

Spaces in-Between: Exile, Emigration, and the Performance of Memory in *Zahra's Mother Tongue*

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Abstract

In her 2011 documentary, *La Langue de Zahra/Zahra's Mother Tongue*, Algerian/French filmmaker Fatima Sissani “gives voice” to her Kabyle mother, Zahra, who lived in France as an immigrant woman for years after Algerian independence without speaking French. Often considered uneducated and ignorant, these women act as archives of oral tradition, history, and poetry in a language their children often do not speak. In this paper, I will look at how this performative documentary film creates “spaces in-between” cultures through its uses of performance, orality, and cinematic space. A number of recent Maghrebi and sub-Saharan African documentaries have emerged that can be described as performative documentaries in which historical evocation and emotive connection to the subject matter is as important to the filmmaker as factual referencing. The filmmaker plays a self-reflexive role in the text, which often shapes the content.

It is important to note that the film is not about being forced to choose between two geographical locations, and it does not seek to hybridize two cultures, but rather is concerned with other sorts of questions such as the nature of Berber culture and language, how it impacts not only the representation of Algeria's post-Independence history (the troubled context of the 1990s, the history of Algerian migration to France), but also the practice and aesthetics of this contemporary documentary filmmaker. The film suggests possible new ways of looking at questions of minority language (Kabyle), culture, and identity that could potentially greatly contribute to the understanding of contemporary independent documentary film practices, discourses, and aesthetics.

Introduction

Contemporary African filmmakers are transforming African cinema as they depict the struggles and triumphs of Africans living in globalized contexts. In particular, contemporary African filmmaking stresses the interrelationship between multiple histories (colonial, national, and personal) as they collide with social, political, and economic imperatives. Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe has observed that African histories in the continental sense have always been the products of the

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movement of peoples and cultures and it was only through the imposition of boundaries during colonialism that such flows were truncated. In this sense, this “movement of worlds,” as Mbembe describes it, creates histories that must be understood as “culture[s] of mobility” emerging in response to internal and external contacts (2002). And although colonization imposed boundaries and strictures, it also resulted in new forms of mobility and border crossings that would have a profound impact on postcolonial identities.

Within this boundary-crossing context, North Africans are increasingly asking what it means to be African, and more specifically, North African, or Maghrebi in post-independence globalized milieux. Even the designations “North African” and “Maghrebi” are contested by Berber activists who prefer the name “Tamazgha” to define all the geographical territory in Northern Africa inhabited by the Berbers. But the term is important to the Amazigh/Berber diaspora as a form of protestation against Arab domination. In the case of Algeria, identity construction is an incredibly complex, fractious undertaking leading to claims that Algerians have endured “the most complicated history of citizenship in the world” (Khanna, 2008: 70). Indeed, one could argue that indigenous Algerian cultural identities were confiscated by the French as early as 1830 at the onset of French colonialism. What followed were years of layered interactions between French settler *colons*, metropolitan France, and indigenous Algerians as France refashioned Algeria into a colonial settler regime with the standard mission civilisatrice argument that the indigenous population needed rescuing from their outmoded ways of life (Ruedy, 2005: 50–51). Tragically, the imposition of French language and modes of being as a form of liberation and human rights would work to curtail the very rights of those the French were seeking to liberate (Khanna, 2008: 70). In fact, the French would impose a system of control that would lead to the division of Arab and Kabyle communities. Focusing on cultural differences between Arabs, who mostly occupied the lowlands, and Kabyles, who mostly occupied the mountains, the French reasoned that the Kabyle were industrious and attached to their lands, whereas the Arabs were lazy. A myth soon developed that would have the Kabyle easily assimilated with French culture thus paving the way for the French to more quickly and easily dominate the Arab majority. What the French did not count on was the two groups’ “loyalty to the common Algerian heritage” as Algerian Arabic actually gathered strength under colonialism’s project of “political and economic integration” (Ruedy, 2005: 90–92). Clearly, the assimilation of Algerians to French civilization went much further than language and culture as thousands of hectares of mostly Kabyle land were appropriated for French settlers. This act of appropriation would cause the disintegration of rural society and force many of those dispossessed of their land to emigrate to France. Relationships and interactions would only become more complicated through the colonial period as various groups worked with, for, or against the French. During the Algerian Revolutionary War of Independence (1954–62), Kabyles, in part because of their perceived integration into colonial society, were often considered traitors and targeted by the FLN – Front de Libération Nationale. As a result, many were forced into exile in France.

