



# New Constructions of Masculinity: Understanding the Dynamics of Conflict: Insights from the Case of Algeria\*

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Competing interpretations of gender roles have played a central role in the recent conflict in Algeria. It is impossible to understand this without exploring the desperate circumstances of many men in Algeria, and throwing new light on the debate on the 'crisis of masculinity'. Nearly all the accounts I have read by women of their experience of the conflict highlight the issue of gender separation and difficult, painful relations between men and women, which leaves both parties in distress. This article is an attempt to explore the way in which masculinity is constructed and represented in Algeria, and to look at the range of possibilities available to young men in particular.

To understand these possibilities I am using three different sources: the independent press, feature film and novels. I will look at newspaper accounts of the position of the hitistes<sup>1</sup> namely the young unemployed men in contemporary Algeria; the fictional representation of the Afghans (Algerian men who, on returning from Afghanistan in the early 1990s formed the backbone of the Islamist militias) and the treatment of masculinity in Algerian film. I will situate this in a socio-economic-legal context and draw out some implications for understanding the relationship between constructions of masculinity and the vulnerability of young men in situations of conflict.

I would like to begin by discussing a well-known Algerian film, *Omar Gatlatu* made in the late 1970s by the director Merzach Allouache. Omar Gatlatu refers to the expression *gatlatu al-rujula* literally 'machismo killed him'. The film affectionately highlights male posturing and alienation (Allouache 1976). It was made during a more stable and prosperous period in Algeria's history, but it illustrates the problems facing young men at the time, and suggests ways in which the situation would later develop. The central character in the film is Omar. In a semi-documentary style, Omar recounts his daily life in the Bab el Oued neighbourhood of Algiers. What Omar says, and the camera shows are two quite different stories. While he dresses himself carefully we discover that he is still living with his parents, grandfather and sisters (some unmarried, another divorced) in a tiny flat. He has an un-pressured bureaucratic job in the service des fraudes but it lacks direction. We see the demoralised routine of office life, casual and liberal phone calls, reading the sports sections of the newspapers, and the occasional raid on (female) illegal street traders in jewellery. The overwhelming impression we are given is of the ineffectiveness of these men's lives. So during the raid the women escape sanction and reprimand the bureaucrats for interfering in their attempt to earn a liv-

ing. Omar's close circle of friends, other young men like himself, look longingly at young women from a distance: Omar sees one woman he likes on his way to work everyday. As she shakes bedding from her window, they exchange discreet signs of recognition. But his male circles of friends are his mainstay and they spend their leisure time together listening to chaabi and hindou music or attending football matches. When Omar loses his prize possession, a tape recorder, in a street robbery, he buys a replacement 'hot' from a friend. Unknown to his friend, it contains a cassette with a short message from a woman. He is fascinated by what she says about her life and despair, and he discovers that she works in the same office as he. He arranges to meet her but after an enormous build-up in which he gets drunk and finally manages to stand in his best suit on the other side of the busy street watching her waiting for him. Omar is torn between his friends who are simultaneously cheering him and calling him back because they don't want to lose him. Across the road, divided by the stream of traffic which would normally provide no obstacle, Omar is powerless to approach her and soon gives up. To save face, he tells himself he will meet her another day.

Three important themes emerge from this film. First it shows the gender segregation of Algerian society and men's hidden fear of women - a theme which is frequently evoked in other works (Allel 2001). Second it exposes men's relative powerlessness, alienation and aimlessness. Third, it draws attention to divisions between men and women who are living in overcrowded conditions and who scrutinise one another closely. Although Omar lives with his sisters, he has a very limited number of interactions with them. He doesn't know why his sister was divorced. He is uneasy about the physical proximity with her, but is powerless to change it. Events take place under the watchful eye of his friends and peer group. His male friends are all watching him and cheering when he stands poised to cross the road.

In retrospect the times of Omar Gatlato, the 1970s, were relatively untroubled years in Algeria. But the 1980s saw considerable turbulence, the beginnings of structural adjustment, a rushed and incomplete process of democratisation and the emergence of the fundamentalist FIS (Lloyd 2003). The 1990s were years of terrible conflict and pressure on socio-economic structures. This has resulted in a social crisis, which has acutely affected many young men who form an active and vociferous minority especially significant in the volatile contemporary situation.

