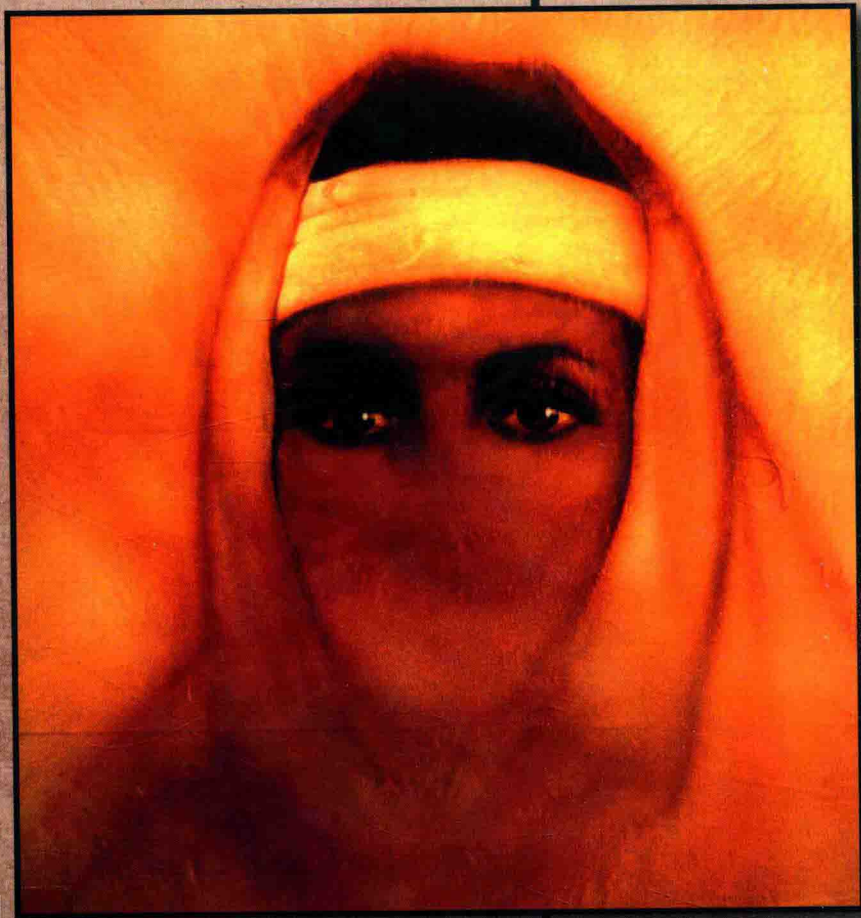


# ALGERIAN NATIONAL CINEMA



GUY AUSTIN

# Algerian national cinema

Guy Austin

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# Preface

Why conceive of Algerian film as a national cinema rather than a transnational, diasporic or regional one? Firstly, because I feel that, as regards Algeria, an understanding of national identity can illuminate issues and realms that Western readers in general are not fully aware of. In terms of the so-called 'clash of civilisations' after '9/11', Islamic states such as Algeria have too often been perceived in the West as 'other' and hence as threatening. One wish I have for this book is that it might help, via an analysis of cinema, to break down some misunderstandings and assumptions about Algeria, which remains to a large extent underrepresented or misrepresented in the UK media. But the book is also about Algerian national cinema because a focus on the national can allow a critique of nationalist ideology, and so can illuminate the ways in which the official mythologising of a national culture at the 'centre' of the postcolonial state has marginalised the diverse identities within the nation. Cinema is one of the ways that repressed identities (for example, women, or the Berber communities) have managed to find representation outside the dominant nationalist discourse. Moreover, in terms of postcolonialism, former colonies have at times tended to be construed as the 'margins' rather than the 'centre' of competing discourses and power relations. Addressing national culture in a postcolonial state is one way of recognising that the 'centre' is not only to be located in the West. Looking at Algerian cultural production through the optic of the relationship with France (or with its neighbours in North Africa) might risk neglecting a detailed engagement with the specificities of a vast country which has a variegated history and an array of plural identities. One of the potential pitfalls of a transnational approach, then, is that it might neglect 'historical and cultural specificity', failing 'to fully

acknowledge the (cultural) politics of difference' (Higbee 2007: 84). In short, the transnational can seem at times 'not specific enough or sufficiently politically engaged' (Higbee 2007: 85). Finally, as writers such as Ranjana Khanna have begun to argue recently, Algeria stands as a form of test case, where issues of representation and power (terror and counter-terror, the postcolonial and the neo-colonial, gender and symbolic violence) are being played out and articulated (see Khanna 2008). This book aims to contribute to the understanding of Algeria in similar terms, via a consideration of its cinema as one of the principal means whereby identities have been articulated in a national context.

