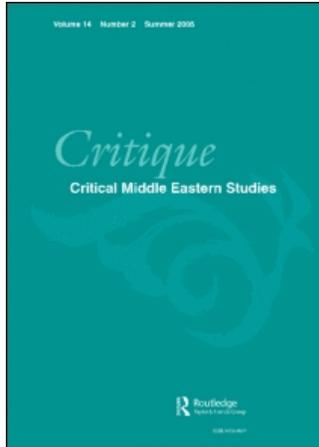


This article was downloaded by:[Slisli, Fouzi]
On: 8 February 2008
Access Details: [subscription number 790507928]
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713411829>

Islam: The Elephant in Fanon's **The Wretched of the Earth**

Fouzi Slisli ^a

^a St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 March 2008

To cite this Article: Slisli, Fouzi (2008) 'Islam: The Elephant in Fanon's **The Wretched of the Earth**', Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies, 17:1, 97 - 108

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10669920701862518

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10669920701862518>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Islam: The Elephant in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*

FOUZI SLISLI

St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, USA

The motto 'look out for yourself,' the atheist's method of salvation, is in this context forbidden.¹

There is an elephant in *The Wretched of the Earth*. It is Islam and its anti-colonial tradition in Algeria. Fanon continuously cites and exalts this tradition. It even can be argued that Fanon's famous death sentence on colonial systems was properly minted only out of his contact with this anti-colonial tradition. But if Fanon cites this tradition everywhere, he does not reference it anywhere. He explains the acts of resistance and applauds the culture of Algerian peasants, but he does not name them for what they were—the tradition of Islamic resistance to colonialism. Rather, he attributes the successful resistance to the famous combination of spontaneity and organization. Marxist revolutionary theory is credited for providing the organization, and impulsive, anti-colonial reactions of the Algerian peasantry are said to be the source of spontaneity. This combination has become the hallmark of Fanon's theory of revolution and is said to be capable of breaking the back of colonial systems. In this article, however, I argue that the peasant spontaneity on which Fanon builds his revolutionary theory was not that spontaneous after all. A careful reading of the famous chapter 'Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness' will show that all the examples he gives of peasant spontaneity belong to a distinctly Islamic anti-colonial tradition that, by the time Fanon was writing, had been in existence for over a century. It is only by remaining silent about the Islamic source of this tradition that Fanon manages to present it as a spontaneous and visceral peasant outburst. In an Algerian context, the categories of spontaneity and organization can emerge only if all references to Islam are erased. Rather than spontaneity and organization, what *The Wretched of the Earth* actually describes is the combination of two systems of organization—one Marxist, the other Islamic.

Correspondence address: Fouzi Slisli, Human Relations and Multicultural Education, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498, USA. Email: fslisli@stcloudstate.edu

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 47. All subsequent references to this edition will be given in the text.

What Made Algerian Peasants Revolutionary?

Marxist studies of the Algerian revolution have found it difficult to explain how the peasant class became the central component of the revolution. By neglecting the proletariat and mobilizing the peasants instead, the Algerian revolution made a departure from Marxist orthodoxy and revolutionary theory. Karl Marx himself gave little revolutionary significance to the peasantry as a class. In fact, he believed peasants to be conservative and lacking in revolutionary consciousness. Many anthropologists and other social scientists often have described the peasantry as an obstacle to social change and revolution. Scientific socialism, too, characterized the peasantry as a conservative class. According to Marie Perinbam, for example, the peasants' attachment to the land and to village culture prevent them from accepting social change, let alone revolution.² 'The peasant himself,' said the famous Vietnamese critic Nguyen Nghe, 'never can have a revolutionary consciousness. It is the militant coming from the cities who will have to search out patiently the most talented elements in the poor peasantry, educate them, organize them, and it is only after a long period of political work that one can mobilize the peasantry'; and Fanon, according to Nghe, failed to realize that the peasants were not inherently revolutionary.³

