

## **Why Rai: An Exploration of how Rai inspired great controversy in Algeria**

Rai is one of the most successful Algerian exports of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but in its home country Rai is as related to musical achievement as it is to death and conflict. Perhaps only a music genre in Western terms, to Algerians Rai is both social critique and entertainment. In this essay I will endeavour to map out the historical, social and religious background of Rai, and to recognize how the combination of a newly independent Algeria and the rise of fundamental Islam became problematic for the proliferation of Rai.

Algeria is situated in North Africa and shares borders with Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Mali, Mauritania and the Mediterranean Sea. Of Algeria's 32 million inhabitants, 90% live in the coastal areas bordering the Mediterranean<sup>1</sup>, mainly in the cities of Algiers, Constantine and Oran. Like many countries of the Mediterranean Algeria has a multi-faceted identity, its geographical local positions it as a Mediterranean, Arabian and African country with numerous influences. Its Arabic identity is perhaps most appropriate because as an Islamic republic Algeria follows the teachings of Islam like many other North African states and middle-eastern countries. However, Algeria is deeply influenced by its colonial past, only becoming independent from France in 1962. Spain is also very close and with the capital Algiers being a port city, trading influences are also great. Due south of the main population area is

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, in *Algeria*. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/algeria>>

the Sahara desert which separates Muslim North Africa from the rest of the continent, and so its African identity is perhaps not as key.

The aboriginal people of Algeria are the Berbers and they constitute 99% of the population of modern-day Algeria. During the 8<sup>th</sup> century the Berbers “adopted Islam *en masse*”<sup>2</sup> like much of the northern continent and not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century did Algeria experience any colonial interest. Spain was the first country to attempt an invasion and seeking help from and becoming part of the Ottoman Empire Algeria repelled this invasion. However they were again invaded by France in 1830 and eventually came under complete French control by the early 1900s. Algeria’s colonial position created great numbers of migrants from France, Italy, Spain and Malta, these migrants then moved to the coastal plains and occupied the best areas of the coastal cities. This led to much of the native population being uprooted from their homes and employments, a result of which was a native society who were poor and uneducated.

The colonial powers also:

“... Set about undermining traditional Muslim Algerian culture. By French law Muslims could not hold public meetings, carry firearms, or leave their homes or villages without permission. Legally, they were

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

French subjects, but to become French citizens, with full rights, they had to renounce Islamic law. Few did so."<sup>3</sup>

In Islam a Muslim society permanently subject to non-Muslim leadership is unacceptable. This idea carried great weight and added an important Islamic element to the resistance movement headed by the National Liberation Front's (FLN) push for independence in 1954. After eight years of fighting, Algeria succeeded in removing all Europeans and Algerian sympathisers, a tenth of the population in 1962.

Although independence was necessary for Algeria, I feel this event created for the Algerian government the issue that confronts many former colonies. How do you create a new social identity distinct from your past, while accepting that your colonial past will forever influence the society you now control? In answering this question the Algerian government had to decide how to balance their Islamic identity with a western identity, possibly generating conflict.

The ruling FLN president was Houari Boumédiène, and he promoted "a policy of "arabization" and made diverse attempts at national islamization."<sup>4</sup> In addition, the government asserted state control over religious activity for

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<sup>3</sup> Answers.com in *Islam in Algeria*.

<<http://www.answers.com/islam%20in%20algeria>>

<sup>4</sup> Schade-Poulsen, Marc, in *Men and Popular Music in Algeria*, 9.

the purpose of “national consolidation and political control.”<sup>5</sup> Other post-independence activities included adopting Friday as the national day of rest and introducing the 1984 Family Code whose principles were based on Islamic, or *Sharia*, law. As an Arab country, it was natural for Boumédiène and his successors to shape Algeria with Islam, and the FLN’s twenty-five year single-party socialist government proved fairly successful in combining Islam whilst accepting the western influence of the French.

However Boumédiène and his successors had militant rivals like Al Qiyam (meaning values) in the 1960s that “... called for a more dominant role for Islam in Algeria’s legal and political systems.”<sup>6</sup> The 1970s brought more Islamic militant groups to the fore and by the 1980s violence had started to spread, eventually resulting in governmental attempts to curb the Islamic movement. What the growing Islamic movement wanted was less of a distinction between state and religion; they desired religion, or Sharia law to dictate the state’s policies on most issues. Whereas the FLN continued to accept western influences, militant Islamists saw the West as a corrupting influence. The balance the FLN tried to create helped militant Islam as a form of opposition to thrive, and in combination with other social and economic factors lead to the downfall of the FLN’s current leader President Chedli Bendjedid in 1991.

