Websites as historical sources? The benefits and limitations of using the websites of former repatriates for the history of schooling in colonial Algeria

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, former repatriates from Algeria, now independent, have used the web as their favorite space to post and share their memories. The school memory plays an important part in these online stories, documented by class photos, testimonies of teachers and students, monographs of schools and, more rarely, personal experiences and institutional documents. Based on a small corpus of websites considered to be born-digital sources, this paper will question the different ways the memories of colonial Algeria are mediated in the internet era. It will look at how colonial experiences are recounted on the web, and also focus on the methodological issues social scientists face when working with these materials.

Keywords: Algeria, methodology, schooling, memories, websites.

This article expresses my opinion and describes my experience of using websites for historical research. They were the default solution I had to resort to because of a lack of iconographic documentation and, more significantly, the difficulty of getting to the country itself. I consulted the websites to gain a concrete understanding of the school environment and to enable me to better illustrate my study of the history of the schooling of Algerian pupils within French primary education between 1944 and 1962 (Mussard 2024). My observations focused primarily on Blida, a region to the south of Algiers in the heart of the well-known Mitidja plain, held up as a prime example of the success of French colonization (Côte 2014). My medium of choice was administrative archive documents, which were available in vast quantities, but I also used a few websites created and updated by former repatriates and their descendants. I had already used the regional websites to seek out testimonies from an area in the East of the country for a previous project researching the mixed commune (*commune mixte*) of El Kala (Mussard 2018).

I used two websites in particular for this analysis. They pertain to a memory of the *pieds-noirs* [French settlers in Algeria] which initially came about with the creation of clubs and associations, one of the iconic ones being *Le Cercle Algérianiste*, founded in 1973 (Moumen 2020). In the early 2000s, the web gradually enabled these groups to raise awareness of a mythicized past and to try to attract new members who could contribute to documentation aimed at publicizing and "safeguarding an endangered

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culture"[1]. The *Cercle Algérianiste* website went live in 2000, and another prominent website—*Alger-roi*—was available from 2002[2]. The websites I consulted for the purposes of this article have a much more local focus than the 'heavyweights' of online *pied-noir* memory but there are similarities in the topics of the documentation and the amount of space given over to schooling. It featured prominently in the online archives and in my search for people from the world of education and the school environment. I found quite a few incredible leads among the class photos and the accompanying anecdotes on two websites dedicated to the city of Blida and the surrounding region. So, my approach primarily involved an opportunistic understanding of these websites as sources. However, in addition to the odd photo and memory I took from these websites, I was also able to see the different ways of presenting the school memories which occupied a large part of these community sharing platforms. They revealed how the contributors were attempting to reunite classes in today's very different French Algeria, providing insights into the social connections of the past and the form they take today. The aim of this article is, therefore, to investigate the different ways of using these websites which tell memory-packed stories, sorting the real from the fake in terms of the sources and understanding the practice of memory expression as a research topic.

I will begin with an overview of these popular spaces for posting regional memories and then look at the main content of the website, focusing on how it presents opportunities and limitations for research. Finally, I will investigate the incomplete nature of a community memory and how the omissions hint at the inequalities of colonial domination and are important for historical research.

1. Local history and regional memory

1.1 Regional memories of a colonized village

It was when conducting my doctoral research that I first consulted a website dedicated to *pied-noir* memories, essentially to find, and make contact, with people who had lived through the era and, as the website said, were returning to the places they spent their childhood and reengaging with the Algerian populations[3]. Alongside the old photos and postcards, there were also a large number of videos of members' recent trips to Algeria. As such, the website was both showcasing the trips and also raising the profile of an association that was still seeking new contributors. Today, there is also a very active, closed Facebook group with daily posts.

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[1] Manifesto of the Cercle Algérianiste association, in *Le Cercle Algérianiste*, March 1985, cited in Moumen 2020.

[2] This information has been taken from the *Wayback Machine*, an online digital archive.

[3] https://amicaledescallois.forumactif.com/. This website was created in 2003.

