Berber Associations and Cultural Change in Algeria

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For Algerians, “la mixité”—a concept inadequately translated “mixed-sex behavior”—encompasses a wide range of behaviors and assumptions about male-female interaction. Through dance, youth in Berber cultural associations in Algeria have begun to introduce new ways of thinking about both clan and gender relations.

It was another hot August night. Several hundred villagers, for whom this was the third of four late-night weddings in a row, watched with jaded interest as first women, then men, occupied the dancing space—a circle carved from a dusty village square, around which women spectators sat on one side and men stood on the other. The party seemed to be winding down. Many were readying to walk the mountain paths back to their homes. But suddenly, the attention of the entire village was galvanized as three young boys, ages 9 to 13, came onto the earthen dance floor. The boys boogied with all they had, one tying a woman’s scarf around his hips for added effect. Excitement crescendoed when, after several minutes, three young girls joined the dance. At first, the girls danced in their own circle, as is customary among Kabyle women. It was not long, however, before the six children had formed three male-female couples. Amid intense rhythmic clapping, ululations and shouts of encouragement from the wedding guests, the children continued their dance for nearly an hour—three to four times longer than most dances last. What galvanized the crowd was the suggestion that a deeply rooted behavioral code, theretofore part of the cultural unconscious, was beginning to shift. The young boys and girls, most in early puberty, were unrelated. A brother and sister were indeed dancing—but not with each other. As the dancing heated up, each girl discarded her tuata—an outer skirt worn by Kabyle women in public spaces—and was outfitted with an aggus—a thick woven belt wound tightly around the hips that signals a woman’s eligibility and emphasizes her sensual beauty. It was as if, in Bourdieu’s terms, the unthinkable had crossed into the realm of the thinkable. A shift in “mentalities” was taking place.

Algerians greeted the country’s short-lived experiment with democracy with buoyant enthusiasm and a sense of empowerment. Following the municipal elections in June 1990, it seemed that every Algerian had become a politician. Debates about the nation’s future raged in cabs and cafes, in private living rooms and on public beaches. Party politics, however, were hardly the only topic under discussion. The discourse of democracy that permeated public culture after 1988 also served to frame and intensify local debates about some of the fundamental structures of Algerian society—specifically, generational privilege, clan-based rivalries and gender inequality.
Although the political liberalization process came to a halt in January 1992, these discussions continue to rage. Many Algerians contend that truly altering the country's political system requires more than the promise of elections. For them, democracy also demands that people change their mentalities. 3

In 1987, the Algerian government recognized the right of citizens to form non-political associations around their common interests. 4 But it was not until after the October 1988 riots, when constitutional changes launched a multiparty system, 5 that associations began to flourish. 6 In the Kabylie region, home to nearly two-thirds of Algeria's Berber population, 7 Berber cultural associations “multiplied like potatoes,” in the words of one young man. By the end of the summer of 1989, 154 youth-dominated associations had been officially established in Kabylia; there are reportedly now more than 1000. 8 While a handful are located in urban areas, most are found in the region’s 1500 mountain villages.

A basic goal of the associations is to promote Berber language and culture. Some offer language classes; the most enterprising produce mimeographed newsletters or linguistic manuals. Association members also collect what they consider endangered cultural capital, such as proverbs, folklore, traditional medicinal remedies and the “original” names of plant and animal life and artifacts that have fallen into disuse. Such collections of culture are ordered, labelled and displayed for village populations, helping to restore a sense of pride in rural traditions long denigrated by the state as “backward” and incompatible with the modern world.

Many cultural associations, however, have another project, which, while less tangible, is far more ambitious. Youth throughout Kabylia see themselves as endowed with a mission to transform their own society by introducing new mentalities, or new ways of thinking about the questions of generation, clan and gender.

Shifting Alliances

The creation of cultural associations is frequently seen as a generational battle. In village assemblies (tijemmarâa, sing. tajmadât), historically the province of powerful older men, young men began to speak out, proposing the creation of associations and requesting the support of their elders. This transition began before 1989. Young men in increasing numbers were attending universities, where they had grown accustomed to having a political voice in student assemblies. This gave them a sense that the decisions of their fathers and uncles were not infallible. The events of 1988-89 accelerated this change and allowed youth to frame it in a more authoritative democratic context. In many villages, the advent of youth's speaking at tajmadât is explicitly dated to 1989, when, in one man's words, “we got democracy.” Another man used the language of equality to describe the shift in the balance of generational power: “We want to speak freely, to have our rights, and all of that.”