Following the war, a process of collective memory and amnesia took hold and memorializing the war soon “became a key means of narrativizing and mythologizing the liberation struggle, and was one of the means whereby that struggle was rewritten so that certain groups were gradually excluded from cultural memory” (Austin, 2010: 28). With the dominance of the FLN for more than 30 years, national identity was shaped to promote a singular cohesive portrait of Algerianness. The Algerian War was depicted as the defining moment in Algerian history with a liberation struggle defined solely by pro-independence fighters within the FLN (2010: 28). As the FLN persisted in the complete Arabization of government, policy, education, and culture, all diversity was actively discouraged, leading to the abolition of minority languages and cultures, including the Kabyle. This new form of oppression evokes the earlier French colonial system and is akin to neocolonialism as one type of oppression is simply replaced with another.

To further complicate matters, the role of the diaspora in the war of liberation, and especially that of Algerians living as immigrants, or in exile in France, was significant, but often overlooked by both Algerian and French national histories. These contributions were also often erased or written out of families' collective memories, becoming the unspoken within family circles. State and self-censorship helped ensure that recollections of war experiences were fragmented, making it difficult for immigrant families in France to pass information down through the generations in any meaningful manner. It would require, as Sylvie Durmelat suggests, a transnational French-Algerian history of the war in order to account for the two nations' colonial and postcolonial entanglements (2011: 94–97).

Durmelat's proposal is interesting and begs an investigation of how these "entanglements" have impacted artistic expression within the Algerian diaspora. And in the case of film, how do Maghrebi/Franco-Algerian filmmakers construct the nation or the transnational? What does the experience of living outside the land of one's ancestors bring to one's creative practice? And how do funding sources, more often found outside the Maghreb, help shape artistic creation? In Algeria, according to Roy Armes (2009: 6), "the lack of a production infrastructure persists to this day ... [with the features produced since 2000 almost exclusively] produced by filmmakers resident in France (and in some cases born there), using French production finance." In his volume *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism*, Dominic Thomas argues that "since at least the 1970s, Africa and African-centered films have successfully evaded simple categorization" and have contributed significantly to the "expansion and decentralization of the parameters of French-language film production itself" (2013: 8). Thomas further argues that the transnational, globalized geographic spaces and contexts of African films have "also been accompanied by a thematic evolution" reflecting the concerns of transnational populations (2013: 7–8).

Many filmmakers of North African descent, living in the Maghreb or the diaspora, or both, have used the narrative and documentary format to explore issues of exile and immigration: *Inch' Allah dimanche* (Yamina Benguigui, 2001), *Vivre au Paradis* (Bourlem Guerdjou, 1999), *Mémoires d'immigrés: L'héritage maghrébin* (Yamina Benguigui, 1997). More recently, filmmakers like Franco-Algerian Fatima Sissani have used the documentary genre for personal and autobiographical explorations of Algerian history, culture, and the impact of immigration. Born in Algeria and raised in France from the age of six, Sissani began her career in journalism with *Radio Zizine*, the magazine *Que Choisir*, and the newspaper *Le Monde diplomatique*. She produced her first feature-length documentary film in 2011 entitled, *La Langue de Zahra/Zahra's Mother Tongue*, a film ostensibly about her mother, a Kabyle immigrant in France who refused the social, political, and cultural burden of integration. In this essay, I propose to explore how Sissani films Zahra's remembering as performance and creates a 'commemorative narrative' in Durmelat's words (2011: 94) to depict how issues of exile, emigration, and cultural displacement are lived and experienced by this extraordinary woman who transmits her rich cultural heritage to her future generations.

