

The French Orientalist Edmond Doutté and his Vision to the Islamic Sufism in the Maghreb Countries from his Book “Notes sur l’Islam maghrébin: Les marabouts”

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Abstract:

This study aims at determining the efforts of the French Orientalist Edmond Doutté, one of the prominent researchers and anthropologists in the history of the Maghreb countries in general, Algeria, and the far Morocco in particular. This is done by highlighting some of his works mainly his blog post entitled “*Notes sur l’Islam maghrébin: Les marabouts (1900)*” which represents a model of the French orientalist vision for Sufism in the countries of the contemporary Maghreb. There is a crucial aspect in his blog post that deals with analysis, observation, comparison and conclusion; without neglecting the colonial and intelligence aspect in his writings.

Keywords: Edmond Doutté, the Righteous, the Marabouts, Sufism, Algeria.

• Introduction

The French Orientalist Edmond Doutté is one of the prominent historians and anthropologists in the history of the modern Maghreb in general and Algeria in particular where he intended from his blogs

and works to show an alternative image from the other travelers and orientalists about Islam and Sufism in the Maghreb countries. We find in his writings a crucial aspect of analysis, observation, comparison and conclusion. We find that his style in investigating the facts obliges the readers and the researcher to respect the scientific and cognitive accountability that the man presents without neglecting the colonial and intelligence-spying aspect in his writings. Thus, this has contributed to identify aspects from the Maghreb societies related to their ways of life, relationships, traditions and beliefs, which allow to the colonizer their use in all the situations and the circumstances.

This is what urges us to search in the writings of this French orientalist to spot the light on its historic and anthropological significance to study the history of both the Maghreb countries and the colonizer. For doing this, we have chosen the book of “*Notes sur l’Islam maghrébin : Les marabouts (1900)*” which has been translated by several researchers; amongst them is the significant Moroccan

researcher Mohamed Nadji Ben Omar who has entitled the book with blogs about the Maghrebi Islam during the 19th century “The Righteous people”. In fact, this term does not precisely refer to the Marabout or the Marabouts.

1- The Definition of Edmond Douттé:

Edmond Douттé was born in the city of Ivro, Northern France (1926-1867). He has finished his studies in the district of Challo Tirman and studied afterwards Museology in Paris, the natural sciences and the Litertaure¹. He worked as an administrative assistant in the Algerian Awras area but because of his terrible health conditions, he moved to Wahran as a writer and an editor in 1894² (Edmond Douттé). He has taken the mission of teaching Arabic in a school in Telemcen in 1898 and after he got tuberculosis, he preferred to settle in the capital of Algeria with his wife and his 2 children³.

Between 1899-1900, he was given the mission of compiling a list of Arabic manuscripts in the Algerian Mosques. Afterwards, he was given a mission in Morocco (1900-1901) related to searching in this area and preparing it to join with the French colonizer. Finally, this work resulted in a report under the title of “**Tools of Developing the French Influence in the Maghreb in 1900**”, the objective of which is the best and the least costly way to achieve the French influence in Morocco and he continued later his travels in the Southeastern of Morocco like Figuig⁴ and others.

In 1901, he worked in the department of Arabic publications for the

General government in Algeria. At the same time, he presented lectures on colloquial Arabic at the school of Arts. During that time, he sought to establish a chair for the history of the African Islam. Regarding his failure to do so, he presided over the chair of the colonial school and the chair of the political science. He was a member of the anthropological institution and a founding member of the colonial academy of sciences.

Douттé owes his work to two great names that he relied on in his studies: one of them is **Henri Bassey**⁵, director of the Higher School of Letters in Algiers, and the other is **August Mouliras**⁶, his teacher on the journey and author of the book “Discovery of Morocco”. Both of them belong to what is called the Algerian school. Douттé died in Paris in 1926.

2- His Contributions in the Maghrebi Sufism

Edmond Douттé contributed to many fields of knowledge that benefited the Maghreb historical school. From anthropology to the journey and the Maghreb history as well, Douттé presented different types of knowledge that André Adam collected in the critical bibliography and amounted to 12 works distributed across three groups. The first encompasses exploratory journeys to several areas in Morocco and Algeria, which constitute six works. The second includes three works that are characterized with social phenomena like the students’ festival, organization, and the fall of the Sultanate.

