



Protest Songs and the Reconfiguration of Youth Identity in Algeria

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Abstract:

This study investigates Algerian youth's method of transforming protest songs into potent resistance tools through their fusion of worldwide musical traditions with traditional Algerian elements. The article analyzes lyrics written by artists to understand their expressions of social exclusion alongside their multiple identity struggles in modern Algeria.

The study identifies three key adaptation mechanisms: the appropriation of international protest elements, their cultural translation, and the creation of hybrid musical forms. These processes give rise to a distinctive “global” protest language that simultaneously addresses universal themes of dissent and reflects specific local realities, providing valuable insights into youth resistance strategies within constrained political and socioeconomic contexts.

Keywords: Protest Song; Immaterial Culture; Marginalized Groups; Lyrical Styles; Algerian Society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Youth populations represent a major social entity, as their energetic nature drives them to address various modern and emerging issues across different fields. The way young people participate in social matters depends on their specific economic and social conditions; therefore, their opinions, attitudes, and life experiences take different forms.

Many youth concerns find their voice through music, which uses songs as its primary expressive medium. These songs often express resistance through protest messages, particularly because specific youth groups encounter social exclusion due to their economic position, which renders them marginalized populations.

This article investigates how protest voices from marginalized youth groups express themselves through musical compositions within this framework. The musical form possesses multiple defining features that stem from its street culture origins, expressing social and cultural elements relevant to youth creators and listeners. Through songs, youth find an effective tool to share their struggles and dreams, functioning as a protest voice that conveys both explicit and implicit messages.

Study Problem:

The song holds important cultural value as an intangible element that developed as an art form closely connected to poetry across different societies throughout history. The connection between music and culture led ethnomusicologists to recognize that all organized sound patterns emerge from societies with particular cultural characteristics (Al-Rihani, 2009, p. 30). Thus, the song functions as a mirror, reflecting the social framework that people experience (Bouzina, 2016, p. 03).

Algeria's present cultural identity stems directly from the historical social and cultural changes that occurred through various stages and significant events in its past. This development created a complex musical landscape encompassing multiple vocal styles and musical traditions. Moreover, the process of globalization has introduced new vocal styles, further expanding the existing diversity of musical expressions. Today, the Algerian musical environment offers an extensive range of vocal expressions to its audience. This diversity is rooted in various historical elements shaped by cultural and social interactions in a dialectical relationship.

The youth group has adopted these musical styles for local protest messages, modifying them to reflect Algerian societal characteristics.

The selection of musical compositions as a substitute language and protest medium has shown its



influence over time. The ability of songs to inspire rebellion stems from their memorability, which arises from rhythmic patterns and rhyming structure. Additionally, adding clear truth statements while removing ambiguity through humorous protest elements allows individuals to spread their message to vast audiences (DARD, 2008, p. 02).

During the initial years of Algerian post-independence, before political pluralism emerged, song served as a medium for sending subtle protest messages due to the restricted freedom available at the time.

The responsibility of delivering coded messages through songs belongs to marginalized youth groups who produce songs containing multiple themes which audiences interpret. The various forms of these songs serve as essential channels to deliver youth messages both overt and covert to authorities because they function as protest instruments. Protest songs maintain their primary connection to social movements which primarily focus on bringing about social transformation.

The preceding discussion establishes essential questions that help investigate major aspects of protest songs created by youth who experience marginalization during the post-independence Algerian dialectical protest contexts. The main research question stands as follows:

How did the political and social contexts experienced by Algeria during the post-independence period contribute to establishing the song as a medium of protest for marginalized youth?

Several subsidiary questions arise from this central inquiry, including:

- In what ways did local protest songs draw upon their external counterparts in terms of form and content?
- How did marginalized youth utilize everyday lived experiences to craft protest-oriented lyrical texts?
- What characteristics defined the thematic content of protest songs produced by marginalized youth?

Study Methodology:

Research methodology selection typically emerges from the specific characteristics of the research subject. A qualitative approach stands as the most suitable method to study social science socio-cultural phenomena, which depend on qualitative data, as it establishes a structured framework for discovering scientific facts (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 60).