Emigration and exile: spaces in-between

During various screening events of her film, Fatima Sissani has declared, "Ce n'est pas un film sur ma mère, c'est un documentaire sur l'émigration à travers l'histoire de ma mère. J'ai trouvé en elle un excellent médium" (Addar, 2012). In the documentary, Sissani "gives voice" (Martin, 2011: 57; Donadey, 1999: 111–112) to and listens as her Kabyle mother, Zahra, who, uprooted 33 years earlier from her native village in the Kabylia region of Algeria, lived in the northern working class suburbs of Paris as an immigrant woman for years after Algerian independence without speaking French. Often considered uneducated and ignorant, these "analphabètes de grande culture," to whom Sissani dedicates the film, act as archives of oral tradition, history, and poetry in a language

their children often do not speak or understand. Zahra, however, refused to integrate into French society, and retained the language, religion, and customs of her ancestors, the Kabyle. In France she might be considered illiterate, but in Algeria, she would be considered an invaluable cultural treasure. Now her daughter, Fatima, documents her mother's displacement, her time in France, and her annual visits to the rustic Algerian countryside, visiting the gardens and homes of her ancestors. Sissani demonstrates to the audience how the simple domestic activities of cooking, swathing hay, watching the sun rise over the mountains are all sources of inspiration and cultural knowledge.¹

The film opens with an extreme long shot vista of the Kabylia mountains as voices murmur "That one, that's the Azrou-N'thour mountain peak. And that one is the sacred summit of Azrou-El-Ghassar. They say that a couscous pot once fell from the top of the mountain. It did not break and not a drop of the sauce spilled out. And it was an earthen pot!" The next image is a medium shot of four women with their backs turned to the camera as they stand on a balcony terrace contemplating the Kabylia mountains in the distance and discussing an upcoming pilgrimage. Sissani then cuts again to the mountain vista as one of the women exclaims, "Once a young man asked me, Dear mother, what prayer do you say for the exiles to return?" The camera then returns to the medium shots of the women for the rest of the sequence and we discover that it is the woman on frame left speaking, even though their backs are still turned to the audience. She continues with her story of the young man wanting exiled Algerians to return as she counters with, "What we want is for our children to be able to go to France" and then implores the sacred summit of Azrou-N'thour to help their children leave for France before declaring that the young man had lost his mind. We are then introduced to Zahra who is second from frame left as she retorts, "It's you who's lost your mind!" The women conclude the discussion by agreeing that France is no longer the "Paradise" it was once thought to be. In the opening sequence, which lasts exactly two minutes, Sissani lays bare the premise of the film through the parable of the couscous pot and the women's discussion: displacement and exile do not necessarily mean loss of cultural heritage or roots (sauce). The audience is also given a hint of Zahra's position on exile and emigration.

The Sissani family emigrated to France in the late 1970s at the end of the period of the *Trentes Glorieuses*, a term used to describe the economic boom in France following the Second World War. Labor migration was a means to rebuild the French nation and in 1945 the French government established the Office National d'Immigration (afterwards, Office des migrations internationales) with the goal of recruiting immigrant workers and organizing family settlements (regroupements de famille), albeit of limited duration through controlled length of stay work permits. The forming of Kabyle residential communities had actually already begun at the end of the nineteenth century and on through the Second World War. When the Algerian war of liberation broke out in 1954, many wives joined immigrant husbands in France, often bringing their children, to escape violence, or to avoid dangerous travel back and forth. Many expected, as would Zahra Sissani much later, to endure short-term stays. Regardless of length of stay in exile, these immigrants created living spaces that reflected their social and cultural structures of origin and were, for the most part, based on the principle of solidarity (Silverstein, 2004: 90–91).

Indeed, solidarity is a pillar of Kabyle society, whose social organization is based around the rhythms of the year-long seasons. Women are accorded a privileged status and are considered to be stewards of their language, culture, and traditional values. They are the "memory carriers" described by Benjamin Stora who also uses this term to describe the "children of Algerian immigrants as a new group of 'memory carriers'" (Durmelat quoting Stora: 96). Interestingly, by the 1990s, some filmmakers, who are also children of Algerian immigrants, began using their cameras to depict "their parents' aging generation and reconstructed their past experiences" (Durmelat, 100). Fatima Sissani would do this through the lens of performative documentary, declaring "Ma patrie, c'est l'émigration" (Addar, 2012).

