

Between fantasy and reality. Indigenous participation to the land sales market within settled areas in Algeria (1877-1960)

(Power point - Doc. 1)

I will start by mentioning **documentation** used to deal with such an issue :

- **Statistical data** from Colonial Government in Algiers (Doc. 2-3) records precisely from 1877 to 1960 European land purchases to Algerians and Algerian land purchases to Europeans, both in terms of **surface and value**. It gives an **overall measure** without many details at local or regional scale but very interesting on several different levels
 - It reveals **periodization** with fluctuations in the short and medium term (and only two significant periods when Algerians buy more land than they sell to Europeans : at the end of the 1st WW and in the last two decades of the French domination)
 - **Curves** in terms of surface and value **do not coincide** exactly ; in other words Algerians always need to spend more money to buy European land than the opposite (in the 1920s, for example, Algerians spend more in their transactions with Europeans whereas they continue to lose ground for the benefit of the latter)
 - These key-findings are reinforced if we underscore **the imbalance** between **respective importance of populations** and of the **main owners of valuable lands** at the beginning of the 20th Century (Doc. 4). Mostly because of their fertility, facilitated access or market value, these lands have been registred and regulated by the French law before the others. Yet, in 1920, **86 % of the registred land** depend of European institutions or private owners while Europeans represent **only 14 % of the population**, mostly in towns

→ Nevertheless, existence of the previous data indicates **the constant concern** of the authorities about the threat of Algerian purchases of European land for the French Sovereignty. Official correspondence which accompanies such data leaves no ambiguity on that issue

➤ Then, to clarify spatial localization of such transactions, the second kind of documentation used is **map collections preserved** in France and Algeria. They are very useful and information can be extracted with GIS mapping tools. It's a way of reminding everyone that the **land market opening has been preceded** by French state interventions and its colonial policy from the beginning of the conquest of Algeria in the 1830s. With respect to **main water resource** – which are crucial under a mostly dry climate (**Doc. 5**), this long term process (**Doc. 6-9**) could consist of :

→ **Confiscating** assets from the « enemies » of France in time of war and revolts

→ **Expropriating** in the « public interest » (knowing that settlers implantations were seen as public interest)

→ « **Recognizing** » public and private domains of the State or new communal institutions dominated by elected Europeans. These property assets could be inherited from the Ottoman State but also the consequence of reforms to consider as public : religious foundations, family rights over lands which could not be proved by written acts, collective rights given to tribes (a French invention, I insist) but which become communal property as soon as European municipalities get control of the place

→ Another way with the advancing **cadastral reform** was the **substitution of French law to Islamic or Customary law** (to eradicate much easier preemptive or undivided rights, to secure the new owners' rights before a French court and to give them access, that is very important, to **mortgage loans**).

→ In addition to higher economic resources, this **legal revolution** makes easier control of the most valuable land for Europeans. As does **the layout of main road and rail routes**, which allow them export of their agricultural products (**Doc. 10**), especially wines, wheat, citruses, cork, etc.

→ And, if **everywhere**, Algerian rural population **overcome** European settlers, competition and tensions on the land market are more strained where Algerian densities are higher, **especially in the East part** of the colony.

➤ The last useful documentation, **to specify on a regional and local scale land market evolutions** between Europeans and Algerians, can be found in **bank records**. Especially those of the Crédit foncier d'Algérie, preserved in Roubaix, North of France (**Doc. 12**) :

→ They give access to **property expertises** which are commanded before granting a mortgage loan, before possibly extending the loan or seizing the property for its legal sale by auction. For the same reasons, the bank periodically orders **regional surveys** of the land market

→ **Even if Europeans** use to offer more legal or economic assurances to become clients of the bank, **some Algerians are clients** also and, in each case, the expert gives enough details to have **a clear vision of the milieu** : historical data, land structure, demographic and climate data, soil and access conditions, water resources, crop conditions, farm equipment and buildings, saling and renting market with prices, potential buyers in the neighborhood, etc. I would even say that the expertises on new acquisitions or for properties in crisis **focus more in locations where land transactions between Europeans and Algerians are the most active**, adding to the value of such a documentation

➤ In these conditions, information collected **allows us to comment more precisely the first graphs**, to understand why European or Algerian land

purchases **progress** here, **stop or retreat** there in a **given period**, the **profile of all actors**, their **motivation and means** to participate to these transactions. And in the time allotted to me, I can give you some of the main lessons to be learnt :

→ In a subsistence economy, Algerian purchases of European properties are **closely linked with crop and livestock quality and prices** each year, especially that of cereals wherever possible in Algeria, sheep meat and wool in dry steppes and highlands, olives and figs in the mountains of Kabylia (**Doc. 13**). Potentially incomes may arise as well from seasonal workers in Algeria or migrant workers in France. These conditions are met, for example, at the end of the 1st WW with higher wheat prices, successive good harvests, income from Algerian employees in the war economy, etc. (**Doc. 14**). That is exactly the opposite in the 1930s with a fall in cereal and olive prices, a successive of poor harvests, a massive unemployment (both in France and Algeria)... With the Algerian population growth, **chronic hunger** even comes back in certain parts of the colony in the 1930s and 40s.

