Bernard Mueller

The Astonishing Fate of Soliman al-Halabi (1777-1800)

Or the Request for Post-Mortem Naturalization of Kléber's Assassin Formulated by the Abounaddara Collective

The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussion on the restitution of looted property in a colonial context. As such, it is one of a series of articles on claims for restitution, the atypical nature of which sheds light on the symbolic dimension activated by these cases, whether involving human remains or so-called ethnographic objects, over and above their materiality and the formal bilateral negotiations involved in settling the post-colonial dispute. On this subject, I refer you in particular to my article: "The "mystery" of the konkomba's severed thumbs, Historical fact, colonial rumour or legend of the defeated?", ZfK – Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften, 2/2021, Bielefeld.

> "We ask you, Mr. President of the (French) Republic, to deprive Soliman al-Halabi of the Syrian nationality that France has unduly attributed to him. At the same time, we ask you to naturalize him as a French citizen, given that the fanatical Syrian he has become corresponds to a French character who has nothing to do with Syria".
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> *Letter to the President of the Republic about the Syrian Fanatic*[1]

Damascus, October 2022[2], Abounaddara, Abounaddara Collective


SOULEYMAN-EL HALEBI
Assassin de Kléber

Collectif Abounaddara, The Murder Returning to the Scene of the Crime (2013), Digital Collage (source: https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/949/abounaddara)

In this blog-note, lbe discussed an unusual case of treatment of human remains seized in a colonial context, in 1800 during the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt. The collective of Syrian filmmakers in exile, Abounaddara[3], recently formed not to demand the restitution of human remains, but to request the French naturalization of its proprietor, in the person of Soliman al-Halabi (1777-1800), the assassin of General Kleber at the head of the conquest of Egypt. His remains are now preserved in the collections of the Museum of Natural History in Paris. The postulate of the Abounaddara collective is the following: it considers that the story of the assassination of Kleber by Soliman al-Halabi was seized by colonial France to produce the image of the Muslim "fanatic", the "bearded", and one thing leading to another, the "terrorist", then the "sauvageon[4]" (see French context of the riots in the Parisian suburbs in 2005[5]).

Through his post-mortem naturalization, the collective's intended goal is to restore to France the authorship of this deleterious cliché, whose disastrous consequences are felt to this day. Under the air of derision, this action of the collective contains in reality a proposal of post-colonial emancipation which would not have displeased Frantz Fanon[6]. It is indeed a question of cutting short a certain psychological mechanism which allows the colonial potentate to lock up the colonized in a subaltern place, a prison which is also interior because internalized by the colonized. The proposal of the Abounaddara collective allows us to return to the ever-present effects of the colonial gaze on the colonized, the alienation and exclusion that it produces, "the violence that this provokes and the psychological consequences that this gaze can generate over several generations[7]".

Let's return here to the reasons for the approach of the Abounaddara collective, which is at the origin of this original request for naturalization. This Syrian collective

is composed of video artists engaged in an “emergency cinema”, self-taught and anonymous, they lead a meticulous fight, not devoid of humor, “in the field of representations of Syrians through history”, aiming at the deconstruction of stereotypes that “obscure our view of Syria”.

The assassination of Kléber

On June 14, 1800 Soliman al-Halabi, a brilliant student and public writer, trained at the famous mosque-university of Cairo al-Azhar, assassinated in Cairo the French army general Jean-Baptiste Kléber, who had just replaced Napoleon at the head of the conquest of Egypt. Pretending to be a beggar in order to approach his target, al-Halabi struck him several times in the heart with a stylus. According to the record of his trial, Soliman al-Halabi was born in 1777 in the village of Kukan near Aleppo to a Kurdish family called Ous Qopar. His father, a religious man named Mohammad Amin, worked in the sale of butter and olive oil, in what was then an important province of the Turkish Empire[8]. Condemned to death by the council of war, as well as his accomplices, al-Halabi would be executed the day of Kléber’s funeral (June 17, 1800). His accomplices had their heads cut off with a sword and were then burned in front of Soliman al-Halabi who had his right hand burned before being impaled alive.