The third type includes studies that are directly related to religious phenomena, the prominent of which is the writer that we

are about to study, which is entitled: “the Marabouts” and others refer to it as “the Saints”, which consists of writings about the Maghrebi Islam.

A- The Magic and Religion Book in Northern Africa

Jack Berk⁷ describes the author as "a critical observer and a vigilant traveler, extremely aware of the need to correct knowledge through imagination. English anthropology and French sociology found in him an organized application," as if to indicate the importance of his work and the downplay of the previous writings in the field.

Returning to the book's introduction, Douuté shows that his work was originally a textbook for students at the Institute of Oriental Studies, but he also reveals the possibility of generalizing it for several readers and researchers. He also mentioned that his research requires considerable depth and precision.

In this book, Douuté links the religion and the social life from which, he observes that the social system of North African inhabitants is purely religious in nature. Most tribes follow one of the saints or the holy men in which the Sufism and the mysticism pervaded almost all aspects of Bedouin life, particularly during the religious and agricultural seasons, and all the temples are under the authority of sacred figures. It is as if he concludes that all village life depends on the words and gestures of the sheikh⁸.

Through this author, he always sees that the civilization of the Maghrebi people and the Arabs in general is based on Islam. Religion is always present in their private

and public lives. Thus, he reaches a conclusion that the history of Muslims is, above all, a religious history in which most of their wars, even if they were not directed against the infidels, are always justified as legitimate and holy wars like those related to the phenomenon of the Mahdi and the appearance of the master of time⁹. In this vein, He introduces the example of the revolution of the Rouji Bouhmara, who aspired to the throne of “Fes” and was labelled “Master of the Hour”, who intended to achieve multiple goals through his revolution¹⁰.

In this book, he also focuses on magic and magicians, and attempts to establish a concept of magic and its development in the Maghreb, noting that women are the most attached to it, and that the female magicians in the contemporary period (the reign of Sultan Abdul Aziz) were most of them the elderly. Most of the Maghreb cities that are full of magic and its practices is Fes, and then Marrakesh in terms of importance¹¹.

B- The Algerian Islam Book at the beginning of 1900

This book consists of ten chapters that dealt with the doctrines of Islam, the sources of Islamic law, and the various rituals associated with them. Other chapters focus on Sufi methods, the status of the marabout and the sherif, the celebrations and the religious occasions. It also takes into account the importance and role of the mosques and the shrines (Sufi lodges), the Islamic institutions of higher education, and the Islamic sects, particularly the Kharijites. At the end of the book, the author refers to some of the sources that he benefited from

especially the book of Depont and Coppolani' "The Muslim Brotherhood" and "the documents of Northwest Africa" of Lacroix and Lamartinière¹².

C- The Aissawa in Tlemcen

The book is a field ethnographic study written by the French Orientalist Edmond Doutté after his witness of the processions and the celebrations of the Aissawa in Tlemcen, Algeria, at the end of the 19th century. The author precisely describes the Aissawa rituals, their religious practices, their loud music, their frenzied dances, and the manifestations of Sufi attraction. He also takes into account the origins of the shrine (Sufi lodge) and its Moroccan founder, Sidi Mohammed Ben Aissa, known as the Perfect Sheikh and compares it to other Sufi orders in the great Maghreb¹³.

Doutté begins his book with a detailed account of the Aissawa procession on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr in 1899 in Tlemcen, heading towards the shrine of Sidi Boumediene; advanced by banners, the head of the shrine (Sufi lodge) and the chants rise with the praise and the glorification of Allah. The followers chant "Ya Allah, Ya Allah" accompanied by the tambourines, the drums, and the flutes. Doutté does not neglect the presence of women in this scene, where ululations and shouts of joy rise.

In the evening, a Sufi gathering (Hadra) takes place in the shrine (Sufi lodge), where Sufi chants and rhythmic dancing escalate until reaching a coma. Some of the disciples practice what the author describes as "wonders" or "miracles," such as piercing their bodies

with swords, striking themselves with a sword without being wounded, walking on embers, and inhaling incense until they lose consciousness. Doutté believes that some of these are visual illusions or collective hysteria that come from religious fervor and physical exhaustion¹⁴.

