

# The local and global in North African popular music

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On 29 September 1994, Cheb Hasni, the most renowned Rai singer living in Algeria, was gunned down outside his family's house in Gambetta, a quarter of the city of Waharan (Oran). He was one of many public figures (and some 50,000 others) who have been killed since the main opposition political party, the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) was prevented from assuming power by the annulment of elections that they would have won in 1991. Like the most notable of Algeria's victims of violence, which include journalists, lawyers, doctors, television presenters and top policemen, Hasni represented a version of Algerian identity that some people clearly could not tolerate. Responsibility for his assassination has not been claimed, but the manner of his death was identical to others carried out by the armed faction of the fundamentalist Islamic movement, the GIA (Armed Islamic Group). His death has possibly marked the demise of a genre of North African popular music known as Rai as it was produced in Algeria. Rai has been a particularly problematic idiom for Islamists and secularists alike. Both groups nurture distinct views of the place of Algeria, and Algerians in the world, and the role of Islam and liberal secularism in Algeria. Rai music constructs its own distinct trajectories linking local and global, 'East' and 'West', and, in this way, constitutes a distinct problem for Algerians, and indeed other North Africans today.

Rai is a popular music produced originally in urban western Algeria but which has been transformed by involvement in the 'World Music' business. By describing the creative choices made in recording studios, I will show how developments in the globalised form of the genre have effected the production and usage of the Rai in North Africa and which influences have been adopted or rejected. I will also consider the meanings attached to these musical features and how these meanings are used to construct concepts of identity and locality (see also Cohen 1994). Whilst the disembedding of a music from its original context and meanings (which occurs to some degree in all technological mediations) can loosen its ties with place, time and identity, this very greyness makes the it more open to multiple usage and interpretation in its active consumption. By looking at studio practice it is possible to observe the process of encoding style and metaphor; studying consumption (of cassettes, for example) enables one to observe the interpretation and construction of meanings, not all of which may have been foreseen by the producers.

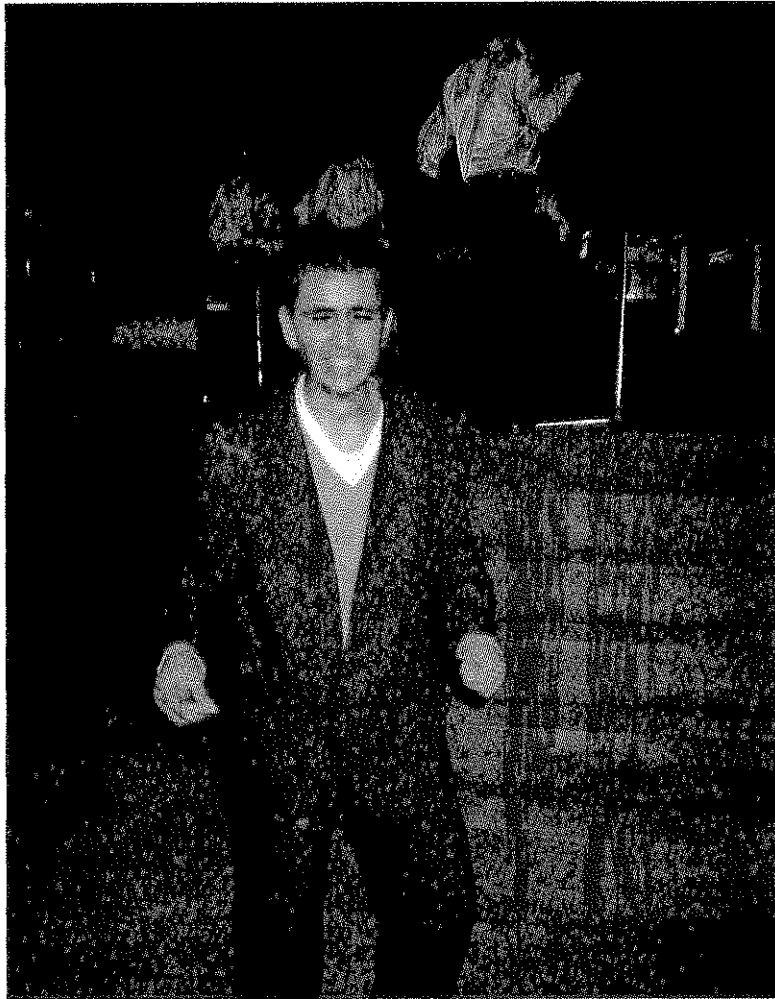
Rai has undergone considerable change since its transition from the wedding parties and intimate night-clubs of Oran to open-air concerts and MTV. Of the

