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French Expeditions to the Algerian Sahara After the Occupation: Léon Roches as a Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines the primary French exploratory missions into the Algerian Sahara subsequent to the French occupation. Various French researchers and authors traveled to the region to observe and document its characteristics, focusing particularly on its largely unknown urban centers. These intellectuals produced numerous publications, motivated by a desire to explore the Algerian desert and disseminate their observations to a wider audience. The expeditions comprised individuals from diverse professions, including researchers, writers, adventurers, clergymen, and military officers. Their objective was to generate reports and studies that would facilitate French authorities' understanding of the Sahara, enabling the implementation of policies and the assertion of control over the region. Notably, Léon Roches, an operative, integrated himself into Emir Abdelkader's forces and accompanied him during campaigns in Ain Madi. Roches penetrated local tribal structures to comprehend the Arab population amidst European colonial influence. Ostensibly promoting enlightenment and French culture, his actual intent was to foster disunity and weaken resistance to French forces, thereby strengthening colonial networks.

Keywords Algerian Sahara ; Colonial penetration; Léon Roches; Exploratory missions; Emir Abdelkader;

I- Introduction:

Since the dawn of creation, exemplified by the descent of Adam and Eve, human beings have inherently engaged in travel, migration, and movement. This intrinsic mobility persists throughout an individual's life, from birth to death, with its forms adapting to changing times and circumstances. The very act of birth can be conceptualized as a journey a transition from the maternal womb to the external world underpinned by an inherent drive for motion and exploration.

Movement is fundamental to life and constitutes a core attribute of both human physical and psychological composition. Human design incorporates mobility as a vital capacity, aligning with the purpose of existence and the objective of creation. Furthermore, a deep-seated human inclination towards curiosity, exploration, understanding others, and the desire to discover the surrounding world has historically propelled individuals toward travel and relocation. This has led to the movement of populations from their native regions to neighboring ones, driven by a pursuit of new horizons and an exploration of the customs and traditions of diverse peoples and tribes.



Travel literature played a fundamental role in stimulating significant interest in the concept of the "Other." Initially an independent theme, it evolved into a specialized field dedicated to exploring the Other's history, civilization, the mechanisms of their cultural and epistemological structures, and the roots and psychological dimensions of their social values. The theme of alterity or "Otherness" within Arabic literature is a nuanced subject that has garnered considerable scholarly attention due to its contemporary relevance and potential implications for future interactions whether convergent or divergent between the Maghrebian Self and the European Other.

The relationship between the Ego and the Other is inherently complex and often paradoxical. It can manifest as the Ego dominating the Other or the Other being negated by the Ego. This dynamic operates within a framework of binary oppositions, such as life/death, good/evil, right/wrong, and masculinity/femininity, where the integration of these poles is perceived as unattainable.

This context gave rise to the field of image studies, also known as imagology (sometimes termed *ilm al-ṣūrah* in Arabic scholarship, derived from the French *imagologie*). As a sub-discipline of comparative literature, imagology emerged from the interplay of civilizations and intercultural communication. Within this framework, the image functions not merely as an illustrative or identifying tool but as an active component of the literary work. The representation of a nation or people is highly variable, depending on the observer's perspective and origin. Travel writing, particularly European accounts of journeys into the Arab world, was instrumental in the proliferation of imagological studies.

European travel to the Maghreb was extensive and multifaceted, driven by diverse objectives and motivations. These journeys frequently aimed to bridge the cultural divide between the European "Other" and the Arab "Ego," with travel narratives serving as critical conduits for observing the region's cultural, social, and religious life. Algeria, owing to its size and strategic location, became a focal point in European travel literature, attracting numerous French researchers and writers. Their expeditions documented Algerian cities, populations, and unfamiliar customs, resulting in a substantial body of work, particularly concerning the Algerian Sahara. This region was perceived as geopolitically significant, functioning as a global nexus connecting North and South, East and West.

