

# The Requisite to Preserve an Architectural and Spiritual Ottoman Legacy in a Decay, the Case of the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani

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## Abstract

One of Constantine's few remaining religious and cultural Ottoman vestiges is the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani where Salah Bey (bey of the Beylik of Constantine), his family, and relatives are all laid to rest there. This institution has not been spared from dilapidation and vandalism, and any attempt to restore its spiritual glow and previous radiance would be doomed to failure unless a range of endogenous and exogenous aspects pertinent to it and its immediate surroundings are taken into account. This study employs a two-tiered historical method. It depends mostly on colonial and post-colonial records about the heritage management of Islamic religious structures and the aforementioned Medersa. It is also dependent on our own field surveys to better establish the factors and the fundamental causes that contributed to the material and spiritual degradation of this monument. Knowing that our primary goal is to regain its significance as a revealing component of Constantine's legacy, this essay aims to alert all organisms concerned about its future so that they can take action to restore the value of this ancestral heritage. Given the building's fragility, a restoration in its favor is more than required; as a result, its functional and cultural reconstruction must be completed thoroughly and competently.

**Keywords:** Medersa, preservation, legacy, decay, ottoman style.

## INTRODUCTION

Since their inception in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Medersa have grown in importance, both architecturally and functionally (Golvin, 1951). Their missions in Algeria have grown throughout time to include the teaching of the Qur'an, the Arabic language and even the sciences (Guechi, 2005; Kaddache, 1998). Some of these colleges were able to provide Constantine with more justifications for the city's popularity and repute as a city of wisdom and academics (Mercier, 1903; Berthier, 1961; Guechi, 2004; Geangaud, 2008). This is the situation with Sidi El Kettani's Medersa. More than a religious and cultural landmark, this Medersa and its adjoining mosque were the cornerstones of Constantine's urban organization (Feraud, 1968; Guechi, 2005, Pagand, 1989). This Medersa is an exemplary model of this type of building that has been subtly designed to preserve a sublime and serene interior beauty within a place of great urban and historical value (Feraud, 1968). It was built in a pure and unadorned Ottoman style following an architectural design that perfectly matches its functional status (Dogan, 1981; Vayssettes, 1867; Janier, 2010).

Indeed, the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani is one of the most important architectural works completed during the Ottoman Empire, with an unmistakable influence on the arrangement of Constantine's downtown (Essahnouni, 1989). It is a living testament to Salah Bey's contribution to the urban orientation of old Cirta (Bouchareb, 2006), as well as one of the few religious and cultural sites in Constantine that still maintains the Ottoman mark (Ben Bella, 2008; Dahdouh, 2009). And this despite the numerous changes made by the French colonial authority and the long years of abandonment it has endured. Without ignoring its significance in the intellectual and militant growth of a significant portion of the Constantinian elite, this Medersa bears the core of its historicity (Essahnouni, 1989). It is the last resting place of Salah Bey, one of the most well-known icons of the Ottoman presence in Algeria, as well as his wife, daughter, and several of his relatives (figure 1). This is an important topic to raise since, in addition to its architectural and artistic worth, the site bears witness to a rich history of events that have shaped the whole region of Constantine.



**Figure 1.** Necropolis of Salah bey and his family (Authors, 2019)

Although its name is firmly associated with Constantine's contemporary history (Bouchareb, 2006, Benidir, 1989), this institution has not been spared from dilapidation and vandalism. Its present situation indicates a profound desolation that no longer reflects the status and rank it previously possessed. Since the late 1990s, the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani has been utilized urgently to house student interns of "Dar El Imam". It has been closed for seven years in a row. This conversion into a dormitory is probably one of the most visible evidence of the deterioration or even devaluation of one of the last Ottoman-era cultural and religious structures (Vayssettes, 1968). But what are the causes of this situation? And what are the tools and tactics that will be put in place to return this Medersa to its proper value? These are the primary questions at the center of this study.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

