

The Traces of Césaire's Colonial Discourse in Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag* (1986)

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Abstract

*Although C.R. Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag* (1986) remains a foundational work on the Rif War (1921–1926), critical scholarship has rarely analyzed how its historiography reflects broader theoretical frameworks of colonial violence. This article sheds light on that gap by using Césaire's theoretical framework from *Discourse on Colonialism*, specifically his concept of the "decivilizing" effect of colonization on the colonizer, as a critical lens to re-evaluate Pennell's representation of the Rif War. According to Césaire, colonization works to decivilize the colonizer by practicing barbaric acts, including torturing, violating, and dehumanizing the colonized, all of which make the colonizer a decivilized agent. In Pennell's book, he represents different aspects of the Rif war, which include the representation of the soldiers, the leaders, the land, men, women,...etc. Césaire's discourse of colonialism is used as a critical lens to analyze Pennell's portrayal of the European colonial forces and the Rif resistance. Through a qualitative textual analysis of Pennell's portrayal of European colonial forces and the Rif resistance, this study investigates the intersection of colonial discourse and historical narrative. The analysis reveals that while Pennell's historical narrative reproduces Orientalist representations, it also exposes the tactics and moral contradictions of the colonizers, addressing how the European attempt to "civilize" the Rif "decivilized" the colonizers themselves.*

Keywords: Césaire, Pennell, decivilization, colonization, Rif, representation

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Introduction

Discourse on Colonialism (1950) by Aimé Césaire's is a seminal work in postcolonial thought that criticizes colonial domination. Césaire believes that the European colonial powers did not bring civilization to the colonized land as they promised. Instead, they dehumanized not only the colonizers but also themselves. Hence, colonialism results in decivilization. This paper undertakes a critical reading of one of the key historical texts on the Moroccan Rif war, which is Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag* in order to trace how Césaire's colonial discourse is implicitly reflected within Pennell's historical narrative.

The Rif War (1921-1926) is a major anti-colonial conflict in northern Morocco, where the Moroccan Rifi tribes resisted against the Spanish and French colonial forces, and this resistance was led by Abdelkrim El Khattabi. Pennell's historical record presents different perspectives, from European military powers to Rifi leaders...etc. However, Pennell's narrative is represented through an orientalist lens. So, by applying Césaire's critical lens, this paper reveals some tensions within Pennell's record. Simply put, even though Pennell repeats some stereotypical colonial ideas about Rifi people, he also sheds light on the barbaric ways the colonizers treated them, which agrees with Césaire's arguments.

Césaire's theoretical framework has been widely applied across postcolonial literature, but its application to the historiography of the Rif War (1921–1926) specifically remains underdeveloped. C.R. Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag* (1986), is one of the most inclusive historical accounts of the Rif conflict. However, existing scholarship on Pennell's work left a critical gap regarding how its historical narrative encodes the moral mechanics of colonial violence. Hence, this study came to address this gap by using Césaire's "decivilizing" thesis as an analytical lens to critically re-evaluate Pennell's historiographical representation of the Rif War. Rather than treating Pennell's text as a passive historical record, this article examines its structural narrative: its representation of European soldiers, Rifi leaders, gender dynamics, land...etc. The significance of this approach lies in its ability to uncover the underlying ideological tensions within Anglo-American historiography of North Africa. This study not only identifies Orientalist representations, but also demonstrates how Pennell's account documents the collapse of the colonial enterprise in the Moroccan Rif. Hence, this research contributes to the Rif War historiography and to postcolonial debates about how colonial violence is exposed in historical writing.

Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework moves from general to specific key issues. It deals with the conceptual framework of the paper, and it defines the key issues that this paper tackles. This theoretical framework defines three keywords, which are colonialism, history, and orientalism, in order to reveal the hypocrisy of colonialism and history and how both of them contribute to the decivilization of the colonized and the colonizer in orientalist texts.

