SONGS OF DISCONTENT:
THE KABYLE VOICE IN POST-COLONIAL ALGERIA

A Thesis in
Musicology
by
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ABSTRACT

After gaining independence from French colonial rule in 1962, the new Algerian government believed that the way to move forward as a nation was to create a homogeneous Arab state. As the government began enforcing legislation demanding complete cultural assimilation, such as forbidding the use of the Kabyle Berber language Taqbaylit, Kabyle songwriters emerged as a voice of dissent. Out of this musical flashpoint came new and blended musical styles, innovative cross-cultural collaborations, and political activism.

In this thesis, I explore the contemporary song movement among the Kabyle Berber tribe in northern Algeria and the ways in which this movement expresses the Kabyle culture within a socially oppressive society in Algeria. I consider five songs by Souad Massi, Hassen Zermani (Takfarinas), Hamid Cheriet (Idir), Lounis Aït Menguellet, and Iness Mezel that exemplify major trends in modern Kabyle music. First, I examine Massi’s song “Ech Edani” and its blend of flamenco, samba, and Kabyle musical elements. I then look at Takfarinas’s pan-Berber advocacy in his song “Azoule.” Third, I discuss the collaboration between Ugandan singer Geoffrey Oryema and Idir in their song “Exil.” Finally, I examine Menguellet’s use of poetic lyrics in his song “Yenna-d umyar,” followed by Mezel’s song “Amazone” and her advocacy for women’s rights. In the final analysis, modern Kabyle song illustrates the struggle of Kabyles for cultural recognition within an Arab-dominated society in Algeria and provides an important avenue for future dialogue between Berbers and Arab Algerians.

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1. Idir, meaning “he will live” in the Kabyle language Taqbaylit, is a name given to male babies who are weak at birth and may not survive infancy. Idir began using this stage name for himself after the release of his album *A Vava Inouva* in 1976.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose and Scope

Throughout history, certain moments stand out when music is used to critique social issues, even to the point of changing society. Such a moment is especially illustrated in postcolonial Algeria and the creation of the modern Kabyle song. Though they comprise forty percent of the country’s population, Kabyles have endured much hardship in Algeria. Following Algeria’s independence from French colonial rule in 1962, the new Algerian government felt strongly that the best way to move forward as a nation was to create a single ethnic identity. Modeled after modern Arab states like Egypt, the government attempted to make Algeria culturally Arabic. As the government began enforcing legislation forbidding the use of Taqbaylit, the Kabyle language, and demanding complete cultural assimilation, Kabyle songwriters emerged as a voice of dissent. Their music assumed a distinctly political edge emphasizing their Berber identity. Kabyle artists who previously had dual careers singing in Taqbaylit and Arabic now defiantly made exclusive use of their mother tongue, preferring French to Arabic as a second language.

Many Kabyle musicians sought to revitalize their cultural heritage by combining traditional Kabyle musical genres with newer Arabic and Western ones in order to create a hybrid style to which modern Kabyle people could relate. Singers like Idir (Hamid Cheriet [b. 1949]) traversed the countryside of Kabylia, collecting traditional folksongs

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and adapting them to a Westernized rock sound. In 1973, Idir’s hit, “A Vava Inouva” (Oh My Father), launched the emerging popular Kabyle sound into the international arena. Idir and other contemporaneous Kabyle artists brought Berber sentiments to the forefront in France and Algeria, eventually initiating the Berber Spring in 1980.\footnote{Jane Goodman’s \textit{Berber Culture on the World Stage} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005) outlines the creation of Idir’s album “A Vava Inouva.” Her transcriptions of personal interviews, translations of texts, and first-hand accounts have provided me with valuable insights into the modernization of Kabyle culture and the creation of the New Song Movement in the 1970s. \textit{Chanson kabyle et identité berbère: L’œuvre d’Aït Menguellet} (Paris: Éditions Paris-Méditerranée, 1998) by Moh Cherbi and Arezki Khouas also broadened my understanding of the creation of the New Song Movement by surveying the political events leading up to the Berber Spring of 1980 and how it affected Kabyle musicians.}

In my thesis, I investigate the continuation of the Kabyle “New Song Movement” from the Algerian revolution to the present day, and the ways in which it still expresses the Kabyle culture within the newly imposed Arab society of Algeria in the later twentieth century.\footnote{A precedent to my work is Liza Kitchell’s “Kabyle Song in the Twentieth Century” (M.A. thesis., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998). Kitchell lays a foundation for my research by giving an historical overview of popular Kabyle music and by considering the cultural tensions that led to the Berber Spring and the political New Song Movement of the 1970s. In my thesis, I build upon her research in a number of ways. Most importantly, I analyze what political and social trends emerge in the music of current Kabyle musicians as well as examine to what extent these artists have either followed or deviated from the vision of the “New Song” generation of the 1970s. Finally, I consider the implications of all these factors for the future of the Kabyles and Algeria.} I address the ways in which Kabyle artists further the same pan-Berber political message in their music and to what degree these artists have gone in different directions. Out of this musical flashpoint have come new and blended musical styles, collaborations between French and Algerian musicians and artists from around the world, and political activism. I also discuss how the issues of modernization, persecution of minorities, and identity apply to other cultures around the world. Finally, I look at the social repercussions of France’s colonial past and the continued cultural dialogue between the two nations through the work of North African musicians.
I have selected five songs to analyze that represent the most important trends involving politics and the blending of musical styles in the Kabyle music of today. My findings show a number of significant consequences emerging from the development of modern Kabyle music. First, I look at the overt political activism in “Azoule” by Takfarinas (2011). Singing in collaboration with Moroccan Berber musician Hassane Idbassaid, Takfarinas advocates for pan-Berber identity in this song (first realized in the 1970s) and calls for all Berber tribes to stand together and demand their rights. Takfarinas also expresses the relevancy and modernity of Berber culture through the juxtaposition of traditional Berber instruments with Western funk idioms.  

Next, I show the willingness of Kabyle musicians to collaborate and blend musical styles through songs such as “Ech Edani” by Souad Massi and “Exil” by Idir. In my analysis of “Ech Edani,” I look at how Massi blends Arab, flamenco, and Brazilian samba musical elements into a Western popular song form. Massi derives her melodic lines and use of chords from a step-descent bass pattern, the lament bass from Western traditions. The rich multicultural palette of Western tonality, Andalusian instruments, and samba rhythms creates an innovative sound and displays the willingness of Kabyle songwriters to collaborate across cultural lines.

In a similar fashion, Idir collaborates with Ugandan singer Geoffrey Oryema on the song “Exil.” As a remake from Idir’s 1973 album A Vava Inouva, “Exil” shows how Idir blends his music with African instrumentation and vocal styles. In addition, the text

5 I have been assisted in my understanding of traditional Kabyle musical elements and their use in contemporary songs by the work of French-Algerian ethnomusicologist Mehenna Mahfoufi. In his Chants des femmes en Kabylie: Fêtes et rites au village: Étude d’ethnomusicologie (Paris: Ibis, 2005), Mahfoufi explains the traditional role of music in Kabylia and creates a theoretical framework for explaining harmony and the use of modes in Kabyle music. My research has also benefited from Mahfoufi’s other books, Chants de la guerre d’indépendence (Paris: Éditions Séguier, 2002) and Musique du monde berbère (Paris: Ibis, 2007).
powerfully conveys the two men’s mutual experience of immigration and exile. My analysis of “Yenna-d umyar” (The Old Sage Says) by Aït Menguellet shows his continuation of his own unique version of the New Song folk-rock style that he helped to create in the 1970s. Menguellet also incorporates elements of the early twentieth-century genre cha’bi, recast with guitar instead of the oud (Arabic lute). The cha’bi influence is discerned both musically from cyclical melodic contours and Arabic percussion, and textually from his use of strophic form and philosophic subject matter. Known as the “great Kabyle poet,” Menguellet comments on his role as a voice of wisdom for his people and his views on the changing role of musicians in Kabyle society.

Lastly, I look at a second female Kabyle artist, Iness Mezel and her advocacy for women’s rights in the song “Amazone.” Her pop style and forthright political critiques resemble those of Takfarinas. Also similar to Takfarinas’s work is Mezel’s inclusion of distinctive Kabyle instruments such as the bendir (drum) and mandole (Kabyle version of the oud); however, unlike Takfarinas, she uses elements specific to Kabyle women, the most notable example being the “ululu” cries of background female singers in the song’s introduction. Taken together, these five songs show the wide degree of variation in Kabyle music today while revealing its common characteristics and direction.

Objectives and Organization

The first part of the thesis provides an historical backdrop to music’s role in a changing Kabyle society. Next, I consider trends in contemporary Kabyle music by examining the most recent work of several exemplary Kabyle songwriters. The end result of this is an informed understanding of modern Kabyle song, its antecedents in the New
Song Movement of the 1970s, and its broader impact on the overall history of Kabylia and North Africa.

After an introduction that outlines the scope of the thesis, Chapter 2 surveys the historical background of the Kabyles and other Berber tribes in North Africa, spanning antiquity, French colonialism, the War of Independence, various regimes of the Algerian government, and the present day. Chapter 3 complements this historical context by discussing traditional Kabyle society in terms of its aesthetics and rhythm of life, along with France’s adjustments following the loss of the Algerian colony, and its struggles with becoming a multiethnic society. This third chapter then surveys traditional Kabyle music before focusing on the musical influence of the Kabyle immigrants living in France following World War II and their contribution to a new Westernized style. The chapter concludes by discussing the musical response to the political events of the 1960s and 70s in Algeria, Idir’s debut album *A Vava Inouva*, and the birth of the New Song style.

Chapter 4 surveys the current trends in Kabyle music by analyzing selected songs by Idir, Aït Menguellet, Takfarinas, Souad Massi, and Iness Mezel. It includes musical transcriptions, analyses of harmonic structure, and readings of song texts. I organize my interpretations by the observed tendencies in the musical output of Kabyle musicians: the Westernization of Kabyle music, blending of styles and cross-cultural collaboration, pan-Berber political activism, and women’s rights.
Chapter 5 summarizes the implications arising from my song analyses and draws a picture of the state of Kabyle music today, with speculations about its future. I reflect on the way music continues both to affect and respond to the changes in Kabyle society, and I conclude the thesis by drawing parallels with cultural tensions in other parts of the world.
Chapter 2: Historical Background of the Berbers and the Kabyle People

Introduction

The origin of the Berbers of North Africa is shrouded in legend and propaganda. Contemporary political baggage surrounding the Berbers’ most important figures makes it hard to distinguish fact from fiction. The elements of Berber history that contemporary Algerian culture has chosen to emphasize reveal the ways in which both outside forces and the Berbers themselves have tried to manipulate the historical record for their own purposes. On the broadest level, the story of the Berber people is one of multiple invasions, with various empires and nations conquering and leaving their territory throughout the millennia. In the process, these outside powers have introduced numerous ideologies, beliefs, and political structures. However, the image of the Berbers that emerges through the course of these occupations from the Romans to the Arabs to France is not the popular one of a primitive people succumbing to a superior, outside civilization, but rather a much more complex tale of assimilation, resistance, and subjugation.

With the modern Pan-Berber, Amazigh movement growing in Algeria, correctly understanding Berber history continues to be relevant today. Even the use of these different titles tells their history. The name “Berber” (Latin for “stranger”) was a label given by the Romans. To be labeled a foreigner by an outside force in one’s homeland illustrates an ironic aspect of Berber history. In contrast, the self-given title “Imazighen” (or Free Men) captures the spirit of the Berber people as they see themselves. The

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7. Throughout Berber history, different periods of foreign occupation and subjugation create ironic circumstances in which the Berbers become the outsiders and minority population in their own land. I explore this theme and how it relates to contemporary Kabyle musical expression throughout the thesis.
Berbers pride themselves in the resilience of their culture and the difficulty that outside forces have had in fully subduing them.

