



# Colonial Violence and Collective Identity in French Algeria

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**Abstract.** French Algeria was a settler colony in which military conquests and repressions were combined with economic inequalities, establishing a structure that privileged European settlers and exploited Algerian Muslims. Nationalism, whose origin was often drawn upon European models, was taking a different path of evolution in Algeria. This article examines how colonial violence shaped the emergence of Algerian collective identity and nationalism by impairing the Algerians physically, economically, and psychologically. This research combines a close investigation of Algerian thinker Frantz Fanon with contemporary policies such as the Code de l'indigénat, as well as the proclamation of the National Liberation Front, to develop an analysis linking the broad colonial and societal context with the ultimate organizational consequence. In French Algeria, systematic violence of physical coercion, dispossession, and identity deformation generated a manichaeic regime that normalized and institutionalized the subjugation of Muslim Algerians, which gave rise to nationalism and the subsequent reformation of Algerian identities. The analysis shows firstly how physical violence fractured the society into a Manichaeic reality, secondly how legalized discrimination functioned as an instrument for exploitation that dispossessed people, and lastly how the rigid hierarchy subjugating Muslim Algerians distorted their self-perception. These dynamics later transformed into rising political awareness and demand for independence culminating the FLN insurgency. Overall, this analysis offers a comparative leverage for studies of colonialism and the recovery of narratives of the oppressed.

**Keywords:** Algeria, Colonialism, Identity.

## 1 Introduction

The land of Algeria was brutally dominated by the French since 1830, after the colonial conquest [1]. French Algeria has been one of the most horrendous examples of colonialism in the modern era. However, unlike other colonies primarily dominated by resource extraction and political dominance, French Algeria experienced a relatively emblematic circumstance during its colonial era: the settler colony. It brought permanent settlement of large numbers of European migrants who established privileged economic, political, social, and religious status in Algerian society over the indigenous

population [1]. Under these circumstances, French Algeria was not a typical colony but rather an extension of metropolitan France, built on this settler colonial foundation. Its influence, marked by racial hierarchy and societal inequalities, continues to shape French and Algerian identities, memory, and politics today.

The concept of nationalism has been a widely debated topic in historical and theoretical scholarship. Normally, the development of nationalism in Europe, especially in France, would be a modeled focus, as it often resonates with other areas of research interest. For instance, Eric Hobsbawm emphasized the historical processes of nation construction and the subsequent emergence of nationalism, examining not only the broad context of the evolution of the concept of nationalism but also the social factors closely related to people, such as sports and ceremonies [2]. Anderson, from a different perspective, raised the concept of an 'imagined community', stressing the importance of shared narratives and cultural symbols that represented collectivity in the development of nationalism [3]. Regardless of the applicability of their theories to French Algeria, Algerian nationalism developed through a path quite distinct from the European model.

Nationalism in Algeria evolved and developed within the broad context of a settler colony and colonial brutality, distinguishing itself from European conditions and those of other colonial regions. In Europe, nationalist movements had often drawn strength from appeals to class solidarity, shared history, and culture. In the French Revolution, for instance, people were united by class struggles. In Algeria, however, nationalism was to a large extent a response to colonialism and colonial brutality and inequality. Nationalism in Algeria truly found its strength from the sharp disparity between colonizer and the colonized, settler and native. The Algerian revolution was therefore not one of the reforms or integration into the French nation or French culture, but a complete dismantling of the colonial system and the subsequent reconstruction of a new independent identity.

This article aims to examine the multifaceted nature of colonial violence, including physical, economic, and identity dimensions, with particular reference to Frantz Fanon's work. French colonial rule did not merely rely on military coercion but also on deeply infiltrated structural violence that reshaped Algerian society from land dispossession and economic marginalization to the systematic devaluation of indigenous culture and identity. This research will analyze how such structural violence not only produced material inequalities but also profound distortions of self-perception, which imposed on the Algerians psychological alienation and internalized inferiority. At the same time, such violence generated resistance: social upheavals, the politicization of everyday grievances, and the emergence of a collective nationalist consciousness. By tracing the interlink between violence, inequality, and identity, this article will explore the consequences of colonial violence in French Algeria, ultimately demonstrating how these processes culminated a rise of political awareness and the ultimate reconstruction of new national identities.

