



AFRICAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Village Matters

KNOWLEDGE, POLITICS & COMMUNITY IN
KABYLIA, ALGERIA

JUDITH SCHEELE



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Knowledge, Politics & Community
in Kabylia, Algeria

African Anthropology

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in Kabylia, Algeria

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To Saïd

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Glossary

<i>aârouch</i> (Arabic)	political organisation that emerged in 2001 in Kabylia
<i>adrum, iderma</i> (Kabyle)	extended patrilineal family
<i>âit</i> (Kab.)	the sons of, the people of
<i>‘âlim, ‘ulamâ’</i> (Ar.)	Islamic scholar
<i>amaziɣ, imaziɣen</i> (Kab.)	Berber (lit. ‘free man’)
<i>amyar, imɣarin</i> (Kab.)	lit. old man; leading member of the village council
<i>‘arsh, ‘arüş (aεrc)</i> (Ar.)	tribe
<i>axxam</i> (Kab.)	house, household, by extension also close family
<i>bach-agma</i> (Turkish)	highest rank to be occupied by indigenous dignitaries in the French colonial administration
<i>banlieue</i> (French)	suburbs, here mainly the poor suburbs surrounding Paris and other large French cities, generally inhabited by first- or second-generation immigrants
<i>baraka</i> (Ar.)	lit. blessing, benediction; spiritual power or life-giving force held by saints, their descendants, and places and objects associated with them
<i>beur</i> (F.)	second-generation North African immigrant in France
<i>Bureaux arabes</i> (F.)	smallest unit of French military administration of Algeria
<i>caïd</i> (Ar.)	from <i>qâ’id</i> , leader; high-ranking indigenous officer in the French colonial administration
<i>cercle</i> (F.)	administrative unit under French military rule
<i>dhikr</i> (Ar.)	Sufi prayer session, based on the repeated invocation of the name of God
<i>douar</i> (Ar.)	lit. round, circle; small administrative unit both in French and independent Algeria
<i>évolué</i> (F.)	member of the French-educated indigenous elite under French colonial rule
<i>jamâ’a</i> (Ar.)	village council
<i>hubus, aħbâs</i> (Ar.)	religious endowment, mainly landholdings
<i>harki</i> (Ar.)	indigenous auxiliary troops in the French army during the Algerian war of independence

x Glossary

<i>hogra</i> (Ar.)	from <i>haqara</i> , to despise; lack of respect, corruption
<i>ʿid</i> (Ar.)	lit. feast; in Islam mainly the first day after Ramadan and the commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice celebrated by the slaughter of a sheep
<i>ikhwân</i> (Ar.)	(Sufi) brothers
<i>instituteur</i> (F.)	French primary school teacher
<i>khammâs</i> (Ar.)	sharecropper receiving a fixed share of the harvest in wages (originally a fifth)
<i>madrasa, madâris</i> (Ar.)	lit. school; urban Islamic institute of higher education in Algeria
<i>makhzan</i> (Ar.)	lit. storehouse (of taxes); referring to the Ottoman government or their military auxiliaries
<i>maquis</i> (F.)	lit. scrub, bush; guerrilla camp, mainly in the mountains
<i>maquisard</i> (F.)	guerrilla, see <i>mujâhid</i>
<i>marabout</i> (from Ar.)	local religious specialist in Kabylia, also used for saint's tomb
<i>médersa</i> (from Ar.)	French-run Islamic secondary teaching institute, or Reformist school in French administrative discourse
<i>mezaour</i> (from Ar.)	village headman in French colonial administration after 1871
<i>mujâhid</i> (Ar.)	fighters on the war of independence on the nationalist side
<i>ouléma</i> (from Ar.)	Islamic reformists, mainly active in Algeria in the 1930s and the following decades
<i>piston</i> (F.)	string-pulling, connections
<i>qânûn, qawânîn</i> (Ar.)	local law codes
<i>saff, sufûf</i> (Ar.)	lit. rank, row; two-fold division in local or regional 'parties'
<i>sénatus-consulte</i> (F.)	first French cadastral survey in Algeria
<i>shahîd, shuhadâ</i> (Ar.)	lit. martyr; nationalist fighter who died during the war of independence, often extended to victims of more recent political events
<i>shaykh, shuyûkh</i> (Ar.)	lit. old man; Islamic scholar, Sufi leader or imam in Kabylia; also village headman under French military colonial administration
<i>taddart</i> (Kab.)	village
<i>tajmaet, tijmaetin</i> (Kab.)	village council
<i>tâlib, talba</i> (Ar.)	(religious) student
<i>taqbaylit</i> (Kab.)	tribal federation, the Kabyle language; also Kabyle-ness
<i>tifinay</i> (Kab.)	Berber script
<i>trabendo</i> (from Spanish)	illegal import-export business

