

Zawiyas and their cultural and religious role in Algeria during the late Ottoman period

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Summary:

Cultural institutions proliferated during the Ottoman era, working to spread and strongly defend Arab-Islamic culture.

Zawiyas were one of the institutions that spread widely across the country, due to their importance and the multiplicity of their positive roles in cultural and religious life. They contributed to educating and teaching generations, fortifying them religiously, and forming a virtuous class of teachers, imams, and muftis in a sound manner that served society. Consequently, they had a great role in preserving the Arab and Islamic constants of the nation from disappearance and extinction.

Introduction:

Numerous historical studies have confirmed that education in Algeria during the late Ottoman period flourished, thanks to the presence of numerous cultural institutions that played a significant role in stimulating scientific and educational activity in the country. Among the most important of these institutions were the zawiyas (religious lodges), which occupied a leading position among cultural institutions, combining religious and educational functions. They thus served as centers of intellectual and religious influence, fulfilling an educational and spiritual role and leaving a profound impact on the hearts and minds of the Algerian people. They continued to perform their role admirably for a long period, leading the cultural resistance, particularly under the colonial policies implemented in the country. This was thanks to the scholars, jurists, and sheikhs who strove to preserve the nation's foundations from erosion and decline.

So, what is their definition? How did they originate, and what was their cultural and religious role? And what was the colonial authorities' stance towards their activities after the occupation of the country?

1- Definition of Zawiyas: Linguistically: It is a word whose singular form is zawiya, derived from the verb inzawa, meaning to take a corner for worship. It is taken

from the verb *zawa*, meaning to isolate oneself and move away. *Zawiyas* were found in rural areas far from cities, and their presence was always in the corner of the city and its outskirts, or in a secluded corner¹.

Technically speaking, a *zawiya* is an educational institution concerned with the Quran and its sciences. Historically, the term *zawiya* refers to a building attached to a mosque in cities, dedicated to receiving children and teaching them the principles of Islam, reading, writing, and basic arithmetic, similar to the role of a traditional Quranic school (*kuttab*)

It is considered a comprehensive institution. It is a place of learning where students at various levels receive instruction. It is also a refuge for the poor, the needy, and travelers, who find everything they need there. Furthermore, it serves as a shelter for students and teachers who stay there throughout their studies. Finally, it is a center for worship and remembrance of God during times of remembrance and for memorizing the Holy Quran².

Abu Qasim Saadallah says that it was a complete institution that included housing, food, shelter, education, and worship, and some of them were considered higher schools to continue the education that the boys had begun in the offices or Quranic schools³.

Yahya Bouaziz defines it as: "A complex of houses and buildings of varying shapes and sizes containing prayer rooms such as mosques, rooms for memorizing the Holy Quran and teaching Arabic and Islamic sciences, and others for student accommodation, cooking, storing food and fodder, and housing the animals used in the *zawiya*'s work." Muhammad Ali Debbouz defines it as: "A *zawiya*, like a *ribat*, is a group of buildings used for teaching⁴."

2-Its Origins:

The first to establish *zawiyas* (Sufi lodges) were the *marabouts* and *Sufis* who chose to retreat to these places, seeking seclusion and distance from the clamor of urban life and architecture, in pursuit of the tranquility and peace conducive to worship and seclusion. Their founders were ascetic Sufi religious figures. Their influence began to emerge in the eastern Islamic world from the 2nd century AH (8th century CE), and then asceticism and Sufism spread to North Africa, becoming widespread there in the late Middle Ages (5th century AH) and the early modern period⁵. Then, the *zawiyas* spread further during the 17th century with the beginning of Spanish and Portuguese harassment of the Maghreb coasts, and they appeared in the countryside, perhaps due to the lack of other educational centers in the countryside, in addition to the spread of Sufi orders, which usually took the *zawiyas* as their center. Hence, the name of the *zawiya* became associated with Sufism, meaning it became affiliated with a sheikh of the Sufi sheikhs. The *zawiya* usually contained the sheikh's shrine, a small mosque, and residences for strangers and students⁶. Then the *zawiyas* penetrated Southeast Asia, the Caucasus, and Africa, especially with the European occupation in the 19th and early

20th centuries ⁷. These zawiyas stood as silent and open resistance to colonial policy, defending the nation's foundations. They served as primary schools, Quran memorization centers, student dormitories, and a section for travelers. They also housed mosques for prayer, preaching, and teaching, working to spread knowledge, provide charity to the poor, and shelter orphans⁸.

In Algeria, the number of zawiyas (religious lodges) in the country before the French occupation exceeded 349, distributed across various regions of the country ⁹. The Kabylie region of Kabylia, encompassing the Kabylie and Bejaia districts, was one of the richest areas in Algeria in terms of the concentration of zawiyas (religious lodges), numbering up to 50. The region was named after the Kabylie people due to the abundance of zawiyas found there. Among the most famous and largest, both materially and intellectually, was the zawiya of Sidi Abdel Rahman El-Yalouli, from which emerged scholars of Kabylie who contributed to cultural affairs both within Algeria and abroad ¹⁰.

