

Morocco in Colonial Photography

Dr. Soufiane Laachiri

Associate Professor, Hassan The 2nd University, Casablanca, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Dr Soufiane Laachiri, **E-mail:** soufiane.laachiri@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: 08 October 2021

Accepted: 14 November 2021

Published: 12 December 2021

DOI: 10.32996/jhsss.2021.3.12.1

KEYWORDS

Colonial photography, Moroccan other, colonial enterprise, photographic representations, photographic archive, Moorish other, photographic discourse.

ABSTRACT

This article represents an attempt to approach the notion of colonial discourse and photography more closely with the exigencies that put Morocco under the zoom of the colonial lens. This photographic documentation shows that nations, Morocco, in this case, were annexed to imperial powers through the utilization of various means of representation. This annexation was carried out not only by military officers, missionaries and spies but also by cartographers, travel writers and photographers who never ceased to polish the lens of their cameras so as to be able to represent indigenous identities, as well as their social lifestyles, and cultures. Therefore, the purpose of the present work is to sketch the colonial experience that links the imperializers with the imperialized through chronological documentation of colonial power and domination. Therefore, the main interest centres around the question of rereading this colonial history by analyzing and questioning colonial photography and its role in colonial expansion over Morocco. Besides, it is to unmask the alleged objective embedded in this country's 'civilizing mission'.

1. Introduction

1.1 Colonialism and photography

While looking forward to studying the histories of Morocco otherwise, we have started looking for some photographic archives and managed to find some important collections that could allow us to study power relationships in their visual terms between the colonizer and the colonized. These relationships depended not only on military actions but also on the colonial lens on which French and Spanish projects of domination and expansion depended. That is to say, before the actual imperial settlement, there was a launch of photographic campaigns led by explorers armed with up-to-date equipment to depict, describe and draw the landscape of Morocco, its geography, its people, and its cultures to understand it first and then annex it to colonizing powers.

Colonialism and photography have enjoyed, therefore, a close relationship. This relationship, being mutually a sustained way to create images of vacant spaces over time and place, highlights settlement in and improvement of 'primitive' lives, which were viewed as 'uncivilized'. It also justifies the colonial enterprise that came to escalate the development of the colonized land and work for the welfare of its people. In this dual process of interaction, photography played a significant role.

2. Camera: A tool for entertainment or a weapon for conquest

There is striking evidence that can be collected from the amassed body of photographic archives, showing the double mission of colonialism. This mission has usually been based -according to imperial centres- on 'a redemptive' project. In fact, the role of photography had relevance as propaganda to guarantee smooth access for the benefits of both the French and Spanish empires. However, through a lapidary analysis of the photographic archives, it can be argued that most of the photographs were produced to vindicate the orientalist's own theses on the orient. In this sense, "cameras were almost used as ubiquitous on the battlefield as were rifles." The Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera put it: "The camera has often been a dire instrument. In Africa, as in most parts of the dispossessed, the camera arrives as part of the colonial paraphernalia, together with the gun and the bible." Therefore, it can be said that imaging colonies were usually carried out before the presential colonial rule to study the colonies first and then annex and own them later.

3. Photographic foregrounding

It is always so screamingly perplexing for the West to read the statement of Edward Said put forward in his *Shadow of The West*, "The act of representing others almost always involves violence to the subject of representation." Put differently, the act of representing reality is often governed by political and ideological transformation and hegemonizing agendas. Hence, when dealing with photographs related to the colonial history of Morocco and its culture, it can be argued that while some of them were aimed at naturalizing the precept of colonialism, others were paradoxically used to criticize it and to empower indigenous subjects. Thus, the attitudes of photographers and their perception of the indigenous other have urged us to read between the spaces of Moroccan history with the ultimate aim to explore the discursive forms of the photographic representations of the Moroccan other. Moreover, it shows the divergences and convergences in terms of representations between French and Spanish photographers on the one hand and British travel writers on the other.

