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COLONIAL RURAL BUILDINGS IN ALGERIA: FROM DISUSE TO VALORIZATION, CASE STUDY OF THE GUELMA REGION

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ABSTRACT

After independence, Algeria inherited a rural built heritage marked by the presence of numerous colonial farms. While some of this heritage has been recovered, it remains largely unknown and undervalued compared to its urban counterpart. Yet these buildings, which bear witness to an era and a way of life, are an invaluable resource for the development of rural areas. This study challenges this neglect by exploring the potential of rural heritage as a catalyst for economic and social revitalization. Case studies from the Guelma region illuminate the practical applications and challenges of repurposing these structures. By examining the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of rural heritage, this research aims to contribute to the development of comprehensive strategies for its preservation and valorization. Key considerations include a deeper understanding of rural built heritage, innovative conservation approaches, and the integration of these efforts into broader rural development plans.

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1. Introduction.

In the Algerian countryside, the buildings, the empty spaces, the landscape, and the farming systems still bear witness to a recent era, that of colonized Algeria. Understanding Algerian society requires an understanding of its space, which is rooted in its colonial history.

Numerous rural buildings reflect a colonial past, omnipresent in the form of farms, mansions, castles, barns, sheds, etc. Between 1962 and 1964, the number of colonial farms existing in Algeria at the time of independence was estimated at 50,000. The state had recovered 22,000 farms, including the farm buildings (Cote, 1993). The existence of these buildings marked the need of the French colonists to occupy agricultural land, to have control over the Algerian landscape, which was dotted with thousands of farm buildings. The relief, the climate, the water, and the nature of the soil all provided favorable conditions for their establishment and proliferation (Cote, 1992).

Unlike urban heritage, the built elements that make up the rural environment are not yet considered to be part of the Algerian heritage, yet they play a major role in the identity, quality, and functioning of rural areas (CAUE, 2013). In other words, if agricultural buildings, through their

materials, style, and location, have played a major role in shaping local identities, then safeguarding them will largely determine the face of this heritage in the future (Rapper, 2002). However, this knowledge is not yet sufficiently integrated into Algerian heritage policies. While there are occasional and sometimes planned actions that aim to reconsider the original character and identity of these buildings, more comprehensive efforts are necessary. Today, this heritage forms an essential part of the collective memory and can serve as a source of inspiration in an ever-changing environment.

2. The Colonial Rural Infrastructure: Mismanagement Combined with a State of Abundance.

Colonization in Algeria progressed through several distinct stages. The period between 1871 and 1896 has witnessed the peak of agricultural land acquisition, leading to a significant transformation of the landscape and the establishment of a new built environment (Rebérioux, 2002). Farming villages were organized in an orthogonal grid pattern, characterized by low, red-roofed houses, often accompanied by a church with a bell tower and a cemetery, dominated by a dock-silo, with the vast emptiness of the countryside in the background. In contrast, other areas were dominated by large isolated farms with buildings that, while once sumptuous, now appear somewhat outdated (Cote, 1993). Between 1962 and 1964, the number of colonial farms at the time of Algeria's independence was estimated at 50,000. The state had recovered 22,000 of these farms, including the main buildings (Cote, 1993).

Today, many farm buildings have lost their original purpose and are either abandoned or drastically transformed to meet the needs of new occupants. For example, some have been converted, with varying degrees of taste and relevance, into permanent or secondary shelters for a rural population fleeing terrorism in the 1990s, or are squatted by families affected by the housing crisis. Additionally, the effects of climate, combined with a psychological factor—a feeling of rejection towards the colonial heritage often evocative of a painful past in the collective memory of Algerians—have accelerated the aging, dilapidation, and even disappearance of this heritage.

Colonial buildings in Algeria are not mere relics; they are an essential component of the typology of rural Algerian architecture. Their evolution has led to the systematic disuse of rural outbuildings. These structures are waiting for a second life, at the risk of disappearing from the rural landscapes in the medium term.