### **The Changing Status of Men in Algeria**

As a whole, the world changing structures of production and reproduction, shifts in education, and the labour market and family organisation have weakened the 'tra-

ditional' roles associated with male dominance such as the role of breadwinner and head of the family and have given rise to the idea of masculinity in crisis or at risk (Bourdieu 2001; Chant 2000). Young lower income males are especially vulnerable to insecurity and marginalisation (Cornwall 1998). There is evidence that men's anger and confusion arising from this crisis may be expressed in increased violence and alcohol/drug abuse so their position is clearly an essential part of any analysis of conflict (Chant 2000).

In the next section I look briefly at the legal and socio-economic position of men in Algeria to reveal how this crisis is played out there.

Family relations and the legal position of men and women in relation to household members is determined in Algeria by the Family Code (1984) which is based on an interpretation of the shari'a. Since the recent changes to the Moroccan Family Code, the Algerian law is the most restrictive in the Maghreb. It established man's dominance over women, the husband as the head of the family, men's right to repudiate their wives, and institutionalised sexual inequality in inheritance. A woman's consent to her first marriage is mediated by a male guardian who can deny her choice of husband, and the code legalises polygamy although this is quite rare in practice (Saadi 1991). A great deal has been written and debated about the impact of the Family Code on women, but we should also be looking at its distorting consequences on gender relations in general (Marouane 1998).

Despite this pre-eminent legal status, men's position in the household is rendered problematic by extremely difficult social conditions. A look at demographics and family/household conditions reveals the extent of the pressure of change.

In the 1980s demographic boom, population grew at over 3% a year. In 1997 38% of the population was under 15.2. Life expectancy in Algeria is similar to Morocco and Tunisia at 66 for men and 69 for women. Since the launch of the National Programme for the Control of Demographic Growth in 1983 there has been a gradual acceptance of contraception, and fertility rates are slightly higher than in neighbouring countries but falling (UNDP 1998). Recent studies such as that recently published by Kamel Kateb suggest that there have been

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basic changes in patterns of marriage running directly counter to the thrust of the Family Code (Kateb 2001). While marriage remains a near-universal institution in Algeria (almost 97% of all adults are married at some time) the average age of women at marriage rose – from 18 in 1966 to 25 in 1992 (Oufreha 1998).<sup>3</sup> With a convergence in the age of spouses it is less common to find older men marrying younger women who they then try to dominate. So despite the Family Code, marriage is becoming more equal. Oufreha also found that the preference for male children is declining: 92% of Algerian women told the PAPCHILD survey that they would prefer female children to males (Oufreha 1998). This suggests that there may be important changes in women's self-perception and the way in which they negotiate patriarchal family structures which clearly has implications for men (Lacoste-Dujardin 1986).

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Living circumstances can be extremely difficult: the building of new housing stock has failed to keep up with population growth.<sup>4</sup> Even in 1977 housing occupation was going beyond the level of 6-7 persons per unit. Despite the mushrooming of buildings since the 1980s, state initiatives lack coherence and the earthquake of 2003 exposed the failure to apply proper building controls.<sup>5</sup> The conflict of the 1990s

has accelerated, and the flight from the countryside to the cities exacerbated overcrowding (Boumedine 1996). So the overcrowded conditions in which the fictional Omar was living in the 1970s have worsened.

Analysis of the crisis of masculinity also draws on evidence of male failure in education and employment (Chant and Mcllwaine 1998; Hern 1998). In Algeria girls have traditionally been pressured to drop out of secondary school leaving the terrain open to their brothers, but recent figures show that more girls complete their education and do better than boys at their studies. Boys are more likely to drop out or have to repeat school years. Although girls are younger than boys in the final year of secondary education, they represented 55.3% of successful candidates in the baccalaureate exams in 1996.

In many countries men's failing integration into the family is associated with women entering the labour force in significant numbers (Moore 1994). But this is not really

true of Algeria. Women only constitute about 10% of the population in paid employment. There are also high levels of unemployment running at about thirty percent and surveys show soaring levels of urban poverty.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of local businesses have closed involving the loss of many previously stable jobs. The growth areas are too frequently insecure and informal.