## 2 Colonial Violence

The brutal process of colonial conquest started in 1830, leading to the century-long colonial control and bloodshed [1]. The French army deployed tactics of repression, including mass executions, displacements, and the destruction of villages. Violence was not only the supposed source of legitimacy for French Algeria as a colonial region but also an instrument of control, ruling through multifaceted violence to establish a clear hierarchy and order within French Algeria. Benjamin Stora claims that violence was constitutive of colonial rule, being inflicted systematically through discriminative acts such as the dispossession of land and the misposition of the settler-native hierarchy [4]. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon asserts that ‘colonization is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state He’ identifies violence as the foundation of colonialism [5]. Building on this statement, Fanon argues that decolonization is ‘simply a question of relative strength ’of violence, of which liberation means to employ the most immediate and primitive resort, force [5]. In this account, such a system can only be dismantled through violent struggles, while peaceful, non-violent attempts are destined to fail. His words hinted at the final Algerian War of Independence, that orders established by violence were to be encountered and dismantled by violent resistance.

Overall, colonization of Algeria was imposed by the oppressors through violence, by direct military conquest and repression of the indigenous population, and by enforcing a rigid hierarchical order in Algerian society. This underlying notion of foundational violence and hierarchy has been an essential premise for understanding the influence of the multifaceted violence in Algeria, as it reflects the brutality and the systemic, violence driven policies that both structured and internally fractured the Algerian society such as land dispossession, legalized imbalance of identity and cultural marginalization which consequently created the context in which Algerians were excluded from political and economic spheres of influence while being subjugated to continuous coercion physically and mentally. These substrate conditions not only embedded and entrenched social divisions, but also provoked rebellious spirits of resistance, which escalated over time and ultimately culminated widespread unrest and the violent insurgencies of the mid-twentieth century.

In French Algeria, colonization is a systematic process of physical, economic, and most importantly, identity violence. The multifaceted violence was imposed to ensure compliance and privileges of settlers, which, whether intentionally or incidentally, downplayed the roles and contributions and subordinated the status of natives in Algerian society.

### 2.1 Physical Violence

Physical violence is the most direct and immediate method by which oppressors establish and maintain control. Military annexations and brutal repressions toward insurgents are significant features of this physical violence. Fanon depicts this dynamic of frictions as a form of ‘Manichaeism: which is a world of constant underlying confrontations where the colonizers ‘never cease to be the enemy, the opponent, the foe that

must be overthrown' [5]. In this Manichaean reality, there is no space for negotiation or compromise; instead, it cultivates an excessively radical and irreconcilable antagonism towards the settlers among the oppressed. This antagonism altogether would forge a collective notion among the oppressed that settlers were a united perpetrator that needed to be taken down. Consequently, this 'shared enemy' of the people would foster nationalistic sentiments and further incite insurgencies by strengthening bonds and unity among the oppressed.

## 2.2 Economic Violence

Economic violence is an essential component of France's colonial dominance. The oppressors implemented this type of violence upon the people through a series of economic exploitation and imposed inequality that dehumanized the native Algerians (especially Muslim Algerians). The Code de l'indigénat, or the Native Code, exemplifies how the French institutionalized economic violence in Algeria by officially legalizing stratification of the society based on race and religion, subordinating Muslim Algerians specifically to forced labor, discriminative taxation, and dispossession [7], which, to a large extent, were subjugating Algerian economic benefits to French interests. There was even an 'Annex Table of special offenses against indigenes status' that included forced compliance of public seizure of land, forced tax on animals, and forced authority-prescribed service such as patrolling and guarding [8]. In this way, the Native Code not only legalized economic exploitation and deliberate disparity but also implanted economic subordination into colonial governance and the community of the colonized. Frantz Fanon also witnessed and stressed the economic exploitation. He criticized how colonizers systematically exploited the colonized regions by extracting wealth and resources, stating that 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World', underlying that European prosperity was built upon the brutal exploitation [5]. Although this tends to be quite controversial, it largely demonstrated that the conception of an underdeveloped third-world circumstance in Algeria was not incidental but a human-made tragedy. Importantly, this economic dimension reinforces the structural violence of colonialism by crippling the capability to sustain the Algerian community and by implementing an underlying financial subordination. This reveals that economic violence was not merely an outcome of colonial dominance but also its instrument or method for control: a strategy that converted legal categories into instruments of dispossession and transformed the locals into a resource for sustaining the colonial state and settler society, crippling the livelihood and coherence of the Algerian society and native community by disintegrating this aspect of necessity (economic independency and development) to maintain control and superiority. Economic violence is both the origin of societal and economic colonialism and the means to ensure colonial rule. It reveals the underlying trajectory of Algerian society, which significantly influenced their identity formation and the culmination of nationalistic affections under repressive and challenging economic circumstances.