Portrait of Dominique-Jean Larrey (1766-1842), chirurgien de la Garde Impériale, painted by his sis-ter-in-law, Marie-Guillemine Benoist, 1804, Toulouse, Musée des Augustins. (Photo: 2020 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Michel Urtado. Source: https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010436975#)

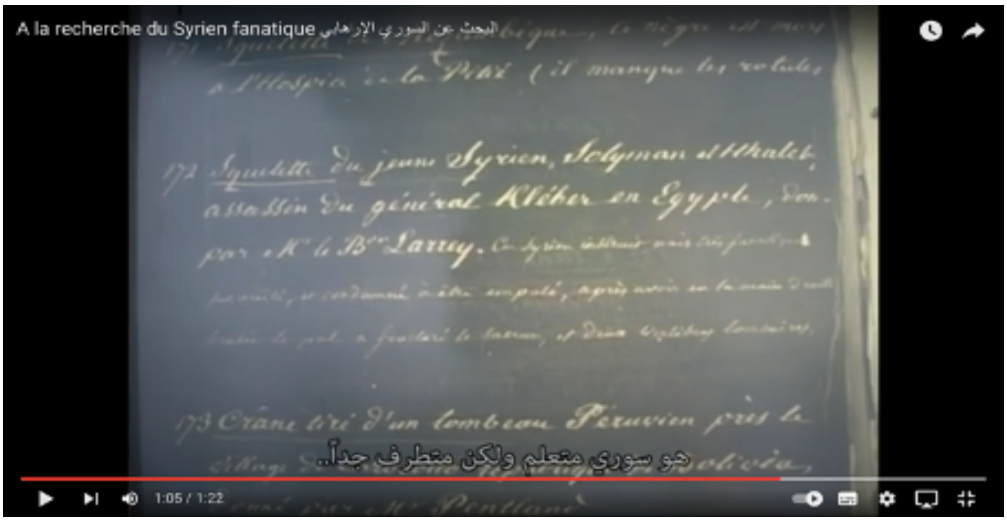
Although he was found guilty, the court tempered his individual responsibility by recalling in its judgment that the assassin had been influenced by "the supreme minister of the Ottoman Empire, that his generals, that his army, had the cowardice to send an assassin to the brave and unfortunate Kleber. A manipulation that would have made the assassination of Kleber a religious duty, a jihad, resulting from a "religious delirium to the highest degree in his head troubled by false ideas on the perfection of Islamism" (Source: Report made on 27 rairial year 8, by the commissioner-ordinator Sartelon, to the commission in charge of judging the murderer of the general in chief Kléber, and his accomplices[9]).

The assassination of Kléber took place during the Egyptian campaign, a vast colonial and military expedition launched in Egypt from 1798 to 1801 by General Bonaparte with the aim of taking over Egypt and the Orient. After crushing the Mamluk sultanate of Murad Bey (1750-1801), Napoleon did not succeed in establishing himself there permanently. A new Anglo-Ottoman offensive led to the French capitulation on August 31, 1801. Kléber's successor, Menou, obtained from the English that the French army be repatriated by English ships. Napoleon then already left Egypt to prepare in France the coup d'état of 18 brumaire year VIII (9-10 November 1799), marking the end of the Directory and the French Revolution, and the beginning of the Consulate.

Also, the Egyptian campaign was coupled with a scientific expedition[10]: many historians, botanists, and draftsmen accompanied the army in order to rediscover the riches of Egypt. The exceptional scientific and artistic results are gathered in a monumental work, published in twenty volumes between 1809 and 1828, and known under the title of "Description de l'Égypte"[11].