few performers to have survived this transformation, Khaled (until his move to Europe 'Cheb' or 'Kid' Khaled) has most effectively exploited the opportunity to experiment widely, mixing North African with other, Western styles of pop music. One of the results of his international success, however, has been the increasing stylistic difference between the Rai produced on each side of the Mediterranean. This is not simply a matter of diverging tastes, but reflects a growing gulf between the resident and immigrant experience of being a Maghrebian, their attitudes and perhaps their aspirations. Since the early 1990s an ideological battle verging on open civil warfare has been raging in Algeria and, in this increasingly politically polarised society, musics, and particularly genres that can be associated with immorality and Westernisation, are far from being culturally neutral phenomena. Discussions of Rai by Gross *et al.* (1994), Morgan (1994), Sweeney (1989) and Virolle-Souibes (1993) have tended to bifurcate the experience of a migrant Diaspora and the North African origins of the genre. This bifurcation omits a crucial dialectic between the North African music industry and 'World Music' elsewhere: a dialectic that has important ramifications for social and political life and everyday musical experience in North Africa, as Guilbault has pointed out in a different context (1993). North African conceptions are very much bound up with the notion of 'the modern'; in this article, I intend to unpack some of the implications of Rai's modernity.

### Local to global

Throughout the mid-1980s, pop-Rai (musically, if not contextually, an eclectic departure from traditional forms), was produced in the city of Oran for a local market. The bulk of the new and rapidly expanding cassette industry in this region, utilising cheap and relatively simple technology, consisted of pop-Rai. As Peter Manuel has shown in an Indian context (1993), the advent of new, cheap means of musical production can, if only temporarily, enable the cultural expression of regional or minority interests, potentially in opposition to those of dominant political groupings. Historically, Rai has been the music most associated with discrete social domains, single-sex wedding parties, 'night-clubs' and brothels, that is, arenas where singers could be outspoken and provocative. Pop-Rai of the 1980s maintained this tradition of frankness and social criticism, continued to sing in the regional dialect and referred directly to places in and around Oran. While the music was now played on a combination of electric and traditional instruments and its largest audience now only heard cassette recordings of the singers, it remained well imbedded in local traditions, both musically and culturally.

The music industry in Oran (and in Oujda, across the border in Morocco, where Rai is also produced) is geared towards a rapid turnover of new products: new cassettes can be produced from recording to distribution in about one month. Singers seldom have contracts that last longer than one recording, and novices will have to pay for, or at least contribute towards the cost of, their own cassettes. Although there is little financial security for performers, they at least have a degree of flexibility, and if their recordings are successful, they are in a good position to negotiate with several *editeurs* for the best deal on their next work. *Editeurs* are producer-managers who seldom own a studio themselves, but make all the creative, financial and marketing decisions for the *edition*, or record label. In order to save time and money, singers very often will record the vocal tracks with minimal



*Dancing to a Rai Band at a public performance for the youth of Oran, Algeria*

keyboard accompaniment, and the *editeur* will add all the other instruments himself, edit and mix the recording and make arrangements for duplication and distribution in the artist's absence. Apart from a *derbukka* (hand-held goblet drum) and synthesiser player, it is rare to find other musicians in a recording studio. Partly due to financial reasons, recording musical 'groups' rarely exist in Rai, though a pool of musicians circulate on the cabaret and wedding scene to accompany singers.

Rai was formerly used in wedding celebrations and night-clubs; both intimate domains where singers were expected to improvise lyrics that praised and teased the audience. Although songs themselves may originally have had a folk religious or patriotic theme, their performance would entail considerable extemporisation, and an aptitude for this was expected from singers. Much of the author's fieldwork period was spent in the company of males in their twenties and thirties, for whom elaborate wordplay was a routine and pleasurable pastime; punning games in particular are part of the normal verbal interaction between good friends. The street slang of the city also changes rapidly – with my very basic Arabic I could never keep up with the latest expressions (though I believe that many, especially older locals, had the same problem). The language of Rai songs used, reflected

and contributed to this lively vernacular. Even though recording 'froze' its development, it gave the local slang a wider listenership and usage than it would otherwise have had, and its quick production rate ensured that the language was always fresh and amusing. Titles and phrases from Rai songs occurred regularly in everyday conversation between young Waharanis. When Rai became primarily a recorded form, its most outspoken lyrics were quickly toned down. The music was not played on Algerian radio stations until 1983, partly because of the poor language it was held to contain, although the general sentiments expressed in Rai songs – complaints against rigid social codes, and praise of alcohol and sexual adventure – were often as unacceptable. What was, in effect, the banning of the genre ended when, firstly, Rai's 'liberal' and 'modern' associations were thought to be useful to the government to counter the growing Islamic cultural critique of the regime; secondly, an awareness of considerable international interest in the music changed the local perception of it; and thirdly, the words and topics of the recordings were rendered suitably innocuous for broadcast. By means of this compromise between the needs of state broadcasting agencies and those of the music industry, Rai grew more popular throughout the Maghreb, though, as many Algerians believe, considerably blander.