The Berbers Enter into History

Little evidence exists today regarding the earliest history of the Berbers. Some of what we know of their origins comes from a mixture of modern archeology and ancient Roman, Byzantine, and Arabic sources. Evidence shows that humans may have lived in North Africa 40,000 years ago. As the climate changed around 3000 BCE and the Sahara dried up, people likely migrated north, away from the Sahara. Starting around 2500 BCE, the Phoenicians began establishing trading settlements across the Mediterranean coast, among them what would become the city of Algiers. During the following millennium, trade increased between ancient Egypt and the lighter-skinned “Libyans” (Berbers) from the west of the Egyptian kingdom. The establishment of the “Libyan Dynasties” in ancient Egypt, inaugurated by the ascension of the Berber Sheshonk I to the throne, marks the definitive entrance of Berbers into history.8

In response to the consolidation of power by the Phoenician city of Carthage, the Berbers living around the city-state organized themselves into the three Numidian kingdoms of Massyli, Masaesyli, and Mauri. For Berberists today, the formation of these kingdoms “[provides] sufficient proof that Berbers had agency in ancient history and were capable of large-scale organization and development,” and that their socio-political entities “were states in every sense of the word.”9

9. Ibid., 16.
The onset of Roman rule in the Maghreb prevented the three Numidian kingdoms from developing into fully fledged states. Throughout early Berber history, several factors hampered the longevity of large-scale political organization, such as the tension between Hellenistic Berber rulers and the tribal Berbers of the countryside. However, the largest impediment to the success of Berber states may have been that as rulers, Berbers did not adopt a system of patriarchal lineage in which a firstborn son ascended to power. Instead, a king would often divide his realm among his heirs. After the death of a monarch, sons and various factions would fight for control of the state, resulting in continuous cycles of fragmentation and unstable governments. The aversion to handing off power to a single line is reflected today in the Kabyle practice of dividing land and resources equally among children, as well as the egalitarian nature of Berber society in general.

Perhaps the most famous example of a problem in the transfer of power is represented by Jugurtha, illegitimate grandson of Masinissa, king of Massyli. Jugurtha wrested control of the kingdom from Masinissa’s two sons after the death of the king. Rome, which had already annexed the city of Carthage through an alliance with Masinissa, took advantage of the situation and went to war against Jugurtha.\footnote{Maddy-Weitzman, \textit{The Berber Identity Movement}, 41.} In a manner repeated throughout North African history, Jugurtha was ultimately defeated by the Romans, and yet remains an admired figure in Berber folklore for his relentless stance against an outside power and his ability to unite and rally the different tribes to his cause. As a result of the conflict, Rome acquired the land of the Numidians and eventually the
rest of North Africa, ushering in the nearly six-hundred-year period of Roman rule from the Third Punic War to the Arab conquests in the late sixth century CE.¹¹

Under Roman rule, however, the Berbers did not simply live as passive subjects but contributed to the development of the Latinized civilization of the Maghreb. The fact that Berbers served in the police force shows that they did not exist in a constant state of revolt. Once a tribe had been civilized according to Roman dictates, many Berbers could elevate themselves to positions of power within the government.¹² In fact, by the late second century, Berbers made up a full third of the Roman senate.¹³ That being said, many tribes reacted to Roman rule with a mixture of assimilation and resistance. In 17 CE, the legendary Berber military leader Tacfarinas, for whom the contemporary singer named himself, led a unified Berber revolt across North Africa to overthrow the Romans, evading capture after several defeats.¹⁴ Despite its ultimate failure, this unsuccessful uprising remains in the minds of Berbers today as another example of their ability to unite and wield their collective will against an imposing force from the outside. The singer Takfarinas, intimately involved with the Pan-Berberism movement, draws from a powerful image of Berber consciousness.

As the Romanized cities in the Maghreb and their aristocratic class became richer, the tenant class became poorer and more directly tied to the landowners. With a growing disparity between outlying Berber tribes and urban centers, the prosperous Latin cities became tempting targets for these less fortunate Berbers. This, combined with Rome’s

¹². Ibid., 67.
lessening grip over North Africa, allowed Berber chiefdoms to attack and gradually take back various areas of the Maghreb. With Roman power waning, the tribal affiliations of the Berbers emerged as strong as ever before the period of occupation.  

After the conquest of the Maghreb by the Byzantines in the third century, the relationship between conquerors and subjects changed. The Byzantines did not treat the Berbers as equals in their new society, drawing a sharper line between civilized Greek and tribal Berber. What is more, the Latinized Berbers no longer spoke the language of the empire, which contributed to the disappearance of the urban Berber aristocracy. The decline of this urban class and the reemerging influence of tribal ties came on the eve of perhaps the most important event in the history of the region: the Arab invasion from the East.

*The Coming of Islam*

Of all the invasions, rulers, and cultures to influence the Maghreb, nothing has matched the profound impact of the Arab invasion in the late seventh century CE. Beginning in 630 CE, the army of the Uyyalad Caliphate, formed from the original *umma* leadership under the Prophet Muhammad, expanded the domain of Islam, sweeping across North Africa and into the Iberian Peninsula. In the following centuries, vestiges of the previous Latin and Byzantine cultures would be swept away as Arab culture and beliefs were imposed and finally embraced by the inhabitants of North Africa. Since Arabs categorized the Byzantines in Africa as Christians, they were permitted under

Islamic law to continue practicing their religion with the payment of a tax. However, since the Arab invaders considered most Berbers to be pagans, they required them to convert to Islam or face death. When a tribe succumbed to Arab authority, the conquerors conscripted many Berbers as soldiers to aid in the conquest of the rest of the Barbary Coast.  

As people of North Africa adopted the religion and customs of their new Muslim rulers and the line between ruled and ruler blurred, a double standard became apparent in which Berbers were taxed and treated as an inferior people outside the faith. This disparity created unrest among the Berbers, and periodic uprisings occurred over the ensuing centuries. Of all the revolts against Arab occupation of North Africa, the most memorable was led by the legendary Berber queen Kahina. Myth can be difficult to separate from history, but it seems that this military and religious leader of the Jawara Berber tribe rallied the Berbers surrounding the Atlas Mountains in eastern Algeria in order to stave off the advance of the Umayyad leader Hasan in the seventh century. While ultimately defeated by Arab forces, Kahina is revered nonetheless alongside Juthurga and Tacfarinas as one of the most iconic figures of Pan-Berberism and the Amazigh movement today.  

The overthrow of the Umayyad Dynasty by the Shi’a-backed Abbasids in 750 allowed Islamic Berbers to assert their independence. With the cultural landscape of North Africa changed, the stage was set for a series of powerful independent Berber Islamic empires. The Fatimid Dynasty completely reorganized the Roman political organization of the region, uniting the Maghreb with the rest of the Islamic world. Later in the eleventh century, two great empires would emerge in modern-day Morocco: first

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the Almavorids followed by the Almohads. Both achieved unprecedented political unification apart from outside rule.\textsuperscript{19}

The period of the Almavorid and Almohad dynasties between the ninth and eleventh centuries CE represents perhaps the intellectual and cultural peak of Islamic civilization in North Africa, producing many famous Muslim philosophers, mathematicians, and scientific thinkers. Notably, both empires were founded and ruled by Berbers who embraced Arabic culture. Both of these later empires coincided with Berber reformist movements of the Islamic faith.\textsuperscript{20} At first, Islamic Berber leaders used the written Berber language, the dialects of which are referred to collectively today as \textit{Tamazight}, for religious books, even allowing the recitation of the Islamic Creed in Berber to suffice for conversion. However, as more Arabs moved westward, the entire culture became increasingly Arabic, including the language of the educated aristocratic class. Only in the peasant classes and isolated mountain settlements did the dialects of Tamazight remain spoken.\textsuperscript{21} Even though Berbers resisted the disappearance of their language under Roman and Byzantine rule, the centuries after the Arab arrival saw Arabic become the dominant language of the region, with some Tamazight written in Arabic script. Arab-speaking immigrants and slaves outnumbered the native Berbers, and the immense system of trade achieved by the Arab empires, stretching from al-Andalus to China, required the use of Arabic for participation in economic activity. Despite all this, the tribal Berbers managed to preserve much of their cultural customs and language in

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\textsuperscript{19} Maddy-Weitzman, \textit{The Berber Identity Movement}, 30.
\textsuperscript{20} Makilam, \textit{The Magical Life of Berber Women in Kabylia}, 10.
\textsuperscript{21} Maddy-Weitzman, \textit{The Berber Identity Movement}, 31.
\end{flushright}
more isolated locations, such as the Djurdjura and Atlas mountains, although they would increasingly become minorities in their own land.  

After the collapse of the Almohad Empire in 1269, three smaller empires—Marinids, Zayyanids, and Hafsids—fought with one another to fill the void. However, none established unified rule and stability that the region previously enjoyed and, as a result, North Africa entered a long period of intellectual decline.  

This era saw a large number of Berbers returning to a pastoral lifestyle, as well as a loss of the urban Berber elite that existed first under Roman rule and then under the intellectual courts of the Almohavids and Almohads. The Marinids, Zayyanids, and Hafsids represent the last of the unified Berber empires, after which yet another foreign empire would wield its authority over the region in the following centuries.

The Ottoman Occupation

The primary reason for the Ottoman Empire’s involvement in North Africa resulted from pleas by the coastal cities for the Ottoman Turks to oust the Spaniards from their holdings, who had begun to retaliate against North African pirates in the Mediterranean. The Turks would ultimately establish permanent control over North Africa, taking Algiers in 1525 and Tripoli in 1574. The following six centuries were dominated by the rise and fall of Ottoman influence over the region. The nature of the Ottoman’s rule, however, differed greatly from previous foreign powers. The Turks established three regencies and allowed them to operate as nearly independent states.


These regencies were ruled by *deys* (governors) and divided into what would later become Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. Algiers, in particular, developed into a prosperous city-state, acting almost autonomously apart from Istanbul. Furthermore, the Turks refused to integrate with the local population. Initially, the Ottoman Empire operated with multiple ethnicities within its ranks in an open-minded multicultural format. However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Turkish ruling class and Janissary soldiers in North Africa separated themselves from the indigenous population, resulting in the formation of distinct classes. During this time Algeria developed into a wealthy agricultural producer and exporter of manufactured goods. The Ottoman Turks transformed and modernized Algiers, which had a population of approximately 125,000 people by the seventeenth century. Simultaneously, the peasant class suffered underneath the taxes levied from Istanbul. In this context, the Berbers continued retreating into the inaccessible Atlas and Djuradjura mountains, moving closer socially to the remote village lifestyle that Berbers embody today. With the upper Turkish class in power in Algiers, the Berbers remained on the periphery, sometimes serving as mercenary troops for the *dey*. With the continuing decline of the once powerful Islamic civilization of the Maghreb and the population becoming more and more susceptible to colonization by European powers, the

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Berbers, who inspired the Europeans to name the North African coast the “Barbary Coast,” largely faded into the background of history.  

*French Colonial Rule in Algeria*

By the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire’s influence began to wane as the power of Europe’s Hapsburgs continued to grow. Fueled by an awakening capitalism and resources from North-American colonies, European powers began to assert themselves in the Mediterranean. In particular, Spain and Portugal exercised sway over Morocco and the Western Maghreb. With the Berber and Arab Muslims driven out of the Iberian Peninsula, it was Spain that invaded and briefly occupied North Africa, taking over Algiers and Oran and several other cities in order to stymie North African pirates. In 1533, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V overthrew the Ottoman puppet ruler in Tunis.

Once European fleets put an end to North African piracy, the economies of Algeria and Tunisia turned to producing grain and foodstuffs, which was subsequently traded with Europe through ports on the Mediterranean. This increased contact with Europe through trade led indirectly to France’s invasion of Algeria in 1830.