The cultural associations also upset clan-based alliances. Viewing the associations as a common goal, youth of different families and sometimes of rival village factions began to align with each other instead of along traditional lines. This allowed radical questions to be raised. In one village, it was suggested that the village leadership committee (imgharen n taddatt), typically composed of one or two representatives designated by each patrilinage, instead be made up of the men best qualified for the job, regardless of family ties. The suggestion met with staunch resistance.

Although cultural association members claimed to be seeking an end to factional rivalries, sometimes a language of political pluralism was invoked to mask and even exacerbate factional conflicts. The four sections of one village, often at odds with each other, have explicit rules prohibiting “outsiders” (villagers from other sections) from using their facilities. For its initial meetings, the cultural association, many of whose members come from one section, used a building belonging to another section, which had been a bastion of support for the National Liberation Front (FLN), the ruling party in Algeria since independence. This provoked a strong reaction: the section to whom the building belonged asked the “outsiders” to leave, falsely accusing them of belonging to the ultra-modernist Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD).

These transitions are not simple, nor is there always unanimity among village youth. In fact, some of the strongest opposition to new ideas can come not from elders but from other young men, who, while not subscribing to Islamist ideology, seek nevertheless to give new value to some of the more conservative Kabyle mores. One university student in his early 20s spoke of a “reverse generation gap” whereby 16-year-olds would moralize to those only a few years older about such matters as proper attire (e.g., not wearing shorts in the village) or correct public conduct. This, however, only lends further credence to the fact that in Kabylia—as in the rest of Algeria—young men have begun to demand and receive a political voice.

A more controversial battle of “mentalities” centers around “la mixité” a concept whose strong cultural and emotional charge is inadequately conveyed by the English translation “mixed-sex behavior.” For Algerians, “la mixité” not only refers to the nominal inclusion of women alongside men in schools or in the workplace, but also encompasses a wide range of deeply engrained behaviors and assumptions—often internalized on an unconscious, bodily level—about male-female interactions.

Gender Relations in Kabylia

Gender relations in Kabyle villages, as in much of rural Algeria, are governed by deeply rooted codes that regulate the ways that men and women interact in public space. 9 Unstated rules govern where women walk, how they dress, and how they communicate in public. Any communication that is channeled through the body—such as singing or dancing—is heavily circumscribed. Men also must observe rules about bodily dispositions. For example, they may not hum or whistle if a woman walks by. To do so would be disrespectful and could call forth the wrath of the woman's kin. Even those
individuals who are outwardly critical of “outdated customs” are generally unwilling to face negative family pressures that violating these codes could unleash.

Although increasing access to high schools and universities is beginning to expand women’s mobility, in many parts of Kabylie a young, unmarried woman walking alone outside of her own adrum (group of adjoining houses belonging to a patrilineage) is still automatically suspect—perhaps she wants a glimpse of a man who has caught her fancy or, worse, is seeking an amorous tryst out of public view. For this reason, adolescent girls and young women in Kabylie villages almost always travel in groups to do any public errand—to go to the grocery store, to buy bread, or even to visit family in a distant part of the village. One young woman, sent by her ailing mother to pick up some food, told of how she would stop at the boundaries of her own adrum until enough time had elapsed, then would return home with some excuse—the store was closed, or it was out of tomatoes. Watching the televised historic handshake between Arafat and Rabin, the women were struck less by its political import than by the fact that the wives of Clinton, Gore and various diplomats were escorted to the ceremony on the arms of marines. That could never happen in Algeria, one marvelled; won’t their husbands suspect something is going on?

