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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anthropology, Empire, and Resistance: French Colonial Ethnography, American Intervention, and the Moroccan Struggle in The Riffian

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| ABSTRACT
This article explores the complex relationship between anthropology, colonialism, and resistance in Morocco by analyzing the works of Edmond Doutté, Robert Montagne, and Carleton Coon. It investigates how French and American anthropologists approached Moroccan society, drawing comparisons between their methods and objectives. The analysis highlights how anthropology was used as both a tool for governance and a form of cultural critique. Particular attention is given to Carleton Coon's novel The Riffian, which serves as a unique case study, blending ethnographic insight with fiction. The article argues that these anthropologists' work reflects the tensions between colonial power, scholarly inquiry, and cultural identity. The findings illustrate that while anthropology often served imperial interests, it also provided spaces for anti-colonial narratives and deeper understandings of Moroccan life.

| KEYWORDS
Anthropology, Colonialism, French and American Ethnography, Literature, Cultural Resistance.

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1. Introduction
Anthropology has long grappled with its colonial roots, as many of its early practitioners conducted research under the auspices of imperial powers. The field's origins in studying "primitives" and "savages" aligned with the political and military interests of colonial regimes (Wagner, 2016). In Morocco, anthropology developed along two distinct paths: French anthropology, which was closely tied to colonial administration, and American anthropology, which initially sought to distinguish itself from colonial complicity but eventually became entangled in military operations during World War II (Mills, 2020; Price, 2008). This article analyzes the works of three influential anthropologists—Edmond Doutté, Robert Montagne, and Carleton Coon—to understand how anthropology shaped the colonial encounter in Morocco. Special focus is given to Coon's *The Riffian* as a literary case study, demonstrating how fiction can both reflect and resist the colonial gaze (Said, 1978; Kauffman, 2022).

2. French Anthropology: Colonial Governance and Divide-and-Rule Strategies
2.1 Edmond Doutté: Anthropology in the Service of Empire
French anthropology in Morocco was closely tied to the colonial administration, with Edmond Doutté exemplifying the use of ethnography to legitimize and reinforce imperial control. Doutté's works, *Missions au Maroc* and *Magie et Religion dans l'Afrique du Nord*, reflect an evolutionary framework that cast Moroccan society as backward and in need of modernization (Doutté, 1914; Doutté, 1909). His portrayal of Moroccan rituals as primitive practices reinforced the narrative of European superiority. Doutté framed Moroccan resistance to colonialism as rooted in irrational fears, dismissing it as a continuation of the "primitive fear of innovation" (bid'a). "The horror of 'bid'a' mirrors the shock of primitives at encountering difference," he wrote, "explaining the initial suspicion towards colonial reforms in Algeria" (Doutté, 1909, p. 28). By situating resistance within a framework of ignorance, Doutté justified the imposition of colonial authority as a civilizing mission.

Furthermore, Doutté's ethnography blurred the line between academic inquiry and military strategy. His descriptions of Moroccan geography reveal his dual purpose: "What a beautiful road for an army," he noted, signaling the strategic significance of the landscapes he studied (Doutté, 1909, p. 298). His alignment with colonial authorities is evident in his acknowledgment of support from the French government, which facilitated his expeditions: "Our missions were enabled by the Ministry of Public Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (Doutté, 1909, p. V).

2.2 Robert Montagne: Divide-and-Rule through Ethnography

Robert Montagne's ethnographic work reflects a more explicit integration of anthropology into colonial governance. His focus on Berber communities in Morocco, as presented in *The Berbers: Their Social and Political Organisation*, was instrumental in the development of French divide-and-rule policies (Montagne, 1932). Montagne emphasized the distinctiveness of Berber society, framing it as separate from and superior to Arab culture. "Berber traditions are resistant to change, making them impervious to external influences," he claimed (Montagne, 1932, p. 57).

This framing aligned with the goals of the controversial 1930 Berber Dahir, which sought to maintain Berber customary law while suppressing Islamic law. Montagne warned against the unification of Berbers and Arabs, advocating for policies that would keep the two groups divided: "It is dangerous to allow the formation of a united phalanx of Moroccans speaking one language" (Montagne, 1932, p. 260). His work reinforced the colonial discourse of the "Moroccan Vulgate," a framework based on binaries such as Berber/Arab and Makhzen/Siba (Burke III, 1980, p. 198).

