

# From Algiers to Timbuktu: Multi-Local Research in Colonial History Across the Saharan Divide

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**Abstract:** The so-called “Saharan Divide” separating sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa into distinct fields has a long and complicated history. Paradoxically, given its dense historiography, this divide is particularly pronounced in scholarship on the colonial period. This article proposes an approach to researching across this division, centered on research in multiple African archives, to build a “multi-local” understanding of colonial-era trans-Saharan Africa. This approach is illustrated by the story of Algerians who taught in colonial schools in Mauritania and French Sudan, and by the author’s discovery of this story in sites across northwest Africa. This approach can help scholars reconceptualize multi-sited research and reevaluate the Area Studies divisions that continue to structure knowledge of African history.

**Résumé:** La prétendue « zone de partage du Sahara » séparant l’Afrique subsaharienne et l’Afrique du Nord en deux domaines distincts a une histoire longue et compliquée. Paradoxalement, étant donnée sa longue historiographie, ce clivage est particulièrement marqué dans la recherche sur la période coloniale. Cet article propose une approche de recherche allant au-delà de cette division, en centrant la recherche dans de multiples centres d’archives africaines, pour construire une compréhension « multi-située » de l’Afrique transsaharienne de l’ère coloniale. Cette approche est illustrée par l’histoire d’Algériens qui enseignaient dans des écoles coloniales en Mauritanie et au Soudan français, et par la découverte par l’auteur de cette histoire dans des sites du nord-ouest de l’Afrique. Cette approche peut aider les chercheurs à reconceptualiser la recherche multi-située et à réévaluer les divisions des études aréales qui continuent de structurer la connaissance de l’histoire africaine.

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Everything fell into place at the last minute. With my visa set to expire, I would have to leave Mauritania the next day. The day before, after several weeks in administrative limbo, I had been granted access to the Mauritanian national archives. I was unsure what to expect as I passed from the dusty streets of Nouakchott onto the greener grounds of the presidential palace. The archives are housed in a simple warehouse, out of the way. Upon entering the building, I was pleased to see that the single dossier I had been able to request had been located and set out for me. (Without access to any archival catalogues ahead of my visit, I had relied on Mohamed Saïd Ould Hamody's encyclopedic guide to Mauritania's scholarly resources to prepare.<sup>1</sup>) The dossier was enormous, with hundreds of pages piled precariously on the table. Thanks to the generosity of the archivist, who passed me glasses of tea as I scanned the pages, I finished the stack of documents by the end of the day. My camera's memory card was full, and it would take weeks to sort through everything. But as I sat in the archive that day, I was struck by one document in particular: a report, from May 1939, by Boualem Ould Rouis, proposing reforms to the *Médersa* of Timbuktu.<sup>2</sup>

Historians sometimes fantasize about finding the one document that uncovers a whole new history. This report did not exactly do that, but it did connect a lot of dots. I had encountered Ould Rouis's name a few months earlier, in the dusty attic of a high school in Algiers. There, I found a brief manuscript, titled *Bilad Shinqit*, that he had written in 1953 describing his impressions of Mauritania.<sup>3</sup> Because of that manuscript, I knew that he was one of a number of Algerians who had traveled to French West Africa to teach in *médersas*, colonial schools that combined Islamic and French curricula and forged new links between North and West Africa through Islamic education. I wanted to learn more about Ould Rouis and others who taught in both Algeria and West Africa – people who embodied this trans-Saharan colonial connection. But in Algeria, as elsewhere, it was difficult to find information about Ould Rouis and his peers. Official archives – the National Archives and National Library in Algiers, and regional archives in multiple provinces – all came up short when I went looking for documentation of the *médersas* and the *medersiens*, as students and graduates of these schools were known. Of the three Algerian *médersas*, only the *Médersa* of Algiers has a relatively complete archive preserved within Algeria.<sup>4</sup> I stumbled upon that collection, preserved

<sup>1</sup> Mohamed Saïd Ould Hamody, *Bibliographie générale de la Mauritanie* (Nouakchott: Centre Culturel Français de Nouakchott, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Archives Nationales de la République Islamique de Mauritanie, Nouakchott (ANRIM) E2/44, Rapport de M. Ould Rouis, 3 May 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Archives du Lycée Amara Rachid, Algiers, Algeria (LAR) Boualem Ould Rouis, *Bilad Shinqit* (unpublished manuscript), 9 April 1953.

<sup>4</sup> The *Médersa* of Algiers became the Lycée Amara Rachid after Algerian independence; in its attic is the most complete institutional archive of the *médersas*. The others are either inaccessible, dispersed, or destroyed. Scant documentation

in the attic of the Lycée Amara Rachid, almost by accident, following up on a tip from a colleague whose father taught there.<sup>5</sup> Only there, outside of an official archival institution, did I find much historical evidence about these schools and the people who passed through them. Ould Rouis's manuscript remains there, alongside reams of attendance records, exam results, and other bureaucratic documents. As I continued my research in Algeria, and subsequently in France and Senegal, Ould Rouis remained a tantalizingly fleeting figure, evidence that the *médersas'* trans-Saharan nature remained out of reach. After seeing the report that day in Nouakchott, I realized that Ould Rouis and the *médersas* fall through the cracks when research is conducted only out of large, prominent archives. Because they spanned colonial borders and crossed the boundaries of current scholarship rooted in Area Studies, these institutions and the people who shaped them have been made invisible by archival and historiographical divisions. Only through research in multiple places, beyond the usual repositories, could I piece together Ould Rouis's itinerant career. In turn, his trajectory from Algiers to Timbuktu revealed the larger trans-Saharan history of the *médersas*. In other words, a new approach to the dispersed colonial archive can reframe our understanding of individuals and institutions that shaped northwest Africa in the colonial period.

Northwest Africa – the Maghrib, Sahara, and Sahel – has long attracted attention from historians. Recent high-profile museum exhibitions in North America attest to an increasing awareness of the region as a place of longstanding, complex cultural exchange.<sup>6</sup> Local iterations of global phenomena – climate change, migration, and the global “war on terror” – have brought more attention to the region's geopolitical importance. Historical scholarship, however, tends to focus on earlier periods of history, especially the long era of trans-Saharan trade. The onset of formal colonialism in the nineteenth century is often interpreted as a different period, when new geographical frameworks arose through European intervention and trade networks reoriented toward the Atlantic coast.<sup>7</sup> Colonialism has long been a major focus of historians of Africa, but the lack of scholarship on northwest

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related to the Médersa of Constantine is preserved in the provincial (*wilāya*) archive in Constantine. Nineteenth-century records from the Médersa of Tlemcen are available in the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, France, but most twentieth-century material is missing.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Brahim Benmoussa for this advice, and for his generosity throughout my research in Algeria.