3- The shape and architecture of the zawiya:

It is a group of buildings with an Islamic architectural style, and its domes were often built over the tombs of righteous saints or to commemorate their memory ¹¹. Its construction differs from that of a mosque or school, often combining elements of both. It features low walls, low domes and courtyards, and few windows. If a zawiya (Sufi lodge) has a mosque, it is usually without a minaret.

As for its architecture, Saadallah says it is not aesthetically pleasing, and is often damp and dark. Its form suggests isolation, austerity, and tranquility, rather than mingling, wealth, and activity. However, some zawiyas originally intended for student housing and similar purposes were spacious and hygienic¹².

4- Types: There are three types:

-In terms of affiliation:

1: The Zawiya of the Murabitun: It does not follow any Sufi order nor does it have any affiliated disciples. It is for teaching, spreading knowledge, and receiving strangers, the poor, and the deprived who are looking for refuge, or it is a place for visitors who come to offer donations and alms. The Murabitun work there without pay despite their poverty and needs¹³.

Thus, this type of charitable and benevolent work was established.

2: Sufi Lodges: A lodge may be the main lodge of a Sufi order or a branch affiliated with it. It is private property, and its system resembles a hereditary monarchy. The sheikh is the supervisor and directly responsible for everything. The order has disciples and followers who provide for the lodge. In the event of the sheikh's death, succession occurs through a guardianship left by the sheikh or chosen by his family according to specific conditions¹⁴.

3:Attributed zawiyas: These are zawiyas named after a deceased person whom the community venerates and whose memory is kept alive while he is buried in the zawiya. The common people make pilgrimages to the zawiya to visit his grave (shrine) seeking blessings, not for knowledge or preaching¹⁵.

-Zawiyas in terms of location:

1- Rural zawiyas: These are built around the tomb of the marabout (a Sufi saint), and his descendants reside in this area. They have endowments of land and orchards, which provide for the poor and guests. The zawiya's due is a tithe (ushr), and it is usually managed by a descendant of the marabout. Whoever seeks refuge there is safe. Its functions are education and upbringing, and it is located in villages, far from the corrupting influences of civilization¹⁶..

2-City Zawiyas: These are large buildings used to house students, scholars, and even strangers. They provide basic necessities such as water and lighting. The zawiya then becomes a school, staffed by a renowned teacher of advanced sciences. It is named after its founder, the neighborhood in which it is located, or sometimes after the marabout (a Sufi saint) to whom it belongs.

3- Those in Charge of the Zawiyas:

The primary person in charge of the zawiya is usually its founder, the marabout himself, or his heirs. The zawiya is the saint's residence, prayer room, and place of worship. It is where he teaches and judges, especially in rural areas. In cities, it is overseen by a qaimat (guardian) or director appointed by representatives. In the absence of the founder or marabout, his sons and grandsons usually manage the zawiya in the same manner. The zawiya also requires cleaners, muezzins (callers to prayer), assistants, etc¹⁷..

4-Sources of Funding for Zawiyas:

The sources of funding for zawiyas are diverse, relying on three main sources:

-Endowments and charitable trusts from properties, agricultural lands, shops, tithes, and other donations and contributions usually given by pious, generous, and devout individuals who consider it a service to the zawiyas¹⁸. This facilitates its spread and long-term existence in service of science and learning.

-The support provided by some individuals, families, or even some sheikhs who established some religious centers (zawiyas) sometimes with the desire to immortalize their names¹⁹.

They endowed their properties and real estate as charitable trusts.

-Funds from visits and gatherings (collections and donations) offered by their visitors, followers, disciples, and devotees in the form of money, goods, foodstuffs, and various clothing items²⁰. People tended to direct their endowments and charitable acts

more towards Sufi lodges (zawiyas) than towards mosques or schools. Those who established endowments and gave alms to these lodges were ordinary people whose minds were dominated by ignorance and superstition. They believed that their reward would come quickly and that their sins would be forgiven immediately, as it was enough for the sheikh to be pleased with them and grant them his blessing²¹..

There are also organized or seasonal visits determined by the sheikhs and leaders, such as those related to zakat (almsgiving), weddings, and celebrations. These visits to the zawiyas (religious endowments) are collective. The aim of these sources was the urgent desire to spread the zawiyas, ensure their continued existence, and reinforce their educational, religious, charitable, and even jihadist functions.

5 -The Educational Role of the Zawiyas: The roles of the zawiyas in Algeria during the late Ottoman period were multifaceted. They were highly active in religious, cultural, social, and even jihadist life.

The education prevalent in Algeria during this period was the traditional Arab-Islamic education, which the country had preserved through generations across its various regions. Religious teachings were deeply rooted in Algerian society, thanks to the zawiyas, which played a leading role in preserving and disseminating them. They thus rendered a great service to the intellectual movement in particular. According to Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, education in the zawiyas was more diverse than in the kuttabs (traditional Quranic schools). He states that education in the kuttabs was almost exclusively limited to the Quran, the principles of religion, reading, and writing, while education in the zawiyas included religious sciences, linguistics, history, Sufism, and the virtues of the righteous²²..

