L'ÉCOLE DES HAUTES ÉTUDES EN SCIENCES SOCIALES

The postal service in the *Douar*

Noncitizen users and the colonial state in rural Algeria from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War

Annick Lacroix
Translation **Helen Tomlinson**

In **Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales** **2016/3 71st year** , pages 709 to 740
Publisher **Éditions de l'EHESS**

ISSN 2268-3763
ISBN 9782713225130
Uploaded: 01/05/2017

Article available online at
https://shs.cairn.info/journal-annales-2016-3-page-709?lang=en

CAIRN.INFO

Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.

Electronic distribution Cairn.info for Éditions de l'EHESS.
You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at cairn.info/copyright.
Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

Colonial Algeria

Éditions de l'EHESS | Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.caim.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

The Postal Service in the *Douar*

Noncitizen Users and the Colonial State in Rural Algeria from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Second World War*

Annick Lacroix

In a half-condescending, half-mocking vein, in 1853 the *Écho d'Oran* described a visit around the city's telegraph bureau organized for a few Algerian notables:

> *It was intriguing to see all these primitive children of a civilization so remote from our own curiously considering the pieces of equipment from every angle and trying to explain to themselves with their eyes, if not with thought, the mysteries of this instantaneous communication, then pronouncing requests of a most peculiar nature for fear of some subterfuge on the part of the French officials.*[1]

These discourses, which resurfaced in the early twentieth century as the telephone was installed across the country, construed Algerians as having a different and archaic relation toward the colonists' technological innovations. The

This article was translated from the French by Helen Tomlinson and edited by Chloe Morgan and Stephen W. Sawyer.

* What follows develops some of the results of my thesis: Annick Lacroix, "Une histoire sociale et spatiale de l'État dans l'Algérie colonisée. L'administration des postes, télégraphes et téléphones du milieu du XIX^e^ siècle à la Seconde Guerre mondiale" (PhD diss., École normale supérieure Cachan, 2014). It is accompanied by documentary materials accessible via the "Complementary Reading" section of the website http://annales.ehess.fr/?lang=en. I would like to thank Augustin Jomier, Camille Lefebvre, and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen for their valuable comments.

1. Excerpt from *L'écho d'Oran*, September 7, 1853, cited by Alfred Etenaud, *La télégraphie électrique en France et en Algérie, depuis son origine jusqu'au 1^er^ janvier 1872* (Montpellier: Ricateau, Hamelin, et Cie, 1872), 1:121.

Annales HSS (English Edition) 71, no. 3 (2016): 469-497, 10.1017/S2398568218000031

© Éditions EHESS 2018

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

representations conveyed by the press and certain reports by the French administration underline the difficulties of the Algerian population's "entry into communication"[2] and, more generally, their entry into modernity. Yet while the Postal, Telegraph, and Telephone Services (PTT) appeared to be precious tools in terms of extending civilization and imposing bureaucratic norms, politicians and senior civil servants hesitated to provide such services to populations from which they were not sure to make a profit.

Throughout the nineteenth century, colonial subjects using these services remained largely absent from the PTT archives. One might be tempted to explain this by the high rate of illiteracy in both Arabic and French, since barely 2 percent of Algerian children attended school at the end of the 1880s.[3] However, this absence contrasts with recent historiography that has underlined the intensity of scriptural practices in Africa during the late modern period. Thanks to the Saharan caravans and traveling peddlers, for centuries written texts and rumors had circulated with men and merchandise along pilgrimage routes and within Sufi confraternal networks.[4]

It is difficult to trace the demarcation line between the refusal of an administration loath to recognize Algerians as service users and the justifiable rejection of a colonial conception of progress. Until the First World War, the *douars*[5]—administrative divisions comprising villages and hamlets inhabited almost exclusively by noncitizens[6]—were rarely served by a postman or equipped with a post office. At the same time, a number of studies focusing on the nineteenth century describe the refusal of a section of the colonized population to send their children to school, the avoidance of vaccination campaigns organized by the French authorities, the circumvention of census procedures, or the discredit heaped upon those who adopted European dress.[7] But though hypothesis of rejection is an

2. Maurice Agulhon, "La société paysanne et la vie à la campagne," in *Histoire de la France rurale*, vol. 3, *Apogée et crise de la civilisation paysanne, 1789–1914*, ed. Georges Duby and Armand Wallon (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1976), 307–86, here p. 307.

3. Charles-Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France, 1871–1919* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968), 341.

4. Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

5. In rural areas, each commune comprised several *douars*, themselves divided into hamlets (*mechtas*). A *douar* could have up to several thousand inhabitants.

6. Until the Second World War, the colonized populations of Algeria possessed French nationality but not the status of citizens (except those who had undertaken an individual "naturalization" procedure, which required abandoning their personal status). Though the national category is partly anachronistic when applied to the early twentieth century, the term "Algerian" has become widespread in the historiography to designate these colonized populations.

7. Yvonne Turin, *Affrontements culturels dans l'Algérie coloniale : écoles, médecines, religion, 1830–1880* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1971); Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, vol. 2, *De l'insurrection de 1871 au déclenchement de la guerre de libération, 1954* (Paris:

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

appealing one, it does not explain how we should take the influx of petitions from Algerians during the interwar period, requesting the extension of postal services to the countryside at a time when a section of the colonized population was becoming increasingly politicized and urbanized.

Shortly after the capture of Algiers in 1830, the colonial authorities established a network of transportation and news distribution in the regions of northern Algeria where there was a sizeable European population; as the conquest progressed, this was extended further into the countryside and the desert regions. The study of this network and its inadequacies makes it possible to measure the great variety of ways that colonized territory was appropriated and control exerted over the populations living there. Colonial domination, far from merely establishing coercive relations, was part of a legal logic of difference and produced socioeconomic inequalities while simultaneously seeking to induce multiple forms of support among the local populations. To what extent did this service, based upon a densely meshed communication network and embodied by a great many civil servants, function in Algeria as it did in metropolitan France? The postal service provides a useful vantage point from which to observe the colonial situation in its most local and everyday manifestations.

This article examines the ways in which the colonized population in the countryside interacted with these tools that were emblematic of a certain technical modernity. Following the seminal work of Omar Carlier, it raises the issue of the "social use and the cultural scope of a system of communication and exchange,"[8] and strives to reconstruct the texture of these practices in a way that avoids reducing them to mere reactions to colonist-led measures. While preexisting circuits of information exchange endured, a growing minority of Algerians identified the postal service as a resource and made use of it. The demand from these "communicants" subsequently led the colonial administration to make certain adjustments to its policies.

As in metropolitan France, the PTT administration rarely produced detailed statistics about its users: it did not seek to determine the proportion of men and women, or citizens and noncitizens, who used its services, nor to describe their socioprofessional profiles. The local press, like collections of letters and postal marks, often reflects an urban and European Algeria with which historians are more familiar.[9] Sources discovered in the Algerian archives nevertheless make it

Presses universitaires de France, 1979); Hannah-Louise Clark, "Administering Vaccination in Interwar Algeria: Medical Auxiliaries, Smallpox, and the Colonial State in the *Communes Mixtes*," in "Between France and Algeria: The Social History of Algerians in the Twentieth Century," ed. Muriel Cohen and Annick Lacroix, special issue, *French Politics, Culture and Society* 34, no. 2 (2016): 32–56.

8. Omar Carlier, "Horaires et réseaux, de la diligence à l'hydravion. Note sur la révolution de l'espace-temps dans l'Algérie coloniale (1830–1954)," in *Villes, transports et déplacements au Maghreb*, ed. Chantal Chanson-Jabeur et al. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 123–44, here p. 124.

9. Postal marks were stamped onto the envelope by the PTT service for the purpose of mail management. See Edgard H. de Beaufond and Charles ab der Halden, *Catalogue des marques postales et oblitérations d'Algérie, 1830–1876* (Paris: E.-H. de Beaufond, 1949).

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

possible to discern the most local and rural stratum of administrative activity.[10] Complaints and correspondence thus attest to the exchanges sustained between village assemblies, colonial administrators, prefects, and the PTT services. The documentation from the *wilāya* of Algiers, in particular, provides information on the transformations under way in Kabylia. This Berber-peopled region had benefited from the favorable prejudices of the French authorities, which from the late nineteenth century had established Christian missions, schools, and infrastructures there.[11] It had its own lettered elites, connected among themselves as well as with villagers who had left to settle in the towns, and capable of supporting the demands of the peasant population. Nevertheless, there are many examples indicating that the demand for facilities expressed by the Algerian population extended beyond this particular region. Far from limiting the field of study to the French presence in Algeria, the colonial documentation elucidates certain workings of Algerian society and raises the question of the forms of reorganization prompted by the colonial encounter.

Algerian Users: Out of Sight until the First World War

Throughout the nineteenth century, European users complained about the slow delivery of mail or the late arrival of the postman. The local press and chambers of commerce relayed these requests, demanding postal and telegraph services of the same quality as the metropole to support the development of agricultural centers and the smooth conduct of commerce.[12] In contrast, the administrative archives of this period have conserved little trace of Algerian appeals requesting facilities for the *douars*.

A Service for Which Public?