I have given the titles of films in French rather than Arabic or Berber where a choice arises, because these are the titles under which Algerian films have usually been circulated most widely. Alternative titles are given in the filmography at the end of the book. Finally, a note on the availability of the films: this varies. Some I saw at the cinema, particularly at film festivals, some at the Centre Culturel Algérien in Paris, others on DVD or even VHS. Increasingly, however, the internet is allowing global access to Algerian films. Entire versions of films as diverse as *Omar Gatalto*, *Machaho* and *Le Clandestin* are now available online and the number is increasing.

All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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This book is dedicated to my family.

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# An introduction to modern Algerian history and politics

Being Algerian has been described as 'the most complicated history of citizenship in the world' (Khanna 2008: 70). Algeria combines an ancient Berber culture with the historical influence of diverse invasions and colonial occupations (Carthaginian, Roman, Vandal, Arab, Byzantine, Egyptian, Spanish, Ottoman and French). For Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist who worked on Algeria throughout his career, this complex history plus the often dysfunctional relation between the state and the people makes what he calls the Algerian problem 'la limite extrême de tous les problèmes sociaux et politiques' [the extreme example of all social and political problems] (Bourdieu 1997: 21). Bourdieu identifies key issues in the recent history of Algeria as originating in the after-effects of colonialism and the war of liberation against the French (1954–62) – he calls the state's position on both these matters an attempt to repress the repressions that resulted – as well as in the confusions and inconsistencies of a language policy which sought to expunge French from everyday use amongst the subordinate classes but kept it alive among the elites (Bourdieu 1997: 22). The complex inter relation of Arabic and French informs the very name of the territory, since the French term *l'Algérie* was itself derived from the Arabic *El Djezaïr* meaning 'the islands'. The language question is just one of the repercussions of Algerian history that reverberate to this day. But the French colonial occupation of Algeria from 1830 onwards was far from the first, nor did Algerian history begin with the arrival of the French as some colonial discourse suggested. Previous attempts to control North African territories had been made by the Carthaginians (largely unsuccessful) and more successfully by the Romans, the Arabs and the Turks. Resistance was led by the indigenous Berber population, the oldest

community in Algeria. As Kateb Yacine puts it in his novel *Nedjma*, the tree of the nation is rooted in an ancient tribal grave (Yacine 1996: 200). Berber figures such as Jugurtha, a Numidian king who fought the Romans, were subsequently venerated in the nationalist discourse of modern independent Algeria. Even in the Arab-dominated, officially Muslim independent Algeria, the Berber pagan Jugurtha was invoked in the 1976 National Charter as representing the origin of the nation (Evans and Phillips 2007: 15). A Berber presence has been a constant in Algerian history throughout the waves of invasion and occupation. Berbers now make up between 20 and 30 per cent of the current population of 35 million, with their most long-standing communities concentrated in particular regions including in the east Kabylia and the Aurès mountains, and to the south the Mزاب and the nomadic Tuaregs of the Sahara Desert (see Change 2009: 19). Modern Algeria is however officially an Islamic state and its national language is Arabic: both legacies of the Arab invasion that began in 647.

Sunni Islam is the official religion of Algeria, and Muslims account for 99 per cent of the current population (see Change 2009: 35). Official nationalist discourse hence tends to portray the Arabisation and Islamisation of Algeria as central to the country's history. Seen through this optic, the seventh-century defeat of the Berber resistance – led by the Jewish queen Dihaya Kahina – and the subsequent conversion of the Berber tribes to Islam 'came to symbolize the inevitable triumph of Islam' and 'the formation of an Arabo-Islamic identity' central to state discourse on nation formation (see Evans and Phillips 2007: 17). The adoption of Islam by the Berbers did not however unproblematically synthesise Arab and Berber identities, nor did Arab culture become strongly established in Algeria until the eleventh century. The earlier Arabisation of the Machrek (eastern North Africa) by invasion from the Middle East meant that pre-Arabic languages in that region disappeared very early. By contrast, the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) was only fully Arabised after the invasion of the Banu Hillal tribe in 1051; this saw the loss of Roman dialect, but the major pre-Arabic language, Berber and its variants, remained and have survived to the present day (see Niehoff 1997: 50). A resultant sense of rupture has been identified between the Arab majority in Algeria and Arab nations in the Middle East, whereby Algerian Arabs can feel cut off from the perceived centre of Arab-Islamic culture. Meanwhile the marginalisation of Berber languages and culture by the modern Algerian state remains a crucial issue, one reflected

in the struggle to develop a Berber cinema within Algeria (see Chapter 5).