1. Colonialism

Colonialism works to "decivilize the colonizer, by torturing him and violating him. The colonizer always feels that he has a sense of superiority and a sense of mission. The colonizer always feels that he is the world's saviour. However, Césaire believes that colonialism functions as a decivilizing tool for the Europeans themselves, because Europe itself is dependent on the East, and it is itself the creation of the Third World. Simply put, it strengthens its power by weakening the East, which is seen as the other. Césaire reveals that "*the colonizers' sense of superiority, their sense of mission as the world's civilizers, depends on turning the Other into a barbarian*" (Césaire, 1950, 09). The colonial mission to civilize the primitive is a "smoke screen", because colonialism always ends up in massive destruction of societies (Césaire, 1950). Hence, colonialism is a tool that destroys Europe more than it serves it.

North Africa is a place that is always linked with primitivity (Omri, 2005). Soldiers, colonial officials, and settlers landed on the shores of North Africa or the oriental North Africa, with the mission to domesticate and familiarize what had been perceived as "other" by them (Omri, 2005). There was severe competition between the first settlers. French colonizers were moving in Africa

freely without any borders or restrictions; not only colonisation, but also their textual products and language invaded the African lands (Omri, 2005). In North Africa, colonization was considered a necessary act “*to reconcile the area with a past it seemed to have forgotten*”, as Mohammed Salah Omri (2005, 06) says. Hence, North Africa became a land where the east and the west live together unwillingly (Omri, 2005).

When France colonised Algeria in 1830, Morocco began to become vulnerable to European invasion. This pushed Spain to reoccupy its coastal presidios and seize Tetouan in 1860, resulting in the Treaty of Tetouan, which imposed a huge indemnity on the Sultan and ceded territorial and trading privileges, and this is how Moroccan sovereignty began to be undermined. The succession of trade treaties eroded the Sultan’s authority. Imperial rivalries culminated in the 1904 Franco-Spanish agreement dividing Morocco into zones of influence. The Sultans tried to create new ministerial departments by imitating European models, but all attempts had failed. Hence, the country faced military defeats and financial collapses. In the wake of the 1908 accession of the Salafi-backed Sultan Abd al-Hafiz, Morocco saw many religious reform attempts, but financial insolvency and tribal rebellions shattered any hope of centralized revival. In 1912, the Treaty of Fez formalized the French protectorate, followed by a Spanish sub-protectorate in the north. The Moroccan state collapsed, leaving only locally organized resistance, such as the Rif uprising of 1921-1926 (Pennell, 1986). The latter is considered one of the most violent wars in Moroccan history specifically and in human history generally.

The Rif war is a historical conflict fought between the Rifis and the Spanish and French forces between 1921 and 1926. It took place in the northern region of Morocco, called the Rif region. The conflict was led by the leader Abdelkim El Khattabi, who succeeded at defeating the Spaniards in several conflicts, such as Dhar Obarran and Annual Battle. Abdelkrim El Khattabi ruled the Rif region relying on Islamic laws, and defeated the colonizers using guerrilla tactics. Indeed, the way the Rifis fought with their guerrilla tactics inspired other people around the world who wanted to fight against bigger armies in the future, such as Che Guevara. In order to restrict the power of the Rifi tribes, France entered into a military alliance with Spain. In September, the Spanish landed several hundred thousand troops on the Rifi coast at Alhucemas Bay and burned Ajdir, El Khattabi's capital. Despite the alliance of two major European forces, the Rifis continued fighting until May 1926, when Abd el-Krim El Khattabi surrendered. After his surrender, the Rifis continued to fight as guerrillas, which took two years for the Spaniards to suppress (Salvin, 1991). The Rif war left deep impacts on Moroccans and the Rifis, and these impacts are social, economic and political.

2. History

Many theorists argue that history is not objective. For example, Peter Novick in his work *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (1988) states that history is not objective, and that the historical interpretations are subjective, even if they can be true, fair, and comprehensive (McCullagh, 1998). Besides that, Keith Jenkins also argues that historians keep the concept of truth solely to strengthen their favoured versions of history (McCullagh, 1998) Jenkins says:

‘Truth’ and similar expressions are devices to open, regulate and shut down interpretations. Truth acts as a censor—it draws the line. We know that such truths are really ‘useful fictions’ that are in discourse by virtue of power (somebody has to put and keep them there) and power uses the term ‘truth’ to exercise control: regimes of truth (McCullagh, 1998, 03).