To adequately respond to these questions, we must first dig deeper and highlight the historical context in which this Medersa was built, the various situations it faced, its cultural, scholastic, and religious role, as well as its marginalization by the colonial administration and structural degradation. The purpose of this essay is to uncover the basic causes and circumstances that contributed to the material and spiritual degradation of this monument notwithstanding the repair work done between 2001 and 2003. To do this, we arranged our research as follows: First, we present our Medersa, its creation date, its implantation, its many applications over time, and the various alterations it has undergone since its founding. Second, we examine all of the causes that have contributed to its architectural, functional, urban, and social decline. To do this we rely mainly on the colonial and post-colonial archives pertaining to the heritage management of Islamic religious buildings in general and the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani in particular (books, periodicals, maps, research reports, newspapers, ...). We did our own field assessments to more properly determine the variables contributing to the deterioration of this monument. By taking a two-level historical approach, we can identify all of the material and spiritual issues associated with this historic site, whose religious and intellectual contributions have marked several Algerians whose names are well inscribed on the register of nationalism and the fight against colonialism (Bennabi, 1990).

This attempt to reinvent the "atmosphere" that has prevailed for decades is not limited to revisiting the history of a Medersa that has made its time, but rather to alert all organisms (including public) concerned about its future so that they can act to restore the value of an ancestral heritage worn out by time and indifference. Through this research we would like to stimulate the attention of our local decision-makers to the significance of the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani as a cultural site par excellence containing a portion of Constantine's memory. Regaining its influence as well as its status as a revealing piece of Constantine's legacy is our major goal. Considering the fragility of this building, a restoration in its favor is more than essential, thus its functional and cultic restructuring must be carried out in a methodical and professional manner.

## PRESENTATION OF SIDI EL KETTANI'S MEDERSA

### The Medersa's location

According to Salah Bey's registers that we have consulted, the construction of this Medersa have begun before 1775. As a result, the completion of the works took place in 1190. The Medersa, which was built on ground adjacent to the Sidi El Kettani mosque, was given the same name since the holy man is buried on the site of its construction. The Medersa is located in the northern portion of the medina, below the Kasbah and next to the souk Al Asr. Ben Mouffok Street borders the Medersa on the west, while Bouhali Laid Street borders it on the southeast (Figure 2). This structure is situated on a location that is rich in Muslim, Jewish, and Christian cultural symbols, as reflected by the many institutional and cultural structures that surround it: mosques, consistory, old court...

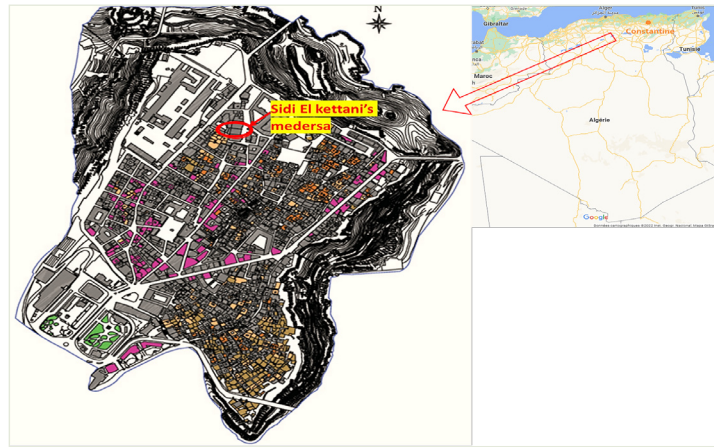


Figure 2. location of Sidi El kettani's Medersa (Authors, 2022)

