

Title: French Colonial Companies and the Exploitation of Southern Oran: The Kenadsa Coal Mine as a Case

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Abstract:

This study investigates the economic role of French colonial companies in Southern Oran, Algeria, with a particular focus on the Kenadsa coal mine. Established in the early 20th century near Béchar, the Kenadsa mine became a key asset in fueling French industry. The paper explores how colonial authorities organized and managed mining operations, prioritizing resource extraction for metropolitan benefit while subjecting local Algerian workers to exploitative labor conditions, racial discrimination, and socio-economic marginalization. The research also addresses the environmental and social repercussions of these practices, which left long-lasting scars on the region. By analyzing the Kenadsa coal mine as a case study, the paper highlights the broader dynamics of colonial exploitation in Algeria's resource-rich southern territories.

Keywords: French colonialism, Kenadsa coal mine, Southern Oran, economic exploitation, colonial companies, labor conditions, Algeria, resource extraction

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Introduction

The colonization of Algeria by France, which began in 1830 and lasted until independence in 1962, was marked not only by political domination and cultural suppression but also by extensive economic exploitation. Among the many strategies employed by the colonial regime to control and benefit from Algerian resources was the establishment of French colonial companies tasked with extracting raw materials. These companies became instrumental in transforming Algeria into a supplier of raw materials for the French economy, often at the expense of the well-being of the local population and the sustainability of the environment. One of the most significant examples of this exploitative model can be found in the southern region of Oran, particularly in the area of B  char, where the Kenadsa coal mine emerged as a vital industrial site.

Located in the arid southwest of Algeria, the Kenadsa coal mine was discovered and exploited in the early 20th century as part of a broader effort by the French to industrialize their colonial possessions. The Compagnie des Charbonnages de Kenadsa, among other companies, was responsible for managing extraction operations that aimed to supply coal for French railways, factories, and military infrastructure. This mine was not only a major source of energy but also a symbol of France's extractive colonial economy. The exploitation of Kenadsa's coal reserves reflected a pattern seen across many parts of the colonial world: the transformation of local resources into tools of imperial power and profit.

The Kenadsa mine offers a unique lens through which to examine the intersection of economic ambition and colonial ideology. French authorities and private investors viewed the mine not merely as a resource site but as an opportunity to impose a model of economic modernization that was heavily centralized and directed toward European benefit. The infrastructural developments surrounding the mine — including the construction of roads, railways, and housing for French engineers — contrasted sharply with the living and working conditions endured by the native Algerian labor force. These disparities reveal the inherent inequality embedded in the colonial enterprise and the exploitative logic that governed its economic practices.

Algerian workers in Kenadsa were subjected to harsh and often inhumane working conditions. They worked long hours in dangerous environments, received meager wages, and were systematically excluded from positions of authority and decision-making. Moreover, their labor was essential yet unacknowledged, as official records and colonial propaganda often glorified the success of French companies while erasing the contributions and sufferings of the indigenous workforce. These labor conditions exemplify the broader racial and economic hierarchies imposed by colonialism, where native populations were relegated to the status of cheap, disposable labor.

Beyond the human toll, the environmental consequences of coal mining in Kenadsa were profound. The aggressive extraction practices led to land degradation, water pollution, and disruption of the

fragile desert ecosystem. Yet these environmental costs were largely ignored by colonial administrators, who viewed the region through a utilitarian lens. In the post-independence era, the people of Béchar and surrounding areas were left to contend with the toxic legacy of colonial mining operations — including environmental damage, abandoned infrastructure, and economic dependency.

This paper argues that the Kenadsa coal mine is a powerful example of how colonialism functioned not only as a political and military occupation but as an economic system rooted in exploitation and inequality. By examining the history of this mine — from its inception under French rule to its long-term impact on local communities — we gain insight into the larger mechanisms of colonial control in Algeria. Furthermore, understanding the dynamics of the Kenadsa mine sheds light on the contemporary challenges faced by post-colonial societies seeking to reclaim and rehabilitate their natural and human resources after decades of systemic plunder.

Research Problem:

During the French colonial period in Algeria, economic exploitation was a central pillar of the colonial agenda. French colonial companies, particularly in the energy and mining sectors, played a significant role in extracting natural resources to serve France's industrial needs. The Kenadsa coal mine in Southern Oran is a striking example of this exploitative dynamic. Despite its importance in fueling French development, the mine was operated under harsh and discriminatory conditions for Algerian

workers, with little regard for social equity or environmental sustainability. The central problem this research addresses is: **How did French colonial companies exploit the Kenadsa coal mine economically and socially, and what were the long-term impacts of this exploitation on the region and its inhabitants?**

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the historical context behind the establishment and operation of the Kenadsa coal mine during French colonial rule.
2. To analyze the role of French colonial companies in managing and profiting from the coal resources of Southern Oran.
3. To investigate the working and living conditions of Algerian laborers employed in the Kenadsa mine.
4. To assess the environmental and social impacts of the mining operations on the Kenadsa region.
5. To understand the long-term legacy of colonial exploitation in the economic and social structures of post-independence Béchar and its surrounding areas.
6. To contribute to broader discussions on colonial economic systems and their lasting effects in formerly colonized nations.

