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The Role of Religious Zawaya in Fostering National Consciousness and Resisting the Colonial Project in Algeria

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Abstract

During the French colonial occupation, Algeria had an extensive network of religious zawaya and traditional educational institutions that played a crucial role in preserving Arab-Islamic identity and fostering religious, cultural, and national awareness. Historical evidence indicates that by 1871, around 2,000 zawaya accommodated nearly 28,000 students, alongside numerous mosques and Quranic schools, particularly in El Hamel, Constantine, and Tlemcen. These institutions taught Arabic, Quran memorization, and Islamic sciences, contributing to the education of generations of scholars and maintaining links with renowned institutions such as Zaytuna and Al-Qarawiyyin. With the establishment of French colonial rule, the authorities recognized the importance of this educational system in preserving Algeria's Arab-Islamic character and consequently imposed systematic restrictions aimed at weakening its institutions. They confiscated religious endowments, reduced financial resources, and promoted French as an instrument of administrative and cultural domination. These policies led to a decline in the number of learners, the migration of scholars, the dispersal of students, and the weakening of traditional educational structures. Despite these pressures, zawaya and Quranic schools continued to operate, particularly in rural areas, often discreetly, they became important spaces for preserving the Arabic language, religious knowledge, collective memory, and cultural identity. Their role therefore extended beyond education to resisting cultural assimilation and sustaining national consciousness. Historical testimonies, including that of

Émile Combes in 1891, indicate that indigenous education had been more widespread and cohesive before the occupation, while its subsequent decline was largely linked to colonial policies targeting Arab-Islamic educational institutions.

Keywords: Religious Zawaya; National Consciousness; French Colonialism in Algeria; Cultural Resistance; Qur'anic Schools (Kuttab); Arab-Islamic Identity; Educational Structure Awqaf (Religious Endowments)

Introduction

Prior to the French occupation of Algeria in 1830, the country possessed a relatively well established and deeply rooted educational and cultural network based primarily on traditional religious institutions, particularly *zawaya* s, mosques, Qur'anic schools (*kuttab*s), and local centres of learning. Far from constituting the alleged "cultural void" portrayed by colonial discourse to legitimize French expansion, Algerian society had developed a decentralized but interconnected system of knowledge transmission that played a significant role in preserving religious, linguistic, and cultural continuity. This educational structure was sustained to a considerable extent by religious endowments (*awqaf*), which provided material resources for teachers, students, scholars, mosques, and *zawaya* .

The educational functions of these institutions extended well beyond elementary literacy and Quranic memorization. They provided instruction in Arabic language and grammar, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, prophetic traditions, Quranic studies, and other branches of traditional knowledge. In many regions, *zawaya* served as intellectual and social centres where scholars, students, travellers, and local communities interacted. Their significance therefore cannot be reduced to purely religious instruction; they also contributed to social solidarity, moral education, cultural reproduction, and the transmission of collective memory from one generation to another. Through these functions, they helped maintain the Arabic language and Islamic cultural framework as essential components of Algerian social identity. The establishment of French colonial rule profoundly disrupted this educational and cultural order. The colonial administration gradually sought to weaken the institutional foundations that sustained traditional education by confiscating or restricting religious endowments, imposing administrative controls, monitoring scholars and religious leaders, and limiting the autonomy of *zawaya* and mosques. At the same time, the colonial educational policy promoted French linguistic and cultural influence, thereby attempting to reshape the intellectual and cultural environment of Algerian society. The objective was not merely administrative control but also the gradual weakening of the cultural mechanisms through which Algerians reproduced their historical identity. Despite these pressures, religious *zawaya*

demonstrated considerable resilience. They continued, under varying and often difficult circumstances, to preserve religious learning, Arabic linguistic knowledge, collective memory, and cultural traditions. Their role increasingly extended beyond formal instruction to become an important means of safeguarding social cohesion and maintaining a sense of belonging to an Arab-Islamic cultural community. In this context, the *zawaya* became a significant space for the reproduction of identity in the face of colonial cultural policies. Moreover, the contribution of *zawaya* should be understood within the broader process of the emergence and development of national consciousness in Algeria. By preserving religious and linguistic continuity, transmitting historical narratives, and maintaining networks of communication among different social and geographical communities, they contributed to sustaining the symbolic and cultural foundations upon which resistance to colonial domination could develop. Although their forms of resistance varied according to historical circumstances and regional contexts, their educational and cultural activities represented an important form of resistance to colonial attempts at cultural assimilation and erasure.