The birth of Egyptology is part of a paradoxical fascination of the “West” for the history of the “Middle East[12]“: the colonization of this part of the world considered as the cradle of the European civilisation and of the West[13] did have to proceed of the reactivation of ancient cultural substrates, but as if put on hold. According to the ideas of the time, the course of the civilisation born in Mesopotamia[14] would have continued in Egypt and then, so to speak, recovered by the Greek-Hellenic civilisation before being diverted, in particular by the expansion of Islam corollary to the Arab conquest. This deviation of the destiny of humanity had to be put back in the right way by the Enlightenment, and colonization, as a cultural project, had to be the instrument. According to the same reasoning, Suleiman al-Halabi is understood as “Syrian”, that is, according to the erroneous but then fashionable conception as an heir of the greatness of his Syro-Egyptian ancestors, but whose greatness he would have lost the memory of. According to the understanding of his “civilizers”, this brilliant young student should have realized the opportunity that colonization represented in order to benefit from the Enlightenment, and to rediscover the ideal of which he would also be the bearer and which colonization was supposed to remind him of.

Syrie imaginaire / Imaginary Syria



"A *la recherche du Syrien fanatique*", *film made by the Abounaddara collective, 1:22 https://youtu.be/EEEnHGSEi7Q. Copyright © 2022 Abounaddara Film Inc. All rights reserved.*

Thus, Soliman al-Halabi appears as a "young Syrian" (see illustration) in the archives, notably in the autopsy report established by Doctor Larrey. What did "Syria" mean in 1800? Who was "Syrian" then? Syria in its current borders never constituted a political entity before 1920 (following the Sykes-Picot agreement). The term "Syria" was unknown until the second half of the 19th century when it re-emerged under European influence. It was not until 1865 that it became the official name of a province, that of the vilayet[15] of Damascus, and it was not until after the establishment of the French mandate in 1920 that it was used to designate the current Syrian state. The inhabitants did not call their region Syria either, but – as the traveler Volney noted -: "The present inhabitants... replace it by that of Barr-el-Châm... and by that they designate all the space included between two lines drawn, one from Alexandrette to the Euphrates, the other from Gaze in the Arabian desert, having for limits in the east this same desert, and in the west the Mediterranean Sea." (Travels in Egypt and Syria, Paris, 1959, p. 159). For the Europeans of the beginning of the 19th century, "Syria" therefore refers more to a mythical, biblical space, from before the Arab-Islamic expansion of the 7th century; the one that the Crusaders already coveted, and that the colonizer also planned to reconquer.

A victim of the skull bumps science?

> „The skeleton of this unfortunate man was brought back to France at the same time as the body of his victim. It is deposited in the buildings adjoining the Jardin du Roi, in the first anatomy room, to the left of the entrance door; it is that of a man of about five feet two inches. The bones of the right wrist are burnt and one can still see the effects of the fire; the pal, for its part, had broken two dorsal vertebrae; they are replaced by two wooden vertebrae which imitate the natural vertebrae, to the extent that

it takes great care to distinguish them from the real ones“,

Alexandre Dumas et Adrien Dauzats[16]

Given the hasty circumstances of the forced departure of the French troops, it would have been simpler to abandon the body of the assassin in a local mass grave. The scientific curiosity of the chief surgeon of the Egyptian army, Dominique-Jean Larrey[17], decided otherwise.

Everything leads us to believe that the remains of Soliman al-Halabi were brought back and then preserved as a scientific specimen, because his remains made it possible to validate several theories in vogue at the beginning of the 19th century, which was enamored of evolutionism and its degenerative and phrenological variations. According to the theories of the time, the fanaticism of Soliman al-Halabi would be the result of a triple mental degeneration corroborated by biological evidence. Soliman al-Halabi was thus contributing to the following theories:

- 1) Racialism: The skeleton of Soliman is said to be the example of an “Arab” and would have been collected in order to prove the theory of races. Racialism is a pseudo-scientific trend of thought that claims to explain social phenomena by hereditary and racial factors leading to hierarchical classifications. Among these racialist taxonomies, the so-called “Arabs” appear to be the degenerate descendants of “Europeans” (of which the „Bedouins” would be the survivors of the “pure” branch). Since races were supposed to be biological categories, they also had a place in a natural history museum. The reasoning, encyclopedic, is the same as that which motivated the conservation of the remains of Sarah Bartman (1789-1815), which was returned to South Africa in 2002, and which had been conserved because of physical characteristics that made her an example of another sub-race, that of the “hottentots”, a sub-group of the „blacks”[18].

