

**French Regime's 'Francisation' as a Paracolonial Policy: A Critical Study of Language, Identity and Assimilation in 'French' Morocco****Saad Boulahnane**Department of Religion & Politics  
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Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco.**Abstract**

This article explores the colonial role of the French language in assimilating the Moroccan subjects during the French 'protectorate' in 1912-1956 Morocco. Probing into the instrumental efforts made via the colonizer's language entails investigating the way the colonizer sought to racially segregate the Moroccan subjects, ascertain inaccessibility to religion, and instill the colonial language and the associated foreign 'elitist' values via the educational policies initially established within the postcolonial project. French language reflects a colonialism, of which the nature was racial, religious, linguistic, and identity based. The ensuing postcolonial effects of the curriculum adopted during the 'protectorate' have given birth to the surviving outcomes of *Francization* and the need to adopt French—a language that is foreign, 'prestigious,' 'elitist,' and practical in the job market. This article illustrates the ideological role of the French language in channeling a timeless, parallel colonialism via certain long-term strategies informed by colonialism and aimed towards a postcolonial project in post-independent Francophone Morocco.

**Keywords:** Francization, Francophonie, Protectorate, Colonialism, French, Morocco

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**Introduction**

The period of 1912-1956 marked the Moroccan history with the French Protectorate, of which the nature was colonial. The failure of the *Makhzen*, Morocco's central government, to maintain control over Moroccan subjects (Gershovich, 2000; Wyrzten, 2011) led to the signing of Treaty of Fez by Moulay Abdel-Hafiz in March, 1912—a day that set a key milestone in the long French-Moroccan colonizer-colonized relationship (Hague Academy of International Law, 1965; Laskier, 1984; Gold, 1989; Segalla, 2009). The date also marked the onset of what Paul Marty, a French writer and commander advocating the colonial policies, labels as 'the spiritual invasion,' which was destined to outlive the military and administrative presence of the 'Protectorate' (Marty, 1926). Although the French-Moroccan agreement set certain administrative, legal, economic, and educational reforms for short and long term plans, French Residency's military domination prevailed across the central plains to Algerian border, leaving Morocco's southern share for the Spanish authority to occupy (Hargraves, 2006).

The disguised conquest was not only implemented at the military level (Gershovich, 2000); the colonial implementation spread on several levels, especially via the initiation of French language, given its instrumental role in bearing more than communication (Hall Milhouse, 2011; Wyrzten, 2011; Burke, 2015). As put forth by Jacque Berque, a French Islamic scholar and sociologist, "une langue ne sert pas à communiquer, elle sert à être" (Payne, 1983, p. 302), which refers to language transcending communication and serving as a way of being. The pragmatic character of language was systematically utilized by the French for a better timeless invasion, to which Late King Hassan II commented saying that similarly to the Moroccan administration, teaching was systematically Frenchized. He notes, "sous le protectorat, l'enseignement—comme l'administration—avait été systématiquement francisé," which is French for: under the protectorate, teaching, as an administration, had been systematically Frenchized. (Hassan II, 1976, p. 110).

The integration of the arriving language aimed at transforming the cultural ground of the Moroccan society, similarly to the case of Algeria, wherein French authorities resorted to the cultural aspect of the colonization, of which language was the key channel (Turin, 1971). The French school represented an ideological tool and site aimed at pre-adapting, hence subduing, the 'protected' subjects—allegedly since it was a 'Protectorate'—leading not only to acceptance of the governing state's conventional takeover but also to further core decisions altering the future landscape of the Moroccan languages, values, and identity. The colonizer was cognizant of the essential role of the language in subduing the colonized population on a long-term scale, given the substantial contribution of schooling to the political system (Spring, 2004). Educating and disciplining a loyal, patriotic citizenry imbued with nationalism and acceptant of the legitimacy of the state was bound to both lead to little resistance and give birth to Frenchized subjects from within.

