THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY AMONG YOUNG ALGERIANS:
THE EVERLASTING SISYPHUS

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ABSTRACT

After decades of a strong colonial yoke, political independence in Algeria has not meant total freedom for the oppresed people. Economically, culturally and linguistically, the population has witnessed difficulties of different sorts to face unsurmountable challenges newly independent countries encounter during their state-building phase to also achieve total independence. However, over forty years after, it is the youngest fringe of the population that is suffering from cultural void and identity problems. Caught between a failing educational system and a rent-hoder political class, the young ones are endlessly trying to find the cultural 'authenticity' their elders have been talking about for a long time, to no avail. This authenticity is but an illusion, a myth the politicians are continually using to justify their position.

This constant quest has been triggered off by on the one hand, a tangible linguistic malaise due to a multilingualism ill-treated by the political and educational authorities more concerned with the management of huge flows of young citizens, than with providing more adequate quality education capable of giving them the basics to face more challenging issues: identity quest, cultural and moral values.

The main purpose of the present paper is to provide an insight into the perceptions of this lost youth that has not been given enough help to face post-socialist Algeria. The State is givin up slowly whole domains that were run by it. On the other hand, these young persons are not equipped with the necessary survival kit to keep up with the new challenges the market economy is throwing at them. Finally, the young are trying to find makeshift solutions to real problems: exodus towards the Western world, black market, drugs, etc.

Key Words: Quest, cultural identity, youth, authenticity, representation.

Independence in developing countries has not always spelt happiness, welfare or better living conditions for the citizens of these countries. Disillusion has more often than not been the unfortunate lot of indigenous populations that have equated political independence with social, cultural, educational and

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personal growth and improvement. Enthusiasm and nationalistic attitudes have not been sufficient to plaster all the cracks that have appeared during the difficult days experienced right after the independence 'hangover'. This is no less the case of Algeria where the youngest fringe of the population has been feeling the hardship of the diversity of difficulties and the toughness of the problems they faced and still do.

The problematics raised in the present paper concerns the most vulnerable section of the nation: i.e., the young generations that have been facing their utmost challenge: their identity within a society that is itself searching for solutions to its queries, witness the bloody events due to the uprising of the Islamist movement (1992-2002), which has put forward a kind of re-islamization of the people. The causes of this identification process are not recent and the youth's malaise has been a recurrent disease the State has not found answers to, while the young are trying to find their own way into an increasingly alien environment.

The Cultural Void

If economically speaking, Algeria is experiencing better days, thanks to the high price of oil and gas, culturally, things have worsened and the islamist upheaval is a proof of the instability the Algerians have been living in, and in particular the youth. In the heydays of the socialist regime, there seemed to be a somewhat accepted mainstream culture feeding itself on the anti-imperialistic rhetoric developed by the State, and the creeping Islamist overbid put to the fore by the everlasting discourse on redemption with an anti-colonialist tint renewed by the contested power to justify its seizure of the reins of the country[4]. The so-called '*Revolutionary family*[5]' has tried to keep a balance between its vision of a socialist country in the tangible world and its wishes for a better Muslim nation, in the religious realm: two antinomic philosophies. However, the seeds of the *'fitna'* (Arabic word for disturbance and agitation) were being planted by careless politicians eager to improve their financial state, by evil-minded teachers (in the early days of Independence a majority came from the Middle East with biased ideas with a view to re-Islamizing the 'lost Algerian souls', some of these belonged to the Muslim Brothers' Movement), and more and more irresponsible parents as far as informal education is concerned.

In front of the cultural vacuum, what was on offer, on the cultural plane, from the State was not clear. There has been an overexploitation of the image of the good old days (those of the Islamic Golden Age between the 8th and the 15th century) of the Arabs (in a country where a third of the population are not Arabs

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[4] '' *Le secret réside dans le noyau* **anti-colonialiste** *qui était comme la colonne vertébrale tenant ensemble toutes les parties de cette construction. C'est sur lui que se réalisait le consensus minimum de telle sorte que l'on peut dire que l'identité nationale de l'Algérie a été fondée avant tout sur l'opposition au colonialisme* '' (Lardjane, 2001: 17)

[5] Members of the State party, FLN, the veterans of the war against France and the children of the martyrs, all interested in the exercise of power.

but from a Berber stock). The educational system has often underlined the 'greatness' the Arabs have experienced for over seven centuries, and the inventiveness and creation of the Arab philosophers, doctors, scientists. Living in the past in a fast-moving world might have seemed to be a wrong answer for the youth to their daily practices, worries and their vision of the world. The State has thus developed a discourse on a supposed **Authenticity** of the Algerian culture. This authenticity has never been spelt out except for its reference to the glorious past of the Arab world. Worse, it has also meant the rubbing out of certain ancient cultural traits that seemed to be shared by a majority:

"*... développer un paradigme de convergence où toutes les idiosyncrasies sociétales et individuelles seraient laminées pour faire place à une prétendue entité originelle: l'*authentique Algérien *affublé des 'constantes nationales' et doté de valeurs arabo-islamiques (où manquerait sa dimension berbère). Cette manière de singulariser certaines variables par rapport à d'autres dérange car c'est toujours par la négation ou l'exclusion que s'opère la mise en place de l'authenticité*" (*Miliani 2003: 29)