In the early years of the conquest, the postal service and the telegraph were used as instruments of control over the Algerian territory: they accompanied soldiers

10. PTT archives conserved in collection 18-75 of the Algerian National Archives, Birkhadem (hereafter "ANA") and collection 6O of the Archives of the *Wilāya* of Algiers (hereafter "AWA").
11. Alain Mahé, *Histoire de la Grande Kabylie, XIX^e–XX^e siècles. Anthropologie historique du lien social dans les communautés villageoises* (Saint-Denis: Bouchène, 2001); Karima Slimani-Direche, *Chrétiens de Kabylie, 1873–1954. Une action missionnaire dans l'Algérie coloniale* (Saint-Denis: Bouchène, 2004); Charles-Robert Ageron, "Du mythe kabyle aux politiques berbères," in *Le mal de voir. Ethnologie et orientalisme, politique et épistémologie, critique et autocritique* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1976), 331–49.
12. AWA, 6O/24, petition from the inhabitants of Bordj-Ménaïel, March 27, 1873; ANA, 2HI/396, complaint by an inhabitant of Mustapha to the Chamber of Commerce of Algiers, February 11, 1888; ANA, Chamber of Commerce of Algiers (hereafter "CCA"), 399, letter from the president of the Chamber of Commerce of Algiers to the director of the PTT concerning distribution of mail in the town of Bône, October 16, 1883.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

and facilitated communication between the interconnected echelons of the new colonial power. Very quickly, however, from the 1840s onward, these services also became a resource for European civilians. The Algerian PTT service was initially frequented by male citizens based in urban areas, who were generally white-collar professionals or worked in trade. Though in towns mail was delivered to homes up to four times a day, users of the postal and telegraph service in the Algerian countryside remained few in number. The 4,400 inhabitants of Félix-Faure, a large village situated approximately sixty kilometers to the east of Algiers, sent no more than four hundred telegrams over the course of 1901.[13] And although some settlers living on isolated farms took out a newspaper subscription, they sometimes did so merely to ensure a daily delivery from the postman, precisely because they did not receive their mail on a regular basis.

Although sharply in deficit, the Algerian PTT service devoted a considerable part of its budget to the provision of public coaches connecting villages that were home to a large number of colonial settlers. The French authorities were of the opinion that the regular transportation of correspondence encouraged long-term European settlement and enabled settlers to maintain a connection with loved ones who remained in the metropole.[14] From 1901, the self-governing "full exercise" communes (*communes de plein exercice*)—where nine-tenths of the European population lived—were all served by the PTT. With an average of one post office for every fifty-one square kilometers, their facilities were of a similar level to those in metropolitan France, whereas the mixed communes (*communes mixtes*) had only one post office for every 560 square kilometers. It was nevertheless in these huge rural districts that three-quarters of the noncitizen population lived.[15]

Until the First World War, colonized spaces thus found themselves hierarchized, with a clear administrative shortfall in mixed communes that was also apparent in other sectors such as health care or teaching.[16] This marked a striking contrast with the French countryside, where significant efforts were made in

13. AWA, 6O/5, questionnaire on the Félix-Faure office, 1901.
14. Higher Council of Government, *Exposé de la situation de l'Algérie par M. le Gouverneur général Chanzy. 12 novembre 1878* (Algiers: Imprimerie de l'association ouvrière, 1878), 52.
15. *Communes de plein exercice* were organized according to the metropolitan model and led by an elected mayor, whereas *communes mixtes* were a colonial creation headed by appointed administrators and could sometimes be as large as a département of metropolitan France. See directorate-general of the Postal Service, *Annuaire de l'Administration des postes et des télégraphes de France pour 1901. Manuel à l'usage du commerce, de la finance et de l'industrie* (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1901); Paul Pelet, *Atlas des colonies françaises, dressé, par ordre du ministère des Colonies, par Paul Pelet : 27 planches de cartes, texte explicatif, index alphabétique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1902); government-general of Algeria (hereafter "GGA"), directorate-general of Civil and Financial Affairs, *Tableau général des communes de plein exercice, mixtes et indigènes des trois provinces de l'Algérie (territoire civil et territoire militaire). Avec indication du chiffre de la population et de la superficie* (Algiers: n.p., 1902).
16. Aïssa Kadri, "Histoire du système d'enseignement colonial en Algérie" (paper presented at the conference "Pour une histoire critique et citoyenne. Le cas de l'histoire franco-algérienne," École normale supérieure de Lyon, 2006), http://colloque-algerie.ens-lsh.fr/article.php3?id_article=71.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

the 1870s and 1880s to provide postal and telegraph facilities.[17] Thus, if Algerians long remained absent from the PTT archives, this was because they were not initially viewed as potential users of this public service. Whereas in Europe the postal service provided an essential institution that worked to create a relation of horizontality between citizens and to bring the inhabitants of the French countryside into closer contact with the central state,[18] the colonial administration was slow to consider noncitizen populations as legitimate service users, let alone as a lucrative clientele. Despite the fall in the price of stamps in the second half of the nineteenth century, the cost of a telegram remained exorbitant, including for the European working classes. Nevertheless, we should not deduce from this that Algerians did not communicate.

The Ancientness of Scriptural Practices

Numerous studies have drawn attention to the ancientness of scriptural practices in the rural Maghreb, as well as in Africa as a whole.[19] They underline the links that this written culture maintained in the early modern period with Islam,[20] and also reiterate the existence of productions that were not exclusively religious, but linked to commercial, diplomatic, or scientific exchanges.[21] For centuries, letters had traveled along the trading circuits that traversed the desert, and several sources evoke the existence of postal services organized by—and for the benefit of—the powerful.[22] As early as the first half of the sixteenth century, the messengers of Leo Africanus connected Timbuktu to the southern border of Morocco. In the 1850s, the Saharan populations still maintained camel-based transport connections, with a relay of riders crossing the 3,000 kilometers separating Biskra from Saint-Louis,

17. Olivier Bataillé, "Naissance d'une administration moderne. La fusion des services postaux et télégraphiques français au XIX^e siècle" (PhD diss., Université Toulouse I, 2002), 113–15; Nicolas Verdier, "Poste et territoires : quelques indications sur une évolution de la pensée du territoire chez les administrateurs de la Poste au XIX^e siècle," in *Histoire de la Poste. De l'administration à l'entreprise*, ed. Muriel Le Roux (Paris: Éd. Rue d'Ulm, 2002), 61–86, here pp. 74–75.

18. Sébastien Richez, *Postes et postiers en Normandie. Témoins des transformations nationales, 1830–1914* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire de La Poste/L'Harmattan), 2009.

19. Éloi Ficquet and Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, "Cultures de l'écrit en Afrique. Anciens débats, nouveaux objets," *Annales HSS* 64, no. 4 (2009): 751–64.

20. For the Maghreb, mention should be made of the ongoing research of Élise Voguet and the work of Ismaïl Warscheid, including his thesis "Traduire le social en normatif. La justice islamique dans le grand Touat (Sahara algérien) au XVIII^e siècle" (PhD diss., EHESS, 2014).

21. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*; Camille Lefebvre, "Le temps des lettres. Échanges diplomatiques entre sultans, émirs et officiers français, Niger 1899–1903," *Monde(s)* 5, no. 1 (2014): 57–80; Lefebvre, "Itinéraires de sable. Parole, geste et écrit au Soudan central au XIX^e siècle," *Annales HSS* 64, no. 4 (2009): 797–824; Daniel J. Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in Southwestern Morocco, 1844–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

22. Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Senegal, in the space of a month.[23] There was thus no public service in the precolonial era, but news was conveyed to Ottoman sultans and governors, tribal chiefs and religious savants, rich merchants, and even occasionally their slaves.[24]

These testimonies serve as a reminder that the Maghrebian populations communicated among themselves before the French conquest, and that after 1830 they continued to maintain parallel circuits which in large part eluded the control of the colonial authorities. On the very edge of the Sahara, the region of the Mzab was one of the bastions of Ibadism, a minority current of Islam. Augustin Jomier has shown that this region found itself at the heart of a network of scholarly circulations well before the colonists established their own system of communication—until the twentieth century, letters continued to circulate between Oman, Zanzibar, and North Africa in the luggage of these pious men.[25] Information traveled "without waiting for the newspaper and the postman."[26] How else to explain the fact that on the day convicted men were summoned by the forces of law and order, "there occurred that phenomenon, well known in these parts, whereby, without the telephone, all the Arabs had been informed. They knew that on this day all the officials would be occupied with the task, and they took advantage of it to take their herds out to graze in the mountains"?[27] Similarly, Julia Clancy-Smith has traced the spread of rumors in periods of crisis, particularly via confraternal networks,[28] while Carlier has underlined the central place of the Moorish café in the circulation of news.[29]

Where the colonial archives describe the alternative means of communication developed by the Algerians, it is often in relation to the reference point that was the colonist's modernity. The press thus denigrated the "crude procedures" used in the countryside to warn of the arrival of the French troops, considering that these methods—the lighting of fires, gun shots—were not "even on a par with those familiar to the Romans."[30] Conversely, some travelers expressed stupefaction

23. Jean Prax, "Communications entre l'Algérie et le Sénégal," *Revue orientale algérienne, recueil de documents*, March 1852, 280–81; Lucette Valensi, *Le Maghreb avant la prise d'Alger (1790–1830)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), 58–59.
24. Bruce S. Hall, "How Slaves Used Islam: The Letters of Enslaved Muslim Commercial Agents in the Nineteenth-Century Niger Bend and Central Sahara," *Journal of African History* 52, no. 3 (2011): 279–97.
25. Augustin Jomier, "Les réseaux étendus d'un archipel saharien. Les circulations de lettrés ibadites (XVII[e] siècle–1950)," in the thematic dossier "Désenclaver l'histoire de l'Algérie à la période coloniale," ed. Hélène Blais, Claire Fredj, and Sylvie Thénault, *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 63, no. 2 (2016): 14–39.
26. Omar Carlier, "L'espace et le temps dans la recomposition du lien social. L'Algérie de 1830 à 1930," *Urbanité arabe. Hommage à Bernard Lepetit*, ed. Jocelyne Dakhlia (Arles: Actes Sud/Sinbad, 1998), 149–224, here pp. 186–89.
27. GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Assemblées plénières* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1908), 415.
28. Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*.
29. Omar Carlier, "Le café maure. Sociabilité masculine et effervescence citoyenne (Algérie XVII[e]–XX[e] siècles)," *Annales ESC* 45, no. 4 (1990): 975–1003.
30. "De la télégraphie en Algérie," *Akhbar. Journal de l'Algérie* 1345, May 14, 1850.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

at the efficacy of the communication methods they encountered. When François Charvériat, a professor at the law school in Algiers, visited Kabylia in 1887, thirty years after the conquest of the region, his small group had "long been spotted" by the local shepherds:

> *Sentinels were staggered from summit to summit so as to keep watch over our movements and communicate news of them over great distances. … All the intelligence they gathered was immediately telegraphed, thanks to the most curious system imaginable. We would hear frequent calls, which, originating nearby, would be repeated from valley to valley. These calls, phrased in tones that the dryness of the air made all the more piercing, formed, through their various nuances, a great many signs serving to transmit dispatches in a manner worthy of the Morse alphabet or the optical telegraph. … To communicate amongst themselves, the natives used cries of a specific intonation and agreed signals, in particular the whacks of a* burnous *in one direction or another.*[31]

Evidence thus suggests innovative individual and collective improvisation as well as considerable areas of freedom. The PTT fell far short of channeling communication flows in their entirety, and it is striking to observe that the service paid scant attention to these parallel circuits which eluded its control, taking little umbrage at the breaches of the postal monopoly they represented. Yet although colonial domination did not make these communication practices disappear, the extension of the French postal service brought about a sea-change and prompted certain adjustments.