As being ideology-based and non-repressive by nature, schools, particularly the French in this context, sought to operate in parallel with the military invasion by attempting to culturally unify the multicultural and multilingual populations existing within the territorial boundaries of Morocco. Manning (2004) ascribes the beliefs taught via the French language to the efforts of the

arriving school, noting that “the schools taught the belief that the French language, literacy and francophone culture were the means to individual social advance and aggregate social renovation” (p. 99). The educational policy envisaged implementing an anti-assimilationist education policy initiated on the ground of safeguarding the close relationship between Moroccans and their identity through their culture, roots, and identity. However, the expansion of French customs, ideas and ideologies, hence the colonizer's hegemony, became apparent even after 1956, the year Morocco officially became independent. The educational system sought to assimilate Moroccans, similarly to the case in Tunisia, by heavily conveying the dominant culture, leading to a systematic increase in the Frenchized population and promotion of colonization by Frenchmen (UNESCO, 1992).

The colonial educational system epitomized a site of close interactions between the French and the Moroccans—a zone of contact and separation between the colonizer and the colonized. French schools transcended their prototypical functions; they were instrumental in reproducing a new culture, defining social roles, categorizing individuals, and transmitting ideologies (Segalla, 2009). The role of the educators was equated with the value of the salesmen of empire. Propagating these values, minimizing conflicts with the Moroccans, and subtly invading the territory entailed the activation of French schools in October 1912. By 1917, there had been in existence a number of eighty-three French schools for Europeans; sixty-two Franco-Arab schools for those who were still retained in the colonizer's mind as moors; and thirty-five Franco-Jewish schools. ‘Berbers’ too had French schools built along the Atlas region to expedite the process of the spiritual invasion (MacLeod, 1918). The colonizer's language enabled the educational institution to transform the Berbers into Frenchmen via pedagogical acculturation—a pedagogical war that became central to the idea of French republicanism waged against the diversity characterizing the Moroccan landscape (Marty, 1926).

Prior to engaging the education policy as an unquestioned new law in the *Francization* process (Koffi, 2012), or the making of ‘Frenchized’ Moroccans, Marshal Lyautey's policy—informed by a colonialist theory—sought to target the territory's urban structure; managing the overseas colonization entailed not only educational establishments and strategies but also modifications at the level of the infrastructure of the ‘protected’ land. Morocco's urban life was restructured by French town-planning architects and artists to alter the aesthetic appeal of the public structure (Germouni & Rousset, 2015), showing an excessively possessive character on the part of the ‘protectorate’ vis-à-vis the ‘protected’ territory. This idea had been envisioned in Marshal Lyautey's colonial blue print. Germouni & Rousset (2015), write:

Lyautey aurait appliqué rigoureusement une formule qui avait fait déjà consensus parmi les décideurs de la métropole, interdisant l'invasion des médinas de Fès, Marrakech et Meknès notamment par les Européens (...)

Lyautey would have rigorously applied a formula, already agreed upon amongst the decision makers of the metropolis, banning the invasion of old town of Fes, Marrakesh, and Meknes, particularly by the Europeans.

En créant ensuite un “service des Beaux Arts et des Monuments Historiques”, quelques mois après la signature du traité du protectorat, Lyautey essaya de protéger et de restaurer les médinas traditionnelles. (p. 139)

By creating “Fine Arts and Historical Monuments services” a few months after the signing of the protectorate treaty, Lyautey tried to protect and restore the traditional old towns.