3. The Status of Colonial Architecture in Algerian Heritage Policy.

Awareness of the role played by colonial heritage in the built environment of Algerian cities has grown, particularly since the 1990s. During this period, heritage policy began to adopt an environmental approach and broadened the notion of heritage to include common heritage. According to this new strategy, heritage is no longer seen merely as a monumental and cultural product that needs to be listed or safeguarded on a case-by-case basis. Instead, it must be at the heart of dynamic and comprehensive economic management. What was once merely a tool now has testimonial value, and therefore a potential cultural, social, or economic value, beyond its functional reasons for existence (Beaumesnil, 2006).

Unlike colonial urban heritage, which enjoys a prominent position in urban policy, supported by its own legal framework and substantial budget, colonial rural heritage appears to be marginalized or even ignored by public players and heritage programs. This raises the question: why is there this underestimation or neglect of a constituent element of the Algerian rural landscape? The answer lies in the fact that these buildings are steeped in history, linked to a traumatic period in Algeria's past (Boumedine, 2010). Revaluing this heritage means recognizing it as a witness to the past and giving it a place in heritage policy on par with other inherited objects. Therefore, it is crucial to develop a knowledge base founded on a historical and comprehensive approach to the territory, one that does not artificially separate rural and urban areas.

4. Identifying Rural Colonial heritage for Better Valorization.

The rural buildings inherited from France are integral to the issue of rural heritage, a concept that carries both ambiguous and simplified meanings. According to Chiva (1994), rural heritage is defined in the broadest sense as all the tangible and intangible assets of a natural, cultural, or architectural nature that we pass on to future generations. This includes houses, village streets and squares, chapels and oratories, constructed with materials specific to each region, as well as works for managing and

exploiting the countryside and all the architectural features associated with village life. It also incorporates new features of each site (Silveira, 2009).

A report by the French Ministry of Culture (1994) states that rural heritage concerns the landscapes shaped over the ages by people working the land and exploiting nature's resources through architectural objects, whether grouped together or dispersed (villages, hamlets, isolated dwellings). This notion also encompasses local products adapted to local conditions and the needs of the people who produced them. According to the same source, the definition of rural heritage extends to the techniques, tools, and know-how that were used to create this heritage and which must be called upon to ensure its maintenance, restoration, and safeguarding, respecting the constructive logic and aesthetics of these buildings and landscapes. These techniques reflect cultural symbolizations and meanings (Cossons, 1989).

Rural heritage cannot be discussed without referencing the people who use it, live by it, and participate in its survival, as well as the rural area itself, considered as an asset and a place where this heritage is lived. Due to its existence in rural areas, the diversity of its forms and uses, and its presence in collective or individual affects, colonial rural buildings must also play a part in territorial identity. They must be recognized by identifying their social, cultural, and economic value, qualifying them as heritage objects ready to receive conservation work and potentially finding a new vocation for them, ensuring their transmission to future generations. Knowing about, maintaining, and promoting this heritage will contribute to local development and the attractiveness of the area (Ministry of Culture, 1994).

In this respect, the inventory of this heritage makes it possible to:

- Identify the most representative elements of the area.
- Highlight the heritage features that are most at risk.
- Draw up a conservation and/or cultural development program.
- Develop the tourism potential of these areas (rural tourism, etc.).
- Encourage local people to take ownership of this little-known or poorly-understood heritage by promoting the dissemination of knowledge.



Figure 1. (Left) Old colonial farm in a state of disrepair built in 1921. (Right) Abandoned colonial hangar in Les Issers by Jaque Regnier in El Marsa. (Source: author).



Figure 2. (Left) Colonial operational dock silo on the side of Frenda (Tiaret). (Right) Colonial farm in the vicinity of Hennaya, repurposed for residential use after rehabilitation. (Source: author).

5. The Multifaceted Value of Rural Heritage.

5.1 Rural Heritage as Identity and Cultural Symbol of the Territory.

Rural identity is deeply tied to the territory, where nature, landscape, and built heritage collectively shape a population's sense of belonging. The built environment is intrinsically linked with the natural, environmental, and human potential of the area, creating a cohesive sense of place (Smith, 1997).