Despite this self-censoring for wider appeal Rai remained clearly geographically located in Oran. Its rapid rate of production ensured that it contained the latest street slang, and, through its dialect, cassette-cover photographs and mentions of specific places in songs, Rai consistently referred to the city. Even without contentious lyrics, such language and associations with the city could be, and often were, considered provocative. To many Oranaise, Rai was a genre of music that simply should not have been heard in public because of its private and clandestine associations – 'cabaret' night-clubs are synonymous with brothels in the public imagination. Ironically, the latest forms of pop-Rai have been criticised just as vehemently for its 'Westernity'. To other Maghrebis throughout North Africa, Oran itself is often perceived as a libertine, amoral place;<sup>1</sup> explicit references to the city, then, are not made simply in order to promote the local sales of cassettes but also to capitalise on the national and international reputation of Oran. This state of affairs angers many 'respectable' Oranaise, particularly those who lean towards a more doctrinal interpretation of Islam.

### Studios and production choices

As a part of the author's fieldwork research in North Africa, some considerable time was spent 'hanging out' in recording studios, both in Oran, western Algeria, and Oujda, just over the border into Morocco, where Rai is also produced. My intention was briefly to study and compare the music businesses on both sides of the border in order better to understand musical practice, the recording and marketing approaches taken to different genres of music, and to appreciate the differences between live and recorded forms. In the course of this research it was found that the *editeurs* (producers, managers and general middle-men) were daily making aesthetic and economic decisions which negotiated several significant social discourses. As shall be shown, these decisions were not usually made in full consciousness of their potential implications; they amount to an encoding of musical features, whose meanings are most effectively left inexplicit.



Mixing down in the studio of 'The Bouchenak Brothers'. Oujda, Morocco

### *Editeurs*

The *editeur* of a studio performs a multiple role. Along with an engineer he records and mixes the music and is usually heavily involved with arranging it. He may also use a synthesiser to overdub the bulk of the instrumental parts, typically added after the vocal track. Furthermore, the *editeur* negotiates all the financial arrangements (first-time performers will have to pay him, whilst he will have to bid against other *editeurs* for more proven talent). It is he who decides how many cassettes will be produced, and when and how they will be marketed. As there are no binding contracts between performers and *editeurs* in Algeria, and very few in Morocco, each cassette is negotiated separately, and has to make money before another is attempted. In charge of creative decisions, A&R and marketing, the *editeur* holds a pivotal position in the music business, and exploits it as best he can since he rarely owns the studio, and would himself be replaced if he failed to make money for the owner.

### *Musicians*

Few 'live' musicians are required for a recording; apart from the singer and a *derbukka* (goblet drum) player, the overwhelming bulk of the music is produced on synthesisers by one or two people. Given the stark capitalistic ethos of the music business the author's initial suspicion was that the ubiquitous use of synthesisers was primarily to reduce the costs of employing musicians. This was confounded when it was realised that studio *editeurs* were often themselves highly talented instrumentalists, sometimes with 'classical' training on the 'ud (lute) or violin, and equally able to play Maghrebian traditional and Western pop music.

Several times inexperienced singers were observed being painstakingly rehearsed with the *editeur* accompanying on 'traditional' instruments, yet when at the recording, the 'ud, for example, would almost invariably be replaced by a synthetic 'Spanish Guitar' sound produced on an electronic keyboard.

This sound seemed to lack the tonal colour and subtlety of performance that the indigenous instrument was capable of, so why was this kind of choice made? It was discovered that in Rai there was a market preference for the modern sound over the traditional, even if this would not have been to the personal taste of the *editeur* himself. Likewise, Western concert flutes, or pan-pipe sounds were employed in preference to the indigenous *gasbah* or *ney*, because the latter sounded 'too close to home' and 'old-fashioned'. Clearly the synthetic 'voices' were considered more exotic and sophisticated than those with regional connotations.