What made a revolutionary like Fanon glorify a class that traditional revolutionary theory tended to scorn and saw as retrograde, tribal and emotional? Critics who defend Fanon note that the working class constituted a very small minority in French Algeria, or as Fanon himself put it: 'a tiny portion of the population, which hardly represents more than 1 per cent [of the population]' (p. 108). They also note that the proletariat is usually the most favored class in colonial countries. Unlike the rest of the natives, the proletariat are integrated into the colonial economy. Fanon, also, assigns an important role to the 'deviant nationalists,' the young Algerians who seceded from the old nationalist party of Messali Hadj and founded the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).⁴ These renegades sought refuge in the countryside where they found the popular support to launch and sustain the war of liberation. It was these renegades, according to critics who defend Fanon, who were in charge of planning the revolution, educating the peasantry, and channeling their energies.⁵ The leaders of the FLN, in that sense, had no choice but to work with the peasantry. Algerian intelligentsia and their parties were interested only in pursuing assimilation, not independence. The Communist Party itself believed the future of Algeria to be better as a province of a socialist France. These facts show that the peasants were the most receptive Algerians to the idea of resisting and ejecting colonialism. It is a fact, as Perinbam notes, that most of the opposition to the French, between 1830 and 1879, came from rural areas. What was it, though, that made these peasants more receptive to the call of revolution than the elite and their political parties?

² B. Marie Perinbam, 'Fanon and the revolutionary peasantry—the Algerian case,' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11(3) (1973), p. 429.

³ Nguyen Nghe, 'Frantz Fanon et les problèmes de l'indépendance,' *La Pensée*, no. 107 (February 1963), p. 29.

⁴ Messali Hadj's party was the PPA-MTLD (Party of the Algerian People—Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties). A splinter group founded the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), which eventually led and won the revolution.

⁵ Irene Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon: A Critical Study* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. 209.

Like Fanon, Perinbam finds that peasants in colonial countries have revolutionary qualities. '[U]nlike their Western counterparts,' she says, 'Third World peasant masses would always answer the call to revolution.'⁶ Her evidence, though, is not substantial. Algerian peasants never turned away fighters who were seeking refuge. Peasants' generosity and altruism obliged them to accept the hunted man and protect him without asking questions. Citing Fanon, she says that the peasant 'never ceased to clutch at a life-style which was in practice anti-colonial'; that the 'authentic peasant' is an anti-colonial peasant. She speaks of a warrior and a resistance tradition that remained alive as late as the 1940s and 1950s.⁷ Perinbam speaks of 'something which the peasant dimly felt' and which 'compelled him to participate in community action.' She mentions 'certain types of group dynamics,' 'conditioning,' and 'instincts' that made Algerian peasants react automatically like a pack of wolves against the colonizer.⁸ She does not inquire about the nature of this 'dynamic' or this 'conditioning' which turned the Algerian peasantry into the backbone of the fiercest anti-colonial war of the modern era. Neither does she seek to know the nature and characteristics of the warrior and resistance tradition that was active in rural Algeria throughout the nineteenth century and remained alive until the 1940s and 1950s.

It is certainly true that Fanon was not a twentieth-century romantic returning to the 'agrarian womb.' He was definitely not a Coleridge or a Wordsworth awestruck with rural lifestyles and noble Bedouins. Algerian peasantry and agrarian life, too, should not be confused with its European counterpart. In spite of these stark differences, Fanon's supporters have been incapable of explaining what made the Algerian peasantry revolutionary. Interestingly, both critics and supporters of Fanon point in the same direction. Toward the very end of her essay, Perinbam mentions in passing the concept of *jihad* as a concept that 'Muslim peasants would have grasped immediately. Perhaps it is no coincidence,' she says, 'that during the 1954–62 war, combatants were known as *mujahidin*, or those who fight holy war.'⁹ Similarly, when the Director of the Institute of International Workers Movement at the USSR Academy of Science, T. Timefeev, spoke disparagingly of Fanon and Algeria, he attributed their deviance from Marxist orthodoxy to the strong influence of Islam.¹⁰

Colonialism, Islam, and the Algerians

The opposition to the French that was active in the Algerian countryside throughout the nineteenth century and to which Perinbam refers, the warrior/resistance tradition that she says was alive as late as the 1940s and 1950s was entirely Islamic in ideology, in culture, in organization, and even in name. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North Africa, it was the Sufi brotherhoods that championed resistance to colonization. The Darqawiyya Muslim brotherhood, for example, mounted a stiff rebellion against Ottoman rule from 1783 to 1805, and again from 1805 to 1809. It was finally defeated through a massive Ottoman retaliation and its member tribes retreated to the Medea region south of Algiers.

⁶ Perinbam, 'Fanon and the revolutionary peasantry,' p. 432.

⁷ Ibid., p. 436.

⁸ Ibid., p. 433.

⁹ Ibid., p. 442.

¹⁰ See Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon*, p. 215; see also Robin Buss, *Wary Partners: The Soviet Union and Arab Socialism*, Adelphi Papers, no. 73 (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, 1970), p. 22.