If Algeria during the medieval period was ruled by powerful religious dynasties, such as Islamic Berbers, the Almoravids and the Almohads, in the sixteenth century it was taken over by the Ottoman Empire, an occupation that saw the era of the so-called Barbary Pirates, operating out of Algiers. As Marnia Lazreg has noted, 'Europeans referred to Algerian ship activity [...] as "piracy", thereby obscuring the fact that it was initially a response to the Spanish *reconquista* with its attendant expulsion of Muslims to North Africa [...] and attempts at seizing Algerian ports' (Lazreg 1994: 22). The country was administered as a regency, not from Constantinople but from Algiers, by the Turkish military elite headed by the *dey* or head of state. As a result, when the city ultimately surrendered to the French in 1830, the declaration was made not in Arabic or Berber, nor indeed in French – the language of the the future occupation – but in Turkish (see Djebbar 2000: 228). Prior to the French invasion, Algiers had begun to suffer from impoverishment and depopulation. In fact, the diplomatic incident used as a partial justification for military action by France – the *dey* of Algiers striking the French consul-general with a fan in April 1827 – was an expression of frustration at France's reluctance to pay debts owed to the Regency. A French blockade of three years followed, and ultimately the expedition of 14 June 1830 in which 37,000 French troops landed at Sidi-Ferruch. By 5 July Algiers had been captured. An ulterior motive for this action was provided by French domestic politics. Ahead of the elections due for July 1830, the Bourbon monarchists wished to shift attention from internal conflicts while bolstering their own popularity via a military success. Charles X mobilised the rhetoric of religious conflict along with nationalism in his address to parliament on 2 March 1830, when he contrasted the Barbary power of Algiers with a France aided by the Almighty and championing the triumph of Christianity (see Vigier 1991: 16). When the French colonial presence in Algeria was itself questioned in the twentieth century by Sheikh Ben Badis, then attacked and ultimately defeated in the 1954–62 war, religion was again to play a key part in the construction of a nationalist cause – in this case, a Muslim Algerian cause (see below and Chapter 3).

The fall of Algiers did not achieve all that the French had wished for. News reached Paris too late to prevent the defeat of the Bourbon faction in the elections and the turmoil of the July Revolution.

Meanwhile, Algerian resistance remained. The coastal towns of Oran and Annaba were quickly occupied, but it took thirty years and hundreds of thousands of men before the territory of Algeria was 'pacified' by the French. The most successful resistance leader was Abd el-Kader, who inflicted defeats on the French during the 1830s and surrendered only in 1847. During this time not only did the size of the French military presence in Algeria increase (from 72,000 troops in 1841 to over 100,000 in 1846) but so did the brutality of their campaign. Led by Thomas Bugeaud, the army began to disrupt and control indigenous activities such as farming, following his order to '*empêcher les Arabes de semer, de récolter, de pâturer sans notre permission*' [prevent the Arabs from sowing, harvesting, or feeding their animals without our permission] (cited in Michel 1991: 24). More infamously the French under Bugeaud also committed atrocities and massacres, notably by means of 'enfumades', when villagers were suffocated by smoke after being shut up in caves. Thanks to such tactics, by 1857 the conquest of Algeria was complete, although rebellions were to recur periodically.

As early as 1847, the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville observed how France had plunged Algeria into darkness: '*nous avons rendu la société musulmane beaucoup plus misérable, plus désordonnée, plus ignorante et plus barbare qu'elle n'était avant de nous connaître*' [we have made Muslim society much more wretched, wild, ignorant and barbarous than it was before it encountered us] (cited in Michel 1991: 25). The imposition of French colonialism on Algeria has been described by Bourdieu as a shock of such magnitude that it ruptured 'not only the economic order but also the social, psychological, moral and ideological' (cited in Silverstein and Goodman 2009: 15). The reduction of Algerians to second-class citizens in their own country, the removal of Algerian land (often tribally rather than individually owned) from Algerian hands, the placing of political, legal and economic power in the hands of European settlers and the brutal 'pacification' of Algerian rebellions were all part and parcel of the colonial system. But beyond these material deprivations the Algerians also suffered, according to Bourdieu, the loss of 'something that they could never recover: their cultural unity' (cited in Silverstein and Goodman 2009: 16). Moreover, as Lazreg comments, 'From now on, Algerians will be figments of the French imagination' (Lazreg 1994: 36). As we shall see in the course of this book, an attempt to wrest Algerian identity away from colonial constructions, as well as a

mythologising of lost national unity (and a critique of this nostalgic idea), is central to much Algerian cinema.