The author dedicates a chapter to the history of the Aisawiya Sufi order, stating that its founder was Sidi Muhammad ibn Aisa of Meknes (16th century CE), known as the Perfect Sheikh. He received his Sufi education from the sheikhs of the Jazuliya and Shadhiliya orders, and established his distinctive method of collective remembrance of Allah and violent movements to reach a state of attraction (El wajd). The popular legend associated him with miracles and wonders like feeding the poor and defying the sultan. His order spread to Algeria and Tunisia, particularly to Tlemcen, where his followers established its shrines¹⁵.

Roy Doutté, quoting a French employee, reported an incident in which Issawiya women were present at the shrine of Sheikh Muhammad bin Belkacem in El Hamel, dancing until they fainted, and using snakes and fire in attraction rituals, reflecting the participation of women in popular Sufism, despite the condemnation of the religious elite.

Doutté compared the Aissawa and other Maghrebi Sufi orders, such as the **Hamdashiyya, Jannawiyya, Mlawiyya, and Rihahiyya**, which practice similar rituals of physical beating, torture, and spiritual attraction. He considers that these rituals have a common origin in the Moroccan Sufi heritage, where religious

practices intersect with popular and magical practices.

Overall, we find that the work combines precise field observation with an Orientalist perspective; which is an important historical source for studying religious life in Tlemcen at the end of the 19th century, Maghrebi popular Sufism, the relationship of the French with the shrines and the Aissawiya order. However, it also reflects a condescending, colonial view that regards Sufism a strange phenomenon requiring scientific explanation, ignoring its profound spiritual and social dimensions within the Maghrebi culture.¹⁶

3- The Historical and Anthropological Significance of his Book "The Marabouts": Notes sur L'islam Maghribin «Les marabouts»

Edmond Doutté published this research in the History of Religions Journal, Volume 20, Part 4, in Paris in 1899 in French language. He addresses in it the phenomenon of shrine veneration in the Maghreb region. He shows the phenomenon, raises the questions about it, and attempts to explain the reasons for its spread in the Muslim Maghreb environment and among the public¹⁷.

In the first footnote of his book, Edmond Doutté explains his purpose in writing "The Righteous," stating, "Our primary goal in this study was to examine the important data concerning Islam found in the most recent and widely circulated writings on Morocco, particularly those of **Mouliéras**¹⁸, **Martinière**, **Lacroix**, and

Foucault. However, in writing this work, we were compelled to present, for comparison, numerous facts that we have included in the footnotes that we have gathered about this subject. Thus, we were driven to limit the scope of our work so that our research would not extend beyond what is necessary. This explains why we have mostly confined ourselves to examples from Morocco. This small part of Africa has taken the greatest importance than what has previously mentioned in order to depict in our present era, a situation similar to that of Algeria and Tunisia. This has happened before our intervention in that country which triggered a series of social disruptions. This work does not claim the generalization in order to be desirable, and we acknowledge that we are so far from presenting general conclusions"¹⁹.

The starting point of Doutté is a basic idea showing the absence of an intermediary between Allah and the believer was the most important reason for the emergence of seeking blessings from the saints and the righteous people. Despite that, he pointed out that Islam calls for the whole monotheism; this has not prevented people from rushing to sanctify saints and position them in a higher and more elevated status than the rest of humanity due to the extraordinary virtues and miracles attributed to them, which people believed to be true. Besides, because of the political and ideological use of a number of countries to the role of the righteous people and the saints to establish and consolidate the legitimacy.

In this book, Doutté examines the phenomenon of the marabouts or the saints,

attempting to surround their religious, political, and cultural roles. He traces their roots and spread in a number of past and present practices. Consequently, the researcher found it necessary to discuss the position of the righteous people in the Maghrebi Islam in general, highlighting their most important characteristics. Then, he explores their geographical distribution, simultaneously tracing the meaning of the words “**ribat**” and “**marbout**,” and paused for a long moment on the political significance of the term by examining its origins and its connection to the Marabout state and its reform movement. In addition, he investigated the meaning of the words “**mawlay**,” “**faqih**,” “**lalla**,” “**dada**,” and “**sheriff**” and their relation to the righteous people²⁰.