Traces of Algerian Service Users in the Early Twentieth Century

The PTT gradually absorbed some of the exchanges occurring in the colonized society, particularly between men of letters and merchants already accustomed to epistolary practices. In the Southern Territories (*Territoires du Sud*), postal revenues increased in the early years of the twentieth century. In Djelfa, they amounted to more than 11,000 francs in 1909, almost twice as much as the revenue from telegrams.[32] Tradesmen in the region, who wrote their business correspondence in Arabic, preferred the postal service to the telegraph, which although more rapid meant using intermediaries to write the telegrams in French and send them.[33] The extension of the telephone network in the early twentieth century would later enable illiterate populations to directly manage their affairs. When, in 1905, the local authorities were discussing the relevance of installing telephone facilities in the mixed commune of Aumale (Sour El-Ghozlane), the inspector-general of the

31. François Charvériat, *À travers la Kabylie et les questions kabyles* (Paris: Plon, Nourrit, et Cie, 1900), 60–61.
32. GGA, *Exposé de la situation générale des Territoires du Sud de l'Algérie, présenté par le Gouverneur général, Ch. Jonnart. Année 1910* (Algiers: A. Jourdan, 1910), 110.
33. GGA, *Exposé de la situation générale des Territoires du Sud de l'Algérie, présenté par le Gouverneur général, Ch. Lutaud. Année 1911* (Algiers: A. Jourdan, 1912), 114.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

PTT voiced his support for the project, pointing out that "the natives … greatly appreciate this means of correspondence, which frees them from recourse to writers, whose assistance is often very expensive."[34]

Use of the PTT services soon moved beyond the small circle that was the European, city-dwelling, educated, and well-heeled elite, extending here and there into the countryside. Fanny Colonna documents the epistolary connections maintained between 1871 and 1903 by Algerian prisoners held in Calvi: alongside the many complaints they addressed to the administration, some prisoners regularly exchanged letters with their loved ones in Kabylia, in the Aurès, and in the south.[35] For some families, separation no doubt instigated the use of the postal service, since incarceration, pilgrimage to Mecca, or seeking employment outside the village would entail the sending of a letter to convey a piece of important news or request money.[36] The colonial period was thus marked by the superposition of "indigenous" and colonial communication practices. Until the 1930s, the old information channels—rumor, word of mouth, and the conveyance of letters and money by trusted intermediaries—endured and coexisted alongside the new network of the colonial postal service.

The Implementation of Bureaucratic Order Revisited

The postal service was a complex institution, by turns envisaged by the colonial authorities as an instrument for establishing control across the territory, a resource to stabilize European settlement, and a commercial service from which they expected a certain degree of profitability. More rarely, the PTT services were presented as a form of social engineering capable—like the school or the dispensary—of transforming and civilizing those under their governance.[37]

In Algeria, as elsewhere, the administration ascribed great importance to the apparatus of writing. Written text was an instrument used to gain knowledge of, and control over, the population; it was also the means by which rules and decisions were conveyed. The colonial administration almost always communicated in French to its Algerian subjects. In return, civil servants from the prefectures, the government-general, or Parisian ministries expected replies to conform to the norms of French bureaucracy. The lettered elites (*tolba*), redeployed in the service of the colonists, were no doubt the first to appropriate these conventions, whether

34. AWA, 6O/22, letter from the inspector-general of the PTT in Algiers to the prefect, August 2, 1905.
35. Fanny Colonna, "Les détenus arabes de Calvi, 1871–1903," in *Golden Roads: Migration, Pilgrimage and Travel in Medieval and Modern Islam*, ed. Ian Richard Netton (London: Curzon Press, 1993), 95–109, here p. 100.
36. The pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) was made by 5,000 Algerians in 1913. See Luc Chantre, *Le pèlerinage à La Mecque. Une histoire européenne* (Paris: Flammarion, forthcoming).
37. Claire Fredj and Marie-Albane de Suremain, "Un Prométhée colonial ? Encadrement et transformation des sociétés coloniales," in *Les empires coloniaux, XIX^e–XX^e siècles*, ed. Pierre Singaravélou (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2013), 271 sq.; On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

they were engaged in administrative letter-writing in the *bureaux arabes* or assisting village chiefs.[38] During her travels in the areas around Laghouat, Marie-Anne de Bovet described the function of the *khodja* who served as her interpreter as follows:

> *A* khodja *is someone who writes. A secretary at the* bureau arabe, *Mohammed-ben-Taleb is a* khodja. … *A man who works—albeit in moderation—and seated on a chair, not on a saddle … ? Yet though the one who writes is of little concern, the writing itself is quite something. The* carta—*one of those Italian infiltrations in a pidgin half comprised of Arabic words, with the rest borrowed from Latin languages—commands the respect of these illiterate people. They profess a superstitious respect for "the writings," that is to say, the apparatus of laws, decrees, orders, and memoranda, the complex, mysterious, all-powerful organ of our authority.*[39]

Nonetheless, the value of writing to bolster legitimacy or administer proof was not a colonial import. Ghislaine Lydon has shown that since the early modern period tradesmen had used the authority of written Muslim law in conjunction with oral testimony in their transactions: contracts already served to cement relations largely based on trust.[40]

The PTT administration sought to play its part in disseminating writing and a certain technical and bureaucratic modernity among its users, whether citizens or noncitizens. To reach out to literate Arabic-speaking populations, it used the official journal *Le Mobacher*, which had been "founded with the aim of informing the natives of the government proceedings that concern them and initiating them into the spirit of our administration."[41] It was here, in May 1866, that the government-general published a public notice in Arabic encouraging "the natives" to put stamps on the letters they posted. The text details the regulations in force and reiterates the advantages of stamps: the absence of a surcharge upon receipt, politeness vis-à-vis one's correspondent, and a better guarantee that the letter would reach its destination. Indeed, the administration estimated that "of ten unstamped letters written by Arabs to Arabs, nine are refused," as most recipients preferred to forego their letter rather than pay the tax of thirty centimes.[42] A poster was also put up in the "native" troops' caserns, at markets, in the *bureaux arabes*, and in the Arab and

38. Colette Establet, *Être caïd dans l'Algérie coloniale* (Paris: Éd. du Cnrs, 1991), 345 and 349. [Established by ministerial decree in 1844, the network of *bureaux arabes* was designed to serve as an interface between the French administration and the colonized population. Their function should not be confused with that of the British "Arab bureau."—*Les Annales*.]
39. Marie-Anne de Bovet, *L'Algérie* (Paris: E. Boccard, 1920), cited in Franck Laurent, *Le voyage en Algérie. Anthologie de voyageurs français dans l'Algérie coloniale, 1830–1930* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008), 888.
40. In her study on the region of present-day Mauritania, Lydon talks of the "paper economy of faith": Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, 277. See also Lydon, "A Paper Economy of Faith without Faith in Paper: A Reflection on Islamic Institutional History," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 71, no. 3 (2009): 647–59.
41. *Le Mobacher* (bilingual Arabic-French official journal), June 2, 1861.
42. *Le Mobacher*, May 2, 1866.

French schools in the subdivision of Oran.[43] It is not certain, however, that these initiatives produced results, since an almost identical document was republished two years later.[44]

The noncitizen masses were above all considered as administrative subjects that the authorities wished to be able to contact, including when they lived in isolated regions. In 1879, a circular reminded mayors and administrators of their role as "intermediaries between the Post Office Services and persons answerable to the law domiciled in territory not visited by postmen."[45] For a section of the Algerian population, a letter was thus synonymous with a court summons, a fine, or a warning from the legal authorities.[46] It was a vehicle of bureaucratic constraint, or indeed of the violence of colonial law.

This effort to instill bureaucratic order nevertheless remained incomplete and margins of maneuver endured. Although in theory the colonized populations had to address the authorities in writing and in French to hope to have their voices heard, studies have shown the persistence of epistolary practices in Arabic.[47] In the colonial archives, historians regularly find letters in Arabic addressed to the administration: Colette Establet estimates that such letters represent 20 percent of the requests that reached the *bureau arabe* in Tébessa in 1890, proving that French established itself only partially and gradually as the favored vector through which to solicit the colonial authorities.[48] Above all, for those who mastered the finer points of how to write complaints and petitions in French, the letter came to constitute a veritable resource.