These 'foreign' voices, however, tend to replace or 'modernise' sounds that were already broadly familiar to the North African listener. For example, what is regarded as the most 'traditional' form of wedding music in this region is played by two *ghraita* (double-reed shawm pipes), which alternate short melodic phrases in a call and answer pattern to the accompaniment of a large double-headed drum, the *tabl*. This tradition is maintained in the villages towards the east of Oran, notably in the town of Mostaganem. To the west of Oran and into Eastern Morocco, identical rhythms are played on military-style snare and bass drums, whilst the same shawm parts are played on trumpets. This example of syncretism is clearly the result of colonial culture contact; instruments have changed, but the role and social context remained largely unaltered. It was in fact this trumpet and drum combination that featured on the first *Pop-Rai* recordings of the mid-1970s by Cheb Maghnaoui and Houari Bellemou, and which distinguished this genre from all earlier versions of Rai. More recently, the same musical features are played on synthesiser and drum machine and, although this is a departure into the exotic in some respects, the musical structure itself and the relationship between the instruments can, to many North Africans, still be somehow evocative of the wedding party context. Possibly many such stylistic changes brought about through the creative decision-making of local *editeurs* consist of such cosmetic renovations rather than innovations, and that this displays more creative conservatism in the indigenous form of Rai than detractors might claim.

One might well expect some conservatism in an area of the music business so closely tied to market forces, and at a time when political polarisation has made all cultural expression poignant. This differs from the approach of the mid-1980s, when producers Rachid and Fethi Baba liberally mixed the traditional with the unfamiliar. It was their relatively adventurous experimentation with disco rhythms and synthesised sounds that helped bring Rai to the attention of Western record companies, but which also began the process of the disembedding of the music from its original context and market. By the middle of the next decade, a time of serious political instability in Algeria and growing concern in Morocco, major stylistic innovations in Rai came from Maghrebis living and working in Europe rather than Oran. Early in 1995 Rachid was shot dead at Tlemcen, his home town and where his recording studio was based.

### Europe and the Maghreb

The success of Cheb Khaled abroad moved the cultural centre of gravity for Rai. No longer was Rai's authenticity the sole property of one or two cities in North

Africa, but its local product was naturally compared with the polished imported form, produced in an environment where star performers were given time to develop their style and encouraged to mix their musical influences to appeal to the widest of audiences. The results of these developments on North African Rai were enormous, and did not only affect instrumentation. In all earlier forms of the genre, lyrics were principally directed towards a home audience, as was evidenced by the common use of regional language and slang, and frequent specific references to places and quarters in the Oran area. Oran itself has a reputation in North Africa for liberality and Westernism (often a bad reputation) and rather like the Liverpool sound of 1960s Britain, Rai and Oran are closely connected in people's minds throughout the Maghreb. Songs that describe nursing a broken heart along the Boulevard Front du Mer mean much less to an international audience than they do in Algeria. Likewise, the inclusion of the occasional song in praise of a local holy man, or another from the repertoire of Ahmed Wahby, who has been the most celebrated Waharani singer since before independence, are not likely to stir the imagination of a Franco-Maghrebi youth in a housing estate in Lyon. Song themes changed considerably in European-produced Rai, but they did so rather slowly in North Africa. To the local audience, the music of Khaled was appreciated enormously, but they complained that his songs were no longer *about* anything. Perhaps, more to the point, people in Oran were accustomed to knowing which town and quarter the singer came from and, although Rai listeners were very proud of the achievements of their own, they found it hard to continue to identify with the global version of their music.

Although there was some reluctance to emulate European song texts, stylistic innovations such as saxophone 'voices', hip-hop 'scratching' and familiar Western chord progressions were gradually incorporated into the indigenous music. In one studio, after watching a singer struggling to fit his song lines into the considerably fewer bars that the *editeur* had allotted for them in his arrangement, I was told that this style of singing was both fashionable and modern, and was what the public wanted at the time. Those involved in the music industry generally considered themselves to be slaves to popular taste rather than enjoying an interactive or proactive relationship with it.

Balancing the demands of the local and the European markets is a further problem for *editeurs* and Rai musicians. Algerian and Moroccan Rai is exported to France and other European countries, but recordings and rights to them are usually sold for a lump sum rather than licensed to European distributors. The *editeur* may profit financially in the short term, but for artists (who have already been paid and have typically disclaimed all copyrights) the main benefit would be increased exposure abroad. Being outside the multinational media corporations, local producers have not the resources to promote cassettes, and, in any case, Oranaise Rai cannot compete in terms of recording quality, distribution or musical material with that produced in Paris.