These travel accounts often included ethnographic observations intended to facilitate a deeper understanding of regional behaviors and characteristics. Expeditions comprised individuals from various fields, including researchers, writers, adventurers, clergymen, and military personnel. Their collective efforts generated reports and studies that aided French authorities in uncovering the Sahara's features, implementing policies, and asserting control for resource exploitation. Notable among these figures was Léon Roches, an operative who infiltrated local tribes and communities, joining Emir Abdelkader's forces during campaigns in Ain Madi. His work documented indigenous customs and traditions in an effort to comprehend an Arab populace encountering European civilization.

This European presence in Algeria was characterized by intellectual and cultural subjugation. A direct consequence of these exploratory endeavors was the expansion of French colonial projects into the Algerian Sahara, marked by the construction of railway lines. These infrastructures served to facilitate resource extraction and further territorial penetration.

What role did these exploratory missions play in enabling France to penetrate deep into the Algerian Sahara? What were the most prominent and significant outcomes of these missions? How did France exploit them for the occupation and seizure of the Algerian Sahara? What were the main impressions of French explorers regarding the Algerian Sahara and its society? And how did Léon Roches, the adventurous spy, manage to carry out his conspiracies and intelligence activities for the French authorities under the guise of his conversion to Islam within Emir Abdelkader's army ?

I. French Travel Literature between Discovery and Domination

Between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, a significant number of major expeditions were undertaken by prominent European explorers. During this period, travel to Algeria typically extended over several months and necessitated considerable financial investment, thereby limiting access to the affluent, particularly members of the nobility. These travelers were commonly accompanied by indigenous guides. For young French aristocrats, a journey to Algeria was perceived as a pathway to liberation, and in some instances, as an avenue for debauchery and sexual tourism, conducted outside the confines of Christian morality. Narratives from these expeditions

frequently presented portrayals of Algeria that were conceived rather than genuinely experienced or observed; they recounted what was presumed to have been witnessed or what was desired to be seen. (Aghmir, 2014, p. 96)

This era witnessed a notable increase in literary and creative output concerning travel within Algeria, a vast continental nation. Perspectives and thematic focuses varied considerably, reflecting the diverse backgrounds and professions of the travelers, who included writers, politicians, military officers, diplomats, and scientific explorers.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, following extensive exploration of the Sahara by the English and Germans across all cardinal directions, the French recognized the opportune moment to engage in Saharan exploration alongside their rivals. (Al-Arabi, 1986, p. 294) Consequently, France resolved to incentivize its citizens to undertake journeys aimed at discovering uncharted regions of the Sahara. To further this initiative, the French Geographical Society offered a reward to the first Frenchman who would comprehensively document and report on their observations.

These initial expeditions laid the groundwork for French expansion into the Saharan territories. A report by Prince Henri d'Orléans (Henri Dureyrier) to the Governor-General of Algeria, concerning the 1944 French campaign that secured Biskra, illustrates this preparatory phase. He noted, "I dispatched my informants officers proficient in the Arabic language who mingled with all the tribes, and within ten days they provided me with the necessary political guidance and health statistics that enabled me to establish solid authority and take the required measures". (Boubaya, 2004, p. 156)

At that time, the Algerian Sahara was largely uncharted. Its interior remained unrecorded and its mysteries undiscovered by external accounts. For Western understanding, the Sahara persisted as an unknown frontier for centuries, until the latter half of the 19th century when the French occupation of Algeria initiated its systematic exploration.

At the dawn of the 19th century, European nations embarked on a period of territorial acquisition within the Islamic world, implementing diverse mechanisms of material and intellectual control. This colonial expansion was notably preceded by extensive psychological, social, and anthropological research. A considerable number of Western intellectuals and writers accompanied the invading forces, exhibiting a keen interest in the customs of the subjugated populations. Their inquiries extended to identifying prevalent thought patterns and mentalities, investigating historical narratives, and even attempting to reanimate archaic ethnic divisions within Islamic territories. This concerted effort aimed to destabilize indigenous populations and foster dissension among members of the same national identity. A significant proportion of these expeditions were conducted by the French, specifically targeting North Africa and Algeria. (Aghmir, 2014, p. 86)

The contemporary configuration of Algerian society is undeniably the product of a protracted historical evolution. To comprehend its intricate structure, an examination of its historical development is essential, particularly to elucidate the socio-cultural manifestations of the Saharan Algerian community during this era. Consequently, contemporary travelers evinced a pronounced interest in the Algerian Sahara, meticulously documenting their observations and impressions of its societal fabric. This approach diverged from that of historians, who frequently adopted ideologically and politically inflected perspectives on such subjects.

