

# THE THERMAL ESTABLISHMENT IN ALGERIA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD: FROM EXPLOITATION TO NEW ARRANGEMENTS

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*Received October 2017 • Final Acceptance: May 2018*

## Abstract

Algeria has an abundance of water heritage, which for centuries marks most of its towns and villages. It certainly illustrates the historical, social and cultural dimension, but especially lavishes to the care and leisure populations. During the nineteenth century, new regulations were introduced in Europe to improve hygiene services. They had enabled the development of real water towns. It was also during this period that the French administration had given special attention to the thermal springs of the newly colonized Algerian territories. Given the state of its water heritage, it was difficult to subject it to any kind of exploitation.

This paper focuses on how to identify the state of the water heritage in the aftermath of colonization and to establish the conditions of the new improvements for exploitation that could be made.

Some of the scenarios as well can be envisaged at the outset, for instance, a simple reorganization-rearrangement of the infrastructures belonging to the thermal spa baths or existing baths can be undertaken; or the construction of new thermal structures in the vicinity of existing natural sources or old baths, which as well has been already undertaken. The *Hammam Bou-Hanifia*, located not far from Mascara, in the Western part of the country, is one of the best examples of the above mentioned scenarios for development. The colonial work was envisaged because of the health endangering conditions of the existing spa. Similar is the case of *Hammam N'bails Nador*, located in Constantinois. This establishment of Roman origin was perfectly preserved, but ill-ventilated and illuminated. Therefore, it was necessary to make certain crucial adjustments to improve it in order for it to function properly. Other establishments have also undergone various transformations. We will be called upon to identify and observe more particularly the new developments initiated within the framework for promotion and improvement of colony hydrotherapy.

The research work presented in this paper is based on unpublished archival sources, which we have exploited and analyzed systematically. They are corroborated by in-situ investigations and tests, which make it possible to ascertain the degree of conservation of these thermal establishments, as well as to make comparisons between their ancient and current states.

**Keywords :** Thermal establishment, Algeria, French colonization, History, Heritage

**Word count:** 3791

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Algeria has a very large number of thermal and mineral springs, the utilization of which has been recorded since the centuries of the Romans. The natives had a true cult for warm waters, they considered the thermal practice as being of religious importance rather than of medical one. This enthusiasm and conviction goes in the direction of the precepts of religion. Which advocates a meticulous hygiene and regular ablutions. This heritage of water is a symbol of not only of the historical, societal and cultural aspect, but also of the tourist dimension.

During these two periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thermalism had been in a much more active phase in the development of hygienic urban planning, which led to the improvement of sanatoriums and thermal establishments. The evolution of the thermal vocation during this period, has allowed the adoption of the notion of modern thermalism. New laws and regulations come to complete the existing, to proceed to the arrangements and the improvements of the hygiene services, which will allow the development of real water stations.

In our quest to highlight this thermal heritage, it was first to look for what it could represent in the eyes of society. And there are no less than three dimensions, which have emerged and which are of a historical, cultural and therapeutic nature. We were allowed to make a retrospective on the regulation and development of thermalism. Also to identify the state in which this water heritage was found in the aftermath of colonization, on the one hand, and to establish, on the other hand, in which conditions its new exploitation could take place. A non-exhaustive classification list will be established, in order to compare the current and former state of the thermal establishments, with the aim of identifying the degree of their conservation.

## 2. NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE REVIVAL OF THERMALISM IN EUROPE AND ALGERIA

The thermal activity has existed since the most remote times, the Greeks and the Romans have bequeathed an exceptional historical heritage and archaeological remains, which show a past thermalism much more related to religion and the way of everyday life than to an activity strictly medical according to Lohez (2000; 2003). Under the development of the notions of thermalism, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new regulations were developed, codifying the improvement and development of the hygienic services in the thermal establishments as stated by Abidi-Belhadj (2016). According to Lohez (2000) the new thermalism, mixes the two forms hedonism and animism beliefs to the virtues of waters. They want to emphasize on its importance. Moreover, the followers of these new cares are not mistaken: to go to water is a cultu (r) al act.