<sup>6</sup> These exhibitions include *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa* at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University and *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

<sup>7</sup> See a recent textbook overview, which covers the colonial era in one chapter – and the postcolonial period in a single page: Ralph Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119–138.

Africa in this era is striking. Colonial rule altered, but did not eliminate, trans-Saharan connections. Reconstituting a trans-Saharan history of the colonial period, as the example of Ould Rouis and the *médersas* demonstrates, necessitates a new approach to both historiographical frameworks and archival research to link North and West Africa into a unified space of analysis. As I circulated among archives in Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, and France, I came to think of this methodological and interpretive approach not only as multi-sited, but as what might be called “multi-local.” Trans-Saharan research requires deep engagement with multiple local contexts, multiple historiographies, and multiple approaches to the colonial archive. In what follows, I connect the West African careers of two Algerian teachers, Boualem Ould Rouis and his successor Abderrahmane Nekli, with my own research trajectory. Following in their footsteps illustrates how such a multi-local approach to institutions and individuals can help historians move beyond the colonial geographies that continue to shape the questions we ask and the stories we tell.

### Trans-Saharan Archival Research

Although the historiography of Africa has long emphasized long-distance connections both within the African continent and through the worldwide African diaspora, a persistent gap in scholarship remains at the Sahara. This gap, which effaces the Sahara as a site of human history, exists for reasons that are both epistemological and practical. For academics and policymakers, North Africa, grafted onto the Middle East, is often considered in a separate geographical framework from “sub-Saharan” Africa. There are deep, complex epistemic roots to this division, often articulated in racial terms separating Black Africa from the Arab world, or, in more antiquated work, White (North) Africa.<sup>8</sup> The so-called Hamitic Hypothesis lent credence to racial thinking among scholars – Arab Muslim and European alike – for centuries, and allowed the Sahara to be construed as a racial barrier as well as a physical one, even among those who lived there.<sup>9</sup> During the colonial era, French scholarship adopted the terminology of *Afrique noire* and *Afrique blanche*; the Area Studies paradigm reinforced this division in academic departments, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations from the mid-twentieth century to the present. The so-called “Saharan Divide” appears natural and timeless given these multiple roots.

<sup>8</sup> Ghislaine Lydon, “Saharan Oceans and Bridges, Barriers and Divides in Africa’s Historiographical Landscape,” *Journal of African History* 56–1 (March 2015), 3–22; Baz Lecocq, “Distant Shores: A Historiographic View on Trans-Saharan Space,” *Journal of African History* 56–1 (March 2015), 23–36.

<sup>9</sup> The most complete study of the Hamitic Hypothesis in northwest Africa is Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 62–93. See also Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 130–172.

Of course, the extensive networks that spanned the desert throughout history challenge this framework. The best known were the trans-Saharan trading caravans that linked towns and cities across northwest Africa, transporting gold, salt, and enslaved people across the desert.<sup>10</sup> States and empires, most famously the Almoravids, also spanned the desert, linking the Mediterranean to the Senegal and Niger Rivers. Islam forged other links, from the famous fourteenth-century hajj of Mansa Musa to the Sufi orders, such as the Sanusiyya and the Tijaniyya, that so frustrated colonial powers bent on controlling them.<sup>11</sup> Anthropologists have shown how, in the post-colonial period, Saharan crossings have taken new forms as trade and migration have shifted with new political, economic, and environmental contexts.<sup>12</sup> These trans-Saharan studies, while challenging the notion of the desert as a barrier, often leave a temporal gap: the era of European colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Writing a trans-Saharan history of the colonial period confronts these epistemological challenges as well as methodological issues related to archival research. As Baz Lecocq argued in an analysis of trans-Saharan historiography, European colonial scholarship on Africa reinforced the “Saharan Divide,” prioritizing different academic fields in North Africa (philology, archaeology, Orientalism) and West Africa (anthropology, ethnography, linguistics).<sup>13</sup> Colonial “scholar-administrators,” who combined service in the French colonial bureaucracy with academic work justifying their policies and who sometimes found university posts later in their careers, remain

<sup>10</sup> See E. W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors: West African Kingdoms in the Fourteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958); and Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson (eds.), *La Tijâniyya: Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l’Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 2000); and Jean-Louis Triaud, *La Légende noire de la Sanûsiyya: Une confrérie musulmane saharienne sous le regard français (1840–1930)* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1995). For an overview of this literature, see Scott S. Reese, “Islam in Africa/Africans and Islam,” *Journal of African History* 55–1 (2014), 17–26.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Meike Meerpohl, “Camels as Trading Goods: The Transition from a Beast of Burden to a Commodity in the Trans-Saharan Trade between Chad and Libya,” in Ahmida, Ali Abdullatif (ed.), *Bridges Across the Sahara: Social, Economic and Cultural Impact of the Trans-Sahara Trade during the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 157–185.

<sup>13</sup> Lecocq, “Distant Shores,” 30–34.

foundational to their respective fields to this day.<sup>14</sup> The division of Africa at the Sahara is thus built into the foundations of colonial history, although these colonial officials sometimes explicitly undermined this division in their policies and in their personal trajectories.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, following the careers of these individuals is one way that historians have begun to address the trans-Saharan history of French colonial rule.<sup>16</sup> Tracking colonial institutions is another.<sup>17</sup>

Adopting this trans-Saharan approach, however, poses practical challenges based on the material conditions of the colonial archive. For all their methodological and theoretical innovations, historians of colonialism tend to follow the archival grain in the sense that they reify colonial borders. These frequently arbitrary lines on the map, which by and large became national borders at independence, are replicated in archival institutions, whether in Africa or in the former colonial metropolises. One salient exception is the National Archives of Senegal, in Dakar, which hold colonial-era records for the nine countries that were once part of French West Africa. Many archival records, though not all, were brought to France during the era of