Therefore, by reading the photographic images produced particularly by French and Spanish photographers and some British explorers in Morocco, it can be discussed that differences in representations of the land and its peoples according to these imperial centres resulted from different social and political agendas. Additionally, In 'periodizing' our history in the triadic terms of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial, we can see that Morocco's French and Spanish colonial projects depended on military occupation and political interference and other forms of cultural production like photography. Hence, exploring the geographies of the other constituted a top priority. Photographs were part of the vast flow of information on which the colonial project depended. In this regard, all the details in their everyday significance constituted a subject of inquiry. The French and Spanish colonizers thus pictured landscapes, topographical features, natural resources, social climate, indigenous customs and traditions, literature, art and so forth in order to reinforce and legitimize colonial discourses in their political implications. The images, which were taken, being officially or by amateur photographers, played a major role in informing about Morocco and inviting French and Spanish audiences to come both as travellers and invaders.

Therefore, ways of defining the Moroccan question was forged in photography before and during the protectorate period. Then, the dominant definition of the colonized land and nation was reintroduced to the colonial administrators, Moroccan nationalists, and public opinion within Morocco and beyond.

Theoretically speaking, photography carries colonial assumptions about the colonized; however, amid this French and Spanish overseas military activity, the mass-production and distribution of photographs through the centre and the colony embedded colonial forms of hegemony and suppression and anti-colonial voices of resistance and rejection. Hence, photographs demonstrating violence, the massacre of both colonial soldiers and native combatants, destruction of land and landscapes and so forth created expanding feelings of sympathy from the part of the public opinion in Europe and the emergence of voices of resistance that questioned the French and Spanish presence in Morocco. Within this perspective, it can be concluded that photography didn't serve to back up French and Spanish colonial missions in the land of "exotic" and "barbaric" Moorish other; rather, it points to the voices of disenchantment and dissatisfaction with colonial conquest in military, political and cultural forms.

4. Colonial photographs and the Moroccan other

The colonial photography about Morocco has documented the whole process of colonialism and hence catalogued the different phases of colonial appropriation and domination. Indeed, this act of cataloguing put into visual and photographic terms the movement of people, tribal fractions, nomadism, traditional schools, rituals and the like to invite military officers, political leaders to invade and appropriate Morocco.

Crucial to interpreting the dimensions and contexts of French and Spanish photography is the question of the local agency. This location strategy is an important logical question to rewrite hegemonic colonial forms of history and culture. By doing so, the colonial camera is recast to retrieve the voices of the indigenous other. In this regard, and following Edward Said ideas on the powerful link between western media images and colonial knowledge and power, French and Spanish colonial photography is, in fact, part and parcel of what Said (1993:22) calls :

The debate about how the natives are represented in the Western 'media' illustrates the persistence of such interdependence and overlapping, not only in the debate's content but in its form, not only in what is said but also in how it is said, by whom, where and for whom.

Said's claims in this passage show that prior to any military and political occupation, such cultural forms of representation as photography give consent to the political process of colonization. It also shows that the invading military and political powers were not slow in adjusting the sails of their media engine, in which photography played a vital role, to picture and transfer messages on the literature of colonizing; to attack the natives and defend the colonizer; to extort the legitimate authority by manoeuvring, and frustrating the popular resistance. For this reason, important sections of the public opinion both in Morocco and in the colonizing centres were prepared via media both in form and content to create the widespread conviction that colonialism will

serve to accelerate the development of the natives who, with their refusal of this, will soon become open 'enemies' and declare their unjustified 'rebellion' and push France and Spain to justifiably deal with this misbehaviour.

In this regard, and from a historical point of view, it is very important to view history as a dual process of representation where the link between photography as an art and its home audiences could open up more chances to read colonial histories otherwise.

Hence, in examining a huge photographic archive, we have managed to analyze French and Spanish photographic representations not as ends but as mechanisms of appropriation and power in their national and cultural configurations. For example, by using gender as a critical category, it is important to question the ways Moroccan women are represented in French and Spanish photography. They are visually exhibited as visual objects of colonial authority and at the service of the colonizer's sexual power, while in fact, they can be read as sites where this sexual power is used as a strategy to permeate, penetrate and disrupt colonial authority.

