.

<sup>15</sup>Mostefa Tacheraf notes that it was « la première du genre » in his *Des Noms et des Lieux* (Algiers: Casbah Éditions, 1998), 261. I am unaware of any earlier such creation, either in Algiers or elsewhere.

<sup>16</sup>"L'Activité des cercles" (note 13), 3.

<sup>17</sup>*al-Islah*, (28 Dec. 1939), translation in AGGA/15H/21/2.

<sup>18</sup>*al-Shihab*, (31 Dec. 1925), quoted in S. Sellam, B. Younessi, and J-L Planche, "Un réformateur venu du désert, cheikh El Okbi," in J-J Jordi and J-L Planche, eds., *Alger, 1860-1939. Le Modèle ambigu du triomphe colonial* (Paris: Autrement, 1999), 204.

<sup>19</sup>*al-Islah*, (28 Dec. 1939), translation in AGGA/15H/21/2.

<sup>20</sup>"Mouvement Réformiste et Culte Musulman," unsigned note [SIDM, Prefecture], Algiers, March 1945. ADA/4I/14/8.

<sup>21</sup>Tacheraf, *Des Noms et des Lieux*, 262.

<sup>22</sup>Governor-General to Prefect of Algiers, 13 Oct. 1937 n°17866<sup>b</sup>, a/s "Musiciens ambulants," ADA/2I/32/2.

<sup>23</sup>Tacheraf, *Des Noms et des Lieux*, 262.

<sup>24</sup>Prefect, Algiers to Governor General, 16 July 1951 n°964 SLNA, report on "médersas" and Qur'anic schools, (5pp), ADA/4I/68/3.

<sup>25</sup>Intelligence note, Commissaire Divisionnaire, PRG, Algiers, 18 Oct. 1956 n°12256 (valeur: bonne), ADA/4I/16/1.

<sup>26</sup>Photocopy of MS letter, ADA/4I/88/10.

<sup>27</sup>Minister for Algeria to Inspecteur de l'Académie, Algiers, 20 June 1957 n°543 AP/AG-2E, ADA/4I/88/10.

<sup>28</sup>Minister for Algeria to Inspecteur de l'Académie, Algiers, 20 June 1957 n°543 AP/AG-2E, ADA/4I/88/10.

<sup>29</sup>SLNA, Prefecture, Algiers to Minister for Algeria, 6 Dec. 1957 n°1651/SLNA (Action Psychologique), ADA/4I/88/10.

<sup>30</sup>SLNA, Prefecture, Algiers to Minister for Algeria, 6 Dec. 1957 n°1651/SLNA (Action Psychologique), ADA/4I/88/10.

<sup>31</sup>Intelligence note, Chef du SLNA, Prefecture, Algiers, 4 Oct. 1956 n°1143/CAB SLNA, ADA/4I/88/10.

<sup>32</sup>There is a very small number of distinguished exceptions, notably Chérif Benhabylès, who ultimately became a senator of the Fifth Republic.

<sup>33</sup>This is not, however, to suggest that their case, too, might not prove instructive in terms of the possibilities they, for whatever reason and with whatever ultimate success, pursued.