



# Nahum Slouschz's Travels in *North Africa* and Colonialist Discourse

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**Abstract:** This article examines the colonialist discourse internalized in Nahum Slouschz' portrait of early 20<sup>th</sup> century North African Jews in his book *Travels In North Africa*. While Slouschz's cognition of the North African Jews drew much parallel with those of the European authorities in the region, Slouschz — as a European Jew — retained a unique perspective in regard to the Jewish communities in North Africa. Despite his condescending outlook on his co-religionists, Slouschz viewed North African Jews as the founders of civilization in the region, thereby placing them as the rightful heirs of their lands whose material and cultural “backwardness” was to be modernized through proper guidance of the Europeans.

**Keywords:** Colonialist Discourse, Nahum Slouschz, North African Jews, Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century North Africa, Travel Writings, Subaltern Studies, Orientalism

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## Introduction

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 prompted researchers in the field of history and area studies to pay stronger attention to the power relations behind the Western construction of knowledge on the non-West.<sup>1</sup> Coinciding with this scholarly development, travel writings have received an increasing spotlight in the aforementioned academia for the colonialist relationship inherent in their contents — in other words, their colonialist discourses.<sup>2</sup> Western travelers' depiction of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century non-West was dotted with biases commonplace at the time, which accentuated the “foreign,” “primitive,” and “static” quality of their travel destinations. Looking at the “backwardness” of their host countries, the Western travelers opted for conclusions that were strongly aligned with the European imperialist projects; the Western authorities brought about or were to bring, changes to those places unmoved by time.<sup>3</sup> The natives were to be cleansed out of their savagery, educated, and uplifted to the status of civilization. Travelers who were standing on the opposite side of imperialism expressed their remorse over the disintegration of the natives' “pure” way of life,

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<sup>1</sup> Burke III and Prochaska, “Rethinking,” 136.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 144.

reinvigorating, rather than nullifying, the innate prejudices in the Western presumption of the non-West.<sup>4</sup>

In parallel to the above trend, academic responses to counter the essentialism of colonialist and nationalist histories in North Africa have shed new light on previously understudied accounts of subaltern agencies in the region's colonial experience.<sup>5</sup> Such progression compelled the scholars to reevaluate the historic role of the Jewish heritage in the region, which accommodated the largest Jewish community in the Muslim world prior to the establishment of the Israeli state in Palestine.<sup>6</sup> In light of this context, European Jew Nahum Slouschz's *Travels in North Africa* remains as an interesting essay that elucidates the orientalist narratives of the contemporary West. Slouschz's writings on colonial North Africa and its Jewry were analogous to that of his European counterparts, and yet were exclusive in its own right. Slouschz maintained a condescending outlook on the "backwardness" of their co-religionists. Notwithstanding, he saw in the North African Jews the founders of civilization in the region whose pure way of life was traced back to the times of the bible, though such notion rationalized European powers' presence in the region. He sympathized with his co-religionists' plights, unlike other Europeans who had little compassion for the Jewish population in the region.<sup>7</sup> While Slouschz praised the colonial regimes' emancipation and assimilation of North Africa, he lamented over the North African Jewry's loss of their Jewish identity. Henceforth, this essay will scrutinize the contents of *Travels in North Africa* and explore how Slouschz's perspective on the heritage and functionality of his North African co-religionists embodied the colonialist discourse of his time.

### **Nahum Slouschz's *Travels in North Africa*- Backwardness, Heritage, and Colonial Teleology of North African Jews**

The disintegration of Western imperialism in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rendered the scholars in the field of history and area studies to criticize Western ideals inherent in literary works for their role in the justification of Western Imperialism's rationale.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have coined the term "colonialist discourse" to encapsulate the set of languages, themes, and motifs that expressed the West's assumptions regarding the perceived inferiority of the non-West and the legitimacy of their subjugation.<sup>9</sup> Against the backdrop of this, travel writings surfaced as a highly-revealing subject of inquiry, as they represented pictorial junctures of cross-cultural contact that provide a highly personalized account of the West's cognition of the non-West. In addition, travel writings have attracted greater attention from the growing genre of sub-altern studies, as those that were written by marginalized elements in the West often reflected their compassionate, and yet paternalistic outlook on their peers in the non-West. For example, Edith Wharton identified herself with the women that she encountered in Morocco, and at the same time endorsed European intervention into the region as the best remedy for the scrouge beset on the women there.<sup>10</sup> In the same token, Slouschz's *Travels in North Africa* expounds upon a European ethnical minority's view on his peers in the non-West and hence, the complexity of

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 150–152.