The main reason behind France’s decision to invade Algeria was a disagreement over the payment of Algerian grain exports. In the now infamous “fly whisk incident,” the French consul spoke haughtily to the *dey* about the matter, at which point the *dey* slapped him across the face with a fly whisk. In response, the French fleet blockaded the

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city. However, the deeper cause of France’s ultimate decision to invade was an effort by 
the unpopular King Charles X to distract the French population from looming domestic 
problems. Ironically, Charles died a month after the invasion began, and King Louis-Phillippe 
hesitantly inherited what would become a 162-year colonial occupation.

Algeria endured colonialism longer than any other North African colony, and 
suffered the bloodiest fight for independence. To understand the rift between Arab and 
Berber Algerians today, one must examine the process by which the two groups were 
alienated from one another, beginning with the period of French colonialism through the 
War of Independence.

The French were different from prior occupiers in that they valued not just 
taxation but also the economic output of their colonies. In addition, France promoted 
settlement of its new possession, and by 1886 there were over 400,000 French and other 
European colons.32 Nicknamed pied-noirs or “black feet,” the European settlers and their 
descendants appropriated Algeria’s best farmland starting in 1871, leaving the Muslim 
population greatly disadvantaged and vulnerable to famine. By 1936, settlers occupied 
7.7 million hectares of the best land in Algeria, or “40 [percent] of the land possessed by 
the indigenous population before the French invasion.”33

For a variety of reasons, the French thought of the Berbers differently from the 
Algerian Arabs, establishing patterns of governance that would ultimately pit Berber 
against Arab in post-colonial Algeria. The French perceived the cultural and political 
differences between the mountain dwelling, sedentary Kabyles—the largest of five 

Berber tribes in Algeria—and the pastoral Arabs of the Algerian planes. The French colonial officials highlighted these differences in order to destabilize any unified opposition to French rule and turn the Kabyles into allies. With these aims, the French resurrected and built upon the “Berber myths” originally posed by Roman and later Arab thinkers. French scholars compared the Kabyles to primitive Scotsmen or Gauls that could be enlightened by European culture. In a sense, the French saw themselves as the heirs to the Romans, finishing the work of civilizing the primitive Kabyles under the moral banner of the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) philosophy of French colonialism. Therefore, the French afforded the Kabyles more opportunities for education and self-advancement in the new colonial society than the Arab population. While these opportunities were still meager when compared to the education offered to *pied-noir* children, the French built far more schools in Kabylia than the rest of Algeria. As a result, by the twentieth century, Kabyles were better educated in French, and achieved more high paying jobs in urban centers than Algerian Arabs.

The French retained this model despite the fierce resistance of the Kabyle people. Due to the inaccessibility of their remote mountainous villages, the Kabyles resisted occupation until the 1850s and were the last segment of the population to come firmly under French authority. Soon after, they led an organized revolt throughout Kabylia in 1871 that nearly upset the stability of the entire colony. Throughout French occupation, the Kabyle’s fierce resentment of colonial rule sat in contrast to French attempts to use and assimilate the Kabyles for their own advantage.34

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Ironically, France’s efforts to educate the Kabyles resulted in them taking charge of the independence movement in the 1950s. Discontentment grew among these educated elites, who saw discrepancies between the ideals of the French Republic and the unfair treatment of Algerian Muslims. In addition, the encouraged emigration of some 200,000 Algerian men to France as replacements for Frenchmen in factories and on the frontlines during World War I greatly strained Algerian society, especially in Kabylia. 35 Advocates for Algerian independence during this period began to use nonviolent political avenues modeled after European ones, such as political organizations and lobby groups. Political leader Messali Hadj formed the first major group, l’Étoile nord-africaine or the “North-African Star,” which promoted and lobbied for Algerian independence. However, when French authorities broke up the organization’s paramilitary branch, l’Opération Spéciale, members of the group went on to form the party of consequence in the war for independence: the FLN (Front Libération Nationale, or National Liberation Front).

Through a combination of terrorist and guerrilla tactics, the FLN played the decisive role in making France accept Algerian autonomy in 1962. The road to independence, however, was marked by horrible atrocities on both sides, as fear gripped both the Muslim population and the European pied-noirs. The use of torture by French paratroopers during the Battle of Algiers has only recently come more fully to light.

In 1962, French President Charles de Gaulle declared Algeria an independent state, and for the first time in history Algeria became a self-governing nation. The events immediately following independence set the course for Berber-Arab relations for the next half-century. Despite near crippling internal division, the FLN held on to control over Algeria through the conflict and after the country’s independence. However, tension

between its Berber and Arab leaders came to a head immediately following Algeria’s birth as a nation.

During the war, a rift had already begun to form between the predominantly Berber FLN force within Algeria led by Ramdane Abane, and the mostly Arab army waiting in the wings along the Moroccan and Tunisian borders. This force was led by the provisional government in exile, headed by Ben Bella. After independence, the external army, led by Colonel Houari Boumediene, seized power and made Ben Bella the first president of Algeria. Under Bella, the vision of the young nation would take a distinctly Arabic character, and one that would leave the Berbers either out of the picture or pegged as enemies of the state. The Kabyles, who played the major role in starting the independence movement, now felt isolated and betrayed by their own nation.36

As the newly appointed president of Algeria, Bella began enacting measures of nation building. Culturally, this meant establishing a homogeneous national identity, firmly planted in the Arabic ethnicity. As Bella famously stated in a speech in 1962: “Nous sommes des Arabes” (We are Arabs). Soon after independence, Hocine Ait Ahmed, a Kabyle and original FLN member, formed an armed opposition group against Bella’s regime but was quickly defeated. Although not explicitly fighting for Kabyle representation in the government, Bella’s administration perceived the divide between Arab and Kabyle and sent the army into Kabylia to stamp out the movement, where Kabyles were still reeling from the War of Independence.37 The ordeal set the tone for


continued Kabyle-Arab relations in Algeria, and the now Arab-dominated FLN would hold singular power in the Algerian government for the next three decades.

As a minority group, the Kabyles have been defined in recent history by a desire to preserve traditions and adapt to the many imposed socio-political changes. Many Kabyle singer-songwriters have become pioneers in forging the path of cultural preservation and relevancy, both in postcolonial Algeria and France. Even through innovative new sounds and styles, Kabyle musicians today draw heavily on their ancestral roots, if from the distant vantage point of a Parisian banlieue (suburban) neighborhood. In the next chapter, I examine how the changing Kabyle culture is reflected by its music.
Chapter 3: Cultural and Musical Background of the Kabyles

Cultural Background of the Kabyle People

Ever since the French first invaded Kabylia, scholars have viewed its society, with its isolated mountain-peak villages, as static and primitive. This perception led colonial leaders to consider the Kabyle people as malleable and a potential ally. Others viewed the Kabyles as stuck in a time capsule, providing a glimpse of early human culture. However, an examination of the history of the region challenges these interpretations and shows that such views ignore the reality of the changes that the Berbers have undergone in the past several centuries. For the Kabyles specifically, the Fatimid Dynasty from the eleventh century provides a prominent example of a prior time in history in which the ancestors of the Kabyles organized themselves into a hierarchical, imperial empire.38 However, modern Kabyle society is indeed egalitarian, containing little hierarchy beyond that found in villages. These present-day characteristics evince the subjugated and threatened state that the Kabyles have felt themselves to be in over the past 500 years.39

After the last of the great Islamic Berber empires of the Middle Ages, it seems that the Kabyles moved increasingly into the isolated areas of the Djurdjura and Atlas mountains during the subsequent period of Ottoman rule. This geographical shift in Berber settlements from lower elevations to remote mountainous locations offers little obvious advantages other than that of security from foreign invaders. By the time of French

39. Ibid., 247.
colonialism, the Kabyles had been relegated to the periphery of Algerian politics and culture.40

The strict separation of the sexes and a general sense of duality pervade every aspect of Kabyle life. During the day, most men work in the more distant grain fields and fruit orchards, while the women remain within the house and around the village. The Tadjmaat, or meeting house, is an exclusively male space, and traditionally the only public building within a Kabyle village. Tribal elders gather there to discuss public matters and render fines for crime and defiance of social norms in the community. This singular authority in the village acts as both civic governing body and police force in a society without large-scale governance. As Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress point out, “[it is] hard to estimate the degree of social control exercised by a Berber community.”41 For women, the equivalent rendezvous point is the fountain or tala. The absence of men during the day allows women greater freedom to move around within the village space, although the primary accepted place of work and life for women remains within the private household and garden, which are out of public view.42

Within her domain, the Kabyle woman is respected and highly regarded. The Kabyles attribute magical powers to the matriarch of the household, who is essential for the continuity of the family and the wellbeing of the society. Each one of her actions, and even her house itself, is considered to be sacred.43 Thus the Kabyles do not consider the division of roles and space between men and women to be the case of male domination

41. Ibid., 249, 255.
42. Makilam, The Magical Life of Berber Women in Kabylia, 152.
over women but rather one of mutually exclusive roles, with both parts essential for the life and vitality of the family. The importance of the seemingly every day domestic activities of the matriarch becomes especially prominent during celebratory events, such as marriages and births, especially when considering the consequential role that women’s traditional music plays in illuminating these ceremonies and rituals. Mahfoufi notes that in the Kabyle mindset, music exists solely for such events, exhibiting the centrality of household activities, the strict delegation of roles, and the strong sense of the collective within the society.44

Women play a central role in Berber spirituality as well, particularly with respect to the veneration of ancestors. This function is closely tied to the familial organization of the society in which groups define themselves by kinship and common ancestral bonds to determine wards, clans, and tribes, as well as friends and foes. Each ward (extended family group) will typically have its own sanctuary over the tomb of their founding ancestor. Interestingly, only women may occupy these spaces. The women of the village will frequent the sanctuaries, gather to cook ceremonial meals, and make pilgrimages there during marriage ceremonies.45

With the adoption of the Islamic faith, many components of these traditional beliefs were carried over into Shi’a Muslim practice, and perception of venerated ancestors was often changed into that of a Muslim saint. As religious leaders transformed many important tombs and sites of pilgrimage into mosques, the primary role played by

44. Mahfoufi, *Chants de femmes*, 39.
women at those sites shifted to men. Partly for this reason, the focus of women’s spirituality turned increasingly to the private, domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{46}

Much can be gleaned about the Kabyle culture and their worldview by looking at the layout of the household. A home usually consists of one main room, with side spaces for storage. Most daily activities, including weaving, cooking, and sleeping, occur within this main space. Everything centers on the hearth, located in the “wall of light,” or the wall opposite to the door. Even within this space, different activities have a particular location in which they are to take place.\textsuperscript{47} Idir expounds on these domestic traditions in his song “A Vava Inouva,” the inclusion of which carries great ideological significance and nostalgic power for the Kabyle listener.\textsuperscript{48}

The layout of a Kabyle village not only embodies the near-dizzying array of familial relationships within the community but displays the importance of family ties as well. The smallest family unit, or \textit{axxam}, has newer dwellings connected to it around a central courtyard. This larger family unit, or \textit{taxxerrubt}, connects with several others inhabited by relatives to form an \textit{adrum} or grouping of households. Narrow pathways and alleys between all of these structures mark boundaries of kinship and connect to the more public roadways.\textsuperscript{49}

These demarcations come with strict rules for how strangers are to enter and interact with the village. In most cases, outsiders may not enter the village proper unless permitted by a resident. Before a man may enter an adrum, he must declare his identity

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\textsuperscript{46} Makilam, \textit{The Magical Life of Berber Women in Kabylia}, 146.
\textsuperscript{47} Brett and Fentress, \textit{The Berbers}, 237.
\textsuperscript{48} Goodman, \textit{Berber Culture on the World Stage}, 63.
\textsuperscript{49} Brett and Fentress, \textit{The Berbers}, 144.
\end{flushleft}
from outside before entrance is permitted. The myriad social protocols for outsiders and villagers alike reveal the great value placed on privacy and security from outside forces, as well as the strong collective mentality of the society.\textsuperscript{50}

The events of the twentieth century affecting Algeria had a profound impact on traditional Kabyle society. As noted previously, the massive emigration of Kabyle men as well as entire families between World Wars I and II greatly affected the social fabric of the Kabyle village. As a result, women had to take on many tasks that were traditionally reserved for men. This situation, combined with an increased exposure to the outside world, caused the Kabyles to turn away from many cultural practices. For example, the changing means of work in Kabylia affected traditional women’s work songs by making them less likely to be sung. After World War II, the more traditional agricultural means of earning a living, such as harvesting figs or olives, became less profitable as manufacturing jobs in Algiers, Oran, or cities in France became available. Such shifts in Kabyle society brought changes to all aspects of daily life.\textsuperscript{51} Today, many Kabyles earn university degrees and, as a result, have become engineers, teachers, business owners, and other white-collar professionals. However, rapid societal changes have brought an increase in crime, drugs, and juvenile problems. In many villages, a large portion of the Kabyle population visits Algeria during the summer to see family but resides in France the rest of the year. This trend of emigration over the past century has disrupted the process of passing on cultural traditions, especially from older women to young girls. Despite living in a foreign country, Kabyles in France have managed to retain some form

\textsuperscript{50} Makilam, \textit{The Magical Life of Berber Women in Kabylia}, 170.