→ Another problem is that economic growth, transport facilities, State and bank support **benefit much more European investors than Algerian ones** in their land acquisitions, farm equipments, technical progress or choice of commercial crops. It does explain **why the blue curve is clearly above the red one** even when the latter is rising. As well, the blue one stays higher, is more resistant when the other curve comes down. That's what happens, for example, in the last three decades of the 19th Century, despite the Great Depression, with the **cadastral reform acceleration** and State strong support to European settlement ; or in the first three decades of the next Century, when **vineyard plantations, dry farming and irrigation technologies** allow **extension** of the European property, **land concentration** at the same time and a significant **increase of the land**

prices. That's also the reason why buying a European property is often higher than buying an Algerian one (**Doc. 15**), especially **within perimeters potentially or frequently irrigated** like vineyard, citrus plantation or vegetable cultivation in red, orange and brown colors on this graph (**Doc. 16**). Please note the **spectacular increase of olive grove** price (in green) until the end of the 1920s (mainly Algerian plantations which play a major role for land reconquest in Kabylia) and **its dramatic fall** after that period (in relation to declining yields, competition with seed oil, lack of support from French authorities)

→ As a consequence, in some regions, European property is consolidated in the 1st half of the 20th Century (**Doc. 17**). In **Oranie**, for example, where we find more settlers (mostly from Spanish origin), where improvement of dry farming and vineyard are more present ; in the **Cheliff valley** as well where dam buildings allow irrigation for citrus and fruit trees, vegetable cultivation in place of cereals ; in the **Mitidja plain**, close to Algiers, where land concentration is maximal for vineyard and citrus and **on the shoreline** where small plots for irrigated vegetable cultivation reach record prices ; at last in the **Highlands and hills of the East** which receive enough rain (> 500 mm per year) and are the kingdom of large cereal European producers

→ Nevertheless, where Algerian densities are high, European land concentration lower with small or medium plots on the market, climate, relief, access or soil conditions less attractive, Algerians can recover some of the lost ground during the same period (**Doc. 18**). Such a phenomenon can be observed in **Kabylia**, in parts of **Sersou High Plains** or **Constantine region Highlands**, especially where water resources, late frost of spring or sirocco winds during summer make cereal crops very uncertain and force to combine, if possible, with sheep breeding (mostly an Algerian activity)

→ Obviously **Algerian buyers** are always a **minority** but their **profiles may be different**. Among them we can find 1) **auxiliaries of the French Government** (caïds, qadis), some of them are saved successors, some others are men rewarded with lands for their loyalty ; but it is not unusual to see them increase their wealth by taking interest in modern agriculture. If they exert a **sufficient influence** (sometimes reinforced by maraboutic charisma), with many allies and customers around them (in other words : farmers or sharecroppers on their lands), they can be strong enough to prevent a sale by auction or to be the first in line to benefit the sale. 2) We meet **merchant families** are also well placed to buy small or medium European plots, especially if the investment is related to their business in grain, olive oil, sheep trade. And 3), especially after a good harvest, **simple peasants** (most of them small holders with family links) can participate to this land market, forming **associations of 20, 50, sometimes 100 buyers** (in Kabylia for example), also becoming heavily indebted, often firstly positioning themselves as farmers or sharecroppers on the European plot they already want to buy

→ Different Algerian buyers mean **different motivations** and I will end on this point from now. **Economic reasons** and **patrimonial interest** usually intertwine ; this land market is no exception. However, **extreme competition** between European and Algerian buyers, or between Algerian buyers of European land make it more unique. It also explains **why land prices can reach so high levels** completely out of touch with economic reality ([doc. 19](#)). Then, **political motivations** are never far away but must be understood within interaction between Europeans and Algerians. Indeed, in these matters, European **feeling of no future or insecurity** in the colony is as important as the Algerian **desire of throwing settlers out** of the country. It does explain ([doc. 20](#)) what Jules Ferry called « a crisis of colonisation » **around 1890**, as well as departures of settlers or the stop in

European land purchases in the East **after 1934 riots**. From the 1940s, the red curve is systematically above the blue one for similar reasons even if, during the War of independence, the National Liberation Front punishes by death land transactions which challenge its land reform plans

In conclusion, I wanted to highlight a very unbalanced land market for economic and political reasons, but where Algerians play a role which should not be ignored nor exaggerated, because it gives a more dynamic view of the land colonisation during the first half of the 20th Century. It gives also a more complex one on a very sensitive issue for different reasons until nowadays :

- Is the French sovereignty threatened before the independence? was the main question until the 1950s
- What is the origin of land family rights (legitimate or not) that heirs can claim today? is the actual question in a very conflicting context. They can be contested both by the Algerian State and by other private claimers