EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

1. What are the working conditions described by the Congolese?
2. What are the specific grievances of the Congolese about their treatment?
3. What is the attitude of the interviewer toward his Congolese informants?
4. Do you believe this report? Why or why not?

26.3 | The Civilizing Mission in Action

Fadhma Amrouche, *My Life Story* (1880s–1890s)

Europeans came to believe over the course of the nineteenth century that they had a "civilizing mission" to take over the world and lift up its various peoples. This attitude was in stark contrast to that of the early days of European colonization when Europeans held other civilizations in awe for their superior accomplishments. The autobiography of Fadhma Amrouche (1882–1967) recounts the struggles of an unmarried Berber woman to protect her illegitimate child (Fadhma) by entrusting her to the French colonial powers and missionaries. These missionaries were attempting to "civilize" Algerians and did so by various means. One was conversion to Catholicism and another was education. Here Amrouche describes her earliest days in the French educational system.

My mother was left on her own at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, with two children, the elder one five or six and the younger one three. She was very beautiful, with a clear pink complexion and blue-gray eyes, rather short and stocky, with broad shoulders, a strong chin and a low, obstinate forehead. . . .

But she was young and foolish. In her own courtyard there lived a young man from the same family as her old husband. She fell in love with him. And the inevitable happened. She became pregnant and the young man denied that he was the father of the child. . . .

On the night of my birth my mother was all alone with her two small children: there was no one at hand to assist her or to go for help. She delivered herself and bit through the umbilical cord. The next day one old woman brought her a little food.

When I was nine days old my mother tied me warmly to her breast, for it had been snowing, and set out, with a child in each hand, to lodge a complaint with the public prosecutor against my father. She wanted him to recognize me and give me his name. He refused because he was engaged to a girl from the village who came from a powerful family; they threatened to kill him if he abandoned this girl and he was afraid! . . .

The world is a cruel place and "the child of sin" becomes the scapegoat of society, especially in Kabylia [region of Algeria where Berbers live]. I cannot count

Fadhma A. M. Amrouche, *My Life Story: The Autobiography of a Berber Woman*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 4–8, 10–12, 15–18, 43, 45–46, 48.

the blows I received. What endless bullying I suffered! If I ventured into the street, I would risk being knocked down and trampled upon. . . .

My mother took fright. What was she to do with me? How was she to protect me from people's cruelty? She could not keep me shut up, but she was afraid that if I went out I would be killed and, in the eyes of the law, the blame would fall on her.

She heard that at Ouadhias [a town sixty miles east of Algiers] there was a convent of the White Sisters, who took in little girls and looked after them. She thought that if she entrusted me to these nuns she would have no more worries on my account; no one would hurt me any more. Nevertheless, she held out for a long time as she loved me, I was her child. She had refused to give me to the magistrate's wife, who was childless and had wanted to adopt me . . . , but seeing that I was still a victim of ill-treatment, she decided to take me to the White Sisters. . . .

From this whole period of my life, I can only recall the tune of *Ave Maria Stella* and the impression of the chapel, all lit up, with the officiating priest holding out the monstrance.[1] (For a long time after I had left Ouadhias, I wondered what all that meant.) But, most of all, I am haunted by a terrible picture: that of a tiny girl standing against the wall of a corridor: the child is covered with filth, dressed in sackcloth, with a little mug full of excrement hung around her neck. She is crying. A priest is walking toward her; the nun who is with him explains that she is a wicked little girl who has thrown her comrades' thimbles into the privy and so has been made to climb down into it to retrieve them: she is covered with the contents of the cesspool, which also fill the mug.

In addition to this punishment, the child was also flogged till she bled: when my mother came the following Wednesday, she found me still covered with the marks from the whip.

And so I left the Sisters of Ouadhias. . . . In the autumn, the *kai'd* [local official] sent for my mother and said, "Your daughter Fadhma is a burden to you, take her to Fort-National where a school for girls has just been opened, she will be happy and treated well, and the Administrator will take her under his wing. You will have nothing more to fear from your first husband's brothers." My mother held out for a long time, but . . . the village people, who still considered me the child of sin, were disapproving. In October or November 1886, she agreed to give me up. Once again she took me on her back and we set out. I cannot recall this journey; I can only remember that as we climbed down toward the river we picked arbutus berries to eat — I can still see the red fruit. This brings us to the end of the first part of my childhood. . . .

The orphanage of Taddert-ou-Fella, which owes its name to the nearby village, was founded between 1882 and 1884. At this same time, the first schools in Greater Kabylia were opened, one in Beni-Yenni, with M. Verdy in charge, one in Tamazirth, under M. Gorde, and one in Tizi-Rached under M. Maille. . . .