Montagne's analysis aligns with contemporary studies on Berber law, which emphasize the role of custom in shaping political identity during colonialism (Hoffman, 2010). Hoffman (2010) explores how the French manipulated Berber law to consolidate colonial control while fostering divisions between Arabs and Berbers. Further supporting this, Tilmatine (1998) highlights the impact of the Berber Dahir on identity formation in Morocco, arguing that the colonial legal system amplified existing tensions (Tilmatine, 1998). These accounts demonstrate how legal frameworks became tools of governance, sustaining colonial rule through strategic manipulation of local customs.

While Montagne admired aspects of Berber governance, describing it as a form of "ordered anarchy," he ultimately argued that it was incompatible with modern statehood: "There is no place for the ordered anarchy of the Berber cantons in a modern state" (Montagne, 1932, p. 69). His ethnography thus provided a blueprint for colonial administrators seeking to manage Berber communities through strategic alliances and political manipulation.

3. American Anthropology: Between Scholarship and Espionage

3.1 Carleton Coon: Anthropology in the Service of War

Carleton Coon's work in Morocco represents a departure from the French tradition, blending scholarship with espionage. Coon developed personal relationships with Moroccans, including his informant Mohammed Limnibhy, but his involvement with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II complicates his legacy. Coon's dual role as an anthropologist and secret agent exemplifies the ethical dilemmas faced by anthropologists who become entangled in military operations (Price, 2008).

Coon used his anthropological knowledge to support American military efforts in North Africa, engaging in covert missions to contact Riffian leaders and arrange arms drops. He recalled: "I carried Riffian clothes to Gibraltar, prepared to accompany an arms drop" (Coon, 1981, p. 168). His involvement in these operations raises questions about the relationship between scholarship and espionage, as his ethnographic expertise was instrumental in advancing military objectives.

David Price critiques Coon's use of anthropology for military purposes, arguing that it undermined trust between scholars and the communities they studied: "Coon's use of his anthropological experience to train assassins and kidnappers was wrong and prefigured the ways the CIA would later subvert international law" (Price, 2008, p. 267). He further asserts that "the blending of anthropology and military operations eroded the credibility of the discipline" (Price, 2008, p. 270). Coon's work, therefore, demonstrates the tension between using anthropological knowledge for intellectual inquiry versus military objectives.

In *Adventures and Discoveries*, Coon reflects on these dual roles and acknowledges the challenges they posed: "Anthropology, when combined with espionage, loses both its objectivity and the trust it requires" (Coon, 1981, p. 315). This statement highlights the internal conflict he faced in balancing academic and operational demands during the war. Despite these ethical concerns, Coon's work offers valuable insights into Moroccan society and resistance, albeit through a politically compromised lens. His studies remain a testament to how anthropology was deployed not only to understand but also to manipulate cultural systems.

4. Literature as Ethnography: Analyzing *The Riffian*

4.1 The Riffian: Fiction as a Critique of Colonialism

Carleton Coon's novel, *The Riffian*, serves as both a literary exploration of Moroccan resistance and an ethnographic reflection on the complexities of colonial encounters. Through the protagonist Ali the Jackal, Coon captures the tensions between identity, loyalty, betrayal, and resistance that defined Morocco under French colonial rule. Ali, a fair-skinned Berber, joins the French military under a false identity, Mohamed Ben Mohamed, with the covert intention of stealing weapons to aid his tribe's rebellion. His participation in the colonial army reflects the ambivalence many Moroccans felt toward colonial powers. Ali seeks to experience the marvels of Europe, confessing: "I should like to see the country of the Christians... and fight the Germans, who are the Children of the Unclean One" (Coon, 1933, p. 47). Yet beneath this desire for exploration lies his deeper commitment to resistance, illustrating the dual motivations driving those caught between two worlds.

As Ali navigates his life in France, the novel reveals the contradictions of colonial ideology. His fair complexion and blond hair disrupt the stereotypes held by the French, who struggle to reconcile his appearance with their assumptions about Moroccans. In a nightclub encounter, a Frenchwoman giggles as she tells him: "Moroccans are horrid black men, whom we bring here to fight in the front lines" (84). This interaction not only exposes the racial prejudices of the colonial system but also underscores the instability of racial categories. Ali's presence challenges the simplicity of colonial stereotypes, forcing both the colonizers and himself to confront the fluidity of identity.