### Technology and tradition

Scales and modes (*maqamat*) that include quarter-tone notes feature rather rarely in Rai, except in vocal melismatic ornamentation, and although historical reasons exist which partly explain this, their absence cannot be completely distanced from the general ideological context in which music is currently practised. Egyptian and

Levantine Arab musics, which typically feature such scales and modes, are actually very popular in North Africa, but the indigenous art and folk traditions tend not to be. Quarter-tones *do* exist amongst the *nubat* (suites) of the Andalous repertoire, but these pieces are rehearsed and performed less frequently than those with less complex tonal systems. Given that Western Algeria and Eastern Morocco were only relatively briefly incorporated into the Ottoman empire, that Oran itself was a Spanish presidio for most of its existence, and the obstinate resistance of Berber ethnicity to both internal and external hegemony, perhaps it is not surprising that the Maghreb remains culturally distinct from the rest of the Arab world.

Recently, the dominance of electronic keyboards in musical practice and the adoption of some European innovations have no doubt contributed to the declining use of quarter-tones in Rai. However, the only epoch in which *maqamat* were frequently used in Oran was in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Egyptian Nasserist politics were being appropriated by Algerians for the purpose of rallying against the French. The great *Waharani Orientale* singers of this period, including Ahmed Wahby, fused regional rhythms and expressions with the arrangements and sentiments of Umm Kulthūm and Mohammed 'Abd al-Wahhāb in an act that expressed a pan-Arabic identity in opposition to European colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Despite regional traditions, the choice of one form of syncretism over another is ideologically loaded and, in the case of contemporary Rai, the existence of some Western features and the absence of others from the East might well be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance to recent attempts at political Islamification (*integrism*).

Since Wahby's time, it has been Western rather than Eastern musical elements that have been most obviously appropriated in Oranaise popular music, perhaps reflecting contemporary aspirations. Since Rai has become a 'world music', in particular, European chord progressions and simple harmonies have become commonplace, whilst songs have become shorter. This, of course, fits the requirements of European radio play (although it has no bearing upon broadcasting in the Maghreb). *Editeurs* have claimed that these developments were not made consciously but were merely reactions to local demands.

### Multi-tracking

Whereas in terms of musical structures, North African Rai has changed at a conservative rate in comparison with its European counterpart, multi-tracking has enabled development in other directions, in particular, the arrangement of 'ensembles' and a variety of instrument sounds. Rai in the 1970s was recorded on four-track equipment, which produced relatively sparse arrangements, very cheaply and quickly. In the 1990s 12-track facilities are the barest minimum a studio offers, and several 24-track studios can now be found in Oran and three in Oujda. Extra tracks can enable more creative stereophonic mixing, greater clarity for individual instruments and the possibility of double-tracking to enhance 'thin' sounds. North African *editeurs* do not usually employ such added facilities primarily in these ways, but tend instead to increase the number of 'instruments' accompanying the singer. Whereas Rai produced in Europe may aim for the novel use of sound textures through the management of stereophonic space, their Maghrebi counterparts would be more likely to add a string, brass and banjo section to the arrangement. This difference in the aesthetic use of technology is, along with other



factors already mentioned, central to the decline in the appeal of Oranaise Rai to Franco-Maghrebi audiences in Europe. It was speculated whether the choices made in arrangement and production might have been made in consideration of the likely form of playback equipment used in North Africa. Music is much more frequently heard on small cassette recorders and car stereos than CD players, and perhaps the Waharan 'sound' was geared to this technology. In fact, *editeurs* would have relished the development of CD technology in the Maghreb, as it would cut down pirating, but on questioning *editeurs* denied that either playback or broadcast equipment influenced studio practice.

### Extra-musical references

Within limits, *editeurs* are enthusiastic musical syncretists. Interestingly, however, their knowledge of extra-musical associations with foreign pop tends to be quite small. The highly popular Jamaican Reggae of Bob Marley, for instance, is regularly classified by both *editeurs* and listeners with the British band UB40 and Ivory-Coaster Alpha Blondy, on account of their musical similarities rather than geography or ideology. In a similar way, perhaps, that in our society all 'exotic other' musics are often grouped together under the category of 'World Music' (regardless of culture of provenance), so too North African producers are content to borrow widely without being aware of the extra-musical baggage that these musical features may carry elsewhere.

An important implication of this is that when adapting 'foreign sounds' (chord progressions, synthesised 'voices', exotic styles etc.) to Rai, *editeurs* are not usually making *associative* references that the audience would understand, ironically or otherwise. To European listeners, somewhat confusing extra-musical associations might be made, which would have quite different connotations in North Africa.