Writing to Lodge Requests

Colonized users did not remain passive in the face of the directives and solicitations of the colonial administration. They could comply, make a request in return, or contest a decision.[49] Traces of these exchanges can be seen on some envelopes, as in the case of a letter posted from the Béni-Aïcha pass to the governor-general, whose address is translated into Arabic characters at the top of the envelope.[50]

43. National Archives of Overseas Territories (hereafter "ANOM"), Aix-en-Provence, 40J/6, letters addressed to the general commander of the subdivision of Oran, May 15, 1866, and June 19, 1867.
44. *Le Mobacher*, October 1, 1868, non-official section.
45. AWA, 6O/61, circular of May 21, 1879, mentioned in a letter from the governor-general to the prefect of Algiers, November 22, 1904.
46. Musée de La Poste, Paris, P. Zoummeroff collection, file 11, letter from the *justice de paix* of Sainte-Barbe-du-Tlelat to Abdelmoulay Abdelkader ould Mohamed, living in a *douar* close to Saint-Lucien, April 1903.
47. Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
48. Establet, *Être caïd dans l'Algérie coloniale*, 365.
49. For instance, several letters from the soldier Salah ben Abdallah contest his expulsion from the French army after almost twenty years of service. See Hubertine Auclert, *Les femmes arabes en Algérie* (Paris: Société d'éditions littéraires, 1900), 215.
50. Musée de La Poste, Paris, P. Zoummeroff collection, file 4, letter addressed to the governor of Algeria, June 17, 1873.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Whether written single-handedly or collectively, a letter could symbolize resistance to an administrative or judicial decision that was deemed illegitimate. One study shows that between 1881 and 1914 the French administration received numerous complaints pointing to abuses of power by civil servants or protesting against dispossessions of land, disciplinary powers, the high rate of taxes, or the forestry regime.[51] This genre of petition was not new in the Arab world, and indeed throughout the nineteenth century certain notables had tried their hand at it in order to have their requests passed on to the Ottoman and later colonial authorities.[52]

Nevertheless, although the petition already formed part of the contestational repertoire of the Maghrebian populations, it was only belatedly employed in the demand for postal services. It was the "native" elected representatives to the financial delegations that first criticized the under-administration of the countryside.[53] On several occasions between 1899 and 1917 they demanded the appointment of postmen and the installation of postboxes across the rural communes of Algeria.[54] Jacques Bouveresse emphasizes that these Arab and Kabyle delegates, often presented as toadies in the pay of the colonial authorities, acquired a genuine understanding of the needs of the noncitizen population.[55] Their demands were followed by those of schoolteachers, who requested the organization of a regular

51. Fatiha Sifou, "La protestation algérienne contre la domination française. Plaintes et pétitions (1830–1914)" (PhD diss., Université de Provence, 2004). See also Ouanassa Siari Tengour, "Constantine, 1887 : des notables contre la naturalisation," in *Histoire de l'Algérie à la période coloniale, 1830–1962*, ed. Abderrahmane Bouchène et al. (Paris/Algiers: La Découverte/Éd. Barzakh, 2012), 235–38.

52. Henning Sievert lists a number of these efforts in "Intermediaries and Local Knowledge in a Changing Political Environment: Complaints from Libya at the Turn of the 20th Century," *Die Welt des Islams* 54, no. 3/4 (2014): 322–62, here p. 331. See also Nora Lafi, "La gouvernance ottomane des équilibres locaux. Le rôle du bureau central des pétitions à Istanbul et l'usage de ses archives," *Cahier du CERES* 21 (2012): 261–74; John Chalcraft, "Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005): 303–25; Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine, 1865–1908* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

53. This small "colonial parliament" comprised three delegations: colonists, noncolonists, and "natives" (the latter composed of an Arab section and a Kabyle section). With the law of December 19, 1900, the financial delegations voted on the revenue and expenses of the special budget of Algeria and contracted loans to operate public services and ensure that the colony possessed a proper economic infrastructure.

54. GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes* (Algiers: Galmiche, 1899), 13, request from the Kabyle section; GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Section kabyle* (Algiers: Galmiche, 1901), 13, session of November 6, 1901; GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Délégations indigènes* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1905), 9, session of March 7, 1905; GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Sections arabe et kabyle* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1908), 31, session of April 7, 1908, request by Ahmed Aïtmehdi; GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Délégations indigènes* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1917), 45–46, session of March 28, 1917, request by Mr. ben Ali ben Cherif.

55. Jacques Bouveresse, *Un parlement colonial? Les délégations financières algériennes, 1898–1945* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2008), 1:837.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

postal distribution service in "*douars* that have schools."[56] But each time the inspector-general of the PTT opposed the budgetary investment these changes would imply.[57]

The argument positing a rejection of the postal service must no doubt be advanced with caution. Can the persistence of parallel circuits be interpreted as a deliberate refusal of the means of communication put in place by the colonial authorities? Did these practices of circumvention, like the incessant damage to the rural telegraph network, represent a "hidden" register of contestation vis-à-vis the colonial order?[58] It is impossible to speculate further, as the motivations of those involved remain difficult to fathom. Yet if the illiterate *fellah* (peasant) did not use these services in the late nineteenth century, it was probably less out of defiance than that he did not know how to write, that the post office was several hours' walk away, and that he simply did not feel the need to.

The Postwar Turning Point: Social Demand and the Pluralistic Practices of Rural and Colonized Users

In the early twentieth century, as a result of the profound reconfigurations of rural society, a growing minority of the Algerian population came to view the recourse to writing and the transmission of news as a resource. The interwar period was thus a pivotal moment, marked by an increased demand for means of communication, discernible in the requests of "native" elected representatives and the drawing up of a great many petitions.

The Spectacular Rise in the Volume of Mail as a Result of the War and Migration

During the First World War, the colonial authorities observed that, as in metropolitan France, correspondence was increasing "in extraordinary proportions."[59] It must

56. Discussions of the General Assembly of Schoolteachers of the department of Algiers, reported in *Le courrier algérien des PTT* 57, April 25, 1905, 1.
57. GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Délégation des non-colons* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1913), 345, session of May 27, 1913, response of E. Nivoix to the request of the delegate from L'Arba, G. Benoît.
58. James Scott develops the concept of "hidden-transcript resistance" to document infrapolitical practices of resistance, such as poaching or attempts to evade taxes. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Damage to communication infrastructures was often perpetrated during children's games or resulted from their being used otherwise than intended (resale of copper, posts used as firewood, construction of snares, etc.): Lacroix, "Une histoire sociale et spatiale de l'État dans l'Algérie colonisée," 284 sq.
59. AWA, 6O/55, letter from the administrator of the Djurdjura to the subprefect of Tizi-Ouzou and the prefect of Algiers, December 29, 1923; Gérard Bacconnier, André Minet, and Louis Soler, *La plume au fusil. Les poilus du Midi à travers leur correspondance* (Toulouse: Privat, 1985).

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

be recognized that for many mobilized men the conflict represented a radical upheaval: many left not only Algeria for the first time, but also their village; they traveled by train and by boat and discovered the metropole. The assistance of the regimental interpreter and the fact that sending mail was free of charge for soldiers encouraged letter-writing.[60] The experience of war also brought soldiers' loved ones in Algeria into contact with the institution of the post office: aside from the fact that the separation provided perhaps one of the first occasions to write to one another, the post offices of Algeria were charged with paying soldiers' families the daily allowance of one and a half francs, introduced in 1917. It was the post offices, too, that would later pay the pensions of maimed and disabled veterans.[61]

The war thus brought new users to the PTT services. Obviously, the conflict was not the sole reason, but it both revealed an increasingly widespread practice and acted as a catalyst.[62] In some rural and trading areas, the payment of wages, pensions, and money orders amounted to considerable sums. Thus, in Chellala, in the High Plateaus region, the cash reserve of 36,000 francs granted to the post office in 1917 proved to be insufficient during the sheep season: between May and June, sales of wool and livestock were so high that the postmaster found himself unable to pay upfront the telegraph money orders sent to Algerian tradesmen.[63]

In the interwar period, the post office became the theater of a new relation to writing and to money, one that extended even into peasant communities. With the acceleration of economic migration, the need to communicate became more pressing. The money flows transiting between post offices on the two shores of the Mediterranean now represented impressive sums.[64] From the mid-1920s onward, the post office in Fort-National (Larbaā Nath Irathen), in Greater Kabylia, earned the state more than 60,000 francs in annual profits. During the first ten months of 1926, it transmitted 21,500 telephone calls and paid 15,700 money orders.[65] The phenomenon of emigration toward metropolitan France should not, however, mask the even more numerous circulations within Algeria itself. Having left to work in

60. This free service applied to all soldiers mobilized in France or in the colonial empire. GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Assemblées plénières* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1917), 602, session of April 7, 1917, report by Charles-Albert Joly.

61. Gilbert Meynier, *L'Algérie révélée. La guerre de 1914–1918 et le premier quart du XX^e siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), 549, decree of March 24, 1917.

62. The war produced valuable documentation that has no equivalent in peacetime: Ministry of Defense Historical Service, Vincennes, 7N/979, report by the Commission of Postal Control, Algiers, no. 45, May 1918; 7N/144, confidential instructions to interpreters seconded to the depots of indigenous Muslim soldiers, signed by the war minister, Alexandre Millerand, November 24, 1914. I would like to thank Alain Messaoudi for providing this reference.

63. AWA, 6O/2, letter from the principal inspector to the prefect of Algiers, May 21, 1917, with an extract from the register of deliberations of the municipal commission of Chellala, April 27, 1917.

64. Octave Depont, *L'Algérie du centenaire. L'œuvre française de libération, de conquête morale et d'évolution sociale des indigènes. Les Berbères en France. La représentation parlementaire des indigènes* (Paris: Sirey, 1928), 139.

65. AWA, 6O/5, extract from the minutes of the Conseil général of Algiers, session of October 21, 1926.

the towns and the mines of Constantinois, many inhabitants of Akbou, in Lesser Kabylia, regularly sent money orders to their home region.[66] Later, in the 1930s, the disputes concerning the postal agency in Larbaā des Ouassifs likewise revealed that these services were being used by natives of the Djurdjura, now spread out across the four corners of Algeria.[67]

The experience of migration also proved transformative for those who remained.[68] Parents, wives, and children saw their social roles reconfigured by the absence of a son, husband, or father hired far from the village. Between 1937 and 1939, the post office in Nedroma, in the far west of Algeria, paid 23,000 money orders addressed to Algerian families, amounting to a total sum of ten million francs.[69] Forced to acquaint themselves with the rules governing correspondence and forms, emigrant workers and their loved ones remaining in the *douar* now knew the price of a stamp, the frequency of deliveries, and the day pensions were paid. These were the new users of the post offices, and they were sometimes obliged to travel thirty or forty kilometers to cash a simple money order.[70]

Ordinary Usages and the Delegation of Writing

In the aftermath of the First World War, the use of the PTT services thus penetrated into the Kabyle mountains and beyond, including the regions supplying emigrant workers and even the High Plateaus, where there were dynamic trading exchanges. Sending one's mail via the colonial postal institution was no longer a curiosity reserved to the wealthy: the price of a stamp for a standard letter—forty centimes in 1927—represented less than 5 percent of the daily wage of an agricultural hand or a noncitizen masonry worker.[71] Clearly, not everyone was accustomed to letter-writing in an Algerian society that remained predominantly illiterate in both Arabic and French.[72] Nonetheless, it was increasingly the method of communication envisaged to resolve a dispute or conclude a deal, one possibility in a repertoire that hitherto prioritized other options, such as journeying in person, sending a representative, or simply abandoning the idea of traveling such a great distance.

66. GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Délégations indigènes* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1917), 45, session of March 28, 1917, request by Mr. ben Ali ben Cherif.
67. AWA, 6O/14, petitions from inhabitants and tradesmen originating from the region of the Djurdjura, addressed to the director of the PTT and the chambers of commerce, 1935–1936.
68. Abdelmalek Sayad, "Les trois 'âges' de l'émigration algérienne en France," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 15, no. 1 (1977): 59–79, here p. 65, considers that emigration encouraged monetary circulation in rural areas and transformed the peasant way of life.
69. Jean-Jacques Rager, *Les musulmans algériens en France et dans les pays islamiques* (Paris/Algiers: Les Belles Lettres/Imbert, 1950), 139–41.
70. AWA, 6O/14, letter from inhabitants of the Djurdjura to the Chamber of Commerce of Algiers, August 14, 1935.
71. In 1925, masonry and leveling workers in Mostaganem earned 1.4 francs an hour. Around 1930, a farm laborer received 8 to 10 francs a day. See ANA, 18-75/55, workers' wages in November 1925; Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, 2:512–14.
72. In 1936, 2.1 percent of Algerian men could write in French. See Fanny Colonna, *Instituteurs algériens, 1883–1939* (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1975), 56.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

In the 1920s, villagers who had previously remained on the margins of epistolary or monetary usages now received a pension, paid their suppliers by money order, or received remittances from a son or brother who had emigrated. Many became familiar with the procedures of the colonial bureaucracy. In the—albeit particularly literate—region of Fort-National, a section of the population sent their requests to the administrator in French and directly by mail in order to save themselves from making the time-consuming trip in person. Over the course of 1930 alone, the secretary of the mixed commune thus received 5,504 requests for civil registration documents or various certificates.[73]

Though these practices had entered the realm of possibilities, few Algerians at this time were able to read their mail and respond to it. For *fellahin* (peasants), as indeed for Italians and Spaniards recently settled in Algeria, the assistance of an intermediary was generally indispensable.[74] Brahim, the father of Bachir Hadjadj, was a professional letter-writer in Sétif before the First World War: "During the day, he would set up stall in some prominent place, with his professional paraphernalia—just a dip pen, an inkwell, blotting paper, and a piece of folded cardboard that served as a desk blotter—in the Moorish café in El-Djemiî." It was there that he wrote "letters to the mayor and to the administrator, requesting that a document be issued, asserting a right, or requesting a tax rebate."[75]

Alongside these writing professionals and the literate neighbor who could help out as a favor, from the interwar period there was a growing discrepancy between the generation of fathers who did not know how to read and that of their children, who were more likely to attend school. In *The Poor Man's Son*, Mouloud Feraoun relates how, in a Kabyle village in the 1920s, a small boy found himself in charge of the mail. Upon his return from school, his mother, brothers, and sisters are waiting for him to open a letter from his father, who has left to work in the metropole:

> *He took the letter from Baya's hand and kissed the envelope. Everyone closed in around him. Dadar, his little brother, pulled at his* gandoura *and cried, "Hurry, let me see Father!" Fouroulou hesitated. It was true that he was in middle school, but a letter is hard, you have to explain it. To be doubly sure, he decided to call for a former student who had graduated with a certificate. The scholar did not need begging.*[76]

As well as suggesting that the arrival of a letter in rural areas remained an exceptional event, this literary testimony underlines the importance that the illiterate invested in writing. The fact that people capable of corresponding were rare

73. Martial Remond, *Au cœur du pays kabyle* (Algiers: Éd. Baconnier-Hélio, 1933), 43.
74. The practice was also common in France in the nineteenth century. See Roger Chartier, ed., *La correspondance. Les usages de la lettre au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 66.
75. Bachir Hadjadj, *Les voleurs de rêves. Cent cinquante ans d'histoire d'une famille algérienne* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), 89.
76. Mouloud Feraoun, *The Poor Man's Son: Menrad, Kabyle Schoolteacher* [1954], trans. Lucy R. McNair (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 87.

made these moments collective.[77] Fouroulou's father turned to the services of a professional letter-writer whom he had met on the rue de la Goutte-d'Or in Paris. Written to be read aloud, his message ends with "warm greetings to all the family," before naming each person individually. Initially, the child does not dare write a reply, worried he does not fully master the epistolary codes: "He knows that there are certain formal expressions and he does not know what these are."[78] Later on in the novel, however, he assumes sole responsibility for correspondence addressed to his father. The example is reminiscent of those portraits of the first generations of literate individuals in colonial contexts: armed with skills that remained fragile and uneven, they composed their letters in a hesitant hand and ventured into uncertain territory to bridge the distance with a loved one or respond to the solicitations of the administration.[79]

More than the—very slow—development of writing skills, and in spite of the remoteness of the post office, the impetus no doubt came from a growing number of Algerians recognizing the advantages of the postal service and the money order. In the interwar period, the local Arabic-language press published postal rates and criticized certain dysfunctional aspects of the postal administration.[80] It also reported on the debates among the *ulama* as to the licitness of using the telegraph or the telephone. In 1936, in the pages of the reformist newspaper *Al-Umma*, Sheikh Bayyūd mounted a campaign against those he referred to as the adversaries of progress and defended recourse to the telephone to announce the dates of Ramadan.[81] Beyond theological quarrels, the importance assumed by these services in the everyday life of the rural populations can be measured above all by the forms of mobilization they launched in order to obtain new facilities.

The Rhetoric of Petitions

In 1918, a petition by the inhabitants of Yakouren, a Kabyle village located to the east of Tizi-Ouzou, denounced the closure of the post office:

> *It has perhaps not occurred to the administration that though there are few Europeans in this center, the importance of Yakouren stems above all from the industries located here and the great many natives it serves. Indeed, there are significant wood, coal,*

77. Keith Breckenridge, "Reasons for Writing," in *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 143–55.
78. Feraoun, *The Poor Man's Son*, 88.
79. Barber, *Africa's Hidden Histories*.
80. *Al-Nadjah*, May 7, 1926, and *Wādī Mīzāb* 26, April 1, 1927, "Open letter to the director of the PTT (*mudir al-būsta*) in Algeria." I would like to thank Hannah Louise Clark and Augustin Jomier for providing me with the references to these Arab-language newspapers, and Charlotte Courreyre for translating them.
81. The introduction of these technologies from the West roused controversy across the Arabo-Muslim world. See Sheikh Bayyūd, *Al-Umma* 58, January 17, 1935, and 60, January 28, 1936; Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dār al-Iftā* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 82–84.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

> *and cork industries in Yakouren. … It is very important to receive not only letters but also recorded deliveries in Yakouren itself, and to be able to conduct business transactions as swiftly as possible. … There is much correspondence between natives and remittance of money in this region. The evangelical mission in Tabarourth willingly provided assistance to the natives and agreed for letters and money orders to be sent there, taking it upon itself to expedite them to those concerned. But each month, this mission alone receives more than three hundred letters and distributes over 10,000 francs. And this money arrives in money orders of low value, of 50, 100, and 200 francs. … At a time when we [i.e., the European community] are seeking to provide some satisfaction to the natives, who have been, and at present remain, so useful to us, whether for public works in France or in terms of defending the cause of law and justice, it would be truly regrettable and impolitic to inconvenience them by closing a post office that is useful to and needed by them.*[82]

The petitioners list the reasons to retain the postal service, citing industrial and commercial activities, the remoteness of neighboring hamlets, and the high volumes of money and letters being sent and received, finally emphasizing the sacrifices that colonized soldiers and workers had made during the war. Only a copy of this text is preserved in the archives, and it does not reproduce either the names or the signatures of the plaintiffs. Yet the passage cited above suggests that those who wrote the petition—European notables no doubt—were not part of the group of "natives" whose virtues and needs they laud. From the 1910s and 1920s, however, Algerians themselves began to demand access to means of communication in order to reduce the isolation of the countryside: representatives of the religious confraternities (*zāwiya*) and village assemblies (*djamā'a*) made it known that the postal agency and the telephone booth had become indispensable services for Algeria's rural population.