It is interesting also to note that photographs demonstrating violence and abuse inherent in the colonial project awoke the growing spirit of anti-colonial movements in Morocco and Europe and contributed to the expanding feelings of uncertainty over colonialism's 'civilizing' mission. While analyzing the photographs, it is very important to note that some French and Spanish colonial photographers didn't capitalize on Morocco financially but also symbolically and culturally. However, it is important to note that this photographic representation contradicted the official narratives at times and hence became disruptive. Therefore, they sometimes work subject to political censorship. However, the wonderful spectacle of the weekly market (Suku), for stance, picturing veiled women with white Hayek, selling their local products, serves the subject of the native rather than the colonizer. Her whiteness blinded the photographer, and her daily struggle became a raw material for many thirsty anthropologists or ethnographers to start their research and studies about such areas of subjugation, hegemony, transnationalism, 'hybridity' the like.

In brief, through analysis of some photographs produced by photographers, reporters, correspondents or the like, we have found it interesting to contextualize these photos, which are considered a source of visual pleasure and a vehicle that carries the colonial assumptions about the colonized. The photograph below entitled "*Maroc- Le Quartier réservé du Casablanca-Du bons Camarades*" portrays four young ladies "being hugged" in public by three French soldiers while being watched by some natives. This photo which would certainly stir the Western fantasies about Morocco and create a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction in the colonizing circles is undoubtedly hurting the Moroccan feelings of dignity and national identity as the photographer's erotic desire to possess Moroccan women disguises a more embedded desire to dominate and take control of Morocco itself. In this context, the representation of women as passive sexual objects and "the phantasm" of the Harem in the photo is just another form of "The Morocco we want" as Lyouti claimed and memory of "*Morocco That Was*" as Walter Harris wrote.



However, from a postcolonial perspective, the dehumanizing aspects of colonial photographic discourse in its stereotypical representation of the native other manifests as a paradoxical act of power and elimination. Thus, this double-edged process of representation pushes power and resistance to go together. This ontological relation restored the voice to the natives who had been silenced under colonial rules. In this regard, we have filed a good selection of photos taken from many sources. Some of these photographs were found in books written by foreign correspondents who lived in Morocco during the colonial era, name

Walter B. Harris as an example, who has written books about his experiences in Morocco such as *France, Spain and the Rif; The Land of The Farthest West; Morocco That Was; Tafilalt* and so forth. In this collection of references, we have found many photos taken by Harris himself since he was a correspondent whose job inherited taking photos and attaching them to his articles and reports for the Times Magazine in London. In addition to imaging, Harris used to subtitle them with his own commentaries so as to add his vision and put them in their historical context.

5. Harris' photographs: 'ethnist' formulation, social differentiation or political subjugation

We can say that Harris' photographs need serious consideration to be more explicit. The disappearance of reality beyond the photograph's frame relegates an objective validity of meaning and pushes it to be made by the mind rather than by the lens. In this sense, the ideologies of the settler, be it a colonizer or its helper, are made visible in the relevance of the photographs not as an artistic production but as imperial propaganda. However, there is an advantage that can always slip through the coat of imperialism; it is the conviction that the presence of foreign occupation always creates "a self-sustaining national sovereignty" that is not just "a narrow nationalism" but a new awareness rejecting an unjustified enlarged cosmopolitanism. This raises the whole question of photographic discourse. The latter contributes to manifest perceptions and attitudes about Morocco and to keep the colonizer in the right place, doing the right thing and guaranteeing the right to rule and dominate. For this purpose, Harris has pursued his career to provide a fascinatingly expanded dimension, which is explicitly ideological but whose effects help to define both the colonizer and the colonized. On the one hand, this explains the real career of the West in the East, as Disraeli puts in his novel *Tancred* (1847), as the photographs become an imperial agenda and a tool for conquest. Besides, "the explosion of photographic images" of Morocco and its people was intended to bring the latter to "a consuming public curious to see the justification of imperialist intervention" and provide "a common sense of colonialism". In this regard, we can deduce that Harris was hard at work in Morocco, as his photographs helped to define, categorize, construct or even invent Morocco as other to European culture. He showed the "supposed deficiencies" of the country, which is hardly a nation, and the need for the colonizing powers "to intervene in and modernize it." However, his generalities and 'annihilation' of the Moroccan society have paradoxically pushed the "unchanging characteristics" of this Moroccan other to raise and speak, rather than letting the advocate speaks for them. In the photographs that follow, we can observe how Harris tampers with cultural and historical facts and colours the frames of his photographs along with his subtitles to "counterbalance the European civilization" and justify its historical rights in Africa, namely in Morocco.