Photos and short films were posted of the groups of Algerian French members of the association *Amicale de Callois* returning to the East of the country. Most documented the different stages of the journey, starting from the airport, and showed them enjoying spending time together. The once-renowned seaside city of La Calle—today known as El Kala—is some 40 kilometers from the Tunisian border. Back in 1550, the small port was besieged by Tomasino Lenche who built the Bastion de France, known for fishing and coral, which was traded for spices from the Levant. Talking about the event on March 29, 1929, the eve of the centenary of French presence in Algeria, Deputy Mayor of Algiers Louis Filippi mentioned "the early pioneers of civilization in the Barbary states [who founded] a first colonization village, the heroic forerunner of all our Algerian villages" (Martini 2002). During the colonial period, this port was known as a fully-fledged commune (*commune de plein exercise*), in other words its administrative functions were similar to those of mainland France. The area I am investigating—the mixed commune (*commune mixte*) of the same name—borders the south of this port and comprises a few small villages founded during French occupation, some of which appear in the photos posted online. In the first instance, I viewed them on the web alongside the vast map resources available at the national archives of the French overseas territories (Archives Nationale d'Outre-Mer), thus familiarizing myself with them from afar before actually seeing them in person.

1.2 A plethora of memory traces from an influential city

For this new local history research project, I focused on the regional websites which had content relating to the city of Blida and the surrounding area. Others, primarily those related to Algeria-Algiers-Roi, provided information about Blida's schools but were more rudimentary. The city of Blida sits in the heart of a central region of Algeria, an economic hub that was densely populated during the French occupation and the city itself had around 300,000 inhabitants in the mid-1950s. With its large estates and farms, the area had a thriving grape and orange growing industry. It was the birthplace of bastions of French industry, the most famous being Orangina, which was established in Boufarik in 1930, and Bastos, which expanded there from Oran. There was also the Sainte-Marguerite estate where plants were grown for the perfume industry. Many French people lived there and ran businesses alongside the Algerians, forming a vast, heterogeneous population. From the plethora of information on the websites created by former repatriates, it is clear that Blida was an important city whose influence extended to the surrounding region. I was much more interested in the documentary resources on these websites than the potential contacts I could make through them.

The names of the websites I used the most—Blida Nostalgie[4], website A, and Blida Rose de mes 15–20 ans[5], website B—gave clear indications of the creators' intentions and the emotions and nostalgia for times gone by. There was an obvious sense of community and potential associations with modern day Algeria on the El Kala site that was absent from the websites created by individuals who had collected documents and information from their own personal resources or had had them sent to them by other contributors.

Both refer back to a past to be documented in images and words, the main topic being schooling. Land on the homepage of website A, and you are very quickly redirected to the newsletters of the Bilda schools' former pupils' association and the first three tabs of website B are dedicated to the schools of Blida and the surrounding area. Website A, created in 2005, is still active and updated by its founder who is now 80 years old. He has contributed to the success of the participative web which has helped democratize the sharing of memories online (Gebeil 2015). By contrast, nothing has been added to website B since 2009. In both cases, the generations coming after those who lived through Algeria's independence have not taken over the administration of these websites. Moreover, they have no inclination to join member associations.

2. The opportunities

2.1 Making contacts and visiting the country

The official *Amicale des Callois* website is a discussion platform for a vibrant and dynamic community. Visitors are initially invited to join the group by completing a membership form and are also given the opportunity to purchase works and publications produced by members.

Through this website I was able to make contact with one of its most active members who gave me permission to post a request for testimonies and, more importantly, to join a trip organized by the association in 2010. This visit to a rather rural Algeria, my first contact with the country, was difficult. Meeting members of the association and also Algerians living there was hugely beneficial for my research. The testimonies I gathered during my stay and the private archives I then collected from descendants of colonists of the village El Tarf were invaluable sources.

2.2 The website as a source

[4] https://blidanostalgie.fr/index.html
[5] http://michelgast.mathieu.free.fr/algerie/blida/index.html