<sup>5</sup> Burke III, "Theorizing," 26.

<sup>6</sup> Wrytzen, "Constructing," 218.

<sup>7</sup> An appendix "The Jews of Morocco" in Charles Foucauld's *Reconnaissance au Maroc* well demonstrates a late-19<sup>th</sup> century European observer's view on the North African Jews. See Foucauld, *Reconnaissance*.

<sup>8</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 135–136.

<sup>10</sup> Tromly, "The small," 242

colonialist discourse as described by Spurr for taking shape in multiple forms and yet sharing a common substance.<sup>11</sup>

Nahum Slouschz was a Russian-born Jew who received his education in orientalism in France.<sup>12</sup> Starting off his career as a member of the Mission Scientifique in Morocco, Slouschz spent several years in North Africa to investigate the historical origins of North African Jewry. Slouschz was closely engaged with the colonial authorities, taking part in the reform programs for the organizational structure of the Jews in Morocco on behalf of French Commander Hubert Lyautey, though his arrangements were not realized.<sup>13</sup> *Travels in North Africa* was published in 1927 as a compilation of the ethnographical and historical research that he had conducted in North Africa during his ten years of stay in the region. As an educated European Jew, Slouschz reserved an intricate identity for himself. Slouschz considered himself as a Frenchman whose sense of style preferred khaki uniforms over traditional rabbinic vestments during his travels.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, Judaism was deeply enrooted in Slouschz's values; Slouschz's family was strongly affiliated with the Hebrew cultural renaissance in Russia, and he made several visitations to Palestine in his youth.<sup>15</sup> *Travels in North Africa* projected how Slouschz's cultural allegiance to Europe and Judaism both operated as a medium of his disdain for the North African Jewry.

Above all, Slouschz's thoughts on North African Jews were closely tied to the philosophy of civilizing mission, a concept popularized in the late 19th century as a tool for the rationalization of European imperialism.<sup>16</sup> The proponents of civilizing mission urged the European powers to intervene in the "backward countries" to rescue the natives from their own "barbarity" and despotic form of governance.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Slouschz saw the North African Jews as natives whose behavioral and material underdevelopment was a subject of European enlightenment. Looking at the poor condition of the Jewish quarters, Slouschz described their residents as "violent" people who "led a wretched and primitive life" and adorned themselves with "filthy garments."<sup>18</sup> Their houses were "miserable" and "dirty," lacking in basic necessities like toilets.<sup>19</sup> Slouschz criticized early marriages prevalent among the Jewish population in the region, a device that European observers frequently utilized to refer to the backwardness of the non-West and the legitimacy of European rule.<sup>20</sup> Slouschz found it imperative for the Europeans to salvage the North African Jews from their "savagery," arguing that his co-religionists were in need of "tremendous education."<sup>21</sup> In turn, Slouschz gave credit to the French authorities for raising up the standards of living of the Jews by modernizing their towns.<sup>22</sup> The works done by Alliance Israélite, a Paris-based NGO that served for the betterment of Jewish welfare worldwide, to set up schools in the Jewish quarters were repeatedly praised as well.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Slouschz's sense of superiority extended to the sphere of religion. Slouschz's attitude towards North African Judaism was much in concert with the European rabbis who

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<sup>11</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric*, 1–2.

<sup>12</sup> Zytnicki, "The "Oriental Jews" of," 31.

<sup>13</sup> Gottreich and Schroeter, "Rethinking," 6.

<sup>14</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 446.

<sup>15</sup> Zytnicki, "The "Oriental Jews" of," 31.

<sup>16</sup> Adas, "Contested," 31.

<sup>17</sup> Adas, "Contested," 31.

<sup>18</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 458–459.

<sup>19</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 455

<sup>20</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 484 and Macmaster and Lewis "Orientalism," 126.

<sup>21</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 349

<sup>22</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 298.