Acting as a custodian over Morocco, French authorities' urban and public art restorations were laid down to set the context for a deeper predisposition via further ideology-borne policies and decisions. The Residency reached its hand on the core elements of the country—urban life, art repertoire, and later education, thereby setting the strategic goal of transforming a timeless French-minded Moroccan—one that outlives the administrative ‘Protectorate’ and revives the French soul. French expertise was consulted to help redesign the urban setting with a more French and modernist structure. Given the traditional organization of old medinas, concepts, for instance, from Le Corbusier, such as *l'unité d'habitation*, were seen as too rigid, especially for the twentieth century, leading to the old towns remaining untouched (Wright, 1991; Pennell, 2013). The restructuring of the urban side entailed discourses and pseudo facts to help restructure the country through the French prism and within the colonial vision. For that, a plethora of French agenda-driven officials, historians, ethnographers, scholars, orientalist, and soldiers made a substantial contribution to the making of discourses forming scholarship that French authorities subsequently referenced for the colonial management of the country's local affairs (Irbouh, 2013).

Prior to exploring the role of the French language in the cultural colonialism characterizing the French protectorate, probing into the meaning of cultural assimilation grants itself as the theoretical side of this article.

### **Assimilation**

The term *assimilation* was used in English to refer to cultural integration of sub-groups within a larger community. As an ideology central to European colonialism, assimilation was key in legitimizing the colonial act on the moral, political, and administrative levels (Kharchi, 2004; Koffi, 2012). It also targeted the indigenous Muslims in Algeria in the nineteenth century and later Morocco through the deeply rooted traditions (Kharchi, 2004). The term was synonymous for civility, *mise en valeur*, civilization, improvement, and the term Francization (Koffi, 2012; Belmessous, 2013), which was central to French colonization of America from the onset through the eighteenth century (Belmessous, 2013; Universalis, 2015). These concepts highlighted the central character of European culture, such as civility, Christianity, social organization, law, and civic status, and sought to integrate other societies into one assimilated European culture within the framework of the European project.

The colonial fashion in converting the natives and locals into Catholicism and French civility found roots in the principle of French paternalism. The view regarded the colonized population as inferior and savage—a new status that repositioned the French colonizer as a custodian over those forcefully seen in dire need of the forced values e.g. civility and Francization

(Benmessous, 2013). As an advocate of the colonization, Marty (1926) admits that it was 'Frenchizing' the Moroccans' soul that constituted the French intentions in Morocco. Although the French way of assimilating the natives was debated from the perspective of merits and demerits, it was summarized in de-ethnicizing colonies, causing the local ethno-linguistic landscape to recede (Koffi, 2012). This de-ethnicization of the colony meant that Arabs and Berbers would merge, resulting in a rupture in the enriching and diverse fabric characterizing the country of Morocco.

### **Arabo-berber context and emerging schools**

The colonial approach in the Arabo-Berber context entailed embarking on Lyautey's belief about the French language as being "véhicule de toutes pensées nobles et claires, expression d'un idéal toujours plus haut" (Bidwell, 1973, p. 52). The statement places French in a lofty position encompassing the means of all noble and clear thoughts and ideal expressions. Following the legislative and administrative re-appropriations, the colonial mind resorted to a racial element in the colonized public space—the Berber Decree—which entailed both the adjustment of Berber cases according to their customs and allowing the French to interfere in some more serious criminal cases. The new law segregated the Berbers not only from the Arabs but also from the Islamic Law (Maddy, 2011). Stabilizing the position of colonizer's language in the Moroccan public space further engaged French Resident, with the help of Marshal Lyautey, initiating the 'divide-to-rule' policy—a segregationist decision that was aimed at making loyal subjects of the French system and prepared an environment in which the Berbers' reach to religion was less encouraging, and the colonizer's agenda more feasible (Micaud & Gellner, 1972; The Maghreb review, 1976; Hoisington, 1984; Benmamoun et al. 2007; Ennaji, 2014).

Indirect rule, a policy of divide and rule, the creation of new, broader political entities by the incorporation of minority groups under a single administrative unit, the introduction of the metropolitan language and culture, the consolidation of colonial administration and the undermining of traditional authority (Micaud & Gellner 1972, p. 390).

