

The Onomastic Research Method in Algeria: Concepts, Methodology, and Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

Recently, the names have begun to present themselves strongly as a research field open to the results of linguistics on the one hand and to what the results of historical research provide on the other hand, especially since they occupy a significant space in historical documents and source texts, re-presenting and dismantling these names based on omasticism and the search for what they hold in their fossil layers. Civilized data, intellectual or ideological references, and the systems, behavioral patterns and identities that can be indicated by it, would illuminate some issues that are still pending, or perhaps provide new readings for the various historical stations in maghreb.

Keywords: *Onomastic, Toponymy, Method, Historical Research, Anthroponymy.*

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Introduction

The scientific revolution that unfolded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven by significant improvements in research methods and the rapid expansion of scholarly knowledge, led to the emergence of new academic disciplines characterized by distinct methodological approaches. These disciplines gradually moved beyond the broad generalizations and traditional paradigms that had previously dominated scholarship. As a result, highly specialized fields developed on the margins of established sciences, directing their attention to increasingly specific research questions and concentrating their efforts on narrowly defined areas of inquiry. This process marked a genuine epistemological transformation, substantially advancing scientific knowledge through the production of innovative findings while simultaneously providing essential auxiliary disciplines that support related fields of study.

Onomastics, the scientific study of proper names, is a specialized branch of linguistics concerned primarily with the investigation of toponymy and anthroponymy. In addition to examining the meanings, origins, and historical development of place names (toponymic onomastics), the discipline also investigates the system of personal names (anthroponymic onomastics), which constitutes one of its principal areas of research. From this perspective, the present study addresses the following questions: What constitutes the nature of the onomastic research methodology? What are its methodological approaches and analytical tools? Furthermore, what are its research prospects and potential contributions to historical and archaeological studies in Algeria?

Onomastic Studies: Scope and Objectives

The Importance of Investigating Personal and Place Names in Social and Cultural History

In Arabic, the word *ism* ("name") is traditionally derived from the triliteral root **w-s-m** (*wasam*), meaning "mark," "sign," or "distinguishing feature." A name is therefore understood as a mark that identifies its referent.³ As one classical Arab linguist observed, "a name is a mark assigned to an object by which it is

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³ Al-Anbārī, 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Muḥammad. *Al-Inṣāf fi Masā'il al-Khilāf bayna al-Baṣriyyīn wa al-Kūfiyyīn* [Equity in the Disputed Issues between the Basran and Kufan Grammarians]. Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 6.

recognized⁴. By contrast, the Basran grammatical school derived the term from the root **s-m-w** (*samā*), meaning "to rise" or "to be elevated," arguing that a name stands above its referent by signifying and distinguishing it. In the same sense, the word *samā* ("sky") is said to derive from this root because of its elevation. A proper name thus functions as a linguistic sign that identifies its bearer, becoming, in classical Arabic linguistic thought, "an expression that denotes a designated referent."⁵

The concept of *naming* (*tasmiya*) refers to the act of assigning a name to a person, place, or object at the moment of its designation. According to the author of *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*, naming consists of assigning lexical forms to entities for the purposes of identification and differentiation. This process gives rise to proper names, which refer directly to unique entities without requiring contextual qualification, such as *Khālīd*, *Faṭīma*, *Damascus*, or the *Nile*. The same principle applies to the names of countries, peoples, tribes, rivers, seas, and mountains⁶. Proper names therefore emerge as a fundamental social and linguistic mechanism through which human communities classify, identify, and integrate their surrounding world into a coherent onomastic and linguistic system.⁷

Any discussion of proper names inevitably raises questions concerning their historical origins and their relationship to the earliest stages of human civilization as linguistic designations for individuals and places. Religious texts provide some of the earliest testimonies to the existence of proper names. In the Qur'ān, for example, several verses in Sūrat al-Baqara recount the story of the first human being, identified as Adam, a name likewise attested in the Torah and the Gospel. According to the Qur'ānic narrative, Adam's distinction over the angels lay in his divinely bestowed ability to learn and identify "the names" (*al-asmā*), accurately associating them with their referents. This exceptional capacity served as the justification for humanity's vicegerency (*khilāfa*) on earth, demonstrating intellectual aptitude and the ability to classify and comprehend the created world. Within this narrative, the knowledge of names symbolizes not merely linguistic competence but also humanity's cognitive superiority and its capacity to establish meaningful relationships between language, knowledge, and reality.⁸

This narrative points to one of the fundamental characteristics that distinguishes humankind from all other living creatures: the ability to differentiate between names and to assign them correctly to their referents. Names thus constitute the first domain in which humanity's worthiness and capacity to assume stewardship (*khilāfa*) on earth were tested. The details of the Qur'ānic account further suggest that names, as linguistic expressions denoting specific referents, existed prior to the creation of Adam. God Himself possesses the Most Beautiful Names (*al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*) that signify His divine essence, while certain angels were likewise designated by names identifying them. This faculty was subsequently bestowed upon humankind, as Adam was created with the cognitive ability to designate, distinguish, and identify the members of the same species. Having learned the names and taught them, Adam transmitted this capacity to his human descendants.