<sup>14</sup> See Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially 93–117, and Lecocq, “Distant Shores.” Paul Marty, Maurice Delafosse, and François Clozel are the three most famous of these figures, but many administrators also produced scholarly studies of African societies, especially in the late colonial period. Another later figure is Yves Person, whose career as an administrator and as a historian culminated in his massive study *Samori: Une révolution dyula* (Dakar, Senegal: IFAN, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> For example, General Louis Faidherbe stated in the 1850s that Senegal should be “no more than a sub-division of Algeria,” governed by the same institutions. See Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Marty, who was born in Algeria and worked across French West Africa and in Morocco, is one of the best-known examples of this career trajectory. See, for example, Pessah Shinar, “A Major Link Between France’s Berber Policy in Morocco and its ‘Policy of Races’ in French West Africa: Commandant Paul Marty (1882–1938),” *Islamic Law and Society* 13–1 (2006), 33–62. Another example is the education official George Hardy who also applied ideas from West Africa to Morocco: see Spencer Segalla, *The Moroccan Soul: French Education, Colonial Ethnology, and Muslim Resistance, 1912–1956* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 61–87. Yet another is Henri Gaden: see Roy Dilley, *Nearly Native, Barely Civilized: Henri Gaden’s Journey through French West Africa (1894–1939)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). For a case study showing the impact of these figures, see David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Allan Christelow pioneered this approach in the 1980s, but it has not been frequently followed since. See Christelow, “The Muslim Judge and Municipal Politics in Colonial Algeria and Senegal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24–1 (January 1982), 3–24; see also Samuel D. Anderson, “The French Médersa in West Africa: Modernizing Islamic Education and Institutionalizing Colonial Racism, 1890s–1920s,” *Islamic Africa* 11–1 (2020), 42–70.

decolonization; researchers there and in African archives face ongoing challenges to access materials.<sup>18</sup> The Area Studies paradigm poses practical problems as well, as trans-Saharan scholars train, teach, and research as specialists in sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East, but very rarely both. Some historians of colonialism are trained in French history, though it is happily becoming less common for histories of Africa to be written solely out of European archives. Scholars of Jewish history have also made significant contributions to the study of the Sahara and trans-Saharan networks.<sup>19</sup> The dispersal of archival collections and the disjointed Area Studies approaches to this region require trans-Saharan researchers to master multiple historiographies and to design complex research itineraries.

Constituting a trans-Saharan archive differs from other sorts of multi-sited research. In an influential article, Angela Zimmerman has argued for “critical imperial history [as] one of the routes beyond imperial history, toward transnational history.”<sup>20</sup> While they emphasize the importance of Africanist scholarship in “provincializing” European theoretical frameworks, Zimmerman’s material approach to transnational scholarship retains an emphasis on the relationship between the European metropole and the African colony. In other words, for historians of colonialism, transnational research has involved traveling to a large European imperial archive and to smaller African archives with a focus on a single region or theme. For trans-Saharan researchers, interested not only in the relationship between metropole and colony but between different colonized spaces, this approach is insufficient. Trans-Saharan colonial histories demand a multi-local approach, sensitive to the fragmented colonial archive and the long-term history of interconnection across northwest Africa.

Since the seminal work of Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, historians of empire have developed sophisticated methods of reading colonial archives as evidence of imperial power and colonized resistance.<sup>21</sup> More

<sup>18</sup> In recent years, France has moved to restrict certain archival materials, especially those related to the Algerian liberation war, against standard practices allowing public access. In Algeria, accessing the national archival collections requires a lengthy approval process; the collections themselves are not fully catalogued and much remains inaccessible. This situation is replicated to varying degrees across many northwest African archives.

<sup>19</sup> See Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Aomar Boum, “Saharan Jewry: History, Memory, and Imagined Identity,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 16–3 (2011), 325–341.

<sup>20</sup> A. Zimmerman, “Africa in Imperial and Transnational History: Multi-Sited Historiography and the Necessity of Theory,” *Journal of African History* 54–3 (2013), 333.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

recent scholarship has emphasized the complex entanglements of imperial history, as in Mostafa Minawi's and M'hamed Oualdi's studies of Ottoman engagement in North and Central Africa and Sarah Zimmerman's study of globetrotting West African *tirailleurs* and their conjugal relationships.<sup>22</sup> One result of these trans-imperial and intra-imperial studies is a clearer sense of how imperial rule forged and reshaped long-distance connections. The colonial *médersas* and the trans-Saharan figures like Ould Rouis who led them are another example of such entangled histories that reveal otherwise overlooked connections. Yet the seemingly straightforward issue of where to find sources for such a complex history remains urgent. The major repositories of French West African colonial history, in Aix-en-Provence and Dakar, left many questions unanswered. Ould Rouis and the *médersas* appeared in those archives, but haphazardly and obliquely. What brought an Algerian teacher to Mauritania? Even that basic a question had no answer in those archival collections.

Searching for answers in archives across northwest Africa, I came to see that the *médersas* were colonial institutions that underwent a process of adaptation to their local contexts. To understand Ould Rouis's trajectory, I had to understand the complex Algerian context he came from, the complex contexts of Mauritania and French Soudan he worked in, and the linked histories of education, Islam, and colonization across Algeria and French West Africa. In other words, multiple areas of inquiry inform one another and allow for a larger picture to emerge, one more complete than can be gained from any single vantage point, historiographical tradition, or archival collection. Pursuing these questions in multiple places means crossing borders, both historiographically and physically. It requires confronting the geographical frameworks that structure scholarly inquiry; it requires time and effort to build multiple local networks and to engage with multiple communities and their archival institutions. As an approach to the dispersed colonial archive, multi-local research allows for a colonial history that overcomes colonial boundaries – a colonial history that is, in some sense, decolonized.

The French colonization of northwest Africa produced documentation that differs in both quantity and quality from the archive of the periods before it. The colonial bureaucracy was the core producer and preserver of printed archival materials, and its output was so vast that it remains incompletely catalogued or examined by archivists and historians. In the case of the *médersas*, colonial bureaucrats from the relevant offices – the schools themselves, various education offices, the Service of Muslim Affairs – produced voluminous reports, correspondences, and other ephemera. These

<sup>22</sup> Mostefa Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); M'hamed Oualdi, *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).



documents were inconsistently produced and preserved; administrators occasionally skipped a quarterly report, for example, leaving a gap in the record. So, too, did students produce a voluminous archive of examinations, petitions, even doodles. Their preservation in archives is similarly inconsistent: correspondence is often split among archives; copies of reports are distributed seemingly haphazardly; troves of administrative minutiae appear unexpectedly in archival dossiers devoted to other topics. This vast but diffuse paper trail allows for a relatively complete view of the history of institutions such as the *médersas*, but achieving that view necessitates research in a wide range of archives in Africa and Europe. In tracking individuals alongside institutions, the research process necessitates multi-local inquiry. Putting the disparate pieces together, while remaining attentive to multiple local contexts, reveals how colonized people navigated imperial spaces and shaped imperial systems. The careers of two Algerians, Boualem Ould Rouis and Abderrahmane Nekli, both of whom leveraged their experiences in Algeria to transform the *médersas* of Mauritania and French Soudan, illustrate how multi-local research illuminates this trans-Saharan history.