This study utilizes qualitative research through content analysis, which researchers define as a



communication research technique that employs intensive, objective, and quantitative methods to describe communication patterns (Ahmad, 2008, p. 128). Furthermore, the content analysis system uses information derived from documents, speeches, and conversations to investigate individual personalities, along with other relevant data sources (Hassan, p. 150).

Study Population:

The research population consists of a specific collection of elements which can be limited or unlimited for observation purposes. According to (Maurice, 2006, p. 238) a population consists of elements which share particular characteristics that differentiate them from all other elements in the study. The population of this study consists of the textual sample which includes selected songs for analysis. A purposive sampling method is used in this study because the researcher makes the selection of research units based on personal judgment. The selection of study items focuses on their ability to fulfill the research goals instead of random selection or systematic sampling (Ahmad-bin, 2003, p. 181).

Study Sample:

Research demands the determination of study participants which must follow a methodical approach that corresponds to the study framework. According to Muhammad Abdel Hamid a research sample consists of a specific group of people or units which stands for the characteristics of the entire population according to study goals and time and resource limits (Abdel-Hamid, 2002, p. 129). The sample for this research uses purposive criteria which follows specific requirements to meet research objectives (Vhattacharjee, 2012, p. 194). The research team selected about 50 recorded songs which became widely popular during Algerian social and protest movements from October 1988 through the 2019 popular uprising. The songs stand as the latest version of peaceful protests which different groups in Algeria have used. The protest wave featured various musical styles including rap along with Ultras chants and other transformed protest lyrics that expressed irony through satire. The selection of content analysis as the analytical method occurred because researchers wanted to study the socio-cultural elements of song content. The analysis method depends on essential categories which help researchers determine the following questions: Who is speaking? What is being said? And why?

The research begins by establishing the social environment which shaped the birth of these songs that presented their messages through discreet expressions and direct approaches. The newly independent nation of Algeria underwent political, economic and social changes which determined its development course from independence until today. The positive advancements that extended to multiple societal groups came alongside multiple obstacles throughout this process. The developmental journey included multiple stages of reservations, criticisms and protests whose form and consistency depended on the social groups behind these demands and the



specific time period under consideration.

2. Chronology of Protest in Algeria from Independence to the Present Stage:

The first step in analyzing songs requires recognition of the socio-cultural contexts which produced these lyrical texts since they functioned as both a subtle discourse and a more forceful tone at different times. The newly independent country of Algeria followed the same path as other nations by undergoing numerous political and social and economic changes which shaped its development from independence until today. The changes brought about some beneficial results to multiple social groups but they also introduced numerous problems and obstacles. The development process during this period experienced occasional phases when people expressed their concerns through reservations and criticisms and protests. The demands presented by social groups and their level of unity changed according to the particular context of each event.

2.1 Period from 1962 to 1986:

The Ben Bella government faced major obstacles after the 1962 liberation revolution because independence marked a crucial turning point in the history of oppressed people. The period contained intense expectations for rights restoration together with economic and social and cultural development. After the late President Houari Boumédiène executed a coup he established a socialist government to lead a young nation which had ended its long economic and cultural conflict. During this time the Algerian people experienced a deadlock that forced them to choose between political dictatorship and economic instability since public sector oil rent revenues became their main revenue source.

Undoubtedly, these successive stages constituted a profound historical, social, and political setback for the Algerian people, as stability was short-lived before the first signs of a crisis began to emerge and intensify in 1985. This situation was exacerbated by the media's amplification of the crisis, during which Algeria's external revenues barely covered its imports, prompting the reintroduction of austerity measures and the need to incur new debts (Al-Kanz, 1998, p. 77).

These developments significantly affected individual purchasing power, leading to widespread feelings of exclusion and marginalization. This was especially pronounced given the structural imbalances that had pervaded Algerian society since independence, accompanied by phenomena such as the monopolization of social institutions by a minority that subordinated them to its own interests (Al-Ayyashi, 1999, p. 86).

