



Masquerades

(Mascarades)

Masquerades, 2008, Algeria

*Arabic, with subtitles in English,
92 minutes*

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**Promoting Cross-Cultural
Understanding through Cinema**

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ONE PAGE SUMMARY: *Before Screening*

Masquerades (Algeria, 2008)
 Directed by Lyes Salem
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SYNOPSIS

After working for much of his life as a gardener in his dusty Algerian village, Mounir dreams of improving his family's fortune and gaining a measure of respect by marrying off his narcoleptic sister, Rym, to a "real gentleman." However, Rym has other plans—she dreams of marrying Mounir's best friend, Khliffa, who has secretly courted her for years.

When Mounir lashes out at village gossip with a fib that he has promised Rym to a wealthy outsider, she comes out of her sleepy stupor to embrace the rumor and press her real betrothed into action. Beautifully brought to life by a memorable cast—including director Lyes Salem as the cocky but compassionate bumbler Mounir—this heartfelt comedy suggests that when dreams become reality, it's time to wake up.

CHARACTERS/CAST

<i>Mounir</i> (Lyes Salem)	Habiba's husband, and Rym's big-hearted but thickheaded brother
<i>Rym</i> (Sarah Reguieg)	Mounir's narcoleptic younger sister and Khliffa's secret girlfriend
<i>Khliffa</i> (Mohamed Bouchaïb)	Mounir's best friend, secretly in love with Mounir's sister
<i>Habiba</i> (Rym Takoucht)	Mounir's wife and mother to their young son Amine
<i>Amine</i> (Merouane Zmirli)	Son to Mounir and Habiba
<i>Rédouane Lamouchi</i> (Mourad Khan)	Mounir's hotshot neighbor, a shady businessman and con artist

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the film use repetition, or near-repetition, in the story to advance its themes?
2. In what ways does music function in the film, both in the soundtrack and in the story itself?
3. What can you tell about the role of religion in daily life from the narrative? How does it enter into the relations between men and women, for example? In what other social contexts does it play a part?
4. On what kinds of things is authority based in the village, and are these forms of authority always complementary or are they at odds with one another?
5. When do we hear French in the film? How does the use of French relate to specific social contexts?

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR: *Lyes Salem***BIOGRAPHY**

Lyes Salem was born in Algiers, Algeria in 1973. After studying at the National Conservatory for Superior Dramatic Arts, he performed Shakespeare in some of Algeria's most respected theaters. His second short film, *Cousines*, received France's César award for Best Short Film in 2005. As an actor, he has appeared in a number of films, including *Alex*, *Banlieue 13* and *L'Ecole de la Chair*. *Masquerades* is his first feature film.

FILM AESTHETICS

Film is unique as an art form in its synthesis of visual arts, writing, drama, movement, and sound. The following notes about film aesthetics and technique suggest some things to watch and listen for in viewing *Masquerades*.

Composition of the Image

Distance from the subject, the frame in which the subject appears (alone or in a crowded room, for instance), and the angle at which a subject is viewed—these are all examples of compositional choices by a filmmaker that affect how a viewer interprets a scene. For example, close-ups may be used for dramatic emphasis and to create a feeling of intimacy; wide shots from a distance may emphasize character in relation to setting and/or allow only a detached, impersonal view of the character. A high angle looking down may make a character seem powerless or victimized, while a low angle looking up may make a character seem powerful or menacing.

In the scene where Mounir, dressed in an elegant suit, accompanies new best friends Rédouane and Hamza on a trip out of town to scam a pair of gullible shepherds out of their money, our sympathies are drawn to the innocent shepherds immediately, in part by use of a tight close-up that fills the screen entirely with the sincere and modest face of one of the two men. We also get a reverse-shot of Rédouane in close-up, but by contrast, Rédouane wears a phony, ingratiating expression. Despite his proximity, he's at a further distance from our sympathies, as it were, as if ripe for more critical inspection and evaluation by the audience.

Music and Sound

Music in a film's soundtrack can be used to comment on or enhance a setting or action. Music often underscores, literally, the emotional significance of a scene, or merely sets a mood or establishes a particular atmosphere (cheerful, somber, dangerous, etc.). In film, music and image are always in a kind of dialogue with one another.

Natural sounds can add a dimension of reality or unreality to a scene. Off-screen sounds, such as traffic noise or gunshots, can contribute subtly or overtly to the narrative elements at work within the frame.