Between 1822 and 1827, the Tijaniyya brotherhood resisted the payment of taxes to the Ottomans and fought them militarily in Western Algeria. They were defeated eventually, and the Ottomans displayed the decapitated head of their leader, Muhammad al-Kabir, in public as a warning to other tribes and brotherhoods.¹¹

It also took no more than two years after the French invasion for the Algerians to develop one of their most formidable anti-colonial revolts. Led by Emir Abd al-Qadir, this rebellion also had a distinctly Islamic banner. From 1832 to 1848, Abd al-Qadir managed to confine the French to three coastal enclaves. In the interior of Algeria, he built an Islamic state based on the *sharia* that his followers widely respected. The mobilizing ideology was the *jihād* to free the land from the invaders. Abd al-Qadir was chosen because he had earned the respect of his co-religionists as a result of the sincerity of his Islamic convictions and his impeccable moral credentials. He was learned in Islamic law and earned the support of the '*ulamas* (Islamic scholars). He organized a network of *zawiyas* (a school-mosque institution) through the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood and created a complex administration and a more egalitarian society than had existed under the French or the Ottomans. 'I hope,' he famously said upon his inauguration on 27 November 1832, 'to prevent strife among Muslims, to ensure safety on the roads, to protect the country from invaders, and to establish law and justice for both the powerful and the weak.' The inauguration ceremony was a literal reenactment of the one in which the Prophet Mohammad was given allegiance by his companions in AD 627.¹²

Many similar anti-colonial rebellions were mobilized in the nineteenth century throughout north, east and west Africa, and they all were led by Sufi brotherhoods or Sufi sheikhs. Hadj el-Moqrani, Cheikh el-Haddad and Cheikh Bouamama were the most notable in Algeria after Abd al-Qadir. Elsewhere, Abd Allah Hasan fought the British and the Italians in Somalia; Al Hadj Umar Tall led the *jihād* in Guinea, Senegal and Mali; Mohammad al-Sanusi, founder of the Sanusiya movement in Libya, led the resistance against the Italians; Usman dan Fodio led the *jihād* in Nigeria; and Ma' al-'Aynayn in Morocco. These are only some of the most prominent anti-colonial leaders. They were all mystics, and most of them expressed their ideas in writing. They all demonstrated a great deal of intellectual independence, and developed various ideologies of *jihād* and diverse methods of resistance.¹³ These movements, as Martin Bradford shows, were not the expression of a stagnating Islam. On the contrary, they constitute a pattern of renewal and revitalization that is distinctly Islamic and that can be traced back to the practices of the Prophet Mohammad.

Even after these movements were defeated, Islamic ideology was still able to mobilize anti-colonial resistance and rebellions. The reason is simply that Islam, unlike other religions, escapes institutionalization. Closeness to power compromises the independence of Islamic scholars. When that happens, the masses always look for more independent scholars to follow. This is evident even today when governments like those of Saudi Arabia or Egypt try to create an 'official' Islam to de-legitimize Islamic opposition.

¹¹ See Ricardo René Laremont, *Islam and the Politics of Resistance in Algeria 1783–1992* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), pp. 27–40.

¹² For an extensive study, see Raphael Danziger, *Abd al-Qadir and the Algerians* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1977).

¹³ See especially Martin Bradford, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa*, African Studies Series, 18 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Scholars who participate in these programs always run the risk of finding their rulings and judgments questioned by the populace. In moments like these, even a minor religious scholar can cultivate and unleash a widespread rebellion. After pacifying Sufi brotherhoods, the French and the British turned them into collaborating institutions, hoping to foster an 'official' Islam that would promote European colonization. In Algeria, the French created what they called 'administrative mosques' and started organizing pilgrimages to Mecca. They instituted civil servant *cadis* (judges) who ruled by a new legal code, a 'bastard product of Muslim law and French jurisprudence.'¹⁴ There is no doubt, wrote E. Doutté in 1900, that France can use the *marabouts* (Sufi brotherhoods) to its advantage:

In purely administrative matters, the *marabouts* have been of service to us: we have seen them order their followers, in the name of God and at the behest of an administrator of a *commune mixte*, to follow an administrative ruling.¹⁵

The pacification of Sufi brotherhoods, though, only triggered the Islamic Reform movement led by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Mohammed Abduh. The latter denounced the intellectual complacencies of the Sufi brotherhoods, developed modernizing school systems, and promoted resistance to colonialism. By the 1930s, reformist movements were a force to reckon with in almost every Islamic country. In Algeria, it was led by the Association of Islamic Scholars ('*ulemas*'). It is no exaggeration to say that 'the most important political development in the first half of the twentieth century in Algeria' was the cultural and educational work that the Association of Islamic Scholars undertook:

Without the Association's work in education and culture, the Algerian movement for independence in the 1950's would have had to have been postponed. Without their effort to establish a cultural basis for Algerian nationalism, the Algerian revolution would never have been successful.¹⁶

From the Sufis of the nineteenth century to the Reformists of the twentieth, an important characteristic of Islamic history becomes obvious. In moments of ideological conservatism, cultural and religious decay, or foreign invasions, Islamic history shows the emergence of movements that promote cultural and political revitalization.¹⁷ These were not religious movements. They were political movements that Islamic mandates legitimize in moments of crises or threats. Historians attest that their leaders were remarkable politicians and diplomats, pragmatic statesmen, shrewd military strategists, and even original writers and poets. Abd al-Qadir, says Danziger, was 'a pragmatic Islamic resistance leader, and a state builder.'¹⁸ The state that he founded and ran was not a religious state. It was an efficient bureaucracy run by an educated elite, and the French

¹⁴ A. Le Chatelier, 'Politique Musulmane,' *Revue du Monde Musulman*, XII (September 1910), p. 80.

¹⁵ E. Doutté, *Les Marabouts* (Paris: Leroux, 1900), p. 118, quoted here from Donal Cruse O'Brien, 'Towards an "Islamic policy" in French West Africa, 1854–1914,' *Journal of African History*, 8(2) (1967), pp. 306–307.

¹⁶ Laremont, *Islam and the Politics of Resistance*, p. 80.

¹⁷ This is one of the main conclusions, for example, of Martin Bradford, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa*.

¹⁸ Danziger, *Abd al-Qadir and the Algerians*, p. 218.

adopted it wholesale after defeating him.¹⁹ Pessah Shinar describes him as ‘a combination of *sharif*, Arab knight and Muslim scholar, a poet, idealist and romantic; an ascetic and (presumably) mystic by inclination, and a charismatic war leader, a statesman and an administrator (albeit an able and original one) by necessity.’²⁰ Islamic political history abounds with such leaders, who become legitimized automatically in times of palpable injustice, popular discontent, foreign occupations, or even natural disasters.

Contrary to Western conceptions, then, Algerian peasants did not rebel against French colonization out of instinctive, subconscious reflex mechanisms, as would a pack of wolves. On the contrary, Islam’s social and political mandates provided an authentic anti-colonial ideology capable of mobilizing the peasant as well as the urban masses. It is true that Islam catalyzed these rebellions and Islamic institutions organized them, but their goals were always political and concrete. Contrary to Western conceptions, also, Algerian peasants were not illiterate. According to colonial scholarship, the rate of illiteracy in Algeria when the French arrived in the 1830s was lower than that of France.²¹ Abd al-Qadir’s *zawiyas*, like all Sufi *zawiyas*, were centers of literacy, jurisprudence, theology, mathematics, geography, and astronomy. They were mosques, but they were also centers of learning with scholars from all over the Arab world visiting and lecturing.

Finally, rather than having an aversion to change, Algerian peasants (Muslims) made the legitimacy of their own existence dependent on change—the ejection of the occupier from the land. As Fanon notes, throughout the years when the nationalist parties were pursuing assimilation and civil rights within a French republic, the ‘peasants’ knew in their heart of hearts that nothing short of the total ejection of the occupiers could create legitimacy in their world. Rather than primitive peasant culture, though, it was their Islamic faith that made it impossible for the Algerians ever to accommodate unjust colonialism in their world. When Messali Hadj turned the demonstration in support of the Blum-Violette reforms, on 2 August 1936, into the first large Algerian demonstration in favor of independence, he invoked the Qu’ran and Islam.²²

Islam in *The Wretched of the Earth*

Fanon was crystal clear in his condemnation of Christianity. He famously compared Christianity in the colonies to the pesticide DDT. ‘The church in the colonies,’ he says, ‘is the white people’s Church, the foreigner’s Church. She does not call the native to God’s ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor. And as we know, in this matter many are called but few chosen’ (p. 42). With regard to Islam, though, Fanon’s attitude was not so clear. On the one hand, he was a secular revolutionary, and he

¹⁹ ‘Perhaps the greatest tribute to the effectiveness of Abd al-Qadir’s governmental system was paid by his French enemies. . . . With few modifications, this replica of Abd al-Qadir’s administration was maintained in Algeria’s interior until the elimination of military rule after the suppression of Muqrani’s insurrection in 1871.’ Danziger, *Abd al-Qadir and the Algerians*, pp. 215–216.