Figure 1: The Sultan Going to The Mosque

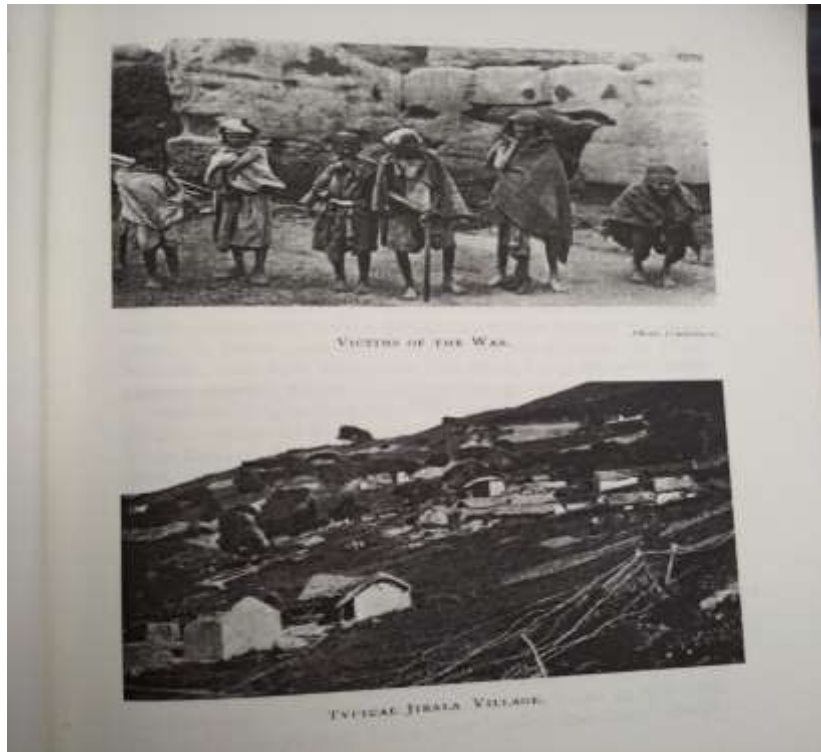


Figure 2:

Picture 1, Victims of War

Picture 2, Typical Jibala Village



Figure 3: The Island of Alhucemas

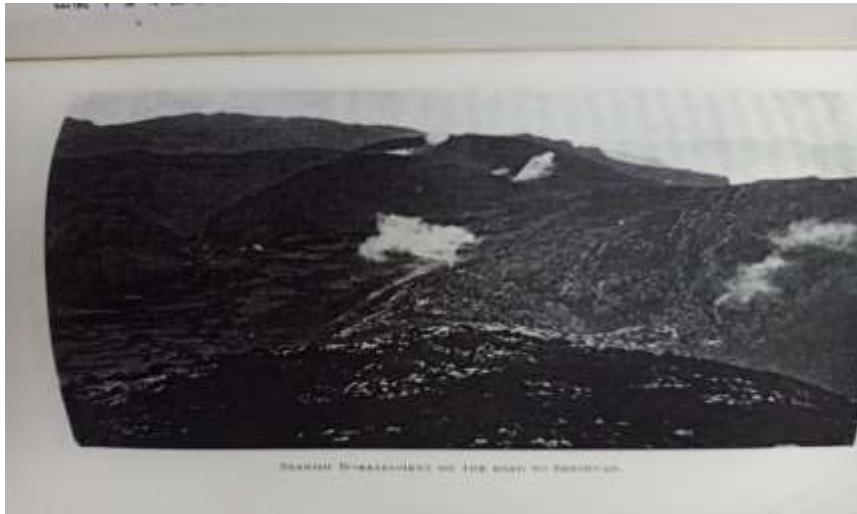


Figure 4: Spanish Bombardment on The Road to Sheshuan

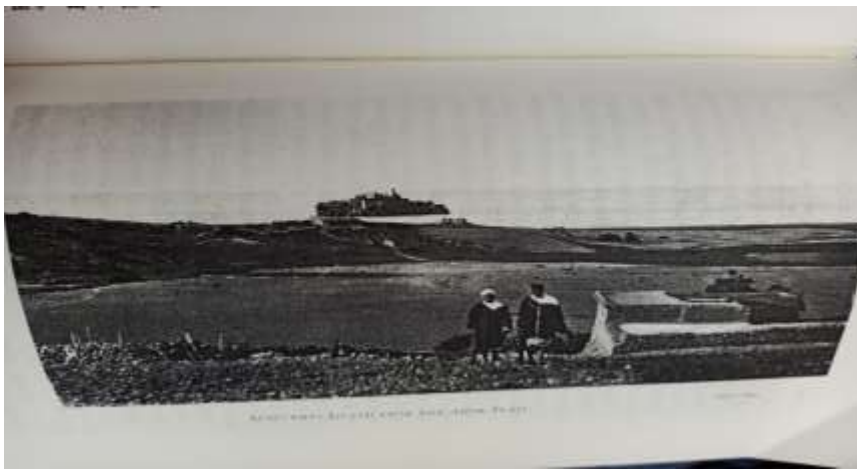


Figure 5: Alhucemas Island From The Ajdir Plain

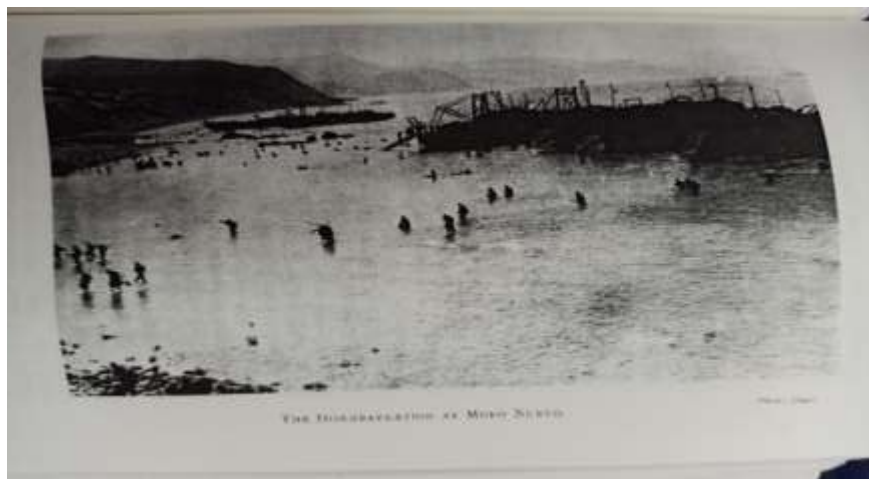


Figure 6: The Disembarkation at Moro Nuevo

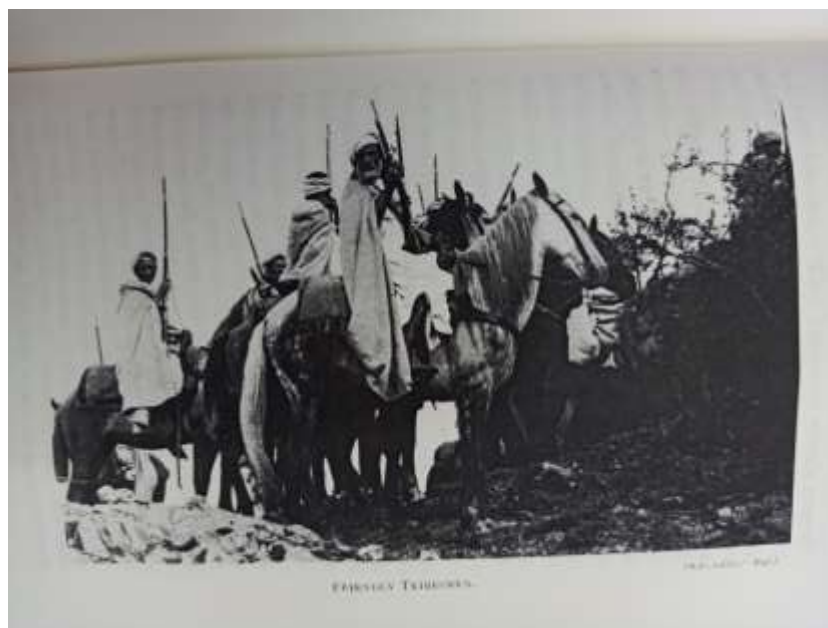


Figure 7: Friendly Tribesmen

Suppose we put the photographs along with Harris's subtitles under the zoom of analysis. In that case, we can easily see the shift of attitudes when representing the Moroccan other, who was pictured as a man who compresses within his own mind stagnation and monotony. Therefore, there is no doubt that Harris has accomplished a great job in Morocco. Sadly enough, this job was not in favour of the 'friendly' natives who welcomed and "carried him on their shoulders" the first day he arrived at Tangier port in 1897. He hasn't missed the opportunity to talk about this screamingly 'funny' scene in his book *The Land of an African Sultan* and on many other occasions. However, in his testimonial, there always seems to be "a peculiarly privileged position by a Western 'explorer' whose representative function is precise to *show* what needs to be seen." Hence, the other Moroccan is pictured as a slave to a supernatural power represented in the picture by the Sultan who has been sent by the Divine as a saviour and whose absolute authority is unarguable. In addition to that, what Harris sees behind himself is a geopolitical reality that is reduced into his pompous generalizations. Therefore, the chaotic villages, narrow binding roads, and destitute infrastructure, as well as his endless worked-out statements, were authentic fruits for his vast photographic project in Morocco.

Harris has also managed to unwillingly help the "lifeless, timeless, forceless" natives to sweep his generalizations and show an anti-imperial consciousness. In so doing, they have overcome the "inferior native", which came via the knowledge of imperial dogmas and gave legitimacy to an oppositional critical consciousness that validates the decolonizing of European colonialism in Morocco.

6. Conclusion