At the assembly of the financial delegations, Arab and Kabyle elected representatives re-entered the fray in the 1920s: after landowners, it was now the turn of the reformist movement Les Jeunes Algériens to relay demands for the provision of facilities. At the same time, petitions poured in. In 1927, the inhabitants of Aïn-Oussera, to the south of Boghari in the High Plateaus, requested that a telephone booth be opened. The members of the *djamā'a*, tradesmen, the café proprietor, and the rural constabulary also lent their support to the request.[83] Like the isolated colonial settlers of the late nineteenth century, they worried about the "lack of any swift means of postal, telegraphic, or telephone communication, [which] is often detrimental, particularly to our tradesmen."[84] Similarly, in 1932 twenty signatories—each bearing an Arab or Berber surname and a male first name—asked the director

82. AWA, 6O/14, copy of the petition from the inhabitants of Yakouren addressed to the inspector-general of the PTT, October 17, 1918.
83. AWA, 6O/16, petition by the inhabitants of Aïn-Oussera addressed to the administrator of the mixed commune of Chellala, April 26, 1925.
84. AWA, 6O/17, letter from the inhabitants of Aïn-Oussera addressed to the prefect of Algiers, May 16, 1927; information provided by the administrator of the mixed commune of Chellala, June 4, 1927; letter from the administrator to the subprefect, June 18, 1927.

of the PTT that their hamlet of Adeni, located in the mixed commune of Fort-National, receive regular deliveries from a postman. In their text, they reiterated their status as taxpayers and specified their profession or their condition as injured veterans. Although most of the petitioners were farmers, the village chief, the schoolmaster, the carpenter, and a tradesman also added their names to the request.[85] At the bottom of these petitions, the names were often written in Arabic characters, while others signed with a cross or their fingerprint.[86] The contribution of the professional letter-writer was occasionally explicit.[87] Above all, the presence of identical elements in multiple requests suggests the elaboration of veritable narrative strategies.[88]

These texts generally emphasize the expected volume of mail, stimulated by the economic dynamism of the region. The number of tradesmen and the main industries are listed, as are all activities likely to encourage exchanges, from the existence of a busy market to the proximity of a Sufi confraternity or Christian missionaries. The figures cited in support of the request confirm that the post office in the administrative center is at saturation point, or stress the number of kilometers inhabitants of the *douar* have to travel to reach it. Lastly, the petitioners reiterate that the departure of villagers to settle in another region or emigrate to the metropole has engendered considerable flows of money and news. The exact line of argument varies from one letter to another, but in each the aim was to convince the PTT service that the provision of postal facilities would be profitable. More rarely, some went so far as to point out the effectiveness of such infrastructures in terms of controlling the territory and the administered subjects. The inhabitants of Tamazirt, for example, were quick to emphasize that opening a postal agency would finally enable summons from the court and the administrator to reach their recipients on time.[89]

Demanding their own communication infrastructures, the inhabitants of the *douars* mobilized the village assemblies in order to have their requests passed on. The *djamā'at* made contact with the administrator or issued requests that were debated by the municipal commission of the mixed commune. For example, in 1937 the assemblies of the villages of Amlouline and Beni-bou-Abdou requested the appointment of a postman, who "would provide the greatest services to the

85. ANA, 18-75/130, letter from the inhabitants of Adeni to the director of the PTT, September 22, 1932.
86. AWA, 6O/13, protestation by the *djamā'a* of the *douar* of Tachachit addressed to the prefect of Algiers, November 5, 1938.
87. ANOM, 23H257/320, request written in Arabic by the professional letter-writer Tahar Mansouri ben Maceur ben Djalallah, for the inhabitants of the village of Azzeguem (Oulad Saoud tribe), translated into French and conveyed to the director of the PTT, February 22, 1946.
88. Didier Fassin, "La supplique. Stratégies rhétoriques et constructions identitaires dans les demandes d'aide d'urgence," *Annales HSS* 55, no. 5 (2000): 955–81, here p. 959, emphasizes the role of intermediaries who formulated "the request in the rhetoric that seemed to them the most effective."
89. ANA, 18-75/130, letter from the inhabitants of the *douar* of Iraten addressed to the governor-general, August 14, 1929.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

very dense population of the region, [which is] in constant contact with the six hundred Kabyle workers currently in France."[90] In the mixed commune of Maillot, meanwhile, the repeated relocation of the El-Esnam postal agency aroused tensions between the *djamā'at* of neighboring villages.[91] Most of the time, the local authorities then voiced their support for these requests to the prefect or the PTT service. The same was true of some financial delegates or members of the departmental council, to whom a few of these petitions were addressed—evidence that, in the interwar period, the workings of the colonial administration no longer held many secrets for a good number of Algerian notables.

Forming part of the long history of relations with the—Ottoman then colonial—political and administrative authorities, these petitions are particularly illuminating when it comes to the preoccupations of noncitizen and rural populations. Access to communication resources still remained segregated and unequal, but such resources represented both a grievance to right and a means with which to address, or even contest, the colonial power.[92] While the Algerian "native" remained at the margins of the political community until the Second World War, the unexpected utilization of the postal service and subversive demands for access to it led noncitizen Algerians to form a political identity that borrowed some of the practices of active citizens. Yet at the same time, the petition—above and beyond the demand for rights it manifested—can also be envisaged as a tool that reinforced the legitimacy of the colonial administration, a recognition of the authority to which the villagers addressed their complaints.

These transformations were especially marked in the highlands of Kabylia,[93] but with the acceleration of migratory movements, the dwindling of any refusal to send children to school, and the rise in monetary exchanges, rural Algeria as a whole soon began to demand more efficient means of communication. Although structured and disseminated through the expertise of the professional letter-writer, the village chief, or a literate tradesman, these writings attest to the aspirations of Algerian *fellahin* in the 1920s and 1930s. Behind the arguments deployed—economic profitability, administrative efficiency—what emerges is the practical utility that the postal, financial, and telephone services now represented in the

90. AWA, 6O/55, extract from the register of the deliberations of the municipal commission of Dra-el-Mizan, June 24, 1937; letter from the departmental director of the PTT to the prefect of Algiers, August 21, 1937.

91. AWA, 6O/13, protestation by the *djamā'a* of the *douar* of Tigherent addressed to the governor-general, November 15, 1933; protestation by the *djamā'a* of the *douar* of Tachachit addressed to the prefect of Algiers, November 5, 1938.

92. Sievert likens the petitions to an "effective political weapon" in "Intermediaries and Local Knowledge in a Changing Political Environment," 362. The use of communication technologies in Egypt under the British protectorate is also illuminating: see Barak, *On Time*.

93. On the eve of independence, one-fifth of the inhabitants of the conurbation of Algiers had been born in a Kabyle commune and the arrondissement of Tizi-Ouzou was the rural district with the lowest rate of illiteracy, according to the 1954 census cited in Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Algérie 1962–1964. Essais d'anthropologie politique* (Saint-Denis: Bouchène, 2005), 54.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

eyes of the colonized population. This population appropriated the language of power and adjusted the format of its requests in line with the canons of French bureaucratic writing. It took advantage of the tools provided by the modern state, and, by raising the issue of service provision in the *douars*, prompted the authorities to adjust their position. The interwar period can thus be understood as a turning point: the insistent requests of rural Algerians revealed pluralistic writing practices, and the administration responded in an unprecedented manner by providing facilities in the countryside.

Responses and Adjustments: Facilities in the *Douars* during the Interwar Period

Many things changed in this "interwar Maghreb."[94] The impoverishment of rural populations and strong demographic growth fostered work-related migration within Algeria and toward the metropole. A minority of Algerians learned to read and write, gained waged employment, and became politicized, while the assimilationist credo crumbled.[95] Next to urban Algeria, where noncitizen workers were becoming organized, the countryside appeared abandoned. Nevertheless, as what follows will show, the postal, telephone, and financial services enabled certain political, economic, and social innovations to penetrate peasant society.[96]

Mail Delivery in the *Douars*

Communication networks participated in the physical marking out of conquered territory and buttressed the stated endeavor to civilize the colonized populations. However, there was a great discrepancy between the intentions and the reality on the ground, and in practice this modernization remained restricted to certain spheres and fringes of the population. Before the First World War, mail for the inhabitants of mixed communes that did not have a PTT postman was generally handed over to the administrators, who tasked their deputies with delivering it to isolated settlers or to the rare Algerian recipients. Various improvised setups made it possible to provide a minimum level of service, entirely focused on the needs of the colonial administration. Schoolteachers appointed to the *douars* seized upon the slightest opportunity—a passing visitor, or a neighbor en route to the local administrative center—to have their correspondence taken to the nearest post office. In the Southern Territories, they generally received their mail once a week, at the same

94. Jacques Berque, *Le Maghreb entre deux guerres* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1962).
95. Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, "1919–1944 : l'essor de l'Algérie algérienne," in Bouchène et al., *Histoire de l'Algérie à la période coloniale*, 319–46, here pp. 319 and 335.
96. Pierre Bourdieu, "Making the Economic Habitus: Algerian Workers Revisited," *Ethnography* 1, no. 1 (2000): 17–41; Bourdieu, *Algérie 60. Structures économiques et structures temporelles* (Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1977), 12.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

time as their food supplies.[97] PTT officers, elected representatives, and local notables were unanimous in judging the infrequent and unremunerated deliveries by intermediaries to be unreliable. Letters went astray or were severely delayed.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the governor-general of Algeria, no longer able to ignore the importance of these exchanges "as our civilization continues to develop," considered the implementation of a system for distributing mail to homes in the "native areas of the countryside."[98] His intention was to remedy the isolation of these regions—plans for a rural postal service had been implemented in Indochina since 1906[99]—while at the same time systematically ruling out the most expensive solutions, such as the appointment of tenured postmen. Finally, a circular of November 6, 1923, renewed the prewar measures within a more clearly defined framework. This was based on the systematic use of the communes' existing employees—the rural constabulary or "native" cavalrymen—to deliver mail to the villages:

> *The correspondence received will be deposited at the headquarters of the mixed commune [by the PTT]. … The cavalryman in charge of supervising the market will bring the mail and hand it over to the rural constabulary of the* douars *whose natives frequent the market. The constables will then deliver the letters either to their recipients, or to the heads of each* douar *subdistrict.*[100]

The aim was to reduce the number of intermediaries and to instill a sense of responsibility by paying them a monthly allowance. Budgetary factors nevertheless limited the scope of the experiment, and even in the 1930s some administrators were still requesting the necessary funds to apply the measure in their district.[101]

In retrospect, however, the head of the Algerian PTT service defended the organizational approach pursued in 1923. He maintained that in the mixed communes of Algeria it was not possible to distribute mail "according to French administrative methods," because the *douars* were too remote, and above all owing to what he called the "mores and customs of the natives." He justified collective distributions on the grounds that "the postman cannot enter a native's house, nor, in the absence of the head of the household, deliver his correspondence to his wife."[102]

97. Discussions of the General Assembly of Schoolteachers of the department of Algiers, reported in *Le courrier algérien des PTT* 57, April 25, 1905.
98. ANOM, 93502/38/1, letter from the governor-general to the prefect of Constantine, mixed commune of La Séfia, February 17, 1922.
99. Denis Cantin, "Le service des postes et télégraphes en Indochine. Des origines aux années trente" (DEA diss., Université d'Aix-Marseille, 1997), 77.
100. ANOM, 93502/38/1, circular of November 6, 1923, issued by the governor-general of Algeria. For the distinction between mixed communes and full exercise communes, see above, n. 15.
101. Order by the governor-general issued May 12, 1924. The sum was charged under section VI (chap. 4, § 6). ANOM, 93502/38/1, letter from the government-general to the prefect of Constantine, mixed commune of La Séfia, May 14, 1924.
102. ANA, CCA, Bi/159, report presented to the council of the PTT by the head of the central PTT service, n.d. (circa 1928), p. 29.