These conditions, among others, further inflamed public discontent, particularly as social disparities became increasingly visible. A highly educated intellectual class emerged, yet it remained dominated by a relatively limited group with less formal education. This was compounded by an identity crisis linked to elite conflicts whether linguistic or political or



struggles over social positioning. The silent, and at times overt, confrontation between Francophone elites, who viewed society as traditional and resistant to modernity while promoting French as the language of science and technology, and Arab nationalist groups, who adopted Islam as a defensive bastion and regarded Arabic as a symbol of identity due to its connection with religion, the primary cultural foundation of Algerian identity, led to a fractured sociocultural landscape. This division weakened the role of cultural elites in guiding critical historical moments experienced by Algerian society (Hami, 2017, p. 57).

The post-independence period was marked by numerous conflicts and harsh conditions for citizens deprived of their rights. The situation resembled a volcano on the brink of eruption, as tensions shifted from the ruling authorities to the streets, giving rise to violent protests. Notably, the cultural movement in the Kabylie region around the language and identity crisis in 1980, followed by the events of October 1988, revealed the true face of the Algerian individual striving for dignity and honor within their country.

2.2 The Period from 1986 to 2020:

2.2.1 The Events of October 1988:

Considerable attention has been devoted in the press to the events of October 1988, which some media outlets and political parties described as a rebellion or revolutionary movement. However, objective evidence indicates that the outbreak on October 5 was not spontaneous. These events, and the subsequent escalation of protests into severe and reciprocal violence between the authorities and the populace, reflected deeper structural tensions. An analysis of the political circumstances preceding this date reveals significant fragmentation and collapse, primarily resulting from the monopolization of power by a minority at the expense of the majority. Protest movements spread across numerous Algerian cities, including Oran, the capital, and Setif, forming a series of social mobilizations that became a defining feature of Algerian society (Djabi, 2012, p. 194).

The initial demonstrators who took to the streets of Algiers were school students, followed by unemployed youth who engaged in acts of vandalism targeting grocery stores, several buildings, the headquarters of the National Liberation Front, as well as the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Social Protection offices. The situation escalated dangerously when unidentified individuals began firing indiscriminately at protesters. Casualty estimates vary, with some reports citing approximately 200 fatalities, while others claim the number reached 500.

These events affected nearly all provinces across the country, prompting the imposition of a nationwide curfew. During this period, a crisis cell was established to assess the situation. Within days, the curfew was lifted, and elections were announced for December 1988, which were again



won by Chadli Bendjedid, who subsequently acknowledged the need to amend the constitution. This led to the legalization of other political parties, allowing them to participate in governance and electoral processes.

This shift was notably evident in the 1990s, when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won a decisive victory and secured a dominant position in the parliamentary seats.

2.2.2 The Black Decade: 1989–2000

Most experts agree that the October 1988 events reshaped Algeria's political and economic and social path because power holders decided to permit party formation and press freedom. The political transformation occurred when Algeria shifted from one-party governance to multiple political parties on February 23 1989. The political domain remained hidden without any institutional or personal communication before this period. Algeria entered a period of heightened violence which surpassed previous levels. The increasing power struggle led the nation into an extremely difficult "Red Decade." The January 1992 coup against the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) which had secured victory in the 1991 elections and held control of the parliament and local councils led to street-level conflict. A historical examination of the period from the 1992 coup until the National Reconciliation or Civil Concord project shows a situation filled with murders alongside torture and forced disappearances. The violent acts targeted not only those opposing the coup but also numerous others because accusations became widespread while death dominated media coverage which different groups manipulated for their own purposes. Some people viewed the political pluralism together with democracy which authorities promoted as instruments designed to split society and dismantle active political power (Brahimi, 2001, p. 207).

The tragic aspect of these events lies in the innocent victims who were unjustly killed, including teachers, educators, police officers, gendarmes, doctors, lawyers, and even artists and singers. Among them was Maâtoub Lounès, whose songs were explicitly political, openly criticizing those responsible for societal problems and assigning blame at the onset of each new artistic work. Similarly, the singer "Ouhlu," known for his song "Pouvoir Assassin," deeply influenced many young people. The lyrics directly accused those responsible for the killings and destruction. Notably, his message was delivered in the Amazigh language, one of Algeria's cultural streams, conveying powerful explicit and implicit messages rejecting the oppressive practices targeting youth.