### Algerian Teachers in Mauritania and Mali

*Médersas* were institutions of bicultural education, incorporating both French curricula and traditions of Islamic learning, run by the French administration.<sup>23</sup> Three *médersas* created in Algeria in 1850 educated young men there until 1951. Amid the conquest of the West African interior in the early twentieth century, seven more *médersas* were founded in West Africa: one in Senegal (in Saint-Louis), two in the French Soudan, today Mali (in Djenné and Timbuktu), and four in Mauritania (in Boutilimit, Atar, Timbédra, and Kiffa) (see [Map 1](#)). Mauritania was an especially popular site for Franco-Muslim schooling for two reasons. The first was the importance of Islamic education to the elite *bīdān* families of the region; the second was the French racist conception that the *bīdān* practiced a more authentic form of Islam than Black groups in Mauritania and elsewhere in West Africa.<sup>24</sup> The *médersas*

<sup>23</sup> See Samuel D. Anderson, “Domesticating the Médersa: Franco-Muslim Education and Colonial Rule in Northwest Africa, 1850–1960” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018). As Louis Brenner and others have explained, “*médersa*” became in the late colonial period a category of bicultural school that was not necessarily under the control of the colonial or post-colonial government. See Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) for a case study focused on French Soudan/Mali.

<sup>24</sup> The term *bīdān*, meaning “white” in Arabic, is a racial category with a long history in the southwestern Sahara and indicates a dominant position vis-à-vis those categorized as Black (known by terms such as *sūdān*, *hratīn*, and *bellah* in multiple contexts). See Catherine Taine-Cheikh, “La Mauritanie en noir et blanc. Petite promenade linguistique en hassāniyya,” *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*

Map 1. The *Médersas* of Northwest Africa

were thus a trans-Saharan institution: originally developed in a Maghribi context, they underwent a series of adaptations in the Sahara and Sahel, thereby creating a system of schools united in their basic structure and purpose but with varying institutional traits – different student populations, differing curricula, wide-ranging relationships with other branches of the colonial administration and with the African communities within which they operated.

Algerian teachers were central to this process of adaptation in West Africa; their actions show the power of colonized individuals to shape colonial institutions. Ould Rouis and Nekli exemplify the ways in which Algerians were able to act as intermediaries for the colonial government in Mauritania and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Their position vis-à-vis other colonial intermediaries endowed

54 (1989), 90–105; Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, *Éléments d'histoire de la Mauritanie* (Nouakchott: Institute Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique et Centre Culturel Français de Nouakchott, 1988); and Bruce Hall, *A History of Race*. For the impact of this racial system on the *médersa* system in Mauritania, see Anderson, “The French Médersa in West Africa” and Francis de Chasse, *Mauritanie 1900–1974* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1978), especially 103–165.

<sup>25</sup> On the particular role of intermediaries in the colonial system, see Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard Roberts (eds.), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Moses Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and*

them with more power, and their experiences were more unusual. It was rare for colonized individuals to cross colonial borders with positions of authority or leadership (other than the rare example of Caribbean-born administrators such as Félix Éboué). More commonly, Africans who moved across the empire did so as soldiers, traders, or in other positions that left fewer individual traces in the archive. By virtue of their powerful colonial careers, Nekli and Ould Rouis appear in multiple archives; it is only by retracing their footsteps that their impact becomes fully visible.

Ould Rouis was not the first Algerian to come to Mauritania, but he was among the most influential. He arrived to direct the *médersa* in Boutilimit, in the southern Trarza region, in 1929. He replaced another Algerian, Mekki el-Djenidi, who had a series of disputes with local leaders that resulted in the school's temporary displacement to the nearby town of Mederdra. The school's interim director was Bokar Ba, a Fulani Mauritanian who, reversing the trajectory of the Algerians, had studied at the *médersas* in Saint-Louis and Algiers. He was by all accounts a more competent administrator than el-Djenidi, but he was disqualified from a permanent post directing the school because of his race. Black educators could teach at the West African *médersas*, but they were not allowed to serve as their directors.<sup>26</sup> Ba's successes helped pave the way for Ould Rouis, who was credited with the school's recovered reputation and subsequent prosperity. Within a year of his arrival in Mauritania, Ould Rouis was praised for "the confidence and respect he inspired in his students and their parents," by the Lieutenant-Governor of the colony.<sup>27</sup> His tenure in Boutilimit saw the *médersa* grow into the largest colonial school in Mauritania. Only under his direction did the school begin to enroll the long-coveted sons of the *bīdān* elite of the region. Whether or not he was fully responsible, Ould Rouis was credited with the transformative success of the Boutilimit *médersa*.

He became an important collaborator of the colonial administration of Mauritania. In 1935, when the French decided to open another *médersa* in the northern Adrar region, Ould Rouis became the main architect of the project. He was sent as an emissary to the region's elite to convince them of the *médersa*'s value. His efforts paid off. He consulted especially carefully with the Reguibat, a nomadic confederation who ranged from the Adrar north to Guelmim, in southern Morocco, and who posed the most consistent threat to Spanish rule in Rio de Oro (what is today Western Sahara). When, upon Ould Rouis's urging, some of the Reguibat

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*Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); and Tamba M'bayo, *Muslim Interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850–1920: Mediations of Knowledge and Power in the Lower and Middle Senegal River Valley* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, "Domesticating the Médersa," 179.

<sup>27</sup> Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (ANOM) FM EE/II/6385/OULDROUIS, Bulletin individuel de notes, 22 November 1930.

began to enroll their sons at the new *médersa*, it was seen as a major accomplishment for the French and a testament to Ould Rouis's personal influence.<sup>28</sup>

The new *médersa* was built in Atar, a town that hosted the largest French military post in the Adrar region. It was chosen over Chinguetti (Shinqit), a nearby town with a longstanding reputation for Islamic learning.<sup>29</sup> The choice was doubtless made so that the colonial authorities could more effectively surveil the school and its students; Ould Rouis and others also argued that Chinguetti was in decline and would not be able to attract students.<sup>30</sup> The school's final organization followed Ould Rouis's recommendations very closely. The physical structure replicated that of the *Médersa* of Boutilimit with a small compound, including a four-classroom school building, a small house for the director, and two dormitories for the students.<sup>31</sup> The site was a shady palm grove a short distance from both the historic center of Atar and the new French military post. Ould Rouis provided a list of materials, from classroom furniture to kitchen utensils, which also matched those used at Boutilimit. He listed a set of ambitious goals that he thought the new *médersa* would accomplish, including "vanquishing prejudice and inspiring the confidence" of the *bidān* elite; "awakening a sense of humanity and a sort of French consciousness" in the students, and rivaling, at least locally, the prestige of well-known centers of Islamic learning including the Zaytuna mosque-university in Tunis and al-Azhar in Cairo.<sup>32</sup> In short, Ould Rouis and the French administration sought to supplant the scholarly history of Chinguetti through the new *médersa* in Atar, itself a carbon copy of the *médersa* in Boutilimit.

