

Algeria's Belle Époque (3) Narratives of Religious and Social Change

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Ed McAllister revient pour Textures du temps sur la nostalgie des années Boumediene. Cette nostalgie n'a pas le même contenu selon le lieu d'où l'on se remémore le passé...

إلى حنين الناس إلى عهد بومدين. هذا الحنين الذي لا يكون له نفس المضمون بحسب المكان الذي نتذكر من خلاله. حيكات الزمان يعود إبد ماكالبيستر في الماضي.

Debates in Algeria about the place religion should occupy in society among many Algerian intellectuals, and many of those I have talked to that live in the wealthier neighbourhoods that occupy the high ground above central Algiers, frequently remind me of a the full frontal opposition between the secular and the religious that is found in debates in France (and increasingly, elsewhere in Europe). This binary is not new to Algeria, where it has evolved and takes different forms from those found in France and has, as a result, become an Algerian narrative. In its least nuanced form, the terms of this debate pit a top-down brand of secularism, imbued with modernist concepts of republicanism, rationality, and toleration of difference against the normative version of Islam that emerged in the mid-1980s and is equated by secularists with intolerance, anti-rationality, social repression and obscurantism. In Algeria, the binary nature of this debate has been intensified by a much oversimplified political split between *éradicateurs* and *conciliateurs* during the conflict of the 1990s and continues a series of binaries that exist in socially held depictions of the Algerian past (Algerian/French; Arab/Berber, internal maquis/frontier army, etc). Such binary approaches are largely unhelpful, since they reduce diversity by excluding and silencing other voices by forcing into mutually exclusive camps.

Memories of the 1970s are often invoked during such debates in Algeria, in reference to a time when "on vivait notre religion normalement". The 1970s are depicted as a time of bars, nightclubs and charcuteries, when people were more interested in the latest Bee Gees track than religion. As such, the 1970s becomes the decade of secularism *par excellence* and is opposed to a perception of a wave of religious sentiment since the 1990s, that is represented by the rise of the FIS. The debate is often fought over women's bodies, with frequent references to the miniskirts of the 1970s opposed to the *jilbab* of the 1990s, with some of the most virulent criticism by staunchly secular women being reserved for girls who attempt to sidestep the debate, wearing tight clothes but still covering their hair. Interestingly, the much loved *hayek* stands for national religious tradition as opposed to transnational forms of Islamic dress that have reached Algeria in recent decades.



[1]

1974, 20th anniversary of the Revolution – The image has been much circulated on Facebook recently, notably on the nostalgic francophone page [Alger à une certaine époque](#) [2]. Most comments praise the

miniskirts (and absence of hijab). Original published in el-Moudjahid, 1st November 1974, with the caption: "Elles ont l'âge de la révolution".^{1[3]}

While such positions reflect the experience and positions of many in Algeria, there are other narratives. Viewed from Bab el-Oued, the representations and social memories invoked when talking about religious change over time are quite different. Indeed the terms of the debate are totally different, and do not take the form of an opposition between a secular past and a religious present.

Memories of the 1970s, based on both lived experiences reformulated in the light of intervening events and on perceptions inherited (and challenged) from parents by young people, broadly depict a time when religion was the preserve of older people – with numerous reports of young people being turned away from mosques because “mazal rak sghir” [you’re still too young]. This is not just because young people were not bothered with religious practice, but due to a perception that religion was a serious business worthy of a respect that only the more mature and experienced could provide. Indeed the difference between the religious practice of the older generation and the lack thereof among young people formed one of the key sites of differentiation between generations and of traditional respect for elders. Old residents of Bab el-Oued react angrily to accusations that in the 1970s all Algerians were strangers to their religion, even though they freely admit not having bothered much with religion when they were young.

Older people in Bab el-Oued remember the gradual changes in urban space related to religion over time. New religious spaces appeared as the state attempted to meet the demands of a growing and ageing population during the mid to late-1970s, as well as to combat pressure from incipient Islamist movements that had already begun to infiltrate institutions such as the Scouts. New mosques were built in central Bab el-Oued, such as Es-Sunna and En-Nasr. Where architecturally possible, some old churches were demolished to make way for new mosques, such as the Église Saint Joseph which became El-Fath Mosque, while others remained as mosques within old church buildings, such as Et-Taqwa Mosque. Loudspeakers replaced the traditional ‘unplugged’ call to prayer and the canon shots marking the end of fasting in Ramadan were abandoned. The 1970s is thus remembered as a time of sincere religious practice for those of appropriate social status with increasing state investment in religious infrastructure.