It is important to note that Sissani doesn't "focus on the need to choose between 'North Africa' and 'France' and does not seek a harmonious synthesis between two cultures ... but suggests possible new ways of looking at culture and 'belonging'" (Rosello and Bjornson, 1993: 18). Sissani's insistence on "the space in-between" in *La Langue de Zahra* evokes "both belonging and affirming the right not to belong" (Levine, 2008: 57) and is reminiscent of what the Tunisian film critic Tahar Chikhaoui has described as "glissements identitaires," or identity glides, which are linked to historical and geographical factors and often involve traveling and border crossings (2004: 36). Chikhaoui's concept works in concert with the notion of "transvergence" employed by Florence Martin in her recent monumental study on women Maghrebi filmmakers. First coined as a term by Marcos Novak to explain "clusters of cultural impacts and creative conditions" that jump in and out of and across boundaries (Martin, 2011: 23), Will Higbee extended the notion to allow "the filming subject to be connected – via a Deleuzian rhizomatic network – to the local and the global via ceaselessly shifting positions" (Martin, 2011: 23).

This search for a way to describe the nature of in-between spaces led Denise Brahimi to evoke the notion of a third space in Maghrebi cinema (2009: 7). Her concept is interesting because it details a space which is more cultural and psychological than physically geographic – a space in-between the local and the global, constructed of a synthesis of many different perspectives including ethnicity, nationality, language, context of production, distribution, and exhibition (Higbee 2012). This is the type of metaphorical and psychological space that Zahra embodies and that Fatima successfully portrays in *Zahra's Mother Tongue*.

Cinematic aesthetic strategies: Memory spaces as performance

Zahra's Mother Tongue falls into the category of documentary that Bill Nichols has termed "the performative mode" in which historical evocation and emotive connection to the subject matter is as important to the filmmaker as factual referencing. He extends the concept to promote knowledge as embodied "in the tradition of poetry" (2001: 130–131). Experience, memory, and emotional involvement all play significant roles and the filmmaker plays a self-reflexive role in the text, which often shapes the content into a "free combination of the actual and the imagined" (2001: 131). The autobiographical is important in this mode of documentary which Zahra performs as orator and which Fatima performs as diarist of her mother's "events of memory."²

Memory enactment as a cinematic strategy is reminiscent of the work of other Algerian women filmmakers, including Habiba Djahnine's *Lettre à ma soeur/Letter to My Sister* (2006), in which the filmmaker pays tribute to her sister who was assassinated in 1995 in Tizi Ouzou, and Assia Djebar's *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont-Chenoua/The Nuba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (1977), in which Djebar tells the story of Leila, an Algerian expatriate returning to her country 15 years after independence. Both filmmakers' point of departure for their films is the breaking away from the silence of the Algerian *mujahidat* – recognizing them and their rights to silence and/or words (Martin, 2011: 56–57), and bringing correctives to French and Algerian national histories. As Leila declares in *Nuba*, "I'm not looking for anything. But I'm listening to the sound of broken memory." Listening, as we see in *Zahra*, is an important part of Kabyle oral tradition because it works to resist forgetting and cultural amnesia.

Kabyliya acts as the visual and metaphorical frame of the film. As described earlier, the opening shot of the film is an extreme long shot vista of Kabyliya mountain peaks Azrou-N'thour and Azrou-el-Ghassar. In the second image – the medium shot of the four women gazing at the mountains as they chat – the audience is introduced to Zahra, whose gaze is clearly on the mountains and landscape and not directed to the camera. The final shots of the film are of this same landscape before a final close-up of Zahra singing the same refrain about exile that acts as non-diegetic music at the