Modern scholarship, however, offers conclusions that differ from the interpretation that language was created fully formed alongside humanity⁹. Linguistic research concerned with the origins and evolution of human language suggests that language, as a medium of human communication, developed progressively

⁴ Al-Anbārī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad. *Asrār al-'Arabiyya* [The Secrets of the Arabic Language]. Edited by Muḥammad Bahjat al-Bayṭār. Damascus, n.d.

⁵ Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī. *Linguistic Distinctions*. Edited by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Salīm. Cairo: Dār al-'Ilm wa al-Thaqāfa, n.d., p. 29.

⁶ Al-Ghalāyīnī, Muṣṭafā. *Jāmi' al-Durūs al-'Arabiyya* [A Comprehensive Arabic Grammar]. Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Maktaba al-'Aṣriyya, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 109.

⁷ Al-Bustānī, Buṭrus. *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ* [The Comprehensive Ocean (Dictionary)]. Beirut, Lebanon: Ṭībū Press, 1987, p. 431.

⁸ The Book of Genesis, Chapters 2 and 3, contains the details of the creation narrative and refers to Adam and Eve. See: Abū al-Ḥasan Ishāq al-Ṣūrī, *The Samaritan Torah: Book of Genesis, Chapters 2–3*. Egypt: Dār Nūn, 2008, pp. 12–14.

⁹ Al-Ṭā'ī, Ḥatīm 'Ulū. "The Origin of Language and Its Importance." *Dirāsāt Tarbawiyya* (Educational Studies), Iraq, Vol. 2, No. 6 (2009), pp. 195–220.

like other aspects of human culture. It initially consisted of bodily gestures, vocal signals, and rudimentary forms of expression before gradually evolving as anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) acquired fully developed linguistic and articulatory capacities, enabling them to produce structured speech. Several studies investigating the origins of language through the evolutionary history of anatomical features and genes associated with speech production conclude that *Homo sapiens* had already developed the physiological ability to produce articulate sounds. Thereafter, language became an exclusively human faculty through which individuals constructed a lexical system that enabled them to distinguish the elements of their physical, natural, and social environments¹⁰. This development responded to the practical demands of communal life, where communication and social interaction required individuals to identify places, designate valleys, ascend mountains, and, above all, distinguish one person from another, select companions, and convey ideas. These communicative necessities led human societies to assign meaningful names to natural features, animals, and human beings alike, thereby creating the linguistic category known as proper names.¹¹

Just as every human being differs from others through a unique combination of physical, psychological, and behavioral characteristics, each individual also requires a distinct name that reflects this individuality and permits unambiguous identification within the community and in relation to the surrounding natural world. Consequently, human societies gradually developed a sophisticated system of naming expressed through proper names. Each member of the community was assigned an individual proper name that preserved personal identity and social recognition within the human group. Over time, the function of proper names expanded beyond individuals to include families, tribes, peoples, and states. The development of these naming practices was fundamentally driven by the communicative needs of human societies and the increasing complexity of social organization.

Human societies progressively expanded their onomastic systems to encompass not only themselves and their descendants, but also their deities, the surrounding natural environment, animals, and virtually every element constituting everyday life. Names were likewise assigned to geographical features such as mountains, springs, rivers, and streams, as well as to inhabited places, including cities and villages, and uninhabited landscapes such as deserts and wastelands. This remarkable diversity constitutes a rich onomastic reservoir capable of yielding significant insights when examined through appropriate analytical methods designed to recover and interpret its informational value.¹²

In the opening chapter of *The Savage Mind*, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that the names assigned to elements of the natural environment—whether flora, fauna, or physical landscapes—may serve as semantic indicators of the antiquity of a tribe's occupation of a given territory. He observed that indigenous communities established within a region over long historical periods possessed an exceptional familiarity with their environment, enabling them to distinguish and identify a vast number of plant and insect species and, in many cases, to recognize their medicinal properties. By contrast, recently arrived or migrant communities generally lacked such extensive environmental knowledge, leaving many components of the surrounding landscape unnamed or only partially identified. This difference reflects the fact that acquiring a comprehensive knowledge of an environment and developing an elaborate system of names requires prolonged interaction over successive generations.¹³

While earlier scholarship had already emphasized the importance of names as an object of research, Lévi-Strauss extended this perspective by directing attention to the immense body of cultural and cognitive knowledge embedded in names of every kind. When investigated systematically and interpreted through

¹⁰ W. Tecumseh Fitch, «The evolution of speech», a comparative review. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 4 (2000), pp. 258–267.