Regarding more sentimental songs, the protest was often expressed subtly, reflecting emotional and affective states. Occasionally, these songs included allusions to patriotism, as exemplified by the work of Cheb Hasni, who excelled in this genre before being treacherously assassinated by unknown perpetrators. His cultural texts and song lyrics served as a vital outlet for many young people during that period. His reputation spread widely, and his name became beloved among



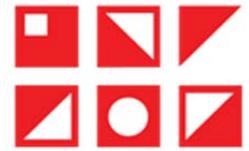
both youth and adults, who eagerly engaged with his messages. Through his musical compositions, he transmitted implicit messages that contributed to a growing consciousness within the Algerian individual's psyche. This awareness, nourished by the culture of listening to the era's singers, led to the adoption of these cultural lyrics as a form of counter-political discourse. The vocabulary embedded in these songs contained a spectrum of messages that inspired individuals to rise anew against any political, socio-cultural, or economic conditions that conflicted with their aspirations.

Despite numerous attempts to suppress the influence of song in its various forms, Algerian youth have persistently continued their creative expression. Following the remarkable international success of Rai music championed by artists such as Cheb Khaled and Cheb Mami, whose work propelled the genre onto the global stage Rai was officially recognized in 2021 by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage. Consequently, some artists chose to explore other genres that had emerged and matured in the West, such as rap music. This genre, which originated in 1975–1976 during celebrations held in predominantly Black neighborhoods and streets, evolved into a serious and sophisticated art form by 1985 (Beshah, 2013, p. 135). Rap resonated deeply with Algerian youth, inspiring artists like Wahab and Lotfi Double Canon, who produced numerous songs addressing a wide range of political, social, economic, and cultural issues. These artists succeeded in transforming rap into a socially engaged musical medium and an indirect form of protest embraced by Algerian youth.

2.3 The February 22, 2019 Movement:

Amid these ongoing developments, it is important to note that street youth continued to generate their own culture throughout the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Protests persisted despite the state's policy of civil concord and national reconciliation. Various internal factors including exclusion, marginalization, irresponsible governance, unemployment, and housing challenges combined with external influences such as the Arab Spring revolutions, exerted significant pressure on Algerian society. This confluence of factors contributed to a dramatic increase in violence, a trend confirmed by official statistics. In 2016, for example, 47% of homicides were the result of verbal altercations escalating into physical confrontations and ultimately criminal acts, indicating a heightened level of aggression and emotional reactivity among Algerians during crises (Bekis, 2020, p. 43).

To secure their place within society, young people must avoid remaining marginalized or relegated to the realm of social invisibility. Consequently, they have chosen intangible culture particularly its oral dimension as a means to respond to provocative discourse through cultural expression, sometimes employing vernacular language. This choice is significant because the language of a people encapsulates their vocabulary, which, as Foucault asserts, serves as a sacred



text faithfully preserving the collective knowledge of that population. By comparing the vocabulary of a nation across different eras, one can gauge its level of progress (Foucault, 1990, p. 92). Thus, the language of those belonging to marginalized groups has successfully fulfilled its intended objectives, recognizing that the issue lies less in the language itself than in the mechanisms of transmitting that language across different contexts to convey the message effectively and in how the audience responds to it.

3. Discussion of Results:

A study of protest-themed songs demonstrates how youth members of society operate within cultural environments which shape their daily personal experiences. Society exists as a complex pattern of cultural aspects which form a social structure based on family units and street life and institutional systems and traditions which people learn from their upbringing. These factors play a decisive role in shaping personality. The environment contains a dual nature which produces both multiple restrictions and difficulties and numerous openings for achievement and greatness. Only the youth have the ability to make wise decisions which will help them establish their position within the environment (Djabir & Gassiri, p. 13).

The earliest documented protest song in Europe dates to around 1318 when *The Cutty Wren* (“The Little Birds”) first appeared according to Michelle Paterson's research. The song appeared at the time of the English peasants' uprisings because public opinion studies show the protesters targeted King Richard II. The song contains complex symbolism because the monarchy considered any direct criticism as treason during this period so the lyrics functioned as a plea for royal mercy to prevent execution of the protesters.