\textsuperscript{51} Mahfoufi, \textit{Chants de femmes}, 32–34.
of village community within neighborhoods in French cities.\textsuperscript{52} As the Berberism movement continues in Kabylia and across North Africa, Berbers must grapple with their own changing identity and the reality of increasing cultural differences between Berbers in Algeria, along with those who have immigrated to Europe.

\textit{The Kabyle Immigrant Community in France}

The cultural history of the Kabyle people is intricately tied to the diaspora of Kabyle immigrants and descendants of immigrants living in France. In recent decades, much attention has been given in France to the political, social, and racial tensions involving the descendants of Algerian immigrants living in the country’s metropolitan areas. Expressed first in the second-generation immigrant cultural movement in the 1980s, followed by the resurgence of a transnational Berberist movement in the 1990s, these tensions reflect the fundamental divide between the universalist French ideal of the Republic in which the citizens are assimilated into French culture, and the French Algerian demand of their “right to difference” and seeking to navigate through cultural particularity and assimilation.\textsuperscript{53} Kabyle immigrants and their children faced immense cultural shock that in many ways paralleled the massive social changes occurring in Kabylia. Despite the social and economic challenges of the past several decades, the Kabyle communities in France and Algeria have played a central role in continuing Berber advocacy and defining what it means to be Kabyle in the modern era.

\textsuperscript{52} Makilam, \textit{The Magical Life of Berber Women in Kabylia}, 174.

\textsuperscript{53} Paul A. Silverstein, \textit{Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 240.
The separation of Kabyle immigrants from their village structure placed a great strain on first and second-generation Kabyles living in France. First-generation families held onto the hope of moving back to Algeria; however, economic downturns in both countries and internal strife made the move nearly impossible. During this generation, the social structure of the village was virtually replicated in neighborhoods in Paris and other French cities. Nevertheless, the absence of domestic and village customs prevented the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next, creating a distinct feeling of nostalgia and loss. Their children, later labeled the Beur generation, lived in flux between two worlds and two identities. Upon visiting their parents’ homes in Algeria, they were increasingly treated as foreigners by villagers. Just as Algerian President Houari Boumedienne undertook massive forced village relocation projects in Kabylia, the French government sought to break old FLN affiliations and networks among immigrants in France through forced relocation to government housing.

Starting in the mid-1960s, the French government sought to relocate the Algerian immigrants from their shantytowns on the outskirts of Paris to modern, low-income housing complexes in the city’s suburbs. Now notoriously referred to as the banlieues (suburbs) of Paris, these cités or industrialized, high-rise housing projects were meant to be temporary but continue to be in use today. Under the state-subsidized system, employers were able to purchase the apartments and then sublet them to their employees. Now dilapidated from decades of overuse, the ring of banlieues around Paris carries the

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54. Beur is a colloquial term formed by the reversal of syllables in the French word Arabe. It corresponds to the descendants of North African immigrants living in France and their urban culture.

stigma of delinquency, crime, and anger against society. The government has gradually closed some complexes as they became uninhabitable, creating an increasing shortage of housing and a concomitant rise in homelessness. Their sterile, industrialized appearance corresponds to the economic and psychological depression of the immigrant community. Serving as a visual reminder of social and cultural difference, these once hopeful initiatives of cultural assimilation now serve to exacerbate a divide between France française (majority ethnic group in France, descended from the Celts and Gauls) and French of North African descent.

Out of this marginalized community came the Beur cultural movement among second-generation North African immigrants in the 1980s, who sought to define themselves in terms of a new hybrid of French and Maghrebian culture. Because of the large proportion of Kabyles among immigrants, the movement took on a distinctly Berberist character. In particular, Kabyles launched the grassroots radio station Radio Beur in Paris in the late 1970s. As discussed in the following section of this chapter, Radio Beur played a crucial role in the dissemination of the music of New Song Kabyle Artists like Idir, Aït Menguellet, Matoub Lounès, Ferhat Mehenni, and others.56 The French government also encouraged the proliferation of Berber artists, writers and scholars, seeking to divert sectarian allegiances of immigrant descendants away from sectarian ties to Algeria.57

The 1990s saw a rise in xenophobia, racism, and fear of Islamic terrorism in France that fed into the popular view of the banlieues as dangerous sections of the city.

56. Silverstein, Algeria in France, 71.

57. Ibid., 177.
characterized by constant violence. The third generation of Kabyle immigrants growing up during this period faced ever-higher unemployment, exacerbated by increasing alienation by French society. Lack of social mobility and a flawed urban school system engendered a sense of hopelessness for prospects of getting out of the cités. Richard Derderian proposes that urban immigrant youths suffer from chronic amnesia, as their lack of a continuous cultural memory produces a “generation zero”—that is, a new generation of youths that must discover and reinvent themselves. Each new generation feels the weight of a cyclical history in which the social and economic problems of the urban immigrant community are never solved, contributing to a sense of anger and cynicism toward the government.58

The influence of Berberism increased further after the collapse of the Beur cultural movement of the 1980s, and French North Africans were left once again trying to envision their cultural identity.59 Among other organizations in the 1980s, the Berber Cultural Association (ACB) provided a meeting place for Berber scholars, authors, musicians, and political refugees from Algeria to promote Berber cultural awareness among its own people. The group encouraged the dissemination of written Tamazight, and today the language is the second-most popular “secondary” language to be chosen for written comprehension in French secondary schools.60 The Berber World Congress, based largely in France, lobbies the UN and the international community for increased Berber rights and recognition. As will be discussed below, contemporary Kabyle

59. Silverstein, Algeria in France, 183.
60. Ibid., 175.
musicians continue to explore what it means to be a Berber as they create new and hybrid styles of music.

Through the Berberist Movement, Kabyles living in France have partially formed their identity through association across national borders, and yet continue to chart this identity within the postcolonial, socialist republic. In this new century, Kabyles in France must grapple with recovering their own cultural memory by decoding their colonial past, overcoming prejudices, and discovering a sustainable existence within an assimilatory yet pluralist France, even as their distinctive identity becomes amalgamated into the urban Beur culture. Likewise, Algerian Kabyles continue to deal with declining village populations and loss of traditions as more young Kabyles move away to cities and the descendants of immigrants in France retain only superficial ties through short holiday visits to their ancestral homeland. Still, the modern rendition of Kabyle culture seems as alive as ever through continuing political and cultural initiatives, of which modern Kabyle music plays an essential part.

Aesthetics of Traditional Kabyle Music

In traditional Kabyle culture, music is tied closely with the collective mentality pervasive in village life. Music exists exclusively for certain group events as defined by society. Consequently, a professional career as a musician is frowned upon in Kabyle culture. In a society where any individual expression apart from the communal voice is highly discouraged, musicians, and especially individual singers, are regarded with suspicion and even disdain within family units. Nevertheless, professional traveling
musicians play a central role in the major events of the village, such as marriage ceremonies, births, and funerals.\textsuperscript{61}

The music of all Berber tribes is predominantly vocal, with a limited use of instrumentation. It features monophonic textures, with hints of heterophony through vocal ornamentation and minute pitch differences in non-tempered wind instruments. This heterophonic element, along with the instances of quarter-tone and three-quarter-tone steps in melodies, most likely derives from Arabic practice.\textsuperscript{62} Traditionally, Kabyle scales consist of intervals ranging from a semitone to a major third. They span a relatively limited range of a fifth to a seventh, consisting of four to five notes. Consequently, melodies always proceed stepwise. Rather than centering on a tonic note, Kabyle scales achieve their tonal stability via several strategically placed cadential pitches within a melody.\textsuperscript{63} These pitches can be compared to non-tonic notes that resolve to tonic ones in a tonal melody. All of these characteristics point to the preference for vocal genres and the preponderance of amateur vocal traditions passed down from generation to generation in Kabyle villages.

Example 3.1 shows the first strophe of a celebration song that is to be sung by two half-choirs of women during a new birth ceremony.\textsuperscript{64} It consists of a binary phrase structure, with two sub-phrases (a and b) in the first phrase A and two analogous sub-phrases (c and d) comprising the second phrase A’. The open notehead at the end of each subphrase is held for several seconds, with slight pauses between the two subphrases. The

\textsuperscript{61} Mahfoufi, \textit{Chants de femmes}, 39.

\textsuperscript{62} Mahfoufi, \textit{Musiques du monde berbère}, 34.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 240.

\textsuperscript{64} Source: Mahfoufi, \textit{Chants de femmes}, 57–66, 242.
Example 3.1: A Traditional Kabyle Song Melody

final A♭ at the end of phrase A represents the “internal cadential pitch” of the key, which coincidentally also serves as the “final cadential pitch” at the end of phrase A’. In the typical antiphonal Kabyle style, half of the women singers will finish the first phrase by holding the A♭ for several seconds, after which the other singers take over with the following phrase on the same pitch. The melody contains a mixture of simple and composite notes, as dictated by the syllables of the text.

Types of Traditional Music

Within the context of Kabyle village life are several broad categories of music, divided into professional and non-professional types, in addition to a third amateur “folk” genre passed down through family tradition. The women of the village carry the responsibility of retaining and passing on the traditional folk music of the Kabyle people. Due to the notion that Kabyle women are isolated from the outside world, the genre of women’s song has been regarded as the best representation of “traditional” or “authentic” Kabyle music at a time when outside influences are mixing with the once-secluded village culture.
Each of these traditional genres uses various instrumentations and demands different social expectations from musicians. As mentioned above, professional musicians provide entertainment for ceremonies highlighting events in village life, such as births, marriages, circumcisions, and religious festivals. The shame surrounding music as a full-time profession discourages the hiring of relatives, and thus professional musicians generally come from outside the village. They most commonly perform in an idebbalen ensemble or all-male instrumental quartet, comprised of two drummers (playing the ttbel or abendayer) and two reed players (playing an oboe-like instrument called the lyida [see Figure 3.1]). Another variation of this grouping uses four drummers in an all-percussion ensemble. Each of these various ensembles has its own set of standard repertoires. This music, moreover, contains elements of Turkish musical practice from the time of the Ottoman occupation, such as the use of gradually increasing tempos in most compositions.  

This quartet has become a symbol for traditional Kabyle music and culture, as it appears in the songs of several contemporary artists promoting pan-Berber and Kabyle rights. Finally, non-professional musicians called “street poets” travel from door to door, looking for a sick person to bless and heal, or for a festival or ceremony to play in for hire. These ensembles will also be hired for family and village events, but are usually hired informally at the time of the event and not in advance.