If ever mentioned, the young are described in terms of the violence they provoke (24 % accused of physical injuries and 76 % concerned with other types of delinquency: petty thieving in particular). This is not the only answer the young have found to face their daily problems. Incivism, want of moral values are becoming recurrent problem-areas the State has to deal with. To this problem, the latter has been adamant with a recall to past values, behaviours and attitudes, hence the idea of Authenticity as a healing method to find alternative ways to solve the young generations' problems. This authenticity seems to be some kind of cultural homogeneity around the Arab-Islamic values while stressing a social consensus about them:

"... the amalgam of a homogeneous political nation based on the French modernist model, legitimized by a key founding historical event, the Algerian Revolution, and its fusion with a supposed homogeneous supra-national culture, based on religion and language, as part of a wider Arab-Islamic culture world, has proved largely unviable." (Majumdar 2005: 128)

In front of such an irresponsive State, the youth has been looking for personal moves. Disturbed by a linguistic malaise (the mother tongues are combated by the guardians of the Norm: i. e. Classical, literary Arabic, a language that is not the language of communication for a majority of Algerians[6]), the young ones are trying to search for a possible Eden on earth. This utopian approach to life has created social and economic havens in their

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[6] *"... la langue d'expression favorise le cheminement de l'identification et ouvre sur la socialization. La langue identitaire est ce pilier identitaire qui permet au sujet de trouver son authenticité, de s'inscrire dans la réalité et d'agir sur elle en lui donnant la parole".* (Arezki, 2005: 184)

minds. These fantasized places are located in France, Australia (!) and today it is either Canada (for the elite) or Europe (for '*El Harraga*'[7] interested in '*El Harga*'[8] to other countries). These terms have been coined because of a new jargon is being developed by the youth themselves. This is also expressed in the *Raï music*[9], once forbidden by the state but imposed by the young ones who have expressed their difficulties through this outlawed music.

Between Singularness and Affiliation

The actual debate among young Algerians is their cultural identification (mainly religious). What is an Algerian? Torn between a desire to follow the steps of their elders (**affiliation process**) holders of an established tradition, followers of age-old religion and guards of reckoned values and a wish to appear peculiar, unique by building their self (**process of singularness**). These two approaches to self-identification generate very often identity conflicts because of the antinomic stands or visions of the world advocated in both methods. If the young Algerian tries to find a balance between his desire for self-actualisation in a world of diversity, he is also interested to develop efforts for singularness (in the way he speaks, dresses or thinks). These attempts are sometimes opposed to the regular tries of the society towards his affiliation and his feeling of belongingness. His identity construction is a slow process which takes place by successive crises rather than smooth adjustments because of a more and more unfriendly environment (social, educational, financial). His historical, social, cultural and religious references are blurred by a failing educational system and less and less responsible parents. Besides, the nation is still too abstract a concept in the eyes of the young to allow the latter to feel deeply that they are part and parcel of their country's history and community.

In his society, the young Algerian tries to manage different identities: the one he displays, the one he accepts, and the one he wishes. This debate is an everlasting one because never do the three types overlap, which may give a more stable personality to the young. The identity he displays is the one he pretends to be in the eyes of the others. The identity he accepts is the one he takes on willingly. As for the identity he wishes or even fantasizes, it is in the realm of the virtual, something like an evanescent entity. However, it is the latter that represents the actual dilemma the young ones are living due to the cultural malaise they are experiencing. Furthermore, it is the religious aspect that the youth are copying from foreign practices of Islam which are external to Sunni faith their parents have been practising for centuries.

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[7] Poor young ones who are deserters in a state of despair.

[8] Illegal escape (which ends sometimes by the death of a young man during his crossing of the Mediterranean towards Spain or Italy). The word means also burning (maybe of one's life).

[9] A type of music developed in Western Algeria, once forbidden on television and radio, but which expressed the feeling (in crude terms) of the youth.

Youth's Perceptions/Representations

We hypothesise that there is a close link between the youth perceptions and their attitudes towards their own environment and the world at large. A three-folded methodology has been used for the present research: classroom observation (at university), discussion with students (aged between 17 and 23) and a questionnaire given to 84 of them. More than one paradox has been unveiled in the process.

Asked about whether they had a clear cultural identity or not, only 50 % said they had a clear idea, 35.71 % said it was unclear, and 3.75 were uncertain. 10.71 % gave no answer. These figures are a proof of the drama the youth in Algeria are living.

As for the second question, asking about their feeling as Algerians: 28.57 % gave no answer, 50 % said they felt good, 17.85 % felt bad and 3.57 % were uncertain about their feelings. Happiness seems not present among half of those who hold the keys to the future.

The third question sought to help clarify the notion of 'authenticity' of the Algerian culture. Over 8 % did not give any answer; however, the pros and cons were even at 46. 42 %, very divided are the young then in front of their elders' discourse about authenticity.