Though the loftiest of these goals went unmet as the French blocked students from traveling to study in North Africa through the end of the colonial period, Ould Rouis's reputation remained sterling through the end of his time in Mauritania. He was named the inaugural director of the *Médersa* of Atar, where his tenure was "entirely satisfactory," in the words of one education inspector.<sup>33</sup> In selecting Ould Rouis for that post, and in following his other recommendations so carefully, the governor of Mauritania went against the advice of the preeminent Orientalist Louis Massignon, who had provided the names of several other candidates, none of whom had experience with either Franco-Muslim education or with Mauritania. Ould

<sup>28</sup> ANRIM E2/44, Lt. Bachmann to Gouverneur de la Mauritanie, 26 October 1935.

<sup>29</sup> This choice echoed the trajectory of the earlier *médersas* in Senegal and French Soudan, where long-established Muslim scholarly centers proved more resistant to colonial intrusions. See Anderson, "The French *Médersa* in West Africa."

<sup>30</sup> ANRIM E2/44, Lt. Bachmann to Gouverneur de la Mauritanie, 13 November 1934; Anderson, "Domesticating the *Médersa*," 182–183.

<sup>31</sup> ANRIM E2/44, Ould Rouis to Gouverneur de la Mauritanie, 26 October 1935.

<sup>32</sup> ANRIM E2/44, Ould Rouis to Gouverneur de la Mauritanie, 26 October 1935.

<sup>33</sup> Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes, France (CADN) Dakar/AOF 183PO/1/385, Rapport sur la *Médersa* d'Atar, 24 March 1936.

Rouis's experience and renown made him a powerful figure in the colonial administration in Mauritania for a decade. Few others, especially few Algerians, could claim a similar impact.

At the end of his tenure in Mauritania, Ould Rouis's influence spread yet further. In 1939, Ould Rouis accepted a position at the *Médersa* of Constantine. On his way back to Algeria, traveling overland, he stopped for several weeks in Timbuktu to evaluate the *médersa* in that city. His status and experience in Mauritania proved influential among administrators in the French Soudan as well.

The *Médersa* of Timbuktu was the oldest continuously operating Franco-Muslim school in West Africa. It had been founded in 1911, part of a wave of *médersas* that opened in Djenné and Saint-Louis, and, slightly later, in Boutilimit. The *médersas* in Djenné and Saint-Louis closed promptly, for reasons that were closely tied to the institutionalization of *Islam noir* ("Black Islam") in French administrative policy and practice across West Africa.<sup>34</sup> In Timbuktu, as in Boutilimit, the *médersa* stayed open because it catered to "white" nomadic elite families. Whereas Ould Rouis's leadership in Mauritania led to the growth and expansion of *médersa* education, in Timbuktu the *médersa* languished from the 1910s to the 1930s. Until 1934, it was under the direction of an eccentric Frenchman, Auguste Dupuis, also known as Yakouba, who had come to Timbuktu as a missionary. He soon left the church, achieving some degree of celebrity in France as someone who had "gone native" in the colonies.<sup>35</sup> His leadership at the *médersa* did little to inspire confidence, either from French administrators or the Timbuktu elite whom he was meant to cultivate as allies. Reports by colonial inspectors criticized him as "old, incapable, and otherwise useless" with only a "superficial" knowledge of Arabic.<sup>36</sup> His successors, a French-trained Soudanese teacher named Bouillagui Fadiga and a French teacher named Vermande, were both tasked with reforming the *médersa* but met with little success. Fadiga adopted a heavy-handed approach to disciplining students and staff and emphasized the French curriculum; his students and the elites of Timbuktu promptly rejected him.<sup>37</sup> Vermande (his first name went unrecorded) echoed the

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, "The French *Médersa* in West Africa."

<sup>35</sup> See William Seabrook, *The White Monk of Timbuktoo* (London: Harrap, 1934), 191; Albert Londres, *Terre d'ébène* (Paris: A. Michel, 1929), 100–111; and Owen White, "The Decivilizing Mission: Auguste Dupuis-Yakouba and French Timbuktu," *French Historical Studies* 27–3 (Summer 2004), 541–568.

<sup>36</sup> Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Dakar (ANS) O85 (31), Extrait du rapport Arnaud, 14 November 1921.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Brenner, "Becoming Muslim in Soudan français," in Robinson, David and Triaud, Jean-Louis (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 473. It is worth noting that Brenner cites sources here from the National Archives of Mali, which I was unable to visit but which I did not see copies of elsewhere. It is likely that Bamako and Timbuktu, like Nouakchott, hold rich archival materials that are unavailable in Dakar, Aix-en-Provence, and elsewhere.

disdain of French educators in Djenné and Saint-Louis for Franco-Muslim schooling. He recommended the closure of the *médersa*, writing that “Timbuktu is not a holy city” and, as such, embracing Islamic education was a strategic mistake.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the *médersas* he had led in Mauritania, the *médersa* Ould Rouis encountered in Timbuktu was clearly not a thriving institution.