²⁰ Pessah Shinar, ‘Abd al-Qadir and Abd al-Krim: religious influences on their thought and action,’ *Asian and African Studies*, 1, p. 173.

²¹ France’s rate of illiteracy in the 1830s was estimated to be higher than 40 percent; see Marcel Emerit (Ed.), *L’Algérie à l’époque d’abd-El-Kader* (Paris: Edition Larose, 1951), p. 199.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 71. Part of Messali Hadj’s speech is quoted in Robert Aron, *Les Origines de la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: Fayard, 1962), p. 70.

perceived the Algerian revolution as a secular, peasant, anti-colonial revolt. However, he did edit the FLN's organ, *El-Moudjahid*. The people he passionately supported in that uprising were called *moujahidin* and were engaged in *jihad*. Fanon's negative attitude toward Christianity never extended to Islam. In fact, by editing *El-Moudjahid* and by championing a revolution that was fundamentally a *jihad*, one can say that he essentially endorsed the *jihad* against the colonizer. He did express concerns to Ali Shariati, who would become the main intellectual force behind the Islamic Revolution in Iran, that religious and sectarian spirits might become an obstacle to Third World unification. But he also encouraged Shariati to exploit the immense social and intellectual resources of Islam for the emancipation of the masses and the creation of a new and egalitarian society. 'Breathe this spirit,' he told Shariati in a letter from *El-Moudjahid*'s office in Tunis, 'into the body of the Muslim Orient.'²³ In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon is also aware of the limitations of atheist ideologies in grasping the Algerian situation: 'the atheist method of salvation in this context,' he says, 'is forbidden' (p. 47).

But Fanon's attitude toward Islam is even more complicated. The careful reader can discern that he makes constant references to Islam without acknowledgement. He says, for example that 'the memory of the anti-colonial period is very much alive in the villages.' Did he know that Algeria's anti-colonial tradition in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was mobilized and organized by Islamic Sufi brotherhoods in the name of *jihad* against occupation? He says that the children of the *douars* (villages) knew already at 12 or 13 years of age 'the names of the old men who were in the old rising' (p. 112). Who were these old men, one would like to ask? Did Fanon know he was referring to Emir Abd al-Qadir, to Hadj el-Moqrani, to Cheikh el-Haddad, to Cheikh Bouamama and their tradition of *jihad*? He says that 'country people as a whole remained disciplined and altruistic' (p. 112). He says the peasant 'never stopped clutching to a way of life which was in practice anti-colonial' (p. 138), that 'country people had more or less kept their individuality free from colonial imposition' (ibid.). What was this way of life, one would like to ask, that was in practice anti-colonial?

The total submission that France demanded of its colonial subjects in Algeria, described eloquently by Fanon, constituted an affront to the foundation of Islam. Absolute submission in Islam should not be given to anything or anyone except God. That would be a violation of the first and only article of faith in Islam—the *shahada*. The entire thrust of the *mission civilizatrice* consisted of degrading Islam as a primitive religion and its language, which was deemed incomprehensible, was labeled *sharabia*.²⁴ By simply practicing his religion and speaking Arabic, the Algerian was defying the *mission civilizatrice*. It is no coincidence that schools where the Arabic language and its literature primarily were taught constituted the central nerve of Sufi rebellions. It is also no coincidence that the Algerian insurrection of the 1950s would have been inconceivable without the educational groundwork that the Association of Muslim Scholars did in the 1930s. The 'anti-colonial lifestyle' that Fanon says Algerian peasants always clutched was

²³ Quoted in Sarah Shariati, 'Le Fanon connu de nous,' *Ghorba*, 14 December 2004, available at <<http://icietlabas.lautre.net/spip.php?article110>> (accessed 20 February 2007).

²⁴ The foremost single element the French used to develop Muslim stereotypes of backwardness was the Arabic language. *Sharabia* remains a French word today denoting any language perceived to be 'incomprehensible.' See Emanuel Sivan, 'Colonialism and popular culture in Algeria,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14(1) (1979), p. 32.

Islamic. The heroes and the names of this anti-colonial tradition are Islamic in inspiration, in practice and in organization. These facts are well known in the cultures of North Africa. They are also well known in colonial history. Why did Fanon call this anti-colonial culture and tradition a peasant culture instead of what it was: a Muslim culture?