France initiated its explorations into the African Sahara with the expeditions of Frédéric Cailliaud in 1820 and René Caillié in 1828. René Caillié, driven by a resolute determination to reach Timbuktu, faced financial constraints that impeded his objective. Consequently, he sought assistance from the English governor of Sierra Leone, who provided him with an appointment and a substantial annual stipend. During his travels, Caillié acquired proficiency in the Arabic language, enabling him to read the Qur'an and expound upon its interpretations to the local populace. (Cam, 1983, p. 12)

Before delving into the thematic content of French travel narratives concerning the Algerian Sahara, it is pertinent to contextualize these accounts and their authors. Among the initial contributors of interest is J. A. Paul, whose travelogue, "Souvenirs of Algeria or a Journey in Africa during the Months of September and October 1838" (Ansaed, 2012, p. 21) provides an early perspective.

Subsequently, Dr. Jacou Felix documented General Cavaignac's Saharan campaign in his own travel account. Felix characterized his journey as an exploration of an unrevealed desert territory, perceiving it as both captivating and enigmatic in its inhabitants and environments. He notably asserted, "The desert is not that desolate wilderness or that dark, threatening emptiness, but rather that magnificent paradisiacal spot." (Ansaed, 2012, pp. 21–22)

A recurring objective within much of French literature from this period was the exploration and promotion of these regions. These narratives may also have sought to encourage engagement with what was considered an exceptionally beautiful, if not unparalleled, global destination.

The establishment of the Scientific Exploration Committee by French authorities marked a pivotal moment, signaling the robust initiation of French exploratory missions in southern Algeria. This endeavor was formalized by a ministerial decree in 1839, which mandated the formation of a committee comprising 21 members. These members were drawn from the Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Fine Arts, and military colleges, and included specialists from diverse fields, predominantly military personnel.(Sa'dallah, 2005, p. 80)

The committee's mandate involved scholars traveling to Algeria to document their research findings. These findings were intended for publication at the expense of the French state, contingent upon the committee's approval. The Academy of Literature and Fine Arts was tasked with delineating the scope and objectives of these works, while the Ministry of War assumed responsibility for participant selection, given the substantial interest from academics and researchers.

Among the notable contributors to travel literature concerning Algeria and its Saharan regions was the French writer, Louis Rejis. Her inaugural work, "Journey to Biskra," is particularly noteworthy as she undertook the journey disguised as a man. Her true identity, however, became known with the publication of her subsequent work, "Journeys and Stays," which focused on Constantine.

These travelogues were introduced by the French academic Meziar, who lauded Rinn's narrative prowess, specifically commending the aesthetic and poetic quality of her natural descriptions. Despite his admiration for her literary style, Meziar, in his preface's conclusion, expressed reservations regarding Rinn's critical stance toward French settlers. He specifically objected to her frequent critiques of French policies and her overt empathy for, and defense of, the Arab population.(Insa'ad, 2012, p. 23)

During the same period, Paul Bord, a correspondent for the *Global Guide* newspaper in France, documented his observations from a journey accompanying French deputies from Marseille to Algeria. Although the parliamentary tour lacked official status, Bord's narrative detailed the Algerian populace's warm reception of the delegation. The itinerary encompassed a wide range of cities across both eastern and western Algeria. Bord's text extensively discussed political issues, specifically focusing on governance, development, and the concept of assimilating Algeria into France. (Insa'ad, 2012, p. 24)

This era witnessed the emergence of specific concepts within French thought, which intensified their animosity towards Algeria. This sentiment was further exacerbated by the substantial expansion of colonialism across the region and France's considerable economic power.