Betrayal emerges as a central theme when Ali returns to Morocco and discovers his lover, Rowazna, in bed with an Arab man. Enraged, he exclaims: "So you lie with negroes" (172). This moment reflects the complex racial hierarchies that colonialism exacerbated, revealing the deep divisions between Arabs and Berbers. Ali's disgust highlights how colonial rule intensified existing fractures within Moroccan society, complicating efforts to build solidarity across ethnic lines. Later, when Ali declares, "Call me a bastard if you will, and then we are brothers! But an Arab, never! I am insulted!" (202–203), it becomes clear that the internal divisions among the colonized complicate the narrative of unified native resistance. Coon's portrayal of these tensions disrupts the binary of colonizer and colonized, revealing the complexities and contradictions within resistance movements.

Ali's journey is also marked by moments of disillusionment with the colonial order. After being injured in battle, he receives the Croix de Guerre for his bravery. However, Ali immediately dismisses the medal as meaningless, telling his English companion to keep it for her child: "Put it in your pocketbook, and when you have a son, give it to him to play with" (106). His rejection of the medal symbolizes his recognition that colonial rewards are hollow, intended to pacify rather than empower. As he laments, "They lure us here to be cut to pieces and die for no profit of our own, and then seek to satisfy us with trinkets" (106). This moment encapsulates the futility of trying to align personal honor with the interests of the colonial state, revealing the emptiness of imperial recognition.

Coon uses Ali's interactions with his uncle to explore the cultural tensions between traditional Moroccan customs and the influences of colonial modernity. Upon returning to Morocco, Ali attempts to justify his actions in France by referencing Islamic teachings that permit flexibility in extreme situations. However, his uncle remains skeptical: "I suppose you even went so far as to eat the flesh of the pig, since you say it was cold there?" (134). This exchange highlights the anxieties surrounding cultural assimilation, as well as the fear that exposure to foreign customs could erode traditional values. Ali's struggle to reconcile these competing influences mirrors the broader challenges faced by Moroccans under colonial rule, as individuals navigated between preservation of tradition and the demands of a changing world.

The novel also reflects on the performative nature of colonial power, as Ali contrasts the behavior of Europeans in Morocco with their conduct in their own countries. "The Christians walk down our streets with great confidence, knocking lesser persons out of their path, yet in their own country, they are humble and kind" (148). This observation captures the duality of colonial authority—benign at home but aggressive abroad—revealing the dissonance that colonial subjects experience as they move between these cultural spaces. Ali's recognition of this discrepancy further fuels his disillusionment with both colonialism and his own society, driving him toward a more personal and independent path.

Despite the novel's nuanced portrayal of resistance, Coon does not entirely escape the exoticism that characterizes much colonial writing. Ali describes Berbers as having "the courage of lions and the shamelessness of wild swine" (233), reinforcing certain stereotypes even as the narrative complicates others. However, these moments of exoticism are tempered by Coon's deep respect for Moroccan culture, as reflected in his detailed descriptions of local rituals and social interactions. The novel captures the beauty and complexity of Moroccan life, presenting characters who are shaped by both personal ambition and cultural loyalty.

In the final stages of the novel, Ali rejects both colonial authority and traditional Moroccan structures, choosing instead to embrace a more inclusive vision of community. His decision to marry an orphan, despite social disapproval, symbolizes his rejection of rigid

hierarchies and his acceptance of cultural difference. "I have lived with the Braber, and I myself like them. They are brave, hearty people, but their minds do not work like those of Riffians. Which of us is right lies between the hands of God to tell" (307). This moment encapsulates the novel's central message: true liberation lies not in isolation but in mutual understanding and acceptance of diversity.

Through *The Riffian*, Coon offers a subtle yet powerful critique of colonialism, highlighting the limitations of both colonial authority and traditional social structures. The novel emphasizes the futility of external control, suggesting that liberation can only be achieved through internal transformation and cultural hybridity. Ali's journey reflects the complexities of negotiating multiple identities in a world marked by conflict and change, offering a narrative that challenges stereotypes and promotes cross-cultural understanding.

