

## The Western Algerian Beylik in european eyes: A study in truth and perception (Book Review)<sup>1</sup>

بايلك الغرب الجزائري في نظر الأوروبيين: دراسة في الحقيقة والتصوير. (قراءة في كتاب)

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### Abstract:

This study examines Kamel Ben Sahraoui's work *Baylek of the West in The African Journal*, (2018) which analyzes the representation of the Western Beylik in the French colonial journal *Revue Africaine*. The research highlights the importance of historiography in preserving historical memory while critically addressing the colonial production of knowledge about Algeria during the Ottoman and French colonial periods. It focuses on how French scholars collected, edited, and interpreted indigenous manuscripts, often within a framework shaped by colonial ideology and cultural bias.

The book provides a critical edition and analysis of texts related to the Western Beylik, emphasizing the administrative structure of Ottoman Algeria and the strategic importance of the western region. It further explores French colonial

<sup>1</sup> Kamel Ben Sahraoui's work *Baylek of the West in The African Journal* (2018).

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representations of cultural, religious, and political realities, including interpretations of historical sites, religious figures, Spanish occupation, and local resistance movements. The study reveals methodological limitations in colonial scholarship, particularly the selective use of sources and the exclusion of indigenous perspectives.

Through six thematic chapters, the author deconstructs colonial historiography by examining cultural narratives, military history, urban development in Oran and Mers El-Kébir, and the broader geopolitical context of North African colonial competition. The analysis also critiques key colonial narratives and highlights the ideological function of historical writing in legitimizing imperial expansion.

The study concludes that Ben Sahraoui's work contributes significantly to Algerian historiography by offering a critical reassessment of colonial sources, correcting biases, and reconstructing neglected aspects of the Western Beylik's history. Despite structural limitations in the book, it remains an important academic reference for understanding colonial discourse, historical memory, and the historiography of Ottoman and colonial Algeria.

### ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة كتاب كمال بن صحراوي «بايلك الغرب في المجلة الإفريقية» (2018)، الذي يحلل تمثيلات بايلك الغرب في المجلة الاستعمارية الفرنسية *Revue Africaine*. وتبرز الدراسة أهمية الكتابة التاريخية في حفظ الذاكرة التاريخية، مع تقديم قراءة نقدية لإنتاج المعرفة الاستعمارية حول الجزائر خلال الفترتين العثمانية والاستعمار الفرنسي. كما تركز على كيفية قيام الباحثين الفرنسيين بجمع المخطوطات المحلية وتحقيقتها وتفسيرها ضمن إطار تحكمه الأيديولوجيا الاستعمارية والانحياز الثقافي.

يقدم الكتاب دراسة نقدية وتحقيقاً للنصوص المتعلقة ببايلك الغرب، مع التركيز على البنية الإدارية للجزائر العثمانية والأهمية الاستراتيجية للمنطقة الغربية. كما يتناول تمثيلات

الاستعمار الفرنسي للواقع الثقافي والديني والسياسي، بما في ذلك تفسير المواقع التاريخية، والشخصيات الدينية، والاحتلال الإسباني، وحركات المقاومة المحلية. وتكشف الدراسة عن محدودية منهجية في الكتابة الاستعمارية، خاصة من حيث الانتقائية في استخدام المصادر وإقصاء الرؤية المحلية.

ومن خلال ستة فصول موضوعاتية، يفكك المؤلف الخطاب الاستعماري عبر دراسة السرديات الثقافية والتاريخ العسكري وتاريخ مدينتي وهران ومسرغين والسياق الجيوسياسي الأوسع للتنافس الاستعماري في شمال إفريقيا. كما ينتقد السرديات الاستعمارية ويبرز الوظيفة الأيديولوجية للكتابة التاريخية في تبرير التوسع الإمبريالي.

وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن عمل بن صحراوي يقدم مساهمة مهمة في كتابة تاريخ الجزائر من خلال إعادة قراءة نقدية للمصادر الاستعمارية، وتصحيح الانحيازات، وإعادة بناء جوانب مهملة من تاريخ بايلك الغرب. وعلى الرغم من بعض الملاحظات المتعلقة بالبنية الداخلية للكتاب، فإنه يظل مرجعًا أكاديميًا مهمًا لفهم الخطاب الاستعماري والذاكرة التاريخية وكتابة تاريخ الجزائر العثمانية والاستعمارية.

**Keywords:** Western Beylik, colonial historiography, Ottoman Algeria, *Revue Africaine*, historical memory.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بايليك الغرب الجزائري، التأريخ الاستعماري، الجزائر العثمانية، مجلة أفريكان ريفيو، الذاكرة التاريخية.

## Introduction

The preservation of historical memory through historiography plays a pivotal role in documenting the experiences and civilizations of peoples across time. During the French colonial period, particularly in the North African colonies, the French systematically collected, classified, and edited numerous indigenous manuscripts, many of which were published in the *Revue Africaine* (African Journal). This journal

became a central platform for French scholars to explore colonial realities, while simultaneously promoting colonial ideologies and Christian beliefs that shaped Western perceptions of the development of colonized peoples. In Algeria, the arrival of the Ottomans brought significant administrative changes, most notably the establishment of the "Beylik system," which divided the country into four administrative regions. The Beylik of the West (Beylik el-Gharb) held particular strategic importance, making it a focal point for colonial ambitions during periods of political instability. The author's project focuses on collecting and translating writings related to the Beylik of the West, published in the *Revue Africaine*, with the aim of consolidating and critically analyzing these primary sources to uncover biases and representations that could influence future research on Algeria's history. This project not only provides valuable historical documents for historians but also raises awareness of the importance of critically examining colonial-era sources to understand their impact on historical interpretation and clarify the role of writing in shaping historical memory.

### **Book content**

Dr. Kamal Ben Sahraoui, a distinguished scholar specializing in modern and contemporary Algerian history at the University of Tiaret, Algeria. Dr. Ben Sahraoui is a leading expert in North African history, having made significant academic contributions through a wide range of articles published in prestigious national and international journals, with a particular focus on Algeria's colonial and post-colonial periods. He is also a member of the Laboratory for Historical and Archaeological Studies of North Africa and has participated in numerous national and international scholarly conferences, further establishing his reputation as a prominent researcher and scholar in the field. His research is distinguished by a meticulous analytical methodology that involves critically examining primary sources and reinterpreting them within a broader context of North African historiography. This reflects his deep commitment to offering a critical and renewed perspective on Algerian history. His

work demonstrates a high capacity for integrating various sources and understanding the interconnected historical contexts, contributing to the enrichment of the academic field and advancing studies related to colonialism, as well as the political and social history of the region.

The book is organized into six thematic chapters that progressively build a comprehensive analysis of how the Western Beylik was portrayed in European, particularly French, scholarship: The book's first chapter, "An Overview of the Western Beylik and the African Journal," provides a specialized historical analysis of Ottoman administration in Algeria during a period of significant administrative and political transformation. Beginning with a precise definition of 'Beylik' - an Ottoman administrative unit governed by a semi-independent ruler known as the 'Bey' - the chapter methodically traces the evolution of these administrative divisions across Algeria, with particular attention to the Western Beylik, noting its distinctive characteristics of mobile capitals and a pronounced military orientation shaped by regional circumstances. The analysis extends to examine the influential African Journal (published from April 1856 to 1962, spanning 106 issues) under the editorship of Louis Adrien Berbrugger,<sup>1</sup> who shaped the publication's role as a primary vehicle for colonial political discourse, though its influence on literary developments within the Western Beylik remained notably limited. The chapter thus establishes a comprehensive foundation for understanding both the administrative structure of Ottoman Algeria and the scholarly apparatus through which it was interpreted by European, particularly French, observers.