*Music figures not only in the soundtrack to *Masquerades*, but in several scenes where characters break joyfully into song. Habiba, for example, serenades her smiling family as they drive home from the city having accomplished the goal of pretending to meet and reject Rym's fictional fiancé. In another car scene, Rym puts on the stereo and sings teasingly along with a seductive song; here Mounir's helpless discomfort is palpable as is the semi-secret flirtation going on between Rym and Khliffa right under Mounir's nose (who seems to silently draw the line with his eyes after the swaying Rym half brushes against Khliffa). Additionally, that both bursts of song from women occur in the privacy of their car may be significant as well, suggesting the relative freedom it affords women to sing in public (traditionally considered immodest).*

Dialogue

The words expressed by the characters in a film can be spoken out loud in conversation, by a character speaking to himself or herself alone, or in an internal speech or words delivered in voiceover in the soundtrack. Dialogue often communicates to the audience much more than the information or ideas expressed in the words themselves. Dialogue serves several functions in a story:

- It can help set the scene by explaining events leading up to it, or by describing something about the characters and their relationships with each other (this kind of dialogue, “exposing” the basis or background of a scene, is called exposition).
- It can serve to develop the relationships between characters.
- It can bring out or highlight *indirectly* some of the larger themes in the film as a whole.

Early in the story, Mounir returns home to find his son, Amine, and [Amine’s] friends torturing a beetle. He admonishes the boy: “How would you like to be treated that way?” We have just seen Mounir walk through town receiving very little courtesy or respect, but his words to his son convey his own innate decency. But later, after Mounir’s ego has ballooned with newfound respect from his peers (thanks to the general perception he is marrying his sister to a wealthy foreigner), he encounters his son again. This time the boy is bruised from fighting to free a toad his friends were torturing and Mounir’s words seem to contradict his previous belief: “It’s just a toad, what do you care?” Mounir goes on to champion the powerful at the expense of the weak, in words that underscore the change that’s come over him, and the social hypocrisy lampooned by the dialogue: “That’s democracy, right? You rally around the strongest! You join the others or you die.”

Narrative Structure

The narrative structure in a film establishes the major themes in the story, answering the question, “What is this story about?” The structure may be linear, running in a straight line chronologically from beginning to end; it may be episodic, made up of a series of connected but also distinct sections; or it may even be circular, finally leaving us once more at the beginning of the story but with perhaps a new perspective on it. The narrative often employs visual and other metaphors to underscore the meaning or significance of its story. Although a narrative usually centers on some problem or conflict inherent in the story, there is not necessarily a sense of resolution at the end of a film. In fact, the lack of any resolution often spurs the viewer to further consideration of the themes developed in the course of the narrative long after the film has ended.

The film’s opening scene takes place in the center of the village with a flurry of preparation for the arrival of a wedding cortege; a line of shiny black SUVs that rush in at high speed, circling in the main intersection and kicking up a cloud of dust. But just before the cars arrive, three old men simultaneously place handkerchiefs over their mouths, suggesting they’ve been through this many times before. As the cars leave, the three men are left covered in dust. In comparison, as the film ends, another marriage cortege goes rapidly in circles in the village center. But instead of shiny SUVs, now Khliffa’s beat-up car is at the front, and Mounir is madly chasing it. The chaos joins a recurring event with an extraordinary circumstance, and the final shot—the three old men again covered in dust—acts as a comical punctuation for a strictly linear narrative that nonetheless—by returning to the same starting spot—resonates with key themes: the timelessness of love, the complexities of marriage, and the elastic nature of tradition in accommodating both.

NARRATIVE THEMES IN THE FILM *MASQUERADES*

Watch for scenes or events that correspond to a particular theme, making mental or written notes as to how the theme unfolds in the film. Note whether the film developed the theme as expected, and if not, what happened instead. Questions for each theme are designed to encourage discussion.

Marriage and Status

1. Why do you think Mounir objects so strongly to the idea of his best friend Khliffa marrying his sister?
2. After Rym announces her engagement to bogus fiancé Vancooten, many in town take it upon themselves to elaborate the details of the family's future in-law: The hairdresser speaks of his huge entourage, Hamza repeats what Vancooten supposedly said, and Mounir even overhears two strangers on the bus talking of the marriage as if it were an intimate concern of their own. Why do these people eagerly take on the story? What's in it for them? What does this suggest about the nature of life in the village?
3. Mounir's personality undergoes a dramatic change as a result of his perceived association with Vancooten. In the process, what is the film saying about the nature of power and influence? Are there competing forms of status at work in the story? If so, how would you describe and contrast them?
4. Mounir's new employer and the one truly "big man" in town is someone we never see but only hear about: the Colonel. How would you describe the Colonel's role in the village and in the story at large? Can you think of any reason, given the story's themes, why he would never be seen or shown?