### 2.3 Identity Violence

Identity violence, or psychological oppression, has been a crucial component in analyzing colonial violence as well, although it tended to be taken for granted considering its commonality in colonial studies. It could be argued that the established settler colony has, to a considerable extent, seemingly 'concealed' the underlying disparity and discrimination in society, as the influx of French settlers into Algerian society created an illusion of harmony through an image of integration between natives and settlers. However, in reality, it reinforced a rigidly cruel societal hierarchy and entrenched discrimination and exclusion of the indigenous majority. The institutionalized racism in French Algeria had a tremendous influence on the future insurgencies and reformation of collective identities. The very existence of Code de l'Indigénat explains well the situation of discrimination and racism in French Algeria. The Native Code presents a form of dual legal regime, in which Europeans, such as the settlers and French citizens, including the Jews, were governed under French civil law, while Muslim Algerians were subject to this parallel, discriminatory, and brutal Native Code. What further intensified the situation was the purposely devised division in French Algeria. For instance the religious discrimination, specifically targeting Algerian Muslim majority was made explicit and condescending by the The Crémieux Decree, in which Algerian Jews were granted French citizenship[15]: 'their real status and their personal status shall be, dating from the promulgation of the present decree, regulated by French law' [9], which on the opposite Muslim natives of Algeria remained subjects, and the disparity between Muslim Algerians and the ones with formal citizenship and settler status was further embedded thoroughly infiltrating the society[13]. This deliberate exclusiveness would not only institutionalize racial and religious division among the colonized people, but also pinpoint a cruel underlying logic of the oppressors, that some natives were assimilable and capable of cooperation with them, while others were denied a rational and fair stance in the social hierarchy. This division, which targeted the Muslim Algerians, has been one of the key approaches of the colonizers to maintain colonial control and dominance by dispersing resentment, internal conflicts, and subjugation, sending out the message of racial inferiority among the community and individuals. The consequence of this institutionalized bullying was fatal to the colonial regime, fostering rebellious spirits among the oppressed.

Additionally, identity violence to a large extent leads to the disaffirmation and misconception of self-perception of the Algerians under the circumstances of racism and subjugation. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon discusses this internalized inferiority produced by colonial racism, describing that 'Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white' [10]. This internalization of racism and distortion of identities leads to an imbalance of status and psychological suffering, alienating the oppressed people from their own social and cultural values [11]. Moreover, Fanon underlines the repression of indigenous cultural practices due to identity violence. Fanon states that 'with ritual circle community acts out its trauma and purification', suggesting that the destruction of these cultural practices would repress vital energies and emotions [5]. This repressed 'latent violence,' which is often diffused through rituals and internalized in the form of self-destruction, could

be channeled and externalized into organized revolutionary struggles[6]. The subjugation imposed by identity violence and the unhealthy desire to be part of the 'white' community have been tormenting the oppressed, which has gradually corrupted and distorted their self-perception and collective identity[16]. These underlying logistics explain well the ultimate breakout of the Algerian Independence War. French Algeria not only marked economic dispossession as mentioned above, but also psychological and spiritual control. This obnoxious process that produced a fractured identity perception among the colonized, ironically aimed at maintaining control, was precipitating insurgencies.

### 3 Discussion

Colonial violence in French Algeria, based on the above discussion, operated as a politically biased regime, an exploitive economy, and a strictly implemented hierarchy that segregated the Algerians from others. The systematic violence thus exceeds bare coercion and subjugation towards the suppressed; it implanted this worldview in which they were rendered instinctively inferior to others, backward rather than modern, and therefore 'naturally' suited only to subordination. In practice, this internalized inferiority, through punitive policies such as the Code de l'indigénat, differentiated citizenship and economic subjugation, was translated into a societal norm of marginalization of Muslim Algerians and of a graded hierarchy. The effect was dichotomous. Firstly, it fractured the subjectivity of the oppressed, implicitly forcing them to aspire to the alien norm brought and enforced in French Algeria by the settlers. This phenomenon was also witnessed by Fanon, who diagnosed it as a colonial 'Manichaeism'. Simultaneously, the repression of indigenous cultural traditions and expressions that were performed within communities as emotional outlets and appeasements, metabolizing trauma, further burdened the already intensifying reality. Secondly, it emphasized intercommunal boundaries between European settlers, Jews, and Muslim Algerians. The inequalities and segregation all manifested a codified exclusion. Over times, this concoction of physical, identity, and economic violence did more than control and domination: it politicized into a systematic subjugation and dehumanization towards the French Algerians through legislation and implicit societal consensus of racism, converting grievances into programmatic, organized nationalism, and most importantly making sovereignty, independence and a justified armed struggle the mainstream, popular propensity among the oppressed. Under these circumstances, armed struggle appeared not only reasonable and legitimate, but also necessary to peel off the imposed distortions and help reconstruct new collective identities on terms free from the influence of colonial rule. This laid the foundation for future insurgencies and calls for revolution and independence.