### Various Uses of the Medersa Throughout History

#### *During Ottoman Epoch*

Since its inception, the Medersa Sidi El Kettani has continued to flourish as a result of the role it has played in Constantine's society (figure 3). Its fame has quickly spread beyond the country's borders. It quickly became a true center for the transmission of knowledge and theological sciences, and it had a significant impact on the formation of a new elite that would not fail to affect the course of events later on. This Medersa had acquired a certain prominence as a result of the quality of its instruction and its organizational structure, which had echoed till the Middle east. The Medersa and the mosque Sidi El Kettani, made famous for a variety of reasons, have substantially contributed to the establishment of Constantine's reputation as a city of "knowledge and academics" (Bouchareb, 2006; Benidir, 1989; Mazri-Benarioua, 2017). An image that has not been usurped in light of the progress of Constantinian society at the time, which was distinguished by a huge cultural activity (Badjadja, 2008). The Medersa was organized according to a strict system and internal norms formed by Salah Bey himself in 1780 (Geangaud, 2008). It had a huge room for courses and prayer, as well as five rooms, one for the instructor and the other four for the pupils who studied there. There was also another chamber that served as an ablution facility (Mercier, 1903). The Medersa was bestowed with an administration consisting of one agent in charge of the budget (Oukil) and another in charge of upkeep and protection (Chaouch). These personnel were paid a set pay based on the sales of wakf items.



Figure 3 . Medersa of Sidi El kettani before restoration's operations (Sourdeval's portrait, 1857).



The Medersa's educational program was concentrated on learning the Koran and its interpretation, the Sunna (tradition of the prophet), the fiqh (jurisprudence), theology, and Arabic grammar. The classes were scheduled throughout the day, with three sessions each day. The first session begins after morning prayer (Sobh), the second after mid-day prayer (Dohr) and finishes before afternoon prayer (Asr), and the third till the end of the day prayer by twilight (Maghreb). In addition to twice daily Quran reading and recitation, the pupils were subjected to a revision of "the index of the good," a hallmark book of the Maliki ideology, every Thursday and Friday. Some subjects, such as hadith (narrations about the Prophet's life and traditions), were arranged according to a precise calendar that included Rajab, Sha'ban, and Ramadhan, the three months of the Hegira. The Medersa exclusively accepted single pupils, whether from urban or rural locations. The latter were subject to severe internal regulations that each member was supposed to follow religiously or face punishment up to and including expulsion from the Medersa. Among the issues mentioned, we shall use the following as an example:

- It was highly banned to spend the night outside the Medersa unless there was a compelling reason.
- Day students and civil workers were not permitted to spend the night inside the Medersa.
- Any student who spends 10 years in the Medersa without raising his level is permanently expelled.
- The yearly vacation lasts 20 to 30 days. If a student does not return to the Medersa within the specified time frame, he will be expelled unless there is a valid reason.
- Any student whose behavior is harmful to the community will be warned. The student is automatically expelled after the third warning.

We can tell from these internal laws that Salah Bey was quite strict about order and discipline. These factors were critical to the proper operation of a Medersa that aspired to be a credible institution producing a really educated and enlightened elite.

### ***During Colonial Epoch***

On October 13, 1837, just after Constantine was captured, the colonial administration did not waste time in cementing the position of the Medersa by annexing it to the French assets (Essahnouni, 1989). Furthermore, all educational and cultural activities were suspended due to a legal-administrative squabble. Thirteen years later, the colonial government decided to establish six bilingual Franco-Arab schools in six towns including Constantine. On September 30, 1850, the Medersa Sidi El Kettani was revived in this context in order to train Algerian administrative agents who would be called upon to serve the French state. To achieve this purpose, French and Algerian professors were hired. During this time, and until Algeria's independence, the Medersa was administered by the secular French state's laws (figure 4).



**Figure 4 .** Medersa of Sidi El Kattani during the French colonial epoch (archives of Constantine)

### ***During the National Liberation Struggle***

The colonial authority tried to give its occupation a civilizing image by building a few schools around the country and granting them secular status, as asserted in numerous speeches. The truth, however, was completely different. Another

goal was veiled under the guise of presenting the appearance that France was devoted to providing Algerian youngsters with an education worthy of the name. The true goal was to generate ideal conditions for the creation of a category of Algerians with no memory and entire commitment to the colonial state. Although this eradication campaign provided France with scores of submissive local agents, it had little effect on this Medersa's loyalty to Islamic beliefs. For these principles were true manifestations of a national conscience articulated by numerous students who did not hesitate to become renowned fighters for Algerian independence. The Medersa Sidi El Kettani was an unending source of "moudjahidine" (fighters) who fought in the ranks of the National Liberation Army. Almost all of these former students have worked tirelessly to supervise the armed revolution's core militants.