Rai regularly uses novel sounds, but in ways that tend to be already well established and accord with local tastes. After some time in studios it was discovered that of the pre-set voices available on studio synthesisers, those *least* employed were the ones with a 'rough' quality to them, such as commonly found in both Western rock 'n' roll and many regional traditional musics. Whatever the source, 'clean', ringing sounds were much preferred to 'dirty' rasping ones. The choice of 'concert flute' over the breathy indigenous instrument may be due as much to a preference for 'purer' tones as it may be to a rejection of the traditional. Over many conversations on this matter it emerged that harsh timbres were often associated with earthiness, even lewdness, which were then not considered appropriate for 'modern' pop musics.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of Rai's development, the music has gradually moved away from an aesthetic that included hoarseness and sensuality to one which was bright, glossy and slightly antiseptic. At the same time, in order to achieve state-controlled radio play (and avoid attacks from Islamic political groups) song texts had themselves become less controversial; in the 1990s they were largely reduced to a bland expression of forlorn sentimentality.

### Marketing locality

Depending upon the experience and degree of preparation of a singer, a cassette with usually six songs can be recorded in under two weeks. Singers normally

bring their own lyrics and some idea of a tune, and leave the arrangement and production to the *editeur*, who puts the bulk of the music together in the performer's absence. The turnover, therefore, is very fast and new cassettes are released whenever there is a lull in the market. Only the biggest stars, with more financial security, invest in advertising and this usually only amounts to coloured posters for display at vending sites. Without a sophisticated marketing side to the business, singers are rarely if ever 'hyped';<sup>4</sup> if the cassette appeals to the vendors they will play it, very loud, and passers-by might risk paying approximately £1 for it. Some members of the public may already be familiar with a new recording artist from his/her live appearances, though would not know his own compositions as most material used in performance consists of versions of well-known songs.

Although Oujda and Oran exist in separate nation-states with distinct post-colonial histories, there is little qualitative difference between the Rai music produced in each city. What is distinguishable between their output is the degree to which regional identity is expressed in the products. Oran is Algeria's second city, known throughout the country for its cosmopolitan relaxed atmosphere, its nearby beaches and its music. It is where Algerians, if they can afford it, come on honeymoon or for summer holidays. It is, at present, the only Algerian city without a curfew, which even makes possible an evening's social strolling along the broad *Front du Mer*. Oranaise Rai has typically been regionally conscious and self-referential. Early 'Cheb' Khaled cassettes included modernisations of Ahmed Wahby material, and other songs referring to local saints and their shrines were recorded alongside more contentious items.

Photographs of artists used on cassette covers make further reference to particular places and popular themes. Those produced ten years ago frequently showed singers in a studio, perhaps wearing headphones, or answering the telephone, amidst prominent items of recording technology. Otherwise they may have been depicted seated at a night-club table with prominent whisky bottle and glass. I have seen several that show the artist standing outside a travel agency waving tickets (to where?) and smiling broadly, reflecting a widespread obsession amongst the young with quitting North Africa for greener and safer fields.

On more recent cassette sleeves one finds the singer photographed against the backdrop of the modern (French-built) buildings of the Boulevard *Front du Mer*, or sitting wistfully staring out to sea in the public park at the end of this thoroughfare, known locally as a place for romantic assignations and the broken-hearted. For the Oranaise, the desire for solitude is often considered symptomatic of some psychological malaise; to be seen brooding in the places where Rai singers are depicted clearly indicates serious romantic disenchantment, which, since the beginning of the present period of political crisis, has been the dominant theme of songs in the genre.<sup>5</sup> Such images may convey meaning to Maghrebians other than those from Oran, but the references to places are far too specific for many to appreciate who do not know the city. It is possible that such iconographic changes mirror local, commonly held social attitudes as held by (male) Waharanis. Cassette covers, as well as song titles, are calculated to evoke empathy with the listener, denying the fact that the singer has *probably* slightly better prospects than the average listener, as least as far as romantic adventure is concerned. It is feasible that beneath the literal romantic surface of such images lies the expression of a much broader disillusionment than being jilted by a heartless girlfriend. Young (male) Maghrebians *are* frustrated by society's restrictions upon their sexual activit-

ies, but this is nothing compared to the general hopelessness expressed in regard to their employment, housing and marriage prospects, and the outlook for their future. Women's expectations and use of music differ in many respects to those of men, but this issue is beyond the scope of this article.