Accordingly, this paper examines the pivotal role played by religious *zawaya* in preserving Algeria's Arab-Islamic identity during the French colonial period. It argues that their historical significance lies not only in their contribution to religious education but also in their broader function as institutions of cultural preservation, social cohesion, and the transmission of collective consciousness. By sustaining knowledge, language, religious traditions, and communal bonds under coercive colonial conditions, *zawaya* contributed to the preservation of the cultural foundations of Algerian society and helped create an intellectual and social environment in which national consciousness and resistance to colonial domination could continue to develop.

First: Algerian Educational Structure before the French Occupation

France did not arrive in Algeria until 1830, and prior to that, the country was not as portrayed by colonial discourse as a "virgin land" or a "civilizational void." Colonial propaganda sought to justify the occupation by portraying Algeria as experiencing a state of stagnation or "cultural sterility." However, this view was criticized by a number of researchers, including the French historian Jacques Simon, who pointed out¹.

the existence of an advanced Islamic educational system in the Algerian territories. The Arab schools established by France constituted an obstacle and did not achieve success. Before the French authorities in Algeria adopted a specific strategy regarding the education of Muslims,

1. Simon, J. (1995). Author of a doctoral thesis on Messali Hadj and founder of the Centre de Recherche et d'Étude sur l'Algérie Contemporaine (CREAC). In S. Jouin (2001), *L'école en Algérie ; 1830-1962 : De la Régence aux centres sociaux éducatifs*. Paris, p. 102.

classical Islamic education had been widespread, and the inherited religious sciences were transmitted, albeit weakly, from one generation to another, particularly in certain cultural centers such as the *zawaya*. According to statistics from 1871, there were approximately 2,000 *zawaya* throughout Algeria, attended by nearly 28,000 students who learned reading and writing and received comprehensive education².

This fact demonstrates that the colonial interpretation of education in Algeria was not a neutral descriptive reading, but rather was charged with ideological assumptions aimed at reshaping the image of Algerian society before 1830 in a manner that served to justify the colonial project. Portraying Algeria as a space “devoid of cultural organization” or as “civilizationally backward” falls within a classical colonial discourse based on denying or diminishing the value of the preexisting local educational structures, despite the existence of historical indicators that confirm the opposite. In this context, the reference to the existence of an advanced Islamic educational system, as indicated by some researchers, reflects the existence of a knowledge network based on *zawaya*, mosques, and Quranic schools (*kuttab*), which played a fundamental role in preserving religious and linguistic knowledge and transmitting it across generations. Although this system was neither unified nor centralized in the modern sense, it nevertheless performed clear educational and social functions within society, particularly in inland and rural areas. Furthermore, the reference to the existence of thousands of *zawaya* and the influx of thousands of students to them reflects the extent of the educational presence of these institutions, which were not merely places of worship, but rather multifunctional spaces combining religious education, linguistic training, and socialization. This indicates that Algerian society before the occupation possessed an established educational structure, although its organization and curricula differed from those of the modern European model.

In this context, the reference to the existence of an advanced Islamic educational system, as pointed out by some researchers, reflects the existence of a knowledge network that was based on *zawaya*, mosques, and Quranic schools (*kuttab*) which played a fundamental role in preserving religious and linguistic knowledge and transmitting it across generations. Although this system was neither unified nor centralized in the modern sense, it nevertheless performed clear educational and social functions within society, particularly in inland and rural areas. Moreover, the reference to the existence of thousands of *zawaya* and the influx of thousands of students to them reflects the extent of the educational presence of these institutions, which were not merely places of worship, but rather multifunctional spaces that combined religious education, linguistic training, and socialization.

2 . De Lassus, A. (1913). *Metropolis and Colonies: The Moral Conquest of the Indigenous Population*. Algeria, p. 28

This indicates that Algerian society prior to the occupation possessed an existing educational structure, although its organization and curricula differed from those of the modern European model.

