

Introduction

From the 18th century on, expanding European imperialism across the globe began to pose acute challenges to states and societies throughout Asia and Africa. These challenges held enormous repercussions for indigenous women of all social classes, religions, and ethno-racial backgrounds. Until the late 18th century, the four states of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria were provinces of the Ottoman Empire; only Morocco was an independent kingdom. European political and cultural influence in North Africa was minimal. This changed dramatically after Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt, and, above all, with France's invasion of Algeria in 1830. This essay and the supporting documents concentrate upon the three North African states—Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco—that were part of the French Empire from 1830 until 1956 and 1962.

The Beginnings of North African Imperialism

Algeria's military pacification demanded nearly 50 years of brutal warfare waged against the Muslim population by the French army. At the same time, the arrival of tens of thousands of impoverished immigrants from around the Mediterranean basin from the 1830s on inflicted additional suffering upon the Algerian people. The immigrants seized land and resources from the Algerians; some of the colonial settlers remained in Algeria until 1962 when independence was finally achieved after eight years of war. Many of the settlers displayed an aggressive racism toward indigenous Muslims and Jews virtually without parallel.

As was true of all European empires at the time, the French in North Africa followed a program based upon the three “Cs” of colonialism—the civilizing mission, commerce, and Christianity. Catholic and Protestant missionary societies attempted to convert the native Muslims and Jews, although without much success, except for conversions among orphans and social outcasts. As was the case around the world, the missionaries created clinics, orphanages, and schools that influenced either directly or indirectly the lives of Arab or Berber women.

The arrival of European women settlers brought complex changes. Most European women did not question the civilizing mission's ideology of domination, although some, as members of the inferior sex within the superior race, did question aspects of imperialism, particularly colonial policies that were harmful to North African women.

French Rule and North African Response

The French conquest of Algeria proved to be a prelude to the “scramble for Africa” by European powers at the end of the 19th century. To protect *L'Algérie Française* [French Algeria] France eventually invaded Tunisia in 1881 and Morocco in 1912, forcibly incorporating these states into the global French Empire. However, the forms that French imperialism assumed in Tunisia and Morocco differed from Algeria, which was made an administrative part of France. In contrast, Morocco and Tunisia were Protectorates, which meant that the appearance of limited sovereignty was maintained and local ruling families remained on the throne. Nevertheless, France controlled finances, public works, education, armed forces and security, and agriculture. In addition, the legal system and

courts were under colonial supervision. Both countries experienced substantial immigration by Europeans who took land and property away from the Tunisians and Moroccans. Nevertheless, the Sunni Muslim Arab majority and Jewish communities were allowed to retain religious courts with jurisdiction over matters relating to civil status or family affairs, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The Berber Muslims were a different matter since French colonial authorities directly interfered with their systems of traditional law, which often had an impact upon Berber women.

The most important change that France introduced was a system of modern education, although severe restrictions were placed upon educational opportunities for colonized children. Even as late as the inter-war period, it was quite rare for children from modest or poor Muslim or Jewish families to receive any formal instruction. Nevertheless, the nationalist movements in all three countries arose among young men—and to a lesser extent—young women who had attended French colonial schools. With modern secular education came demands from graduates of colonial schools for legal, political, and social rights.

In Algeria, colonial officials and the European settlers manipulated the stereotype of the sensuous Arab or Muslim woman to oppose granting even limited political representation to French-educated Algerian men. The argument was that: “Algerian women are confined to harems and depraved thus their men can not exercise the right to vote intelligently.” So politics, the manipulation of women for imperial ends, and negative visual representations of native women, worked hand in hand.

North African responses to foreign control varied immensely. Militant anti-colonial resistance represented only one of several collective solutions to the disruptions of military occupation and dispossession. All of the European empires in the Middle East and North Africa pursued virtually identical policies, choosing consciously to collaborate generally with the most retrograde indigenous political or social groups to divide and rule, and block modernity—and eventually, democracy. The legacy of these policies is still very much in evidence today. Movements for women’s emancipation arose in those North African or Middle Eastern countries that were the least disrupted by imperialism and violence. In other words, the more that male honor and masculinity were defined by waging warfare and by a cult of violence and militarism, the more precarious women’s rights were and would remain—the classic example of this being present-day Algeria.

Sources about North African Women

History knows of no other group of women as extensively painted, portrayed, and photographed as North African and Middle Eastern women—depicted by others. Orientalist painters—for examples, Ingres, Delacroix, and Gérôme—and European writers, therefore, were not innocent bystanders; their artistic production was very much implicated in justifications for empire-building.

The sources in this module illustrate the complexity of forms assumed by French colonialism in North Africa as well as the range of North African responses to conquest and foreign rule. They also demonstrate that there is no monolithic “Arab woman” or

“Muslim woman.” Rather there existed wide-ranging variations in women’s legal, social, political, and cultural statuses in each country and in each historical era. The nature of the state, various social class formations, the organization of families, local traditions and interpretations of Islam as lived, levels of education, etc, all shaped women’s daily lives and thus their opportunities for independent action.