Jenkins believes that truth is not a fixed or absolute reality, but it is a tool that shapes and controls how people perceive the information. Power comes to enforce these accepted truths and maintain control over knowledge and influence society, creating “regimes of truth”. Hence, truth is a mechanism of power that governs what people accept as reality. On the other hand, there have been a few attempts to defend the truth and objectivity of history. For example, the Australian historian, Keith Windschuttle, in *The Killing of History* (1994) defends the integrity of history. Also, in *Telling the Truth about History* (1994) Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob argue that telling truths about the past is possible, even if these truths are not absolute (McCullagh, 1998). This makes

us believe that history is created for ideological purposes, rather than constrained by evidence to reveal what actually happened in the past (McCullagh, 1998).

Hence, all historical records need to be questioned, especially when they are tackled by a historian who belongs to the West and studies the East. Their historical records are considered eligible, because they are well-supported by evidence and explanations. McCullagh says:

Historians are taken to be aiming for the truth, the vehicle for which is the atomic statement. Historians assume that when their statements about the past are adequately supported by available evidence, then it is reasonable to believe them true¹⁵ (McCullagh, 1984, 246).

Historians aim is to unfold and uncover the truth about the past through "atomic statements" which are basic claims about historical events or facts. If these ideas are well-supported by available evidence, then they are regarded as true and credible. Indeed, finding explanations for historical events and supporting them is what all historians do, but that does not guarantee the truth and credibility of these records, for they are most of the time narrating the story of the colonizers/ the winners only. These stories present a one-sided view, by highlighting the colonizers' actions to suppress the colonized or emphasizing the failures of the colonized to resist.

3. Orientalism

Orientalism is a methodology of cultural hegemony that shows how the West represents the East. It is where Western discourses create a power imbalance that facilitates the exploitation of the Orient (Nijamatulla, 2025). So, the "subaltern" remains oppressed and voiceless, as any attempt to speak is often challenged and/or misinterpreted by dominant colonial powers (Spivak, 2023). This dominance and marginalization is acute for women of the Orient, who have been misrepresented in European literature, serving the colonial project (Lovell & Miller, 1992). Hence, to challenge these structures, decolonization came to address the "habits of mind" instilled by colonial rule (Cooper, 2005). Decolonization requires overcoming these normalized representations to move beyond the frameworks established by the colonizers.

Analysis Part

This part is dedicated to the analysis of the traces of Césaire's colonial discourse in Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag*. It begins by shedding light on Aimé Césaire's colonial discourse, including the decivilization and barbarism of colonialism. Then, it contextualizes Césaire's colonial discourse within the Moroccan Rif War, particularly in relation to Pennell's historical account. This section also addresses colonial violence as decivilization during the Rif War and provides the example of the use of chemical weapons. Furthermore, it illustrates the orientalist representation of the Rifis by focusing on two aspects: the representation of the Rifis as barbaric people and the representation of Abdelkrim El Khattabi, in order to reveal Pennell's orientalist gaze and the colonial discourse embedded in it. At the same time, it unveils colonial hypocrisy in Pennell's book.

Aimé Césaire's Colonial Discourse: Decivilization and the Barbarism of Colonialism

Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* is a seminal work that argues that colonialism was never a civilizing mission but a pure decivilizing mission. Césaire sheds light on the hypocrisy of colonialism, where the colonizers commit the most barbaric and inhuman acts, that include: taking over a land unwillingly, killing people, torturing them, imprisoning them, and imposing a foreign culture on them. On the other hand, pretending that the mission of the colonizer is to civilize the land, while in reality he is working to decivilize himself. So, colonialism is a tool that the colonizer utilizes to decivilize not only himself, but also the colonized, and this makes racism, barbarism, and violence the core of colonialism.

Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* argues that colonialism is "*not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state.*" (Césaire, 1950, 05). These acts of torturing, raping, and exploiting the colonized are not exceptions, but they are the core features of colonial rule, which degrade the colonizer into a decivilized agent. Hence, by decivilizing the colonized, the colonizer abandons the values of civilization he claims to uphold.

Indeed, this reveals a hypocrisy and contradiction in the European civilizing mission, which is a colonialist justification for military colonization. Europe believed that it had a duty to spread its

culture to primitive, uncivilized societies. Instead, they came to the land that they preconceived as uncivilized, colonized it unwillingly, by torturing, killing, punishing, and dehumanizing the colonizers to make them surrender and accept Europe's oppression. Hence, the colonizers end up becoming decivilized, instead of being a role model of civilization.