However, the transformation that occurred with the beginning of the French occupation was not merely a transition from one educational system to another rather, it was a comprehensive restructuring of the educational sphere. The colonial school was introduced as a new model, while traditional educational institutions were gradually marginalized or subjected to supervision and regulation. This interaction between the two systems led to a period of educational disruption, particularly during the first decades of the occupation, when French educational policies had not yet been stabilized and their relationship with local institutions had not been clearly defined. These *zawaya* were open to students, who received both religious and non-religious lessons in cities and villages. This contributed to the education of the emerging generations and prepared young people to pursue their studies in Tunisia or Morocco. As for the Qur'anic schools (*kuttab*), they provided instruction in reading and writing and the memorization of the Holy Qur'an. They were also regarded as centers for motivation and opposition to the occupation therefore, the French authorities placed them under surveillance and warned against their activities.

At the same time, there were large *zawaya* equipped with all the necessary facilities and providing education beyond Qur'anic instruction, including the Arabic language, Islamic jurisprudence, the principles of religion, and so forth. An example of this is the *Zawiya of El Hamel*, located near Bou Saada, which was founded in 1863. Those who wrote about education in Algeria before the French colonial period differed considerably in their assessments: some acknowledged its existence, some considered it advanced, while others held the opposite view.

Perhaps the most significant of these views are those expressed by French writers who performed sensitive functions at almost all levels of authority. One of them stated: "No educational organization specific to education was found in Algeria in 1830, except for some *zawaya* that provided instruction in rudimentary doctrines without spiritual or social value. The pupils learned reading and writing, and, to a greater extent, memorized the Qur'an and studied Sufism and the principles of religious doctrine. Then, upon graduating from the *zawiya*, the student would return to his village and open a school with very modest resources. The school was generally financed through donations from the villagers so that their children could learn, subsequently, a few Qur'anic chapters, reading and writing, as well as become acquainted with the biographies of some Muslim jurists."³

3 .De Lassus, A. (1913). *Métropole et colonies : la conquête morale des indigènes*. Algérie, p. 28.

The contradiction here may be seen in the fact that the French themselves acknowledged that education existed in Algeria prior to the occupation, even if it took a traditional form. Nevertheless, it fulfilled its purposes and objectives. At times, however, they appeared to reproach themselves for making such an acknowledgment, considering it an exaggeration of a reality that, according to their perspective, was unknown to anyone but themselves. Some even raised the question: if such education had not existed, where would the French have begun in order to establish their so called modern education? Did they not, in fact, build their educational system upon the ruins of that existing system? Some of these *zawaya* took pride in preparing students who aspired to attend the most renowned Islamic institutions of learning in the Maghreb, namely Al-Zaytuna in Tunis and Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez. Through the efforts of these *zawaya* and those responsible for them, Qur'anic education spread among Algerian youth, in most cases serving as the sole form of basic education. They also contributed, to a considerable and commendable extent, to preserving Arab-Islamic culture in Algeria. Therefore, the services provided by the *zawaya* to Algerian culture during extremely critical periods, particularly in the absence of any governmental organization in the field of education, cannot be underestimated.

The role played by the *zawaya* was not always given the recognition it deserved, nor was it adequately understood by the French governments, which often perceived them solely through their religious dimension and, at times, their allegedly radical nature. Despite implicit and sometimes overt opposition, as well as the ill intentions of the European colonizer, the religious *zawaya* remained the only centers for acquiring knowledge and culture in a country where illiteracy was widespread. This is what the Senate Commission concluded in 1891: "Education in Algeria has currently been left in the hands of the indigenous population, as the only educational institution is the *zawiya*, where the Holy Qur'an, its interpretations, and the memorization of Hadiths are taught⁴."

Second: *Zawaya* Education and Arab-Islamic Culture during the Period of French Colonialism in Algeria

These *zawaya*, with the exception of those located in the capital, numbered nearly one hundred. For example, in Constantine, their number reached approximately 90 schools providing instruction to nearly 1,400 students in 1873 while the population of the city was estimated at approximately 24,000 inhabitants in the same year, according to official government statistics. In Tlemcen meanwhile, the number of *zawaya* reached approximately 40, where reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught. No one, except one who denies the facts, can deny the role played by these *zawaya* in memorizing the Holy Qur'an and disseminating Arab-Islamic culture at a time when despotism and

4. Béque, L. (1891). Intervention by the Councillor of State. In Senate Commission, p. 44.

tyranny prevailed in the country. Without these centers, all Algerian children would have been left to suffer from ignorance and illiteracy.