Algerian militants who knew Fanon recall that he was astonished to discover that Algerian resistance had been a prominent feature of Algerian life before 1954.²⁵ Fanon's late discovery of this tradition could explain its partial treatment in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In his letter to Shariati, however, Fanon seemed aware of what he called 'the work of cultural resistance' that the Association of Islamic Scholars was doing throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Although he did not agree with the Islamic Scholars entirely, he told Shariati that he respected 'their efficient contribution in the struggle against French cultural colonialism.'²⁶ While it is clear from this letter that Fanon was aware of the Association's work in the twentieth century, this knowledge hardly ever gets a right of citation in his publications on Algeria. To be more precise, the actual work of the Association is cited extensively in Fanon's work, but it is always stripped of its Islamic references and never attributed to the Association. Even when he describes insurgency tactics that used traditional Islamic symbols, like the veil in 'L'Algérie se dévoile' [Algeria unveils itself], Fanon is silent on the Islamic source of these tactics and does not recognize the part that the Association of Muslim Scholars played in them.²⁷ Thus, while Fanon relies heavily on this Islamic tradition to argue that the peasants had an authentic anti-colonial tradition, he also seems to weed out all its Islamic references. Was he ignorant of this Islamic tradition or did he choose to ignore it?

Even when he talks about the Algerians' religion, he mentions 'an atmosphere of solemnity,' a 'veritable collective ecstasy,' but he does not name it for what it is: Islam. He goes out of his way to borrow words from other religious traditions like 'confraternity' or 'mystical body of belief.' He even describes the spiritual atmosphere of Algerian villages as that of a church: 'All this is evocative of a confraternity, a church, and a mystical body of belief at one and the same time' (pp. 132–133). Curiously, though, Fanon does not name this spiritual tradition Islam, even once. He even says that the 'mass of the peasantry continue to revere their religious leaders who are descendent of ancient families' (p. 136), but he does not name this culture, these people, these practices, and these religious leaders for what they were: Muslims.

From the start of the book, in its very title, Fanon clearly is determined to talk about the 'wretched of the earth.' His passion for their cause and his full engagement are both concrete and remarkable. By failing to name them as Muslims and their anti-colonial culture as Islamic, however, Fanon has no choice but to attribute that anti-colonial culture to tribalism and primitivism. He attributes their opposition to colonialism simply to a peasant, 'noble savage' culture. Sometimes, under noticeable surrealist influence, he even

²⁵ Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon*, p. 247.

²⁶ Quoted in Shariati, 'Le Fanon connu de nous.'

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, 'L'Algérie se dévoile,' in *Sociologie d'une révolution* (Paris: Maspero, 1982), pp. 16–48. Among the literature surveyed for this paper, only Robert Revere recognizes this fact. In a footnote, he says: 'Fanon fails to recognize the reform effort of the Society of Algerian 'Ulema and their work of secularization of education, an important step in the reawakening of Algerian nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s which led to the revolution itself'; see Robert Revere, 'Revolutionary ideology in Algeria,' *Polity*, 5(4) (1973), p. 483, n. 22.

degenerates into an orientalism reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The Algerian peasant, he says, 'defends his tradition stubbornly' (p. 111). The 'wretched of the earth' are comparable to 'hordes of rats' who act when moved by the primordial spirits of their environments—the bush, the jungle, or the desert (p. 130). The Algerians are, ultimately, 'the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals' who 'throw themselves into the struggle for liberation like stout working men,' but they have to be 'urged from behind' first (p. 130).

The fact is that Fanon's distinction between peasants and city-dwellers in Algeria is to some extent inaccurate. The anti-colonial culture to which he refers was not restricted to the countryside. The Islamic Association of Scholars was even more active in the cities, especially Algiers, Oran and Constantine, than in the countryside. By the 1930s, however, their educational and cultural associations had penetrated the countryside, the mountainous areas, and the Berber regions, and were smashing the then complacent and collaborationist culture of the Sufi brotherhoods.²⁸ By 1935, and despite French obstructions, the Association had established 70 elementary schools and three seminaries. By 1947 the Association increased the number of its elementary schools to 90, and by 1955 it had established 181 schools, 50 seminaries, and 441 educational centers with branches all over Algeria as well as in Paris and Cairo.²⁹ The Association also boasted a number of newspapers and magazines like *al-Muntaqid* and *al-Shihab*. Its famous motto—'Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my country'—became the rallying cry of the armed insurrection of 1954. This can hardly be the work that visceral peasant energy alone could accomplish, and these are hardly the people who can be compared, as Fanon does, to packs of wolves or 'hordes of rats' (p. 130). The educational and cultural effort of the Association of Muslim Scholars was, as John Damis and others have noted, 'a necessary psychological precondition for the Algerian revolution.' This intellectual revolt (*thawra fikriya*), as the Algerians call it, 'paved the way for the armed insurrection.'³⁰