The first chapter of his book is dedicated to explore the sainthood, the righteous people and how their number increased and the visits to their shrines spread. In addition to the status and the favor that they attained in the Maghrebi society. He draws attention to a crucial point which is the number of shrines and saints' tombs that increases as one travels from East to West, from Tunisia to Algeria, and finally to the far Morocco. “In the Chlef plain, we see numerous shrines of the righteous people, their number constantly increase. Concerning Tlemcen and its surrounding decorated areas, all of them full of the tombs of the righteous people to a degree that we can hardly move ahead fifty meters without encountering several shrines. When we reach Morocco, in the far West of Africa, the number of righteous

people, the ascetics, and the saints is truly remarkable”²¹.

In the origins of the visit of the righteous people, Doutté shows a collection of western these of philosophers and thinkers, favoring the view of **Gold Zouhir**, who argues that the visit of the holy men in North Africa is just one of the manifestations that come under Islam. In fact, the ancient Berbers inclined towards it with the magic, the veneration that surround their male and female witches.

In this regard, he indicates that the continuation of visiting the holy men throughout the middle Ages to writing a history about such practice in the great Maghreb before the 16th century is a complex and challenging task that remains to be fully completed, and that the research about it is exhausting and difficult.

Doutté casts doubt on some of the past shrines and the tombs of the holy men in the modern and contemporary periods, particularly that many of them cannot be checked in terms of their authenticity, lineage, or even their righteousness. Although, he points out that the holy men, particularly in Morocco, achieved a high level of sanctity that reached deification, with the common people vying to kiss “**the bournous**” or feet of the Marabout, barely able to push through the throngs of the admirers. He then recounts what **Rohlfs** mentioned about the extraordinary majesty that **Sherif Wazzan** enjoyed during his tour in Algeria²².

In the same chapter, he points out that in spite of the sanctity and the position that the righteous people enjoyed in the Maghreb countries, there are some desert

tribes like the **Dhawi Bilal**, among whom the righteous people did not receive that status and esteem. The same applies to the **Tuareg tribes**, whose loyalty was given to their leaders more than to the righteous people. He also points out that **the Mzabites** in Southern Algeria are closer to the **Wahhabis** in prohibiting the visit of the graves of the righteous people. Despite that, there was a veneration among them for some religious sheikhs and the visit of their graves as a universal matter.

In the third chapter of the book, he exposes the meaning of the word “righteous,” listing the names given by Moroccans to the righteous people. He pauses for a long time on the definition of “marabout” and its relation to “**ribat**” or “**marbout**,” and on the word “**wali**,” the term “**majdoub**” and “**bahloul**,” and the meaning of the word “**mawlay**,” which is specific to the countries of the Morocco and Southern Algeria in particular. The same applies to the terms “**sayyidna**,” “**sidi**,” “**si**,” and “**ami**,” the latter of which is more specific to **the Mzabites** more than others, in the veneration of their sheikhs.

Regarding women, Douттé also tried to understand the meaning of the use of “Lalla” and “Setti”, and he moved to the personalities and the places that took this name, such as Lalla Fatma N'Soumer and Lalla Setti, noting that this name was more widespread among the inhabitants of the tribes.

The fourth chapter of the book is devoted to the meaning of the word “Sharif”, as it talks about the noble lineage and how most tribes, even the Amazigh ones, have come to claim the noble lineage.

It then poses the question of how a tribe with Berber customs and the language from Quraysh and the House of the Prophet? This leads to the belief that Quraysh migrated to Africa since ancient times according to these lineages, and every time the search is deepened for the name of “Salih”, his lineage or his miracles, we just find his fake affiliation²³.

Within this chapter, Douттé specified some of the righteous and honorable figures for definition and note, foremost among them Sidi Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish, the most revered of the holy men in Northern Morocco, as confirmed by the author of the book “Al-Istiqsa”. He is “Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish ibn Abi Bakr ibn Ali ibn Hamza ibn Isa ibn Salam ibn Mazwar ibn Haydara, and his real name is Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Idris ibn Idris ibn Abdullah ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Hasan ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib”.²⁴

He also discusses the righteous people whose names are unknown and those who claim Arab lineage. He also distinguishes between the holy men of the cities and the villages. In the same vein, he indicates that some of these righteous figures foretold the defeat of the French.

In the fifth chapter, he examines the behaviors and characteristics of the righteous and their classifications. Some are pious through good deeds, some by birth, some through asceticism, and some through foolishness. He also notes that some were characterized by actions contrary to religion and morality, such as debauchery, adultery, and drinking alcohol.