The idea of liberated miniskirt wearing women sitting on café terraces is also challenged from Bab el-Oued, where many would not have condoned such behaviour in the 1970s. Women’s access to public space is depicted as being more limited than in the present. Unlike today, the central market in Bab el-Oued was the sole preserve of men, who would generally be responsible for the shopping. While small numbers of women did work in the tobacco and textile factories on Rue Mizon and Rue Livingstone, the main employer of women in Bab el-Oued was, and still is, the public sector (schools, Maillot Hospital and the CNAS). Women would never stop in cafés, and the *Salons de Thé* and ice cream parlours that are major sites of female sociability on Bab el-Oued’s main commercial street did not open until the 2000s. Relations between men and women in the 1970s are seen to have been governed by a sense of *horma*, respectful distance sometimes equating to physical separation. Many residents describe continuity with gender interactions present before independence in the Casbah, from where many of Bab el-Oued’s residents gradually descended until the mid-1960s to occupy flats left by departed Europeans. An often quoted example is that of the man who returns home to a shared house and coughs to announce his presence on the stairs to give women from other families the chance to disappear before he enters the main patio. *Horma* also implied that one could not talk to women in the street beyond family members or neighbours, while *tarbiyya* [good manners] dictated that men should step off the pavement to give women enough space to pass. By all accounts, while some women in Bab el-Oued did dress à l’Européene or civilisé, miniskirts were few and far between and were more the preserve of women in wealthier districts. Many residents of Bab el-Oued remember shopping trips to central Algiers being like visiting another world.

Women’s religious practice seems to have been more syncretic than that of men, with women in the 1970s being equally likely to visit the mausoleum of Sidi Abderrahmane to ask for intercession or go up to light a candle at the basilica of Madam L’Afrique [Notre Dame d’Afrique]. A number of women have mentioned that since the 1990s, they have stopped doing this, after “understanding what our religion really says”, giving a sense that many feel they were ignorant of ‘true’ Islam before the appearance of reconfigurations of normative religious practice. One woman even described the early-1990s as “ki ja el-Islam” [when Islam arrived]. However, while this period changed the habits of many in Bab el-Oued, depictions of the 1990s as being purely religious are too simplistic, given that many of the district’s bars and brasseries serving alcohol closed only in 2008.

One of the most frequent references to religious practice in the 1970s was that it simply reflected sincerity and good manners, two factors seen by many to be lacking in the much more fragmented Bab el-Oued that has been inherited from the 1990s. Even those politically involved in the heyday of the religious movement point to a golden age between 1989 and 1991 in which it seemed that the *terbiya* and *horma* that had defined social relations in the post-independence Bab el-Oued of the 1970s seemed to be at last returning after the dislocations of the 1980s, recast in an even more 'authentic' religious guise defined by an end to syncretism and the spread of religious practice to all age groups. Now in their fifties and able to remember the 1970s, these men draw an explicit parallel between the society the FIS tried to create and that of the 1970s. This allows us to glimpse new clues that help to explain the attractiveness of the religious movements of the 1990s. Like the older generation that preceded them, young people sporting *qamis* and beard also contrast a 1970s seen as representing sincere religious practice, *horma* and *terbiya* with a present in which religious appearances are more important than the principles behind them. Despite the importance of appearances, a major fault line today in Bab el-Oued is not between *akhina* [those with a religious appearance] and non-*akhina*, but between Islamists accepted wholeheartedly as *tawa3na* ['ours', i.e. from the neighbourhood] and the repentis that arrived in Bab el-Oued after the amnesty of 2005, who are often seen as having blood on their hands, as well as being identified with *kwava* [uneducated rural migrants]. In El-Feth mosque, more long-term residents pray separately from the repentis. Many repentis run the myriad of Islamic emporiums that dot the neighbourhood, businesses which are seen by many residents as money-laundering fronts for income earned through racketeering during the 1990s.

If for some in Algiers, the 1970s appear to stand partly for a 'natural' Algerian religious order that is often identified with secularism and pitted against a monolithic category of Islamism, from Bab el-Oued, the 1970s is more likely to be identified with a past seen as more morally intact and the present with a loss of traditional social values. The important point here is that, the 1970s is seen as being simply 'better' for different groups of people and becomes a repository of authenticity that articulates a number of different moral perspectives in the present. In Bab el-Oued, representations of religious change are crisscrossed first and foremost by images of earth-shattering social fragmentation in the 1990s, of rampant materialism and consumerism in the 2000s, rural-urban migration and the results of the 2005 amnesty. Also prevalent in depictions of socio-religious change in Bab el-Oued are previous patterns of age-defined religious practice and decreasing respect for elders and traditional structures of authority in the present; an increase access of women to public space since the 1970s and perceptions of declining respect for gender boundaries in the present; and a rise in the importance of the trappings of religious identity that is not always seen as articulating 'true' moral principles and which is sometimes conflated with hypocrisy, particularly by the generation born during the 1990s. Representations of religious change over time in Bab el-Oued do not therefore seem to reproduce a full-frontal religious-secular debate that exists elsewhere in Algerian society.

1. Thanks to Natalya Vince for the details [[↩](#) ^[4]]

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