Old agricultural buildings, for social and cultural reasons, not only enhance aesthetic pleasure and quality of life but also forge connections between people and their history and roots. These structures contribute significantly to the area's meaning and identity. By linking individuals to their heritage, they foster a sense of belonging to a community, which, in turn, reinforces the foundation of citizenship (Beaumesnil, 2006). Thus, rural heritage serves as a crucial element in sustaining and celebrating local identity, in this respect Relph (1976) claimed that the utilization of heritage assets within rural development strategies not only aids in retaining local populations in their native regions but also prevents their displacement and concentration on the fringes of urban centers.

5.2 Leveraging Rural Heritage for Socio-Economic Development

In the context of leveraging rural heritage for socio-economic development, the trend of rural residents migrating to urban centers presents a unique opportunity. By enhancing the value of rural buildings, young job-seekers can engage in or establish their own SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises), utilizing these structures as a foundation for heritage-related trades. The upkeep and renovation of these buildings emerge as significant sources of employment, weaving a robust fabric within the local economic and social landscape (Stovel, 1998). Simultaneously, the development of essential infrastructures and institutions such as roads, schools, and hospitals across rural areas becomes indispensable for the continuity of progress. This holistic approach not only brings about immediate socio-economic benefits but seeds the groundwork for enduring sustainable economic development (Nora, 1992). This transformation leads to the diversification of job opportunities and attracts new residents, signifying a positive shift towards a more vibrant and economically empowered rural community.

5.3 Heritage as a Catalyst for Tourism.

Alternative or green tourism is a recognized sector that serves as a promotional tool for regions endowed with tourism potential intertwined with their natural and architectural heritage (Richards, 2000). This heritage can be harnessed as a catalyst for wealth creation and local development while concurrently preserving the essence of the heritage itself. This form of tourism actively engages local inhabitants in the tourism project lifecycle, emphasizing respect for local communities, cultures, and the environment. Rooted in the principles of alternative tourism, values such as equitable resource distribution, a profound connection to heritage, and a harmonious relationship with nature and the surroundings epitomize a solidarity-driven ethos (Fairclough, 2008). Green tourism, diverging from the conventional supply-demand model, strives to forge enduring bonds between tourists, the region, and the local populace. The revitalization of rural structures into lodging options like gîtes, inns, bed and breakfasts, or hotel establishments, complemented by the natural landscape, can instigate a vibrant tourism ecosystem for local residents and communities. This transformation can further be enriched by the promotion of local artisanal products. This progressive approach, mirrored in tourism development strategies overseas, is beginning to resonate positively in Algeria, exemplified by initiatives like the restoration project of a colonial castle, the Château de la Comtesse, in the northern region of the country.

6. The Reconversion: A Mean to Give a Second Life to Rural Heritage.

For heritage professionals, reconversion often emerges as the most effective strategy to ensure the preservation of heritage, whether it is urban, rural, or industrial. Reconversion has become essential as it aims to preserve the testimonial values of heritage while integrating principles of sustainable development and urban requalification. While perhaps not as immediately recognized as urban heritage, the reconversion of rural heritage can serve as a catalyst for the reorganization and rejuvenation of the rural landscape. It facilitates the harmonization of diverse uses and elevates the architectural essence of rural structures without compromising the inherent qualities of the original buildings (Silveira, 2012).

A successful reconversion project must take into account several crucial considerations. These include selecting a program that aligns with the morphology of the converted buildings, preserving the original materials, and incorporating spaces dedicated to interpreting the site's historical significance.

These deliberations ensure that the reconversion not only conserves the architectural and historical authenticity of the buildings but also enhances their functional and cultural relevance in contemporary contexts (Smith, 1997).



Figure 3. Reconversion of a colonial rural farm, Château de la Comtesse, into a youth hostel in Bejaia. (Source: author).