In 1891, the committee appointed by the French National Assembly to investigate education in Algeria examined possible changes to the various laws and regulations governing the different services in Algeria. The book *Al-Haqiqa al Jazairiyya* (The Algerian Truth) quotes from a speech delivered by Émile Combes¹ before the French Senate, in which he stated: "There is no doubt that education in Algeria in 1830 was more widespread and in a better condition than it is today, a situation that did not satisfy the French authorities. There were no fewer than two thousand primary, secondary, and higher schools, taught by a distinguished group of competent teachers. The students were also young people eager for knowledge attending their lessons with great diligence, in addition to hundreds of mosques that provided instruction in Arabic to all students, including adults."

This testimony attributed to Émile Combes before the French Senate in 1891, as reported in some later sources, reveals an important dimension in the historical debate concerning the state of education in Algeria before and after the occupation. On the surface, it reflects a kind of comparison between two historical periods: the period before 1830 and the period following the consolidation of the colonial administration. However, when this comparison is analyzed within its political and ideological context, it raises a methodological issue concerning the extent to which the colonial discourse itself was objective in reconstructing the image of the past.

From a historical perspective, this type of statement can be interpreted as part of an internal French discourse that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and sought to reassess some of the outcomes of colonial policy in Algeria, particularly in the field of education. The acknowledgment of the existence of relatively widespread education prior to the occupation, whether through traditional schools *zawaya*, or educational circles in mosques, does not necessarily imply the adoption of a fully objective perspective. Rather, it may have been connected to a political context seeking to justify the failures of the colonial educational system in comparison with the theoretical objectives that had been formulated for it. On the other hand, the reference to the existence of "two thousand schools" and educational institutions at different levels, in addition to the spread of education in mosques, reflects a particular conception of the structure of traditional education in Algeria, based on its non-centralized character and its close connection with the local community. Although this system was non-institutional in accordance with modern standards, it relied on networks of scholars, jurists, and *zawaya* that played an important role in transmitting religious and linguistic knowledge. This makes the notion of the "spread of education" understandable within its sociocontext rather than according to the modern administrative conception of education.

Furthermore, the emphasis placed in the discourse on the quality of education, the competence of teachers, and the students' eagerness to learn forms part of the construction of an idealized image of pre colonial society. Such an image requires a critical approach, as it was often employed in subsequent political discourses whether to justify colonialism or to criticize it. Therefore, the historical value of these testimonies does not lie so much in their numerical accuracy as in their significance for understanding how the past was reconstructed and reproduced within French political memory.

Combes emerged as a leader of the Democratic Left and became Prime Minister of France in 1902. His name became associated with "Combesism," a political orientation that emphasized the consolidation of secularism and the separation of Church and state, which constituted one of the defining features of his political tenure. He later participated in the national government as Minister of State during the First World War and died in 1921 after a long and influential political career.

Third: French Occupation and the Dismantling of Traditional Education and the Preservation of Arab-Islamic Identity

General de Hauteville stated in a report to Napoleon III in 1850 that "Islamic studies were in a relatively prosperous state," that is, prior to the French occupation of Algeria in 1830. As for Professor Marcel Emerit, who studied the life of the indigenous population extensively during the nineteenth century, he noted that in Constantine alone there were 35 mosques used as educational centers. There were also seven secondary schools that attracted approximately 700 to 900 students, staffed by respected teachers who received high salaries. As for primary schools, their number reached 90, with approximately 1350 students receiving education there⁵.

These data indicate that education during that period was neither fragmented nor random, as colonial discourse would later attempt to portray it. Rather, it was connected to a coherent social and cultural structure, in which awqaf (religious endowments, habous) played a central role in financing educational institutions thereby providing a degree of financial independence for teachers and learners. This explains the continued activity of educational mosques and the relatively high number of students compared with some other cities, particularly major urban centers such as Constantine. From a historical analytical perspective, these figures 35 mosques, 7 secondary schools, approximately 700 to 900 students, and 90 primary schools should not be read merely as statistical data, but rather as an indication of the existence of a "local knowledge system" that produced and redistributed knowledge within society in accordance with religious, judicial, and educational needs.