Coon's use of fiction allows him to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of colonial encounters, going beyond the limitations of traditional ethnography. *The Riffian* serves as both a narrative of individual struggle and a reflection of the broader tensions that defined Morocco's colonial experience. The novel's blend of adventure, romance, and political commentary provides a nuanced portrait of Moroccan life, capturing both the triumphs and challenges of living under colonial rule. As such, *The Riffian* stands as a testament to the potential of literature to engage with the complexities of cultural identity and resistance, offering a rare glimpse into the intricate realities of Moroccan society during a time of profound upheaval.

5. Conclusion

The nuanced examination of *The Riffian* alongside the works of Edmond Doutté and Robert Montagne reveals the ways in which anthropology and literature intersected with the colonial enterprise in Morocco. French anthropologists, such as Doutté and Montagne, embedded their ethnographic studies within frameworks of imperial governance, reinforcing hierarchies between "primitive" societies and the modern colonial state. Their research aligned closely with colonial policies, using ethnographic knowledge to divide and control Moroccan populations. Montagne's divide-and-rule strategy, for example, amplified the Berber-Arab dichotomy, providing colonial administrators with the ideological tools necessary to maintain dominance. Doutté's observations reinforced the portrayal of Moroccan rituals as remnants of archaic systems, justifying the imposition of European governance as a civilizing mission. Both anthropologists used scientific objectivity to distance themselves from the cultural realities of the communities they studied, reinforcing the separation between observer and observed.

In contrast, Carleton Coon's engagement with Moroccan society represents a more complex, if equally problematic, approach. His dual role as an anthropologist and covert operative during World War II reflects the tension between scholarship and espionage, as his ethnographic expertise was leveraged to advance American military objectives. Yet, through *The Riffian*, Coon offers a narrative that disrupts colonial stereotypes and critiques the exploitative dynamics of empire. The novel's protagonist, Ali the Jackal, embodies the complexities of identity and resistance, navigating multiple cultural worlds while rejecting both colonial authority and traditional tribal hierarchies. Ali's journey exposes the internal divisions within Moroccan society—particularly the tensions between Arabs and Berbers—and critiques the hollow promises of colonial rewards. His disillusionment with both the French military and aspects of his own culture reflects the broader frustrations of a generation caught between tradition and modernity, resistance and collaboration.

The narrative power of *The Riffian* lies in its ability to humanize these tensions, moving beyond ethnographic abstraction to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of colonial encounters. By blending fiction with ethnographic insight, Coon presents a more empathetic and layered portrayal of Moroccan life, one that challenges both Western exoticism and internal divisions. Ali's rejection of rigid social hierarchies in favor of cultural hybridity suggests that true liberation requires more than political independence—it demands a reimagining of identity and community, transcending the binaries imposed by both colonial and traditional systems.

Ultimately, this comparative analysis highlights the ways in which anthropology—whether in the form of academic research or literary fiction—can both serve and resist imperial interests. While French anthropologists like Doutté and Montagne reinforced colonial structures, Coon's *The Riffian* offers a subtle critique of these very systems, pointing toward the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and resistance. Yet, even Coon's narrative is not free from moments of exoticism and racial essentialism, reminding us that the colonial gaze is difficult to fully escape. The lasting value of *The Riffian*, however, lies in its ability to complicate the categories of colonizer and colonized, offering a narrative that reflects the fluidity and ambiguity of identity in a world shaped by power and conflict.

This exploration underscores the importance of reexamining anthropology's colonial legacy and the ways in which literary works like *The Riffian* can challenge dominant narratives while also revealing the contradictions inherent in resistance movements.

Moving forward, anthropology must embrace a more engaged and collaborative approach, recognizing the agency of the communities it studies and striving to move beyond the binary frameworks that have long defined the discipline. The story of Ali the Jackal, much like the history of Morocco itself, demonstrates that liberation is not achieved through simple opposition but through the negotiation of multiple identities, values, and allegiances. In this sense, Coon's work remains a valuable, if imperfect, contribution to the ongoing dialogue between anthropology, literature, and the complexities of postcolonial identity.

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