The French in Algeria were conscious of previous imperial structures notably those imposed by the Roman Empire. Indeed the French colonial project sought to emulate Rome's 'civilising' discourse by establishing one European empire on the ruins of another, with which the French shared a Latin identity. This ideology found physical manifestation in the building of a new French bridge on the ruins of a collapsed Roman one at El-Kantara near Constantine, or in 1838 building from scratch – on the site of an ancient Roman port – the town of Philippeville, 'the first entirely French town in Algeria' (Zarobell 2010: 117). A certain amount of the French colonial system in Algeria was also calqued upon inherited Ottoman structures: hence the use of 'compliant local leaders' in the roles of *caïds* (tax collectors), *cadis* (judges) and *bachagas* (tribal leaders) (Evans and Phillips 2007: 30) – figures often represented as collaborators in Algerian cinema, as in *Les Hors la loi* or *La Montagne de Baya* (see Chapters 3 and 5). But whereas Constantinople had left Algeria to be administered at arm's length, the ultimate phase of the French colonial project was to declare Algeria part of France itself: 'With the advent of the Third Republic (1871), northern Algeria was divided into three French departments – Algiers, Oran and Constantine – that were in principle governed by the same laws as metropolitan France. The Algerian Sahara remained under military jurisdiction' (Colonna 2009: 90, n.10). This legal change did nothing to prevent the so-called 'under-development' of Algeria. Political power and material resources (notably the best agricultural land) were in the hands of European settlers known as *pieds-noirs* – predominantly French, but also Spanish and Maltese. The result was to drive the indigenous Algerian tribes further into remote or infertile areas (the mountains or the desert), where the hardships associated with a struggle for subsistence only increased. The land-grab was accelerated by official policy in the aftermath of unsuccessful Algerian revolts, when the state confiscated land held by the rebels: hence 450,000 hectares were removed from Algerian tribal ownership after the suppression of a rebellion led by Moqrani in 1871. A combination of official annexations and shady private deals meant that during a century of colonialism, from the 1830s to the 1930s, an estimated 7.7 million hectares, or 40 per cent of Algerian-held territory, was transferred to European hands (Droz 1991: 43).

Not all Algerians were conceived as the same in French colonial eyes. The so-called 'Kabyle myth' of the late 1800s suggested that the Berber communities based in Kabylia were more assimilable to French values than their Arab counterparts (see Chapter 5). It has been noted that the Kabyle myth 'was preceded by a successful "Jewish mythology" that initiated policies based on the "fact" that Jews were less "barbaric" than Muslims' (Schreier 2006: 116). The requirement for Muslims in Algeria to renounce their religion in order to gain French citizenship was not applied in the same way to Jews, since 'By the 1840s, Jews were submitted to a separate legislation from Muslims, and in October 1870 the government naturalized Algerian Jews en masse' (Schreier 2006: 101). This was the famous *décret Crémieux* which, despite officially granting the thirty thousand or so Algerian Jews French citizenship, did not prevent them from being targeted by an anti-semitism described as one of the essential characteristics of the colonial mentality during the Third Republic (see Ageron 1991: 56). Particularly around the turn of the century, several anti-Jewish leagues were established in cities such as Algiers and Constantine, contesting the *décret Crémieux* – which was ultimately abolished by the Vichy government as soon as it came to power in 1940. It is notable however that, despite incitement from the colonisers' anti-Jewish lobby, Muslim Algerians tended not to target their Jewish neighbours, who for all their religious differences shared the same language, neighbourhoods and even names (see Ageron 1991: 56). Racial tensions did however emerge briefly in 1943 in Constantine, and more regularly during the struggle for independence which, as we shall see, was formulated above all as a Muslim cause. Indicative of Algeria's long-standing ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, the Jewish community remained much less visible than Arabic or Berber communities in Algerian culture and cinema after independence.