7. Methodology and Study Context.

Our research focused on the Guelma region, specifically the commune of Ain Regada. As part of a comprehensive inventory of rural buildings across the wilaya, we identified a selection of structures that had undergone adaptive reuse. Our criteria for building selection emphasized geographical location, original building typology, and the nature of its repurposed function.

The locality of Ain Regada, representative of many in the Guelma region, was established during the colonial era. Its urban fabric is significantly composed of colonial buildings such as farms, residences, a water tower, and a dock. These structures, varying in preservation and functionality, are tangible remnants of the colonial presence and have enriched the commune's urban structure. This case study was selected due to the concentration of colonial architecture and its potential to inform broader research on the adaptive reuse of rural heritage. A descriptive and analytical study of these examples is crucial to identify the challenges and opportunities for developing suitable projects that respect both the building's history and its physical appearance while addressing current constraints and needs. The investigation focuses on buildings that have contributed to the commune's local development through their original or current function. The selected cases present contrasting specificities, notably a colonial agricultural dock and a former church converted into a mosque. This investigation aims to question the following postulate: the colonial rural heritage present in these territories contributes to the territorial identity, and its knowledge, preservation, and valorization contribute to local development and territorial attractiveness. For that purpose, a field visit was undertaken to closely observe and assess the state of conversion of each building, aiming to evaluate the effectiveness and success of their new functionalities.

8. Results and Discussion.

8.1 The valorization by Maintaining the Original Function of a Colonial Dock in Ain Regada.

The economy of the village of Ain Regada was long based almost exclusively on agriculture. Even today, this rural tradition deeply influences the territory. Among the elements that undeniably contribute to the collective perception of the age-old character of these landscapes is a large colonial dock with its warehouses, outbuildings, and facilities. It is located at the bottom of the colonial village, amidst the farms alongside the fields.



*Figure 4. The dock's exterior shows mostly intact buildings with minor damage.
(Source: author).*

This dock belonged to the agricultural group Jacky, and its construction project was initiated in the mid-19th century, along with that of the village church. It is a structure comprised of three large buildings spread over an area of approximately three hectares. Each building is unique in its characteristics and surroundings, yet together they form an inseparable whole. These buildings house warehouses and facilities primarily used for storing wheat before transferring it to other silos for milling. The dock has a capacity of 100,000 quintals of wheat, grains, and legumes.

Currently managed by the village's Cooperative of Cereals and Legumes, it employs 20 workers, both seasonal and permanent. These employees all express a sensitivity, or rather a concern, regarding this significant facility that generates work opportunities and wealth for the commune, given the absence of any preservation actions on the part of local authorities.



*Figure 5. A well-preserved state inside the warehouses with the wooden framework in good condition.
(Source: author).*

The dock of Ain Regada has not only preserved the architectural integrity of its buildings but has also maintained its original function since its creation. It has endured despite technological advancements, climatic challenges, and the absence of any preservation efforts, continuing to serve as the storage facility for the harvest from several municipalities such as Oued Zenati, Tamlouka, and a part of Ain Abid.

In general, the Ain Regada dock does not appear dilapidated, except for the front facade of the building constructed initially. The other buildings are well-preserved, with only minor localized damages to the plaster and occasional tile loss on the roofs. These colonial warehouses and stores stand out not only for their morphological and spatial aspects but also for their refined and beautiful architectural detail. Additionally, they feature an ingenious wheat circulation system that demonstrates an ancient yet effective industrial process.

If this project has endured until today, it is due to the ingenuity of its construction technique, giving the impression that it was designed to defy time. The refinement of its architecture, combined with the precision of its operation and the solidity of its structure, all blend into a rural landscape that transports the observer to a timeless atmosphere. While the dock has not undergone any official interventions, partial restoration modifications have been observed, initiated by the site's users. For example, filling in falling walls with hollow bricks, using zinc instead of lost tiles for roofing, applying lime wash over the old plaster, and devising a wheat pumping method that alters the traditional, yet more effective and original, setup.