The Rif War: Context and Pennell's Historical Account

The Rif War (1921-1926) took place in Northern Morocco between the Rifi tribes and Spanish and later French colonial forces. The war marked a fierce resistance by the Rifis, led by the leader Abdelkrim El Khattabi, who is famous for his guerrilla warfare tactics. The war ended with the use of chemical weapons, and it was the first time chemical weapons were used in the 20th century. With the alliance of France and Spain and the heavy casualties, the Rifi soldiers decided to surrender.

A Country with a Government and a Flag: The Rif War in Morocco, 1921-1926 by Richard C. Pennell stands as a significant historical book. This book covers the changes that occurred in the Rif region, the establishment of the Spanish protectorate, and the triumphs and tribulations of the Rifi people. However, there is always the question of credibility in any historical record, especially since the history of the Rif War in this book is written by a Westerner; thus, there will always be the question of whether Pennell's historical record is credible or is it shaped by the lens of Orientalism.

Traces of Césaire's Colonial Discourse in Pennell's Work

Colonial Violence as Decivilization: the Use of Chemical Weapons as an Example

Pennell's vivid recounting of colonial military operations reveals the barbarity of colonial rule. The documented use of chemical weapons by Spanish and French imperial forces is an example. Using poison gas in the Rif War was very harsh and showed how war was becoming more dangerous and cruel. In a Telegram sent by General Dámaso Berenguer, who is the Spanish High Commissioner in Tetouan, on 12 August 1921, the General Dámaso says: *"I have always been reluctant to use asphyxiant gases against indigenous people, but after seeing what they did in the Battle of Annual, I will use them with great delight"* (Daudin, 2023, 924). In fact, General Damaso states that he would use poison gas in the Rif region with great delight, despite the fact that he knows that they cause great harm not only to people but also to the land in general. As a result, a few Moroccan non-governmental organizations highlighted the fact that the Rifi people seemed to suffer from abnormally high rates of cancer, especially thyroid cancer and physical malformations in 2000 (Daudin, 2023). However, there is an absence of any international or independent scientific studies that look into this phenomenon. In the summer of 2000, a study carried out by the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire (CHU) of Rabat reported that 60% of thyroid cancer in the Nador region was linked to chemical weapons that were used seventy years earlier (Daudin, 2023). While some claim that using mustard gas was ineffective, Sebastian Balfour provides evidence of its impacts, including *"blindness, permanent respiratory problems, and cancer"* (Balfour, 2002, 153). Hence, this shows the profound impacts of chemical weapons on the Rif region.

Orientalist Representation of the Rifis

Pennell's narrative in *A Country with a Government and a Flag* reflects an orientalist gaze, portraying the Rif land, people, soldiers, and leaders as primitive, weak, barbaric...etc. This axis focuses on two aspects of the Moroccan Rifi resistance. The first aspect lifts the curtains on the barbarity of the Moroccan Rifis in the way they treated the colonizers, while the second aspect tackles the personality of the Rifi leader Abdelkrim El Khattabi and the way he resisted the oppression of colonialism.

A. Aspect: The Rifis as Barbaric

Pennell portrays the Riffi men as barbaric. During warfares, after the death of the enemy, the victors sometimes leave the enemies who died unburied, to be attended to by the dogs and the crows, while the supporters were buried respectfully. Indeed, this tactic is a form of extreme humiliation and psychological warfare. In the Rif war, the Rifis did the same with bodies of the dead Spaniards. Pennell says: *"Rifi revenge followed. His supporters were made to bury the Rifi dead while their own were left unburied, to be attended to by the dogs and the crows"* (Pennell, 1986, 206). In fact, the act of burying the dead bodies of their supporters signifies control. In the meantime, it also signifies dishonor and an act of dehumanization to the Spaniards. Despite the fact that this tactic was

implemented by many nations in many wars, but Pennell has mentioned it in his historical record, in order to represent the Riffis as inhumans and to justify his representation to the Rifis as barbarians.