When I arrived at the school I was still very young and I cannot remember much of my first two years there. I was very impressed when I was taken to the

[1]**monstrance:** A vessel containing the consecrated communion bread.

headmistress. My mother had first gone to see the Administrator to put me in his care. This wasn't M. Sabatier, who had been elected Deputy, but his successor, M. Demonque. The commune was still responsible for the school expenses. I saw a tall woman, dressed all in black; she seemed terribly sad to me. She had recently lost her only son from typhoid and her husband had died some little time before. They came from Aveyron where they had been ruined when phylloxera [a disease that kills grapes and other plants] destroyed all the vines. Since the death of her husband and son, Mme Malaval had devoted herself wholeheartedly to her school.

When I arrived the dormitory was full. There were some really big girls who were put in charge of the smaller ones. My memories are vague up to 1888. In October of that year, I was put up into the big girls' class; there were four of us little ones: Alice, Ines, Blanche and myself, Marguerite. We had all been given French names, as there were too many Fadhmas, Tassadits and Dabhias. . . .

For a long time the school at Taddert-ou-Fella was considered a show-place and we were visited by a succession of members of the French government, including Jules Ferry [French statesman], and often tourists came simply out of curiosity, like the Grand Duke George of Russia. . . .

The years went by, the seasons, summers and winters. In 1892 I in turn passed my school certificate. I was fairly good at the subjects I liked. I was top in French history, but I hated geography—I could never remember all the Departments and Districts, whereas I can still remember in detail all the kings of France, who married whom, who succeeded whom, and all about the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era. I loved French, except when I had to explain proverbs and maxims. . . .

People were beginning to demand the emancipation of Muslim women. At that time school was compulsory for boys; if a pupil played truant, the father and son were sentenced to three days in prison and a fine of fifteen francs. So boys attended school regularly. But, alas! nothing similar was enforced for girls. There was no secular teaching for them, with the exception of our school which unfortunately soon had to close. . . .

Mme Malaval refused to obey; she kept the orphanage going for six months out of her own savings; she moved heaven and earth, writing to members of the government and any influential persons who might help her. Eventually she got her way in 1893. It was decided that the Taddert-ou-Fella Orphanage should be taken over by the State and renamed "The Taddert-ou-Fella Normal School." . . .

February was over and we were into March when, one morning, I saw the Mother Superior of Tagmount arriving. She told me that she had submitted my application to the Mother General, who wanted to see me.

I wasn't sure at first if I should go with her, but then I got dressed and left with her. . . . I was taken to a tall, dark nun with a rather severe expression who told me to go to the Hospital at Ai'th-Maneguleth, saying she had sent me, and to ask for Mother Saint-Matthew. But before that she asked me if we had been taught anything about religion at school. I told her, no, not a word, as it was a lay school and supposed to be non-sectarian.

The day I arrived, I entered by "the corridor" where I found the janitor, a gnome-like creature.

He went to fetch a nun who took me to Mother Saint-Matthew. I remember my surprise at finding myself in the presence of a young woman of pleasant appearance as the name Matthew had for some reason made me expect someone old and shriveled up.

Mother Saint-Matthew told me that she had been warned to expect me by the Mother General, Mother Salome. I would be fed, all my expenses paid and, in addition, would earn ten francs a month. I accepted and went back to let my brother know of the arrangements before he returned home. Then I followed the nun who was to take me in hand. I went with her to a room on a lower level on the other side of the main building.

There I found creatures of all ages; with few exceptions they had all been patients in the hospital and still had scars and sores visible on their bodies. When I was asked what my name was, and replied "Marguerite," I was told that I had no right to a Christian name as I hadn't been baptized, and so I became "Fadhma from Tagmount." That already put a damper on my spirits. . . .

I still have a confused and painful impression of that period of my life. Everyone kept talking about God, everything had to be done for the love of God, but you felt you were being spied upon, everything you said was judged and reported to the Mother Superior. I thought I was going to be back in the friendly atmosphere of Taddert-ou-Fella but I was disappointed and baffled. When I mentioned that there was some good to be found in all religions, it was considered blasphemous.

The prayers had been translated into Kabyle: the *Ave Maria*, "Our Father," the *Credo*, and the nuns pegged away at drumming these expressions into our rebellious heads. And I couldn't help smiling when I heard the nuns' way of pronouncing the Kabyle language. . . .

Easter was approaching. During Holy Week we went to the service at the monastery every day. . . . I liked these Holy Week services because of the liturgical chants and the organ music. As for the Catholic religion, I don't think I was ever truly convinced. But I believe sincerely in God. When the Fathers declared that only those who had been baptized would go to heaven, I didn't believe them. I thought of my mother, of all that she had suffered, the three months a year she spent fasting (for besides Ramadan, she imposed supplementary fasts on herself), of the heavy loads of water she took it upon herself to carry to the mosque in all weathers and I thought, "Is it possible that my mother will not go to heaven?"

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

1. Why would a woman such as Amrouche's mother, whose country was colonized by the French, deal so often with French officials and missionaries?
2. What were Amrouche's experiences of the "civilizing mission"?
3. In what ways did the French in Algeria behave in a civilized manner toward Amrouche and her mother? Which behaviors of the French seem far from civilized?
4. Overall, what is your opinion of the lives of women under colonialism as expressed in Amrouche's passage?