6. Marcel Emerit, *Studies on Constantine in the Nineteenth Century*, n.d., cited in Saadallah, Abdullah, p. 62.

They also reflect the fact that education was not restricted to a particular group, but was relatively accessible within the framework of the “pursuit of knowledge,” which constituted part of the prevailing social and religious culture. On the other hand, the colonial administration would later seek to reinterpret this reality, either by portraying it as “primitive” or unorganized education, in order to justify its alternative educational project based on the French school as a modern and centralized institution. Here, a contrast emerges between two perspectives: an internal perspective that regards education as an extension of religious and social identity, and a colonial perspective that seeks to reshape it according to the logic of cultural and administrative control. However, the trajectory that the educational question had reached in Algeria did not last. The presence of the French in 1830 caused disruption and destabilized the stability and tranquility of those intellectuals and writers, including jurists, in addition to those who were forced to abandon their positions and offices for fear of the oppression and tyranny of the occupation. The students were also dispersed as a result of being compelled to pursue knowledge secretly and discreetly, away from the eyes of those monitoring them, after the French occupation appointed its agents to administer the mosques and schools.

The French occupation of Algeria in 1830 thus constituted a decisive turning point in the history of education and culture in the country. Its impact was not limited to the political and military dimensions, but extended to the intellectual, religious, and social structure of Algerian society. Following the entry of the French forces, the traditional educational system overseen by the *zawaya*, mosques, and Qur’anic schools (*kuttab*) was subjected to profound disruption as a result of colonial policies aimed at weakening the foundations of the Arab-Islamic identity of the Algerian people.

The colonial administration realized from the early years of the occupation that educational and religious institutions were not merely spaces for education and the memorization of the Holy Qur’an; rather, they represented centers for preserving the Arabic language and disseminating Islamic culture, in addition to their role in organizing society and fostering the spirit of resistance against the French presence. Therefore, the colonial authorities worked to monitor these institutions, restrict their activities, and even close a considerable number of them, particularly those associated with resistance movements. France also sought to impose a new educational model that served its colonial objectives, based on disseminating the French language and linking education to the colonial administration. This resulted in a significant decline in the number of schools and *zawaya*, as well as a decrease in the proportion of educated people compared with the situation in Algeria before the occupation. In this context, Charles-Robert Ageron indicates that French educational policy in Algeria was based on the principle of cultural assimilation and on the attempt to create an

elite culturally and linguistically affiliated with France, while marginalizing traditional Arab-Islamic education.⁶

It can therefore be understood that colonial educational policy was not aimed merely at organizing education or modernizing it according to European standards rather, it sought to gradually reshape the cultural structure of Algerian society by controlling language as a vehicle of identity and knowledge. Consequently emphasis was placed on French as the primary language of instruction within the new system, while the presence of Arabic was reduced, despite the fact that it represented, at that time, one of the principal elements of the cultural and religious continuity of the local society.

The colonial administration also worked to redirect the functions of educational institutions so that they became directly connected to the administrative and economic needs of the colonizer, rather than remaining independent spaces for the production of local knowledge. Hence emerged the idea of a “mediating elite ” upon which reliance was placed to facilitate communication between the French administration and the local population, without granting this elite any genuine capacity to influence decision-making or formulate educational policies Within this framework, it can be argued that education in Algeria during this period was not neutral, but was governed by the balance of power between the two sides. France sought to impose its educational model as a “civilizing” model, while the zawaya and traditional institutions, despite the restrictions imposed upon them, maintained their role in sustaining Arab-Islamic education, albeit within increasingly limited possibilities. Thus, a dual educational sphere took shape one.

was an official colonial system subject to supervision and direction, while the other was a traditional system operating under difficult conditions but preserving the continuity of the Arabic language and cultural identity Accordingly, understanding this period requires viewing education not merely as a pedagogical process, but also as an instrument of symbolic and cultural struggle between two contradictory projects: a colonial project seeking assimilation and domination, and a local project committed to preserving its cultural and religious identity despite the imbalance of power This situation also led a number of scholars and jurists to migrate to Tunisia, Morocco, and the Mashreq, out of fear of restrictions and persecution, while some were forced to continue teaching secretly within homes and zawaya located away from the surveillance of the occupation. These

7. Charles-Robert Ageron, *History of Contemporary Algeria*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France (PUF), 1979.

circumstances also contributed to the decline of the intellectual and scholarly activity that had characterized major Algerian cities such as Constantine, Tlemcen, and Algiers.