Between Country and City

5. Mounir, desperate to impress his immediate male social circle, describes his new job at the Colonel's estate as "horticultural engineer." In general, what does the employment scene offer men like Mounir and his fellow villagers, as far as you can tell?
6. Near the end of the film, Rédouane leads a mob to hunt down Khliffa, who he thinks is about to ruin the arranged marriage to Vancooten. What makes the crowd finally turn on him in disgust?
7. Rédouane pulls Mounir into a scheme to cheat some innocent, landless shepherds out of a large sum of money by pretending Mounir is a sophisticated and influential urbanite with connections to the government minister. Heading home, the three con artists laugh at the gullibility of their prey. Their ruthlessness in this case is ignoble, but does it also reflect more general attitudes? How would you compare the social dynamics between city and village with that between village and countryside in the story?

Men and Women

8. As they lie in bed, Habiba tries talking sense into Mounir, who has succumbed to the “Vancooten marriage” mirage sparked by Rym. Admonishing her to leave the problem to him, he says, “Take care of your cleaning, I’ll deal with the jackals outside.” How would you describe the larger social context of this petulant remark? What assumptions lie behind it, and what does the film seem to say about them?
9. As the fake wedding with Vancooten approaches, Rym blames herself for the unfolding trouble and regrets not listening to Khliffa’s urging to be cautious. “Men are always right,” she says to her female companions. To this El Hadja, the village matriarch, replies, “Don’t you start saying asinine things too.” Can you think of other scenes in which the purported superiority or authority of men is challenged or undercut? How would you describe the film’s take on patriarchy and the overall balance between male and female social spheres?
10. As their courtyard fills with chairs for a wedding with a made-up fiancé, Mounir assures Habiba he’ll come clean and tell everyone the truth, he’s just waiting for “the right moment.” “That’s it,” he repeats, “the right moment.” The excuse, comically inept, echoes another we’ve heard: Khliffa telling Rym after four years of courtship he needs to find the right moment to speak with Mounir. Does this point to something in common between Mounir and Khliffa, with respect to the women in their lives?
11. At one point, Khliffa resists Rym’s suggestion that they just elope, saying, “You live in your dreams, where everything is simple. Where I live, it’s another story.” What does he mean by this? What does the film ultimately suggest about the relationship between Rym’s approach to life and Khliffa’s?
12. Throughout the Vancooten hullabaloo, there is one villager outside Mounir’s immediate circle who seems to know all along what’s really going on. Who is it, and to what do you attribute such insight?

Love and Marriage

13. Rym asks the Mufti to stage a “practice” marriage between herself and her “cousin” Khliffa, while El Hadja goes to fetch a camera to document the event. This staged marriage is actually the story’s real marriage, of course. Why do you think the people involved use the pretense of a “practice” marriage?
14. After Rym runs off with Khliffa, a distraught Mounir retreats to a mountaintop ruin, where Habiba instinctually knows to find him. What do we find out there about Mounir and Habiba’s own marriage? How does this change the nature of the threat Mounir feels in the face of his sister’s elopement?
15. Habiba tells Rym the story of her own honeymoon plans: After promising to take her traveling, bridegroom Mounir is taken aside by his father and father-in-law. Habiba has stayed put in the village ever since. What do you think transpired between the three men? What does it say about the reconciling of love and tradition?

Religion's Role in Society

16. Amine repeats to his mother what his father once told him about Rym's narcolepsy: that if eating pork could cure Rym, his father would eat pork. What is the significance of this gesture on Mounir's part and what does it tell you about him?
17. The friendly gentleman who marries Rym and Khliffa is addressed as Mufti. Without necessarily knowing the precise definition of "mufti," what can you gather about his particular role in society? How would you define "mufti" based on this character? (Afterward, see References from the Film for a definition.)
18. In swindling the shepherders, Rédouane invokes the saying of the Prophet and other pious phrases. What does it tell you about his character and what does it say about the place of religion in daily life?
19. As Habiba and Rym join Mounir and Khliffa in the car, Mounir asks his wife where her headscarf is. She brushes aside his concern saying she lost it, while Rym chimes in that hers is with Habiba's. What's the issue here on each side? What does the scene suggest about the nature of the rules governing social behavior and relations between the sexes?