1. The Sahara as a Space of Covetousness: A Reading into the Motives of French Colonialism

The Algerian Sahara holds a strategically vital position within the nation's territory. Its natural and strategic characteristics significantly enhance the geopolitical importance and distinct depth of Algeria and the Maghreb. Consequently, it has historically been a target and object of desire for invading powers across various eras, most recently the French colonial forces. France's occupation and penetration of the Sahara pursued several aims and objectives, the most significant of which were:

1.1 Colonial Expansion into the Algerian Sahara

The primary objective of dispatching French exploratory missions to the Algerian Sahara was to comprehensively document the region's human and scientific aspects. This endeavor aimed to identify the economic and human potential of this "vast and unknown expanse of yellow sands with its scattered green oases" for future exploitation and investment. Furthermore, the missions sought to explore its geographical, natural, and climatic features, and to study its population groups, including their customs, traditions, political and cultural history, and their economic, social, and cultural conditions. The ultimate goal was to leverage this information to advance the colonial project. (Bouaziz, 1996, p. 318)

Consequently, the strategic importance of occupying the Sahara became apparent, as it was perceived as the primary conduit for penetrating sub-Saharan Africa. The successful occupation of Algeria was, moreover, viewed as contingent upon the occupation of the Sahara itself. Thus, France committed to extending and consolidating its

inland presence, employing various strategies primarily the organization of exploratory missions to establish complete control.

1.2 The Economic Potential of the Algerian Desert

The economic potential of the Algerian desert was documented through exploratory expeditions into southern Algeria. French interest was specifically directed toward assessing the region's economic viability and resource abundance, alongside its geographical and natural characteristics. Investigations also encompassed the urban and scientific dimensions of the area, notably encapsulated by one explorer's description of "green islands in an ocean of fire".(Taheri, 2020, pp. 319-320)

This escalating interest in Algeria is attributable to France's colonial expansionist objectives and its pursuit of national growth and development. Consequently, a systematic search for raw materials commenced following the occupation. Upon successful territorial expansion, the French administration facilitated the exploration of Algerian cities by numerous writers, who subsequently documented the character, customs, and traditions of the indigenous population, aspects previously unfamiliar to them, thereby intensifying their engagement with the region.

1.3 Facilitating the Movement of Military Units

A stated objective of the colonial administration, subsequent to occupation, was the establishment of military bases in Saharan regions and other strategic areas. This was intended to manage stability and facilitate operational activities(Taheri, 2020, p. 320).The expansive desert terrains offered optimal conditions for modern warfare, accommodating strategic aviation, command centers, and depots for ammunition and equipment. Furthermore, these areas were suitable for the erection of military bases for both wartime and emergency scenarios, as well as for the execution of training exercises and maneuvers. (Bouhala, 2014, p. 40)

During the last decade of the 19th century, the French specifically focused on establishing forward military outposts deep within the Sahara. The purpose of these outposts was to organize military campaigns and advance colonial expansion, often with the assistance of explorers.

1.4 Spreading Christianity:

Upon its arrival in Algeria, France pursued a policy aimed at eradicating Islam and dismantling its key institutions. This objective was explicitly articulated by Charles Lavigerie from the beginning of his tenure in Algeria. Addressing the clergy, Lavigerie declared: "We must make Algerian soil the cradle of the Christian French nation, and we must spread around us the true lights of civilization inspired by the Gospel, and carry them into the desert and the African world that lives a barbaric life".(Boubi, 2015, p. 78)

Furthermore, France endeavored to manipulate the region's history by promoting studies that served colonial interests and strengthened colonial networks. Islamic conquests were intentionally depicted as acts of colonization and coercive occupation enforced by military means. Concurrently, France established schools designed to assimilate Algerian youth into French culture and the Christian faith. This process also involved the deliberate division of the Algerian population, historically unified for centuries, into distinct Berber (Amazigh) and Arab identities.

