

Analysis of Iorcin's view of imperialism



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Imperialism, Colonial Identity, and Race in Algeria, 1830-1870; the Role of the French Medical Corps (Patricia M. E. Lorcin)

As Conklin has argued in her book “”, that only in the third Republic France was the “ mission to civilise” employed as an official ideology to justify imperial conquests, Lorcin’s research focuses on the historical development of social hierarchies in French North African colony, Algeria. Assessing how physicians without professional background knowledge in ethnographic analysis racially distinguished between the Berber-speaking Kabyles and the Arabic-speaking inhabitants of Algeria, the author asserts that such distinction influenced French perception of Algeria, informed the colonial policies developed and dictated her future colonial enterprise in the region. In her assessment of the intellectual contributions of French physicians and surgeons to this “ civilizing mission”, Lorcin argues that the medical corps which was attached to the French troops in Algeria facilitated the projection of French imperial power that was essential to the development of a socio-political domain in the colony.” She attributes the medical corps’ achievement to the scientific methodology of their work and their awareness of current philosophical and intellectual currents. In other words, “ their work carried methodological and analytical weight, which ensured initial acceptance and in many cases ultimate validity”. Importantly, their publication not only brought them political opportunities which stimulate more physicians’ interest in the venture, but subsequent assessment of North African culture and environment by Eurocentric historians were based on their racial conclusions.

During the cholera and smallpox epidemics of the early 1830s, colonial medical officials in their line of duty to the local population served as the eyes and ears of the colonizer. The medical officials not only kept the metropole abreast of medical developments through publications in literary journals in order to further scientific research in Europe, but also passed information about the natives' culture to France. That is, in the process of studying the condition of hygiene in the colony, colonial medical personnel – without previous training as anthropologists – developed negative stereotypes of the indigenous population based on speculation and self-proclaimed knowledge of the natives' culture. In fact, these medical officials blamed sporadic epidemics that decimated the depopulation of the colony on their “primitive” cultural practices of polygamy, circumcision, the abandonment of sick children and bad political leadership. Sexuality and the relation of the sexes were particular indexes for evaluating the natives' level of civilisation, hence, everything Arab, especially their religion became evil and needed to be destroyed and everything Kabyle became inferior and needed reform.

Graduates of the medical school of Paris formed the larger part of the medical corps that went to Algeria to promote France's idea of health through civilisation”. These graduates went to North Africa with an idea of a superior European culture and of a primitive Africa that was in urgent need of civilization. In other words, colonial physicians during their time in the colony constructed an African Other, not only based on the pre-conceived racial superiority their civilisation, but also based on the assumption that they understand the colonised culture and society. Linking this racism ideology (i. e. class defines man's nature and destiny) to the paternalistic idea of the

Utopian philosopher – Saint Simon, Lorcin posits that the French standard of living, culture, environment, civilisation and morality were used by the medical officials as indicators in studying and explaining the environment of French Algeria. These evaluation of the Algerians were published in European journals and helped reinforce the prevailing notions of the inferiority of African indigenous society and culture in France. As a corollary, the publications won over the French public into supporting the “civilising mission” in Africa.

Lorcin identified two important factors which made the medical corps indispensable in the French administration of Algeria: first, their research publication on the culture and society of the colonised which put them in active colonial politics legitimise the use of assimilation policy in the colony, and secondly, their regular contact with the native population put them in a position to discover which tribe was likely to cooperate with French rule (p. 665). These two factors resulted in the categorization of the local population – the plain-dwelling Arabs as unfriendly religious fanatics and thieves, and the mountain-dwelling Kabyles as friendly primitive race. One of the physicians, Eugene Bodichon, in his unguided quest to propose how to secure the colony compared African environment with other European society in the 1830s and blamed his perceived backwardness of Algeria on African climate and hierarchy of race, thus advancing the concept of moral hygiene through assimilation and agricultural plantation which he claim would purge the natives of their laziness and moral deterioration.

The physicians’ intellectual contributions not only facilitated colonial rule by linking French rule to health and civilization, but also justified assimilation

policy by claiming hierarchy of race. Although the physicians' access to the homes of the natives gave them an idea of the daily activities of the Algerians, however, their pre-conceived racial ideology had a tremendous influence on the development of French ethno-racial attitudes that informed the imposition of her culture on the people. In other words, the extensive focus of the physicians' publications on the unhygienic aspect of the natives' society coupled with the derogatory description of ethnic groups provided justification for the "mission to civilise". In all, her biographical approach which shows the physicians' individual contribution worth commendation.