

Organising a Muslim Society

by Arthur Asseraf

The Association of Algerian Ulema played an important role in the process of decolonisation. Its goal: making Algeria into a Muslim society.

On: Charlotte Courreye, *L'Algérie des oulémas : une histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine (1931-1991)*. Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020. 536 pages, €43.

Universities, diplomas, expert councils: throughout the ages, Muslim societies have developed numerous ways of institutionalising science (*'ilm*). Charlotte Courreye's book invites us to discover an attempt at organising expertise in a specific colonial context: an association under the French 1901 law, with a president, secretary, treasurer and articles of association. In a fine-grained social history, she sketches out a central object in the history of contemporary Algeria: the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema. The religious authority of the scholar or *'ālim* (plural *'ūlama'*, hence the English ulema) was transformed by this new institutional form. United at the national level, the ulema had a project for society as a whole: to turn Algeria into a Muslim society. The book, which is derived from a doctoral thesis, has a lot to teach us in two respects. Firstly, it offers a new look at contemporary Algerian history by following the trajectories of actors before and after independence. But it also allows us to reflect on the multiple transformations in the place of religious authority in the colonial and post-colonial context, going well beyond the Algerian case.

The spirit of the ulema

The Association (sometimes known by its French acronym, 'AUMA') is well known to Algerians. Founded in 1931 by Shaykh Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, the AUMA played a key role in the development of the Algerian national movement. Establishing a network of schools throughout the country, it defended the Arabic language and the Muslim religion in the context of French Algeria. Without officially getting involved in politics, it played a significant role in the cultural development of an Algerian national identity, and during the war, in 1956, it rallied to the FLN. In 1962, after independence, the association ceased to exist institutionally. But by presenting a social history of the networks of men and women brought together by the association, Charlotte Courreye reveals continuities despite these institutional changes. Former members of the association took part in developing the independent state and occupied strategic positions in the ministries, especially those of Religious Affairs and of Education. For example, Zhor Ounissi (Zuhur Wunisi), who was born in Constantine in 1936, went to primary school in an ulema school, then taught in the same schools, before ending up in 1982 as Minister of Social Affairs, the first female member of an Algerian government. Despite the association's disappearance a certain "ulema spirit" remained, most notably by retaining a certain distance from the political apparatus of the FLN, which became a veritable party-state in the post-independence period. In 1991, when the study ends, a new association was founded in the context of a multi-party system and political crisis, which made reference to the old without however bringing together all of these former members.

There are many studies on the ulema, as well as many polemics on their history that polarize Algerian political life to this day. It may be worth reminding a French readership that the controversies about the Algerian War of Independence are not the same everywhere. The French army's use of torture, for example, which regularly makes the covers of the French press, is hardly a subject of debate in Algeria, where it is an accepted and consensual fact. On the other hand, the role of the ulema in the nationalist movement and then the revolution, as the war of independence is known in Algeria, is a hotly debated topic. Thus, as touched upon in the book's introduction, among the most polarising slogans of the 2019 *hirak* was a call for a *bādisiyya novembriyya* republic, a Badissist-Novembrist republic: i.e. a republic established according to the principles of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis and the revolution of 1 November 1954. Now, Ibn Badis, the founder of the Association, died in 1940. He never took part in the revolution or called for political independence. The relationship between the

demands of the ulema for a Muslim society and those of the FLN for political independence, between the different components of the national movement, is today at the heart of issues of political legitimacy in independent Algeria.

In the face of this highly polemical history, *L'Algérie des oulémas* dismantles or qualifies a large number of clichés in Algerian political debates. Indeed, the great merit of this book is its re-reading of the Association in a way that goes beyond just the Algerian national movement. To gain a better understanding of the role played by the ulema in 20th century Algerian society, the author proposes to open up the subject in two respects, chronologically and geographically. Charlotte Courreye has written a history in which 1962, the date of independence, is neither the beginning nor the end, but a pivotal moment right in the middle of a longer historical process. This is in itself remarkable, because writing a history of Algeria that crosses the junction of independence is not self-evident. Since Malika Rahal's ground-breaking work, there has been an abundance of increasingly rich studies on the history of independent Algeria.¹ Saphia Arezki recently wrote a history of the Algerian army that likewise extends to the 1990s, while Jeffrey James Byrne has examined the FLN's foreign policy by straddling 1962, in order to encompass the early years of independence.² Above all, James McDougall's important synthesis invites us to think about the continuities in Algerian history from the sixteenth century to 2012.³ The book thus forms part of a major renewal in the field of contemporary Algerian history. We should also mention, in particular, Augustin Jomier's very interesting book on Algerian ibadism, which is published in the same collection and which can usefully be read together with *L'Algérie des oulémas*, in order to understand the transformations in religious authority.⁴

Even if it is becoming increasingly common, writing across 1962 is no simple matter and entails playing different sources off against one another – a challenge that Charlotte Courreye meets in an elegant way. For the period before 1962, we can draw on a field of official archives produced by the colonial administration in France and Algeria, which closely monitored the activities of the ulema. For the period after, the impossibility of having access to official archives is finally less of an obstacle than it

¹ See Malika Rahal, "Fille d'Octobre : Générations, engagement et histoire", *L'Année du Maghreb*, 10, 2014, pp.183-187, and *Algérie 1962 : une histoire populaire*, Barzakh/La Découverte, 2022.