At the end of this dynamic engaged research in the field of thermalism, Carribon (1997) found the establishment of an organization of the thermal activity with its codes, its products and its aesthetics. New functions appear within the spas, including care, accommodation and amusement facilities. In parallel of this change, under the century of the industrial revolution, technological progress extended to the means of transport, thus allowing to develop the railway, which on its turn encouraged tourism and contributed to the development of thermalism as stated by Berbain (2013). Authier and Duvernois (1997) in their research found as well as the wide spread issue of tourist guides and popularization of the medical expanded the public knowledge and understanding of the spas have replaced advantageously the descriptive albums of the romantic period. Following development, several tourists arrive to effectuate not only their medical treatments but also for a simple bathing with therapeutic mineral waters according to Penez (2005, p.28) go to the waters, for some it is to exist socially and for others to exist simply by seeking the cure.

During this period, the notion of thermalism saw a remarkable rise in France, as well as in the Maghreb and in Algeria, giving to the medical practice a new breath and a new opening. According to Abidi-Belhadj (2016) it

was marked by the progress of the developing sciences. The operations of physicochemical analysis of mineral waters will provoke the evolution of the thermal medicine and to the research on the mechanisms of actions influence of the thermal waters on the organism. Therefore, the knowledge of the properties of the waters has become paramount in order to be able to prescribe them safely for a *curist*, but this is not anything exceptional since this practice fits well in the traditional medical heritage. It was during this period that the thermal monument was lived a very important stage of its development.

Immediately, the transformation of a small thermal bath to a larger station at last as well have emerged, so many buildings came to complete the existing ensemble, and this is how the city of water is born to offer to the tourists not only the best conditions of care but also comfortable and enjoyable stay, thus constituting a varied heritage palaces, thermal baths, casinos equipped with a strong and original identity as stated by Abidi-Belhadj (2016).

### 3. THE THERMAL SPRINGS OF ALGERIA: THERAPEUTIC VIRTUES AND EXPLOITATION

The natives considered the thermal practice as a sacred remedy for all the diseases, resulting from the fusion of the past civilizations Greek, Roman and ottoman. According to (Babilee, 1927) the local populations used the mineral water springs for daily bathing, either by exploiting the very rudimentary Roman pools or in holes dug created by them, along with the settlements of tents in order to spend the stay. This mode of primitive encampment hindered most of the European tourists coming to spend some time near these mineral springs. Unfortunately, very little effort has been made for the restoration of the smallest of these Roman pools. At this same time, it was found the European population also had an important interest for the thermal waters of Algeria recently colonized. They constitute a valuable resource for the Europeans, still insufficiently acclimated, enabling them to fight victoriously against the debilitating of the summer heats. Besides other therapeutic and utilitarian reasons, which encouraged the French scientifically prospect the mineral springs of Algeria, so they were used by military doctors for the treatments of their patients at the time of the occupation. This same colonial administration has noted the precarious state, in which the thermal installations used by the natives or by the foreign population dating back to the previous period. According to (Cellerier, 1932-1933), the first regulations relating to the thermal springs and their control were implemented. The attribution to the state of mineral waters for the right of property had appeared in the law of 1851, in order to lease them or to grant them to individuals. To this end, the colonial administration has invested tirelessly to the restoration of Roman old swimming pools and the construction of new infrastructures in conformity with the new regulations. Several refitting were carried out, notably the thermal establishments, hotels and lodgings, in order to welcome the *curists* and tourists during the thermal season, as well as thermal parks allowing to the *curists* to take a walk during their stay.

The interest for the thermal springs, appears to be a growing attraction for these areas spaces, the development and enhancement of which are then perceived like a means of developing city.

A study based on the identification of Algerian thermal springs, colonized by the European population, will enable us to identify the state, in which this heritage of water was found in the aftermath of colonization, on the one hand, and to establish, on the other hand, in what conditions its new exploitation could take place.

In the context of this study some scenarios can be envisaged:

- Simple arrangement of the infrastructure of existing baths or *thermes*;
- Realization of an infrastructure near an existing natural source;
- New infrastructure near an existing bath, due to its dilapidated condition.

These scenarios find their confirmation through in few examples of thermal establishments that are considered interesting, demonstrating the different arrangements or improvements made during the French occupation.

