

Primary Source: The Story of Mazouna



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Introduction

Mazouna, 1921

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The cultural destruction experienced under French rule led to a new generation of Algerians who felt detached and uprooted from traditional culture, and who longed to find a place where they belonged.

Below you will read about a story relayed by a French colonial ethnographer in 1921. The story is called Mazouna, which is the name of a town in Algeria. The excerpt we will focus on is about an Algerian secretary.

As you read, ask yourself: What does this story reveal about life in Algeria at the time?

Mazouna, 1921

In the story *Mazouna*, published by a colonial ethnographer in 1921, we learn of a distraught Algerian secretary who made a terrible mistake. He had been invited to speak at a prestigious European ball:



French government building, Algeria, 19th century

“I left for this ceremony with enthusiasm, my [brimmed] hat cocked forward to affirm my liberal convictions in the eyes of the French... my literary taste pulled me towards Europe and yet! And yet! Only the magnificent verbalism of your writers pleased me, for I could never adopt their beliefs.”

In his youth, the secretary confessed, he used to sit and drink absinthe with the ‘Frenchies’; he dreamed of becoming an author, and wrote poetry.

Arriving at the ball, however, his confidence failed him. With his friends insisting that he speak nonetheless, a French schoolmaster fatefully offered him a shot of alcohol, causing him to speak somewhat more frankly than he had intended.

“A bizarre exultation agitated within me new ideas like the floods of the sea... a thousand unexpected phrases rose to my lips...” explained the Algerian secretary. Then, he spoke:

“My dear French sirs, I gather from your good humor that you are happy to celebrate... the settlers grow rich through their labor and the administrators [grow rich] through the labor of others.

In sum, sirs, your extreme joy is understandable... but a poor Muslim teacher, does he also have the right to enjoy himself? His colleagues, placed at the bottom rung of this assembly, do they have the right to celebrate their place in life? The Muslims who were vanquished by your famous general, must they also applaud? I don’t think so.”

He was pulled off the stage still requesting “Five minutes of your attention, sirs!” and fired immediately. He now regretted the fact that he had received an education in the first place, for it had alienated him from both European and Muslim societies. “Why am I not an obscure peasant?,” he lamented. “I have been taught only enough to know that I am a lost man who will never become anything, for I can no longer find my natural spirit.”



Algerians rest in front of a Kabyle home, c. 1889

Image Citations

Page 1:

Mazouna, Fair Use, <https://www.algerie360.com/mazou-na-gala-a-la-memoire-de-bekada-belmehel/>

Page 2:

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