¹¹ Charles Perreault, Sarah Mathew, «Dating the Origin of Language Using Phonemic Diversity», *PLoS ONE* 7(4), journal pone, volume (07), 2012, p. 01.

¹² Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. Translated by Naẓīr Jāhil. 3rd ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Majd Press, 2007, p. 24.

¹³ Berque, Jacques. «On the Meaning of the Tribe in North Africa.» In *Anthropology and History*. Translated by ‘Abd al-Aḥad al-Sabṭī and ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Falaq. Morocco: Dār Tūbqāl, 1988, p. 121.

rigorous scientific methodologies, names become valuable repositories of historical, social, and cultural information. From this standpoint, the proper name assumes the status of a continuously renewed historical document, constantly evolving through recurring processes of semantic transformation. Onomastic systems simultaneously preserve names inherited from the past and generate new ones, each reflecting changing cultural values, social structures, and historical circumstances. Jacques Berque aptly expressed this idea when he observed: "Within the life of words lies a part of the history and morphology of societies."¹⁴

Once established, proper names become carriers of multiple layers of cultural meaning and symbolic significance, reflecting the worldview and collective mentality of the communities that create and use them. Although some scholars have argued that the creation and assignment of names constitute little more than an arbitrary linguistic convention imposed by the practical necessities of everyday communication—governed neither by intellectual nor cultural principles and representing merely a tradition inherited from the earliest human societies—such an interpretation overlooks the complex cultural processes underlying naming practices. While it is true that naming allows a considerable degree of apparent freedom in the act of selection, this freedom is far from absolute. Rather, it is constrained by implicit values and shaped by a wide range of identity-based references emerging from the linguistic, cultural, and social contexts within which names are created and acquire meaning in the collective imagination. These underlying cultural frameworks have been described by some scholars as the "values that guide naming choices."

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss identifies three fundamental functions of naming: distinction, classification, and meaning. When a father names one of his children, or when a community assigns a name to a geographical feature, the primary objective is to distinguish that individual or place from others so that it becomes identifiable. The proper name thus functions as a sign referring to a specific referent, whereby the mere mention of the name evokes the person or place designated. At the same time, names perform a classificatory function, becoming indicators of social, political, linguistic, or cultural affiliation. They also convey meanings selected by the community on the basis of symbolic concepts, implicit values, and representations of individual or collective identity. Indeed, proper names possess the capacity to embody multiple forms of belonging—familial, tribal, political, religious, regional, and historical—each expressing a particular dimension of collective identity.

From this perspective, a proper name may also function as a marker of social status. By virtue of the information it conveys, it often reveals not only the identity of those to whom it is assigned but also that of those who bestow it. Proper names therefore represent more than simple linguistic labels; they constitute a social relationship between the namer and the named. In this sense, the name is transformed into an indicator of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu described as cultural and social capital. Embedded within every proper name is a cultural heritage inherited from successive civilizations and historical periods, shaped through religion, language, and diverse cultural traditions transmitted across generations by means of conquest, colonization, migration, and cultural diffusion. Such processes have continually enriched onomastic systems, making proper names invaluable witnesses to the historical interactions and cultural transformations experienced by human societies.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Azayko, Ali Sidqi. *History of Morocco, or Possible Interpretations*. Rabat: Tariq Ibn Ziyad Center, 2002, p. 11.

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The symbolic and semantic associations embedded in proper names make their study and the exploration of their cultural and identity-related dimensions a particularly challenging undertaking. Reading a name and uncovering all its hidden meanings is by no means a straightforward task¹⁹. A name may reveal itself, becoming a question that contains its own answer and an open text whose multiple meanings are explicit and readily accessible, thereby serving as a living source that sheds light on diverse social and cultural realities. Conversely, it may remain closed upon itself, resisting interpretation and rendering every attempt at inquiry and analysis exceedingly difficult. Its deconstruction thus becomes a complex intellectual endeavor. Researchers may at times misinterpret a name by attributing to it meanings and values that it cannot legitimately bear, while in other cases interpretation may become overly forced²⁰, as Raḥma Touriras has observed in her discussion of the internal logic governing names within cultural and linguistic systems. According to her, proper names often preserve archaic linguistic forms and meanings that can no longer be confidently connected to any identifiable linguistic origin, thereby making their analysis and interpretation particularly problematic²¹. For this reason, Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that understanding a name requires reconstructing the social circumstances within which the act of naming originally took place,

¹⁶ Dadoua Hadria, Nabia. "The Semantic Reference of Names between the Regions of Beni Achir (Tlemcen) and Telilat, 1954–1962." In *Names and Naming: Place Names, Tribal Names, and Personal Names in Algeria*. Oran: Research Center for Social and Cultural Anthropology, 2005, p. 59.

¹⁷ Zonabend, F. "Name." In *Dictionary of Ethnology and Anthropology*. Translated by Misbah al-Samad. Beirut, Lebanon: University Foundation for Studies – Majd, 2006, p. 78.