2.2.1 Identifying segregated school areas

From the two websites I consulted as part of my research into Blida, I obtained a wide variety of documents that depicted the different aspects of schooling in the region. Taken together with the archives and testimonies, I was able to build an in-depth knowledge of the school establishments in the city and the surrounding area. Their names, urban or rural locations, and the history of their creation were important for my research into the schooling issues faced by the Algerian pupils. Through postcards, local press clippings, descriptions of the building and classrooms, I was able to sketch an initial outline of where the young Algerian pupils went to school and identify the sectorization criteria in the city of Blida. A visit to the region itself then confirmed the location of these places which are still present on the various websites I consulted. The information on the website therefore paved the way for my understanding of schooling as one of the strong markers of the different levels of segmentation in the colonial village. By pulling together the class photos and the map I found on the website with the press cuttings and testimonies I gathered in the country, I was able to identify the diversity of the school environment in the city of Blida and, to a lesser extent, the smaller surrounding communities. I was thus able to draw a distinction between the schools which were almost exclusively attended by Algerian pupils and those frequented by the Europeans and to map the logics of a school landscape which the families can tend to overlook. I was also able to use the descriptions of some of the establishments, confirmed by maps recovered from archives, to understand how, in the 1950s, new classrooms and annexes were added to create a reconfigured school complex in order to accommodate some of the Algerian pupils who had until then been excluded from French public establishments.

2.2.2 An almost partial picture of life in the classroom

There were a vast number of class photos, a common feature of former pupil websites. Annotations varied but some were accompanied by lists of almost exclusively European names, suggesting that it was only former repatriates who visited the website. Website A had no schools for Algerian nationals only and there were very few of them on website B.

Stories about these establishments, which were even more rare, gave the reader an in-depth insight into everyday school life, the real-life experience of the “black box ” (Caspard 1990) of the classroom. On website A, the “memories of lessons at Bonnier school” pages were written by former pupils who recounted in detail the quirks of their former teachers, the school’s practices, and the games they played at break time. There was in

particular a lot of information about this boys' school, described as the "very best school in Mitidja and an incubator for talent"[6], posted by former pupils. They described in detail the layout and use of the buildings, some of the teachers and schooling during World War 2 but these accounts were difficult to confirm from other sources. This school featured prominently but there was no further input about others mentioned on a list, the "école de la cité musulmane" girls' school for example. The fact that not all schools and classes are represented equally on the website, and those with the most coverage were mainly attended by Europeans, is evidence that the contributors' aim was not to replicate the entire school landscape at the time of French Algeria but to share only part of the history that showcased the French schooling policy at local level, reflected in the quality of the buildings, the expertise of the staff and also the conviviality of the inaugurations and prize giving ceremonies. Despite the fact they were very much in the minority in this region, almost all of the photos and comments are about the Europeans. A rare exception to this 'blinkered' portrayal of schooling at the time is the page devoted to the *école-ouvreur* Gallieni, a school-cum-workshop opened in 1913 and initially for Algerian girls only. The article about this school contains no testimonies or photos of pupils but rather a cutting from a local newspaper explaining its inauguration, the success which led to its expansion, and the importance of its role within a Muslim population where "mothers of families sent their daughters to school so they didn't have to worry about looking after them rather than as a concern for what they were doing there[7]". The local press cutting did however mention the name of the headmistress, which led me to want to find out more about her and, more generally, to involve the local press which reported on the school inaugurations.

Several links in the list of schools led to detailed testimonies of school life. Learning, a punishment received, and a surprise interrogation are some of the topics which interspersed the very few accounts, and all within the very specific context of the classroom. There was very little about break times and what happened outside the school, but when mentioned, there was reference to the games and childhood practices in the 1950s. Although girls were in the classroom and appeared on some of the photos uploaded, they were rarely mentioned in the memories which were almost exclusively posted by men.

[6] https://blidanostalgie.fr/bulletin-anciens-eleves/Scan%20des%20bulletins/Bulletin_2012/bonnier.pdf
[7] Le Tell journal des intérêts coloniaux, March 18, 1918.

2.2.3 Capturing the rare voice of the teachers

There were fewer memories posted by former teachers, especially concerning the lessons given to Algerians. A female teacher who had worked at the Tirman school for Algerian boys talks about her time in the classroom teaching hard-working pupils who arrived at school soaked after a long walk which took them across a ravine. This testimony is one of the only ones which mentions these local boys and is more about looking after them after the ordeal of their journey than teaching them. However, the teachers were frequently mentioned and described by former pupils, who sent the website administrator group photos or told them about a strict math teacher or an elegant art teacher.