If walking in public is problematic, public singing and dancing are even more so. Among themselves, women frequently break into spontaneous dance or song, but it is always punctuated with furtive over-the-shoulder glances to make sure no man is in sight. In many Kabylie villages, public dance is sex-segregated; during celebrations such as weddings, women typically occupy an interior courtyard, while men dance together in an outdoor public space. In some villages, however, weddings are mixed—men and women, albeit seated on opposite sides, watch the dancing together. Most dances are for women only; men’s dances are specially signalled by a particular drumbeat. Closely related men and women from the family hosting the celebration may dance together, but under no circumstances can unrelated males and females share the dancing space.

For the cultural association, whose active members were all men, confronting the issue of “la mixité” in a Kabylie village was not an easy proposition. A few women had nominally joined, but none would risk her reputation to attend a meeting. The cultural association would have to find a different strategy.

**Pedagogical Performances**

The dancing of the children on that August night was not an innocent event. It was the direct result of a conscious effort to change villagers’ ideas of gendered interaction that members of the cultural association had been working toward for several years. After creating a theater troupe to provide humorous yet penetrating commentary on such subjects as the lifestyles of immigrants to France or the corruption of local politicians, village youth were frustrated. For one thing, it was impossible to find women who would agree to appear on stage, so men played the women’s roles. For another, they did not feel that their message was getting through—people laughed at the plays, but nothing changed. In early 1993, one enterprising 26-year-old, Hend (pseudonym), decided to try another performance medium. Seeking to instill a new relationship to “la mixité” in the young while setting an example for other villagers, Hend began a children’s chorus under the auspices of the local cultural association. The young adolescents who got up to dance all came from this newly created group.

Hend viewed the chorus as a way to redress internalized beliefs and behaviors surrounding gender. Starting the group was no simple matter. He first had to fight for permission from the village assembly in order to use a public building for rehearsals. Permission was initially accorded only for children who lived in the section of the village to which the building belonged—the others were considered “outsiders.” To recruit members, Hend went one by one to see each child’s father, explaining the project and asking for cooperation. He had initially wanted older teenagers, but each time he would request the elder daughter, the father would propose the younger one. Sometimes initial permission would be withdrawn with no explanation.

Hend describes how he felt when he entered the first rehearsal: “I was shocked,” he recounts. “I saw a group of girls in one corner, and a group of boys in another. That blew me away, it just killed me. These kids are innocent... If I created this [chorus], it was in order to change, to revolutionize, if you will, people’s mentalities, to give an example...” But Hend said nothing to the children and simply began to teach them songs, interspersed with informal skits to foster a climate of trust. As the weeks went by, his strategy began to bear fruit. The children became so engrossed by the work of the chorus that they began to forget about who they were standing next to; a boy would find himself between two girls, or vice versa. By the end of the summer, things had become completely “normal,” said Hend. “The children play together... without complexes, without anything.” So much so that on a hot summer’s evening, they were able to galvanize an entire village.

On its third wedding performance of the season, the children’s chorus was gaining approval from many villagers and grudging acceptance from even the most recalcitrant. But this night was different: it was the wedding of Hend’s brother, and Hend’s father would be present. Hend had—with much difficulty—persuaded his 17-year-old sister Debbia (pseudonym) to perform, along with one of the chorus boys, a duet he had written about the complexity of male-female relationships. Stepping to the front of the stage, Debbia spoke clearly and dramatically into her hand-held microphone in front of hundreds of wedding guests.

The next day, as Hend tells it, “it was a war in the house.” For a young woman to appear on a public stage, microphone and all, in front of the entire village and in her father’s presence, was—according to the old “mentality”—to compromise her modesty and to call into question not only her own reputation but also that of her father and brothers. Predictably, Hend’s father exploded; for weeks afterward, stony silence
alternated with outraged outbursts. Hend also became the target of village gossip; suddenly, his every movement became suspect. He was even suspected of the worst crime imaginable in a Kabyle village—having secret affairs with village girls. Greeted time and again with his mother’s tears, he was continually pried with her questions about his whereabouts.

Attacked from all sides, Hend sensed more clearly than ever the weight of the cultural baggage he was up against. “La mixité is something that all Westerners have,” he said to me. “You were born into it. But it’s because your ancestors, long ago, lived through changes that allowed you to be who you are today... So now it’s up to us to sacrifice ourselves. It’s not for me that I’m working for ‘la mixité’, it’s for my son, for the future.”