The natural development of protest discourse through song emerges from communities which use it to unite members against oppression and injustice. The strong social bonds within neighborhoods help popular districts develop multiple generations of songwriters who create music about their homeland as well as expressions of affection and social and psychological states and daily Algerian life. The folk song tradition has stood as an enduring companion for all marginalized communities.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music (1996) explains that protest songs first rose to prominence in the United States during the 1960s while addressing social and political injustices along with international events and producing intense emotional responses (Paterson, 2015, p. 23). The youth of Algeria together with other youth from throughout the Arab world and worldwide have experienced the effects of worldwide cultural and economic globalization. The expression of protest songs takes different forms throughout historical periods connected to youth cultural development starting with the 1950s rock music emergence that sparked young people's interest in dance and music (Dableh & Abbasi, 2015, p. 128). The Algerian youth population has embraced



foreign musical genres which includes rap that has become an influential element of Algerian popular culture. The term "Hip" in hip-hop music refers to the vernacular language used by African American communities in poor neighborhoods while the "Hop" denotes the dance elements of the music. The genre spread from its birthplace to Europe and then to the Maghreb region specifically Algeria through immigrant communities who also brought Raï music to the area. The social and political themes that Raï music explores are very similar to those found in rap music (Beshah, 2013, pp. 134-144).

Although Bertolt Brecht composed numerous politically charged songs in collaboration with Hanns Eisler such as the song "Solidarity," which was directly connected to class struggles in Wilhelmine Germany (Beshah, 2013, p. 234) Algerian youth have likewise demonstrated creative innovation in this field through various genres, notably rap.

- It is noteworthy that the term "artist" only emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, originally referring to painters and sculptors who had previously been designated as craftsmen. Over time, the scope of this term expanded: by the early nineteenth century, it came to include musicians and theatrical performers, and by the twentieth century, film actors as well (Heinich, 2011, p. 152).
- The genre of rap music appeared in the working-class neighborhoods adjacent to the capital and other major cities. As a form of political and social expression, rap was initially embraced by the state, which organized festivals for these groups as a means of monitoring and ultimately neutralizing their content (Heinich, 2011, p. 135).
- The government used to forbid all negative evaluations of its administration because it censored and suppressed artistic works which contained political messages. According to Michelle Paterson the artist Maria Alyokhina from Russian group Pussy Riot performed songs that criticized Putin's policies. Alyokhina faced incarceration as well as multiple arrests throughout her activism efforts. The degree of authoritarian control in each regime determines the extent of governmental repression which follows a similar pattern in Tibet as well as Brazil and Chile (Paterson, 2015, p. 23).
- These musical compositions delivered an in-depth analysis of youth oppression which targeted conservative religious groups in particular. Youth represents a stage of revolution through which they experience physical and psychological and social rebellion (Al-Suwaïdi, p. 50). The path of imported culture attracted numerous Algerian youth who became influenced by it thus leading them to adopt its values. The music scene witnessed a surge of performers after Double Canon who included Shakir and Karim El Kanq alongside Azou and Diden Clash and Ubi and Flan and Phobia and Zad Ka and Abdo Salam who all sang in Modern Standard Arabic. The cultural impact reached women too because Raja



Mezian joined the youth movement as an artist who defended Algerian traditions alongside her commitment to the homeland.

Algerian youth culture defines itself through two essential processes known as acculturation and interculturalization which create fundamental elements for youth identity development. The cultural development of youth falls into three primary categories which include traditional culture alongside local culture and global culture in the context of fast social transformation (Dableh & Abbasi, 2015, p. 130). Modern Algerian culture stands as a natural continuation of the societal and cultural transformations which have taken place in the Algerian community since ancient times. The Algerian cultural system has evolved through multiple historical stages and major historical events through multiple cultural elements and influences which combined to establish the Algerian cultural framework.

According to this system Algerian youth culture shows a developing pattern which spreads individualistic values throughout society. The values focus on personal autonomy which requires individuals to make decisions about their bodies and appearances and their social connections and life choices thereby freeing themselves from family authority and traditional norms (Dableh & Abbasi, 2015, p. 130). Young women experience the greatest freedom from authoritarian control. The hip-hop genre draws youth through its ability to let them explore their literary selves better than any other genre (DARD, 2008, p. 22) which has led Algerian women to adopt the cultural characteristics of this music while expressing their intricate personal identities. Since the beginning of time women have stood beside men to support them in revolutionary movements and every social transformation as important and powerful social actors.