On the initiative of the prefect of Oran, in 1930 the delivery of mail at markets was extended to the *douars* in full exercise communes.[103] It is almost as though, when it came to the management of the colonized populations, the mixed communes were areas of experimentation or regions that possessed a specific expertise.

This method did not receive unanimous support: some administrators pointed out that the rural constabulary and cavalrymen were generally unable to read and write in French, and that they should not be distracted from otherwise priority tasks, such as supervising the harvests.[104] Nevertheless, it was a response of sorts to the rise in the volume of mail. Traveling up and down the mule tracks, in 1929 the seven rural constables of the mixed commune of Mizrana distributed almost three thousand letters a month, a figure which, according to the administrator, would "rise constantly with the increasing exodus of Kabyles toward France."[105]

The funds earmarked for the distribution of mail in the *douars* increased noticeably in the interwar period, though it never represented a budgetary priority for the Algerian PTT service.[106] Indeed, the service chose to renew precarious solutions so as to avoid taking on more staff. The mobilization of commune personnel had no equivalent in metropolitan France, and indeed the specificity of the colonial situation no doubt lay in the increasingly widespread application of these inexpensive measures. In contrast with the colonial centers in the Tell[107] or with metropolitan communes, in the Algerian countryside the postman did not pass by each house, nor even each hamlet (*mechta*) or village, on a daily basis.

Embedding the State

The interwar period was certainly a distinctive moment in colonial history. As France's empire reached its largest extent and the discourses singing its praises proliferated, whole swaths of Algeria still eluded the everyday control of the French authorities. Admittedly, auxiliary post offices had served colonial villages and farms since the 1860s.[108] Algerian peasants from the surrounding areas were able to enjoy the benefits of these facilities, without however being their main target users. They also contributed to their cost, since, in the 1910s and 1920s, rural telephone

103. AWA, 6O/66, order by the governor-general issued February 6, 1930, and letter from the prefect of Algiers to the central PTT service, May 12, 1929; ANA, CCA, Bi/159, draft budget for the financial year 1930 (art. 5-5).
104. Motion by Emir Khaled el-Hassani ben el-Hachemi at the session of 1920, cited in Bouveresse, *Un parlement colonial*, 2:685.
105. AWA, 6O/55, letter from the administrator of Mizrana to the director of the PTT in Algiers, May 17, 1929.
106. In the budget of 1931, the funds allocated to the distribution of mail in the *douars* equaled a third of the transport allowances granted for tenured staff's leave to metropolitan France or Corsica. GGA, PTT service, *Budget annexe des PTT, Projet de budget pour l'exercice 1931*, 1st section (Algiers: É. Pfister, 1930), 38, chap. 5, art. 5.
107. At the start of the conquest, this mountainous area located in northern Algeria was identified as the only colonizable region. To the south of the Tell stretched the High Plateaus and then the Sahara proper.
108. Lacroix, "Une histoire sociale et spatiale de l'État dans l'Algérie colonisée," 192 sq.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

networks and public bus services were partly financed by funds from the *douars*.[109] But in the interwar period, the colonial state was feeling its way and adjusting its policy to reflect the increasingly insistent demands of the colonized populations. When it became clear that these groups constituted a lucrative clientele, facilities intended especially for them were introduced. It was thus in these years that rural Algerians earned their stripes as bona fide service users.

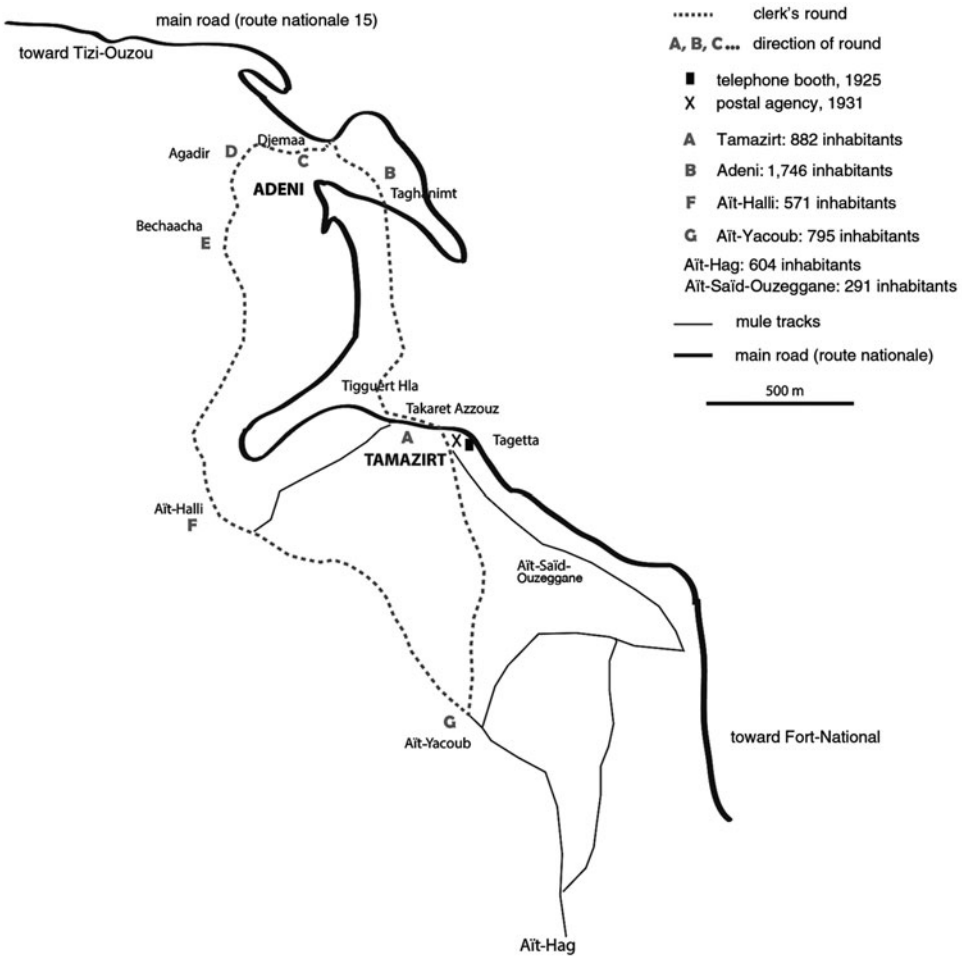
Alongside the mobilization of commune personnel, the PTT service also turned to tools previously tried and tested in the French countryside and in northern Algeria. Developed for rural regions of France, such as the Côte d'Or or the Jura, from the 1920s the postal agency became a favored means of extending services to the colonized population.[110] This small office, which performed the most common operations, was run by a non-tenured clerk approved by the departmental director of the PTT.[111] The remuneration was modest—a simple allowance calculated on the basis of the volume of mail—and the number of opening hours limited. The running of a postal agency thus cost the administration five times less than a fully functioning post office. A "very supple organ of extension,"[112] this arrangement was privileged by the Algerian PTT service as it expanded its presence into the most remote areas of the countryside: between 1920 and 1938, the number of postal agencies in Algeria rose from 90 to 221. Though this setup was not a specifically colonial one, the efforts in this area were much belated in comparison with what, in France, had been a densely meshed rural network since the 1880s.[113]

Identified in the 1920s as a pool of potential clients, Kabylia was soon studded with telephone booths and postal agencies, in locations such as Taourirt-Mimoun, El-Esnam, Yakouren, Maaktas, and Aomar.[114] At the request of the local community, a telephone booth was installed in Tamazirt in December 1925; once linked up to the network in Fort-National, it served almost eight thousand people in a radius of six kilometers.[115] The village residents then mobilized to request the opening

109. GGA, *Délégations financières algériennes. Délégation des non-colons* (Algiers: V. Heintz, 1912), 144, session of May 13, 1912, motion by Émile Morinaud.
110. AWA, 6O/1, letter from the undersecretary of state for the PTT to the prefects of the metropole and Algeria, August 8, 1923.
111. In addition to selling stamps, envelopes, and postcards, the clerk dealt with recorded deliveries, the issuance and payment of money orders, and the distribution and dispatch of correspondence. He also acted as an intermediary with the national savings bank (the Caisse nationale d'épargne) when opening current accounts and making transfers into savings accounts.
112. GGA, PTT service, *Rapport sur la gestion financière pendant l'exercice 1925 et sur la marche générale du service des PTT, présenté par le Gouverneur général de l'Algérie* (Algiers: É. Pfister, 1933), 73.
113. Verdier, "Poste et territoires," 74.
114. *Bulletin officiel des PTT*, "Liste des bureaux d'Algérie en 1938," 579–80.
115. Tamazirt was a "native village" belonging to the *douar* of Iraten. In 1936, it was inhabited by around one hundred French citizens and almost 13,000 "natives," and was one of the ten *douars* of the mixed commune of Fort-National. AWA, 6O/17, minutes of the Conseil général at Algiers, October 21, 1925; ANA, CCA, B72, letter from the director of the central PTT service to the president of the Chamber of Commerce of Algiers, December 8, 1925.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Figure 1. The round of the Tamazirt postal agency clerk circa 1930