1.5 Attempt to Establish a Network of Railways, Roads, and Telegraph Lines

This initiative sought to facilitate the secure transit of military personnel and explorers across diverse Saharan territories. Consequently, French efforts commenced with the topographical and geographical study of these regions to ascertain optimal locations for railway extensions. Focus was directed towards the oases of the Tunisian Djerid, alongside the Biskra and Oued Souf basins in the northern desert, conceptualized as a central point for the formation of a Saharan inland sea that would link the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Gabès via Chott elDjerid.(Bouaziz, 1996, p. 319)

Given Algeria's extensive territorial expanse, sharing borders with seven nations, its strategic geographical significance garnered considerable attention. Subsequent to the French occupation, France initiated the deployment of intelligence operatives, the dispatch of explorers, the equipping of exploratory missions, and the organization of expeditions, all presented as scientific endeavors. Nevertheless, the underlying objective, predetermined from the outset, was the comprehensive occupation of Algerian territory and the indiscriminate penetration of all its regions.

1.6 The Strategic Imperative in the Region

Intense competition characterized the interactions among major powers as they formulated their prospective strategies for the Sahara. Britain and France were prominent players, with the latter consistently challenging British colonial endeavors and expansion outside Europe, particularly in the pursuit of crucial spheres of influence across Asia and Africa. This rivalry propelled French engagement in exploration, adventure, and investigation, all serving their colonial ambitions.(Moussaoui, 2014, p. 315)

This perspective was explicitly articulated by French Minister of War, Marshal Soult, who declared: "The Algerian desert must not be neglected, for it offers us wealth and provides a vital, political, and commercial dimension. Our rule must prevail there, as no commercial relations can be established within Africa except through control and dominance."

During this period, numerous French authors visited Algeria, driven by diverse and complex motivations. Notably, some were part of cultural missions meticulously planned and executed by the French government. Consequently, the French perception of Algeria during its occupation and invasion originated from an external viewpoint, fundamentally shaped by an antagonistic posture towards the Algerian Sahara.

II. Léon Roches: Intelligence Missions and Political Roles within Emir Abdelkader's Army

1. A Brief Biography of Léon Roches

Léon Roches was born in Grenoble, France, on September 27, 1809, and died in the same city in 1901. He commenced his secondary education in Grenoble, concluding it at the Tournon secondary school, where he earned his baccalaureate in 1828. Subsequently, he pursued legal studies at the Faculty of Law in Grenoble for six months. Roches was characterized by ambition, an adventurous spirit, a daring disposition, sharp intellect, and consistent industriousness. His proficiency in Arabic facilitated his comprehension of Muslim mentalities and customs, establishing him as a significant figure among the military interpreters who provided essential services to the French Army in Africa.(Manasriya, 1990, p. 13)

During the nineteenth century, Léon Roches undertook colonial activities in the Maghreb. His intelligence operations in Algeria were connected with his diplomatic assignments in Morocco, his subversive colonial actions in Libya, and his missionary work in Tunisia. He held positions in Algeria and Morocco as a sworn military officer, translator, and head of the military interpreters corps within the French army. Additionally, he served as the private secretary to Emir Abdelkader.(Manasriya, 1990, p. 7) Roches recognized the imperative for competent translators to mediate between the French and Algerians, which motivated his dedication to the Arabic language and his study of Muslim customs and traditions.



Léon Roches

2. The Narrative of Infiltration: Léon Roches at the Heart of Algerian Resistance within Emir Abdelkader's Army

It is a widely held understanding that behind every military apparatus or colonial and imperial strategy, there exists an intelligence infrastructure, a military arsenal, and a network of spies. These elements collectively paved the way for the colonizer to achieve their objective: the occupation and penetration of Algeria. Throughout history, the world has witnessed numerous accounts from the realm of espionage stories often shrouded in mystery and suspense. Algeria, during its period of occupation, similarly experienced a significant intelligence presence that facilitated the colonization of this vast country. Among these figures was Léon Roches, a colonial agent and traveler in the service of French imperialism, who rendered substantial services to the oppressive colonial regime. He is arguably considered the most dangerous among all such travelers due to his involvement in numerous missions focused on tracking and monitoring the occupied enemy.

The French authorities were compelled to establish peace in western and central Algeria after seven years of intense warfare against Emir Abdelkader. This action was undertaken to mitigate the disgrace of their initial failed campaign on Constantine. Consequently, the French government decided to dispatch General Bugeaud to Algeria to negotiate with the Emir and propose a peace agreement. Emir Abdelkader, for his part, required a truce to suppress internal unrest and unify the Muslim population in order to procure ammunition. Ultimately, a treaty was signed between the two parties, known as the Treaty of Tafna, which comprised fifteen clauses. Among these was the fourth clause, which stipulated that Muslims were free to move as they wished either to territories occupied by the French or to reside under the authority of the Emir.