¹⁸ Ramdani, Fatiha. *Factors Influencing the Choice of Personal Names in Algerian Society: A Field Study*. Algiers: Dar al-Umma, 2013, p. 23.

¹⁹ Azayko, Ali Sidqi. *History of Morocco, or Possible Interpretations*. Rabat: Tañiq Ibn Ziyad Center, 2002, p. 11.

²⁰ Dadoua Hadria, Nabia. "The Semantic Reference of Names in the Regions of Beni Achir (Tlemcen) and Telilat, 1954–1962." In *Names and Naming: Place Names, Tribal Names, and Personal Names in Algeria*. Oran: Research Center for Social and Cultural Anthropology, 2005, p. 59.

²¹ Zonabend, F. "Name." In *Dictionary of Ethnology and Anthropology*. Translated by Misbah al-Samad. Beirut, Lebanon: University Foundation for Studies – Majd, 2006, p. 78.

since changes in social conditions inevitably transform the conceptual framework through which names are created and understood.²²

The systematic investigation of proper names through careful observation, critical analysis, and contextual interpretation—seeking to uncover the historical, cultural, ideological, and religious information embedded within their accumulated semantic layers, as well as the social structures, behavioral patterns, and identities they reflect—constitutes the primary objective of onomastic research. To achieve this goal, onomastics has developed a range of analytical approaches, methodologies, and classifications specifically designed to examine names and maximize their value as historical evidence. This raises two fundamental questions: What is onomastics as a scientific discipline? And how can it transform proper names into a new field of inquiry capable of making a substantial contribution to historical research?

Onomastic Research: Nature and Objectives

The scientific revolution that unfolded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven by significant improvements in research methods and the rapid expansion of human knowledge, gave rise to new academic disciplines founded upon innovative methodological approaches. These emerging fields gradually moved beyond the broad generalizations and traditional scholastic frameworks that had previously dominated scholarly inquiry. As a result, a number of highly specialized disciplines developed alongside the established sciences, directing their attention toward increasingly precise and narrowly defined research questions. This specialization represented a genuine epistemological transformation, producing substantial advances in scientific knowledge both through the importance of its own findings and through its role as an auxiliary discipline supporting related fields of study. Philology²³ is one of these disciplines that emerged within the broader field of linguistics, focusing on the study of ancient languages through the analysis of their vocabulary, semantic and phonological evolution, patterns of transmission across languages, and the sound changes affecting them over time²⁴. It soon became evident that addressing these linguistic questions could generate important new insights capable of advancing historical linguistics and reshaping our understanding of the world's linguistic landscape. At the same time, it became equally clear that the outcomes of philological research depend to a considerable extent upon the findings of history, since history provides the chronological framework within which names and linguistic forms emerged, evolved, and were transmitted. It also preserves the record of the geographical transformations and the movements of peoples and communities responsible for the dissemination and modification of lexical and linguistic forms across different regions and historical periods.²⁵

Interest in proper names denoting places and geographical locations grew steadily as they increasingly attracted the attention of historical scholarship. This was particularly evident in monographic studies, whose authors were often required to examine certain place names, explain their meanings, and clarify the reasons behind their designation. As these monographs succeeded in addressing many previously unresolved historical questions, it became increasingly apparent that the systematic study of names as an independent field of inquiry—examining their formation, development, semantic evolution, and their cultural and

²² Ramdani, Fatiha. *Factors Influencing the Choice of Personal Names in Algerian Society: A Field Study*. Algiers: Dar al-Umma, 2013, p. 23.

²³ Philology: the study of language through written documents. Its scope also encompasses the study of texts and their transmission. Just as archaeology investigates the material remains of the past, historical philology is concerned with the study of words, their history and evolution, the development of their meanings, and the extraction of the historical and cultural information they preserve. See: Karim Ould al-Niyya, "A Historical Philological Study of Ibn Khaldūn's Terminology in the Writings of 'Abd Allāh Sharīf," **Journal of Arts and Humanities*, No. 5 (2006), p. 243.

²⁴ Al-Hitti, Hanna Nasr, *Dictionary of Arabic and Arabized Names and the Interpretation of Their Meanings*. 2nd ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003.