- 2) Theory of heredity-degeneration: The idea of degeneration permeates the medical and hygienic conceptions of the time, and certainly also that of Dr. Larrey, who – no doubt – was looking for the physical causes of which the violence of Soliman al-Halabi was the symptom. Diagnosed as a "fanatic", according to this erroneous conception of Social Darwinism, he would suffer from a hereditary mental illness, a "defect", which would have pushed him to such murderous outbursts, whereas reason, embodied by his Syrian part, heir to "civilisation", should have restrained him. At this point, the theory of degeneration merges with that of social decadence (assimilated to a degeneration of values) and civilisational decline (assimilated to a genetic corruption).

- 3) Phrenology: Mixed with the theory of degeneration, the observation of a supposed skull "bump"[19] in Soliman Al-Halabi fed another pseudo-science that was phrenology (Franz Joseph Gall[20]). The latter proposes to study the character of an individual from the shape of his skull, not without resonance with racialist and evolutionist theories. Not only "crazy" but also "degenerate", Soliman's behavior could be explained above all by biological and genetic properties that had to be studied according to the scientific paradigms of the time.

The birth of an archetype of colonial propaganda

From the detailed circumstances of Kléber's assassination, to the judicial chronicle of his trial and then the story of his unbelievable resistance to a terrible execution, to the exhibition of his skull as a specimen of the "fanatic and criminal", all of this taking place in the context of the Egyptian campaign that fascinated the world, widely reported by the press of the time, on the eve of the 18 Brumaire, made the "Soliman al-Halabi affair" the source of inspiration for several short stories, soap operas, plays and films.

Alexandre Dumas portrayed him as a "fanatic in spite of himself" in a newspaper

serial entitled Mort de Kléber. The Lumière brothers set him up as an enemy of the Republic, bearded and treacherous, in a film devoted to the Assassination of Kléber. A historical mimodrama entitled “La mort de Kléber ou Les Français en Égypte” (The death of Kléber or The French in Egypt) directed in 1819 by Jean-Guillaume Cuvelier de Trie (1766-1824) will also be dedicated to this event[21].



Kléber’s assassination was the subject of an 1897 short film by Auguste and Louis Lu-mière titled “Assassinat de Kléber” (film view). Film in public domain. Drama produced by the Lu-mière brothers society and directed by French theater manager, filmmaker and screenwriter Georges Alphonse Hatot in 1897, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLiAazPPZ1A

Surprisingly, in the “East”, the character remained unknown for a long time and it was only in 1965 that the story of Soliman al-Halabi was transposed into a play by the Egyptian playwright, Alfred Farag (1929-2005). The dramaturg showed that the cliché of the “fanatic”, from then on constructed as a positive hero of Arab nationalism (and no longer as a victim of Islam), was recovered by the colonized, but after having been constructed by the colonists, in the same way that the “West” constructed the “East”[22]. From the end of the 1960s, 160 years after the assassination of Kléber by Soliman al-Halabi, the latter will also become in “Syria” the source of an inexhaustible popular inspiration, to the point of giving the name of al-Halabi to a neighborhood of Aleppo.