PROFILE OF ALGERIA



FULL NAME: People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

SIZE: 2,381,741 sq km (919,595 sq miles)

POPULATION: 34,994,937 (July 2011 est.)

CAPITAL: Algiers

GOVERNMENT: Republic

RELIGION: Sunni Muslim (state religion) 99%, Christian and Jewish 1%.

ETHNIC GROUPS: Arab-Berber 99%, European less than 1%.

LANGUAGES: Arabic (official), Berber (national language), French

LITERACY: 69.9% (of population 15 and over); male 79.6%; female 60.1% (2002 est.)

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 9.9% (2010 est.)

GEOGRAPHY & CLIMATE: Algeria, situated on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa between Morocco and Tunisia, is an arid to semi-arid land comprised mostly of high plateau and desert with some mountains and a narrow, discontinuous coastal plain. Its mountainous areas are subject to severe earthquakes and mudslides. Winters along the coast are mild and wet; the summers hot and dry. The winters grow drier and colder on the high plateau. During the summer, a hot, dust and sand-laden wind called sirocco is especially common.

CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: Air pollution (greenhouse gases, sulfur dioxide particulates) from reliance on coal produces acid rain. Algeria also suffers water shortages, particularly in the north; water pollution from untreated wastes; deforestation; and an estimated loss of one-fifth of agricultural land since 1949 to soil erosion, economic development and desertification. A trade in endangered species also exists. (CIA World Factbook)

BACKGROUND:

Algeria is more than three times the size of Texas and the second-largest country in Africa after Sudan. The Sahara Desert covers more than four-fifths of the land. Most of the population lives along the northern coast. Historically, the country has been at a major gateway along the trans-Saharan trade routes between Africa and Europe.

Modern Algeria gained independence from France in 1962 after a brutal struggle that began in 1954, a conflict in which more than a million Algerians died. In 1992, a challenge to the ruling party by Islamic political groups led to a suspension of elections, triggering a violent internal conflict and another tumultuous period from which the country has only recently emerged.

By independence in 1962, France had ruled Algeria as a colony for over a century, and the French influence on Algerian society remains strong. Although Standard Arabic is the official language, for example, French remains the language of bureaucracy and social climbing.

Algeria is overwhelmingly a Muslim country; more particularly, Algerians identify with the dominant Sunni branch of Islam. Islamic influence stretches back to the seventh century with the beginning of the Arab conquest of North Africa, and in general the influence of Islam across Africa has been great, pre-dating European influence by centuries.

The overwhelming majority of Algerians are not Arabs but descended from the Berber tribes that have occupied the western region of North Africa (an area known as the Maghreb or, alternately, Maghrib) for probably more than four thousand years. Still a sizeable population in contemporary Morocco and Algeria, the Berbers long ago adopted Islam as well as the larger Arabic culture—even while blending it with their own indigenous traditions—so that today only a minority of Algerians (about 30%) specifically identify as Berber. Of those, most live in the mountainous Kabylie region east of the capital, Algiers. While the Algerian state has resisted the sometimes-violent bids for Berber autonomy over the years, Berber culture—including specifically the Berber language—is enjoying some newfound prestige by now being taught in schools.

Prehistory, the Maghrib in the Neolithic Age Between 8000 and 4000 B.C., the region known as the Maghrib (western North Africa generally, including contemporary Algeria) was not the desert that it is today. Instead, it was more temperate and teeming with life: a vast savanna filled with now long-vanished herds of buffalo, elephants, and other large mammals. Here, in places like Tassili-n'Ajjer, north of Tamanrasset (in southern Algeria), tribes of hunting peoples left behind vivid cave paintings that suggest the everyday life they led, offering a rare and vital record of a prehistoric African culture. Neolithic civilization, of the kind depicted in the cave paintings, and which arises historically with the development of subsistence agriculture and domestication of animals, sustained itself in the Maghrib until roughly 2000 B.C., when the classical period begins. Remains dating as far back as 200,000 B.C., however, have been found in places like Ain el Hanech, near Saïda, pointing to much earlier occupation of the region by hominids. Neanderthal communities left behind tools, such as hand axes, which date to roughly 43,000 B.C. and a pattern of highly developed tools and blades spread throughout the coastal part of the Maghrib between 15,000 and 10,000 B.C.