Based on this clause, Roches decided to join Emir Abdelkader's army, justifying his decision by expressing an intention to convert to Islam. He departed from his father's residence and settled among the elders of the Beni Moussa tribe, with whom he had established a prior relationship in previous years. (Manasriya, 1990, pp. 23-24). One of his most critical missions, according to his own account, was to persuade Muslim imams to issue a fatwa discouraging jihad, thereby facilitating colonization. He claimed to have converted to Islam to gain access to sacred lands. The French had dispatched him in an attempt to halt the Emir's resistance, envisioning a fatwa that would assist them by arguing that Christians could be permitted to live among Muslims provided they respected Islamic sanctities. Through these negotiations, Roches developed profound admiration for the personality of Emir Abdelkader and began to draw closer to him. He subsequently managed to escape from the French authorities and sought refuge within the Emir's army, accompanying him in his wars and both internal and external journeys.

The personal motivations of Léon Roches appear to have significantly influenced his infiltration into Emir Abdelkader's forces. Roches reportedly harbored romantic sentiments for an Algerian woman named Khadija, and his desire to rejoin her ostensibly drove his decision to align with the Emir's army. He had learned that Khadija and her husband had settled in Miliana, a city under the Emir's control, which prompted Roches to proceed to the Emir's capital, ostensibly to be near her.

However, the text critically assesses the veracity of this asserted motive. It questions why, if his sole intention was to reconnect with Khadija, he did not pursue a more direct route by joining his associate Omar Pasha, who was already residing in Miliana, to facilitate their meetings. Conversely, if one accepts his claim of intending to assist the Emir in "enlightening Muslims and introducing them to French civilization," the underlying objective may be inferred as an attempt to disrupt Muslim solidarity, persuade susceptible individuals to align with France, and project an image of humanitarianism and intellectual superiority. (Manasriya, 1990, p. 24)

Irrespective of his declared personal reasons, Roches was resolute in his integration into the Emir's army under the guise of converting to Islam. His actual purpose, as indicated by the text, was to conduct espionage against the Muslim forces. The Muslims, convinced of his conversion and sincerity, accorded him respect and favorable treatment. Having cultivated their trust, Roches initiated correspondence with French authorities, providing them with intelligence concerning the various facets of the Muslims' political, military, and administrative affairs.

Roches commenced organizing contacts with certain French and Algerian individuals to collect sufficient information regarding Emir Abdelkader's situation. He contacted First Lieutenant Lavergne and accompanied him to the city of Blida to observe the judgment of Algerians accused of killing a French soldier. Roches publicly displayed his conversion to Islam before the governor to gain his attention, which led the governor to host him. Roches seized this opportunity to contact the city's marabout, Sidi Belkacem, son of Sidi Lekbir, expressing his fear of assassination by "Jahoud" men, given his Muslim status, similar to what occurred with the French soldier. (Manasriya, 1990, p. 24)

Thus, having publicly declared his conversion to Islam, Roches infiltrated the Algerian resistance during the colonial years, becoming close to the Emir. He exerted considerable effort to thwart the resistance. Roches' objective in embracing Islam and joining the Emir's army was to understand the condition of Muslims and to work towards securing their allegiance to France.

At this juncture, Roches commenced organizing his work to fulfill his actual mission as a spy. He became cautious, avoiding any task that might genuinely benefit the Emir, which would constitute a crime against his own country. He started gathering information, corresponding with the French, and informing them of all facets of Emir Abdelkader's military and political affairs. His initial letter, dated 1837, was dispatched from the Emir's camp in Oued Nougha to an unnamed Frenchman, referred to solely as "my friend." He began the letter by describing the Emir's personality, virtues, attire, physical characteristics, and religious doctrines.