Musicians and *editeurs* in Oujda (in Morocco) prefer to deny that Rai is Oranaise at all, and it is quite reasonable for them to claim that much of the genre's musical roots and language are common to the entire region (if not the circumstances that enabled the development of the music as an internationally popular form). Lacking the domestic marketability of Oran's local and national references, Oujda's studios have become perhaps more outward looking in their attitude to musical influences and exporting their recordings. Cassette covers from Oujdi artists contain virtually no reference to the place of origin and, in the songs, strong accents and regional references are avoided. This strategy is adopted in order to capitalise upon the global popularity of Rai. Unlike that in Oran, the Oujdi music industry could not survive on local demand for Rai alone and faces fierce competition from Moroccan *Cha'abi* and other vibrant popular genres. In this way the Oujdi product is deliberately made less distinguishable from that of Algeria or Europe and is therefore moulded by the demands of the World Music industry to a greater extent here than across the border.

### Language, purity and place

With its blend of traditional, 'modern' and exotic musical elements Rai is indeed not unlike a *patois*. As such it is simultaneously used everywhere in the region, whilst considered a debased version of 'high' musical, linguistic and moral codes. Languages, in the Maghreb as elsewhere, have important political significance. Throughout North Africa, *local* dialects of Arabic and Berber predominate, with French, Spanish and standard Arabic used for specific purposes, such as education, commerce or official discourse. For communication internationally, literacy and bilingualism are pragmatic necessities, but their usage, especially in state-run institutions and bureaucracy, excludes monolingual Arabic speakers (often the less privileged section of society) from a significant area of political authority. Furthermore, widespread use of the language of the colonial regime, however necessary this may be, severely hampers the project of satisfactorily distinguishing the modern independent state from the colony. Official business is still partly conducted in French and although politicians attempt to use standard Arabic in all broadcast speeches, this is not a language many feel comfortable with.

The *patois* of the Oran/Oujda region (known as *Derrija*) is much simpler grammatically than standard Arabic, and the vocabulary is shorter, but its very limitations make it well suited to humorous word-play, puns and *double entendres*. The local language is not simply the most familiar, but that most suitable for the creative and playful construction of experience-near meaning. Like Rai, the dialect is a flexible, universally used, unwritten language, which distinguishes the people from this area but simultaneously denies them inclusion in the broader constructions of national and pan-Islamic community.

Adherence to and respect for tradition is considered a virtue in North African society, an attitude that applies equally to language, religious practice, social values and music. This acknowledgement of the authority of the past is reflected in both formal and informal power relationships, particularly in the deference

expected and shown within the family, to religious leaders and between the individual and state representatives. Since independence, such 'traditional' power relationships were largely taken for granted. Emigration northwards served as an alternative for those who dissented, it also masked economic and demographic problems facing the governing FLN (National Liberation Front) party. In the last decade, however, Europe has severely restricted immigration, and the younger generation of North Africa (some 60 per cent of the population are under 30 years of age) have become highly critical of post-colonial regimes. The government of Algeria in particular, is seen to have failed to live up to either the Socialist or Islamic principles it has espoused since the early 1960s. It has clearly been unable to provide adequate housing, employment and an acceptable quality of life for all but a select few. Similar criticisms are voiced in Morocco, although less centralised economic policies and the King's skilful manipulation of modern and traditional discourses has kept him in a much stronger political position.<sup>6</sup>

'Traditional' relationships of deference to the older generation has been ruptured by the widespread conviction that the governments have failed their people, and before the deterioration of political circumstances in the early 1990s Rai served to express some of this disenchantment. Both Waharanis and Oujdis well known to me expressed some dismay at the degree to which their culture had departed from a moral and ideological purity they believe to have existed in the past; many tended to put the blame upon 'outside forces' for placing in their way temptations they were unable to refuse, and upon their own authorities for allowing this to happen. At the same time very few (including some decidedly religious-minded people) would have refused the opportunity to emigrate to the West even if it were possible to procure a visa.

### Conclusion

In the present circumstances in North Africa, Rai often occupies uncomfortable cultural territory. It is not as 'Westernised' as its detractors maintain, and this view is supported by the growing disenchantment with 'French' Rai, as it increasingly comes to resemble mainstream Euro-pop.

Whether or not Rai remains a local music is not merely a matter for academic debate about musical style. In the political circumstances prevailing in Algeria (and to an increasing extent in Eastern Morocco), language, dress, and behaviour are taken to indicate whether one identifies with the 'modern' or 'traditional' concept of national identity. Many Maghrebis who favour the latter alternative regard most musics as *haram*, that is, against the spirit of Islamic doctrine, though to many more, Rai, amongst all other indigenous musics, has the most immoral local connotations and simultaneously seems to be that most influenced by the West.