Regarded as the quintessential genre of traditional Kabyle music, women’s vocal repertoires embody the soul of Kabyle village culture. From wedding songs to lullabies to work songs, they pervade every aspect of village life. Along with the emphasis placed on community, the practice of women’s musical activities highlights traditional gender roles

65. Mahfoufi, Chants de femmes, 223.
and the strict separation of men and women in Kabyle society. The extensive repertoire of women’s vocal music and dance are typically experienced and performed only by women, and usually away from the presence of men. The men have their own, more limited repertoire and times for experiencing music. In a few circumstances, however, men and women do experience music together. For instance, on day three of a four-day marriage ceremony, the groom’s wedding party walks in festive procession to the house of the bride, accompanied by professional drum and lyida ensembles, along with a women’s antiphonal choir singing songs of celebration.\\[68\\]

Larger vocal ensembles performing during specific ceremonies and festivals usually take the form of an antiphonal choir of around a dozen female singers. They may

\[\text{Musician\ with\ a\ Ghaita\ Musicien\ la\ ghaita/ [accessed November 10, 2012].}\]


\[68\text{. Mahfoufi, }Chants de femmes, 43.\]
also feature a call-and-response arrangement with a solo leader. In the case of the celebration of a new birth, for example, women from nearby houses will arrive at the home of the new mother and sing songs of joy and blessing for the new child in a semicircle around the mother’s bedside.  

*Cha’bi and the Beginning of Modern Kabyle Song*

The twentieth century saw the creation of new popular music styles in North Africa that reflected the societal changes occurring across the region. With the mass migration of people to the cities of Algeria came a new poor urban class. Out of the impoverished sections of Algiers emerged the popular genre known as cha’bi. In contrast to more classical genres of Arab music, cha’bi expressed the everyday struggles and social and economic ills of the ordinary person.

Based largely on Andalusian harmonies and melodic structure, cha’bi borrows from a myriad of musical traditions. The form originated from the multimovement Milhûn suite from Morocco, with couplets of sung Arabic moral poetry (*bayt*) and instrumental interludes (*istikhbar*). A cha’bi performance typically opens with an instrumental solo on the oud or Berber mandole, establishing the mode of the section (see Figure 3.2 for pictures of cha’bi instruments). Other instruments like the violin, banjo, and guitar comment on the melodic phrase, while a piano may also contribute open, tremolo octaves, creating a delayed, heterophonic effect. The solo voice then sings a *bayt* in the established mode, accompanied by the solo instrument and a host of supporting

69. Mahfoufi, *Chants de femmes*, 58.


Figure 3.2: Instruments Used in *Cha’bi*

Abdelli with a Berber mandole

[Nay](#)  

[Darbouka](#)

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73. “McDaniel College,” [http://www2.mcdaniel.edu/rarmstrong/elements/ud.htm](http://www2.mcdaniel.edu/rarmstrong/elements/ud.htm) [accessed February 20, 2013].


instruments, such as a violin-based ensemble, banjo, nay, and the darbouka (hand drum) and *tar* for Arabic-based percussion.\(^{76}\) Cha’bi also borrows from Gnaoua rhythms from the Sahara. The diverse elements in the development of the genre reflect the new multiethnic nature of Algeria’s cities as well as in the countryside of Kabylia.\(^{77}\)

Berbers in Algeria and Morocco also played a major role in the development of cha’bi, and the genre serves as the largest precursor to modern Kabyle song. As economic challenges during the early twentieth century in Kabylia pushed more Kabyles out of the isolated villages and into the urban centers of Algiers and Oran, Kabyle musicians began living side-by-side with Arabs and adopted elements of Arabic music. Migrant Kabyles related to the lyrics about the sufferings of everyday people. Kabyle singers like El Nourredine, Cheikh El Hasnaoui, and El Anka appropriated the genre and contributed to its development in Algeria and France.\(^{78}\)

The Westernized New Song style among Kabyle musicians grew out of this earlier popular genre in Algeria. Many Kabyle artists today have received some form of training in cha’bi and incorporate the genre into their recordings. Abderrahmane Abdelli and Aït Menguellet (b. 1950) in particular have carried the qualities of this genre into the New Song generation. Perhaps more than any other popular Kabyle artist today, Abderrahmane Abdelli models his musical style and form on Algerian cha’bi. Many of his songs are introduced with an improvised oud solo with free meter, similar to the alternating structure of instrumental interlude and sung poetry in cha’bi. Abdelli


\(^{77}\) Ibid.

\(^{78}\) Kitchell, “The Development of Kabyle Song,” 42.
identifies his greatest influence to be El Hasnooui. While Menguellet prefers the acoustic guitar and sings in Kabyle and not Arabic, his rich and philosophic lyrics resemble the Arabic moral poetry of traditional cha’bi. Most Kabyles praise Menguellet for his philosophic poetry as much as his music. The strophic form of his lyrics with instrumental interludes also reflects the typical form of cha’bi.

**The “Third Generation” and the Shift to the New Kabyle Song**

Several major factors contributed to the change in musical style and ideological focus of popular Kabyle song in the early 1970s. On one hand, the transition occurred gradually over a number of decades with the migration of hundreds of thousands of Kabyle workers to urban centers in Algeria and France. On the other, the change was abrupt, reflecting the backlash of Kabyles to the assimilatory measures enforced in the years immediately following Algeria’s independence from France.

Without a doubt, Algeria’s long and tumultuous relationship with France profoundly affected the musical styles of Kabyle artists and the political sentiments in their lyrics. Immigrants residing in France were exposed to Western musical practices, and soon appropriated elements of Western harmony and instrumentation in their music. Moreover, independent recording and far-reaching dissemination of Kabyle music could not have occurred within Algeria with its more limited resources and political upheaval as it did in France. After independence, severe government censoring stifled the dissemination of Berber artistic expression, forcing many Third Generation artists to migrate to Paris.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{79} Mahfoufi, *Chants kabyles de la guerre d'indépendance*, 31.
The shift from large, orchestral textures to sparser, Western rock ones in some sense represents the birth of the Kabyle New Song style. Although the distinct change to a folk-rock idiom did not occur until the 1970s, precedents can be found in the music of Algerians migrating to France beginning in the 1930s. As Kabyle immigrant communities became established in France’s metropolitan areas, workers-turned-musicians performed and recorded with the Radio-Paris Kabyle orchestra and Arabic orchestra in Paris. Back in French-controlled Algeria, Kabyle musicians were encouraged to record with the state-sponsored Kabyle National Orchestra. All of these large string ensembles resembled the Egyptian model for Westernized Arabic orchestras and reflected the collaboration between Arab and Kabyle musicians during this time. In turn, amateur Kabyle musicians would perform informally at Kabyle-run cafés in Paris. One of the first popular Kabyle immigrant musicians to modernize Kabyle song (as an alternative to the Arab-style orchestras) was Slimane Azem (1918–83). Using only a guitar and his voice, he established in his recordings the model for the next generation of Kabyle musicians who would further westernize Kabyle song, and affirmed the possibility that Kabyle music could be widely disseminated. In fact, the advent of radios in Kabylia, in conjunction with the recordings of Azem and others like him, replaced traditional folk singing within the homes of villages.

The sudden change in Kabyle musical style came as a result of the strong reaction to the Algerian government’s efforts to marginalize the cultural identity of the Kabyle people. It was precisely the newly formed government’s concern over distancing itself from France that caused it to persecute its minority groups, namely the five major Berber

tribes residing within its borders. Central to the struggle between Arab cultural hegemony and Berber cultural preservation lay the issue of language. Colonialism had finally been purged from the Maghreb, and the use of French served as a constant reminder of a humiliating and troubled past. Desperate to recover the soul of a nation that had been stifled for so long, the Algerian government determined that the best alternative to Western civilization was found in Egypt, the emblem of the secular modern Arabic state. With this political assertion came the firm establishment of Modern Standard Arabic as the new national language. Not only was Arabic (albeit a North African dialect) the first language of the Arab majority population, it was also held in great esteem because of its association with Islam and past Arabic civilizations. Finally, the government took measures to change the cultural, linguistic, and religious landscape of its people through the hiring of proper Arabic school teachers from Egypt.81

Beginning with the cancellation of Berber studies at the University of Algiers in 1971, the government implemented a series of measures meant to eliminate the Berber culture and language and assimilate all minority groups into a homogeneous Arab state. Other anti-Berber sanctions included the outlawing of Berber periodicals in 1976, several bans on performances by Aït Menguellet, and the cancellation of an academic conference on Berber art at the University of Tizi Ouzou, the ultimate straw that sparked the riots of the Berber Spring in 1980.82

Confronted by this immense pressure to eliminate their cultural identity, Algerian Berbers felt betrayed by the freshly won independence for which they had fought and

82. Cherbi and Khouas, Chanson kabyle et identité berbère, 25.
longed. All of these factors became the impetus for the Kabyle backlash as demonstrated in linguistic and lyrical shifts in the New Song artists of the 1970s. In their desire to distance themselves from all Arabic influences, Kabyle artists stopped using any Arabic in their songs and searched for alternatives to the sound of the Egyptian-style Arabic orchestra. Unlike the previous generation, third-generation Kabyle musicians refused to associate with Arab performers, as Kabyles felt their cultural identity to be increasingly threatened by the Algerian government. Likewise, the lyrical content of Kabyle song after 1973 would gain a distinctly political edge. Kabyle songwriters directed their musical attacks at the Algerian government and called for a Pan-Berber awareness among the various tribes across North Africa. 83

Kabyle musicians sought to combat the government’s accusations of Berber culture as outdated, backwards, and irrelevant by reimagining symbols of traditional village culture within modern musical contexts. For example, Idir reharmonized traditional Kabyle lullabies and women’s songs with Western chordal progressions in the style of Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, and the Beatles in his 1973 album, A Vava Inouva. In the famous title track of the album, Idir subtly criticized the Algerian government’s efforts at cultural homogenization by simultaneously valorizing Kabyle culture as well as modernizing it. The reworking of the lyrics, namely by using the chorus and adding new verses to it, created contemporary political meaning by adding an extra layer of narrative commentary to the original, anonymous text. In essence, this new meaning was metaphorical. The ogre in the text of the original refrain, standing ominously outside a village house, symbolized outside forces threatening the Kabyle

83. Cherbi and Khouas, Chanson kabyle et identité berbère, 43.
people, ready to swallow up Amazigh culture and make it vanish forever. Every element of the text’s story creates an intense feeling of nostalgia for any Kabyle relating their own childhood memories to the scene. The fact that the song is reharmonized and infused with Western elements does not diminish the importance of Amazigh culture, but seems to revalorize it, in the sense that it proves its worth to the modern world and to the rest of Algeria.\textsuperscript{84}

This blending of traditional oral and musical elements with a Western folk-rock sound helped to preserve the Kabyle culture while also modernizing it, which was the ultimate test of legitimacy in the eyes of the Algerian government.\textsuperscript{85} Kabyle New Song presented a counterargument to the attempted ossification of its culture by the government at state-sponsored Algerian cultural festivals. In this more modern style, Kabyles could take hold of a sense of identity and coalesce underneath a single politico-cultural banner that not only acknowledged the cultural heritage of the Kabyle people but also emphasized the currency and forward-looking stance of the culture. Such a message of cultural legitimacy with a clear reliance on Western (that is, French) civilization posed an obvious threat to the new government’s vision of a modern, secular Arab state which, because of the bitter legacy of colonialism, meant distancing the new independent country from France and anything Western as much as possible. This tension over the place of Berbers in Algeria’s cultural identity has come to define Kabyle musical expression over the past forty years, as music continues to play a key role in Kabyle political discontent and the formation of cultural identity.

\textsuperscript{84} Goodman, \textit{Berber Culture on the World Stage}, 55, 61–64.