<sup>23</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 443 and Gilbert, *In Ismael's*, 113.

served the French colonial regime in North Africa. From the early stage of colonial Algeria, French rabbis accrued grievances from local Jews for their condescending view on the North African Jewry's religious customs and their attempts to "correct" their co-religionists' understanding of Judaism.<sup>24</sup> Like other French Jews who upheld the European brand of Judaism, Slouschz degraded the North African Jews' religious practices as something far too "African" or "Arab" to be considered a "true" form of Judaism. Slouschz condemned the North African rabbis' shallow knowledge of the *Torah* and their adherence to the mystical teachings of the *Zohar*.<sup>25</sup> When the women of Teluet accused Slouschz of killing an adolescent by alluring evil *Jinns* to the town, Slouschz saw their spiritual beliefs to be overtly superstitious and "African."<sup>26</sup> He plainly mocked a Gharian rabbi in a Jewish tent town near Constantine as "a cave-dweller teaching tent-dwellers," adding that such a display was only observed in Africa.<sup>27</sup> In light of this view, Slouschz perceived the North African Jewry's 'ignorance' of Judaism as a vice that should be cured through a Western-styled education. Slouschz strongly endorsed Alliance Israélite's initiatives to offer religious courses to Algerian Jews, defining appropriate knowledge of Judaism as a virtue of the "modern Jewry."<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to his salty assessment of the moral standing of the North African Jewry, Slouschz took high regard for his co-religionists' leading role in the North African history in a fashion that much resembled the *Kabyle myth* and its narrative that stressed the Imazighens' suzerainty over North Africa.<sup>29</sup> Popularized by the French authorities, the *Kabyle myth* accentuated the binary between the Arabs and the Imazighens in North Africa and highlighted the Imazighens' presence in the region before North Africa's Arabization.<sup>30</sup> In looking at their customs, the French authorities deemed the Imazighens to be more assimilable to European culture.<sup>31</sup> Slouschz expounded upon the significance of Jewish heritage in the region in a similar light, reiterating the proximity between the Jews and the Imazighens in anthropological terms. Slouschz was a fervent supporter of the "Eastern" origin of North African Jewry and "Hebraeo-Phonician" lineage of the Jews and the Imazighens; Slouschz believed that the Jews and the Imazighens in North Africa shared common ancestry from Palestine who immigrated to North Africa in the ancient times.<sup>32</sup> As such, *Travels in North Africa* emphasized the longevity of North African Jews' heritage that were traceable to the age of pre-Islam. Slouschz time and again underscored the remnants of Jewish customs in Imazighen culture, and speculated that Judaism would have taken Islam's place in North Africa if it was not for the Arab invasion.<sup>33</sup> Jews were introduced as the bringers of civilization who built "the first public buildings" and "the first canals" in North Africa, in a way that resembled the Western colonialists who were illustrated as the benefactors of progress in contemporary travel writings.<sup>34</sup> In contradiction, Slouschz's portrayal of the deplorable state of the North African Jewry under Islam drew a clear parallel from his appreciation for the greatness of North African Jews' past. With the invasion of the Arabs, the Jewish community in North Africa was stripped of their independence, and

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<sup>24</sup> Schreier, *Arabs*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 468.

<sup>26</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 469.

<sup>27</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 305.

<sup>28</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 321.

<sup>29</sup> Lazreg, "The Reproduction," 386.

<sup>30</sup> Silverstein, "The Kabyle," 135–136.

<sup>31</sup> Burke II, *The Ethnographic*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Zytnicki, "The "Oriental Jews" of," 39–41.

<sup>33</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 341.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 147.

the great cities that they had built were left in ruins.<sup>35</sup> Slouschz also noted that Arab influence defiled North African Jews' culture, describing the North African Jewry's custom of assassination as a trait that they had learned from "savage Mussulmen."<sup>36</sup>

Based on his understanding of North African Jews' history, Slouschz deemed the Jews as the rightful natives of North Africa who deserved protection and guidance from Europe. Accordingly, he celebrated the French authorities' guarantee of safety and emancipation for the North African Jews, which had a colonial teleology of justifying the European presence in the region and widening the gap between local Jews and Arabs.<sup>37</sup> Slouschz presented a story of a Jew who sought refuge in French-controlled Marrakesh after he was extorted from his town by the Muslims. Taking note of this incident, Slouschz exclaimed that the French authorities were obliged to seize the rest of Morocco.<sup>38</sup> On another occasion, Slouschz elaborated how French rule endowed liberty to the Jews in the Algerian town of Mzab, as the region's traditional custom that forced the Jews to wear black robes were disbanded.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Slouschz demonstrated the value of North African Jews for the consolidation of French interest in the region. Slouschz portrayed North African Jews as people who were ready to incorporate themselves into the European system of governance and culture. Slouschz extolled the former students in Alliance Israélite school who convened the first social meeting of Jewish youth in Morocco.<sup>40</sup> Taking pride in their European attires, Slouschz introduced them as fine examples of North African Jewry who were ready to modernize themselves under European patronage. Looking at the Jews of Oran who served in the French military during the First World War, Slouschz asserted that the Algerian Jews had evolved into a proud citizenry of France who sacrificed their lives for their country.<sup>41</sup>

