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Research Paper

## Colonialism and disability: The situation of blind people in colonised Algeria



### *Colonialisme et handicap : la situation des aveugles dans l'Algérie colonisée*

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#### ABSTRACT

Our article analyses the mode of assistance to the blind in Algeria from the beginning of the 20th century until the Declaration of Independence of the country (1962). If Muslim blinds face discriminatory practices, all the blind – French citizens and subjects – are victims of unequal treatment because they are not entitled to the social measures granted to the blind in metropolitan France. Nevertheless, during the first decades of the 20th century many actors travel between metropolitan France and the Algerian colony and introduce on the Algerian territory innovating practices developed in France (Braille schools for the blind, eye clinics, promotion of manual work). They thus disrupt traditional practices of assistance to the blind, which are intrinsically related to Islam. Moreover, we want to underline the agency of the blind in the context of colonial Algeria, since blind association leaders take part in the colonial policy making of assistance to the blind. From the 1930's, they start to claim the equality of rights of the blind of Algeria with those of metropolitan France. This research allows to reflect on the construction of the citizenship of the blind in a colonial context.

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## R É S U M É

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Notre article analyse le régime de prise en charge des aveugles en Algérie, du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à la déclaration d'indépendance du pays (1962). Si les aveugles musulmans sont l'objet de pratiques discriminatoires, tous les aveugles – citoyens et sujets français – sont victimes d'un traitement inégalitaire car ils ne bénéficient pas des mesures de protection sociale accordées aux aveugles de la métropole. Néanmoins, de nombreux acteurs circulent entre la métropole et la colonie algérienne dès les premières décennies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et insèrent sur le territoire algérien des pratiques innovantes développées dans la métropole (écoles spécialisées d'enseignement du Braille, dispensaire ophtalmologique, promotion des activités professionnelles manuelles). Ils bouleversent ainsi des pratiques traditionnelles d'assistance aux aveugles, dont certaines sont intrinsèquement liées à l'Islam. De plus, nous tenons à souligner la capacité d'action autonome des aveugles dans le contexte de l'Algérie colonisée, puisque les dirigeants associatifs aveugles participent largement à la construction de la politique coloniale d'assistance aux aveugles. Dès les années 1930, des revendications émergent en faveur de l'égalité des droits des aveugles d'Algérie avec ceux de la métropole française. Cette recherche permet de réfléchir à la construction de la citoyenneté des aveugles dans un contexte colonial.

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For more than a decade, Western sociologists have been interested in the life experience of disabled people in Southern countries and have shown an increasing interest in the colonial and postcolonial situations (Villoing, Ruffié, & Ferez, 2016). Shaun Grech attempts to analyse links between colonialism and disability using existing historical research in Latin America, Africa and Asia. In so doing, he standardizes colonial experiences and draws a uniform picture of the negative consequences of colonisation on disabled people (the role of the Christian mission in disparaging non-Christian beliefs; physical violence and mutilations as instruments of colonial punishment; monetary value attributed to the enslaved body; the role of Western medical professionals in imposing a new way of understanding the disabled body; the role of medical experiments on the body) (Grech, 2015). The author rightly points out that Western historians working on disability overlook the study of the colonial context and that it is absolutely necessary to understand how colonised people understood disability and dealt with disabled people (Grech, 2015, p. 12).

Studies from first hand sources of information on disabled people during the colonial period are very rare. In his article on the Cyrene mission and the representation of physical disability in colonised Zimbabwe, Patrick Devlieger notes that in the colonial context, assistance to disabled people fit perfectly with the civilising mission put forward by Anglican religious figures. He also points out the importance of the Christian conversion of children assisted by the Anglican mission (Devlieger, 1998, p. 721). In their article on disability in the Belgian Congo, Pieter Verstraete, Evelyne Verhaegen and Marc Depaepe emphasise the mutilations inflicted on workers unable to bring back enough rubber, on the absence of educational policies for disabled people before independence and on the fact that in their speeches, colonists considered all black natives as mentally retarded people (Verstraete, Verhaegen, & Depaepe, 2016).

The history of the blind in Africa and the Middle-East remains practically unexplored; only one article focuses on blind people's activism in Kenya (Gebrekidan, 2012), and one chapter of Sara Scalenghe's book is about blindness in the Arab Ottoman Empire (Scalenghe, 2014, p. 52–86).

Our intention here is to offer a more nuanced picture, based on empirical research in several archives, of the care provided to blind people in Algeria during the first half of the 20th century. It is

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