

OBITUARY

Edmund Burke III

FANNY COLONNA (1934–2014)

Fanny Reynaud Colonna was born in 1934 in El Milia in eastern Algeria, the daughter of a French civil administrator who made sure she learned Arabic. She died on 18 November 2014 in Paris at the age of eighty. Widely regarded as the foremost sociologist/anthropologist of Algeria of her generation, Fanny's life and publications were devoted to raising inconvenient questions about the colonial fact and its contemporary afterlife.

Best known to scholars of Arab North Africa and France, Colonna's work moved easily between fieldwork and the archive, between sociology, ethnology, and history, and between micro and macro, always aiming to make a larger point.

An elegant intellectual with a demonstrated commitment to scholarship and research, Colonna was principled in her political and intellectual stands, and warm in her relations with younger scholars, who saw in her a beloved mentor. Deeply committed to collaborative efforts across a broad range of topics, Colonna's life and work inspired admiration among those who came into contact with her.

Fanny Colonna lived the contradictions of French colonialism. In 1954 she and her husband, physician Pierre Colonna, opted for the Algerian side during the freedom struggle (1954–62) and then took Algerian citizenship following independence (this despite the fact that her father was killed by the FLN in 1955).

In the 1960s Colonna was a student at the University of Algiers (and the mother of four children), writing a DEA thesis in sociology on Mouloud Feraoun. Soon thereafter she joined the sociology faculty of the University of Algiers and embarked upon her doctorat de troisième cycle in Paris. Her thesis, written under the direction of Pierre Bourdieu, was published in 1975 under the title *Les instituteurs algériens (1883–1939)* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1975). By then she was a member of the Bourdieu research group at the French National Research Center in Paris, commuting back and forth to Algiers.

Her book examined the role of the French Normal School of Bouzeréah in training a generation of French-speaking Algerian Muslim Berber teachers to mediate between colonizers and colonized. Over the next several years Colonna's interest in the emergence of Algerian intermediary elites broadened and deepened, eventually leading her to collaborate with other Algerian colleagues in a project on local elites, both Arabs and Berbers. This in turn provided an entry point for critiquing the official FLN version of Algerian history, a group she later referred to as “les centralisateurs.”

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In the 1980s Colonna's interests shifted to the Aurès Mountains, home of the Shawi, a disfavored population of mixed Berber pastoralists and agriculturalists. Here she began to develop her method of closely reading colonial texts and contexts, one best seen in her brilliant introduction to the re-edition of Emile Masqueray's *Formation des cités chez les populations sédentaires de l'Algérie Kabyles du Djurdjura, Chaouïa de l'Aourâs, Beni Mezâb* (Paris: Edisud, 1983).

Always on the lookout for female precursors, Colonna next focused her attention on the work of Thérèse Rivière, the other female member of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro's 1934 research team to the Aurès Mountains (Germaine Tillion being the better-known one). Colonna's 1987 *Aurès/Algérie 1935–1936* consisted of two parts. The first was devoted to Rivière's remarkable (and previously unknown) photographic documentation of domestic scenes in the lives of Awrasi women and men. In the second part, *Elle a passé tant d'heures*, she stated the case for Rivière's brilliance.

Following extensive fieldwork in the Aurès in the 1980s she published *Les versets de l'invincibilité: Permanence et changements religieux dans l'Algérie contemporaine* (Paris: FNSP, 1995). A central theme of this work was the importance of popular Muslim cultures in shaping the prerevolutionary context in the Aurès region and the subsequent struggle with Islamic modernism and French rationalism. Her later interest in cultural minorities dates to this time.

By 1990, increasingly suspicious of grand narratives, she began to focus upon the power of microsocial worlds in revealing the past of colonialism. Her contributions to two 1993 collections, E. Burke, ed., *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993) and Fanny Colonna and Zakya Daoud, eds., *Etre Marginal au Maghreb* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1993), provide a telling example.

Intellectually, Colonna's move to social biography appears linked to her discovery (c. 1986) of James Agee and Walker Evan's *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960). But it also derives from her opposition to the growing threat of Arabo-Muslim forces to ethnic and political minorities within Algeria. These political changes explain her decision to definitively relocate to France in 1993, and to embark upon a decade of research in Egypt.

The full-blown demonstration of her method can be best seen in her remarkable book, *Récits de la province égyptienne: Une ethnographie Sud/Sud* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2004), a brilliant work that has not received the recognition it deserves, especially from scholars who work primarily in the English language. Based upon the social biographies of twenty-four Egyptian rural men and women, it provides an alternative history of the social and political contexts of fin de siècle Egypt seen from the Egyptian countryside. (For examples of her method, see her contributions "Nasir: Sa'idi Youth between Islamism and Agriculture," in Edmund Burke and Nejde Yaghoubian, *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* [Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006] and "A Round Trip to Isma'iliya: Cairo's Media Exiles, Television Innovation, and Provincial Citizenship," in Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, *Cairo Cosmopolitan* [Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006]).

Meditations on the theme of marginality led her to consider the reasons for the nonexistence of a subaltern studies school in postcolonial Algeria (see "The Nation's 'Unknowing Other': Three Intellectuals and the Culture(s) of Being Algerian, or the

Impossibility of Subaltern Studies in Algeria,” *Journal of North African Studies* [2003]: 155–70). The impact of the Algerian Islamists on Algerian women is the theme of her foreword to Algerian journalist Baya Gacemi’s book *I, Nadia, Wife of a Terrorist* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

Colonna’s final book, *Le meunier, les moines et le bandit: Des vies quotidiennes dans l’Aurès (Algérie) du XXe siècle* (Paris: Sindbad, 2010), is a masterpiece of the cultural archeology of colonialism. Based upon scraps of information gathered over years of research, the book conjures the alternate social world of isolated individuals living in a remote corner of the Aurès mountains: a few French monks, a Berber social bandit, and a renegade French baker with a Muslim wife. This too was colonialism, it insists, contradictions and all. It is a fitting monument to the life of this exemplary activist, scholar, and teacher.