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<sup>5</sup> Answers.com, in *Islam in Algeria*.  
<<http://www.answers.com/islam%20in%20algeria>>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

In addition, Marc Schade-Poulsen points out that:

“... Since independence, Algeria has been ruled by an authoritarian elite which has left little room for popular, democratic experiences and whose backbone has been the army.”<sup>7</sup>

So whereas the FLN were perhaps successful in allowing a pluralistic society, where Algerians could be Islamic and westernised, their power was based on the army and a single-party political system. Therefore there was not any politically based way for policy to change, for elected representatives to increase the Islamic nature of Algeria further.

The economics factors that led to the FLN’s failure involved the export of gas and oil, the base of Algeria’s economy. Schade-Poulson states that “the 1980s experienced a severe recession particularly after the fall of oil prices”<sup>8</sup> and that this caused the oil-reliant economy to come under great strain. To compound this Algeria experienced rapid growth in its population, from twelve million in 1966 to twenty-five million in 1989, and a fast rate of urbanisation with 50% of the population living in cities by 1987. The increase in population and urbanisation coupled with severe economics problems then furthered the housing shortage in 1994 with the twenty-seven million strong population living in accommodation of eight persons per home.

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<sup>7</sup> Schade-Poulson, Marc, in *Men and Popular Music in Algeria*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 7.

Such issues would have put great pressure on the government and so Algerians would have perhaps looked to Islam for the answer to their problems. Militant groups tended to preach of an Islamic utopia where the justice system would be moral and without corruption so this was possibly a way out of the country's problems.

The increased dissatisfaction in Algeria sparked off national protests, the culmination of which was 'Black October' in 1988 where demonstrations against President Bendjedid ended in violence, with the army firing and killing demonstrators. Perhaps related to the then current decline of communist Russia and the single-party state, Bendjedid's response was not a clamping down of the protesters, but rather a process of reformation. In 1989, he:

"... Brought in a new constitution... which disestablished the official ruling party... [the FLN]... and made no mention of socialism, while promising 'freedom of expression, association, and assembly.'"<sup>9</sup>

The reforms paved the way for the creation of new political parties and among other parties, the militant groups formed together to create the Islamic Salvation front or FIS. The FIS preached their ideology in mosques throughout Algeria and when local elections took place in June 1990, they polled 54% of votes cast. The party was becoming very powerful and called a

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<sup>9</sup> Answers.com, in *Algerian civil war*.  
<<http://www.answers.com/algerian%20civil%20war>>

general strike in May 1991 to force the government to call parliamentary elections. They did not succeed in the strike but the vast number of FIS supporters pushed the government to concede to a parliamentary election on December 26<sup>th</sup> 1991.

As these events were unfolding great swathes of change were sweeping Algeria. Bendjedid's constitutional change had created freedom of the press and the army was withdrawn from the political scene. Algeria experienced "an intense democratic period"<sup>10</sup> but once the parliamentary elections had been declared, the country gradually began its civil war, a war that is estimated to have cost 100,000 lives.

The FIS received 48% of the vote, and gained 188 out of 232 seats. This result brought the army back into politics and on January 11<sup>th</sup> 1992, they cancelled the final round of voting which would have put the FIS into power. President Bendjedid was forced to resign and the army put one Mohammed Boudiaf in charge, the army also started to arrest FIS members and put them in internment camps. Ultimately it seemed that the army would support the democratic process if this process kept the existing government in power, when this did not happen democracy was taken away. Answers.com states that "a state of emergency was declared, suspending many ordinary

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<sup>10</sup> Schade-Poulson, Marc, in *Men and Popular Music in Algeria*, 9.

constitutional rights"<sup>11</sup> and that the FIS was dissolved by the government two months later on March 4<sup>th</sup>.

This period was the start of the aforementioned civil war where Algeria descended into guerrilla fighting and failed in its negotiations with the FIS and other militant groups that arose throughout the 1990s. Nearly fifteen years later the violence has generally subsided and the current President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has now won two elections in 1999 and 2004.

