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Hearing Idir in Bouïra

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A Vava Inouva is the name of two distinct things, the celebrated song composed by Idir (Hamid Cheriet) and Ben Mohamed (Mohamed Benhamadouche) that was recorded and broadcast on Algerian radio in 1973 and the long-player album of 17 tracks that Idir brought out in Paris in 1976. The making of the song as a recording and then as a 45 rpm vinyl disc, on the one hand, and of the LP, three years later, on the other, were events in distinct histories. The 1976 album was an event in the international history of Berber music,¹ the cultural history of the Kabyle diaspora in France and elsewhere, and the history of commercial music production in France. But the original hit – combining the recording, initial broadcasting, promotion, and popular reception of the song as a single – was an entirely Algerian event.

I am concerned here only with this Algerian event, the song, how it sounded, how it played in a provincial town when it first came out, and what it signified in its original historical moment. What it signified was, in part, a function of how it sounded, to be sure, as well as a function of the social context, the time and the place. But it was also, in part, a function of the factor of agency, and this was not a simple matter.

I first heard *A Vava Inouva* in Bouïra, where it was playing in the cafés on the Rue Abane Ramdane in the center of town, in the autumn of 1973. I think I heard it almost immediately after I arrived there on 12 September, but I am not certain; it may have been a bit later. In any case, I thought it a beautiful song, and it captivated me at once. It was the first time I had heard Berber sung (or spoken, for that matter), and I was intrigued. What was particularly striking about it, at least to my mind, was its sheer charm: not so much the actual content of the lyrics, which I certainly did not grasp at first, as the distinctly Mediterranean sound and delicacy of Idir's guitar introduction and accompaniment; the charm naturally inherent in its form as a duet between Idir and Mila, a young Kabyle woman; Mila's enchantingly low, soft voice; and its novelty, the fact that I, like many others, had never heard anything like it before.

As for how it went down in Bouïra in general, I had at the time only my impressions, which my memory has retained. As a teacher at the Lycée, I was well aware of its reception among the foreign staff, the *coopérants*, or at any rate the French ones and the two British teachers (my colleague Ian Bunton and myself). The teachers from Eastern Europe and the Middle East I cannot answer for, but the French ones all liked it enormously, as much as Ian and I did. Developments in French

¹ I use the words 'Berber' and 'Berbère' exactly as I heard them used in Algeria – in Bouïra and in Kabylia in general – during my fieldwork there in the 1970s and 1980s, without the slightest pejorative content or connotations. This is how Mohand Arab Bessaoud used them in the French name of his *Agraw Imazighen* - l'Académie Berbère – and how Kabyle activists used them when speaking of *Tafsut Imazighen* as 'le Printemps Berbère' / 'the Berber Spring' and the movement that came out of it as 'le Mouvement Culturel Berbère' / 'Berber Cultural Movement'.

popular music had probably prepared the ground for this positive response, at least to some degree. A striking revival of Celtic music had been under way in France since the mid-1960s, if not earlier, the achievement above all of the Breton musician Alan Stivell, with whom, years later, Idir himself would perform in Paris, and Occitan language and culture had begun to attract wide interest by the 1970s; Joseph Cantaloube's superb *Chants d'Auvergne* with their lyrics in Occitan date from much earlier and had already been recorded by several artists, notably Netania Devrath in the 1960s. So, independently of the tradition, inherited from the colonial era, of France's interest in Algeria's Berbers, French schoolteachers in Algeria in the early 1970s were already disposed to be receptive to Berber music, at any rate when this music expressed a clearly Mediterranean identity.

The Kabyles of Bouïra were apparently delighted by the song and by its success. At any rate, that was the impression I got from my pupils at the Lycée and from frequently hearing the song playing in Bouïra's cafés. But it is easy to misread that, and for a foreign observer to grasp the ins and outs of a new development and complication in the cultural sphere of a host society is easier said than done.

Bouïra was a particularly interesting place in which to experience the song and its reception in Algeria. Situated near the foot of the superb Jebel Haïzer² range of the Jurjura massif, which rises dramatically out of the surrounding plain and dominates the horizon to the north, Bouïra in the 1970s was still quite a small town,³ with plenty of charm to my eyes, a modest halt on both the road and rail routes that linked Algiers to Constantine and an important market for the farmers of the district. Although then part of the wilaya of Tizi Ouzou, which included the daïra of Bouïra and that of Lakhdaria in those days, and despite possessing a Kabyle version of its name, *Thuvirets*, it was not universally considered a fully Kabyle town. I once asked the *Receveur*, who collected my rent, if he was from Bouïra. "Non! Je suis Kabyle, moi!", was his immediate reply; he turned out to be from near Aïn el-Hammam. Originally a colonial settlement built by the French in 1873⁴ on the site of Borj Hamza, one of the fortified bases the Ottoman Regency established to watch over the route to the eastern province, it was located at the point of contact of the Berberophone and Arabophone populations, with the highway to Constantine broadly the frontier between them, the Berber speakers of the Jurjura and the Biban occupying the districts to the north and east of the town and the Arabophone populations those to the south and west.

This situation may seem to have destined Bouïra after independence to play the important role of melting pot. But, although nearly all of the *Pieds noirs* had gone by 1973,⁵ it was not yet really a melting pot at that time. A large percentage, perhaps as much as a third, possibly more than that, of its population consisted of migrants from the surrounding countryside, many of whom had arrived in 1956 or 1957, fleeing the battle zones of the war. People would often say: "c'est une

² Also written Heïdzer. Curiously, in 1973 both spellings were in use, Heïdzer for the mountain and Haïzer for the commune at its foot.

³ Its population in 1973 was circa 25,000; by 1998 it had risen to 75,086; it is probably well over 90,000 today.

⁴ And so in the wake of the great rebellion of the Bashagha El-Moqrani and the Rahmaniyya order.

⁵ Only three *Pieds noirs* remained - an elderly French couple and their also elderly Spanish friend, who were accepted by the rest of the population and ran a bar, one of the two places where alcohol was served in Bouïra.

ville *nos-nos*⁶ and that at least was true; its population was partly Berberophone (Kabyle, plus two or three Mzabi families) and partly Arabophone, and the proportions may well have been roughly 50-50, although I never saw any statistics to back up that suggestion. But, a mere 11 years after independence, the melting had not really begun or was, at best, in its earliest stages. There was not yet anything much in the economic life of the place to weave the various elements of its population, let alone the population of its rural hinterland, into a common local identity founded on a clear collective interest. If anything, to the extent that the state, as represented by the *wilaya* offices in Tizi Ouzou and the *Assemblée Populaire Communale* in Bouïra, was the driver of economic development and the source of material benefits, local society was more inclined to constitute itself into competing clientelist networks and lobbies than to develop a collective consciousness of common interest. And the town did not have a football club of its own for people to support and enthuse about.

So the various elements supposedly destined to melt into one another were in reality only juxtaposed, sharing (up to a point) the town's steadily expanding space but still distinct in their respective histories, self-images, and outlooks. Moreover, although a minority of the population of the region – the later *wilaya* of Bouïra - as a whole, the Kabyles were in the majority and hegemonic, politically speaking, in the *daira* of Bouïra, consisting of the commune of the same name and those of Ahl el-Ksar, Bechloul, Chorfa, Haïzer, and M'Chedallah.

These circumstances did not encourage the Arabophone Algerians of Bouïra to be very demonstrative of their sentiments (whether for or against) regarding Berber music, and as far as I could see, they were quite undemonstrative. I have no memory of any of my Arabophone friends, neighbors, colleagues, or pupils commenting on Idir's song in any way. While aware of the song and its success and of the pleasure it gave their Kabyle neighbors and colleagues, they seem to have been largely indifferent to it themselves, although in a relaxed and good-humored way. It was as if they were thinking, "this is the Kabyles doing their thing and enjoying themselves" and had no problem with that.

Of course, most Arabophones in Bouïra would not understand Thaqbaylith, the Kabyle dialect of Tamazight, and so the content and novelty of the song might have escaped them, except that they might nonetheless have been charmed by it as I was. But we may also wonder to what extent this content and novelty affected its Kabyle hearers in Bouïra. Jane Goodman, author of a major study,⁷ has suggested that it affected them very powerfully,

A vava inouva's effect on Kabyle Berbers was electrifying. The song engendered simultaneously a sense of deep recognition and a feeling of novelty. For many of the older women storytellers whose repertoire inspired the song, *A vava inouva* mirrored back to them their own practices. "When they hear the song, they see themselves," as my language tutor put it. For postwar generations raised in Kabylia, the song produced a new form of cultural memory. Many of my interlocutors would tell me of how the song evoked the evenings they spent as children listening to their grandmothers' tales, snow blocking the doors [...] *A vava inouva* enabled Kabyles to see themselves from an entirely new vantage point. Songwriter Ben Mohamed called this new way of seeing an "internal perspective" or "an "internal gaze"

⁶ In standard Arabic, *nusf-nusf*: half and half, mixed, more or less equally Arabophone and Berberophone.

⁷ Jane E. Goodman, *Berber Culture on the World Stage: from village to video*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005.

(*le regard intérieur*), informed by neither the East nor the West but by indigenous modes of knowledge.
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No doubt there is much truth in this. But there is a danger of overstating the song's initial impact and generalizing to a degree that overlooks the variety of ways in which its Kabyle hearers reacted to it at the time.

In observing my Kabyle pupils, I was able to gain an impression of the song's impact on the generation that was neither pre-war nor post-war but born *during the war*, especially the years 1956-1959. The majority of these had been born in Bouïra, their parents having taken refuge in the town in flight from the war zones, and in most cases, the grandparents, if they survived, had stayed in the old house in the village when the parents fled. These teenagers would have had no memory of evenings spent listening to grandmothers' tales in the old mountain village house, "snow blocking the doors"; it was their mothers and fathers who would have had this memory and who would have been moved, perhaps deeply, by the song and the "internal gaze" it prompted. It was older men, not teenagers, who formed the clientèle of Bouïra cafés, where the song played over and over. So I came to the conclusion that it was my pupils' parents, aunts, and uncles who were most immediately affected by the song, while its novel content had, at the time, at any rate, a correspondingly slight and superficial meaning for the 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds I taught at the Lycée.

One of the reasons for this is that there were a lot of other things going on in the cultural and especially the musical sphere to distract, intrigue, engage and enthuse Bouïra's teenagers. My pupils – whether Berberophone or Arabophone – were all very aware of and interested in Western popular music. Particularly fond of those very Mediterranean artists, Demis Roussos and Enrico Macias, they also followed and appreciated British as well as American music, to look no further.⁸ This lively and very catholic interest had received practical expression in Bouïra's own rock band, which was led by its talented left-handed guitarist (the scion of a prominent saintly lineage⁹) and boasted a Russian name, *Soyuz*, while playing American rock music – notably Creedence Clearwater Revival's big hit, *Rolling' on the river*¹⁰ – at the concerts it gave from time to time, for male-only audiences, in one of Bouïra's halls.

The young Kabyles I knew in Bouïra in 1973 were not at all primarily, let alone exclusively, preoccupied with their own identity but interested in learning about *everything* that was new to them and audibly driven by *une curiosité tout azimuts*, so I doubt that hearing *A Vava Inouva* amounted to a watershed cultural or emotional experience for them. What registered with them was that a new Kabyle song had rapidly climbed to the top of the Algerian hit parade and was a current sensation, widely admired. They could take great pride in that, as they had taken great pride

⁸ Their interest in British pop music, which was intense, existed in parallel with their also intense interest in British sport in general and British football in particular; my pupils were far better informed about the relative prowess and standing of the principal British football clubs than I was.

⁹ *Soyuz*'s leader was from the Ath Sidi Braham in the Biban.

¹⁰ Which *Soyuz* performed as *Rollin' on the railroad*, since I swear this is what I heard when the band played this number to an enthusiastic youthful audience at the concert in Bouïra that I attended.

in the success of the Tizi Ouzou club, JSK,¹¹ in winning the soccer championship in the 1972-3 season. It is not self-evident that there was any more to their reaction than that.

Nonetheless, I believe there was a third element in the response of Kabyles to Idir's song in late 1973, an element that the older and younger generations could share. This element was an implication of the fact that the song became known, at least initially, thanks to being repeatedly broadcast on Algerian state radio.

It is not clear that the complete history of the initial production of *A Vava Inouva* has already been established as public knowledge. I am certain that I do not know all there is to know. But it seems clear that it was originally recorded for and on *Chaîne II* (the Kabyle-language channel) of Algerian Radio, which came under the umbrella organization of *Radio-Télévision Algérienne* (RTA), which came under the responsibility ('*tutelle*') of the Ministry of Information and Culture. RTA was and is a state apparatus, and *Chaîne II* also was and is a state apparatus. And the behavior of a state apparatus is usually informed, however discreetly, by a political purpose of some kind.

To implicate the Algerian state in the story of Idir's first hit is not to cast any aspersion whatever on any of those involved in composing and performing the song. As far as I am concerned, the joint ownership of Ben Mohamed, Idir, and Mila in the song is entire and unqualified, and do not doubt that the original recording of the song was simply part of the normal routine of artistic endeavor on *Chaîne II* and as innocent of other intentions as it could be. But the subsequent promotion of the song is another matter.

There has never been a moment since Independence when the condition of Kabylia and of Kabyle public opinion has not been an affair of the state. The Algerian state was widely considered to be strong and stable in 1973, and the regime of President Houari Boumediène, who had just hosted the summit conference of the Non-Aligned Movement with great success, was at the zenith of its self-confidence and authority at home and abroad. This was the moment at which *A Vava Inouva* was first heard on Algerian radio, and it became a sensation almost immediately. This could not have happened if the Algerian state had had any objection to the song, if it thought, for example, that the song would have a disturbing or negative impact on Kabyle opinion or Algerian opinion in general. In that case, it would have used its influence to keep the diffusion of the song to a minimum. It did no such thing. On the contrary, it appears to have enabled and encouraged the song's distribution and dissemination. Why might it have done this?

The independent Algerian state is a distributive state, and its distributive function has not been confined to socio-economic matters but has covered potentially everything, including the right to speak. In this respect, during the Boumediène period, the state performed at the national level much the same function as the *amin* of a *thajma'th* used to perform at the village level, that of deciding who may speak and when. In French, one would say that "*l-amin* donne la parole" to X

¹¹ 'JSK' stood then for *Jeunesse Sportive de Kabylie* and it was regarded as not merely the Tizi Ouzou side but the *Kabyle* side par excellence (much as Glamorgan, the only County Cricket Club in Wales, was regarded as *the Welsh* cricket side by Welsh people everywhere). In controversial moves, the Algerian government decreed in 1974 that JSK's name be changed to *Jamiat Sari Kawkabi* (apparently intended to mean something like 'All-Stars Racing Club' – presumably by analogy with *Racing Club de France*) then, in 1977, *Jeunesse Electronique de Tizi Ouzou*; it recovered its original name in 1990.

or Y. In English, the conventional phrase is: “the chair *recognizes...*”. In discreetly giving the green light to the extensive promotion of Idir’s song, the state was tacitly recognizing Idir as a new and particularly interesting *voice of Kabylia* and, in doing so, it was also recognizing Kabylia’s own cultural traditions and honoring them as integral elements of Algeria’s national heritage. It had two main reasons for doing this.

The immediate reason was the need to compensate for a measure that might otherwise have gone down badly with Kabyle opinion and provoked unrest. With effect from the start of the new university year in September, the Ministry of higher education and scientific research had decreed the abolition of the courses in anthropology and ethnology that had previously been authorized. Its reason for doing this was ideological, a nationalist objection to colonial social science, but it happened to affect directly none other than Mouloud Mammeri, who had been teaching the now rejected curriculum since 1965 and had been able to teach the Berber language on an informal basis alongside his formal duties. With an abrupt if not brutal stop being put to all this, there was a real prospect of Kabyle disaffection once the news spread.

It was at this juncture that *A Vava Inouva* started rocketing up the hit parade. The danger that Kabyle opinion might get worked up over the treatment of Kabylia’s leading intellectual was immediately headed off by the way Kabyle opinion was distracted, moved, and engrossed by Idir’s song and gratified by its spectacular success.¹² The necessary adjustment was effected by the ministry, headed by Dr. Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, that controlled Algerian state radio. Despite being a strong advocate of the Arabization policy, it was Taleb Ibrahimi who, in his earlier role as minister of education, had arranged for Mammeri to be allowed to teach the Berber language informally. That arrangement having ended, it was Taleb Ibrahimi’s ministry that oversaw the necessary compensatory move, the repeated broadcasting of Idir’s song on state radio as the launch pad of its subsequent success.

The second reason was strategic. By promoting Kabyle’s satisfaction over *A Vava Inouva* and thereby heading off bitterness over the treatment of Mammeri, the Boumediène government was protecting the policy towards Kabylia it had developed since 1965 as part of its overall nation-building project. This policy sought to reconcile the Kabyles to their place in the emerging Algerian nation-state by acting to include them in it and to facilitate their participation in it. For this to work, it was important that the measures calculated to interest and gratify the Kabyles should in no way alienate other Algerians. Idir’s song was perfect from this point of view, its charm inseparable from the *gentleness* of the singing, expressing and celebrating an aspect of Kabylia’s cultural traditions in a way that nobody could possibly resent.

Seen from this angle, the success of *A Vava Inouva* in 1973 was not so much an anticipation of the 1980 Berber Spring but the last phase of a constructive line of national development that would be fatally disrupted by the trouble at the Larba‘a n’Ath Irathen cherry festival nine months later. From June 1974 onwards, the condition of inclusion of the Kabyles was being problematized anew, and the expression of Kabyle opinion becoming increasingly a matter of grievance and rancor. Hearing

¹² It would not even be possible to raise a significant protest among the Ath Yenni, the prominent *‘arsh* to which Mammeri’s village, Tawriat Mimoun, belongs, because Idir’s village, Ath Lahcène, also belongs to the Ath Yenni and Tawriat Mimoun’s traditional leadership would have been neutralized on this issue.

Idir in Bouïra, I experienced the autumn of 1973 as a time of hope. As soon as I heard of the incidents at Larba‘a, I knew the skies had darkened and there was more trouble ahead.