²⁵ Some attention to the study of names and kunyas (honorific teknonyms) emerged in the Arabic scholarly tradition, particularly within the disciplines of ḥadīth studies and ṭabaqāt (biographical dictionaries). The primary objective of these works was to identify individuals and trace their lives and scholarly transmissions. A notable example is: Aḥmad ibn Ḥammād al-Dūlābī, *Kunyas and Names*. Edited by Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999.

intellectual foundations—could open new avenues of research capable of generating fresh insights and providing new perspectives on long-standing historical problems.²⁶

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the study of names had firmly established itself as a field of research drawing simultaneously upon the findings of linguistics and historical scholarship. Its significance was increasingly recognized as one of the auxiliary sciences of history, particularly because proper names occupy a substantial place within historical documents and primary source materials. Re-examining these names and analyzing them through the advanced methodologies of onomastic research promised to yield new historical interpretations. Consequently, numerous studies emerged focusing on proper names, whether personal names or geographical names such as those of cities, mountains, roads, rivers, and other physical features. Among the pioneering contributions was the work of the French scholar Auguste Longnon (1844–1911), entitled *The Place Names of France: Their Origins, Meanings, and Transformations*. This publication was, in fact, the culmination of Longnon's lifelong scholarly efforts, drawing upon the lectures he delivered at the French institution where he taught, together with the notes he meticulously compiled throughout his career. Following his death, these materials were preserved by his family and later edited into a comprehensive study by two of his former students, who published the work five years after his death. These efforts demonstrated the immense scholarly value of proper names and the rich body of historical knowledge they preserve, particularly when investigated within a well-established theoretical framework as an autonomous field of research.²⁷

The foundations of onomastic studies gradually began to take shape during the 1920s, as names increasingly became the focus of scholarly investigation. Although no fully developed methodological framework yet existed for conducting comprehensive research within this emerging field, the contributions of the French scholar Albert Dauzat (1877–1955) may rightly be regarded as foundational. His 1926 work, *Place Names: Their Origins and Evolution—Cities, Villages, Localities, Springs, Mountains, and Places*, laid the first building blocks for the establishment of onomastics as an independent field of inquiry²⁸. Dauzat's scholarship drew researchers' attention to the importance of studying names through new analytical approaches and methodologies, which became progressively more refined as increasing numbers of scholars entered the field. These efforts culminated in the convening of the First International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (*Congrès international des sciences onomastiques*)²⁹, held in Paris from 25 to 29 July 1938. The congress represented the culmination of Dauzat's extensive work as Director of the Institute of Phonetics at the University of Paris. It provided an important forum for bringing together scholars interested in onomastic research, encouraging the exchange of ideas and methodological approaches. It also inaugurated a tradition of international conferences that continued with subsequent meetings in Paris (1947) and Brussels (1948), eventually becoming a well-established scholarly tradition that persists to the present day. Through these successive gatherings, the discipline of onomastics gradually consolidated its theoretical foundations, strengthened its methodological framework, refined its analytical tools, and developed the specialized terminology that now defines it as a distinct academic field.³⁰

These names may appear, at first glance, to denote nothing more than ordinary terms referring to elements of the natural world—such as water, animals, plants, or physical landforms. In reality, however, they function as identity markers attached to the places they designate and constitute invaluable resources for linguists and specialists engaged in the emerging field of verbal archaeology (*archéologie verbale*)³¹, a discipline

²⁶ François Delaborde, «Auguste Longnon, Les Noms de lieu de France; leurs origine, leurs signification, leurs transformation, publié par Paul Marichal et Léon Miro» .In : journal des savants .19e année, Mai-juin 1921, pp.131-133.

²⁷ Auguste Longnon, Les Noms de lieu de la France; leur origine, leur signification, leurs transformations, paris, librairie ancienne honoré champion, 1920 .

²⁸ Albert Dauzat, Les Noms de lieux: origine et évolution, villes et villages, pays, cours d'eau, montagnes, lieux-dits, librairie Delagrave, paris, 1926.

²⁹ congrès de toponymie et d'anthroponymie .In : Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes, 1938, tome 99, p. 429.

³⁰ Albert Dauzat, Dictionnaire étymologique des noms de famille et prénom de France, paris, larousse, 1951

³¹ Ikherbane, Mohand Akli. "Place Names in the Guelma Region during Antiquity." In Names and Naming: Place Names, Tribal Names, and Personal Names in Algeria. Oran: Research Center for Social and Cultural Anthropology, 2005, pp. 17–18.

capable of producing remarkable and often unexpected discoveries. In his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Lyon, entitled *Toponymy and Territory in Algeria*³², Ibrahim Atoui emphasizes the importance of toponymy in reconstructing the movements and migrations of ancient peoples and demonstrates how place names preserve answers to fundamental questions about the past. Toponymic evidence can contribute to the reconstruction of ancient cultures, shedding light on their political organization, the mineral resources they exploited, and even their distinctive dietary practices. Yet the ambitions of onomastic research extend well beyond these objectives. Proper names also preserve the collective memory of societies and provide tangible evidence of the historical rootedness of the original inhabitants of a territory. In doing so, they reinforce both individual and collective senses of historical and cultural belonging³³, while fostering appreciation of a shared cultural heritage. Moreover, they enable researchers to reconstruct patterns of human settlement and forms of territorial occupation, offering valuable evidence for tracing environmental transformations and the evolving relationship between human communities and their geographical surroundings³⁴. Ultimately, the study of names may reveal the deeper structures of collective mentality and the extent to which social groups have been shaped by their material environment and ideological systems in defining relationships both within the community itself and with neighboring communities.³⁵