- Songs which use the vernacular dialect known as "darija" to portray Algerian 1990s life create a more dramatic and evocative musical atmosphere. The emotional power and cultural connection of this dialect stems from its roots among Algerian people and society. The French philosopher Michel Foucault describes discourse as a societal product which undergoes processes of negation and monitoring and regulation and redistribution that serve to limit its power and control its possible manifestations and hide its substantial material presence (Paterson, 2015, p. 40).
- The cultural practice of protest songs emerges from youth creation and undergoes transformation alongside social developments thus causing variations in today's generational discourse. These discourses operate as distribution platforms which enable repetition and dissemination thus serving as strategic deployment zones for shaping written and visual and spoken communication. The analysis avoids uncovering concealed meanings through interpretation while it also avoids exposing concealed values through repression analysis and it does not attempt to overcome all-encompassing silence. These



songs exist as discourses that convey implicit messages through a unique and organized sequence of events (Al-Aziz, 1994, p. 20).

- Criticism also extends to formal aspects, including the analysis of expressions contained in the majority of songs, that is, patterns of discourse alongside the expressive value of each. This entails the analysis of metaphors and the various relationships that words establish with their representational content whether by naming a part or the whole, the essential or the incidental, the event or the circumstance, the object itself or its analogues (Foucault, 1990, p. 87).

Throughout social progress the phrase "li haytist" maintains regular usage in daily life although its intricate meanings remain misunderstood. The term represents multiple layers of exclusion together with marginalization and mainly un employment. The term appeared first in the 1980s to refer to young people in capital city neighborhoods who spent their days leaning against walls without performing any work. The worsening socio-economic situation at that time produced this situation through the decline of oil prices which triggered a national crisis.

The discussion about "li haytist" who mainly consist of proletarian members requires referencing Bertolt Brecht's contributions to protest songs. Lenin described the "proletarian song that comes from the heart to denounce wage slavery" in 1913. These songs arrived during a historically perfect time because their words were turned into demonstration slogans. According to Michel Foucault "time functions as language analysis' internal structure instead of being its originating place" (Foucault, 1990, p. 93).

According to Foucault words function as indicators of speaker's ideas which mirrors Locke's statement that people cannot directly use words to represent anything except ideas from their own minds (Foucault, 1990, p. 88). The development of political and cultural awareness among youth found significant support through protest songs. The cultural phenomenon endures as an inherited tradition which passes down from one generation to the next despite the social changes that take place during different stages of Algerian society.

4. Conclusion:

At the conclusion of this article entitled "Protest Songs and the Reconfiguration of Youth Identity in Algeria" several key findings can be drawn:

- Social environments that youth faced after independence have strongly shaped the path of following generations. A defeatist attitude along with diminished prospects for a dignified existence became standard for every generation. The cultural youth revolution developed because of these factors while the song functioned as a communication bridge between youth and ruling authorities. The basic structure of songs makes them easy to remember



which enables fast distribution and connects with people from all social backgrounds so youth use this medium to protest against officials' oppressive actions. Protests emerged as recurring phenomena because of the unstable socio-cultural environment.

- Various social groups that face the most severe impact from current national challenges have uncertain future prospects. The official cultural discourse has become a platform for the most genuine youth expressions to emerge. The resurgence of Kabyle music through Aït Menguellet and Idir along with the Rai movement led by Khaled and Mami demonstrates how these artists use Arabic and vernacular dialects to express youth struggles. The common language used in neighborhoods and streets and cafés consistently discusses social matters which affect all populations but mainly youth regarding employment and migration and marriage. The youth have transformed their concerns into thematic content and lyrical texts which convey messages toward authority figures.
- The song has been a support system for many youth groups while its main influence remains within specific locations rather than spreading worldwide. The demonstrators who were unhappy with their harsh conditions selected a different method of communication by using a unique cultural language which remains simple and memorable. The musical rhythms create an impact on listeners through multiple psychological pathways. Through musical instruments people create social and cultural meanings. Music functions as a universal human experience which produces sensory effects that connect directly to mental processes and cultural social behaviors in different communities.



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