beginning of the film, just after the opening sequence and opening credits and dedication: “To our parents, illiterates of great culture; To us, Children of immigration.” The filmmaker cuts to static medium shots of a salon and kitchen in a European-style apartment before depicting in a medium shot Zahra ironing on a table as the first line of the refrain, in Kabyle, is translated as: “Don’t cry, my partridge.” The song proceeds, “Your in-laws are at the threshold,” as a medium shot frames a younger woman (we soon learn it is Fatima, the filmmaker, and Zahra’s daughter) hanging laundry on the balcony. The laundry line obscures the background; the viewer can barely make out what appear to be hills and apartment buildings. A high angle long shot then presents the view of the street and apartment buildings from this same balcony (the viewer presumes) as the words, “It’s me who is exiled” are heard. Shots alternate between Zahra and Fatima during the phrases: “The exile who left his country. Don’t cry Lady Falcon. Your in-laws are in the house. It’s me the exiled.” The final line, “The exiled who left his mother” acts as a sound bridge over a close-up of curtains fluttering in the breeze and an extreme close-up of Zahra’s fingers, then her face, as she attempts in vain to thread a needle. This is clearly a film about mourning and nostalgia for one’s homeland.

Fatima Sissani cleverly constructs her cinematic space “to highlight strategies of spatial appropriation” by Zahra (Geesey, 2011: 162). The ways in which she inhabits the space of the film provide a metaphor for the ways in which she inhabits French physical space (2011: 163). These apartment settings define much of Zahra’s space in France and her agency within this space is in sharp contrast to that of the Kabyle countryside scenes in which she wanders openly and happily through the landscape. Zahra lives “in-between” – in the psychological space described earlier by Brahimi. What was meant, in Zahra’s mind, to be a temporary sojourn in France turned out to be long-term and now she no longer has the physical force to live permanently in Algeria. Now, she must be content with her annual visits to Kabylia to see her friends and extended family and each year as the holidays approach, Zahra becomes very excited at the thought of her approaching visit to her homeland. As Zahra exclaims near the beginning of the film, “To stay back in France was like being buried alive.” Filmmaker Sissani constructs moments of displacement by shifting the scenes between the apartment in France and her mother’s annual sojourns in Algeria. Despite a clear division between the urban and the rural, the viewer is never sure exactly where they are located. This very absence of points of reference in the classical narrative sense, which so shocked viewers of *La Nouba* when it was first released, actually works in *Zahra* to gradually suture the viewer into the narrative without the benefit of classical narrative continuity or economy of narrative (Bensmaïa, 2003: 83). Bensmaïa has described Assia Djebar’s aesthetic style in *La Nouba* as “an aesthetic of the fragment,” a form not common in Maghrebi film before Djebar. Through this aesthetic, the story moves forward exploring places of memory, snippets of speech, dialogue, poetry, music, and sounds, and unearthing the time and space of buried memories (2003: 90–91). In *Zahra*, the stitching or piecing together of fragments of memories finds its metaphoric meaning on form when Fatima must finish threading the needle for her mother: together mother and daughter stitch together the family memories that will be remembered for and by future generations.

As a further strategy to counteract displacement, Sissani creates distancing devices or breathing spaces in the narrative throughout the film, allowing for moments of pause. Shots in the documentary devoid of characters, such as rain on a window or a city street, the bustling of a park, or the light on a table decorated with flowers, close-ups of hands chopping vegetables and making bread, not strictly located geographically, centre the action on quiet domestic moments in space. They function like Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu’s curtain shots³ where, between scenes, he would insert carefully framed shots of the surroundings to signal changes in settings. These shots also act as distancing devices and rest points in the narrative and allow the spectators a chance to ponder what they have witnessed. Sometimes shots of a domestic task being performed in France “transform” into shots of a similar action taking place in Kabylia, stitching or suturing the two locations

together and demonstrating that they are inextricably linked for Zahra and her family, not only geographically, but culturally and psychologically as well, somewhat akin to the third space described by Brahimi. An example of this occurs about a third of the way into the film when Zahra and Fatima embrace after Zahra has said her prayers and the two begin to make the *harsha*, a traditional Kabyle bread, in Zahra's kitchen in Paris. As the two discuss how Zahra would not have been able to endure not being able to make regular visits to her ancestral home, a medium close-up shot of the two frames Zahra in the foreground on the right with Fatima in mid-ground centre frame. Zahra's hands, centre-frame, dominate the action as the two women peel vegetables. A blunt cut follows with an extreme close-up of the *harsha* cooking, making crackling sounds as a hand drops bits of vegetables on the bread before adding the top layer of dough and patting it down. Another blunt cut to a slightly high-angle extreme close-up of a woman's face in semi profile on frame right. She is the woman cooking the bread, but who is she – the spectator wonders. Yet another blunt cut reveals the woman, in a medium shot in an airy kitchen, with the doors wide open to the outside. Zahra, adorned in a traditional Kabyle dress, is framed through the doors, standing across the passageway, looking contentedly off toward frame left. Trees are seen in the background, through the open door and window. The sun is shining and the image is one of peace and contentment. Zahra is in Kabylia. She walks off, frame left, and the next images are medium shots of her greeting friends and family members who have arrived to share a meal.