Berber Civilization of North Africa The various peoples of prehistoric North Africa eventually came to share a specific set of cultural and linguistic attributes, forming a distinct population known as Berbers. Lacking a written language, their story has been marginalized in historical accounts by the Romans, Greeks, Byzantines and Arab chroniclers, who generally disparaged North Africa's native population as backward or ignorant nomads, though the Berbers in fact play a prominent part in the region's historical development. Since the 5th century B.C., the Berbers have met successive waves of invaders: Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, and, finally, the French. The Arab invasions of the 8th to the 11th centuries left the greatest cultural impact on the native population, in the form of Islam and the Arabic language, although remnants of the French occupation—including the French language and European-style socialist ideals—persist as well.

The Arab Conquest of North Africa The first Arab expeditions into the Maghrib, or western North Africa, began in 642 and were based from Egypt. These initial Arab forays into *Ifriqiya* (the Arabic word for Africa) were separately initiated rather than centrally planned under the Islamic caliphate (based in Medina), and mark the introduction of Islam into the region. In 670, a major and centrally orchestrated military campaign followed, this time emanating from Damascus (where the caliphate had relocated) and leading to the founding of the base town Al Qayrawan, south of modern-day Tunis. The settling of North Africa helped to secure strategic control of the Mediterranean for the Muslim dynasty of the Umayyads. As the Arabs pushed westward into modern-day Algeria, they established an alliance with the Christian Berbers in the area, headed by Kusayla (who eventually converted to Islam), and by 711 Arab forces along with Berber converts to Islam had taken control of all of North Africa. Berber Muslims eventually revolted (in 739–40) against their Arab brethren, however, in the face of heavy taxation and discriminatory practices by the Arab elite. Adopting a dissenting brand of the faith called *Kharijite Islam*, whose egalitarian principals appealed to a group treated as second-class Muslims, the Berbers founded several mostly short-lived theocratic tribal kingdoms in the region. A new Arab regime, meanwhile, under the Abbasid dynasty based in Baghdad, established a largely autonomous and culturally flourishing court in Al Qayrawan that lasted until 909. To the west, another Arab colony under Abd ar-Rahman ibn Rustam ruled a wide area of central Maghrib from Tahert, near contemporary Algiers. The Rustamid imamate (run by imams elected by leading citizens) grew a reputation for fairness and justice as well as support of science, theology and law. It too lasted until the early 10th century, when the Fatimids came to power throughout the larger region. A succession of Arab kingdoms followed, including the Almoravids, Almohads, Zayanids, and Marabouts.

Spain in North Africa Christian Spain had a decided influence on the development of Algeria and North Africa after 1492. The expulsion in the same year of Spain's Jewish population, for instance, led to the influence of government and commerce in the Maghrib, where many Spanish Jews fled. During the 15th and early 16th centuries, Christian Spain established presidios (fortified outposts) along the North African coast, took over several towns west of Algiers, and commenced extracting tributes. Other European powers, including England, Portugal, the Netherlands, France and Italy, all competed and shared in the domination of Mediterranean trade from the 16th to the 18th century.

The umbrella of the Ottoman Empire and the pirate Barbarossa Beginning in the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire took control of North Africa. The catalyst for this was Khayr ad-Dīn, also known as Barbarossa (“red beard”), a Turkish pirate and later admiral of the Ottoman fleet, who with his brother ‘Arūj conducted raids on Spanish and Portuguese ships prone to attacking North Africa between 1505 and 1511. The brothers were establishing their own North African domain with the help of Turks and Spanish Muslims. After the Spanish killed his brother, Khayr negotiated support from the Ottoman sultan and with the help of Ottoman forces captured Algiers, which became a stronghold of Mediterranean piracy for more than two centuries. (A then-young United States even negotiated a “tribute” to the Barbary states in 1784 to stave off with money any attacks on its merchant ships in local waters, an effort that ultimately failed and led to the building of U.S. warships and North African battles instead.) Barbarossa soon expanded the Ottoman hold on North Africa, conquering Tunisia and turning Tunis into another major base of Mediterranean piracy. The pirates of the Barbary Coast were a diverse group, with bases of operation in various North African ports, including Algiers, Tunis, Sale, and Tripoli. With the arrival of the Ottomans in Algeria, the Spanish lost the coastal foothold they had occupied for several centuries.