Chapter two, "Insights into Certain Works on the Western Algerian Beylik," presents a critical analysis of the local sources utilized by contributors of the *Revue Africaine*. The chapter examines how these scholars engaged with indigenous texts,

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<sup>1</sup> Louis-Adrien Berbrugger: (1801–1869) was a French archeologist and philologist. He was an Arabist, with a Muslim wife, who set up the National Library in Algiers.

analyzing their methodological approaches and the consequent impact on historical interpretation. The analysis reveals a significant methodological flaw in the research process: the systematic exclusion of local sources. This deliberate omission resulted in methodologically compromised conclusions and misrepresentation of regional history. The study demonstrates that such scholarly practices were often influenced by colonial imperatives, leading to interpretations of the Western Beylik's history that served colonial interests rather than historical accuracy.

In Chapter Three, "Cultural Issues in the Western Beylik," the author turns to an exploration of the French researchers' interest in the region's cultural and religious heritage. The study focuses on key historical sites such as the ancient mosque in Mascara,<sup>1</sup> the Mazouna school,<sup>2</sup> and the Ain El-Hout<sup>3</sup> site in Tlemcen,<sup>4</sup> which were of particular interest to colonial scholars. Additionally, figures such as Sidi Ahmed Ben Yousef<sup>5</sup> and Emir Abdelkader<sup>6</sup> are analyzed in the context of French research. A crucial aspect of this chapter is the French emphasis on preserving Spanish-era monuments in Oran,<sup>7</sup> reflecting colonial biases that sought to reframe the history of the region as an

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<sup>1</sup> The ancient mosque in Mascara: is a historic mosque located in Mascara, Algeria. It was built during the Ottoman era in 1747 AD and was restored and expanded in the 1960.

<sup>2</sup> The Mazouna school: is a commune in Relizane Province, Algeria, formerly the capital of the Ottoman western province, known for the historic Elzawya Mosque, a center of Quranic education.

<sup>3</sup> Ain El-Hout: A populated place located in Tlemcen, Algeria. The terrain elevation above sea level is estimated to be 516 meters.

<sup>4</sup> Tlemcen, incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the early 16th century, was a key trade and defense center in western Algeria

<sup>5</sup> Sidi Ahmed Ben Yousef: One of the most prominent Sufi sheikhs in Algeria and the Maghreb during the early 16th century.

<sup>6</sup> El-Amir Abdelkader (1808–1883), the founder of the modern Algerian state and a pioneer of its resistance against French colonialism between 1832 and 1847.

<sup>7</sup> Oran: is a historic city on the Mediterranean coast of northwestern Algeria. During the Ottoman period, it was of great strategic and commercial importance.

extension of European heritage. The author critiques the research methods used, revealing how the colonial mindset influenced the cultural studies of the time, thus limiting an authentic understanding of the region's history.

The fourth analysis, "The Spanish Occupation of North Africa in the Modern Era," examines the Spanish colonial presence in the region, focusing on the occupation of Oran and Mersa El-Kebir.<sup>1</sup> The author evaluates several articles from the *Revue Africaine* that examine the Spanish presence in Algeria, specifically their military campaigns, the institutions they established, and the figures who played key roles in the occupation. Through critical analysis of these articles, the author traces the historiographical construction of Spanish colonial presence, shedding light on the biases inherent in these depictions. The chapter also offers readers additional references and sources for further study, facilitating deeper scholarly investigation into Spain's colonial impact on North Africa.

The fifth examination is dedicated to "Milestones in the History of Oran and Mersa El-Kebir," explores the scholarly interest, particularly from French researchers, in the history of these two significant western Algerian cities. Drawing from the *Revue Africaine*, the chapter covers diverse topics including the Spanish occupation, local tribes, liberation movements, and key figures such as Bey Mohammad Ben Othman<sup>2</sup>. The author critically examines the content and methodologies of the research, pointing out several flaws and biases that shaped the colonial interpretation of the region's history. By providing footnotes and references, the author offers a more critical lens for

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<sup>1</sup> Mersa El-Kebir a port city proximate to Oran, Algeria. derives its name from Arabic, signifying "The Great Harbor," which reflects its strategic importance as a major maritime and military hub, especially during the Ottoman period.