### **Post-Independence Epoch**

Following Algeria's independence, the Medersa took on a variety of roles. Between 1962 and 1965, it was classified as an institution. Then it served as an elementary school until 1983, when it was converted to a high school. Unfortunately, the Medersa was soon the subject of a series of imprudent actions that exacerbated its "descent into hell," until it became a vulgar local linked with the People's Communal Assembly of Constantine's service of cleanliness. It was converted into a transit hub where roughly twenty families sought sanctuary. It was then decommissioned until 2011, when it was annexed to the previous court to give birth the national institute of specialized training of entities responsible for religious affairs management. It is being utilized as an accommodation center for the institute's trainee females.

## **DIFFERENT MEDERSA RESTORATION OPERATIONS**

### **Under the Reign of Napoleon Iii**

During Napoleon III's reign, the Medersa was the focus of a restoration operation. He had, in fact, added a floor before the reopening. The Medersa had originally a first level, as seen in Sourdeval's 1875 portrait (figure 5a). The installation of a floor altered its exterior physiognomy, which is now distinguished by a blend of two distinct styles: Ottoman and neo-classical (figure 5c). The superimposition of historical images and modern pictures enabled us to see the alterations that happened in the necropolis, where columns were replaced with pillars. The identical columns were discovered in the Medersa's patio (figure 5b).



**Figure 5.** different changes occurred during napoleon's reign (A: Sourdeval's 1875 portrait; B&C: authors 2021)

### **The 2001-2003 Restoration**

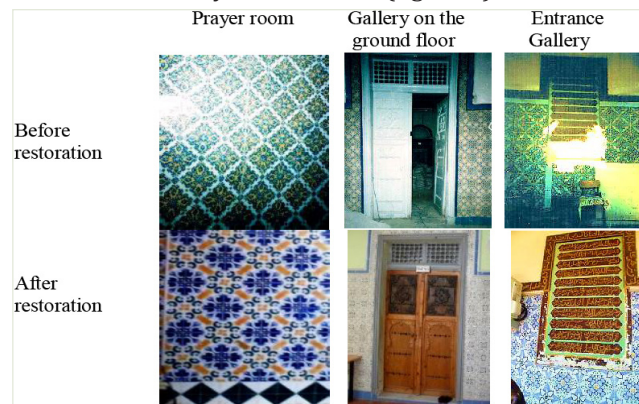
It took 39 years after independence for the public authorities to pay notice to the deteriorating status of this historical landmark (figure 6), as a result, the Medersa was the subject of a restoration project to rebuild it as part of a beautifying plan that also included the former court that adjoined it. This project began in 2001 and was finished in 2003.

Although several changes have been made, such as structural work, the resumption of false ceilings and wooden floors, the coating of floors and walls, wall panelling, carpentry, heating and plumbing, electricity, and so on, the restoration operation has not altered the Medersa's original structure (composed of a first floor and a floor) or its original functional configuration (formed by The patio and the classroom). Nonetheless, the following components saw the most notable changes:



**Figure 6.** The state of the Medersa before to renovation (Direction of construction & urbanism, 2002)

**Ceramic tiling:** Although the Medersa had preserved a large portion of the Ottoman period ceramic tiles until the day the restoration project was launched, it is regrettable to note that several parts have been renewed (particularly in the entrance gallery, prayer room, and galleries overlooking the patio) and are not identical to the original designs. Many of the ancient tiles were in good shape and might have been rescued instead of being replaced in a hurry, as indicated in the images taken before the restoration. On the other hand, we will not overlook some whimsical modifications that have altered the originality of some parts of the building, such as the addition of tiles on the walls overlooking the upper floor patio and the cursive, when these walls and the cursive were not previously provided with these elements. During our investigation, we were able to get some information concerning the genuine ceramic tiles that were taken. And it is for this reason that they have been replaced by newer ones. Without any pretension or judgment on our side, the event elucidates the degree of carelessness sustained by this Medersa (figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Ceramic tile modifications before (Archives) and following restoration (Authors, 2021)

**Columns and frames added:** According to our research, twelve columns bearing the framework that covers the four galleries on the top level were added to the Medersa 's constructions (figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Columns and framework erected to Sidi El Kettani's Medersa (Authors, 2021)