² Saphia Arezki, *De l'ALN à l'ANP : la construction de l'armée algérienne, 1954-1991*, Barzakh, 2018. Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

³ James McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

⁴ Augustin Jomier, *Islam, réforme et colonisation : une histoire de l'ibadisme en Algérie (1882-1962)*, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2020.

might have seemed, because Courreye manages to use official publications produced by various ministries, the memoirs of numerous actors, and interviews to retrace individual trajectories. Courreye not only uses primary sources in Arabic, but also engages a flourishing Arabic-language historiography on the ulema, which is too rarely the case among historians publishing in French on the Maghreb.

How to create a Muslim Algeria

What is so striking in reading this book are the continuities of the dynamics between different political regimes. The members of the association tried to create a Muslim Algeria. This project emerged in a colonial context, but continued after independence. By looking at the trajectory of the ulema over a longer period, Charlotte Courreye manages to remove them from the specificity of the colonial context in which they were born, and to reveal a more complex dance between religious and political authority: between *'ilm* (science) and *hukm* (power). The ulema wanted to have influence in the political domain while at the same time keeping a certain distance from it. This was, of course, the case during the colonial period vis-à-vis a non-Muslim administration, but also vis-à-vis the emergent political parties of the 1940s and 1950s. The Association was not a party, but preferred to position itself above the parties as kingmaker. Similarly, its attitude to the insurrection that broke out in 1954 was unclear at first, even if the ulema ended up officially joining the FLN in 1956. After independence, although the ulema were happy to get involved with the new state in 1962, many of them also positioned themselves at a certain distance from the single party, preferring to be experts giving advice (*nasihah*) to the political authorities. They thus reproduced a much older pattern that goes back to the relationships between the *'ulama'* and pre-colonial Muslim rulers.

This fine-grained reading also makes it possible to reveal the relationships between religious and political authority in a variety of ways. Here, Courreye carefully deactivates a number of traps. A widespread view among secularists in Algeria is that by imbuing the state with their religious mission after 1962, the ulema developed political Islam and thus contributed to the Islamist violence of the dark decade of the 1990s. The author shows us that the reality is far more complex. First of all, the evolution of the former members of the association followed different tendencies: if they all shared the project of a Muslim Algeria, they did not agree on the specific modalities. Most of them took their distance from the new Islamist groupings which

emerged in the 1980s, preferring to position themselves as advocates of a middle ground, or even of a “state fundamentalism” in which the Islamisation of society would come from above, in opposition to the more radical organisations which positioned themselves as anti-state. When viewed in the long term, the relationship between Islam and politics appears far more nuanced.

The role of education

Because, in reality, the project of the ulema went beyond politics. Creating a Muslim society was first and foremost a matter of education. The reader of this book will discover an entire educational system in parallel to the colonial system from the 1930s onwards, which did not only have its own schools and teacher training, but even its own inspectors who were supposed to ensure the quality of teaching throughout the territory. This development of a pedagogy ensuring the progress of the Algerian people by reviving its relationship with its origins was a constant concern, as evoked by some of the most interesting passages in the book about the creation of “original” or “authentic” teaching (*ta’alim asli*) in the 1970s: that is, teaching based on traditional religious models. This project does not necessarily involve political power, as numerous ethnographic studies on contemporary Muslim societies have shown. It can rely on civil society associations, informal networks or even changes in personal behaviour aimed at developing a more pious society.⁵

By extending the chronology, Courreye is able to remove the Association of the ulema from the context of French Algeria and the struggle for independence, and thus to open up the geographical horizon as well. The author makes numerous judicious comparisons with other national contexts, including the Moroccan and Tunisian neighbours of course, but also the very telling Indonesian case, in which the Nahdlatul Ulama (“Awakening of the Ulema”) association, which was founded in 1926, openly got involved in the political parties of independent Indonesia. One would have sometimes liked to see these comparisons developed further. In Morocco and Tunisia, the ulema remained organised around the ancient mosque-universities of al-Qarawiyyīn in Fez and al-Zaytūna in Tunis, which played important roles before and after independence. The Algerian case, with its association formed on a French

⁵ For a particularly influential example, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton, 2005.

institutional model on the national level, seems to stand out here. This specificity would need to be explored in greater detail together with other long-colonised territories – hence the pertinence of the Indonesian case. We may also wonder about the similarities with Muslims in British India: the Deobandi movement, in particular, which, in trying to develop Islam to meet the challenges of the modern world under colonial rule starting in the 1860s, also founded a *Jamiat Ulema-e Hind* in 1919, whose name is very close to the *jam'iyyat 'ulama' al-muslimin al-jazā'iriyyīn*, the Arabic name of the AUMA.

But it is precisely the interest of this book to stimulate the desire to engage in new research which links the Algerian case with others. Thanks to her detailed and meticulous work, Charlotte Courreye manages to make the projects and lives of the women and men who were part of the Association simultaneously more complex and more accessible to us. By looking at the changing destiny of an association whose aim was to transform Algeria via education and science, she allows us to rethink the transformations of religious, scientific and political authority in way that goes far beyond the Algerian case.

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