It has been noted that resorting to such materials to refurbish a part of the building has more often distorted its aesthetic appeal rather than enhancing it. It is important to understand that intervening randomly and personally on this heritage risks losing the authenticity of each structure. Instead, its

preservation should be carefully studied and integrated into a heritage approach ensuring its authenticity and longevity.



Figure 6. Temporary intervention by unskilled labor and inadequate materials in one of the buildings of the dock. (Source: author).

The study of the Ain Regada dock demonstrates that this extensive and rich rural built heritage is poised to sustain its function for future generations, and its potential for adaptation is greater than imagined. It is a true agricultural workshop that should be embraced by the younger generations. These spaces should also be of keen interest to local authorities with a view to revitalizing agriculture.

Despite their operability and contributions to the development of the commune and even the region, these former agricultural production sites, if exploited irrationally and left without maintenance, are at risk of losing their productive potential and falling into ruin. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize them as a heritage carrying cultural and artistic value, as well as a preserver of historical memory. This can only be achieved through a heritage preservation operation aimed at safeguarding their status as witnesses of a colonial era. Any successful preservation initiative must stem from a heritage preservation policy that aligns with the objectives of local development policy.

8.2 The Conversion of a Colonial Place of Worship into a Small Islamic Center in Ain Regada.

The church of Ain Regada, dating back to 1860, is the first building of the colonial conquest, the nucleus that gave birth to the village. After undergoing several years of rehabilitation, it was converted into a mosque. The modifications concealed all expressions or symbols of the Christian faith, such as the bell tower which was transformed into a minaret, alongside a mihrab carved into the internal wall of the church.

With the increasing number of people frequenting this place, the village's religious association embarked on the construction of a new mosque right next to the church. This new mosque houses two large prayer halls for men and women, as well as a library and other annexes. The project was further enhanced by a second building accommodating classrooms for religious education and a residential unit.



Figure 7. The church of Ain Regada. (Source: author).

The use of the existing building as an essential element of the extension project, the placement of the new mosque next to the church, and the design of its minaret to mirror the old bell tower have ensured a certain coherence between the old and the new structures.

The church alongside the new mosque exemplifies a model of functional integration, creating a harmonious union between two buildings of different morphological, architectural, and ideological styles but with complementary functions. Together with the other buildings, they form the core of a small Islamic center employing about ten people and meeting an increased demand for religious practice and education.

The study of this project demonstrates that it is not just about preserving a building with heritage value, but also about appropriating it and repurposing it by assigning it a new role within the overall project. This is done with the aim of creating a place of religious influence, the positive effects of which are already evident in the cultural and religious dynamics of the former village.



Figure 8. The church and the mosque when the old harmonizes with the new. (Source: author).

9. Conclusion.

Rural heritage is viewed as a generator of wealth; it blends into the landscape, carries cultural values to be passed down through generations, and is seen as a creator of jobs linked to a specific territory. In Algeria, rural heritage is partly represented by colonial buildings; a diverse and varied legacy (farms, residences, docks, churches, water towers, etc.), which form the backdrop of our landscapes and countryside. It represents a significant territorial and historical reality, yet unfortunately, it is not widely known or it conveys a negative image of the past. Vacant sets of colonial buildings raise many questions and sometimes fears, long regarded as bearers of painful memories and hindrances to the attractiveness of our territories. Today, it is necessary to contemplate the role of this architecture, determining how it can be integrated as heritage and which elements can or should be converted and deeply modified. Cases studied in Ain Regada demonstrate that it is possible to alter perceptions of this often neglected heritage by assigning it new vocations or maintaining its original functions if they align with local development trends. Its valorization allows for its reintegration into the promotion process of rural territories, but this should not happen in an irrational, random, or isolated manner. On the contrary, this heritage, rich in economic or sociocultural potential, should be part of a policy aimed at guiding the evolution and transformation of its structures. Beyond its cultural value rooted in the country's history, colonial heritage in Algeria can contribute to enhancing the territory if repurposed within agricultural or socio-cultural projects that have positive impacts on countryside development.

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