### 3.1 Region Center: Thermal station of *hammam-melouane*

The spa resort of *Hammam Melouane* is located at 37 kilometers in south-west of Algiers, on a superb site, shaded by mountains and with the level of which four principal springs of water gushing, distant from each other of approximately a hundred meters. It is about: the source of *Marabout Sidi-Slimane*, the source of the European swimming pool, the source of the medium and the surrounding salt source. These places do not reveal traces of the Roman vestiges. This suggests that probably the natives were the first to have discovered and used the hot springs of the *Harrach Gorge*, for hygienic and therapeutic purposes (data reported in Dr's thesis (Cherif-Zahar, 1947 p. 34). Among these springs water, the most wide one is the one called *Marabout Sidi-Slimane*, providing hot water with temperature of 44°C, and to which were added various runoffs pouring their water in masonry basin, with dimensions (L 2m10, l 1m10, h 0m60) as reported by Hanriot (1911, pp.203-204). The name of this source refers to King Solomon, who wanted to discover during his journey the baths of *Hammam Melouane*, whose last days of life were spent in this magnificent place. Upon arrival of the French in the land of Algeria, and during his visit in 1879, Dr Rotureau, according to Trolard (1901 p.36) he had established a state of the whole of the baths of the region. The pools that were within the various baths were of the most rudimentary, as well as the places of accommodation of the Muslim and the Jews bathers, whose health states had been infected. However, due to the lamentable state of places, the Europeans did not go there for bathing. Content of the existing infrastructure being obsolete, it was, therefore, decided to make new arrangements to the latter, in order to accommodate a better population of either Native or European origin, under for benefit thus more pleasant stays of cures within these new modern facilities.

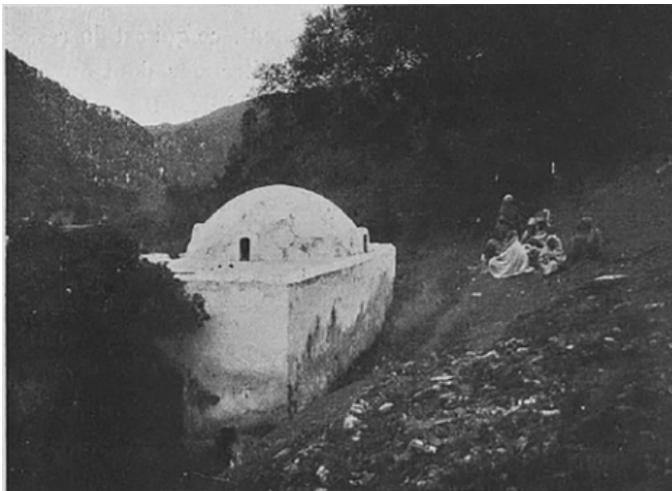


Figure 1: *Hammam Melouane*- Spring of *Sidi-Slimane*



Figure 2: *Hammam Melouane*- The *Gourbis* where lodge the bathers

The situation prevailing at this period, has allowed the mixed commune of *Hammam Melouane* to become a concessionaire of these springs water for a period of 99 years. Then in its turn the commune has retroceded the concession of these springs to private companies, who made them to realize that it is necessary to carry out work of development and improvements on the one hand, and on the other hand, to engage of the other work for the construction of new establishments and equipments of companies as indicated in the contribution of (Cellerier, 1932-1933). In mind all of the above, the concessionaire have built two large constructions on the site, namely a thermal establishment and a hotel accommodating the European population to carry out the necessary care, also other equipment has been built and restored such as the bar-restaurant, located near these two establishments and also the sacred pool of the *Marabout*, the area of which has been quadrupled. These few improvements have been very appreciated by the *curist*, who expressed their satisfaction for the good conditions of stays. Also other splendid buildings were erected to replace the dilapidated barracks and *gourbis* implanted on the spot. Many *curists* have go there to the thermal station of *Hammam Melouane*, in order to treat the various diseases, including rheumatisms, algies, lymphatism, trauma suites and women's diseases.