Generally speaking, to speak about the colonial history of Morocco, it is, I think, important to track colonial histories and legacies in their visual terms, namely photographic ones. This is a new perspective that continues to be ignored by some Moroccan historians despite the possibilities it offers to revisit and question colonial knowledge and power in their historical implications. And if the question is how much the total benefit to the colonizing powers derived from the Moroccan colony, then the answer would be easier to answer. But the real question is, what are the "advantages" of French and Spanish colonial representations about Morocco that we can read in photographs? Therefore, 'the fragility' or 'forcedness' of the photograph, whether arrayed in exhibition galleries or placed by the side of the bed, inherit that they are used to refer to that points or facts which "historical time has no right to destroy." Besides, every single picture, whether depicting misery and ignorance or justifying colonialism, cannot go beyond the frames of pity and abjection. And if the imperial underpinning of photographing elicits the question of why the indigenous is like that? The real question should be why the indigenous should wait to be allowed to be humans by colonial photographers.

References

- [1] Achkroft, B. (1995). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London & New York: Routledge
- [2] Alloula, M. H. (1987). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- [3] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. In: *The postcolonial studies reader*. Routledge
- [4] Bhabha, H. and Mitchell W.J.T. (2005). *Edward Said Continuing the Conversation*. In: Routledge.
- [5] Brooks, T.S. (2003). *The photography of LALLA ESSAYDI: critiquing and contextualizing orientalism*.
- [6] Edwards, E. (2006). *Sensible objects: colonialism, museums and material culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- [7] Fanon, F. (1969). *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*. New York: Grove.
- [8] Goldsworthy, P. M. (2009). *Colonial negatives: The prohibition and commodification of photography in Sharifian and French Morocco*. US: University of California.
- [9] Hans, C. K. N. and Jakob S. P. (2001). *Middle Eastern Cities: 1900-1950. Public places and public spheres in transformation*. The Danish Institute.
- [10] Jonathan.W. (2009). *Constructing Morocco: The colonial struggle to define the nation, 1912—1956*. US: Georgetown university.
- [11] Moresco. E. (1939). *Colonial Questions and peace*. New York: International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, League of Nations.
- [12] Said.E. (1978). *Orientalism*. US. Vintage Books.
- [13] Salvin.D.V. (2001). *Colonial cinema and imperial France, 1919-1939: white blind spots, male fantasies, settler myths*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [14] Wodak. R. and Michael M. (2009). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage Publication.