Recently the Algerian press highlighted the growth of the informal economy. Young men can earn well by selling places in the queue for visas in front of the French consulate in Algiers.<sup>7</sup> Their clients are mainly women, older people and people living outside the city. Labour is divided between those who queue and those who find customers. Work starts with the queue at four in the morning. They charge about 300 dinars (about 5 Euros) for a place near the front but when the queue is longer it can rise to as much as 4000 dinars (about 60 Euros). This compares favourably with the minimum wage of 8000 dinars,<sup>8</sup> or the daily wage of a building worker at 400 dinars. Those who work like this can earn 16,000 dinar (about 242 Euros), which is the equivalent wage of a secondary school teacher.

The catastrophic floods in November 2001 drew attention to the growing numbers of people in insecure employment. Two examples published in the daily newspaper *El Watan* give a flavour: 17 year old Samir sells second hand clothing in the Belcourt area of Algiers. His elder brother is a hittiste who at the age of 26 asks him for money to buy cigarettes. Samir gets up every morning at 7 and goes to work where he earns about 7000 dinars a month (about 105 Euros) and has the right to take one or two items of clothing for himself. He has no time to do anything apart from work. Another young man, Mohammed left school in the 4th year of primary education when his father abandoned his wife and children. He began running errands at the Triolet market in Bab El Oued, then selling and carrying crates of fruit. He then got a job in a shoe factory as a posteur, earning 2 dinars a piece. When the factory was inspected he was told to say that he was an apprentice although he was actually doing the work of a qualified worker sometimes doing unpaid overtime, with no paid leave. The factory was destroyed in the floods of November 2001 and he like many others had to start again.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Different Roles**

Given these constraints on men's positions within the family, education and employment, what are the roles open to young men in contemporary Algeria? Here I discuss two extreme cases: that of the hittiste and that of the Afghan. They are not the only possibilities available, but they illustrate the difficulties faced by many.

### Hittistes

The word hittiste derives from the Algerian Arabic *\_\_\_\_\_* hit meaning wall: the hittistes are men who prop up the walls of Algeria's towns and villages. Their domain is the street; they observe life and take advantage of any opportunities, which may arise but are essentially aimless. Their presence in the streets reveals that there is no room for them at their parent's home and that they lack the resources to have their own private spaces. Hittistes are not necessarily unqualified, but they are victims of high levels of unemployment and lack of opportunity. Algerian popular discourse is full of references to the unrealised dreams of the hittiste who may fantasize about migrating, becoming a famous singer like Khaled, or a world class footballer like Zinedine Zidane, or even use his wit like the comedian Fellag who draws his material from street humour.<sup>10</sup> It is no coincidence that these stories of success are of people who have left Algeria. The hittistes are a visible reserve army for any subversive activity since migration is not an easy possibility.

### Afghans

In the early 1980s, one of the obvious directions for the disillusioned dreamer was to go and fight in Afghanistan. In Algerian literature of the 1990s there are many accounts of the impact of the returning veterans of the Afghan wars on local communities in the late 1980s (Allouache 1995; Boudjedra 1991; Boudjedra 1992; Boudjedra 1993; Boudjedra 1995; Khadra 1998; Khadra 1999; Sansal 1999; Sansal 2000; YB 1998; YB 1999; YB 2001).

Yasmina Khadra's<sup>11</sup> novel *Les Agneaux du Seigneur* is set in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the outset of the civil conflict in Algeria in the remote village of Ghachimat (Khadra 1998). It traces the way in which the village is gradually implicated in the conflict. Old animosities are channeled into the conflict, helping to determine people's positions. Women play a subordinate role in the novel except for two women: Sarah the virgin of the village who is pursued by a number of suitors who compete for her hand. The other woman is Mère Osmane, the mother of one of the main Islamist terrorists, who controls events from behind the scenes.