<i>umma</i> (Ar.)	community of all Muslims
<i>walī</i> (Ar.)	president of a <i>wilāya</i>
<i>wilāya, -ât</i> (Ar.)	administrative unit in independent Algeria, roughly corresponding to a French department, also administrative unit used by the FLN during the war of independence
<i>zakât</i> (Ar.)	Islamic alms tax to be paid after Ramadan
<i>zâwiya, zawâya</i> (Ar.)	rural teaching institute, pilgrimage site, Sufi centre, in contemporary usage also Sufi meetings

Acronyms & Abbreviations

ALN	Armée de libération nationale
CADC	Coordination des archs, douars et communes
FFS	Front des forces socialistes
FIS	Front islamique du salut
FLN	Front de libération nationale
JSK	Jeunesse sportive de la Kabylie
MAK	Mouvement pour l'autonomie de la Kabylie
MCB	Mouvement culturel berbère
MNA	Mouvement national algérien (former MTLD/PPA)
MTLD	Mouvement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques
OAS	Organisation d'action spéciale
ONM	Organisation nationale des moudjahidines
PPA	Parti du peuple algérien
PT	Parti du travailleur
RCD	Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie
RND	Rassemblement national pour la démocratie
SATEF	Syndicat autonome des travailleurs de l'éducation et de la formation

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Note on Transliteration

Transcriptions of Kabyle follow the transcription suggested by Mouloud Mammeri; for Arabic, they follow a simplified version of the transcription used by Hans Wehr in his *Dictionary of Modern Arabic*. Broken Arabic and Kabyle plurals are indicated in the text. Terms that, in a certain spelling, have come to refer to political groupings or specific categories in French historical and anthropological writings are maintained as such (such as the *Association des oulémas* or the *aârouch*), following local usage. Where a word is used both in Kabyle and in Arabic, the transcription chosen depends on the context.

Introduction

We are here; we will always be here. We won't let them sleep in peace. Even when we have fallen to the ground, a real or an imaginary bullet in our flat chest, we will get up to throw yet another stone into the face of the bad guys in Algiers and elsewhere. The future young martyrs will know what to do. Our photos will be on a poster that other young people will hold up when it is their turn to go and die. This is our history, and it will not betray us. The history that our generation will write with its blood on all the roads and in front of all *gendarmerie* stations.

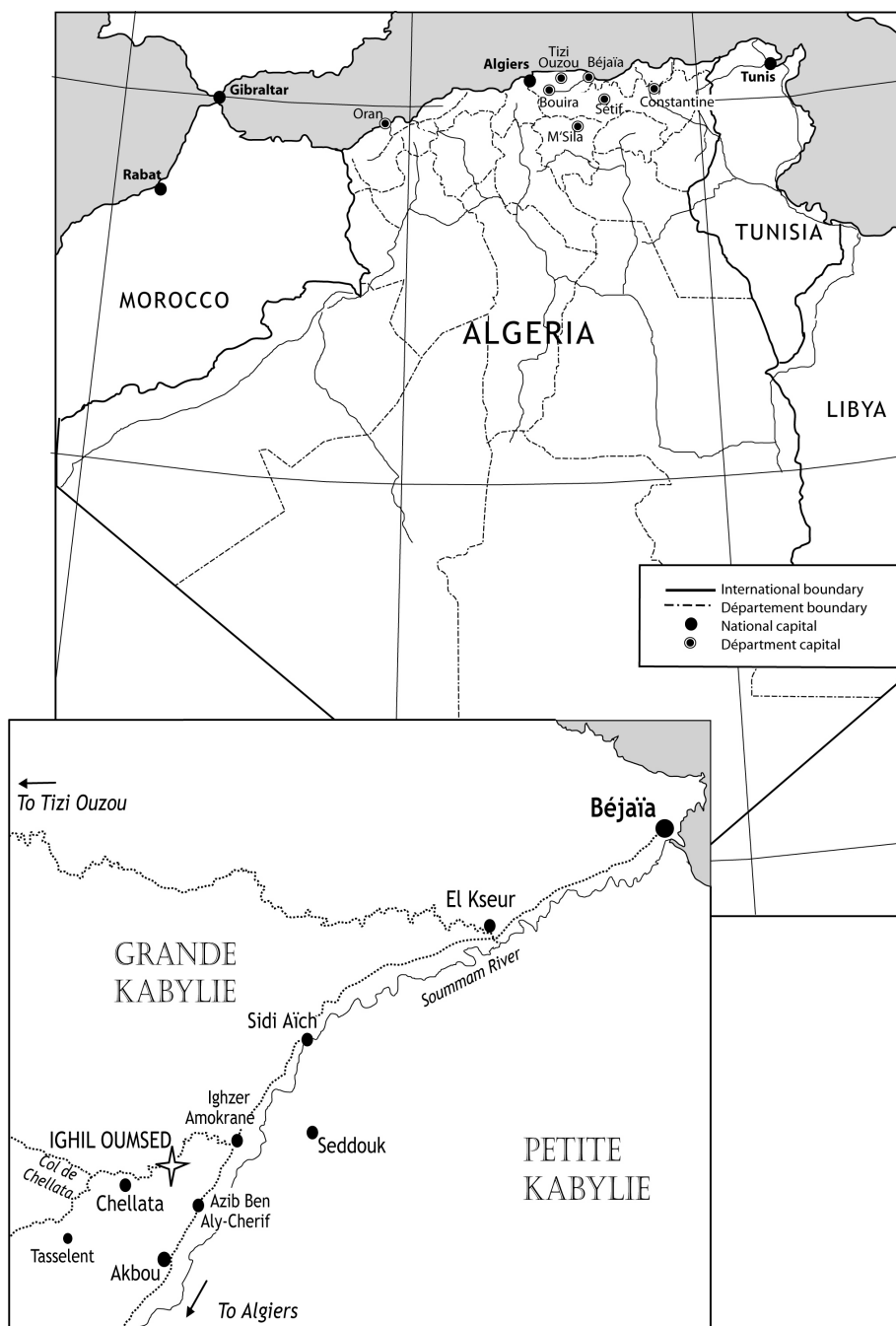
There are still villages that deserve to be called villages in Kabylia.¹