Source: ANA, 18-75/130, several sketches from the douar *of Iraten, produced by the administrator of the mixed commune of Fort-National, dating from 1929–1931. Image produced by Annick Lacroix.*

of a postal agency.[116] The administrator of the mixed commune and the PTT inspector dispatched to the village confirmed the economic interest of such an agency and reiterated that "as soon as a postal agency is opened at any given location in Kabylia, the forecasts as to the projected volume of mail are largely exceeded."[117] In April 1931, less than two years after the residents' petition, the

116. ANA, 18-75/130, letter from the inhabitants of the *douar* of Iraten addressed to the governor-general, August 14, 1929.
117. ANA, 18-75/130, breakdown of operations performed for Tamazirt by the Fort-National office, letter from the PTT inspector, Mr. Tardos, to the departmental director of the PTT in Algiers, January 25, 1930.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

new postal agency in Tamazirt was up and running in a small rammed-earth house close to the Moorish café, the telephone booth, and the future girls' school. A room measuring sixteen square meters was given over to the postal service, separated in two by a bar that served as a counter.[118] From these modest premises the clerk performed the principal postal and financial operations. Three times a day, he would station himself alongside the main road to retrieve the mail, transported by bus between Tizi-Ouzou and Fort-National. In the afternoon, his round extended beyond the village proper, and saw him traveling five kilometers on foot along mule tracks bordered with cacti, hawthorn, olive trees, and elderberry bushes, calling in first at the hilltop village of Adeni, before moving south toward Aït-Halli and Aït-Yacoub (fig. 1). He would collect the mail deposited in the two postboxes, while a "native designated by the administrator" took charge of distributing correspondence to the more distant villages of Aït-Hag and Aït-Saïd-Ouzeggane.[119]

These measures facilitated the access of Algeria's rural populations to correspondence, the telephone, and money transfer services. In the interwar period, the proliferation of telephone booths and postal agencies specifically intended for the noncitizen population constituted a major break with the past. It represented a halfway-house solution, falling between the rudimentary organization of distributions by the rural constabulary and the costly appointment of state functionaries.

Service Provision in the *Douars* on the Eve of Independence

Following the Second World War, the volume of mail and financial operations continued to rise, stimulated by Algerians' adoption of these services on a massive scale. The role of economic migrations should be emphasized once again, as these brought ever-greater numbers of new users to the post offices. In the desert on the Tunisian border, the inhabitants of a village in the region of El-Oued asked the PTT service to take their distinctive situation into account:

> *How, under the oppressive summer sun, will a woman or an invalid be able to travel to a post office, where their business necessarily calls them, for let us not forget that the village of Zgoum [Azzeguem] is home to a thousand people [one-fifth of its population] who are scattered across the whole of the Tunisian territory and the Algerian Tell, either as workers or as tradesmen, and whose only correspondents in their country of origin are women who do not leave the house unveiled, or invalid fathers, or infant children?*[120]

118. ANA, 18-75/130, letter from the administrator of Fort-National to the director of the PTT, December 4, 1930; deliberations of the mixed commune of Fort-National, February 13, 1930.
119. ANA, 18-75/130, letter from the PTT inspector, Mr. Tardos, to the departmental director in Algiers, January 25, 1930; report of the supervisory postal agent, Mr. Di Méglio, April 1, 1930.
120. ANOM, 23H257/320, petition by the inhabitants of the village of Azzeguem (Southern Territories), conveyed to the director of the PTT, February 22, 1946.

In the 1940s and 1950s, however, the administrators of the mixed communes continued to coordinate the transportation of mail in the Algerian countryside. The postal rounds were generally performed by the rural constabulary,[121] with some distributions made collectively on market day or, as in Chabet-el-Ameur in 1958, before the town hall: "The employee calls out the names of the recipients [and] hands the letters either to the recipient or to relatives or neighbors."[122]

Precarious solutions thus prevailed until independence, occasionally arousing sharp criticism from the local authorities. In 1950, the administrator of La Séfia, near the Tunisian border, lost his temper with the rural constables in his commune, finding it inadmissible "that through [their] failings people from the *douar* are obliged to call in twice … for money orders of which the value is sometimes so low that it does not cover the travel costs of the persons concerned!"[123] Lamenting the very patchy service provided by the commune's personnel, in spring 1958 the departmental PTT director stated that he had catalogued almost 180 delayed or lost letters in the district of Tizi-Ouzou.[124] The shortcomings of this organization again raised the issue of increasing the number of PTT staff. Plans for the *douars* to be served by tenured postmen resurfaced in 1946, and again in 1958, the idea being that such postmen would deliver the mail on a set day, pay low-value money orders, and retrieve mail to be dispatched.[125] But, once again, budgetary considerations prevailed over the ideal of a fairer and more reliable public service. The PTT service continued to assign the rounds in the *douars* to non-tenured staff—the telephone booth or postal agency clerks—or to existing employees of the communes.

At the time of independence, 755 settlements—almost half the localities—remained without a post office.[126] The new Algerian state was of the opinion that the concentration of facilities in the towns in the north of the country did not respond to the "demands of a socialist state under construction, one preoccupied with economic development and concerned to improve the well-being of the least fortunate."[127] The Algerian postal and telecommunications administration relied

121. Each year, over a two-week period, the correspondence distributed in the *douars* was tallied, making it possible to adjust their remuneration, now proportional to the volume of mail delivered. ANA, 18-75/41, order of May 10, 1951, by the governor-general concerning the remuneration of commune personnel; ANA, 18-75/210, tally of correspondence from January 4 to January 16, 1960, pursuant to the departmental circular of December 19, 1959.
122. ANA, 18-75/41, tally of March 3 to March 15, 1958, in the village of Chabet-el-Ameur, March 15, 1958.
123. ANOM, 93502/38/1, letter from the administrator of civic services to the rural constabulary of La Séfia, January 6, 1950.
124. ANA, 18-75/41, draft letter from the departmental director of the PTT in Tizi-Ouzou, Mr. Ayat, to the prefect of Greater Kabylia, March 6, 1958.
125. AWA, 6O/1, PTT service, "Minutes of the regional conference of the PTT," session of June 25, 1946, 17–19; ANA, 18-75/41, letter from the departmental director of the PTT in Tizi-Ouzou to the chief engineer and director-general of the PTT, July 28, 1958.
126. ANOM, 81F/1257, figures for the year, lecture by the director of postal and telecommunications services, J. Gastebois, January 4, 1961.
127. Brochure issued by the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Algerian Republic, "Visages de l'Algérie," *Les postes et télécommunications* (November 1970), p. 8.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

on the network that had been established since the nineteenth century by the French colonists, but was open about its determination to make the provision of such services in rural areas a gain of the independence era.[128]

Initially designed to support the progression of soldiers and serve European populations that were largely urbanized or concentrated in the Tell, postal, telegraph, and telephone infrastructures remained sparse across the Algerian countryside throughout the entire colonial period. The French authorities never fully assumed the cost of installing an equitable public service for all the inhabitants of Algeria. And the mixed communes, those vast districts where noncitizens made up 98 percent of the population,[129] remained distinctly under-administered. It was not until the interwar period that the morphology of the network was transformed by the demand of noncitizen users. There was a proliferation of petitions by inhabitants of the *douars* demanding the opening of a post office or the appointment of a postman, while the PTT service made adjustments and responded by establishing a less costly auxiliary network.

Far from simply representing a rigid transposition of programs designed in Parisian offices, the postal institution found itself effectively absent from many Algerian localities and was embodied locally by actors with the most varied of statuses (tenured functionaries, clerks receiving an allowance, the "native" employees of the communes). As a consequence, the colonial state appears less a coherent entity or a constraining set of measures than a coproduction by local actors, permanently inflected by the practices of its agents[130] and by the demands of highly resourceful users.

A century after the conquest of Algiers, the relationship between the state and the colonized rural populations had considerably altered. After several decades of mutual ignorance, the interwar years represented a distinctive moment in which insistent demand on the part of villagers pushed the local authorities to make certain adjustments. The PTT service made greater efforts to engage with Algerian users because it expected financial benefits from them, because these means of communication facilitated the task of administering the territory, and because the authorities were aware of the limits of their sovereignty. It was through the postal institution that administrative subjects received summons and in return dispatched their petitions and requests; it was also occasionally through the postal service that they received their salary or a pension. The postal service was no longer identified solely as a resource that brought money and the news of loved ones; it also forged a relationship of proximity with the central authorities, to such an extent

128. It would be interesting to study the morphology of the network in the 1970s and 1980s to see how these declarations of intent materialized.
129. In 1926, the proportion of Europeans in the mixed communes was 1.96 percent, according to Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, 2:475.
130. Annick Lacroix, "Au contact. Postiers non-citoyens dans l'Algérie colonisée (vers 1900–1939)," in Cohen and Lacroix, "Between France and Algeria," 11–31.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)

that the introduction of these local services was invoked, at the height of the war of independence, in the battle to win hearts and minds over to the continuation of French Algeria.[131]

Algerians in the *douars* seemed to concede to the colonial state the position of a necessary intermediary. They continued to use parallel circuits of exchange, but thanks to the telephone and the professional letter-writer the PTT network was not reserved to the tiny contingent of those able to read and write in Arabic or French. Even the Algerian *fellah*, confined to the sphere delimited by the field, the house, and the village, became acquainted with the letter, the money order form, and the telephone booth. Migrations within the Maghreb and to France played a decisive role. The opportunity to correspond was triggered by the departure of a brother or a son, and separation seemed to attract to the post offices a rural populace hitherto unfamiliar with the institution, and who requested services they acknowledged to be advantageous. More than a demand for a greater state presence, these petitions reveal that the expectations of the colonized populations had increased. These populations wished to share the fruits of technical progress and found the resources necessary to make this demand, without necessarily immuring themselves in the vindictive—and putatively traditional—register of revolt or riot.

Annick Lacroix
Université Paris Nanterre – IDHES

131. ANA, 18-75/41, memorandum from the prefect of Tizi-Ouzou to remedy the shortcomings of the postal service in order to avoid any "unfortunate impression on public opinion," May 9, 1958.

Éditions de l'EHESS| Downloaded on 06/07/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.36)