Landscape also sometimes acts as narrator, offering point, counterpoint and rest to the film's narrative structure. Landscape as structuring principle has already been successfully employed in previous Algerian documentaries such as *Lettre à ma Soeur* (Habiba Djahmine, 2006), fiction works such as *Bab El-Oued City* (Merzak Allouache, 1994), and more recently Karim Moussaoui's *Les Jours d'Avant* (2013), all three films deftly exploiting the use of natural light and landscape to underscore the pervading sense of bleak hopelessness of the 1990s Black Decade when Algerians were once again working through a very painful period of their own history and searching for identity.

Language is an important aspect of performative documentary, but it is also a central aspect of Algerian, and especially Kabyle identity. Martin Stone has argued that “[l]anguage is a primary political, ideological, social and psychological issue in Algeria ... connected with the country's search for its identity and is a unifying force in a land of enormous regional and ethnic diversity” (1997: 18). At the time of independence, French and Arabic dominated the northern part of the country, while French and Berber were spoken in Kabylia. The government's subsequent efforts at Arabization and homogenization of the whole nation provided the catalyst for conflicts that would ensue. Social unrest, increasing unemployment, housing shortages, etc would also lead to a series of events including the Berber Spring of 1980, Black October in 1988 when students and workers rioted against Chadli Benjedid's regime, with the most visible and vocal opponents being Berber university students who protested against the Arabization of government and the education system. At the same time, Islamists in Algeria were gaining prominence as the government increasingly lost control on economic reform (Lenze Jr, 2011: 85). Algeria of the 1990s was marred by civil war “as military repression failed to halt Islamic insurrection against political, economic, and social conditions within Algeria” (2011: 96). Although violence escalated during the 1990s, and the state “has transitioned from authoritarianism to ‘democracy’” (2011: 110), language control and identity construction continue to this day to be of major concern to Berbers in Algeria.

In *Zahra's Mother Tongue* it is through Zahra's own voice as orator and her use of the Kabyle language, in the proverbs and parables she narrates, the singing of songs, and the recitation of poetry that she carries her culture forward from her ancestors to her grandchildren and future generations. Sissani herself has declared that Kabyle parents of her mother's generation are talented orators with fertile imaginations, but outside of Kabylia their value was only seen in the labor market. Yet, as Sissani declares, “The Kabyle language was the language of the household,

the language through which values were transmitted. It was a living library, the cradle of our family life” In fact, Fatima and her sister acknowledge that they have been “constructed” by and through the Kabyle language (Addar, 2012). Myth and legend are embodied in the Kabyle language, through which one listens to spontaneous and improvised poetry, inspired by songs and pastoral village settings. It is an uplifting poetry, liberating one from suffering and pain, a soothing therapy arising from an internal energy source and from the art of contemplation. Kabyle poetry is an eternal memory for present and future generations, a memory of happiness and misfortune inscribed in the collective soul.⁴ For example, at the beginning of the kitchen scene in Paris during which Fatima and Zahra embrace and cook the *harsha*, a non-diegetic refrain is heard and the melody and voice are reminiscent of those from the beginning of the film. As mother and daughter embrace, the voice intones, “She will be gay and happy. She will have a good time and children will be with her. She will have a good time and will rest. She will have children with her.” As the words intimate, these moments are precious and help forge links between the generations through the transmission of cultural values.