Despite these policies, the *zawaya* continued to perform their cultural and religious role, becoming spaces for preserving national identity and the Arabic language. They also played an important role in nurturing national consciousness and resisting attempts at cultural erasure. Abu al Qasim Saadallah confirms that the *zawaya* contributed significantly to protecting the foundations of Algerian identity during the colonial period, particularly in inland and rural areas where traditional education continued to exist despite the difficult circumstances.⁷

Conversely, colonial policy was not limited to restricting the role of the *zawaya* and traditional institutions; it extended to the broader reorientation of the educational sphere toward serving its administrative and cultural project, through imposing control over educational content, controlling the pedagogical use of knowledge, and linking education to the French language as the language of administration and social advancement. This orientation transformed the colonial school into an instrument of social and cultural selection that reinforced differentiation within Algerian society itself. This situation also contributed to the emergence of a clear educational duality, whereby the Algerian pupil found himself confronted with two parallel paths: a traditional path based on religious education and the Arabic language within the *zawaya*, and a modern path associated with the French school, which focused on.

the French language and prescribed historical and geographical content. This disparity resulted in unequal educational opportunities and contributed to widening the gap between groups educated according to each system.

Over time, this duality became an influential factor in shaping social and cultural consciousness, as education was not merely a tool for transmitting knowledge, but also became a means of reshaping belonging and identities. In this context, the importance of traditional institutions in preserving cultural continuity became increasingly evident, in contrast to the colonial institution, which sought to reformulate this belonging within a framework serving the French project in Algeria.

Thus, it becomes clear that French educational policy was not a reformist policy, as colonial discourse attempted to portray it, but rather constituted part of a comprehensive colonial project

8. Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, *The Cultural History of Algeria*, Vol. 1, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 1998

aimed at culturally and linguistically reshaping Algerian society in a manner that served the interests of the occupation and ensured its continuation.

Conclusion:

The historical experience of religious *zawaya* during the French colonial occupation demonstrates that their significance extended far beyond the provision of religious instruction. They constituted an essential component of Algeria's traditional educational and cultural structure and played a decisive role in preserving the foundations of Arab-Islamic identity under conditions of colonial domination. Through Qur'anic education, the teaching of Arabic and Islamic sciences, and the transmission of religious and cultural knowledge, *zawaya* helped maintain continuity between generations at a time when colonial policies sought to weaken indigenous institutions and promote linguistic and cultural assimilation.

Despite the systematic restrictions imposed on religious endowments, scholars' students, mosques, and traditional educational institutions, *zawaya* demonstrated remarkable resilience. Their continued activities, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, enabled them to preserve not only religious knowledge but also collective memory, cultural traditions, social solidarity, and a sense of belonging. In this respect, education became a form of cultural resistance: preserving Arabic and Islamic knowledge meant preserving an essential dimension of Algerian identity in the face of colonial attempts to reshape the cultural and intellectual foundations of society. Moreover, the role of *zawaya* contributed indirectly to the development of national consciousness. By maintaining networks of knowledge, communication, and social interaction across different regions, they helped sustain the cultural conditions necessary for collective awareness and resistance to colonial domination. Although they did not constitute a centralized political movement, their educational and cultural functions provided an important social and intellectual foundation upon which later forms of national resistance could develop. Therefore, the history of *zawaya* challenges the colonial representation of Algeria as a society lacking educational and cultural institutions prior to French rule. Rather, it reveals the existence of a resilient, decentralized, and socially embedded system of knowledge transmission. The experience of these institutions illustrates that cultural preservation can itself become a powerful form of resistance

particularly when language, religion, education, and collective memory are placed at the centre of the struggle for identity and continuity. Thus, *zawaya* should be understood not merely as religious institutions, but as historical spaces of education, cultural preservation, social cohesion, and the gradual reproduction of Algerian national consciousness.

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