The Berber Decree's latent intent was twofold; it targeted race and language (Ennaji, 2014). Instructed by military officials specialized in the psychological side of colonialism, (Jendari, 2012), the decree was central in the ruling of Berbers under French civil law afar from Islamic law. The goal was of a racial nature as it was to ascertain the schooling of Berbers in separation from religion, therefore the absence of Arabic and the associated Islamic teachings it channels. The exclusion of this language led to the closing of Quranic schools, hence the opportunity for the French to prevail and subsequently inculcate the entrapped Berbers with French values, culture, and the ensuing acceptance of the colonial situation.

### **Religion**

Comparing the 'world' of the colonizer to that of the colonized—seen as the superior versus the inferior—entails the presence of religion as a "pillar around which the two supposed 'worlds' are compared and contrasted" (Boulahmane, 2018, p. 110). Religion represents a strong pillar around which a religion-based nation stands and, for that, causing it to fall facilitates the penetration of

such nations. Across the region of the Maghreb, Islam has transcended being a ritual practiced by a certain person or people; it rather encompasses a higher status in the way people feel about themselves as it represents both a religious and cultural factor constitutive of unity (Esposito & Shahin, 2016). With this parameter taken into account, the regime's literature curriculum was initiated to fight the local religion by engaging a new task for the instructor: "to restrain a bit their [local students] corrosive enthusiasm, and, without veiling what remains of the great critical effort of the eighteenth century, to insist on its fairly narrow limits." (Marty 1923, as cited in Segalla, p. 185). Marty's words clearly encourage subduing the locals' anti-French will and potential power leading to the corrosion of the foreign presence in the Moroccan territory and the rejection of the French-imported values. Segalla's (2009) reading of Marty's words focuses on the inculcation of French intellectual and moral influence to ascertain the rejection of all radical, or pseudo-radical, ideas opposing French values. Arranging the locals' consent of the policy was aimed at constructing readiness to embrace 'civilization,' which would re-position them afar from their 'uncivilized' world, hence language, culture, and identity. This 'civilizing mission'—*mission civilisatrice*—was emphasized in Marty's (1923) words as he puts forth, "open them to the salutary influences of our civilization, of which one moreover spares them the purely negative aspects" (cited in Segalla, 2009, p. 13). He also states that "everyone knows that the study of French is the most effective one can employ against [religious] fanaticism, and experience teaches us that Muslims who know our language are less imbued with prejudice than those who know only Arabic" (Marty as cited in Brenner, 1984, p. 37). Marty's words overtly speak to the ethnocentric character of the mission and the superposed superiority it grants to itself. By replacing the Arabic language with that of the colonizer, superintendent France aimed at demolishing the columns on which rest the culture, religion, and the soul of the Moroccans.

One of the chief principles of our Muslim policy in west Africa is to win over and turn to our advantage the forces of Islam, wherever this religion has triumphed over local animism, but to carefully avoid helping its development in fetishist societies, much less working ourselves to aid its diffusion and more vigorous implantation. (Marty as cited in Kobo, 2012, p. 89)

Similarly to other Francophone countries, the agenda of 'frenchizing' the colonized and transforming the spiritual and cultural background of the territory was undertaken under the banner *la mission civilisatrice*, or the civilizing mission—one that presupposes that the 'other' is uncivilized. The forceful adoption of the arriving language was also directed at de-Islamizing Moroccan Berbers via the renowned Berber Decree, which was instrumental in eradicating Arabo-Islamic heritage (Benrabah, 2013). France's early anxieties regarding the church-state conflicts led to the intervention of the French language as a buffer zone against the spread and development of Islam (Burke, 2015)—a development that was processed in the colonial mind as potential Islamic uprisings seeking to overthrow the Residency and foil France's future strategies to 'Frenchize' the population. Paul Marty, who advocated the assimilation and Christianization of the colonized people, was also reported to distribute Arabic versions of Christian stories and of Muslims who converted to Christianity in several Berber tribes (Wyrzten, 2011). The preaching of religion

unfolded in parallel to the linguistic, cultural, and military invasion and within the colonial frame—one that placed the spiritual colonialism at the heart of the mission.