Conclusion

By demanding the French naturalization of Soliman al-Halabi, instead of formulating the demand for the restitution of his remains, the collective opens another debate no less fundamentally inherent to the symbolic stakes that accompany the reparation of the colonial trauma. If restitution were limited to a material operation that consists of moving objects, whether booty or human remains, from one place to another, a transfer from a museum institution in the center to a similar institution in the periphery (while we are at it also financed by the former), but without modifying the framework of enunciation in which they appear, it risks to reproduce only under other latitudes the same alienating mechanisms, the same epistemic violence, which it claims to fight, and which was at the origin of the spoliation, the humiliation and the domination. The reading of Frantz Fanon invites us to compare the stereotype of the "fanatic" embodied by Soliman al-Halabi to the cliché of the Algerian "kills savagely and for nothing"[23], especially when he notes the presence of this stereotype even in the most official writings, theorized and taught at the university. Fanon recalls that in 1935, at the Congress of French-speaking alienists and neurologists, Professor Antoine Porot made the following comment: "The indigenous North African, whose superior and cortical activities are not very evolved, is a primitive being whose essentially vegetative and instinctive life is mainly regulated by his diencephalon[24]", and Dr. Carothers, an expert from the WHO, still maintains in 1954 that "the African makes very little use of his frontal lobes. All the peculiarities of African psychiatry can be related to frontal laziness"[25], and he continued: "The resemblance between the European leucotomized[26] patient and the African primitive is very complete [...]. The African, with his total lack of ability to synthesize, must consequently use his frontal lobes very little, and all the particularities of African psychiatry can be related to this frontal laziness[27]"... and here comes the phrenology hump again. This theory of "frontal laziness" which results from it will be taken up in psychiatric circles, until the Nigerian psychiatrist Thomas Adeoye Lambo

(1923-2002), in his turn president of the WHO, definitively rejects the thesis and the possible therapeutic implications in 1973[28]. The process proposed by the Abounaddara collective is a form of collage or "surrealist idiom" as Césaire[29] would have said, and it is typical of a form of colonial derision. The process allows us to show that the critical re-examination of colonial history implies a real work of deconstruction of colonial categories and cultural clichés produced by colonization in order to assign individually dominated populations to the roles that are expected of them in a relationship of domination, and for purposes of control.

Among these personality-types produced by colonial propaganda, there is that of the "young bearded radicalized Muslim", the icon of the "fanatic", the ancestor of the "radicalized terrorist", the seedling of the "savage", of which Soliman al-Halabi is, according to the members of the collective, the archetype, the matrix. Indeed, used by several ministers, the term "savage" implies that young people in the suburbs have returned to the "savage state", i.e. to their situation before colonization gave them access to civilisation and progress (as happened to young Soliman, who was only 23 at the time of the events). These clichés make it possible, and this is undoubtedly also the reason for their success, to elude the profoundly political motive that drove Soliman al-Halabi to commit the assassination of Kléber: it was an act of resistance to foreign domination. In reality, this act does not express "fanaticism" so much as a rational approach expressed by the representative of a population that disagrees with the colonial project to which it is ordered to submit.

Le collectif Abounaddara

Abounaddara is a Syrian "emergency cinema" video art collective known for its documentation of life in Syria. The members of the collective, self-taught and anonymous, wage a meticulous, not without humor, struggle in the field of representations of Syrians through history. Whether it is the accounts of travels to the East more than two hundred years ago recounted by Volney's *Voyage en Syrie et*

en Égypte (1787), the Lumière brothers' *Assassinat de Kléber* (1897), the first film in which a Syrian is seen on screen, or the colonialist statements of twentieth-century governors, the same portrait is sketched out: an archaic, violent and ignorant individual. In each of Abounaddara's productions, the anonymous collective attempts to undo the stereotypes that obscure our view of Syria, it seeks to shift the coordinates through which we observe a war that reaches levels of violence we no longer even suspect. The collective does this by making this violence palpable, but far from the voyeurism that exploits the suffering of women and men in front of the camera.

Abounaddara has collaborated with a number of international universities to reformulate a right to image based on the principle of dignity, rather than simply on the right to property or the right to privacy. This collaboration has resulted in a book, *The Question of Image Rights*, published in 2019 after two years of reflection on the topic in a graduate course co-organized with the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. The Abounaddara spokesperson was also appointed as a visiting professor at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, November 2014, and at the Stockholm University of the Arts, May 2019. For 2020-22, the Abounaddara are fellows at the Institute of Ideas and Imagination at Columbia University, Paris.