3. The shadowy side of the source

3.1 Perpetrating a closed group

As with all materials used for historical research, a website gives only a partial and one-sided insight into the topic so it is vitally important that the online data is compared with other sources. Website A, which is particularly well populated and updated, and thus the main one I consulted, did as I mentioned contain individual testimonies, photos, postcards, and also press cuttings. These press cuttings, and also extracts from the newsletters of former pupil associations,[8] are different in that they contain personal accounts from the contributors and are more akin to 'documentary evidence', which gives the website greater credibility. However, hardly any of the accounts given refer to the schools for local Algerians which are sometimes mentioned but not backed up by any documents. The names of the pupils in the class photos are almost exclusively of European origin. Indeed, the main school featured on the website is a school for French pupils, or rather Europeans in Algeria. The bias is such that the content could be French, or more specifically about mainland France. This could be explained by the willingness on the part of former repatriates to reunite their classes and the website has thus become a place primarily for members of that community to chat and share documents and information. As such, it encourages and perpetrates a closed group, while at the same time questioning the widespread notion of schooling for childhood friends from all backgrounds that broke down social and cultural barriers. There is absolutely no doubt that this type of social connection did exist between the populations of these colonial societies but there is no mention of it in the documents and accounts, thus excluding it from the past that is being disclosed and preserved.

[8] https://blidanostalgie.fr/journaux/Bulletin%20%20juin%201932/bulletin-juin%201932.htm

So where is Algeria in these school-based community recollections? What route is it taking? The names of the schools, pupils and teachers, the subjects taught, and the classroom processes could easily be those of a primary or secondary school in a North Mediterranean country. This particular portrayal of the school institution in French Algeria contradicts the perceived notion that schooling was an exception to the generally negative 'record' of French domination. Class photos are often seen as tangible proof of what was learnt at the French schools and the childhood and adolescent friendships forged between the different populations. There are indeed Algerians in the photos on the websites consulted but they only account for a very small portion of the indigenous school-age population. Despite being in the majority at the time, this group did not have access to schooling; on the eve of independence, only 31% of them were schooled by the French (Desvages 1972). The mediocre education record of French colonization is representative of the whole Empire and the vast numbers of theses and publications which appeared in the 1970s dispelled any illusion of the success of a "civilizing mission" in both the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa (Barthelemy 2010). By contrast, all the European pupils in Algeria received schooling, just like their counterparts living on the other side of the Mediterranean. As and when French families settled in the mixed communities of colonial villages, small towns, and coastal areas, drawn by public initiatives or the many congregations of different religious denominations, first primary schools and then secondary schools appeared. Areas where there were little or no French inhabitants, on the other hand, had very few schools. The reason for the lack of Algerian pupils on the website is therefore because only a small number of them received schooling compared to the pupils of European origin in Algeria, who received the same level of education as those on mainland France. So behind the story of a steadfast French educational institution lies a schooling divide and a lack of Algerian pupils in the classroom.

Moreover, the various anecdotes and illustrations say nothing or very little about the tensions that were brewing some years or months before the start of the Algerian war of independence, and yet school in the throws of the second world war, when some teachers were called up to fight and flag raising became a daily practice, does get a mention. There is one single reference to murmurings and unrest on May 8, 1945, of "Arabs armed with sticks", but the pupils had come out of school to celebrate the Allies victory. They caused the pupils to flee and suggest that the independence demonstrations in the East of the country also took place in Blida (Rey-Goldzeiguer 2006).

So, if these websites are to be used as potential sources to understand the

history of schooling in colonized Algeria, the gaps and omissions in the school memory cannot be ignored. This means that historians should also have conducted a preliminary quantitative study, backed by statistical sources, of the schooling of these populations.

4. Conclusion

Producing a history of schooling in colonized Algeria using the websites of former repatriates calls for additional methodological precautions. Historians using the web might be delighted to find such a lot of diverse documentary sources, which is of course what the contributors intended. They should however stick to their strict research procedures and compare all types of traces with other sources because the website created, and the content uploaded, is very much influenced by the agenda behind the memory and community recollection. Every source is to a certain extent subjective but these, at the conjuncture of history and memory and packed with truly unique recollections, require particular attention, but this does not mean that they are any less valuable.

The absence of Algerians, but also reminiscences of the normal day-to-day of a French education system in an Algeria where tensions and divides are emerging, lead to gaps and cover-ups in a truncated past, a topic for investigation by historians. Actually, this selective and incomplete account of schooling in Algeria confirms the unequal access to education, and yet this right had been legalized by the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1944 and the end of segregated schooling brought in by the decree of March 1949. The regional recollections uploaded to the web, therefore, confirm the discrepancies and contravention of the rules experienced in the country itself, fuelled in particular by silence and omission.

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