Algeria witnessed the widespread establishment of zawiyas (religious lodges) due to their importance and multifaceted roles. Rural zawiyas played a more positive role than those in cities, particularly in the field of education, where they were widely disseminated. For example, the city of Zwawa experienced a vibrant intellectual movement comparable to some of Algeria's major centers of learning. It was also the region with the highest concentration of zawiyas in Algeria, numbering around 50, so much so that its name, Zwawa, derives from the abundance of zawiyas found there ²³. They all bore the responsibility of spreading knowledge.

The zawiyas (religious lodges) in Algeria played a significant and positive role in cultural and religious life. Their role lay in preserving the Holy Quran and ensuring its memorization, both in writing and script, as well as its recitation and intonation, so that it would not be altered or distorted. The Quran was recited morning and evening, individually and in groups. Children would sit on the ground during the recitation, believing that this fostered a sense of reverence appropriate to worship and a way to draw closer to God Almighty so that He would answer their prayers.

The zawiyas played a vital role in disseminating Islamic religious education among

all segments of society and were extremely careful to protect it from being lost or forgotten. They had a major role in elevating its status and preserving it in the country²⁴.

In addition to their religious function, zawiyas served as institutes for educating young men and enlightening the general public. They were centers of learning, housing numerous students aspiring to higher knowledge. Within these zawiyas, students received instruction in the most prominent sciences of their time, such as Arabic language and related disciplines. Furthermore, zawiyas continuously preserved the Arabic language from decline and worked to protect it from extinction, recognizing its sacred status as the language of the Quran, the language in which divine revelation descended, thus granting it permanence in the hearts of its speakers²⁵. The zawiya (Sufi lodge) was a formidable fortress that staunchly defended Islam, the Arabic language, and Islamic culture. It also played a vital role in preserving the fundamental principles of the nation. Despite the simplicity and modesty of its educational offerings, the zawiyas were able to safeguard national identity, protect faith, and ensure that the Arab nation remained steadfast in its religion, proud of its values, and attached to its language. Furthermore, they produced virtuous men whose expertise spanned various fields, including religion, culture, and even politics, and who played a crucial role in preserving the core values of the Arab and Islamic nation. The zawiyas also served as repositories and archives for books and manuscripts covering diverse sciences and arts, thanks to the dedication of their sheikhs and followers to knowledge, teaching, copying, transmission, authorship, and compilation²⁶.

The zawiyas (religious lodges) opened their doors to students of knowledge, providing them with complete care, including accommodation and food, and supporting them from their own resources. In doing so, they became a powerful engine of intellectual activity in Algeria. Following instruction and education, generations of scholars and learned individuals graduated from these zawiyas—a generation deeply rooted in Arabic and imbued with the principles of the Holy Quran. They played a significant role in disseminating education and fostering the principles of Islam, as well as consolidating the rules of the Arabic language.

The activities of the zawiyas have been subject to some criticism. Some researchers accuse them of contributing to the decline of Islamic education by limiting themselves to rote learning and discouraging the use of independent thought and free intellectual initiatives, while also promoting certain ideas such as fatalism and superstition²⁷. This, in addition to their self-imposed isolation and lack of cooperation and partnership with other scientific and cultural institutions, their detachment from the sphere of social influence, and their perpetuation of sectarianism, tribalism, and factionalism, exacerbated the causes of discord and division among the Sufi lodges themselves. This means that there were ignorant and corrupt lodges in Algeria that deviated from the true path of religion and inflicted great harm upon the country. They were tools of the colonial powers, a source of affliction and strife, namely the colonial Sufi orders.

Conversely, we cannot deny the function and noble role of the lodges. They fulfilled a vital mission: spreading education and spiritual guidance, thereby fortifying generations religiously and culturally, and nurturing the spirit of resistance after the occupation of the country. This was achieved by rejecting all the enemy's plans. Some lodges remained dormant in the face of French colonialism for many years, due to the nature of their function, their structure, and their standing in Algerian society. They did not shirk their assigned task but went further, raising the banner of jihad with both the sword and the pen. Thus, their mission was civilizational, blending religious and national spirit. In conclusion, we can say that Algeria has preserved and strongly defended its Arab-Islamic culture throughout the preceding centuries, enriching its heritage with numerous commentaries, explanations, and serious works. This is largely due to cultural institutions, most notably the zawiyas (religious lodges), which served science and education invaluable, leading to their spread and flourishing in Algeria during the late Ottoman period. Even the French themselves acknowledged this during their occupation of the country in 1830. It should be noted that the Ottomans in Algeria lacked a clear educational policy and did not encourage or develop education or support those involved in it, due to various political and military expansionist considerations. Consequently, education was largely private, relying on individual and family initiatives, and sustained by the waqf (religious endowment) system, which served as its primary source of funding.

As for their fate after the French occupation, some were destroyed and others were converted into churches and museums, or some were left to be exploited in service of the interests of the colonial powers. For example, we find that Napoleon III paid attention to the zawiyas, not for the purpose of developing Islamic education, but rather his goal was to create a class of informants and spies on whom France could rely to impose its political and intellectual control and prevent a revolution or rebellion that could start from these zawiyas²⁸.

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