Chapter Six, entitled “**The Order of the Righteous**” highlights their esteemed status and the various social, commercial,

and political roles they played. The book concludes with a political and religious analysis that denotes the extent to which the various authorities that passed over the Maghreb countries needed the righteous Sufi orders and how they won their favor through the gifts and the favors²⁵.

Doutté frequently regards that most of these righteous people, as some of them claim, originated in **the Saguia el-Hamra** region and spread throughout North Africa.

Doutté devoted several pages to discuss the marabouts, or women saints, distinguishing between those who lived in seclusion and those who led communal rituals and enjoyed social and religious standing.

He describes women's participation in religious festivals, the visits of the shrines and dances, indicating to a men's clothing sometimes to ascetic women. In spite of the attempts that intend to exterminate predominantly on the conservative Maghrebi woman, this text is among the earliest to document the Maghrebi Sufi feminism. While Doutté failed to recognize its social and educational dimensions, he reduced it to a deviation or a departure from the natural instinct. However, from a historical perspective, his observations represent a rare piece of material about the roles of women in the shrines at the end of the 19th century²⁶.

In Chapter Seven of the book, Doutté examines the ranks and the classes of the marabouts, from those serving in shrines (Sufi lodges) to those with the noble lineages, and the inheritance of the sainthood and the status. He also discusses

“the Muqaddams”, “dervishes”, and “the poor”. He analyzes their roles in the judiciary, the mediation, the trade, the agriculture, and the protection of caravans. He also points to the phenomenon of the marabout as a judge and the marabout as a thief as social paradoxes. This chapter is important in clarifying the concept of the economy of sanctity and the religious tourism in the traditional societies.

Chapter Eight is also crucial, as it reveals the relationship between the Ottomans in previous times, then, the French colonizer, and later the Moroccan authority with the Sufi righteous people. Doutté acknowledges that the marabouts played a significant role in consolidating colonial rule and controlling the tribes. France had to adopt a policy of neutrality and oversight towards the shrines. In this regard, he cites the instructions of the General- Governor of Algeria in 1895 concerning appointment service for the shrines²⁷.

Chapter 9 serves as a conclusion, guidelines and advices to the French administration. Doutté acknowledges that his research was preliminary and still incomplete, and that the study of the Maghrebi Islam requires knowledge of the original Arabic sources and the local witnesses. He expresses about his hope of discovering connections between Islam and the ancient traditions²⁸.

However, this conclusion also highlights the duality of Doutté, as he acknowledges, on the one hand, the limitations of his knowledge and on the other hand, he insists on his presuppositions regarding the

connection of the Sufism with the ancient Greek paganism.

• Conclusion

The colonial anthropological studies are a double-edged sword. As much as they provide a historical and social importance in a period when local documentation is almost nonexistent. These studies served the French colonialization greatly for achieving its colonial goals by penetrating the religious institutions; especially the Sufi orders and the specific focus on the customs and the falsehoods that are contrary to the reason and the religion. The fact of endorsing and valuing them will unintentionally prevent society to adhere to its religion and values, especially since they are the only ones capable of resisting and expelling it.

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- 3- Younes Al-Wakily: The previous reference, p. 2
- 4- Figuig: Figuig, or Fguig, is a desert oasis containing a group of fortified villages (ksour) located in southeastern Morocco on the border with the Algerian Sahara. It is characterized by its agricultural

nature, benefiting from the waters of desert wadis (Wadi Guir).

- 5- Henri Basset (1868-1924) was a prominent French Orientalist and scholar of Maghrebi and Berber studies. His name is strongly associated with French colonial knowledge in North Africa, particularly Algeria and Morocco, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among his most important works are studies on Sufi lodges (zawiyas) and Sufism in Algeria and Morocco.
- 6- Auguste Mouliéras (1855-1931) was a French Orientalist who previously served as an officer in the French military administration in Morocco. He adopted Lyautey's vision of a gradual penetration of Morocco. One of his most important works is "Morocco Unknown."
- 7- Jacques Berque (1910-1995) was a French historian, thinker, and sociologist who lived a significant part of his life in Morocco during the French Protectorate. He was a critic of the colonial vision in the Maghreb countries. One of his most important works is "The Arabs from Yesterday to Tomorrow".
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