In spring 2001, a high school student named Massinissah Guermah was killed inside a *gendarmerie* post in a small village in Kabylia, north-eastern Algeria. This event, which as such was not unusual in a country plagued by endemic violence, often perpetrated by the security forces themselves, led to riots that quickly spread through the region. They were the longest and most sustained in the history of independent Algeria (Roberts 2001; Salhi 2002). The immediate concerns of the rioters were familiar to anyone who had followed the news on Algeria since the 1980s. The main issue was the fight against the *hogra*, a term used to mean corruption, disrespect of citizens by the government, and a general 'lack of morality' among the ruling classes and security forces. The protesters demanded that the *gendarmes* be withdrawn from Kabylia and replaced by locally recruited policemen.²

As in riots in Algeria before, government buildings, party offices, shops and institutions, as well as *gendarmeries*, were attacked. However, the riots of 2001 showed certain particularities: they were confined to the Berber-speaking area of Kabylia and hardly spread to other regions in Algeria, where general economic and social conditions were no less conducive to popular outrage. They were also soon followed by the emergence of a peculiar system of organisation or monitoring of the events by village-based 'citizens' committees', which the national and international media ascribed to the re-activation of 'traditional' village committees attested throughout

¹ Two e-mails sent by a Kabyle protester to www.kabylie.com in 2002. All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

² As in many former French colonies, the Algerian internal security forces are divided into two: the police and the paramilitary *gendarmerie*. In Kabylia, the latter are generally perceived to be 'foreigners', whereas the former are more easily accepted.



Map 0.1 Algeria and the Soummam Valley

the anthropological and historical literature on Kabylia, and labelled now *aârouch* (a term which up to then had been used to mean ‘tribes’). These committees succeeded for several months in channelling the revolt, in organising the region-wide protest movement and in expressing the protesters’ anger in a list of claims presented to the government. Alongside claims for a more democratic form of government, for unemployment benefits and justice, this list included demands for the official acknowledgement of the ‘*spécificité berbère*’ of the region and of the country as a whole – although the meaning of the term ‘Berber’ and the forms in which ‘specificity’ should be acknowledged were and still are disputed.

Kabylia is a mountainous region east of Algiers (see Map 0.1). It is densely populated, and although it occupies only a small part of the vast Algerian territory, roughly a fifth of the Algerian population count themselves as Kabyles (Chaker 1999). Most of the region’s inhabitants speak Kabyle, one of the local variants of Berber, a language that pre-dates Arabic in North Africa and that in one form or another is spoken by a substantial minority in the countries of the Maghreb and the Sahara. Kabylia prides itself on its strong participation in the Algerian war of independence (1954–62); within Algeria, it is the region that looks back on the longest history of emigration to France and French schooling, and that produced the largest number of intellectuals and government officials at independence (Quandt 1972). It is also the region in Algeria that has lived through most political trouble in the post-war period, from an early uprising against the newly established national government in 1963 to the Berber movement in 1980 to the events of 2001 described above; but it is also the part of Algeria that – at least according to official voting statistics, dress and publicly displayed political allegiance – remained least touched by the political Islam that dominated Algeria’s political landscape throughout the 1990s.