Indeed, when he arrived in Timbuktu, Ould Rouis was dismayed by the state of the school. Unlike Vermande, however, he laid out a comprehensive plan for reforms instead of recommending its closure. These recommendations drew explicitly and directly on the Mauritanian *médersas* he knew so well in Boutilimit and Atar – a comparison that earlier leaders, without such expansive experience, had not made. Indeed, his proposals for the *Médersa* of Timbuktu mirrored almost exactly his plans for the *Médersa* of Atar, drawn up four years before and put into successful practice afterward. He recommended that the school move from its site in the center of Timbuktu’s old city to a new compound on its outskirts. He argued that students should be housed in dormitories on site – as in Atar and Boutilimit – rather than with local host families. Throughout, he cited the positive response to his ideas in Mauritania as evidence that they would succeed in Timbuktu as well.<sup>39</sup>

Ould Rouis criticized the faculty of the school as mediocre, especially in their knowledge of Arabic, which he saw as the core of a *médersa* education. In recommended changes to the teaching staff, he again sought to connect the Soudanese and Mauritanian institutions directly. He proposed hiring two Mauritanians to teach in Timbuktu as a way to guarantee the Arabic fluency of the staff. One, Mohamedou Ould Abdillah, was a jurist, poet, grammarian, and the professor of Qur’anic studies at the *Médersa* of Atar; Ould Rouis proposed him as the professor of Arabic at Timbuktu. The other, Beddi (also recorded as Badadi) Ould Mounir, was still a student at the *Médersa* of Atar, originally from Chinguetti. Ould Rouis recommended hiring him as a *mon-iteur*, or a teaching assistant, for the Arabic classes in Timbuktu.<sup>40</sup> By the next year, Ould Mounir was indeed employed in that capacity at the Timbuktu *médersa*.<sup>41</sup> The *médersas* developed closer institutional and personal connections, through Ould Rouis, across colonial borders.

Ould Rouis drew a further connection through the idiom of race. In Timbuktu, as in Mauritania, administrators had long been frustrated that so many of the *médersas*’ students came from the local Black populations, especially those of lower social status – the *hvatīn* in Mauritania, the *bellah* and Songhay in Soudan. In their view, the *médersas* were meant to transform the existing social elite, called white, or *bīdān*, in both places, into allies and agents of the colonial state. But the elites were often wary, and lower classes

<sup>38</sup> ANS O530 (31), Vermande, La *Médersah* depuis sa création, 17 October 1936.

<sup>39</sup> ANRIM E2/44, Rapport de M. Ould Rouis, 3 May 1939.

<sup>40</sup> ANRIM E2/44, Rapport de M. Ould Rouis, 3 May 1939.

<sup>41</sup> ANS O502 (31), Bulletin d’inspection, *Médersa* de Tombouctou, 15 October 1940.

more eager to seek advantage through a colonial education. A 1935 report on the *Médersa* of Timbuktu lists the students as follows: out of 105 students, 93 were Black (Songhay, Fula, or *bellah*). The remaining students included 8 “Cherifs,” probably denoting residents claiming Moroccan ancestry, dating back to the 1591 Moroccan invasion of the Songhay Empire, as well as 3 Berabich (an Arab nomadic clan) and 1 Kel Arawan (a Tuareg group).<sup>42</sup> In other words, only 12 percent of the school’s population came from the Arab-Amazigh (Berber) elite that the administration targeted; even fewer came from within the politically crucial target demographic of the sons of local chiefs. In his 1939 report, Ould Rouis dismissed the administration’s concerns and proposed a simple solution. The students would be separated into two groups, *bīdān* and *sūdān*, such that the “racial question” would not be an issue. He also suggested an answer to the question of how to increase the numbers of elite students: the administration should simply “accept only the sons of noble families.”<sup>43</sup> Finally, Ould Rouis recommended that the position of *médersa* director be reserved exclusively for an Algerian graduate of the Algerian *médersas*. Europeans, he argued, were incapable of fully understanding the complex social and political context of Timbuktu and its hinterland. Only an Algerian would be able to transform the *médersa* by following Ould Rouis’s prescriptions, all taken explicitly from Ould Rouis’s Mauritanian experience in Boutilimit and Atar. They suggest the complex, trans-Saharan logic at work in the West African *médersa* system, which drew on, and reinforced, longstanding racial idioms that emphasized Arab authority, especially in religious matters. The personal success that Ould Rouis had found in Mauritania seemed natural to him and naturally applied to Timbuktu; ensuring that other Algerians followed in his footsteps seemed to be a sure way to continue making the *médersas* into useful instruments for the colonial administration.

Upon concluding his study in Timbuktu, Ould Rouis traveled to Gao, where he turned north and returned to Algeria by crossing the Sahara. He taught at the *Médersa* of Constantine for several years; he ended his career as a professor at the *Médersa* of Algiers, the largest and most important of the *médersas*. In 1951, the Algerian *médersas* were transformed into secular high schools, and in Algiers that school continues to operate as the Lycée Amara Rachid, named after a martyr of the independence struggle.

The archives of the *médersa* are preserved in the *lycée*’s attic, and they are not formally classified or incorporated into the Algerian national archives system. I was able to access them after gaining authorizations from both the Ministry of Education and the school’s director. By and large, even more than the other documentation preserved elsewhere, this *médersa*’s archive is predominantly composed of quotidian bureaucratic sources: lists of attendance records, for example, dating back to the late nineteenth century. Nestled among these prosaic pages, though, are more unusual documents. One of

<sup>42</sup> ANS O530 (31), Renseignements sur la Médersa de Tombouctou, n.d. [1935].

<sup>43</sup> ANRIM E2/44, Rapport de M. Ould Rouis, 3 May 1939.

them is a description of Mauritania, written in Arabic by Ould Rouis. It is, to my knowledge, the only account of the region by a North African in the employ of the colonial administration. There is no clear explanation for why he composed the manuscript, though it is kept in a folder alongside other texts by *médersa* professors and students, usually treating topics related to Islamic law, presumably written for pedagogical purposes.

The text is dated 9 April 1953, indicating it was written fourteen years after Ould Rouis left Mauritania, and two years after the transformation of the Algiers *médersa* into a *lycée*. The account is descriptive, even ethnographic, in nature. He characterizes the inhabitants of *Bilad Shinqit* as “healthy, strong, and smart,” despite the scant resources they have access to in the desert.<sup>44</sup> He devotes much of the text to describing *bīdān* women, praising the way that girls are educated alongside boys, for example. He recounts the way the *bīdān* equate fatness with beauty and wealth: because of the region’s poverty, “fat people are the most beautiful thing eyes can see there.”<sup>45</sup> He describes the way women dress, walk, and clean and perfume themselves in the desert; he contrasts the hair texture and hairstyles of Shinqiti and Sudanese (in other words, *bīdān* and *sūdān*) women. Finally, he describes how marriage and divorce are conducted in *bīdān* society. The text concludes, “though the Shinqiti woman enjoys some freedom, she does not have a happy family or a stable marriage....divorce is her destiny.”<sup>46</sup> It is sprinkled with references to the Qur’an and to Arabic poetry, both classical and modern. The document demonstrates Ould Rouis’s intimate familiarity with the society and culture of the southwestern Sahara.