### **Two schools**

Since the tribal people of the Atlas often moved in transhumance, the French system launched the mobile school project to maintain the same pace as that of the local mobility. The goal was not limited to disciplining the moving Berbers only; it went as far as to train Berber teachers under the slogan *schools for Berbers by Berbers* as Berbers represented a better French political system in disseminating the French propaganda than other typical pedagogical centers (Marty, 1926). Establishing bilingual schools facilitated the colonial operation; following the racial separatist policy, it was now the 'only French is used' policy, which had been implemented earlier in Algeria (Turin, 1971), due to the similarities bringing Morocco and Algeria together, particularly on the ethnic level. French-run schools were destined to reinforce French hegemony by convincing the locals that it was in their interest to comply with the French colonial agenda. As described by Antonio Gramsci, hegemony draws on the spontaneous consent of "the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (cited in Crehan, 2002, p. 102).

The impregnating of the Muslim Arabo-Berber landscape with French values led to a new *élite* (Spickard, 2012) or at least a French-created pseudo *élite*. The suppression of Arabic language was not perceived as a linguistic change only; the political decision emanated from the French awareness of it being the main vehicular language for religion, which constituted the urge to deter the Berbers from accessing the Arabic-channeled religious teachings. Therefore, eradicating the mother tongue signified the expulsion of religion, customs and identity since Arabic, again, was seen as a carrier of Morocco's cultural aspects. Furthermore, the Berbers' submissiveness to religion was taken as a sort of hypnotism and readiness to follow the Sultan, who governed by reference to religion—seen then by the French as people's disobedience to the new authorities. Because of Morocco's religious character and because it associated with national identity (Gershovich, 2000; Spickard, 2012), the excluding of the national language facilitated the colonizer's subduing of the religious character of the Moroccans' national identity—a policy that overtly conflicted with the country's identity and aspirations (Rocheron & Rolfe, 2004).

### **A European language—detrimental but 'Elitist'**

The French colonialism sought to exclude the idea of autonomy and the possibility of development outside the confines of the French empire (Lewis, 1962), and set long-term strategies, of which the colonial repercussions have gone beyond the time limits of the 'protectorate.' One of the plans was to plant the seed of French with a status of foreignness and overseas values of loftiness, elitism, and power, as stated once by H.M. the late king Hassan II (Haddad, 1994). The king also conceded that the presence of French and bilingualism as Morocco's new linguistic situation would contribute to the enrichment the country's culture (Pennell, 2000). However, the highly demanded acquisition of French soon seemed to emerge to the detriment of the languages existing within the Moroccan confines; the king's words make explicit the growing dominance of the French language:

La dominance de la langue française “est de nature à saper les fondements de notre personnalité ainsi que l'unité du pays en détruisant la langue maternelle ainsi que l'unité du pays en détruisant la langue maternelle son unité culturelle, qui est basée sur la langue nationale, la langue du Coran (Redouane, 1998b, p. 2).

The dominance of the French language will normally sap the foundations of our personality and thus, the unity of our country by destroying our mother tongue, and cultural unity, which is based on the national language, the language of the Quran.

The dubious view of the foreign language and its deleterious influence on the Moroccan linguistic landscape has also been noted by other scholars. Hall Milhouse (2011) holds, “as the legacy of colonization, French has a troubled history in Morocco, where linguistic imperialism is often equated with territorial and economic imperialism” (p. 230).

This character of power and prestige created reluctance on the part of the Moroccan ‘*élite*’ to switch into Arabic, which is partly ascribed to good education in French, leading to less practice of Arabic in their social milieu (Pennell, 2003). The status of French in Morocco was guaranteed by the early colonial policy and has been underpinned by the administrative and economic fields. French has also ceased to signify the language of the colonizer since it is mostly spoken by the ‘*élite*’—a status supported by its communicative nature and the prestige it associates with (Benzakour, Gaadi & Queffélec, 2000). Fanon's (2008) take on the symbolism of language can be invoked, in which he holds that someone who “possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language” (p. 2).