## 4 The Awakening of Collective Identity in French Algeria

The underlying context of surging demand for independence was rising political awareness in French Algeria, which infiltrated and solidified in people's minds due to systematic violence. The grievances and tribulations suffered were to be distributed and transformed into explicit claims about human rights, sovereignty, and liberty. Contemporary racism-inclined legislations, such as the discussed Code de l'indigénat, fostered not only nationalism among the Algerians and antagonism against the oppressed, but also the epiphany of independence and sovereignty. An example, adhering chronologically to the gradual ascendance to the outbreak of the independence war, would be the 1920 Petition organized around Amir Khaled post-World War 1 [12]. The allied Muslim Algerian notables collected signatures and submitted the petition to the French Parliament, demanding an overhaul of the political order. The petition specifically focused on the abolishment of the Code de l'indigénat, pragmatic political representation for Muslim Algerians and equal citizenship, and cultural preservation [11]. The coherent and unified demand illustrates well the transformation of colonial 'subjects' to consciously independence-seeking spirits. The petition, built on war efforts by the Algerians, was justified enough that it prompted a supposed sense of equivalence towards the oppressors among the suppressed. It, to a very large extent, reveals a shift from passive colonial subjugation and the abiding restrictions and prejudices that chained people for long, towards active and self-conscious claims to political equality and sovereignty.

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) transformed that diagnosis into practice, and crucially, it led to the reconstruction of a collective identity that peeled away the colonial influence of inferiority. The war broke out on November 1, 1954 [1]. In that day an important announcement was made, marking the ascendance of political awareness among people and its ultimate form: armed struggle. The FLN (the National Liberation Front) Proclamation of November 1, 1954, called for 'the restoration of the Algerian state, sovereign, democratic and social', justifying armed struggle as a necessary and effective means to achieve such a goal [14]. This proclamation specifically pointed out that the national struggle 'has reached its final stage of realization', appealing to the rising political consciousness among the people and echoing with the surge of resistant spirits. The mobilization of people by FLN and its armed wing, ALN, marked a new chapter in Algerian history, uniting people under the shared objective of independence and the defeat of their common enemy [1]. In the process, the movement gradually displaces and deconstructs the psychological distortions implanted by the colonizers through their own stories and narratives of unity, sovereignty, and sacrifice for the greater purpose of independence. Ultimately, at the end of the war in 1962, independence was not only the outcome of diplomacy and brutal conflicts of war, but a cultural and societal reformation rinsing away the dirt of colonialism, underpinned by a collective discard of the imposed inferiority and a reclamation of sovereignty.

## 5 Conclusion

French Algeria shows how systematic violence fractured and distorted the economy, society, and perception of the people. It became a manichaeian regime that physical conquest and recurrent oppression, accompanied by economic exploitation, exemplified by the Code de l'indigénat and differentiated citizenship, which normalized and institutionalized the subjugation of Muslim Algerians. Following Algerian philosopher Frantz Fanon's insight that colonialism itself is 'violence in its natural state', French Algeria reveals how the violence degraded livelihood and distorted self-perception while generating solidarities and politicized desire for independence and sovereignty[14]. The grievances crystallized and deeply infiltrated the people, forming a widespread popular nationalist movement that sought armed struggle as a remedy for past injustices. Thus, the importance of independence in 1962 to the Algerians was not only tied to the defeat of a colonial power and the destruction of its abusive social order, but also closely linked to the construction of a new political community, as the Algerians reclaimed sovereignty and rebuilt collective identity on their own self-conscious, subjective terms.

Future research could focus on the more profound, long-term influence of identity violence in contemporary Algeria, investigating its current impact on political memory and nationalism at present. It is also encouraged that comparative studies be conducted between Algeria and other colonial states, such as Congo, Kenya, or South Africa, to elaborate and define the boundaries of the applicability of systematic violence and identity distortion in research on colonialism. It should be noted that the psychological suffering should not be overlooked in research on imperialism and colonization: it was one of the most durable consequences of empires. By focusing on the oppressed and their mentality, the underlying moral connotations and the brutality inflicted upon them would not be underplayed or euphemized under the broad narrative of colonization and imperialism. Euphemizing the perspective of the victims and neglecting their psychological suffering not only silenced past suffering but also distorted societal perceptions in a way that it sugarcoated and perpetuated the historical injustices. Historians have the unique authority in interpreting the past and inquiring into the truth, and with this authority bear the responsibility of recovering the truth and the proper inspection of the past, even when doing so challenges the long-standing narratives of heroism and gradually normalized physical brutality about colonial conquest that has been inspected with apathy and indifference. Otherwise, it would only deepen the wound of those who suffered in the past by silencing them and euphemizing their misery at the present.

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