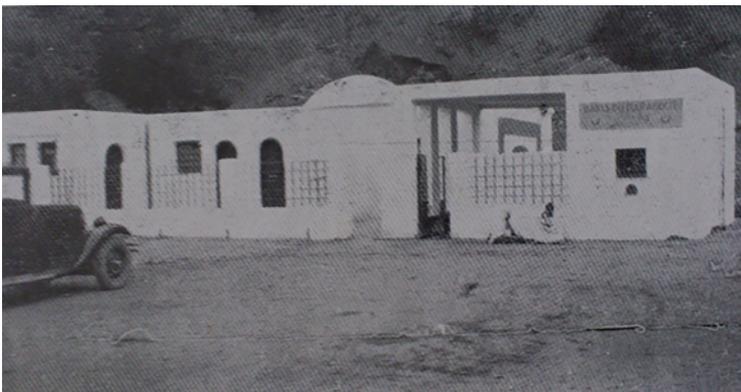


Figure 3: *Hammam Melouane*- Restoring of the *Marabout* pool of *Sidi-Slimane*

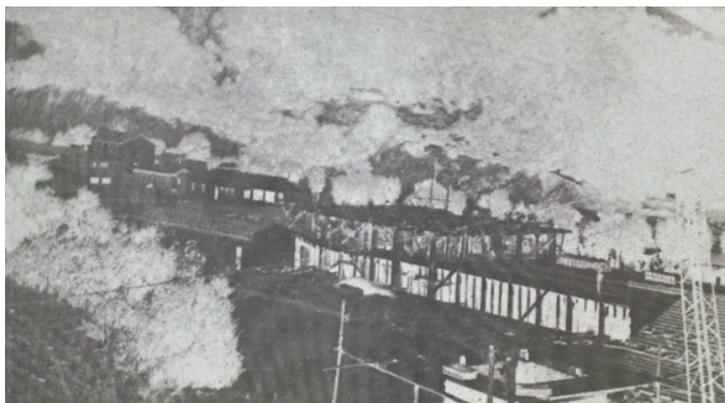


Figure 4: *Hammam Melouane*- Construction of the thermal establishment. Source: (*The Hydro-mineral Station of Hammam-Melouane*, 1934, pp. 16-17)

### 3.2 West Region: Thermal Station Of *Hammam Bou-Hanifia*

The thermal station of *Hammam Bou-Hanifia* is located 20 kilometers from the town of Mascara near the Oran-Bechar railway line. At the time, this station has been considered as the ancient thermal capital of North Africa, it is carried at an altitude of 230 meters, on a rather vast plate, surrounded by rocky mountains which gives it a rather picturesque character. On this site emerged eight springs on the right bank of the *oued el Hammam*, the temperature and water flow of which varies from the others. As the Romans granted great importance to the hot mineral waters, one of their discoveries was the springs water of *Hammam Bou-Hanifia* according to (Babille, 1927). During the same period, some measures have been taken to carry out new constructions particularly in those relating to bathing places swimming pools, with the aim of having therapeutic care for their military soldiers. The successive occupations of the region haven't made improvements to the state of existing constructions, until the advent of French colonization. The Roman remains called the *Aqua Sirenses* thermal baths still remained, but their states did not allow them to be restored, and even less to put them into activities. According to Trolard (1901, p.49), the management of these hot springs of water by the colonial administration, has led to the realization of two establishments, one intended for the natives, named the source water of the palm with the temperature of water is 61.5 C° and comprising a swimming pool and two rest rooms. As for the other establishment, this one is intended for the European with hot water temperature 66 C°, including two swimming pool, two baths and three rest rooms. The Moorish cafeteria reserved for the natives on the one hand, and on the other hand a caravanserai comprising thirteen rooms for Europeans was built on n the same site as reported by Hanriot (1911, p.324).



Figure 5 : *Hammam Bou-Hanifia*- The native establishment



Figure 6 : *Hammam Bou-Hanifia*- The European establishment. Source: (The mineral waters of Algeria, 1911, p.228)

During his visit to *Hammam Bou-Hanifia*, Mr Hanriot has found that the thermal establishments have been in an unhealthy and infectious state without any hygiene, and that the capacity for lodging was very insufficient. In spite of all these imperfections, the frequentation of these establishments has been increasing more and more. According to Hanriot (1911, p.324), it was noted that every year there were about 18000 natives and 3000 Europeans, due to the climate of the temperate and the dry region through-out the winter, and also because of its known waters universally on the part of their hyperthermal and radioactivity. The concession of these mineral springs water have been entrusted to a private company, in order to take charge of the development of these places, the program of which consisted in the realization of new buildings and to proceed to the renewals and the improvement of the state of existing establishments. Remarkably, a new establishment and a hotel all two first class have been erected and comprising all the amenities necessary to accommodate *curists* for the purpose of care. Also, other works had been undertaken, notably improvement and construction of the water collection, with the aim of putting these thermal stations in competition with the thermal spas established in France. The diseases treated at *Hammam Bou-Hanifia*, appeared those of the skin, syphilis, dysentery, infertility and abdominal engorgement.