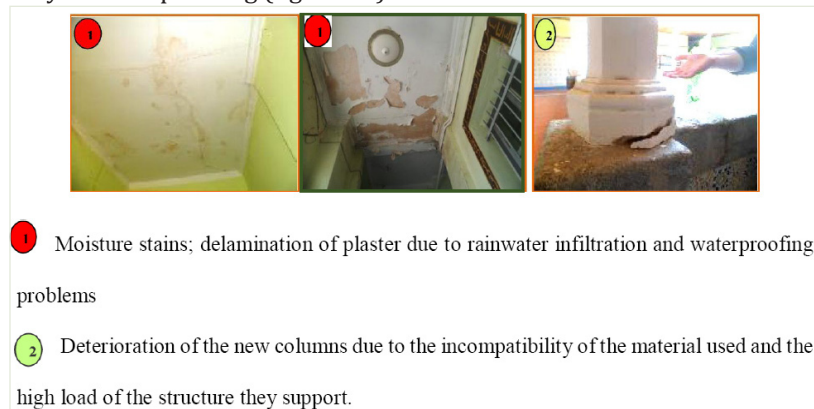
## AFTER-RESTORATION DEGRADATION OF THE MEDERSA

Less than a decade after its repair, the Medersa is once again in a critical situation. Our field assessments enabled us to understand the numerous disorders that exist at the level of the ground floor, the first floor, and the facade. Concerning the ground level, the detected concerns include the degradation of the floor of the necropolis's second chamber, many fractures, humidity stains, the detachment of the plaster on several walls, and the detachment of ceramic tiles, even those that were recently put (figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Disorders at the first floor (Authors, 2021)

As a result, the collapse of a portion of the floor caused significant damage to the second chamber of the necropolis, where Aisha, Salah Bey's wife, is buried. Some of the ceramic tiles covering her tomb were destroyed by the collision and became irrecoverable debris. It is worth noting that, prior to the fall of the floor, a request for assistance was made to Constantine's Directorate of Housing and Public Equipment, but no action was done to prevent the damage. The primary issues on the first floor are: degradation of the new columns owing to incompatibility of the material chosen and the high load of the framework that they support, a plethora of moisture stains, plaster separation due to rainfall penetration, and the difficulty of waterproofing (figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Disorders at the 1st floor (Authors, 2021)

The facade, which serves as the building's vitrine, has not been spared from deterioration since it has been entirely denatured by the anarchic installation of air conditioners and its windows have been obstructed. A plethora of filth and moisture stains have also contributed to its deterioration by increasing plaster separation. We also see that the Medersa's garden is neglected, and that rust has eaten away at the gate (figure 11).



**Figure 11.** some disorders at the façade of the Medersa (Authors, 2021)

## **FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE MEDERSA'S DETERIORATION**

Numerous reasons have expedited the degradation of Sidi El Kettani's Medersa, in contrast to several other structures that surround it. The detrimental impact on this infrastructure over time has resulted in the removal of its aura and influence of yesteryear. Following multiple trips to the study location and thorough research on the issue, we have summarized them below:

### **Its Rivalry by the Colonial Medersa**

Until the eve of French colonialism, the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani had a dominant position in the dissemination of knowledge and Islamic sciences (Bennabi, 1990). Its renown, which was founded mostly on the quality of its instruction, had already spread beyond the region's borders. It is with the aim of limiting the influence of this Medersa that the French colonists decided to build another one whose orientation was controlled entirely by the French administration. The colonial Medersa, designed and built by French architects and located on the present Larbi Ben M'hidi street in Constantine (figure 12), was inaugurated in 1909. It fully encapsulated the colonial strategy of recovery, which aimed to control Algerian cultural and spiritual values within the framework of pacific dominance. It profited from the material and political assistance of the colonial government, which resolved to rearrange the teaching of the Arabic language in accordance with the colonial fact from that point forward. In exchange, Sidi El Kettani's Medersa was essentially ignored.