Questions 4 and 5 were linked in the sense that if question 4 asked them if they were tolerant (89. 28 %) or not (10.7 %), question 5 wanted to know if they would accept that people had another religion than theirs. 32.15 % gave a negative answer though some of them said they were tolerant. This is quite revealing of the ambivalence of the young people investigated. Ambivalence is therefore a salient trait in the young's identity.

In relation with the youth's constant wish of leaving their country for another one, 60.71 % said they would not leave their country. Only 7.14 % said they would. 17.85 % said they would like to go and study or travel as tourists and return home. The result is rather unexpected and paradoxical. One would expect more students to leave their country for more shining and welcoming shores. A wish that seemed broadly shared.

However, a word of caution needs to be given here: these questioned persons were students with the possibility of having a good future. Those who are our concern are very often without much education and are poor.

The Failing Identity Quest

In front of an acknowledged cultural void and a society that has surrendered to the forces of money, the young people have in a differentiated way, undertaken their identity construction, an uphill fight that has laminated whole young generations. This has ended up with a culture of ambivalences and paradoxes (**See:** results of questionnaire) developed by those who were looking,

in the process of enculturation, of a more coherent and adequate image of them. This quest for identity has been (and still is) a difficult endeavour because very often, these youth are lost between their individual identity in the making and the social (collective) identity in crisis because of the unrelenting social changes that generate instability more than anything. Besides, on a political plane the decision-makers advocate a culture of sameness, of convergence and uniformity of thought:

"*Mainstreaming, as it is understood in this country, i. e. the ironing out of all idiosyncrasies characteristic of the Algerian society, has been on the political agenda for decades now*" (Miliani, 2005: 133)

Our investigation/observation has shown contradictions and ambivalences because norms are no more displayed by the older generation or even the resigned State. This is why these young people have a very difficult relationship with authority (in the form of parents, the State, educators or society). It is not rare to see these people challenge authority in a diverse ways: street demonstrations, petty thieving, quarrels with educators or even parents, bad driving, etc. The difficult rapport with their surrounding is the proof of an identity crisis of a youth forming their self. This surrounding is characterised by an identity void (witness the invasion of the Iranian type of *chador* (instead of the more tradition veil, *haïk,* among young and old women) created by the contradictory injunctions of the various authorities they have to deal with (parents, schools, society).

Therefore, it is in a situation of cultural crisis that the youth has developed a strong relation with the Arab-Muslim past (greatness of the Arab world in the past and the glorious history of the Algerian Revolution 1954-1962, when in fact they should also be attracted by their fate in the future. However, in such a whirlwind, the young generation is often animated by opposed feelings and attitudes whose main characteristic is built on an attraction-rejection mode. Ambivalence seems to be the youth's motto in the face of disturbing existential questions. This is so because no set answers are provided by any guards of the norms of behaviour, leaving the young to find their way into the jungle of life. This is why the internal debate is not between modern culture and tradition, but consists rather of a string of incantations about the country's motionless history[10] and a sudden religious bulimia[11] nearing bigotry, interested only in futile details of how to lead a life as a real Muslim, accepting anachronisms without any *Ijtihad* (reflection). This is why religious fundamentalism has become for many young men a rampart against external attacks: can this not

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[10] Because of legitimacy problems, there is an over-exploitation and an over-evaluation of the War for Independence, in order to keep power between those who took part in it.

[11] "*Une fois que les Algériens sont perdus, ils se raccrochent à l'islam. Dans l'énonciation par la plupart des nationalistes algériens des critères de l'identité, il y eut pour l'essentiel l'islam et seulement l'islam et/ou sa variante consubstantielle en Algérie: l'arabisme*". (Meynier 2001 :41)

happen if one's culture is weak or quasi inexistent? This is why the identity quest has ended by becoming a roaming. The young adolescent is often wandering about, victim at times of their elders who manipulate them. Witness the recent bombings (September 8th 2007, near Algiers) by young fundamentalist 'kamikazes' (in Arabic they are called: *ishtish hadiyin* or candidates for martyrdom). These people are often taken hostage by those who posit a convergent national unity, but are left on their own to search for their individual identity.

CONCLUSION

The identity problematics among the young ones is a recurrent debate because of the social changes their country experiences and against which they are not fully prepared. This is why it is a renewed struggle to assert one's identity in a changing world, first because a cultural vacuum prevails in the country that offers very little hope of progress to its youth, hence the quasi perpetual dreams of exodus to other parts of the world. Second, some have even died for a virtual country far from theirs by crossing the Mediterranean because no satisfactory answer has been given by the contested authorities (political, cultural, educational, social or parental) they meet in their life trajectories. This is so because of the increasing anomie taking root in a country drifting off.

Just like Sisyphus, the Algerian youth is bound to take up endlessly the challenges that may come their way each and every day. There is no end to their quest (or roaming about) because of the on-going instability of their country, the greed of the politicians, the low status of teachers, the resignation of the parents as far their tasks are concerned and the loss of values. The young are therefore becoming strays because of the frequent paroxystic situations they have to face daily. Insurmountable is thus the task in the hands of the Algerian youth. They seem not to have resigned, but not always choosing better alternative solutions. Immaturity. Unpreparedness. Or are they condemned to err?

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