The events in Algeria since 1962's independence have provided a backdrop for Raï, a source of lyrics, subject matter and social commentary. It is this element of Raï that has made it so popular with the young generation, but not so popular with the older generation, or the ruling elite. Algeria is an Islamic country, and by its nature is conservative, and the tensions between religion and the secular world have flamed much of the troubles I have been speaking of. Islam provides Algerians with ethics, attitudes and a value system that they adhere to in life, and because this system is written in the Qur'an it has not changed in the many centuries of Islam. Whereas westerners are more commonly atheist and as atheists have created their own ethics code, Algerians have a pre-subscribed code that nearly all of the population follows. To go against this code is to go against Islam, and Raï is considered to be leading young people to do exactly that.

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<sup>11</sup> Answers.com, in *Algerian civil war*.  
<<http://www.answers.com/algeria%20civil%20war>>

The growth of Raï in the post-independence era also coincided with a governmental desire to promote an Islamic-Arab identity. Raï was not seen to promote this identity and as the younger generation were the future of Algeria, if they did not identify solely with Islam, how would Algeria's future be an Islamic one? This is not to say that the post-independence generation, like the Raï star Khaled, were not respectful of Islam, quite to the contrary, but that the traditional way of life was exactly that, traditional. In addition to this, like many societies, Algeria is a patriarchal society, where the family unit is "headed by the husband... [and seen as] the basic unit of society."<sup>12</sup> This is an added pressure with the implication being to follow what your father and other male members of the family do. If you differ from this way of life you are also going against your family, not just Islam or tradition. For a young Algerian to listen to Raï they were in opposition to their family, their religion and to the values espoused by the state.

As mentioned earlier, President Boumédiène tried in the 1960s to allow a pluralistic society where western and Islamic values sat side by side. Yes there was a push for the arabization of Algeria, but I feel that the first post-independence generation were allowed a duality in their lifestyles, they could be Islamic at home and in the mosque, but in their free time they could listen to western music, and could dance to Raï. Until the late 1980s and the violent push for a more fundamentalist state there was an allowance of

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<sup>12</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica in *Daily life and social customs*. <<http://0-search.eb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/eb/article-46528>>

duality in Algerian life. The emergence of Raï is also telling the older generation that the traditional ways were lacking for the young:

“Young people are searching for an identity. They try to find something in Islamic fundamentalism... or they may look to Raï which enables them express a sensibility, an emotion, love and so on.”<sup>13</sup>

The idea of expression is important, every generation searches for how to be different from their parents, to express themselves in a new way. Young people would go to bars and beaches to meet the opposite sex, drink, listen to Raï and to dance. These were places distinct from the family home or the mosque. With tradition also came the idea of respect, that to listen to Raï which talks of love and being in love for example was to be disrespectful to your parents. Similarly in western society, grown-up children do not listen or watch anything sexual with their parents, but this tends to be more an issue of embarrassment not one of respect.

Respecting one's parents was also very important for an offspring's future and although families would turn a blind eye to their son having a girlfriend, when it came to marriage the parents were in charge. The mother is generally in charge of choosing her child's spouse and the issue of love is not important. Also for women, it is very hard to have freedom because if you are seen to be impure you may be considered unworthy to get married. So

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<sup>13</sup> Hagani, Zoubida, in Kidel, Mark (Prod.), *Algeria*.

even within the sexes of the younger generation, the male has greater freedom and ability to satisfy his desires. Hadj Miliani emphasizes the situation:

“We may appear to be a highly westernised society but in reality, this just isn’t so. When it’s time to get married, marriage has to be according to the rules... It’s a society which is both permissive, and yet highly rule-bound.”<sup>14</sup>

Additional rules included the aforementioned Family Code, which specifies laws relating to family relationships. These laws are based on Sharia law and include elements of inequality between men and women. The code has not been revised since its introduction in 1984 and it could be argued that the code’s impact is another way for religion to dictate state policy. Fundamental Islamists are in support of the code, but modernizers and feminist groups believe the code to demonstrate a lack of forward thinking and that it is another aspect of Algerian society that separates it from the modern world.