**Figure 12.** proximity of the colonial Medersa to the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani (Authors, 2021)

Malek Ben Nabi, an acclaimed thinker who lived in Constantine at this era, remembered the intentional fall of the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani to the advantage of the colonial Medersa intended for strategic goals of control in his book "Memories of a Witness of the Century" (1990). Following in the footsteps of the colonial Medersa of Tlemcen and Algiers, Constantine's Medersa was established as a true institution at a time when the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani was besieged by the colonist. As paradoxical as it may appear, the colonial Medersa was promoted even after independence, despite serving as a training institution for auxiliaries working for the colonial government. It was not only preserved as a cultural relic, but it was also converted into an annex of Constantine's Mentouri University, while the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani kept closed.

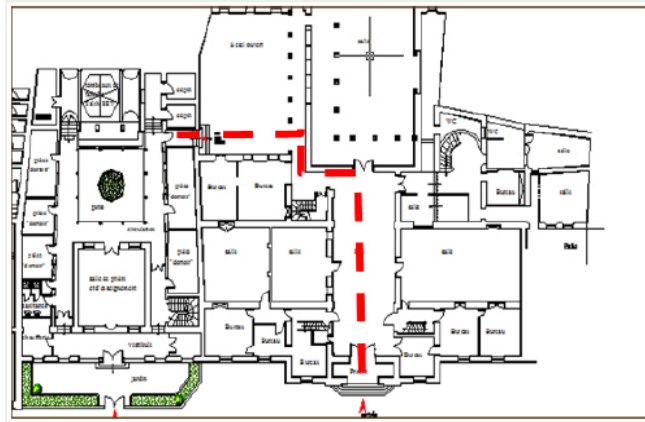
### **Its Restoration between 2001 and 2003**

The restoration carried out between 2001 and 2003 spared the Medersa from an announced degradation and an unpleasant fate, but the results did not live up to the expectations. Unfortunately, this operation caused alterations that have harmed the authenticity of various components of this architecturally significant landmark and urban area that has withstood the test of time. However, the necropolis is the sole place that has retained its individuality.

### **The diversion from its main entrance**

Because the main entrance to the Medersa has been "condemned" for reasons that are not always evident, any lawfully permitted visitor must take a long detour from the ancient court via a genuine maze (figure 13). By entering through this secondary entrance, the visitor is robbed of the spiritual environment that has already manifested in the main entry gallery with its calligraphic embellishments. Deprived of its original reception space, the Medersa loses one of its most crucial components





**Figure 13.** Current access to Sidi El Kettani's Medersa (Authors, 2021)

### **Deterioration of its Immediate Surroundings**

The fact that the Medersa is surrounded by ancient and damaged structures has largely contributed to its spiritual image deterioration (Figure 14). One of the causes of its marginalization was the degradation of the living environment in its adjacent periphery.



**Figure 14.** local environment surrounding the Medersa (Authors, 2021)

Despite the considerable economic activity contained in these locations, the Medersa has found itself imprisoned in the center of a decaying urban environment. This milieu, controlled by the chaotic development of commercial stalls, continues to draw thousands of people every day. Similarly, its closeness to Souk El Asr has certainly contributed to its isolation, but the market's expansion has completely robbed the Medersa of a free intermediary area. Furthermore, the chaos in the souk and the noise deprive it of a tranquil and quiet setting. In the end, no one can disagree that preserving the brightness of the Medersa in such a "scene," where waste is laid out in the open air in front of decaying buildings and badly kept stores, is exceedingly difficult. All of these things are at the root of this place's "desecration" and loss of holiness.

### **The Change of its Original Function**

According to numerous experts, the Medersa's most fitting function should be cultural and religious (Laaradj, 2001; Essahnouni, 1989). Nonetheless, decision-makers justified the conversion of this facility into a housing complex meant to house girls' trainees seeking instruction in religious disciplines as a need necessitated by the circumstances. Isn't the usage of this Medersa as a simple dormitory a hasty choice that selected an easy answer over an alternative that may restore its influence?