In this novel, Khadra shows how the Afghans' command over their communities arises partly from their challenge to the Algerian authorities and partly from prestige attached to their experience of hardship either in prison or in travelling (or both). Their experiences outside the country set them apart from those who remained in the village. The novel opens with the return from prison of Cheikh Abbas who brings Islamist ideas to the village. Although he did not go to Afghanistan he is portrayed as someone who has had exceptional experiences, and therefore, is worthy of respect. But Kada Hilal, a schoolteacher, gives

up his love for Sara who marries a policeman and sets off to Afghanistan. Kada is given a rapturous send-off by his peers when he decides to go to Afghanistan (p. 95). When he returns he automatically takes command of the situation because of his new won authority, based on experience. Another form of authority comes from social status. In some instances (as with Issa Osmane known as Issa la Honte) his position is partly determined by his role under colonialism or during the war of independence in the 1950s.

We can trace the history of the eruption of religious zealotry in post-independence Algeria to the early 1980s when for a short time a group captured the town of Laghouat on the edge of the Sahara and forbade women to work outside the home, and insisted that people should only eat dates and milk and walk barefoot. They were eventually chased

away by the police. But in the next decade groups such as these launched other attacks (especially towards the border with Tunisia) Significantly, such men grew up in the urban slums where their tirades against government corruption found an audience among young people who were acutely aware of social inequalities.<sup>12</sup> Islamic Fundamentalist groups aided by the Saudis and others rapidly responded to social crises such as the earthquake in the autumn of 1989, and began building a popular base<sup>13</sup>, while many others were recruited to go to Afghanistan (Mahfoud Nahnah, current leader of the MSP and member of the present government, has recently recognised that he sent some thirty groups of Algerians to fight in Afghanistan in the early 1980s).<sup>14</sup> As they returned in the early 1990s from Afghanistan the first references to Afghans began to surface.<sup>15</sup>

One of the militias, the GIA (Groupe Islamique Arme) was dominated by the "Afghans". Tayeb al-Afghani was one of its early leaders. Al-Afghani was the *nom de guerre* of an Afghan War veteran and former smuggler who had commanded an Arab group in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> The GIA and its Afghans were active around Algiers in the mid 1990s. While the FIS military wing, and the AIS largely confined their attacks to military and government targets, the GIA concentrated its death squads on foreigners and Algerian intellectuals in and around the capital. For some time, it was viewed as the champion of young, uneducated and mostly unemployed Algerians who were turning to militant Islam.

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People's position towards the Islamistes was expressed in the kind of clothes they wore and their beards which were grown and shaved off depending on the political climate.<sup>17</sup> Men wearing ties and collars were accused of working for the government and thus were targets for assassination.

Following the Concorde Civile of autumn 1999, the Algerian authorities have been involved in a controversial attempt to end the conflict by offering an amnesty to members of the Islamist militia who were prepared to call a truce. The return of the so-called repentis to their communities in the early months of 2000 has given rise to agonised analyses of their effects, particularly on Algerian youth. One analysis published in the independent daily newspaper *Le Quotidien d'Oran*<sup>18</sup> wrote of 'the terrorists, these new heroes'. *Le Quotidien* shows how they are telling stories to fascinated groups of youth about war activities, ambushes, assassinations, the fraternity of the maquis, and their exploits with women. Since they have been cultivating a myth about their heroism, their sheer return from the war alive is a victory in itself. Many commentators believe that the repentis are acting like conquerors, and seeing their new position (which involves considerable social support) as the right one. The psychologist Fatima Karadja is not surprised by their attempts at self-glorification, but draws attention to the way in which many have transgressed human taboos, mutilating bodies, booby-trapping corpses and committing rape. She argues that they need to go through a more sustained process of treatment in which they recognize what has happened to them. There is deep concern about the possibility of another generation of young men being indoctrinated especially in the present situation.

## Conclusion

The idea of a crisis of masculinity is present in the case of Algeria for several reasons. Firstly we are talking about a crisis of identity which goes back many years, to massive social dislocation during the colonial period and which persisted even after independence. This identity crisis was underscored by problems in housing, education and employment which have given rise to massive migration in the ranks of the hittistes, and the under/unemployed. There is enormous unrealised potential which comes to the surface when we study accounts of survival strategies, and responses to disaster. Accounts of the way the population of Bab el Oued responded to the November floods or how young men worked to save victims of the earthquake of 2003 shows a capacity to show goodwill and contribute socially.

The Family Code was introduced in an attempt to re-establish what was seen as Algerian, particularly Islamic values. But what many women experience as intolerable oppression also involves a distortion of gender relations which has presented young men with the possibility of wielding power, inside the home having been denied power outside because of unemployment.