By itself, this text is remarkable but difficult to interpret. It does not explicitly describe Ould Rouis’s experience teaching in the Mauritanian *médersas*. In fact, Ould Rouis does not insert himself at all into the text, so when I encountered it in the attic in Algiers, I did not know what to make of it. Within the context of his life and work in Algeria, and within the context of the school’s archive, his text seemed incongruous. It was only after reading his report from Timbuktu, in Nouakchott, that the disparate puzzle pieces of his career began to fit together. On their own, each of these two documents – and the many other, less detailed sources scattered in different archives – seemed incomplete, even unremarkable. Taken together, however, they revealed his central role in the development of Franco-Muslim schooling in Mauritania and Mali and demonstrated how the dispersal of archival materials in lesser-known repositories obscured his importance.

Just as one document, or one archive, does not reveal the full picture of this history so, too, does a focus on one individual obscure larger patterns. Ould Rouis forged a path that would be followed by other Algerians in the final decades of the colonial period. Abderrahmane Nekli followed most

<sup>44</sup> LAR, Ould Rouis, *Bilad Shinqit*. I am grateful to Essayed Taha and Brady Ryan for their translation and for grappling with Ould Rouis’s cryptic handwriting.

<sup>45</sup> LAR, Ould Rouis, *Bilad Shinqit*.

<sup>46</sup> LAR, Ould Rouis, *Bilad Shinqit*.



closely in Ould Rouis's footsteps. Nekli left an archival trail that is less extensive than Ould Rouis's; I was, however, able to interview two of his children in Nouakchott in 2016. Their memories allow for a more complete picture to emerge as their family's history across northwest Africa emphasizes again the importance of multi-local research in this region. Nekli was born in 1914 to a scholarly family in Kabylia. He studied at the *Médersa* of Constantine, and at the Superior Division of the *Médersa* of Algiers. He first arrived in Mauritania in 1939, posted originally at the new *Médersa* of Kiffa, in the southern Assaba region, and spent most of the next several decades in West Africa.

Before long, Nekli moved to Atar, where he succeeded Ould Rouis as the director of the *médersa*. He expanded on his predecessor's work, integrating himself into the local society and enhancing the school's prestige. Soon after his arrival in Atar, Nekli married Maryem Mint Habot, the daughter of his colleague at the *médersa* and a member of one of the region's most prominent families, the Ahel Habot. This marriage between an outsider and the Habot family would have been unthinkable in the earlier social world of the Adrar, but it had the effect of bolstering the *médersa*'s reputation, linking Nekli and the school to local networks of Islamic authority. Nekli befriended the region's French administrators and visiting European researchers, forging especially close ties with scholars from the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. According to his children, Nekli felt closely connected with the local community: he would share the family's modest resources by providing food to hungry families in Atar and Chinguetti, especially in times of scarcity.<sup>47</sup> Through these acts, Nekli wove himself, and the *médersa* he led, into the region's social and cultural fabric.

One of Nekli's most influential contacts was a colleague at the *Médersa* of Atar, the Mauritanian historian Mokhtar Ould Hamidun. Originally from the southern Trarza region and a member of a prominent scholarly lineage, Ould Hamidun was hired to teach Arabic at the *médersa* in 1943.<sup>48</sup> Together, Ould Hamidun and Nekli oversaw a grand period in the history of the *Médersa* of Atar, when it gained wider acceptance by the local community. Even Marebbi Rebbo, a son of Shaykh Ma' al-Aynayn, the great resister of French and Spanish incursions into the Sahara, allowed two of his nephews to study at the *médersa* during this time.<sup>49</sup> Mohammed Saïd Ould Hamody, a student at Atar in the late 1940s who became one of Mauritania's most influential scholars and diplomats in the late twentieth century, recalled Ould Hamidun in particular as an especially impressive and influential

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Malika Nekli and Khalil Nekli, Nouakchott, 31 March 2016.

<sup>48</sup> G.-J. Duchemin and A. Leriche, "Avant-propos," in Mokhtar Ould Hamidoun, *Précis sur la Mauritanie* (Saint-Louis, Senegal: Centre IFAN-Mauritanie, 1952), 5–6.

<sup>49</sup> CADN Dakar/AOF 183PO/1/385, Directeur des Affaires Politiques et Administratives to Directeur du Personnel, 7 September 1940.

teacher.<sup>50</sup> In 1949, Ould Hamidun moved on to a post at IFAN, the French West African Research Institute in Saint-Louis, where he joined luminaries including Amadou Hampaté Bâ, Théodore Monod, and Jean Suret-Canale and where he began publishing encyclopedic works on the history and culture of the peoples of the Sahara.<sup>51</sup> Like Ould Hamidun and Ould Rouis, Nekli developed a keen understanding of Saharan social life and used that knowledge to develop the *médersa* into an important educational institution in the region.

Nekli also followed Ould Rouis's footsteps to Timbuktu. Around the time that Ould Hamidun departed for Saint-Louis, Nekli was appointed to the post of director of the Timbuktu *médersa*. He would remain in the French Soudan for many years. In Timbuktu, he oversaw the transition of the *médersa* from its Franco-Muslim curriculum to Franco-Arabic schooling (in other words, the removal of the Islamic curriculum and the increase in Arabic language training), which was the fate of all the *médersas* in West Africa and in Algeria in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>52</sup> Nekli was based in Timbuktu through the 1950s and 1960s, when, while continuing to teach in colonial schools, he became involved in the Algerian war for independence. He helped to coordinate the efforts of the FLN (Algerian National Liberation Front) and the GPRA (Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic) in the diplomatic and military arenas in West Africa. After Algeria won its independence in 1962, he remained in West Africa, serving as the Algerian ambassador to Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso. He represented Algeria at the creation of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa in 1963 and helped to organize the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969. A pioneering force in Algeria's African diplomacy, he retired to Algiers, where he died in 1990.<sup>53</sup>

Nekli and Ould Rouis are emblematic figures in the history of Franco-Muslim education in the late colonial period. Their complex status – as Algerian Muslims educated in both French and Islamic traditions – made them embodiments of the hyphenated Franco-Muslim culture that the *médersas* were meant to foster in Algeria and West Africa. They were

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Mohamed Saïd Ould Hamody, Nouakchott, 17 May 2015. Ould Hamody also followed in Ould Hamidoun's footsteps as a preeminent scholar of Mauritanian history and society, who compiled the encyclopedic bibliography of Mauritanian sources that led me to this story in the first place.