It might no longer be possible to ascertain for sure whether Fanon was truly ignorant of the Islamic anti-colonial tradition of Algeria, or whether he simply chose to ignore it. One thing is sure, however: Fanon's description of the Algerians' anti-colonial ideology as 'spontaneous' and primitive is possible only if one ignores Islam and its culture based on the Arabic language and literature. Without that exclusion, Fanon's combination of spontaneity and organization would have had to be substituted for a combination of two systems of organization: one Islamic, with its schools, mosques, its intelligentsia, its language, its literature and its anti-colonial ideology, and the other Western, Marxist, and revolutionary. What *The Wretched of the Earth* presents, instead, is the famous combination of spontaneity and organization. The first is presented as the illiterate culture of the majority peasant population, while the second is presented as a Marxist revolutionary culture introduced by the small Westernized elite.

²⁸ John Damis, 'The free-school phenomenon: the cases of Tunisia and Algeria,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5(4) (1974), p. 445.

²⁹ Laremont, *Islam and the Politics of Resistance*, p. 84.

³⁰ Damis, 'The free-school phenomenon,' p. 449.

Algerians who knew Fanon and fought alongside him have highlighted his lack of knowledge about Islam.³¹ They simply wanted to stress that there were other anti-colonial ideas in Algeria besides those of Fanon. Western critics tend to accuse these Algerians of being ‘ungrateful’ to Fanon, or of trying to appease the post-independence regime.³² While Fanon contributed greatly in explaining the revolution to a Western readership in a language and a terminology that they understood, it certainly would be preposterous to assume that Algerians had to wait for Fanon to teach them the ABCs of anti-colonialism. It would be equally preposterous to claim that he had any decisive impact on the course of that revolution. The war of liberation in Algeria was mobilized, organized, and fought following patterns of rebellion and insurgency that had been simmering there since the days of Emir Abd al-Qadir. Fanon himself, as shown above, cites this tradition extensively and praises it without referencing it. His failure to reference it is understandable given his ignorance of Islam in Algeria. It is also understandable given that he was addressing a Western, atheist readership that had no epistemological frame of reference to understand the role of a non-Western religion in wars of national liberation. Fanon simply used a revolutionary terminology familiar to Western readers and cleansed from his content all references to Islam.

More importantly, the foundation of *The Wretched of the Earth* is the combination of spontaneity and organization. Bringing in Islam would have upset this theoretical framework. Instead of a combination of spontaneity and organization, Fanon would have been forced to look at a combination of two systems of organization—one that was Islamic, literate, and indigenous with its own anti-colonial ideology and modes of organization through schools and mosques and its own intelligentsia, and the other Western, Marxist, atheist, and revolutionary. Fanon would have been mired in theoretical problems whose existence academia hadn’t even recognized at that time. Moreover, Fanon was waging a people’s war, and *The Wretched of the Earth* has to be understood as a contribution to the military effort. In the midst of a people’s war, one does not always have the time or the luxury to scrutinize the theoretical foundation of everything that is written. Finally, Fanon was also passionate about making the Algerian revolution applicable to other Third World countries, especially black Africa. One would not be surprised if he excluded aspects that he thought were specific to Algeria from his discourse (like Islam) simply to make the lessons of that war as relevant as possible to other African countries.

These considerations provide ample justifications for why Fanon did not reference the Islamic tradition on which he heavily relies in *The Wretched of the Earth*. His book openly aims to be a contribution to the Algerian war effort in its final years. Under such conditions, it would be safe to say that Fanon simply did the best he could with the resources and the knowledge he had at his disposition.

To a large extent, though, Fanon’s partial perspective still informs Western discussions of the Algerian revolution. If Fanon recognizes no other epistemology in Algeria besides

³¹ See especially the three articles by Mohamed el Mili: ‘Fanon and Western thought,’ *al Thaqafa* (March 1971), pp. 10–25; ‘The Algerian revolution and Fanon,’ *al Thaqafa* (May 1971), pp. 40–54; and ‘The Algerian roots of Fanon’s thought,’ *al Thaqafa* (November 1971), pp. 22–45.