Onomastic Studies in Historical Research in Algeria

It is difficult to speak of the existence of an independent linguistic or historical scholarly tradition in Algeria during the period of French colonial rule. The colonial administration relied on coercive measures to suppress any signs of intellectual or reformist activity, systematically obstructing numerous scientific and cultural initiatives that might have contributed to the intellectual emancipation of Algerian society. Efforts capable of fostering national consciousness and challenging the distorted historical narrative promoted by the colonial regime were deliberately curtailed. At the same time, research institutions and the colonial media apparatus were mobilized to serve imperial interests, functioning as instruments of domination and ideological control. Scholarly production was frequently employed to legitimize colonial claims to the territory, while portraying the colonial enterprise as a civilizing mission driven by supposedly noble objectives and humanitarian ideals.

French historical scholarship on Algeria was expressed through a wide range of linguistic, historical, and archaeological studies. The earliest of these works emerged within the framework of French Orientalist scholarship, reflecting France's perception of Algeria as one of its overseas territories across the Mediterranean. Particular attention was devoted to the Roman period, which occupied a central place in colonial historiography. Emphasizing Roman history as the starting point of civilization in North Africa, together with the revival of Roman place names and the identification of ancient centers of settlement, was not merely an academic undertaking. Rather, many of these efforts served implicit ideological objectives, seeking to promote the alleged cultural superiority and historical precedence of the European presence in the region. Such interpretations formed part of a broader colonial discourse intended to legitimize foreign domination and provide historical justification for colonial occupation.

It is true that these studies contributed significantly to uncovering important aspects of Algeria's³⁶ past and brought to light valuable bodies of historical knowledge. Nevertheless, many of them were far from methodologically neutral in their interpretation of historical issues. They placed particular emphasis on highlighting the ethnic composition of the population of Central Maghreb, focusing on dichotomies such as Berbers versus Arabs, Botr versus Barānis, and nomadism versus sedentarism. Within these debates, proper names constituted an essential body of evidence, since they preserve the cultural diversity that has

³² Atoui Brahim, *toponymie et espace en Algérie*, thèse de doctorat, (S/D) . M.Marc cote, université de provence (Aix Marseille 1), 1996, p.12

³³ Saad, Khadija. *Amazigh Toponymy: Names and Places in the Aurès*. Vol. 1. Biskra, Algeria: Anzar Publishing House, 2017, p. 7.

³⁴ Nasri, Abdelmalek. "Toponymy in the Islamic West: Methodological Questions." In *Toponymy in the Islamic West*, p. 62.

³⁵ Azayko, Ali Sidqi. *History of Morocco, or Possible Interpretations*, p. 11.

³⁶ For a discussion of this issue, see the first chapter of: Mohamed Bachir Chenniti, *The French School and the History of Ancient Algeria: Scientific Approaches and Ideological Underpinnings* In *Highlights on the Ancient History of Algeria*. Algiers: Dar al-Hikma, 2003.

historically characterized the region. Among the most influential contributions in this regard were the linguistic studies of the French scholar René Basset (1855–1924), whose extensive body of work includes two major publications: *Linguistic Geography of Algeria* and *Linguistic Atlas of the Berber Languages of Northern Algeria* (1936–1939).³⁷

In the mid-twentieth century, specifically in 1949, the French linguist (A. Pellegrin), a member of the Linguistic Society of Paris, published a study entitled *Essai sur les noms de lieux d'Algérie et de Tunisie: étymologie, signification* (*Essay on the Place Names of Algeria and Tunisia: Etymology and Meaning*). According to Ibrahim Atoui³⁸, this work represents the first serious Western study devoted to the toponymy of Algeria and North Africa. In this publication, Pellegrin examined the linguistic origins and semantic meanings of a number of Algerian place names while emphasizing the remarkable linguistic diversity reflected in the country's toponymic heritage. He argued that Algerian place names preserve successive linguistic strata inherited from the Phoenician, Latin, Libyan (Ancient Berber), Arabic, and other languages that have shaped the region throughout its history.³⁹

Following Algeria's independence, scientific research gradually regained momentum, and scholarly attention increasingly turned toward rewriting the country's history in an effort to free it from the intellectual dominance of the French historical school. A new generation of Algerian historians produced alternative interpretations that challenged many colonial narratives. At the same time, the state's policy of Arabization led to a growing emphasis on the Arab component in post-independence historical writing. Nevertheless, onomastics and toponymy remained largely outside the mainstream of academic research and attracted only limited attention from scholars. This relative neglect can be attributed both to the novelty of these disciplines and to their highly interdisciplinary nature, which requires familiarity with complex and interconnected fields of knowledge, making research particularly demanding in terms of time, effort, and methodological expertise. It also reflected a limited awareness of the broader scholarly significance of onomastic research across different disciplines.⁴⁰