### 3.3 Est Region: Thermal Station Of Hammam N'bails-Nador

The station of *Hammam N'bails Nador* located about twenty kilometers from Guelma. As reported by Trolard (1901, p.69), in this locality there are two points of emergence, of which gush of saline and chloride sodium waters of temperature varying from 30°C to 49°C. In the Roman period these springs of water have fed a swimming pool, whose successors had continued to use until the arrival of the French, who had engaged in work of reconstruction and improvements of the places, because of their unhealthy state, infects and dilapidated places. In the framework of this work, two joints swimming pools of dimensions (L 10m, l 3m) each one whose use was reserved respectively for women and men. Each swimming pool was lighted by very small windows, so that the room temperature remains always invariable, and the ventilation is sufficient to ventilate the pool area. According to Hanriot (1911, p.228), the water of this one was of a temperature of 42.8°C, and the air in the shelter room recorded 36.3°C.



Figure 7: *Hammam N'Bails Nador*- Thermal baths. Source: (The mineral waters of Algeria, 1911, p.228)

These baths have been much more frequently used by natives than by Europeans, to use the benefits of mineral water, especially to treat rheumatism. In parallel, a new construction was built to lodge Europeans in order to also benefit from the repairing effects of mineral waters. With the increasing visits of the natives and Europeans populations to the *Hammam N'bails Nador*, the latter could not more cope with such density in terms of capacity as interior conveniences, especially at the level of the room sheltering the swimming pool, which is very hot and poorly ventilated where reigns a stifling temperature as stated in the contribution of (Cellerier, 1932-1933). As a result, the mixed municipality has proposed to arrange this station, in order to bring the infrastructure in conformity to the rules of a modern thermal installation, to take in charge an increasingly important clientele, offering them the high quality services.

#### 4. BETWEEN EXPLOITATIONS AND NEW INSTALLATIONS

The ancient constructions built by the Romans at the level of the thermal springs water were of great importance for the natives and Europeans *curists*. Later in the past, they had been frequented by the natives for carrying out hygienic baths as well as therapeutic. The Europeans also have been attracted by the hydromineral water wealth of Algeria. It was, therefore, the beginning of the exploitation of the first Roman springs and baths, and this, for the effect of treating among other things the military soldiers' convalescent. With the evolution of thermalism, a new law has been adopted in 1851 by the colonial administration, and also few new regulations have been elaborated with the aim of improving the hygienic state of the premises and the renewal of dilapidated buildings. The measures of improvements committed had provided a tourist image of the thermal heritage, which as a results had given birth to the development of the existing sites and the realization of new buildings to accommodate a larger population of *curists*.

With the independence of the country, the Algerian public authorities have developed a plan of reorganization and development for the exploitation of the most important thermal establishments in order to allow the population to benefit from the best conditions of reception and relaxation.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The wealth as regarding the thermal springs available currently in Algeria has been made up starting from the heritage left respectively by the Romans and the French. During the Roman period, several springs of water were discovered and the sites, of which have been arranged and used because of the benefits of their warm waters.

During the French period, the Roman thermal remains arrangements for which and constructions of new establishments have been carried out at on the initiative of the French authorities, thanks to the great interest shown in therapeutic cures of both natives and European populations.

These multiple benefits of hot springs water, have therefore prompted the authorities to regulate the thermal activity in order to make it evolve it towards a wellness hydrotherapy. The warm waters, the chemical composition of which is very varied from one station to another, has then provoked an interest on the part of the health sector to provide treatments to patients suffering from various affections such as : rheumatism, overwork , weakness, anemia, hypotension, arthritis ... etc.

The thermal activity in Algeria has been taken over by the public authorities, within the framework of a plan for the modernization and development of thermal tourism. Currently the potential of this activity is estimated at 200 thermal stations.

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