\textsuperscript{85} Cherbi and Khouas, \textit{Chanson kabyle et identité berbère}, 46.
In the following decades, the Kabyle immigrant population in France continued to play a central role in the development of contemporary Berber music. Through the Beur cultural movement and toward the new millennium, Berber musicians experimented with the blend of cha’bi and raï, Western hip-hop and electronic music with lyrics in Tamazight, Arabic and French. Artists like Idir, Massi, and Abdelli embarked on innovative collaborations with French Kabyle groups, producing new sounds and subgenres.86 Today the variety of Kabyle musical expression in France and the rise in the transnational Berber movement in Algeria sustains the voice of the large population of Kabyle immigrant descendants living in France and the Berber community in Algeria, even as the two populations grow increasingly distant from one another.

86. Silverstein, Algeria in France, 164, 171.
Chapter 4: Musical Analysis of Songs by Contemporary Kabyle Artists

Introduction

The following analyses provide a cross-section of the rich and varied landscape of contemporary Kabyle music, revealing common trends while also displaying the variety of musical styles and aesthetics among its associated artists. Idir and Aït Menguellet represent the continuity of the style and ideals of the New Song Movement from the 1970s to the present. Iness Mezel and Souad Massi both exemplify the rising prominence of female Kabyle artists and the intersection of the fight for women’s rights and Berber cultural recognition. Although some artists like Takfarinas place their Berber identity at the forefront of their musical personality, others like Menguellet take a more tangential approach in order to reach a broader audience. Considered together, these five musicians run the gamut of musical styles, but nevertheless come together under shared themes of political advocacy, blending with Western styles, and affinity for collaboration with musicians of other cultures.

“Azoule” by Takfarinas

Since the late 1970s, Takfarinas (Hassen Zermani, [b. 1958]) has remained one of the most faithful and overtly political songwriters of the Berberist cause. Approximately from the same generation as Idir and Matoub Lounès, Takfarinas continues to convey the message of the Kabyle people through his music. His song “Azoule” (2004) typifies his dedication and demonstrates several of the political and musical trends in contemporary Kabyle song.
As a collaboration between Takarinas and Moroccan Berber singer Hassane Idbassaid, “Azoule” embodies the vision of a pan-Berber identity. The title is the traditional Berber greeting in the Tamazight language. In the song’s introduction, men and women are heard welcoming one another with this greeting. Takfarinas and Idbassaid begin with the chorus, extending the greeting to all the Berber tribes and ending with the line “we deserve freedom.” In essence, the whole opening of the song creates the effect of a rallying cry for Berbers to come together as a single people and demand their rights:

Tak: Greetings brother Moroccan  
Idb: Greetings to my Algerian brother  
Tak: Greetings to the Amazigh there  
Together: You deserve freedom  

Tak: Greetings to the Mauritanian and Tunisian  
Idb: Greetings to my Libyan brother  
Together: We deserve freedom

The lyrics of the first verse express hope for the future of the Berber people as placed in the awakening of a pan-Berber identity across tribal and national lines:

Tak: For so many centuries  
We have searched for ourselves and have not despaired  
I believe, blood brother, one day we will find ourselves  

Now that we have met each other, my brother,  
I believe that we will attain our desires

In addition to the content of the lyrics, Takfarinas conveys the pan-Berberist message by incorporating many traditional Berber instruments. In doing so, he not only promotes a sense of unity among the various tribes but also seeks to highlight distinctions between Arabic and Berber music. To accomplish this, Takfarinas uses traditional

instruments strategically, starting with the opening material of the song, which later forms the basis of an instrumental refrain between each verse (see Example 4.1). This refrain can be divided into two sections featuring two melodies. The initial melody imitates those associated with the *lyida* (Kabyle double-reed instrument; see Figure 4.1 for pictures of all instruments) or Tunisian ghaita (also double reed). The second melody then enters, emulating melodies associated with a *mizwid* (bagpipes). Combined with typical dotted Berber rhythms in the percussion, the texture approximates the sound of an idebbalen ensemble. This ensemble, so central to traditional village life, has

Example 4.1: Lyida and Mizwid Melodies of the Instrumental Refrain

Note: played as $\frac{3}{8}$.

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88. Mahfoufi, *Chants de femmes*, 220.

89. All transcriptions are mine unless indicated otherwise.
Figure 4.1: Pictures of Referenced Instruments and Ensembles

Lyida or Ghaita (double reed)\(^{90}\)

Mizwid (bagpipe)\(^{91}\)

*Gimbri* (three-stringed lute)\(^{92}\)

Idebbalen ensemble\(^{93}\)

Instruments from left to right: Ttbel drum, 2 ghaiten, bendir drum

*Gaspa* (*chaoui* flute)\(^{94}\)

\(^{90}\) Rachim Naid, “Musician with a Ghaita,” http://www.lurvely.com/photo/4272681318/Musician_with_a_Rhaita_Musicien_la_ghai\(t\)a/ [accessed November 10, 2012]. I have included pictures of the ly\(\text{i}\)dia and idebbalen ensemble again from Figure 3.1 (see p. 35) to facilitate my discussion of “Azoule.”


become one of the most recognizable symbols of Kabyle village culture. In “Azoule,”
this texture of ttbel and bendir is heard in the introduction before the entrance of the
drums and bass. The repetitive nature of the two instrumental melodies, their constant
return to the final cadential note, and their limited range all characterize traditional
Kabyle melodies. The held E♭ in the first melody functions as an interior cadence, similar
in type to those found in the antecedent phrases of Kabyle women’s songs.⁹⁵ A gaspa
(chaoui flute) and gimbri (three-stringed lute) can also be heard during the improvisatory
refrain following the third verse. Takfarinas incorporates all of these intentional stylistic
components to emphasize the qualities associated with Berber music.

Besides emphasizing the traits of Berber music, Takfarinas follows another trend
of modern Kabyle song by blending Western funk and rock elements in his music.
Distorted electric guitars and bass create a driving rhythmic accompaniment over a static,
B-minor chord, while trumpets, trombones, and saxophones pierce through the texture
with syncopated gestures in the choruses. The sliding bass riffs at the beginning double as
a gesture in rock as well as an imitation of the upbeat buzzing sound of a bendir drum.
After the lyida melody returns in the refrain, the drummer enters for the duration of the
song, playing synthesized drum pads while keeping the rhythm within a standard 4/4
meter.

The coupling of traditional Berber musical elements with Western ones helps to
accomplish the goal of Takfarinas and other third-generation Kabyle artists: to prove the
worth of their culture in the modern world while maintaining its distinctiveness. By
presenting such a large and varied palette of Berber instrumentation within one song,
Takfarinas and Idbassaid demonstrate the relevance of their culture to the outside world

and display commonalities shared among the different tribes to those people within the Berber community. The song unabashedly sends the political message of increased autonomy and cultural recognition to the governments of the Maghreb and carries the torch of the Berberism movement forward into the twenty-first century. As a musician from the Third Generation of the 1970s, Takfarinas reflects the sentiments of the Berber Spring more directly through his music than perhaps any other Kabyle popular singer today. What is more, he continues to produce thoroughly entertaining and innovative music.

“Ech Edani” by Souad Massi

The song “Ech Edani” (I Shouldn’t Have Fallen in Love with You) offers one of the most fascinating examples of collaboration between a Kabyle musician and those from other cultures. The song incorporates musical elements from Spain, North Africa, and even Brazil, combining them seamlessly into a truly innovative sound. Through this song Souad Massi displays both her adaptability as a musician and the various cultural influences that contribute to her musical style. The song serves as a prime example of a Kabyle artist thriving on the global stage by reinventing traditions in a relevant, modern context.

“Ech Edani” is an exemplary synthesis of different styles. Besides juxtaposing Flamenco guitars with an oud, Massi incorporates Brazilian samba percussion instruments and an electric bass playing a Latin bossa-nova rhythm along with an Arabic darbouka and Flamenco clapping. The song is even multilingual, with Massi singing the verses in Arabic, and the background singers alternating between an Arabic and Spanish refrain. The harsh, raspy vocal cantillation of a Flamenco singer in the introduction
contrasts with Massi’s own Arabic-influenced ornamentation during the verses (see Figure 4.2).

Although popularized, the characteristics of the song closely identify it with the lamenting Flamenco dance genre known as the siguiriyas. Lyrically, Massi emulates the typically tragic subject matter of the genre with her lyrics about scorned love. Even more distinctive, however, is the song’s direct step-descent bass (1–7–6–5) and its harmonic setting, which moves from tonic to dominant harmonies (see Example 4.2). This type of bass pattern is used quite frequently in the siguiriyas song genre in Andalusian music.\textsuperscript{96} Interestingly, it is also the same lament bass found in Western classical and popular music traditions. Judging from Massi’s musical output and exposure to Western music, it would not be unreasonable to assume that she was familiar with both musical traditions.

A shared musical gesture such as this is a fitting tool with which to build a multicultural song like “Ech Edani.”

\textsuperscript{96} Robin Totton, \textit{Song of the Outcasts: An Introduction to Flamenco} (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2003), 89-91.
Figure 4.2: “Ech Edani”[^97]

(Verses and Refrain 1 are sung in Arabic while Refrain 2 is sung in Spanish).

| Vocal Incantation | I think of you all night long  
I love you so much |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Verse 1           | D  
I can’t sleep at night  
C B♭ A  
And I’m haunted by your image (3x)  
D  
I get into trouble with your love  
C B♭ A  
But you’re the only one I want (3x) |
| Refrain 1         | D C B♭ A  
I shouldn’t (3x) have fallen in love with you  
D C B♭ A  
I shouldn’t (3x) have fallen in love with you |
| Refrain 2         | D C  
I think of you all night long  
B♭  
I think of you all night long  
A  
I love you so much |
| Verse 2           | When I’m with you, I suffer  
My heart is torn into pieces  
And I cry my heart out  
Because what we lose is gone forever. |
| Refrain 1         |  
| Refrain 2         |  
| Instrumental Interlude |  
| Refrain 1         |  |

[^97]: Source: *Deb (Heartbroken)*, Wrasse Records CD, 2005, liner notes.
Example 4.2: Melodies of the Verses, Refrain 1, and Refrain 2 (respectively)

Even when looking at the bass line’s harmonic setting, its interpretation becomes blurred by both traditions. The triadic harmonies underneath the descending tetrachord (Dm, C, B♭7, A♭7) sound to the Western ear like the typical harmonic progression I – VII – VI – V of a lament bass. However, in a traditional siguiriya song, the step-descent bass implies a different harmonic function, where the final chord (A in this case) is considered to be the tonic, making the overall modality of the music A phrygian. Upon listening to the recording, however, one realizes this is not the case with “Ech Edani.” The traditional musical elements have been popularized and assimilated into a Western tonal idiom, and the key is unquestionably D minor.

Besides the D-minor tonality of the song, “Ech Edani” has several other features that suggest Western classical and popular music traditions. Instead of a complex twelve-beat rhythmic pattern typical of the siguiriyas, the music suggests quadruple meter, for
the most part, with a bossa-nova-driven bass line.\footnote{The predominant quadruple meter includes some instances of changing meters. Specifically, Refrain 2 follows a $\frac{4}{4} \frac{2}{4} \frac{2}{4}$ pattern (see Figure 4.2 above).} Traditionally, Andalusian singers would be accompanied by as little as handclapping \textit{(palmeros)} or just tapping the side of a guitar. In this instance, the mixture of Brazilian percussion and darbouka drives the piece forward, with the Flamenco guitars strumming in a constant eighth-note pattern.

Through her collaboration with Andalusian, Arabic, and Brazilian samba musicians, Souad Massi achieves a remarkable integration of musical traditions from various cultures. A female artist from Kabylia, Massi breaks multiple perceptions placed upon her and the Kabyle people in Algeria. Her leadership on such an innovative and successful musical project fits the continuing trend of Kabyle musicians to collaborate cross-culturally and helps in their efforts to showcase relevant examples of Kabyle cultural creativity to the modern world.