Subsequently, he proceeded to discuss the economic, financial, and military conditions, asserting their near non-existence and the disorganization of the Emir's regular army (Manasriya, 1990, p. 26). Roches exploited his close proximity to Emir Abdelkader to accumulate detailed information and strategic plans the Emir was preparing to execute against the French occupation. He transmitted this intelligence to the French authorities via one of his French acquaintances, sending a letter that delineated every detail.

Roches began by precisely describing the Emir's character and concluded with key political updates. In his letter, he stated: "The Emir views the Treaty of Tafna merely as a provisional peace enabling him to prepare for a new war. His influence expanded during the first six months post-treaty, and his authority broadened now acknowledged from the Moroccan borders to Constantine. The Emir has initiated collecting taxes and funds to establish his state's foundations". (Manasriya, 1990, p. 26)

Thus, Léon Roches executed his espionage activities by relaying detailed intelligence to the oppressive enemy, particularly concerning the Emir's military and financial assets.

Roches accompanied Emir Abdelkader on his 1838 campaign to Ain Madi. The Emir had resolved to head south to bring the desert tribes under his authority. At that time, the Tijaniyya order was dominant in the region, centered in Ain Madi. The Emir treated its leader as he would any marabout. He had found a letter from the Tijani leader

addressed to the people of Laghouat, inciting them against the Emir. When the Emir reached Ras al-Bayda, tribes from all directions came to him.

The Emir dispatched twenty horsemen, led by Roches, to inform the Tijani leader that the Emir's sole aim in this campaign was to unite Muslims. However, the Tijani believed himself more entitled to rule the Muslims than the Emir. Instead of fulfilling his mission to improve relations between the Emir and the Tijani, Roches worked to incite the latter against the Emir. In doing so, he added fuel to the fire, thereby achieving his greater objective: weakening Muslim strength and sowing division among them.(Manasriya, 1990, p. 30)

Roches was known for his infiltration into Emir Abdelkader's state, constantly observing every detail and provoking divisions among the Emir's officers and the opposing tribes. His deceit of the Muslims is evident in his concealment of the true content of the mission entrusted to him by the Emir who had sent him to inform the Tijani that his campaign in Ain Madi was solely intended to unite Muslims against the enemy.

When Emir Abdelkader declared jihad and commenced preparations from his base in Tagdemt, he met with Roches and inquired about his position on resuming hostilities against the adversary. At that juncture, Roches could no longer restrain himself and declared he did not wish to fight against France, identifying it as the homeland protecting his kin. He candidly admitted in the Emir's presence that he had never been a Muslim.(Manasriya, 1990, p. 32)

Despite this confession, the Emir's trust in Roches was profound, leading him to take no action. Roches exploited the Emir's absence to flee to the French army. By then, he had already obtained highly precise political and military intelligence regarding the Muslims. He had also collected documents, maps, and data pertaining to their affairs, including the origins of their weaponry and ammunition.

This event paralleled the broader fate of Emir Abdelkader's resistance, which suffered significant weakening from internal betrayal by certain Algerian tribes and external betrayal from the Moroccan Sultan. The Sultan succumbed to French pressure, besieging the Emir from the western front.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, these "travelers" were not genuine researchers, thinkers, clergymen, or journalists. Instead, they were individuals with encyclopedic knowledge, whose singular purpose was to advance the French colonial agenda. They leveraged their journeys as a means to serve French interests and ambitions, playing a significant role in solidifying the foundations of French colonization in Algeria. French authorities and their institutions tasked them with deep penetration into the Algerian Sahara. They facilitated this by submitting reports detailing crucial observations about the local population, including their origins, customs, and traditions.

They presented their observations, notes, and research to politicians and military officials. The French colonial intelligence apparatus thus began collecting information and conducting historical studies on the Sahara from the earliest days of occupation, just as Roches did by spreading his poison among Muslims. He claimed to aim at enlightening them and introducing them to French civilization; however, he sought to undermine their unity and divide their ranks, so they would turn away from fighting the French and instead support the colonial cells. After discovering that the root of their weakness lay in the differences among the religious orders they followed, France was then able to concentrate most of its forces on the eastern part of the country to eliminate the Algerian resistance. They indeed contributed to keeping this colonizer on our pure land for more than 130 years before we regained our freedom.

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