³² These accusations are made in Irene Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon*, pp. 231–260. The fact that the study of Fanon’s text continues to happen in the abstract with no real reference to the social, political, and religious context of Algeria at the time of the revolution is proof that the indigenous Algerian perspective still does not have a right of citation in what has become a decidedly Western debate.

Western Marxist ideology, Western scholarship has made no effort to find one either. Fanon is considered in the West to be the chief ideologist of the Algerian revolution. Of the small camp of Westernized elite, his account has been considered most representative. His portrayal of the Islamic anti-colonial culture of Algeria as primal, illiterate, and instinctive still goes unchallenged. This attitude hardly reflects the fact that this culture had a written language, a literature, an organized and text-based religion, and an effective school system that could spread with minimum resources. It also had newspapers, magazines, cultural centers, an Arabophone intelligentsia, and an ideology that strongly encourages social action to effect change. The fact that the few Algerian voices that have been included in this post-independence debate have almost all been secular (if not atheist) does not help, either.

If Fanon's silence is ethically and operationally understandable, the continuous refusal to recognize the central contribution of the Islamic anti-colonial tradition to all the rebellions and insurrections in Algeria is not. This attitude, one might add, concurs with France's *mission civilisatrice* that Islam in Algeria is an archaic and pre-modern tradition, and that civilization (understood to be exclusively a Western affair) should extinguish it. The fact is that it hasn't. While scholarship persists in seeing the world exclusively through its 'atheist method of salvation,' that Islamic anti-colonial tradition is again clearly at work today in Palestine, in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in other Muslim lands. In the same way that it was incomprehensible then, it is still incomprehensible today.

The Frantz Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth* is himself a product of Algeria's Islamic anti-colonial tradition. The extent to which he draws on this tradition makes one wonder whether his intransigence to colonialism was minted coherently only out of his contact with this tradition. Without the physical ejection of the colonizer, he says, 'there is nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets. There is nothing but a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving' (p. 147). How much was the Islamic anti-colonial tradition of Algeria behind Fanon's legendary death warrant (or should we say *fatwa*?) on colonial systems?

References

- Aron, R. (1962) *Les Origines de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Fayard).
- Bradford, M. (1976) *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Buss, R. (1970) *Wary Partners: The Soviet Union and Arab Socialism* (London: Institute for Strategic Studies).
- Cruise O'Brien, D. (1967) Towards an 'Islamic policy' in French West Africa, 1854–1914, *Journal of African History*, 8(2), pp. 303–316.
- Damis, J. (1974) The free-school phenomenon: the cases of Tunisia and Algeria, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5(4), pp. 434–449.
- Danziger, R. (1977) *Abd al-Qadir and the Algerians* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier).
- el Mili, M. (1971) The Algerian revolution and Fanon, *al Thaqafa*, (May), pp. 40–54.
- el Mili, M. (1971) The Algerian roots of Fanon's thought, *al Thaqafa*, (November), pp. 22–45.
- el Mili, M. (1971) Fanon and Western thought, *al Thaqafa*, (March), pp. 10–25.
- Emerit, M. (Ed.) (1951) *L'Algérie à l'époque d'abd-El-Kader* (Paris: Edition Larose).
- Fanon, F. (1982) 'L'Algérie se dévoile,' in: *Sociologie d'une révolution*, pp. 16–48 (Paris: Maspéro).
- Fanon, F. (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press).
- Gendzier, I. (1973) *Frantz Fanon: A Critical Study* (New York: Pantheon Books).
- Laremont, R. R. (2000) *Islam and the Politics of Resistance in Algeria 1783–1992* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press).
- Le Chatelier, A. (1910) Politique Musulmane, *Revue du Monde Musulman*, XII(September), pp. 1–165.

- Nghe, Nguyen (1963) Frantz Fanon et les problèmes de l'indépendance, *La Pensée*, no. 107(February), p. 29.
- Perinbam, B. M. (1973) Fanon and the revolutionary peasantry—the Algerian case, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11(3), pp. 427–445.
- Revere, R. (1973) Revolutionary ideology in Algeria, *Polity*, 5(4), pp. 477–488.
- Shariati, Sarah (2004) Le Fanon connu de nous. *Ghorba*, 14 December, available at <<http://icietlabas.lautre.net/spip.php?article110>> (accessed 20 February 2007).
- Shinar, P. (1965) Abd al-Qadir and Abd al-Krim: religious influences on their thought and action, *Asian and African Studies*, 1, pp. 139–174.
- Sivan, E. (1979) Colonialism and popular culture in Algeria, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14(1), pp. 21–53.