<sup>2</sup> Bey Mohammad Ben Othman: was a key religious scholar and leader in Ottoman Algeria. He governed the Western Beylik from (1779–1797) and was recognized for his significant reformist influence on politics and religion.

future scholars seeking to understand the complexities of Oran and Mersa El-Kebir's history.

The final study, titled "The French historian Marcel Emerit's<sup>1</sup> attitude towards Léon Roche's memoirs," examines the role of colonial narratives in shaping historical discourse. The analysis focuses on Léon Roche,<sup>2</sup> whose memoir *Thirty-two Years in the Land of Islam* has faced substantial scholarly critique for its methodological inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies. Marcel Emerit's critical analysis of Roche's work reveals its fallacies and academic plagiarism, and the author provides insight into how colonial powers use such personal narratives as cultural tools to further their imperialist goals. This chapter demonstrates the necessity of critical examination of colonial narratives, illuminating their role in legitimizing colonial expansion and obscuring indigenous histories.

The book provides a methodological study of the *Revue Africaine* concerning the Western Beylik of Algeria, reflecting notable academic efforts in gathering, translating, and critically analyzing the related articles, while correcting errors and providing the source materials. Despite these contributions, the work exhibits certain limitations that affect its overall comprehensiveness. A primary weakness lies in the structural imbalance: the chapters vary significantly in length and analytical depth, which compromises the coherence and unity of the book. Moreover, repetitive introductory paragraphs, particularly on pages 8, 18, 19, 134, 135, 176, 177, and 178, disrupt the textual flow and coherence. The study presents an inconsistent assessment

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Emerit: (1899–1985) was a French historian and academician.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Roches:(1809–1901) served as a French military interpreter in North Africa, achieving proficiency in Arabic within two years before his recruitment into the French Army.

of the *Revue Africaine's* coverage of the Western Beylik, alternately describing it as limited and abundant, potentially creating confusion for readers.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the researcher demonstrates sophisticated critical analysis in evaluating the texts, and his work is considered an important reference in the field, especially since it tackles the history of the Western Beylik, an area largely overlooked in historical scholarship. The study pays significant attention to rural areas, the history of Oran, the tribes of the western region, and revolutionary movements such as the Derkaouia<sup>1</sup> and Tijaniya,<sup>2</sup> despite the scarcity of previous studies on these topics. Significantly, the study's reliance on French-language sources reflects the limited availability of archival documents related to the Western Beylik. This documentary situation distinguishes the historiography of this region from that of other beyliks and presents unique challenges for researchers examining Western Algeria's past.

Despite these limitations, this book presents a distinguished academic study focusing on the history of Algeria, particularly the Western Beylik, through an analysis of The African Journal's role in shaping historical narratives. The author reassesses prevailing ideas and offers deeper insights into the historical context, emphasizing the colonial objectives of European powers in the region, especially Spain's policy toward North Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The study also examines the trade history between the Western Beylik and European powers, highlighting Oran and Mersa El-Kebir as

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<sup>1</sup> The Derkaouia Revolution: A nineteenth-century religious resistance movement in western Algeria, led by Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abdullah Derkaoui, using Sufi zawiyas to resist French colonialism.

<sup>2</sup> The Tijaniya Revolution A late nineteenth -century religious resistance in western Algeria, led by the Tijaniya order, focused on defending Islam and rejecting French occupation through Sufi centers.

significant commercial hubs. Ben Sahraoui makes a valuable contribution to colonial studies and Algerian history, adopting a critical methodology that opens new avenues for research on colonial documentation and the historical understanding of this period.

**Annex:** Cover page of the book

بايلك الغرب الجزائري في المجلة الإفريقية:

