

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

29 June 93.

Oran, ALGERIA

Mr. Peter B. Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Welcome to the wild west of Algeria, where the contradictions evident elsewhere in the country are all the more startling. The funny mix of European, African and Arab cultures characteristic of Algeria are on the boil in Oran, the country's second city, where the deep haze off the coast makes it nearly impossible to make out where the Arab world stops and where Europe starts. It's a funny sort of in-between, almost closer to Spain than to Algiers.

During the 1990 elections the now-banned Islamic Salvation Front scored nearly 60 percent of the vote here, a higher portion than in the capital. There were two major meetings of Hamas, another Islamic party, held during the week I've been here. You wouldn't know it by looking around.

The locals here like their music loud, their clothes casual and their dance tight and subtle. The traditional Islamic garb frequently seen around Algiers is largely absent here. Women are covered up but it's not what you'd think. They wear glittery jewelry and brightly covered *jalabas* of shiny fabric that's just slightly transparent and, with a little breeze, accentuates the form of the body as they step to the beat of the Rai music which blares from nearly every house and shop.

There's a liquor store with a big glass window and flashing lights around the corner from where I sit. Pastice and Heineken are sold openly in Oran's central marketplace by the same guys who sell black market cigarettes, the renowned and well-travelled "trabandistes".

Katherine Roth is a Fellow of the Institute.

She is studying and writing about tradition and modernity in the Arab world.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

There are drunks in the park and drunks on the stoops of the now-dilapidated Hispano-Mauresque apartment buildings.

Prostitution is also doing well and is about as hidden as the alcohol. In the old section of town heavy-set women with just a tad too much make-up lean against door-frames, many of which lead into the dens of inequity which top the forbidden list of more conservative Muslims.

As the struggle for an Islamic state becomes hotter elsewhere in the capital, Oran is gaining importance as a place where "modernist" Algerians can get away from the stress and the 10:30 p.m. curfew for a weekend and let it all hang out. So where are all the folks that voted for an Islamic state?

They may be dancing and drinking in the Rai cabarets on the fringes of town.

To understand Oran, you have to understand Rai, the music for which the town is now famous. In local Arabic, the word Rai can best be translated as "I'm free," or "I want to." Traditionally it was sung by older women in the rural areas of western Algeria. It was sung at local festivals and at clandestine bars. The rhythm is somewhere between African samba and Arab and the lyrics are reminiscent of Billie Holiday.

These are songs of heartache and of passion, that, like early American jazz, have their roots in the underbelly of society. They speak openly of sex, broken families and alcoholism. They are songs that answer to warnings of what is forbidden by a response in vulgar street Arabic something like "I will 'cause I want to".

Rai lyrics abandon the florid language and elegant metaphors of other popular Arab music styles for a direct approach that, elsewhere in the country, is considered a detriment to society. Here are a few random snips from one of the latest cassettes by Zahouania, a woman who has bridged the gap between traditional and modern forms of Rai. In addition to singing alongside Cheb Khalid, probably the best known Rai singer, she continues to perform regularly at social occasions in the Oran area:

"My man drinks too much and doesn't come home at night
but I love him. I would die for him.
Everyone tells me to leave my man, but I can't.
Why does he do this to me? Why is he so cruel?"

"We'll have a fine time tonight, baby.
If my brother or father find me they'll kill me,
but I don't care. I have to be with you tonight."

"My love came to my pad but the door was closed.
I gave him the keys and said come when you want,
I'll offer you silk and I'll offer you velvet.
He came again stinking of Pastiche.
I feel so sick. Bring me a drink and I'll drink till I drown.
I left my husband and children for him
and now he comes home drunk.
Let him drink till he's road tar, but I love him."

The Rai cassette industry started in the early -1980s, when the political situation in Algeria seemed pretty calm. There were few shortages of basic foods and the economy was doing all right. The principle leaders of the Islamic movement had recently been imprisoned, and the movement was less active than it had been in previous years or has been since.

Rai arguable spoke to many of the same needs as political Islam and found a ready audience among the young and disenfranchised, who make up the majority of the country.

About 75 percent of the Algerian population is under 30 and many are frustrated and dissatisfied. The education system is unable to cope with these masses of students and, even for those who somehow make it through with a good education, there are few jobs to be had. The unemployment rate is appalling and, with no money, these young Algerians find themselves without housing or marriage possibilities. Many become what are known as "hittistes," or, literally, "wallists," because they spend what should be the most productive

years of their lives leaning against walls in downtown areas and staring blankly into space.

Then there's the problem of sex. Theoretically one is supposed to wait until marriage to have sex here, but no family will agree to marriage with a man with no flat and no job. Western-style dating is also problematic, not only because it is considered immoral by many, because there is literally no place to go. Algerian apartments are overcrowded with brothers and uncles and aunts, hotels are expensive, and to do it in the back seat of a car, a *l'american*, requires, well, a car.

In order to deal with the difficulties of daily life, Algerians generally choose one of two options: Religion or Rai. In the case of Oran, they choose both, and seem to see little contradiction.

When asked how she could vote for a party that will ban her favorite music style if Algeria becomes an Islamic state, one woman simply shrugged her shoulders. "It's normal. I am a Muslim and I believe in God," she said, then turned up the Rai cassette to which she was listening. Some men I talked to in a local bar came up with similar responses.

At least a few locals didn't perceive the now-banned Islamic Salvation Front as a political entity so much as a natural extension of their lives as Muslims in a Muslim country. No one wants to vote against God, especially when times are tough.

For now, the bars are full and so are the mosques. New cassettes are coming out every day but my hunch is that if there were another election tomorrow, the Islamists would sweep the charts yet again. Until then, the people of Oran keep on doing what they're doing. Living and dreaming and praying life will get a little easier in the wild west.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Katherine', written over a horizontal line.

Katherine

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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

27 July 93.
Algiers, ALGERIA

Mr. Peter B. Martin
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Dear Peter,

Despite Western stereotypes that Islamism is oppressive to women, many Algerian women opt for the veil and say that embracing Islamism improves their social status and gives them more rights than they previously had.

In an Islamic state women may inherit half of what men do, but that's a lot more than some of them they get now. In some Berber families, for example, women still don't have any right to inherit at all.

Arguments that if Algeria becomes an Islamic state women may no longer have the right to work outside the home, wear revealing clothing and drink alcohol ring hollow for many Algerian women, who find themselves unable to do those things now. The Algerian Family Code, adopted in 1984, is as close as Algerian law currently comes to *Sharia*, or Islamic Law. In article 39, the law goes so far as to state: "A women is bound to show respect to her husband and accord him the respect due a head of the family, to respect her parents, and her husband's close relatives."

For most Algerian women, the feminist ideal of an independent woman seems inaccessible. It is symbolically associated with the Western *bled alkufr* [land of infidels] and brings into question many of the most fundamental values of Algerian society. It's an uphill battle that some women say often ends up causing more harm than good, especially in the short term. If a woman here strays from social norms she is more often than not shunned, risks being thrown out of the house and may find difficulties marrying. If she tries living on her own, chances are she won't find a job to support yourself, and even if she does, she is unlikely to find affordable housing in order to move out of her parents' home.

"It was tough trying to convince women I know to attend the big feminist march in 1990. Women were afraid of what their neighbors and husbands would say and it didn't seem worth the risk to them. Finally the march took place, and soon after came the first Islamic Salvation Front marches," said Salima Ghazali, a militant feminist and editor-in-chief of

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studying tradition and modernity in the Arab world

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