As the women prepare the bread they listen to a CD of the Kabyle singer Slimane Azzem, who was born in Kabylia in 1918 but died in exile in France in 1983. Alleged to have collaborated with the French (along with his whole village) during the Algerian War of Independence, Azzem was forced into exile in France in 1962 at the end of the war. He established himself as a singer. His voice was legendary and his repertoire focused primarily on songs about his homeland and exile. Zahra translates the words at Fatima’s request and recounts how Azzem sings about a partridge that hid under a stone because his wings were broken. The hunters saw the mujahedeen and tried to kill them. This is a metaphorical reference to FLN resistance fighters hiding in the Kabylia mountains during the war of independence, who were eventually found and assassinated. At Fatima’s probing, Zahra continues to explain that after Azzem fled, the ALN (Armée de Libération Nationale) as the military wing of the FLN sought out his brothers and they also fled into exile. According to Zahra, all three of the Azzems were wrongly accused. She then proceeds to recite by heart the poem Azzem composed describing his flight into exile and his subsequent anguish:

I remember as if it were today. The day I took my bags. My friends around me. My father and my mother too. They wept and I did too. I mourned when the sea crept afar. My dear land that I left against my will. Fate had thus decided it was to be my destiny.

Je me souviens comme si c’était aujourd’hui. Du jour où j’ai pris mes valises. Mes amis m’ont entouré. Mon père et ma mère aussi. Ils pleuraient et moi aussi. J’ai pris le deuil quand la mer s’est éloignée. Mon pays bien-aimé que j’ai laissé contre ma volonté. Le sort en a décidé. C’est mon destin.

These understated references to the Algerian War form part of a strategy employed by other French/Algerian filmmakers such as Malik Chibane (*Hexagone*, 1994, and *Douce France*, 1995) who use them to “highlight the central role descendants of immigrants play in the reinvention and rebirth of their parents’ past” (Durmelat, 2011: 98–99). Interestingly, the same conversation in the Paris kitchen between Zahra and Fatima is picked up in the scenes that follow in Kabylia as though the filmmaker and her mother had not really changed locations. Zahra continues with anecdotes about how the war didn’t end the same way for everybody. Humor and nostalgia weave their way into Zahra’s narration as she regales not only her daughter, but the other women who have come to visit Zahra and share memories with her. Throughout the documentary, Zahra recites poetry all the while protesting that she doesn’t remember any verses. She explains to Fatima, and thus the audience, that poetry was improvised during communal work or tasks, such as harvesting crops. Constructing poems was akin to building the community and language was shared and belonged to all.

Conclusion

Zahra's refusal to adopt the French language and continue to speak Kabyle makes her a steward of her culture, whether she is physically present in Kabylia or not. A devout Muslim, Zahra prays daily and finds spiritual refuge in her religion. She believes her spiritual and physical protection is contained within the embodiment of the marabout (holy man) and saint, Sidi Ali Om'hand, "the Lion of Tiza." Protector against all evil and capable of travelling through the skies, he locates spiritually in France and Algeria simultaneously, effecting in a metaphysical way Tahar Chikhaoui's "identity glides" described above. He watches over and protects the Sissani family and its future generations, thus meriting from Zahra weekly visits to his tomb when she is in Kabylia.

Zahra's exhortation that "[n]otre langue est authentique et ne doit pas être mélangée" is countered by Fatima who insists on the impossibility of this unrealistic expectation. As a product of the diaspora, her mastery of the Kabyle language is weak, she claims, creating a parallel with Zahra's inability to speak French. It is important to note that the film is not about being forced to choose between two geographical locations, and it does not seek to hybridize two cultures, but rather, is concerned with other sorts of questions such as language and culture, which speak to larger concerns of identity construction in globalizing worlds. The film suggests possible new ways of looking at questions of minority language (Kabyle), culture, and identity that could potentially greatly contribute to our understanding of history and histories as living documents.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to David Gane for discussions about the themes and form of this film when he wrote a review of it for *Directory of World Cinema: Africa* (Stefanson and Petty, 2014).
2. Mireille Rosello (2011) coined this term.
3. Special thanks to David Gane for pointing out this aesthetic device.
4. I am indebted to Brahim Benbouazza for his insights into Berber oral tradition.

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