\textit{“Exil” by Idir}

Nearly forty years after the premiere of \textit{A Vava Inouva}, Idir remains a leading figure of Berber cultural expression and advocacy. In addition to giving frequent concerts in his later career, Idir has released three solo albums, the most recent one being \textit{Adrar Inu} (My Mountain) in February 2013. His music reflects a number of trends associated with modern Kabyle music and even continues to define it. While in France, Idir has collaborated extensively with other musicians, many of whom come from other cultural backgrounds. Two of the other recent albums released by Idir, \textit{Identités} (1999) and \textit{La France des Couleurs} (2007), consist entirely of collaborations with other musicians. In general, Idir takes his own acoustic folk style and places it unaltered within the musical context of each featured artist. Compared to \textit{Identités}, \textit{La France des Couleurs} deals
more with the problems of integration and ethnic tensions within France. In this latter album, Idir collaborates with mostly younger artists who were born in France as second-or third-generation immigrants. Because the artists in *La France des Couleurs* better represent the Beur minority youth culture in France, the later album more directly addresses the social issues affecting this community and proposes changes that need to occur within French society in order to better recognize the multiethnic character of the country.

Idir’s extensive collaboration with top French artists from the most popular genres certainly contributes to making him more relevant to the international community, a commendable feat for a singer who made his international debut four decades ago. His renown as an established artist, cultural figure, and activist makes him perfectly suited for the task of bringing together such a wide array of musicians, both minority and French *française*, in order to present a rich sonic rainbow of France’s cultural and musical landscape. Through this album, Idir continues to seek commonalities between the struggles of his own people and those of other minority groups, as well as trying to reach the hearts of all French people.

Besides cross-cultural collaborations, Idir’s years of living in Paris, away from his native Algeria, have prompted him to engage with the immigrant experience and pain of homesickness. This engagement comes through most strongly in *Identités*, which focuses mostly on the struggles of immigrants living throughout Europe as exiles from various homelands. Idir reveals his goals and intentions for *Identités* in his introduction to the liner notes.99 He presents his dilemma: How can one be completely Berber while also

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taking on the Algerian identity? On top of that, how can one be completely Algerian while embracing the country in which he now lives and loves (France) at the same time? Being away from Algeria now for a long time, he expresses a “strange impression that my country moves away each year little by little, and I reflect on an image that becomes more and more mythic.” Idir summarizes his feelings by saying, “From all these questions follows one conviction: that to be a minority both here and there causes me to feel that I belong to two countries. One has my childhood and gives me my origin, a history, and an identity; the other has adopted me and offered me a path on which I express myself fully.”

He concludes by describing how he has been enriched by the differences of the other artists on the album, stating that the project has helped him display commonalities between the experiences of Berbers and other people around the world: “In any case, [the artists] have permitted me to show that my culture, minority that it is, can write in the universal.” This conclusion by Idir captures the desire of modern Kabyle artists to identify with other cultures outside their own, and in doing so, to show their culture’s worth and contribution to the world.

Most of the featured artists on Identités live in France as exiles. Many of them are politically vocal themselves and share similar sentiments with Idir. As such, these other artists struggle with issues of dual identities, nostalgia, the pain of separation from loved ones, and remaining true to one’s roots. With his desire to connect with musicians with similar experiences, Idir remade his song “Daɣ rib” (Exile) from his 1979 album Ay Arrac Negh (To Our Children) for release on Identités. In this later album, he collaborates
with Ugandan singer Geoffrey Oryema. A political refugee and musical advocate for human rights, Oryema is an ideal choice for the album. As a child, Oreyma received a privileged musical education. He learned how to play the inanga (seven-string harp zither), the myamulere (flute), along with the lukeme (thumb piano) and other Ugandan percussion instruments from his father, who was himself an accomplished inanga player as well as top government minister (see Figure 4.3 for pictures of these instruments).100

Figure 4.3: Ugandan and Kabyle Instruments Used or Evoked in “Exil”

Inanga (Seven-stringed harp zither)101 Geoffrey Oryema with a lukeme102

Idir in concert with a Kabyle shepherd flute103


Oryema fled Uganda in 1977 following the assassination of his father by then president Idi Amin. Since then, Oryema has lived as an exile in Paris. Oryema wistfully remembers his childhood by incorporating “Swahili and Acholi folk songs.” He is an active performer and songwriter, participating in numerous collaborative recordings and benefit concerts for such organizations as Amnesty International and the United Nations.

As with Idir’s original lyrics in “Daɣ rib,” the added commentary to “Exil” similarly reflects on the pain of exile and the difficulty of existing in two worlds. In the accompanying liner notes, both singers muse how they are tossed between the two shores[,]

“I have a suitcase always ready in my soul … and a suitcase that may never be taken.” The summation of the song resonates with Idir’s original lyrics, which describe someone leaving their family for the first time and going to another country:

The moment of parting has arrived,
suitcase in hand.
Goodbye friends
and all of those who love us.
If our life is long
we will return to you.
If fate decides otherwise
you will forgive us in your hearts. 105

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Musically, the song blends Ugandan percussion with Idir’s folk-rock style in much the same way that Idir incorporates Kabyle instrumentation in his other songs. Oryema’s ambient, inanga-influenced style blends well with the solo-line melodic texture of Idir’s acoustic guitar playing. The song opens with a triangle, bass, and lukeme, creating an ostinato-like pattern (see Figure 4.3 on p. 57 for all instruments mentioned in this analysis). Idir’s verses retain their conjunct melodic contour typical of Kabyle musical practice. Upon Idir’s vocal entrance, the texture fills out with the addition of another acoustic guitar and a lefhel (Kabyle flute). After each verse, Oryema sings the refrain in his native Swahili, with back-up vocals sung in unison (see Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Form of “Exil”

**Refrain** – Sung by Oryema

**Verse 1** – Sung by Idir, words from original song “Daɣ rib”

**Refrain** – Sung by Oryema

**Verse 2** – Sung by Idir, words from original song “Daɣ rib”

**Refrain** – Sung by Oryema, fade out

“Exil” demonstrates the musical and ideological similarities between Idir and Oryema. It is not surprising that these two songwriters were able to produce such a successful collaborative piece of music that crosses cultural lines. Indeed, both artists have arrived at similar places musically with a contemporary, blended musical language that evokes their respective cultural traditions in a Western idiom. Moreover, both serve as leading advocates of their own culture while simultaneously addressing universal human issues and emotions through their music.
“Yenna-d Umyar” by Lounis Aït Menguellet

Lounis Aït Menguellet stands out as one of the most enduring and respected Berber cultural leaders. His involvement with the creation of the New Song style, the events leading up to the Berber Spring, and his prolonged, prolific musical and poetic output has ensured lasting fame and admiration in the eyes of the Kabyle people. While addressing issues affecting Kabyles today, Menguellet crafts lyrics that also apply to all people by encouraging his listeners to connect personally to the text, regardless of their cultural background. Menguellet insists that he is not a politician, but rather sees himself as a philosophical voice of reason for his people. His musical style reflects simultaneously the New Song movement he helped develop in the 1970s and the cha’bi influence of his musical hero, El Hadj M'Hamed El Anka.\(^\text{106}\) His extensive repertoire covers a variety of topics, spanning themes of nostalgia and sentimentality, lost love, cultural identity, and philosophy of life.\(^\text{107}\)

The desire of Menguellet to appeal to both sides of the Berber issue can be seen in his choice of languages for the liner notes of his recordings. Menguellet is one of the only New Song Kabyle artists to print lyrics in Arabic in addition to French and various Berber scripts. The practice reflects an earlier time in the twentieth century when Arabic and Berber musicians willingly collaborated with one another and Berbers regularly sang in Arabic. This corresponds with his affinity for the Arab-based musical genre of cha’bi. The use of both languages is an exception to the Kabyle practice of boycotting the printing of song lyrics in Arabic after the mid-1970s. The practice of printing his lyrics in

\(^\text{106}\) Khouas, *Chanson kabyle et identité berbère*, 18.

\(^\text{107}\) Ibid., 59-61.
Latin-script Taqbaylit, French, and Arabic opens up opportunities for reconciliation and mutual understanding between Kabyles and Algerian Arabs.

The subject matter of the two opening songs of his album *Yenna-d Umγar* (“The Wise Sage Has Said,” 2005) reveals how Menguellet conceives of himself as a musician, philosopher, and voice of wisdom to the Kabyle people. These two songs act as a pair in which the first one, “In-d a yamγar” (Tell Us, Old sage…), depicts a presumably younger character asking an old wise man the difficult questions of life related to suffering, injustice, neglect of tradition, and apprehensions regarding the future. Then in “Yenna-d umγar” (The Old Sage Says), the title track of the album, the old wise sage gives his response:

The old sage
He says: That which will happen,
The same or otherwise,
Was already determined long ago.\(^\text{108}\)

“*Yenna-d Umγar*” exemplifies the theme of the album as a whole. Through colorful poetry, Menguellet portrays himself as the old sage, the source of wisdom and direction for his people. As in all of his songs, his lyrics consist of colorful parallels, metaphors, and axioms that reveal Menguellet’s concerns for the future of the Kabyles, Algeria, and humanity in general. While especially poignant for the Kabyle listener who shares his experiences and cultural memories, the lyrics of this song are not so specific as to exclude others, but remain relatable to universal themes of humanity. In the printed synopsis of the song, the old sage tells his younger companion (by extension his listeners) that “all of us hold the answer deep within himself,” and that the answer has “already

\(^{108}\) Source: Lounis Aït Menguellet, *Yenna-d Umγar*, 2008, liner notes. Song texts are translated by me from the French.
been revealed to us.” In an almost proverbial fashion, the sage gives his thoughts of the condition of humanity and hints at the realities of his people’s sufferings.

I have seen men
Kill other men
I have seen the errors of men
And see men persist
In the error

That which this age erects
This age undoes
That which was good
Becomes bad

That which was bad
Becomes good
Life swirls in turbulence
And returns to order

The mistakes of the youth
Create the regrets of the old
This is, and will be,
And remains unavoidable

From a musical point of view, the song is a hybrid between cha’bi and the New Song style in a number of different ways. First, the instrumentation is a mixture of Western instruments of the New Song Movement and Arabic ones found in classical Arabic music and cha’bi. At each interlude, the texture fills out with periodic violin solos—typical of cha’bi—and ghasba solos more indicative of Kabyle music. During the final few verses, Menguellet’s voice is doubled by a Kabyle shepherd’s flute in the same manner as in many of Idir’s performances. Furthermore, Menguellet uses certain instruments in stylistically dualistic ways. His instrument of choice is the acoustic guitar. As in most of his recordings, Menguellet uses his guitar both for outlining background harmonies and for playing solo lines. These solo melodic constructs not only align closely with Idir’s style but also mimic that of a classical oud in the way they ornament
and trace the vocal melodies. The presence of Western chordal harmony sounding at the same time as the oud’s ornamented imitations of the vocal line creates the heterophonic effect characteristic of classical Arab music.

Other elements of the song suggest the influence of cha’bi on Menguellet’s musical style. The form of the song is strophic with the last half of the opening text repeated at the end of each verse as a refrain. This form, typical of cha’bi and classical Arab music, accommodates the rich poetic tradition found in cha’bi lyrics. Perhaps more than any musical characteristic, it is Menguellet’s composition of lengthy, creative poetry that connects him with cha’bi musicians of the earlier twentieth century. The vocal melody resembles the Bayati family of Arabic maqam, except the three-quarter-flat second scale degree seems to be normalized to the Western intervals of the guitar (see Example 4.3).109

Example 4.3: Refrain Melody of “Yenna-d umyar”

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109. “Maqam World,” http://www.maqamworld.com/index.html [accessed March 9 2013]. A maqam is the equivalent of a mode or scale in Arabic music. Each one is made up of overlapping or adjoining trichords, tetrachords, and pentachords, with some containing quarter steps, three quarter steps, and five quarter steps.
Example 4.4: Arabic Maqam – Bayati

Menguellet’s work remains a relevant and tangible representation of the New Song movement and the 1980 Berber Spring. His long-standing creative output and commitment to his people have earned him the respect as a wise leader among Kabyles. His philosophic lyrics continue the cha’bi tradition in a modern musical idiom and create common ground between Kabyles and Arabs through universal themes that provide a hope for reconciliation in Algeria.