### **Its Absence from Collective Memory**

Due to a lack of careful care that takes into consideration the historical vocation of this monument which have been closed for many years, the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani and its glorious past have ended up being forgotten. After conducting a brief survey with 30 persons from Constantine's population in November 2021, we discovered that a lot of the residents

are unaware about this Medersa as well as its cultural contributions, and only a few select initiates are aware of this monument's illustrious past:

- The Medersa is highly recognized among the elderly, some of whom having studied there and others who have relatives who have completed their education there. These folks all told us that the Medersa remained open during the colonial period and that anyone who wished to pray could easily do so.
- The majority of individuals who are aware of the Medersa dwell or have lived in the city center, whereas the majority of those who are unaware of it live on the city's outskirts.
- Several interviewees are familiar with the Sidi El Kettani mosque but are unaware of the existence of a Medersa with the same name. Most persons interviewed confuse this Medersa with the colonial one, confirming that French colonization succeeded in erasing the history and splendour of this monument from common memory.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The status of the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani is more than serious. This cultural and architectural monument could not reclaim its impact or find its position as a revealing piece of the richness of the Constantinian history until it is restructured and revalued in a logical and professional manner, both functionally and culturally, without ignoring its fragility. Bringing this Medersa back from the brink of extinction is not a simple matter of rehabilitation or restoration, and it appears fair to recommend certain strategies for better management in its favor:

### **On an Architectural Scale**

A well-planned and painstakingly done restoration in exact line with the specifics of this structure will undoubtedly restore a significant portion of its lost radiance. To accomplish this aim, the persons in charge of this operation must completely resolve the following issues:

- before fixing the problem, determine the source of the fractures and their severity.
- restore the waterproofing of the roof.
- recreate the floor of the necropolis's second room with authentic materials
- restore the tombs that have deteriorated by repairing the ceramic tiles that are still in excellent condition and replacing the others with identical tiles.
- replace the ceramic tiles glued to the walls of the galleries surrounding the patio and the classroom with other tiles more in keeping with the original design.
- remove all elements added to the upper floor: the columns and the framework that did not exist prior to the 2001.
- restoration fixing faulty downspouts.
- remove air conditioners that distort the facade and, if required, replace them with a more discrete system.

### **On a Functional Level**

One of the best ways to give a religious architectural legacy a second "breath" is to equip it with a fresh practical usefulness that corresponds to its spiritual dimension (Dufour, 2009; Grondin, 2009). In this regard, the cases of the Al Amiriya Medersa in Yemen and the Holy Spirit Church in Quebec should be considered (Noppen et Morisset, 2005; Tania et Audy, 2008; Laurier et Louise, 2009). The multiple infrastructures of the Medersa of Sidi El Kettani predispose it to become an Islamic cultural space (Papadopoulo, 1988; Janine, 1976 ; Mozzati, 2003), bringing together a plethora of activities: a conference room, an exhibition space, a library and a section dedicated to the presentation of the Medersa and its history. The necropolis, on the other hand, must be preserved as a testament to an age that has a place not only in the history of the city, but also in the history of Algeria as a whole. The most important is to make this building an opened space to the public, because it is through the rate of attendance that the Medersa will regain its prestige within a society that is turning toward modernity while attempting to maintain its religious anchoring.

### **On a Socio-Cultural Scale**

The intellectual elite of Constantine and the local associative movements are also urged to become more active in order to restore the luster to this public institution (Essahnouni, 1989). Any desire to reclaim even a portion of its reputation

is subservient to the efforts that may be made by intellectuals and religious leaders committed to the preservation of this monument. Isn't the veneration of Sidi El Kettani's Medersa the right pretext for a twinning between Constantine, the city of Salah Bey's glory, and Izmir, his birthplace city? A cultural collaboration between the two cities has the potential to significantly contribute to the international recognition of this Medersa. Constantine's elite is also relied upon considerably to invest in large-scale safeguarding initiatives like as the modernization of Constantine (Salah-Salah, 2021). It is its responsibility to suggest initiatives for the preservation of the city's historical depth. Scholars, journalists, professors, etc. are therefore the first to be affected by the mediatization of the case of this Medersa as a historical heritage to conserve and promote. Which would allow Constantine to become a cultural tourism destination (Mazri-Benarioua, 2017).

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