In the 1980s another set of options opened up, represented by the growth of Islamic Fundamentalism and the adventure of the war in Afghanistan. This had a brutalising impact, but we should not lose sight of the positive values of experience, knowledge, travel, action, which require to be harnessed in a less destructive manner. Alongside the valuing of sensational and violent exploits, there is also respect for the attempt to take control of one's life. It is striking that young men's main alternatives to the tedium of their lives at home lies outside the country either joining foreign wars or migrating.

## END NOTES

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1. They are young, but they don't move around, they are just there, always in the same place, their backs to the wall, a blank gaze, they watch the time go by, they are called hittistes. Definition: Hittiste : a masculine name derived from the word "Hit" which in Algérois means "wall". Deeper Definition: All young people who can find nothing better to do with his life than to practice hittisme is a hittiste. Intellectual Definition: A youth leaning against a wall because he has no personal space at home or particular activity in society. Hittiste speech : young people speak of "dégoutage" the key word of the 1990s. They also say "Leguaïa" to express a confused feeling, a mixture of distress and disturbance.  
Hittiste joke: "instead of breaking down the Berlin wall the

Germans should have sent it to us' This typically Algérois humour enables us to pose the question : "Given the birth rate are there enough walls for the hittistes?" <http://www.lesouk.org/arhittistes.htm> (accessed 21 January 2001).

2. [http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications.wpp2000/annex-tables.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2000/annex-tables.pdf) (accessed 27 March 2004).

3. EASME/PAPCHILD survey 1999 conducted by the Office national des statistiques among 6,694 households.

4. A report published in 1963 emphasised the need to build 100,000 housing units a year in order to replace housing destroyed by the war. But no action was taken, partly because of the illusion of abundance created by the departure of Europeans who left empty accommodation behind them. Between 1973-4 an initiative to build 1,000 socialist villages, realised only 350. The Ministry of Housing, Urbanism and Construction was established in 1977.

5. More than 786,000 building permits have been issued in the last twenty years. Often plans are not realised: land is being privatised, the cost of raw materials increases, and building standards lax.

6. *El Watan* 23-24 novembre 2001.

7. AFP 28 janvier 2001

8. In Jan 2001 the national minimum wage was 8,000 dinars (about 212 ). 100 dinars = 1.51.

9. *El Watan* 5 janvier 2002.

10. Fellag says about the sources of his passionate humour: 'While I was writing *Un bateau pour l'Australie*, I was in a café in Algiers in 1989 and I heard a dialogue between two youths: 'Yesterday one of my cousins came from back home. He slept in my bed. And you? Under the cupboard. It's a good job my cousin is in temporary transit' When I got home, I wrote twenty pages in one go. That 'my cousin is in temporary transit' was all theatre.'

'Fellag le rire grâce', René Solis Liberation vendredi 26 mars 2004.  
11. Yasmina Khadra is the nom de plume of Mohammed Moulesshoul, an ex-army officer. Many of 'her' readers suspected that Yasmina was not a woman (style of the novels, treatment of the themes and the male/female characters). 'Yasmina Khadra se

démâque Entretien' Le Monde des livres, Yasmina Khadra, ancien officier supérieur de l'armée algérienne, révèle son identité. 11 janvier 2001. Also Guardian 3 January 2002.

12. *Independent* 15 October 1988.

13. *Sunday Telegraph* 8 April 1990.

14. *El Watan* 6 novembre 2001.

15. On the role of Afghans in the Casbah. *Daily Telegraph* 8 Feb 1992; *Sunday Times* 3 Feb 1992.

16. He became a symbol of the Afghans and Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria when he was captured after an attack on a police station at al-Gummar in south-eastern Algeria near the Tunisian border in November 1992. That triggered a wider conflict between the fundamentalists and the Algerian army. Other splinter groups, hard-line, anti-Western radicals, emerged, such as the Organization of Free Islamic Youth, held responsible for the murder of Islamic moderates who advocated dialogue between the FIS and the government, and the Movement of the Islamic State: Compass).

17. Robert Fisk 'Going underground at the barbers', *The Independent* 10 February 1992.

18. *Quotidien d'Oran* 10 février 2000.

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