Footnotes

[1] https://www.debordements.fr/IMG/pdf/debordements_15.pdf
[2] https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/949/abounaddara
[3] Abounaddara was chosen as the project name from the first Arabic-language satirical magazine, which was launched in Cairo, Egypt, in the 19th century. In English, Abounaddara means "the man with glasses".
[4] See the controversy triggered by Jean-Pierre Chevènement in 1999 when he used

the term “sauvageon” to designate young “beur” delinquents (Zeribi, Karim, Pur beur ou le sauvageon de la république, JC Lattès, 2003)

[5] Fabien Jobard. The 2005 French Urban Unrests: Data-Based Interpretations. Sociology Compass, 2008, 2 (4), pp. 1287-1302.

[6] Frantz Fanon: “Guerre coloniale et troubles mentaux”, in: Les damnés de la terre, La découverte, 2001 (1961)

[7] Cherki, Alice. « Fanon au temps présent. L’assignation au regard », Politique africaine, vol. 143, no. 3, 2016, pp. 145-152.

[8] Recueil des pièces relatives à la Procédure et au Jugement de Soliman al-Halabi, assassin du Général en Chef Kléber / Au Kaire, de l’imprimerie nationale, An VIII de la République Française / 1807

[9] http://desaix.unblog.fr/2007/09/21/requisitoire-et-verdict-2/

[10] It was during this same expedition, on 15 July 1799, that Lieutenant Pierre-François-Xavier Bouchard discovered the Rosetta Stone, bearing three versions of the same text that allowed the deciphering of hieroglyphs. Following a new Anglo-Ottoman offensive that led to the French defeat, the original Rosetta Stone became British property in 1801. This explains why it is now kept in the British Museum, while a simple copy is on display in the Louvre.

[11] Collection of the observations and researches which were made in Egypt during the expedition of the French Army, published by the orders of His Majesty the Emperor Napoleon the Great (Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

[12] The french term “Moyen Orient” comes from the translation of the English Middle East, which referred to the territories between the Mediterranean, the British Indian Empire and East Asia, i.e. the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, Mesopotamia and the Persian world. After the First World War, the French used the term Near East as a synonym for the term “Levant”, which dates from the 16th century.

[13] Pécout, G. (2004). Chapitre IV. Jusqu’où va l’Europe au xixe siècle?. Dans : Gilles Pécout éd., Penser les frontières de l’Europe du XIXe au XXIe siècle (pp. 95-117). Paris cedex 14: Presses Universitaires de France.

[14] Georg Feuerstein, In Search of the Cradle of Civilization, Quest Books, 2001

[15] Vilayet: Ottoman administrative division
[16] Alexandre Dumas et Adrien Dauzats, 52ième volume de la Revue de Paris, 1838
[17] Dominique-Jean Larrey, the same man who embalmed Kléber (before his remains were placed under the statue of General Kleber in Strasbourg, where they still stand).
[18] Pierre-André Taguieff, La couleur et le sang : doctrines racistes à la française, Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2002
[19] It should be noted that there is no mention of this cranial protuberance in the autopsy performed by Larrey. One then wonders if this supposed “bump” was not simply his zabiba, the mark on the fore-head of some Muslims, caused by the friction generated by the regular contact of the forehead with the prayer mat. Unless it was a metaphor…
[20] Franz Joseph Gall & Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, Des dispositions innées de l’âme et de l’esprit, 1811
[21] https://archive.org/details/lamortdeklberoul00cuve/page/n3/mode/2up
[22] Edward Said, Orientalism, 1978
[23] Antoine Porot, «Notes de psychiatrie musulmane», Annales médico-psychologiques, 1918, no. 9
[24] The part of the brain located between the cerebral hemispheres, which consists mainly of the thalamus, epiphysis and hypothalamus. It is the oldest part of the human brain.
[25] Carothers, J. C & World Health Organization. (1953). The African mind in health and disease : a study in ethnopsychiatry / J. C. Carothers. World Health Organization.
[26] Brain surgery to remedy certain mental disorders, either by removing their cause (brain tumour, post-traumatic injury) or by excluding parts of the cerebral cortex, such as frontal lobectomy.
[27] Carothers, op. cit., p. 157
[28] See: Lambo Adeoye Thomas, « A new world in the making », World Health (April): 2–5, 1980

[29] Aimé Césaire, Soleil cou coupé, 1948

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