<sup>51</sup> Mokhtar Ould Hamidoun, *Hayāt Mūrītāniyā* (Rabat: Manshūrāt al-Zaman, 2009). See also Pierre Bonte, Edouard Conte, Constant Hamès, and Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh (eds.), *Al Ansâb: La Quête des origines* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1991), 7–8.

<sup>52</sup> Baba Mama, "La Médersa de Tombouctou," in *Culture et civilisation islamiques: Le Mali* (Rabat, Morocco: Publications de l'ISESCO, 1988), 146–148.

<sup>53</sup> Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, La Courneuve, France (CADLC) 29QO/39, Activité FLN au Mali, 28 June 1962; interview with Malika Nekli and Khalil Nekli, 5 April 2016.

mediating figures in the Saharan societies where they lived and worked: colonial agents who earned the respect of local communities, and colonized people who were seen as experts by French officers. Through their efforts, the *médersas* of Boutilimit and Atar, and to a lesser extent Timbuktu, became important educational institutions in colonial Mauritania and Mali, the training ground of a new elite. Nekli's political activity demonstrates that these men were not always loyal pawns of the colonial state. Rather, the position afforded by employment at the *médersas* enabled these Algerian teachers to work in new ways to achieve distinct political and personal goals. Among groups that the French administration – and more recent scholarship – considered fundamentally distinct from one another, these individuals developed affinities and relationships that shaped the course of local and regional politics, societies, and cultures. Invisible from the major archives of Dakar and Aix-en-Provence, their impact is clear through multi-local research in smaller archival collections.

## Conclusion

The lives and careers of Boualem Ould Rouis and Abderrahmane Nekli show how trans-Saharan connections transformed under colonial rule. Trading caravans no longer served as the dominant mode of connection across the Saharan space. Rather, French colonial rule from the Mediterranean to the Bight of Benin shaped new modes of connection among Africans in this region. The *médersas*, with their Franco-Muslim character first developed in Algeria, show how colonial institutions grew across northwest Africa. Through these schools, Algerian teachers like Ould Rouis and Nekli became agents for the colonial administration, chosen for their ability to navigate complex social worlds alien to the French. Ould Rouis's service in particular illustrates how Algerian expertise shaped colonial institutions like the *médersas* and how it crossed colonial borders, in his case from Algeria to Mauritania and thence to Mali. Nekli's career likewise demonstrates the impact of Algerians in fostering Franco-Muslim education in West Africa, and it, too, indicates the extent to which individual agency and political action could operate outside of colonial frameworks, even for colonized intermediaries. In short, both men's careers show how accommodation and resistance operated in tandem, in individual lives and through individual agency, and how these forces were built into the structure of colonial institutions.

The intricacies of these lives are impossible to understand from a single vantage point, and impossible to reconstruct through a single archive or method. Only through trans-Saharan research, retracing their movements through multiple archival collections, can historians piece together their trajectories, and their significance. Moreover, following these individuals through their institutions – in this case, the *médersas* – only raises the stakes of multi-local research because institutional archives are so unevenly distributed throughout the region. In the story laid out above, the crucial source was Ould Rouis's report on the Médersa of Timbuktu. This proved to me that he

drew explicitly on his experience as an Algerian in Mauritania while reforming colonial education in French Soudan. That document is stored only, to my knowledge, in the National archives of Mauritania, a repository that is far off the beaten path for historians of Algeria, French Soudan, or colonial schooling in general. And yet it explicitly and directly links these histories together.

As citations elsewhere in this article show, however, no single, unexpected archival find can illuminate this history or its significance. Piecing together the careers of Ould Rouis and Nekli required making linkages from the Mauritanian archives in Nouakchott to the archives of the Lycée Amara Rachid in Algiers, the Senegalese national archives in Dakar, and multiple collections in France, including the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence and, surprisingly, the diplomatic archives divided between Nantes and Paris.<sup>54</sup> (I was unable to make use of archives in Mali, which doubtless hold yet more relevant documentation.) I was lucky to encounter, on a subsequent visit to Nouakchott, two of Nekli's children, who generously spent hours speaking with me about their father's life and their family's peripatetic history. Together, the many scraps of information gathered in these places illuminated the larger narrative of these men's lives, their contributions to the *médersas*, and the larger-still trans-Saharan history of Franco-Muslim education.

In a recent contribution to the *American Historical Review*, the Africanist historian Emily Callaci reflects on acknowledgments as a place where gender relations and privilege in the academy are laid bare, as scholars credit their families for the sacrifices they make for the sake of scholarship.<sup>55</sup> Footnotes might be another place to look for evidence of intersections between the intellectual and the personal. I was only able to embark on the extended research program this project required due to the confluence of several factors. With my American passport, I was able to visit multiple countries multiple times, obtaining visas and research clearances while others, with different citizenship or less lucky timing, might not have. As a white man, I could navigate these foreign societies and institutions with greater ease than others without the racial and gender privilege I hold. As a young scholar with relatively few family obligations, I was able to devote significant time to traveling for research. I was also lucky to receive external research funding, which made these travels possible in a way that my state university institution would never have been able to fund on its own. This is not to say that these benefits came without other, more hidden costs: it was still logistically and emotionally difficult to uproot my life for an extended period. As a gay man,

<sup>54</sup> I initially went to the diplomatic archives looking for material on Franco-Muslim education in the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia. I was surprised to find significant material related to the West African colonies, in particular from the late colonial period – material that was not held in Aix-en-Provence or in Dakar.

<sup>55</sup> Emily Callaci, "On Acknowledgments," *The American Historical Review* 125–1 (February 2020), 126–131.

though I knew my passport protected me, I was ill at ease in countries where homosexuality remains a criminal offense (and, in Mauritania, a capital crime). At present, of course, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic makes such a research agenda all the more complicated to imagine for any scholar.

And yet, researching across the Saharan divide has made it clear how the Area Studies paradigm distorts our understanding of the history of northwest Africa. Equally rooted in the Maghrib and in West Africa, the *médersas* are one concrete example of trans-Saharan connections in the colonial era. Ould Rouis, Nekli, and their colleagues embodied the ways in which Islam and colonialism intersected to create new connections between places and people usually considered in separate scholarly frames. It is only through multi-local research, across the imagined division of the Sahara, that such histories can be recovered. Doing so requires a new, logistically complex approach to the diffuse colonial-era archive. But the rewards of such a method are many, chief among them a fundamental reconceptualization of conventional regional frameworks to enable a more comprehensive vision of this influential period in African history.

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