The colonial division of Algerian territory – whether originally in Arab, Berber or Jewish hands – can be characterised as threefold: firstly, *quadrillage*, that is to say the military 'occupation and control of the entire geographical space'; secondly, the forced dispossession of fertile Algerian land, and the development of a certain modern infrastructure, both to the benefit of the *pieds-noirs*; and thirdly, the concomitant massive disparity between the northern cities and the *bled* or rural interior, between 'the advanced urban and European-dominated societies' established around Algiers, Oran and Constantine, and the 'underdeveloped interior in which 70 per cent of Algerians

lived in abject poverty as peasants and nomads' (MacMaster 2009: 9, 10). The resultant pauperisation of the Algerian population was exacerbated by famines, epidemics, a rural exodus, massive unemployment – all of which are referenced in the epic film *Chronique des années de braise* (see Chapter 2) – and at the same time by a surge in demographic growth in the twentieth century, which saw the non-European population almost double in two generations from 4.5 million in 1914 to 8.5 million in 1954 (Droz 1991: 43). This period of demographic growth in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s also saw a crystallisation of Algerian nationalism around several factions and charismatic leaders, notably Sheikh Ben Badis and Messali Hadj. The former is renowned for his 1936 *déclaration nette* in which he asserted that Algeria would never assimilate into the French nation:

cette nation algérienne musulmane n'est pas la France; il n'est pas possible qu'elle soit la France. [...] c'est une nation totalement éloignée de la France, par sa langue, par ses moeurs, par ses origines ethniques, par sa religion [this Muslim Algerian nation is not France; it is not possible that it ever be France. It is a nation entirely removed from France, by its language, its customs, its ethnic origins and its religion]. (cited in Ageron 1991: 89)

Islam was central to this vision of nationalism. Ben Badis had set up the AOMA (Association des oulémas musulmans algériens) in 1931, aimed at politicising Algerian opinion through a system of reformed Islamic schools, sports clubs and cultural activities. His anti-colonialist, Arabo-Islamic credo was succinctly expressed in the slogan 'L'Islam est ma religion. L'Arabe est ma langue. L'Algérie est mon pays' [Islam is my religion. Arabic is my language. Algeria is my country] (see Ageron 1991: 90). As incorporated into the post-1962 Algerian state, this credo was to be used to exclude non-Arab identities, principally Berbers, from official definitions of nationalism. Contemporaneous with the AOMA of Ben Badis were the two organisations established by Messali Hadj, first the communist-derived L'Etoile nord-africaine, then, after the latter was shut down by the French in 1929, the PPA (Parti du peuple algérien). Hadj too used powerful nationalist rhetoric, declaring that 'l'Algérie ne fut jamais française, elle n'est pas française, elle ne sera jamais française' [Algeria is not French, never was French, never will be French] (see Ageron 1991: 91). The green and white flag of L'Etoile nord-africaine was eventually adopted as the Algerian national flag. But Hadj was denied a place in the negotiation of a

post-independence Algerian state, principally because during the war against the French he rejected the dominant revolutionary force, the FLN (Front de libération nationale), and established a rival organisation, the MNA (Mouvement national algérien). From 1957 onwards it was the FLN rather than the MNA which gained supremacy in the Algerian revolution.

The Algerian war or Algerian revolution began with an insurrection in the Aurès mountains in the east of the country on 1 November 1954. The struggle was fuelled by versions of nationalism often derived from Hadj or Ben Badis, memories of the French massacres of civilians at Sétif in 1945 (described by the PPA as 'genocide') and also the increasingly brutal French reprisals against rebel activity – from the killing of over a thousand Algerians after the death of 71 Europeans in August 1955 to the infamous torture techniques such as *la gégène* (electric shocks). Despite the focus on urban conflict (and on the French use of torture) in the most well-known representation of the war, *La Bataille d'Alger* (see Chapter 3), the revolution was in fact 'predominantly a peasant-based phenomenon'; French control was strongest in the urban centres and weakest in the underdeveloped *bled* where over half of the country's 8.7 million Muslims lived (MacMaster 2009: 28–9). Europeans made up only 0.3 million of Algeria's 9 million population, and were heavily dependent on military, administrative and material investment from mainland France, combined with a political and legal system that denied representation and rights to the Muslim majority. This disparity extended to education, so that 'On the eve of the war in 1954, while virtually all European children aged six to fourteen years received primary schooling, this was true for only one in five Algerian boys, and one in sixteen girls' (MacMaster 2009: 29). One of the major achievements of the post-independence regime, although not one translated into employment figures, was a massive increase in the education of Algeria's children, especially girls: between 1954 and 1987 the education of Algerian girls aged six to fourteen had risen from below 10 per cent to 71.5 per cent (MacMaster 2009: 370). The importance of the rural peasantry in supporting the revolution had certain negative consequences. According to Assia Djebar, the FLN purges led by Colonel Amirouche during 1958–59 targeted young, urban, French-speaking volunteers such as students, leaving up to three thousand activists dead: 'The hunt is on: death to the students who have joined up in massive numbers, to the intellectuals coming from the cities to fuse their revolutionary spirit with that of