Although he encouraged his sister to take the stage, Hend had, in a sense, substituted himself for her father. “I’m the one who brought her up,” he claimed. “[When our father started] making her account for her every move, for every last penny she spent, I told her, ‘Look, don’t take his money any more, I’ll take care of you...’ But I also set conditions—because giving a woman total freedom, in our country, is impossible. It can’t be done. She has to be prepared for that freedom and that’s what I did with her... Now she’s responsible, and I can let her do what she wants... ‘La mixité’ must be prepared for.”

Hend, buoyed by the radical implications of his efforts, seemed unaware of his own confrontational relationship to “la mixité.” Other young Kabyle men are at once more conscious than Hend and more tormented. Boualem, a founding member of Kabylia’s only mixed theater group and strongly committed to “sweeping away old ideas,” sadly recognized that his upbringing left him with “scars” from which he cannot seem to recover. Makhlouf, living in Paris where he is active in the Kabyle artistic community, encouraged his niece not to hide the fact that she smokes and drinks, but then acknowledged that he would be lying if he said it didn’t bother him on some level. “It’s as if there’s a war in my head,” were his words; however, while his intellectual values may not prevent his visceral response, they do mitigate his behavior.

As a number of scholars have recently noted, the regulation of women’s activities in public space is among Algeria’s most heavily charged cultural sites. It is a site where men not only construct their sense of honor and self-respect but also forge their cultural and political identities. Looked at as an isolated local event, Hend’s initiative may be interpreted as simply another instance of the penetration of Western dance forms occurring worldwide. But in the ideological frame in which the Algerian civil conflict is occurring, Hend’s action takes on added significance. By placing his sister on the village stage, Hend positioned himself on a national stage, proclaiming his adhesion, however partial, to the contested principle of “la mixité.” By choosing to make his sister’s body publicly visible, Hend displayed his own political allegiances, demarcating himself from certain groups and identifying with others. Once again, however, control over “la mixité” remains in male hands. A few young women in this village may have begun to adopt new behaviors, but it is only because the men decided that they could. One is tempted to argue that, after all, nothing has really changed.

To do so, however, would be to deny the subtle, paradoxical, almost imperceptible ways that cultural change occurs. Perhaps one or two chorus children will have discovered an openness to experiences that they would not otherwise have had. While the debate about women’s and men’s roles in Algerian society will no doubt continue well into the next century, it will be decided largely not only by politicians but also through a host of microscopic situations like those initiated by the cultural association of this village.

The author would like to thank Hamou Amirouche, Judith Irvine, Arun Kapil, Brinkley Messick, Ben Soares and Diana Wylie for their thoughtful and insightful comments. Research in Algeria and France from 1992-1994 was supported by the American Institute for Maghribi Studies, the Fulbright Institute for International Education, the Social Science Research Council and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

Endnotes
1 An agneau is also fastened around a new bride’s hips as she makes her ritual trip to the village fountain, where she draws water for a young boy to drink—an obvious symbol of fertility.
3 Bradford Dillman reports that during his field research [in 1988-90], when asked what was necessary to bring Algeria out of crisis, people most commonly responded, “We have to change people’s mentalities.” “Transition to Democracy in Algeria,” in Ernesto and Naylor, eds., State and Society in Algeria (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 31-51.
7 A 1986 census estimates 3 million Kabyles of a total Berber-speaking population of at least 4.5 million (the total population of Algeria was then 22 million). Salam Chaker, Berbères Aujourd’hui (Paris, L’Harmattan, 1989), pp. 9-10.
8 Salam Chaker, “Berber Language and Political Identity in Algeria and Morocco,” talk presented at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, April 25, 1995. This phenomenon has spread to North America; the Amsaasid Cultural Association of America (ACUA) was founded in 1995.
9 Discussion of the women’s movement in urban areas, as well as the complex movement of the many women who regularly cross from rural to urban contexts (including France) for work or university study, is beyond the scope of this article.
10 To date, no satisfactory explanation has been advanced for why some villages have mixed celebrations while others do not. The phenomenon does not appear to correlate with the percentage of immigrants to France. When asked, villagers say simply, “It’s always been like this.”