I believe that post-independent Algeria bought together a number of factors that conspired to put Raï automatically into a position of conflict. As independence bought freedom from the colonial powers, Algerians desired a new identity and those in charge put forward a policy of arabization. With the rise of militants, this policy was then given a fundamentalist flavour that

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<sup>14</sup> Miliani, Hadj, in Kidel, Mark (Prod.), *Algeria*.

pushed Islam to the front, making it the ideology that would unite Algeria. Nevertheless, forcing Islam centre stage highlighted other aspects of Algerian society that the militants were not happy with, western values and social commentary in the form of Raï was not part of the pure and moral Islamic state they wanted. At the same time the economy was failing, housing shortages and social problems were rife, and Raï musicians were telling the youth of Algeria these problems, further highlighting the far from perfect country. The opposition wanted a single identity for Algeria, but Raï was reminding them that Algeria was essentially pluralistic in its nature. It is this pluralism that inspired Raï's controversy and it was the listeners and creators for Raï that were to suffer.

Raï originated in the port city of Oran, and was the music of the local Arab population. Before independence Oran was divided into quarters, one for each of the French, Spanish, Jewish and Arab populations and it is in the Arab area that the traditional music of the Bedouin tribes was played. Hadj Miliani speaks of a combination of the rural and urban, a "rurbanity" that refers to "people who live in the city but behave as if they were still in the countryside."<sup>15</sup> It is this 'rurbanity' that accounts for the playing of rural music in Oran and why the roots of Raï are rural. It was the *cheikhs* who sang and played in the *cafés* and marketplaces, but their subject matter was poetic and based on the *melhûn* canon. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial period:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

"... A new urban underclass of poor factory workers arose, for the most part illiterate and rootless. The venerable cheikhs seemed unprepared to sing about the stresses of poverty, rural immigration [and] colonial rule..."<sup>16</sup>

Therefore another group of singers arose, the street poets who sang *zendanias* or bar songs and combined social commentary with *melhûn* phrases and improvisation. The term *Raï* came from these improvisations, and it means "opinion, choice, advice, or point of view."<sup>17</sup> In addition there was the *cheikhas*, the female poets who took their repertoire further by adding songs of passion and love, lamentations and local religious songs. I think it is this combination of the *cheikhas* and the *zendani* singers that came to symbolise *Raï*, groups of people willing to sing about real life in opposition to a poetic ideal. However, even in colonial times there was much hostility to the *zendani* and the *cheikhas* public performances to mixed crowds, "... the boldness of the singers themselves were widely condemned by a local Arab community."<sup>18</sup> Condemnation did not stop artists such as Cheikha Remitti however, as an orphan in the town Relizane she grew up with a hard life as her birth gave her no social standing. Her only real option was to become a singer, an 86-year old *cheikha* who is now considered to be the grandmother of *Raï*.

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<sup>16</sup> Morgan, Andy, in *Raï: Music under fire*, 414-15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 415.

<sup>18</sup> Langlois, Tony, in *Raï*.

<<http://www.groovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.52373>>

Hostility to Raï continued into the next generation when artists like Khaled were growing up and beginning their careers. On the other hand this period of the late 1970s coincided with cassette tape recorders becoming available in 1974, causing access to Raï to increase dramatically. In addition, it did not matter that the state media would not play Raï because Raï now had a cheap and durable means of distribution. These developments now meant Raï could spread outside of Oran into Algeria and further a field. In Paris, France, there was a sizable expatriate Algerian population, and so a Raï fan base grew in Paris, increasing its international visibility. Raï's growing popularity was acknowledged at home in 1985 when the first festival of Raï was staged in Oran. Then a year later France also acknowledged Raï with a festival in the Parisian suburb of Bobigny.

By the late 1980s Raï and its superstars were big names on the world music scene and in Algeria and France. As I have alluded to before, it is the lyrical content of Raï that makes it so successful. The 1989 BBC production on Algeria illustrates some of the lyrics that appeal to Algerian youth:

“We made love in a tumble-down shack,  
I’d give anything in the world for that dark-haired girl of mine.  
To hell with your mother,  
I’ll never let you go.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cheb Tahar. in Kidel, Mark (Prod.), *Algeria*.