Yet Kabylia is more than just a geographical area. It is also an ideal, shaped and shared by a variety of intellectual trends and traditions, many of which clearly had an impact on the form taken by the 2001 rebellion. The term ‘Kabyle’ itself, coined in the years following the French conquest of Algiers in 1830, is of relatively recent origin. ‘Kabylia’ is notoriously difficult to delimit, and the distinction between Arabs and Kabyles – self-evident as it might appear both in ethnographic accounts and contemporary political manifestos – varies with different historical readings and political contexts, to the point where some writers (such as Lazreg 1983) attribute its very existence to the influence of French colonial ethnography and policy. Ethnographic writing on the area has been rich since the early nineteenth century, and Kabylia is still the area that takes up most space in the anthropology section of mainstream French bookshops. Despite their obvious differences, most of these writings share certain notions of ‘Kabyle-ness’, which by now have largely been appropriated by Kabyles themselves, and figure prominently in the various political movements that have succeeded one another in the region. These notions invariably include the democratic tradition of the Kabyles, their lack of religiosity, or rather of

4 Introduction

'religious fanaticism', their love of freedom, their settled way of life, their materialism and egalitarianism. Throughout the literature, as well as in everyday conversations in contemporary Kabylia, these qualities are seen as summed up in the Kabyles' attachment to their home village, which is in turn often compared to the primitive *polis* of ancient Greece (cf. for example, Masqueray 1983 [1886]).

Although many of these notions can be traced back to the peculiar colonial context that gave rise to them (Ageron 1979; Lucas and Vatin 1975; Lorcin 1995), their current popularity in Kabylia shows that they are more than just French 'inventions', and that to dismiss them on these grounds would be to misunderstand profoundly, and to lack respect for, local realities. By now, Kabyles have made these notions their own, by adapting them to new intellectual and political developments, and by enriching them with elements from a variety of intellectual strands, such as, for example, the numerous regional Islamic traditions and Algerian nationalism. Thus transformed, these notions and the various and variable idioms in which they are expressed make it possible for those who use them to be part of larger global intellectual trends and traditions. At the same time, they provide a conceptual grid for the evaluation of local activities and political strategies, for the production of community and political legitimacy, and for the expression of social, political, economic and cultural frustration and exclusion, of which the 'events' of 2001 are but one instance. Kabylia therefore constitutes an ideal case study of how ideas that are part of larger, 'global' intellectual complexes develop and are developed (or 'digested') locally, and how these outside complexes, rather than being 'foreign' additions to an already existing locality which would 'falsify' its reality, are constitutive of the very notion of local community itself. This book aims to analyse such a process, through an in-depth study of a medium-sized village in Kabylia, and of the notions of identity, knowledge, political legitimacy and community that are particular to it.

The village

Ighil Oumsed, the village thus studied, is situated in the eastern part of Kabylia, perched on top of a small peak half-way up the southern face of the Djurdjura mountain range, at an altitude of 700 metres (Photo 0.1). From there, it overlooks the Soummam valley, which since time immemorial has been the main land route inland from the important harbour town of Béjaïa. Although, according to villagers and to French archives, the village used to be one of the largest in the area, it is now only of average size due to the population growth in the region generally. According to official statistics,³ it is permanently inhabited by 1,500 people. Villagers

³ The *Plan directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme* (PDAU) of the *commune* of Chellata, established in February 1997.



Photo 0.1
Ighil Oumsed



Photo 0.2
Village
architecture



Photo 0.3
Interior of a
'traditional'
Kabyle house

6 Introduction

themselves estimate its size at anything between 1,000 and 6,000 inhabitants. As in any contemporary Kabyle village, its inhabitants speak the local variety of Kabyle among themselves, learn classical Arabic at school and like to watch French satellite television if they can afford it. Levels of schooling vary, as do the professional occupations of the inhabitants, among whom can be found retired workers from the French mines, university teachers, doctors, engineers, school teachers, workers in local factories, mechanics, peasants, petty traders and a large group of un- or under-employed. Every family owns land and engages in some subsistence agriculture, producing mainly olive oil, but most of the villagers' income is derived from outside employment. Emigration to other areas of Algeria, and especially to France, goes back a long way. The first emigrant to take the boat to Marseille is said to have left the village just after the First World War, and there is not a family in the village that does not count one or more emigrants among its members.