North African culture, like all others, comprises and is negotiated from numerous, often contradictory strands.<sup>7</sup> The syncretic nature of Rai music, with all its contradictions, can be considered in many ways to be 'typically Oranaise' and has meaningful resonances throughout the Maghreb. However true this may be, this position runs counter to the ideology espoused by Islamic political movements. Whilst Rai has not actively supported the incumbent military regime, it has made compromises in its anti-authoritarian stance in order to achieve broadcast

on national networks. As such it has allowed itself to be partly appropriated by the vehemently anti-Islamic government.

North African Rai has been constructed on an ideological fault-line, exhibiting all the mixed metaphors of a society divided not only by age, class and gender distinctions, but also torn between the attractions of both Western and Eastern globalised configurations of identity. Given the close, if antagonistic, relationship between Algeria in particular and colonial powers, the glossy modernism of 'Westernity' is in many ways the most familiar and desirable discourse. On the other hand, claims to inclusion in the morally correct *Ummah* (the community of believers) are undeniable, even if this ideology effectively denies the value of local and Berber identities, which are more 'experience near' concepts. Rai, which at an important level displays the syncretic reality of all these competing influences, was problematic because this reality is not, in the end, acceptable to those prepared to use violence to erase cultural 'anomalies'.

In a recent visit to Oujda, I was informed by musicians working the wedding circuit that since Cheb Hasni's death no one wanted to hear Rai any more. Whether Hasni was shot because he represented a way of being Algerian that offended the GIA, or whether he was involved in dangerous extra-musical activities is not known, but the production of Rai from Oran since autumn 1994 has, it would seem, slowed to a standstill. Oujdi musicians were playing *Sha'abi*, *Hausi* and a good deal of *Orientale* pop music from Egypt. Musicians feel too constrained by current political circumstances to make anything meaningful of Rai, and have turned their attentions elsewhere. Listeners, too, have turned to less contentious, and more locally phrased, genres. Whatever attractions 'the modern' might have had, 'tradition' is a safer bet.

## Endnotes

1. *Waharan* (or in French, Oran), the most westerly city in Algeria, is geographically closer to Morocco and Spain than to Algiers, and its history has been shaped at least as much through interaction with these 'foreigners' as its own. The city was a Spanish military presidio for over two hundred years, and during the French Colonisation period had a lower percentage of Arabs than other major cities. The city, then, long had a reputation for being 'foreign' and also for prostitution, undoubtedly one of the most reliable forms of trade between the port and its hinterland. Useful social-historical studies of these cities can be found in Katan (1994) and Benkadda (1988). For a comparison with the 'border culture' of the existing presidio of Mélilla see Dreissen (1991).
2. Ahmed Wahby, who died in 1993, was known as 'le professeur' of a style of music known as 'Oranaise', which has been popular in Algeria since the mid-1950s. Wahby's music utilised popular conceptions of 'noble proletarianism' and combined it with elements of 'high tradition'. Wahby, amongst others, was employed during the war of independence to perform for references, though it is possible that they have been used at least partly ironically in the present context.
3. This conjectural relationship between sound and sensuality was supported by the discovery that gut snares, which give *bendirs* (frame drums) their rasping timbre, were removed from the instruments when used by male religious sects in local *Dikhr* ceremonies (ritual repetition of the names of God). The rough timbre that the snares produced was considered excessively sensual for such metaphysical purposes.
4. Rai, as produced in Oran, is an 'experience-near' cultural form not best suited to marketing techniques, which serve to make the singer a distant and superhuman object of desire. Local people knew, for example, where Cheb Hasni lived, what car he drove and gossip about his personal lifestyle. In North Africa, wealth and celebrity do not override the importance of belonging to a community. Rai can be problematic in this respect, as singers usually *do* market themselves as individuals rather than performing in group ensembles. Rai singers'



a stall or shop. This makes it difficult to refer readers to specific recordings, though listed here is a number of important Rai and other singers who may be found on compilation albums licensed to the West or obtainable through importers of Maghrebi music.

*Rai Chebs* (resident Maghrebi): Hasni, Nasro, Mami, Fethi, Kamel el Oujdi, Maghnaoui & Bellemou, Les Freres Bouchenak, Mohammed Ray, Houari Benchenet

*Chebs (f.)*: Zohra, Saharouia, Fadela

*Musique Oranaise*: Ahmed Wahby, Blaoui el Houari, Ahmed Saber

*Rai Artists* (resident in Europe): Khaled, Kader