“Amazone” by Iness Mezel

Iness Mezel captures a blended Kabyle-Western musical style that is reflective of her eclectic musical training and her own multiethnic identity. Born to a French-Italian mother and Algerian-Kabyle father, Mezel grew up in France, moving to Algeria at the age of seven in order to be with her Kabyle grandmother for two years. Upon returning to Paris and making the most of her experience and talent, she developed into a multicultural recording artist. In addition to the blend of popular and traditional musical elements, her music carries a strong political character that combines Berber cultural advocacy with women’s rights. The pointed lyrics of her latest album Beyond the Trance (2010) critique the status quo of women in Algeria and expound upon the desire of
women to enjoy basic freedoms. Through her singing, she embodies the hopes of Kabyle women as a whole, while simultaneously encouraging the pan-Berber Amazigh movement.

In *Beyond the Trance*, much of Mezel’s lyrics and liner notes connect her Berber identity to that as a woman, while in the process universalizing the ideals of Berber culture. The backcover reads, “To the wild part in each one of us/ to the free souls.”110 These statements suggest that the Berber self-given name *Amazigh*, or “Free Men,” can be applied to every person in the world, and that there is a desire in each one of us to be free, regardless of what culture from which we come. In the song “Respect,” she describes the way in which Berber women incite the animistic spirits of nature for guidance and courage. In this way she highlights the notion suggested by Makilam that women play an essential role in creating the soul of Kabyle culture, embodied in domestic activities, rituals, and beliefs.

“Amazone,” the opening track of Mezel’s album *Beyond the Trance*, evokes the mythical society of independent warrior women from Greek folklore. In fact, some versions of the myth placed these women in ancient Libya, where the ancestors of modern-day Berbers resided. The name “Amazone” is also intriguingly close to the word *Amazigh*. The powerful parallel further connects the image of a free, independent race of people to the freedom of women. In this fashion, Mezel blurs the distinction between advocating Berber culture and women’s rights by idealizing the image of the strong, independent Berber woman, central to the Berber identity and valued by the society.

Mezel’s lyrics assume an unapologetic stance toward her rights as a woman. Although these lyrics bear no overt Berber references, contextual elements in the liner notes:

notes and the music itself clearly mark her Berber affiliation, such as the Berber Tifinagh language characters interspersed in the liner notes along with pictures of Kabylia, the four songs sung in Tamazight, and the use of various Kabyle instruments and musical elements in the song itself. Mezel firmly challenges the status quo of women in Algeria throughout the song. In the refrain, she declares that she will unveil herself, study, vote, and exist, “whether you like it or not.” In the second verse, she equates the reconnection to the customs of her ancestors to be a way of liberation:

I don’t follow the crowd,
I hold to that of my ancestors.
I choose my destiny
in the light of heaven.
And even if the storm breaks out,
I am happy and free.¹¹¹

From a musical perspective, the song captures the Berber identity in a number of ways. It opens with a beat created by a combination of a darbouka, djembe, and the distinctive buzz of a bendir drum (see Example 4.5 for all referenced musical elements). Soon after, a distorted electric guitar picks up the same rhythmic figure on a C♯, prefiguring the vocal melody and gimbri ostinato. Before singing, Mezel lets out a piercing ululation (a high-pitched cry produced by trilling the tongue and uvula), a hallmark of Kabyle women in celebration. Starting in the first verse, the electric guitar is complemented by a gimbri and a tehardant lute, both instruments of the Saharan Tuareg Berbers. As in Takfarinas’ song “Azoule,” the inclusion of these instruments gives the song a pan-Berberism feel, extending beyond the Kabyle tribe.

¹¹¹ Source: Liner notes. Song texts are translated by me from the French.
Example 4.5: “Amazone”

Rhythm produced by the darbouka, djembe, and bendir drum

Three-note ostinato played by the gimbri

Vocal melody during the verse

The repetitive nature and restricted range of Mezel’s melodic line mimics the traditional songs of Kabyle women. The melody’s constant return to a sustained C♯ resembles that of a cadential pitch in traditional Kabyle melodies. The ornamentation produced by the vacillation between C♯ and D♯ also recalls the ornamentation of structural notes in antiphonal women’s music performed in Kabyle villages. In addition, Mezel’s melody follows the gimbri’s repeating three-note pattern on G♯, B, and C♯, complementing the natural harmonic tendencies of the instrument.
Unlike other modern Kabyle singers, Mezel does not use the mandole or show any influence of cha’bi in her music. Instead, she creates her blended style by combining a jazz-funk vocal style and harmonic framework with traditional musical elements found in Kabyle villages. In this way, her music differs from that of other New Song artists like Azem, Lounès, Takfarinas, and Abdelli, who find their musical heritage in the more urban, Arabic-influenced cha’bi style. Her music combines cultural activism with advocacy for women’s rights by highlighting the key role women play in Kabyle society and beliefs. Through instrumentation, melodic contour, and coloring, Mezel achieves a naturally sounding synthesis unparalleled by other Kabyle songwriters, no doubt indicative of her multicultural heritage.

Conclusion

This examination of contemporary Kabyle song shows the range of musical styles and interpretations of what it means to be a Kabyle musician today. By looking at the array of musical styles, one can deduce common threads that define the Kabyle voice in the modern era and help shape the tribe’s trajectory for the future. All of the artists examined incorporate some degree of collaboration with musicians of other cultures and/or blend their conception of traditional Kabyle music with Western styles. This trend reflects the desire of Kabyles to relate their identity to other minority cultures around the world, with the goal of legitimizing the value of their own culture and validating the call for increased recognition from the Algerian government. Commonalities can also be sensed in the subject matter of lyrics. As Kabyles have continued to feel threatened by cultural hegemony, Kabyle cultural advocacy has remained a major theme in their music.
Despite these commonalities, each artist differs, nevertheless, in his or her stylistic influences, artistic philosophies, and attitudes toward politics and Pan-Berber activism and what it means to be a Kabyle in the twenty-first century. For instance, Takfarinas attempts to distinguish his popular music style from that of Arabic raï and hip hop, while Menguellet draws from Arab-based cha’bi and Western-influenced New Song style to set his poetry. While some artists like Takfarinas define themselves in terms of their Kabyle identity and devote their work to promoting that end, others resist the urge to identify so overtly with a political movement. Iness Mezel evokes her Kabyle identity through the use of Kabyle instruments within a jazz-funk style, whereas Souad Massi freely navigates between a fully Western acoustic rock and Andalusian style in her most recent albums. In contrast to Mezel’s sometimes provocative and politically audacious lyrics, Massi tends to focus more on the personal struggles and emotions of everyday life. In the final analysis, these five musicians are just as much individuals as they are part of a collective cultural identity, each uniquely shaped by their personal experiences and values. Kabyle music promises to continue to be a venue for musical innovation and relevancy.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Berbers across North Africa, particularly the Kabyle tribe, face several significant challenges in the years ahead. In both Morocco and Algeria, the number of people who identify themselves both culturally and linguistically as Berbers is on the decline, as villages continue to undergo modernization and young people move away in order to pursue an education or work in the cities. Nevertheless, the efforts of Berber activists, especially Kabyles, have brought some improvements in the government’s recognition of the Kabyle presence in Algeria. The Algerian government now recognizes Tamazight as a national (albeit not official) language of Algeria, and increasing numbers of Kabyles are learning written Taqbaylit in primary schools. On the whole, Berberism has retained its momentum from four decades ago, even as it competes with religious movements and the Arab Spring for the attention of Berber youth.

In this thesis, I have examined how Kabyles have used music to convey a unified understanding of their cultural identity. Through my research, I have discovered that much Kabyle popular music of today is an outgrowth of the New Song movement of the 1970s, displayed in a number of trends present in the music studied. Musically, songwriters Idir, Takfarinas, Souad Massi, and Iness Mezel have all emulated the movement by adopting one of several Western popular styles and incorporating aspects of traditional Kabyle instrumentation and language. Ideologically, Idir, Lounis Aït Menguellet, and Takfarinas all remain strong advocates of cultural recognition and autonomy within Algeria. The experience of living in France has nuanced the subject matter of Idir’s songs, turning his focus toward addressing antagonism between multiple ethnicities in France, as well as reflecting on the experience of being an exile. As a result,
his music is marked by a tone of nostalgia for a bygone Kabyla—one that resonates with other immigrants in France but simultaneously projects the fear on the part of all Kabyles of losing their cultural heritage in the wave of modernism, globalization, and pressure to assimilate into present-day French and Arab Algerian societies.

The five songwriters discussed in this thesis exhibit an eagerness to collaborate with musicians from other cultures, particularly those from other minority groups who are in similar circumstances. This trend is motivated by a need to prove the worth of their culture through participation on a world stage and connecting to broader humanistic issues. These feelings of inferiority can be traced back to reactions against the government’s efforts to ossify Berber culture through state-run folk festivals and exhibitions. So long as the term “Berber” connotes an oppressed subculture, Kabyle musicians, for better or for worse, will likely continue to define their musical careers in these terms, acting as agents for their culture against a societal mainstream.

This project has multiple implications for understanding the globalization of culture and how members of a minority culture engage with the rest of the world. One can draw parallels to other minority cultures around the world that are facing pressures to assimilate or are in danger of disappearing altogether. The Kabyle story offers insight into the process of globalization as it relates to artistic expression, as well as the development of a “world music” genre in which elements of traditional folk music are amalgamated into a more “user friendly,” Western packaging for mass production. In the case of the Kabyles, opinions differ as to whether the blending of traditional village music with Western popular genres has helped save Kabyle culture from disappearing through the creation of a viable art form, or harmed it by supplanting authentic Kabyle
music of the village. The implications of these developments for the future existence of a Kabyle cultural identity remain to be seen. Kabyles today live in a sort of paradox, in which a collective awareness of self-identity among Kabyles continues to gain momentum, even as traditional aspects of village life are fading away.

There remains the question for third and now fourth-generation Kabyle immigrants living in France as to how they are to define themselves as either Kabyle, North African immigrant, or French. Historically, the Kabyle community in France has played a crucial role in the creation and production of Berber music. Over the past century, France has served as a venue for the recording and performance of Kabyle music on an international stage, launching the careers of many well-known Kabyle artists. As youths attempt to discover and redefine what it means to be Kabyle, North African, and French in the pluralistic society of the modern French Republic, the outcome of their searching will no doubt continue to be reflected in their changing music. It remains to be seen as to how the French government will deal with the housing and social integration issues of the marginalized, economically depressed banlieues. Even as Kabyle youth meld into the pan-North African immigrant Beur identity of France’s metropolitan areas, many still desire to hold onto their Berber heritage. How French Kabyle musicians distinguish themselves from the more dominant Beur Arabic raï and hip hop genres will be a fascinating future study.

So what does the future hold for Kabyles and their music? If a culture is produced by its adherents, then music will likely be a primary way in which Kabyles continue to manifest their heritage. The musicians studied in this thesis certainly create relevant art that bears the unique mark of the Kabyle heritage while adhering to current popular
music styles. So long as this happens, Berber culture will certainly not be relegated to a shelf behind museum glass or folk festival. If the millennia of history are any testimony to the durability of their culture, Berbers will continue to persevere in both preserving and reinventing themselves as a distinct cultural entity, not least of which includes unique and creative music.
Bibliography


Compact Disc Citations


Picture Citations


World Instrument Gallery. “Gimbri, guimbri or sinter.”