Among the few Algerian intellectuals who recognized the importance of this field was Mostefa Lacheraf, who devoted one of his works to the subject under the title *Des noms et des lieux* (*Names and Places*). In the third chapter of this book, he examined a number of male and female personal names alongside the names of cities and places in Algeria, drawing attention to the cultural meanings, social dimensions, and identity-related connotations embedded in proper names.⁴¹

Interest in the study of proper names has grown steadily since the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly following the publication of several important works on toponymy in Tunisia and Morocco. Among the most influential is the work of Mohamed Hassan, *The Historical Geography of Ifriqiya*, in which the first chapter introduces the concept of toponymy or geographical naming as one of the auxiliary tools available to the historian⁴². Hassan emphasizes its importance for investigating historical questions related to cultural continuity across successive historical periods in Ifriqiya. In Morocco, the field has likewise benefited from significant contributions, including the studies of Mohamed Hammam on Amazigh names in Islamic history, as well as the collaborative work edited by Mohamed El Baraka and other Moroccan

³⁷ Souad bouhadjar, *Approche Sociolinguistique des Noms des Lieux en Algérie Cas de la toponymie de Boussemghoun*, Thèse de doctorat en Dialectologie, s/d, Ghitri Sidi Mohamed, Université Abou Bekr Belkaid Tlemcen ,2016, p. 37

³⁸ Atoui Brahim, *toponymie et espace en Algérie*, pp. 5-6.

³⁹ A.pellegrin, *Essai sur les nom de lieux D'Algérie et de Tunisie, étymologie, signification*, Tunis, éditions S.A.P.I, 1949.

⁴⁰ Saad, Khadija. *Amazigh Toponymy: Names and Places in the Aurès*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Mostefa lacheraf, *des noms et des lieux mémoire d'une Algérie oubliée*, Alger, CSBAH éditions, 1998, pp. 145-170 .

⁴² Hassan, Mohamed. *The Historical Geography of Ifriqiya from the First to the Ninth Century AH: Studies in the History of Places, Routes, and Territories*. Libya: United New Book House, 2003.

scholars, published under the title *Toponymy in the Islamic West, or the Standardization of Geographical Names: Introductions to Understanding, Methodology, and Relationships*.⁴³

This collective volume brings together a wide range of studies devoted to the practical application of toponymic methods and the analytical approaches employed in the study of names, thereby expanding the scholarly ambitions and research potential of this discipline. In Algeria, interest in onomastic studies has likewise increased, particularly through linguistic research produced by research centers, master's and doctoral theses, and independent scholarly initiatives such as toponymic dictionaries, journal articles, and papers presented at national and international conferences. This development has been further encouraged by studies highlighting the Amazigh component as an integral element of Algerian cultural heritage following the constitutional recognition of Amazigh as a national language and the establishment of the High Commission for Amazighity to promote, develop, and revitalize the language. Consequently, scholars have increasingly recognized that excluding the Berber language as a historical source deprives historical research of an essential body of evidence possessing its own distinctive value for understanding the history of the Maghreb. Indeed, the historical geography of Morocco cannot be properly interpreted through rigorous scientific analysis without reference to the maghreb Berber lexicon.⁴⁴

The Research Center for Social and Cultural Anthropology (CRASC) is among the leading institutions in Algeria devoted to the study of proper names and place names through its numerous scholarly publications. Among its most significant contributions is the *General Bibliographic Catalogue of Algerian Place and Personal Names*, in which the volume's editor, Farid Ben Ramdane, together with his research team, compiled an extensive bibliography of books, articles, and academic theses dealing with onomastic studies. The Center has also produced several important collective volumes, including *Names and Naming: Place Names, Tribal Names, and Personal Names in Algeria* and *Maghrebi Proper Names: People, Settlements, Landforms, and Water*, the latter bringing together a diverse collection of contributions in both Arabic and French. Collectively, these publications address a wide range of topics devoted to the study of names in both their toponymic and anthroponymic dimensions.⁴⁵

At the university level, a number of important individual contributions have also emerged from Algerian academics and researchers, particularly in the field of toponymic lexicography. Among these are Fodil Cheriguen's study, *Toponymie algérienne des lieux habités (Algerian Toponymy of Inhabited Places)*, and the substantial work of Mohamed Akli Haddadou⁴⁶, who compiled the *Dictionnaire toponymique et historique de l'Algérie (Toponymic and Historical Dictionary of Algeria)*⁴⁷. This comprehensive dictionary brings together a vast corpus of Algerian place names and provides their toponymic interpretations. Haddadou also produced another reference work compiling Arabic and Berber lexical elements that constitute the foundation of Algerian toponymy. These publications gave new impetus to the study of toponymy in particular and onomastics in general. Their impact was subsequently reflected in the organization of several national and international conferences, including the National Symposium on Toponymy held in Jijel, whose proceedings were published under the title *De la toponymie algérienne: du local au national (Algerian Toponymy: From the Local to the National)*.⁴⁸

These contributions encouraged further engagement with both toponymic and anthroponymic studies in Algeria, leading to the publication of additional research devoted to the study of names. Among these is

⁴³ Hammam, Mohamed, et al. *Amazigh Terminology in the History and Civilization of Morocco*. Rabat: Publications of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture, New Knowledge Press, 2006.