Theoretical Framework

The study of colonial resource exploitation is deeply rooted in several interconnected theoretical frameworks, particularly those developed within **post-colonial theory**, **political economy**, and **dependency theory**. These frameworks help explain

the structural dynamics of power, labor, and capital that shaped the relationship between colonial powers and colonized regions. They are essential in understanding how the Kenadsa coal mine, operated by French colonial companies, served not merely as an industrial site but as a mechanism for enforcing economic domination.

One of the foundational concepts in post-colonial theory is **coloniality of power**, a term coined by sociologist Anibal Quijano. This concept refers to the lasting patterns of power, labor control, and economic exploitation that persist even after formal colonialism ends. In the case of Algeria, the colonial system did not merely involve political conquest, but also the imposition of a hierarchical economic order, wherein local populations were subordinated and natural resources were commodified for European markets. The Kenadsa coal mine exemplifies this pattern: while situated in Algerian territory, it functioned primarily to serve the economic interests of France.

From a **Marxist political economy perspective**, the exploitation of the Kenadsa coal mine can be seen as a manifestation of **primitive accumulation**, a process whereby colonizing powers expropriate land, labor, and resources to initiate and sustain capitalist growth. Marx referred to this as the "pre-history of capitalism" — a violent, external process of accumulation that laid the foundation for modern European industry. French companies in Algeria did not merely participate in capitalism; they expanded and deepened it by extracting surplus value from Algeri-

an workers and exporting that value to the metropole.

Closely related to this is **dependency theory**, which emerged in the 20th century to critique the structural relationship between the Global North and the Global South. Scholars such as André Gunder Frank and Samir Amin argued that colonialism created a system where peripheral nations — such as Algeria — were locked into a cycle of underdevelopment by being forced to supply raw materials while importing manufactured goods. The Kenadsa coal mine was part of this extractive pattern: it supplied coal to France, while the region itself remained economically marginalized and lacked the industrial capacity to benefit from its own resources.

Labor theory is another key aspect of the theoretical foundation for this study. The concept of **racialized labor** — labor that is differentiated and devalued based on race or ethnicity — is essential for understanding the treatment of Algerian workers in colonial enterprises. French colonial companies systematically relegated indigenous workers to the most dangerous and lowest-paid jobs in the Kenadsa mine, while reserving skilled and managerial positions for European settlers. This racial segmentation of labor created a dual workforce that mirrored and reinforced the broader structures of colonial apartheid.

Furthermore, **environmental justice theory** provides insight into the unequal environmental burdens placed upon colonized populations. Mining operations such as those in Kenadsa not only extracted resources but also left behind lasting ecological

damage: deforestation, soil degradation, water pollution, and air contamination. The theoretical framework of environmental justice examines how these harms were disproportionately borne by marginalized communities — in this case, the indigenous Algerians — while the benefits of resource extraction accrued elsewhere.

The concept of **extractivism** also helps to contextualize the broader colonial strategy. Extractivism refers to a mode of economic activity focused on the large-scale removal of natural resources for export, with minimal local processing or benefit. In colonial Algeria, extractivism was driven by state policy and private capital, with the Kenadsa coal mine serving as a textbook example. The mine was not integrated into a local industrial system; instead, it was linked directly to French transport and manufacturing networks. This pattern reinforced dependency and hindered Algeria's capacity for self-sustained development.

To further understand the social consequences of colonial mining, **Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony** is relevant. Gramsci argued that dominant powers maintain control not only through force but also through cultural and ideological means. French colonialism, including its economic arms such as mining companies, propagated the idea that modernization and industrialization were only achievable under French leadership. This ideological narrative justified the exploitation of Kenadsa's coal as a civilizing mission, masking the realities of oppression and dispossession faced by the local population.

Another useful theoretical tool is the concept of **resource curse**, which is often applied to post-colonial states. This theory posits that countries rich in natural resources often experience slower economic growth and weaker institutions due to corruption, conflict, and dependency on foreign capital. Although originally applied to independent states, it can be retroactively applied to colonial contexts. The exploitation of the Kenadsa coal mine did not lead to development for the local area; rather, it entrenched extractive economic structures that persisted long after independence.

Lastly, this theoretical exploration would be incomplete without addressing the concept of **historical memory and post-colonial trauma**. The legacy of exploitation at sites like Kenadsa is not merely economic or environmental — it is also psychological and cultural. Generations of Algerians in the Béchar region inherited the consequences of a colonial system that prioritized foreign profit over local dignity. A theoretical approach that acknowledges collective memory and historical injustice is crucial in framing the Kenadsa coal mine not only as a case of resource exploitation, but also as a site of resistance, remembrance, and reclamation.