In a fieldwork study conducted by Crawford and Newcomb (2013), respondents reported choice of the French language, which they equated with certain cultural and political meanings in a francophone milieu. One of the respondents expressed that French constituted her linguistic preference for its associated established status and added that using French idioms was not an escape from what may associate with Arabic but was an escape into the identity of an authority figure that is both educated and upper class. However, French-speaking people have been found influenced to the point that they affirmed a French cultural identity, taking the assimilation seriously as they considered it a means to acquire power and dignity within the postcolonial situation. Knowledge of French seemed essential to obtaining and maintaining power, and therefore it attracted people, particularly the *élite* (Segalla, 2009). The use of French seems to have given rise to a new social class of elites—one that is detrimental to Arabic and its adherents. The French-created ‘elites’ can be seen as instruments through whom the status of French in colonial Morocco is maintained; it is this Frenchized Moroccan that carries the colonial heritage, which can only outlive the administrative labeling of ‘protectorate’ or, candidly said ‘colonization,’ through an ‘independent’ nation.

Even in independent Morocco, French was adopted in education until the arrival of the ‘Arabization’ policy in the 1970s, a decision that still failed to prevent the monopoly of French in most private schools and in the teaching of many subjects (De Mejía, 2002). Less important

subjects in public schools—primary, secondary, and tertiary—are left taught in Arabic, with French dominating the more coveted subjects and majors, such as medicine, engineering, architecture, business, etc. The presence of both languages in Moroccan sectors—public, administration, media, educations, etc.—does not place them on equal footing; French still reigns the official field: documents, communications, and reports across the country (Crawford & Newcomb, 2013). Even with the introduction of Arabization, the fear of Arabic's failure to respond to the educational needs prevailed. In this regard, a ministry of education official states:

Il y a eu une peur de la part de la population, qui a commence a faire scolariser leurs enfants dans les établissements privés et du coup il y a eu un regain d'intérêt vis-à-vis de la langue française mais toujours par peur que la langue arabe ne puisse donner a leurs enfants tous les moyens dont ils ont besoin pour affronter le 21 siècle (C, Rolfe, personal communication, 2000).

There was a fear on the part of the people, who have begun sending their children to private schools; therefore, renewed interest towards French rose, which was always driven by fear that Arabic would not be able to provide to their children the means needed to face the 21st century.

### Conclusion

This article has probed into the parallel colonialism accompanying the French 'Protectorate' in 1912-1956 Morocco, which was racial, religious, linguistic, and identity based. The colonizer's assimilatory efforts targeted the local religious and racial landscape not only to ensure access to the French language as a colonial carrier but also in a segregated environment. In parallel with French colonialism, *francization* constituted an assimilatory tool recycling the colonized into Frenchmen. The initiation of the language project came in the wake of the racial segregation of the Berbers and Arabs, which encompassed within its perspective a smoother penetration without the interference of religion. Since Islamic teachings came through Arabic, the deterrence of Berbers from being ruled under Islamic laws led to a dispensability of Islam equating Berbers' inaccessibility to the Arabic language since it was the only carrier of the religion. The subsequent step was to instill French into the Berbers and Arabs separately and inculcate French values to form a Frenchman. The long-term strategy was aimed at succeeding even in post-independent Morocco for being foreign, of a foreign character, and for being linked to the idea of prestige, power, and elite, of which Arabic and Berber have very little.

The success of the long-term strategies set within colonial framework via the French language was meant to outlive the administrative period of the 'Protectorate,' hence an extension from the exploitation of space to one that is most manifest in the human asset—one that guarantees the continuing celebration of French empire or *la Francophonie*.

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