⁴⁴ Al-Qasimi, Hashim Al-Alawi. *The Society of al-Maghrib al-Aqsā up to the Mid-Fourth Century AH / Mid-Tenth Century CE*. Vol. 1. Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Ben Ramdane, Farid, et al. *Algerian Place and Personal Names: A General Bibliographic Catalogue*. Oran: Research Center for Social and Cultural Anthropology (CRASC), 2005.

⁴⁶ Mohand-Akli Haddadou, *Dictionnaire toponymique et historique de l'Algérie*, Tizi – Ouzou, Algérie, Achab, 2012.

⁴⁷ Mohand –Akli Haddadou, *Glossaire des termes arabes et berbères entrant dans la toponymie Algérienne*, Alger, ENAG éditions, 2011.

⁴⁸ The symposium was held in Jijel from 25 to 27 July 2015 in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture. Its proceedings were published in 2016 under the title: *Actes du colloque national: De la toponymie algérienne, du local au national (25–27 July 2015)*. Algiers: ENAG, 2016.

Khadija Saad's work on Amazigh toponymy in the Aurès, in which she compiled the names of geographical features throughout the Aurès region and attempted to explain their meanings. This first volume was conceived as the initial stage of a broader project intended to be expanded in subsequent volumes to encompass the toponymy of Algeria and, ultimately, the wider Maghreb.⁴⁹

Interest in onomastic studies has also become increasingly evident within academic research institutions through numerous master's and doctoral theses produced in departments of history and linguistics. Among the most notable is the doctoral dissertation by Habib Hadj Ahmed⁵⁰ in the field of folk literature, entitled *Amazigh Place Names in the Tlemcen Region: A Toponymic Study*. Another significant contribution is the doctoral thesis submitted to the Department of History at the University of Tlemcen by Fatima al-Zahra Nejraoui⁵¹, entitled *The Etymological Study of the Names of Inhabited Places in the Tlemcen Region*. In addition, several dissertations have been written in foreign languages, including Souad Bouhajar's doctoral thesis, *Approche sociolinguistique des noms des lieux en Algérie (A Sociolinguistic Approach to Place Names in Algeria)*. With regard to anthroponymy, particular mention should be made of Fatiha Ramdani's study on the factors influencing the selection of personal names in Algerian society, submitted as a master's thesis in anthropology at the University of Constantine.⁵²

Conclusion

The onomastic research method constitutes a new methodological approach designed to open unexplored fields of inquiry and to renew the tools of historical investigation within the broader framework of historical research. The findings presented in this study are based on the evidentiary value of onomastic data and may be summarized as follows.

The principal contribution of onomastic research lies in its ability to reopen historical questions that have remained unresolved by providing new avenues for interpretation. Its analytical framework relies fundamentally on advances in linguistics, philology, and language studies, disciplines whose methodological developments have the potential to make substantial contributions to historical scholarship across different periods and regions. Nevertheless, research in onomastics faces numerous methodological challenges that constitute genuine obstacles to the study of names. Among the most significant is the absence of contemporary or near-contemporary written documentation reflecting the language in use at the time when names were created. Other difficulties relate to the rigorous requirements of historical source criticism, which demands meticulous attention to linguistic forms and orthographic variants in order to avoid textual corruption, erroneous interpretations, and overly speculative conclusions.

Despite several serious contributions made by Algerian scholars and researchers, onomastic studies in Algeria have not yet reached the level of development achieved by the French scholarly tradition in this field. The study of proper names has remained largely outside the mainstream of academic research and has received only limited attention from both historians and linguists. This situation can be explained by the relative novelty of the discipline, its highly interdisciplinary and methodologically demanding nature, and the considerable investment of time and expertise required to conduct onomastic research. It also reflects a continuing lack of awareness of the important contribution that onomastic studies can make to historical, linguistic, archaeological, and cultural research.

⁴⁹ Saad, Khadija. *Amazigh Toponymy: Names and Places in the Aurès*. Vol. 1, 2017.

⁵⁰ Hadj Ahmed, Habib. *Amazigh Place Names in the Tlemcen Region: A Toponymic Study*. PhD diss., supervised by Abdelhak Zerrouh. University of Tlemcen, 2013.

⁵¹ Souad bouhadjar, *Approche Sociolinguistique des Noms des Lieux en Algérie Cas de la toponymie de Boussemghoun*, 2016.

⁵² Ramdani, Fatiha. *Factors Influencing the Selection of Personal Names in Algerian Society*. 2013.

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