In addition to that, Pennell quotes the Rifis themselves, in order to show how they are representing each other, to prove that they are inhumans, and the Rifis themselves admit that. Pennell describes the intense nature of the fighting during the Rif war, quoting a group of people from al-Matalsa tribe. Pennell says:

When Sheean met several *sais_d-s* from the al-Matalsa tribe in the eastern Rif one of them gave him an extremely colourful account of the Rifi victories in 1921: And the Riffi killed and killed and killed, until there were one hundred and sixty-four thousand million Spaniards dead upon the field The Rifi will kill until he is tired, and he will take all the rest prisoners (Pennell, 1986, 272)

In this quote, the Rifis are portrayed as fierce killers who kill tirelessly. Pennell highlights the Rifis' commitment to continuous fighting, in order to justify and prove that they are inhumans. The statement "*one hundred and sixty-four thousand million*" is a statement of hyperbole, to emphasise the strong killing power of the Rifis during the Rif war.

B. Aspect: Abdelkrim El Khattabi

As any orientalist who depicts the people of the Orient as violent people, Pennell also believes that El Khattabi is a violent leader, and he gives the example of the death penalty that is regarded as an Islamic law that is used in the Rif region and applied by El Khattabi. Pennell says:

Killing is the ruination of what was intended to be the aim of creation and He (God) ordained that the killer should be killed, as a discouragement to murder, so that the killing (of a murderer) should be a punishment, that reduces the number of murderers . . . The Imam (bin `Abd al-Karim) must therefore punish him . . . It was announced that the pardon of the relatives of the dead man - either all of them or some of them - is not valid in a case of murder and fighting because the death penalty for it is one of the laws of God which must not be set aside. (Pennell, 1986, 170)

According to Islamic law, a killer must be killed, so that the number of murderers will be reduced. Pennell also shows that this rule was necessarily applied, it guarantees abiding by Islamic principles. Indeed, this quote states that God has commanded a strict consequence for those who commit murder: the killer must be killed. This in order to reduce the occurrence of murder crimes and to make the punishment severe. According to Pennell, it is Abdelkrim who enforces this law, and he, as an Imam, is obliged to carry out the punishment of the killer. Therefore, Pennell represents El Khattabi as a violent leader, by highlighting his persistence in applying the rule of killing the murderer.

Unveiling Colonial Hypocrisy

Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag* came as a historical record that narrates the events of the Rif war (1921-1926). However, the book unintentionally unmask three things. The first is the orientalist gaze of Pennell in reading the Rif war, and hence challenges the credibility of his book. The second is that the book uncovers unintentionally the barbarity, inhumanity, and decivilization of the European colonial powers, France and Spain. The third one is the duplicity of colonial ideology, which argues that the empire is a civilizing mission, yet it practices the most barbaric, inhuman, and decivilizing acts. All these support Césaire's argument that colonization is a "sick civilization," because it resorts to barbarism in order to maintain its power. Therefore, this colonial hypocrisy that is reflected in Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag* enacts the paradox at the heart of Césaire's discourse, where the colonizer loses civilization through violent acts.

Conclusion

This study re-evaluates C.R. Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag* (1986) through Aimé Césaire's theoretical framework in *Discourse on Colonialism*. By analyzing Pennell's portrayal of European forces, Rifi soldiers and leaders, and the land, this article shows that historiography cannot escape the "decivilizing" reality of the colonial enterprise. By applying Aimé Césaire's colonial discourse to Pennell's *A Country with a Government and a Flag*, this paper illustrates the inhumanity, barbarity, and brutality of the colonizer that is reflected in one of the key historical records of the Rif War (1921-1926). Césaire's discourse of colonialism reveals the

barbarity of the colonizer in Pennell's narrative and sheds light on his questionable orientalist historical book. This analysis highlights the problems of prioritizing the perspective of the colonized and proves the importance of Césaire's discourse in understanding the legacies of colonialism not only in historical memory, but also in contemporary postcolonial studies. Beyond the paper's contribution to the historiography of the Moroccan Rif, the significance of these findings extends to broader debates within postcolonial studies and historical discourse. Indeed, applying Césaire's concept of decivilization to a foundational Western historical text proves that colonial violence is not just something done to others, but it is a corruption from within that destroys the colonizers' own moral excuse for empire.

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