The village features varying styles of architecture, ranging from 'traditional' stone houses huddled together around the village mosque, which still conserve the interior that inspired Bourdieu's (1972) study of the Kabyle house to modern concrete villas constructed at a certain distance from the village and surrounded by gardens and parking lots (see Photos 0.2 and 0.3). Since the mid-1980s, the village's only road of access has been paved. The Soummam valley down below is by now densely populated, as much by villagers who have left the cold mountain areas as by 'foreigners' from other areas of Kabylia or from Arabic-speaking parts of Algeria. The nearest town of any importance is Akbou, which can be reached in little more than half an hour by recently legalised private minibuses. The nearest university town and the capital of the *wilāya* (department), Béjaïa, can be reached in less than two hours.

I had been invited to this village by a contact I made through a Kabyle student at a French university and then followed up via the internet. This was not an unusual way to be introduced to the country. French universities are full of Kabyle students, both first- and second-generation emigrants, many of whom have chosen to study subjects related to their own country, and especially to Berber history and culture, a subject that has long been unavailable in Algerian universities. Consequently, most academic knowledge on Kabylia is produced in Paris, from where the only Berber television channel broadcasts, where most of the many Berber websites are based, and where most Berber books are edited or re-edited. To be a local activist thus means to be well connected to France. My host in the village, Arezqi Yennat,⁴ had been active in various Berber and other political organisations, and was therefore known within the French as well as the

⁴ All names have been changed. Members of one family bear the same pseudonym, and the pseudonyms of related families have been derived from the same root, in order to identify the speaker in relation with his or her family background (eg. the Hamlal and the Ihamlalen are distant cousins). The structural relationships between my informants should thus remain intelligible to the reader despite the need to maintain privacy.

Algerian ‘Berber scene’. He was very keen to guide a researcher from a university as prestigious as Oxford on her visit to Kabylia. After a first visit in his home village in August 2003, I decided to stay – initially as an honoured guest, and then increasingly as the youngest and most spoiled ‘daughter’ of Avezqi’s family. By the end of my fieldwork, I had spent just over a year in the village, interrupted by short spells in neighbouring villages and in nearby towns and cities. I had also conducted research among the emigrant village community in France.⁵

After my arrival in the village, however, Avezqi, although he generally shared and partly reproduced the discourse on Kabyle identity outlined above, with its emphasis on the ‘Kabyle village’ as central to Kabyle identity, seemed surprised at the idea that I wanted to stay for a whole year in the village itself, where by definition nothing of interest ever happened – otherwise, why would so many people want to go to the city or even to France, the place where ‘real’, universally valid knowledge was produced? He was certainly not the only one to be surprised: everybody in the village seemed to know much better than I did what I should really be studying (and where), and they all agreed that my intention to focus on the village, and on the village only, could not result in any serious, ‘scientific’ work – and that particular village affairs were none of my business, anyway. A ‘proper’ object of study would have been ‘Kabyle culture’, or even better, ‘Berber culture’, as *exemplified* by the village in its more ‘traditional’ parts and activities, but not the contemporary village itself.

I soon noticed that the villagers’ scepticism towards my project was, in a sense, well founded. To try to explain and understand the village in terms only of the village would be to miss the point: the more closely I approached ‘village realities’, the more all notions of village-ness dissolved, and the village itself seemed to disappear and give way to a loose agglomeration of houses on a hilltop.⁶ Even these became increasingly difficult to delimit. How should the village be defined in any case? By its inhabitants? As mentioned above, estimates of the total number of inhabitants by villagers varied hugely, depending on whether they included villagers who lived in the valley, in Algiers or elsewhere: much as the definition of ‘Kabyle’ could vary according to circumstances, the definition of ‘villager’ itself was not clear, and there were degrees of village-ness determined according to constantly changing criteria. This was further complicated by the fact that, although there was obviously a physical village in the form of several

⁵ During my fieldwork, I conducted interviews in almost equal proportions in French and in Kabyle. The boundaries between languages, especially when speaking to foreigners, are flexible, and many French and Arabic terms tend to be used in colloquial Kabyle. In my field-notes, I translated all quotes directly into French. In the following, most quotes are thus an English translation of my on-the-spot French translations of Kabyle. French and Kabyle terms are added when the English term was not available.

⁶ Similar problems have been encountered by anthropologists working on villages all over the world, ever since Maine (1876) had established the ‘village’ as a fundamental category not only of analysis, but also of law and government (for a more detailed discussion of the notion of the ‘village’, in particular in India, see Dumont 1957 and 1966; Breman 1988 and Kemp 1988; for Central Africa, see von Oppen 2003).