While Slouschz denounced North African Jewry's religious practices for clinging to superstitions, he romanticized their traditional way of life and beliefs, aligning himself with the counter-discourse of his times as defined in Saidian terminology — a narrative utilized by the dissidents in the West to cast doubt on the spiritual superiority of the Western Civilization.<sup>42</sup> In reaction to the contemporary travel writings' colonialist discourse, the proponents of counter-discourse criticized the legitimacy of the West's civilizing mission through glamorizing the moral standing of the non-West; as opposed to the Europeans whose minds were defiled by civilization, the natives of their dominions were seen as the "noble savages" who retained the natural state of human innocence.<sup>43</sup> Despite its disapproval over Western Imperialism, counter discourse fueled the Western audiences' prejudices towards the residents of the non-West. In a similar vein, Slouschz described the North African Jews as people who had preserved the "Israelite epoch of the Judges in the wastes of the Great Desert," whose lives reflected the Jewish customs in the times of the bible.<sup>44</sup> In the forward of *Travels*, Slouschz argued that European influence had bestowed unprecedented changes to the North African Jewry's social configuration, and that he had rendered useful service to the academia by recording the habits

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<sup>35</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 384.

<sup>36</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 348–349.

<sup>37</sup> Schreier, *Arabs*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 476

<sup>39</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 352.

<sup>40</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 443–444.

<sup>41</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 322.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 149.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 149–150.

<sup>44</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 358.



of Jews who were to “quickly lose their individuality and thousand-year-old traditions.”<sup>45</sup> Slouschz expressed his sour feelings about such loss, finding it regrettable to see that the Algerian Jews were forgetting their Jewish identity due to their thorough assimilation into French culture.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

*Travels in North Africa* illustrates the complexity inherent in Slouschz’s cognition of North African Jews, which was deeply immersed in the colonialist dialogue of his time. Slouschz’s dual identity as a European and a Jew channeled into his feeling of superiority concurrently, in conjunction with other European Jews who maintained a patronizing outlook on their co-religionists in the non-West. As a European, Slouschz looked down upon the North African Jews’ customs and their lack of material affluence.<sup>47</sup> As a Jew, he condemned North African Judaism for being faulty in its teachings.<sup>48</sup> Slouschz frequently resorted to the “othering” of North African Jews; Slouschz equated his co-religionists’ “African” and “Arab” nature to “backwardness”, “superstition,” and “violence” while he equated “Europe” to “modern,” “progress,” and “liberty.” Even in the sphere of religion, Slouschz ascribed the notion of modernity to the “Europeanness” of his denomination.<sup>49</sup> Despite his derogatory judgement of his co-religionists, Slouschz maintained a highly personalized view of the Jewish heritage in North Africa, taking pride in the leading role of the Jews in the region’s history. Nevertheless, colonialist discourse was evident in such assumptions, as he found it essential for the European powers to sustain their presence in the region in order to protect and guide the North African Jews who were, in Slouschz’s mind, the rightful heirs of the land.<sup>50</sup> While he praised the French authorities’ civilizing mission and the North African Jews’ efforts to modernize themselves, Slouschz romanticized his co-religionists’ traditional way of life and expressed his melancholy for North African Jews’ loss of their unique identities.<sup>51</sup> Engraved with Slouschz’s contradictory, and yet paternalizing view on the North African Jews, *Travels in North Africa* is an interesting specimen of early 20<sup>th</sup> century travel writing that reflects how power relation was internalized in a European Jew’s perspective on his “cousins” in North Africa.

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<sup>45</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, ix.

<sup>46</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 321.

<sup>47</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 458–459.

<sup>48</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 468.

<sup>49</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 321.

<sup>50</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 476.

<sup>51</sup> Slouschz, *Travels*, 321–322.

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