Cheb Tahar's lyrics seem to epitomise the nature of Raï, the song speaks of love, sex, yearning and the desire to fight against the older generation's rule. The language is also very direct and honest, enabling the listener to know exactly what the singer means. This relates back to the idea of respect and tradition, the above lyrics would not be appropriate for Algerians to listen to in front of their families. Hence the need to go to bars or clubs to hear Raï. However, the success of Raï meant it spread out of the clubs and into the general public's consciousness. Banning Eyre comments that "Raï singers dispensed with decorum and sang songs that proved shockingly outspoken for Algerians."<sup>20</sup> It is not that Raï singers were attempting to be anti-Islamic or to have shock-value in the manner of a western artist like Marilyn Manson for example, they were simply giving their opinion, and or stating their desires.

A western comparison would be the birth of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s, this was also greeted with fear and concern about the corruption of youth. As time went on however, there was acceptance and rock 'n' roll was absorbed into the mainstream of cultural life. This acceptance was not as easy for Algeria though, now in 2005 Raï is an established genre with books and articles on the subject, but in the 1980s and 90s Raï had to deal with censure and murder.

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<sup>20</sup> Eyre, Banning, in *Khaled*.  
<[http://www.afropop.org/explore/artist\\_info/ID/23/Khaled](http://www.afropop.org/explore/artist_info/ID/23/Khaled)>

Throughout my exploration of Raï's history it can be seen that although Raï had a hostile reception from traditional society, it was grudgingly accepted if not appreciated. As the political situation worsened, a respect for the older generation was no longer automatic, and "the widespread conviction that the governments have failed their people"<sup>21</sup> was expressed through Raï.

Therefore Raï was punished and the government banned public concerts for two years in 1990. Luckily for Raï its international following and the cassette technology that had made Raï so accessible continued Raï's proliferation.

Indeed artists such as Cheb Hasni produced over 80 cassettes in this period.

Hasni was the king of lover's Raï and sold up to 400,000 copies of each cassette. Regrettably as the civil war began musicians, writers, artists and journalists began to be intimidated. Many emigrated or had done so years before, Khaled emigrated to Paris in 1985 and rarely went back to Algeria, especially in the wake of the civil war. There were two major Raï casualties, Hasni and Raï producer Rachid Baba Ahmed, both gunned down in 1994 and 1995 respectively. Hasni had received death threats from Islamic extremists and Ahmed was shot during Ramadan.

These two deaths were the most severe reactions to Raï and demonstrate just how extreme the fundamentalists reaction to a style of music was. From a western perspective, this may come across as ridiculous, why should people die for simply being musicians? My exploration of why Raï inspired such conflict should make this clear though, Raï was the culture epitome of

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<sup>21</sup> Langlois, Tony, in *The Local and Global in North African Popular Music*, 270.

what the militants viewed as the western and secular influence on Algeria. In their minds, a pure Islamic state would not have created Raï. This again relates back to the idea of a society where everyone has the same intellect, the same ethics code and only one goal in life, the achievement of religious purity. Nature does not allow this, Algerians like other nations have dual or even multiple identities. Raï gives people the ability to celebrate life and love, whether this love be drink, a woman or both.

“Some think of us as traitors, as non-religious, anti-Islamist, because we live overseas. We are still Muslim, we still have faith, we are not traitors. God gave me life so I could profit from it, not so I would sleep.”<sup>22</sup>

Khaled’s words speak of a person who has created a balance between his religious beliefs and his own personal freedom and happiness. The Algerian governments attempts to creating a post-independence identity have not achieved this, they understand the need to modernize but feel the pull of traditions, traditions that were denied to them by the French less than 50 years ago. The civil war that ran throughout the 1990s only exacerbated the social problems that the power struggle was trying to solve. Algeria still faces huge obstacles, politically and socially, but hopefully the 100,000 dead will make the solution diplomacy not more warfare.

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<sup>22</sup> Khaled in Barlow, Sean, in *Khaled Interview*.  
<<http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/17/Khaled,+January+2002>>

In addition Raï has proved immensely popular, so would it not be a positive move to capitalise on this success, rather than attempt to destroy it. If only from an economic standpoint, Algeria could capitalise on its position as the birthplace of Raï, it could try and solve its social problems by embracing the genre and accepting its language and subject matter as indicative of a modern Algerian social identity.

“Objectively, Raï conveys no revolutionary message,”<sup>23</sup> it is simply a product of its time that appealed to the younger generation in Algeria, but conflicted with the older traditions. It has been given meaning by its artists and its audience but that does not justify death, Raï is ultimately a genre of music that inspired controversy but that did not create it.

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<sup>23</sup> Mazouzi, Bezza in 'Raï', 271.

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