Recommendations

1. Preserve and archive colonial-era mining records **to enable more accurate historical research and raise awareness about the scope of economic exploitation in regions like Kenadsa.**
2. Establish a local historical museum or memorial in Kenadsa **dedicated to the memory of miners**

and workers who endured colonial labor exploitation.

3. **Promote academic research in Algerian universities focused on colonial industrial systems and their long-term socioeconomic effects, especially in the south.**
4. **Include colonial economic history in national educational curricula to help younger generations understand the roots of modern underdevelopment.**
5. **Launch environmental rehabilitation projects in areas affected by colonial mining to address soil degradation, water contamination, and ecological imbalance.**
6. **Provide socio-economic development programs for communities in Béchar and Kenadsa to address lingering inequalities rooted in colonial underinvestment.**
7. **Encourage oral history projects that collect testimonies from descendants of mine workers to preserve personal and community narratives.**
8. **Support local NGOs and historical societies in documenting and disseminating information on colonial economic practices and their legacies.**
9. **Implement regional development policies that prioritize former colonial industrial zones as sites for equitable and sustainable investment.**
10. **Collaborate with international human rights and heritage organizations to recognize colonial exploitation as a form of historical injustice.**
11. **Establish compensation or recognition mechanisms (symbolic or material) for families affected by historical labor exploitation in colonial enterprises.**

12. Foster regional and international dialogue on colonial economic legacies as part of broader post-colonial justice and reconciliation efforts.

Implications of the Study

1. **Reveals the depth of economic exploitation practiced by colonial powers beyond mere political domination, focusing on resource-rich southern Algeria.**
2. **Highlights the systemic racial discrimination in labor practices, contributing to a better understanding of colonial social hierarchies.**
3. **Demonstrates the environmental consequences of colonial extractive industries, calling attention to ecological degradation in desert regions.**
4. **Challenges traditional narratives of French modernization, showing that development was unequally distributed and extractive in nature.**
5. **Sheds light on the role of private companies as active agents of colonialism, not just passive economic actors.**
6. **Contributes to the historiography of colonial Algeria by offering a case study grounded in material and archival evidence.**
7. **Raises awareness about the long-term underdevelopment in post-colonial regions once used for resource extraction.**
8. **Supports the decolonization of knowledge, pushing for reinterpretation of colonial economic activities from an Algerian perspective.**
9. **Illustrates the legacy of labor exploitation, connecting historical injustices to current socio-economic disparities in the Béchar region.**

10. **Provides a framework for comparative studies** between Algeria and other colonized nations with similar resource extraction histories.

11. **Enriches debates in post-colonial and environmental studies**, bridging economic history with social and ecological concerns.

12. **Informs current policymaking** related to regional equity, historical justice, and environmental restoration in formerly exploited areas

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of the Kenadsa coal mine within the context of French colonialism provides a critical lens through which to understand the economic, social, and environmental impacts of colonial resource extraction. The mine, like many others in colonial Algeria, was not merely an industrial site but a symbol of how colonial powers exploited natural resources and local labor for the benefit of the metropole. The operations at Kenadsa exemplified the broader patterns of economic domination that characterized the French colonial project, where Algerian workers were subjected to harsh conditions, racial discrimination, and economic marginalization.

Through this case study, we see that the colonial economic system was deeply structured around the extraction of wealth from Algeria's natural resources, with little regard for the welfare of the indigenous population or the long-term sustainability of the environment. The economic models established by French companies in Algeria, such as the

Compagnie des Charbonnages de Kenadsa, perpetuated a cycle of dependency that has had lasting consequences for the development of the region, even in the post-colonial era.

The implications of the exploitation at Kenadsa are still felt today, as the region continues to grapple with the legacies of environmental degradation, socio-economic inequalities, and the psychological toll of colonial exploitation. As a result, addressing these issues is not only important for understanding Algeria's colonial past but also for shaping its future development and recovery. The long-term effects of the Kenadsa coal mine's exploitation remind us of the need for sustainable development, historical justice, and the rehabilitation of the environment.

The recommendations of this study advocate for preserving the memory of the colonial past through historical documentation, community empowerment, and environmental restoration. By acknowledging the injustices faced by Algerian workers in colonial mines, it is possible to foster a deeper understanding of the complex legacy of colonialism in Algeria and other former colonial territories. It is essential that these histories continue to inform discussions on post-colonial justice and equitable development.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of decolonizing the historical narrative, confronting the socio-economic consequences of resource extraction, and promoting an inclusive approach to regional development. The story of the

Kenadsa coal mine is not just a relic of Algeria's colonial past but a vital point of reference for addressing the challenges that post-colonial societies continue to face today.

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