French colonization from 1830 and the shaping of Algerian life The longstanding piracy against European ships emanating from the coast of North Africa, and Algeria in particular, eventually led France to undertake a military expedition along the Algerian coast in 1830, the year that begins the French colonial venture in North Africa. Algeria’s modern borders were drawn under the French occupation. Most of the French colonists were farmers or businessmen. In the latter 19th century, these settlers built hundreds of villages in the rural countryside that were laid out after traditional French patterns and often became centers of the otherwise scattered rural population. The countryside was divided into government “departments” with representatives in France’s National Assembly. Although France controlled the entire country, the rural Muslim population remained essentially outside the economic infrastructure of Europe. Cities grew extensively under French rule, and coastal port towns grew too with the development of industry. During the war of independence (1954–62), many villages were destroyed and many thousands of people displaced by the conflict ended up in resettlement centers, most of which became villages in their own right after the war. The war also drove many of the native rural population into the towns, rapidly expanding and transforming them from mainly European enclaves into heavily crowded cities with mixed populations.

The war for independence from France In 1954, an armed political struggle for independence from France erupted, led by the National Liberation Front, or FLN (after the French title, Front de Libération Nationale), which formed in the early 1950s to bring pressure on the colonial regime. The ensuing conflict was one of the most violent of many violent wars for independence in the post–World War II era, taking an estimated one million Algerian lives. The vast majority of the Algerian population supported the FLN, while on the other side were the French military, French settlers (known as *pieds noirs*), and their Arab supporters (called *harkis*). The FLN recognized that in an exclusively military sense they were outmatched, and therefore resorted to a variety of tactics designed to bring internal (French public) and external (international) pressure on France, isolating it in world opinion. After the French, under Charles de Gaulle, finally conceded the fight in 1962, an FLN-dominated socialist government formed under Ahmed Ben Bella. (The FLN has dominated Algerian politics ever since, though significant challenges have manifested themselves from Islamist parties in particular.) Houari Boumedienne, the minister of defense, later overthrew Ben Bella and ruled the country until his death in 1978. Chadli Bendjedid, a military figure, replaced him at this time. In 1986, the country’s charter was rewritten to emphasize “pragmatic socialism” as opposed to the orthodox socialist ideals originally adopted by the FLN at independence. In part, the move was a response to the rise of Islamic organizations and influences, particularly among the urban poor.

Post-independence conflict and the roots of Civil War By the late 1980s, the planned economy under Algeria's single-party socialist state was proving increasingly unviable (especially after a global drop in the price of oil, the country's main export), as the country succumbed to high unemployment and shortages of necessities. At the same time, a group of Islamic parties gained influence among some of the more dire segments of Algeria's population. Mass demonstrations took place in October 1988 against President Chadli Bendjedid, in which the Islamist element was prominent. A publicly shocking confrontation between the crowds and the army left several demonstrators dead after the army opened fire, but the president afterward made moves toward reform, introducing a new constitution in 1989, which paved the way for multi-party politics.

Islam and secular society Since independence, the Algerian state has tended to reaffirm the country's Islamic heritage (evidenced, for example, in the partial reliance on Sharia law in the Algerian Family Code, described below). At the same time, specific government policies have spurred secular developments, including greater rights for women, which in turn have led, since the late 1970s, to the development of militant fundamentalist religious groups. Structural policies such as land reform have also helped to spur this resistance, which is motivated by a mix of economic, political and ideological causes.

The rise of the FIS and the Civil War of the 1990s Although the FLN came out with a majority of the vote in the first multi-party elections for municipal and local offices, which took place in June of 1990, the vote revealed strong support for Islamic parties among the urban poor of Algiers and other cities. The largest of these, the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, or FIS), went on to influence Algerian politics dramatically after winning a resounding result in the first round of national elections in December 1991. The outcome of that election led to the cancellation of the electoral process by the army and the government's declaring a state of emergency. The military assumed overt control of the country, headed by army officer Liamine Zéroual—defense minister and eventually president—in collaboration with a group of government bureaucrats and intelligence officials. Thousands of FIS members were arrested and camps were built to house the overflow from the jails. (Bearded men were reportedly afraid to leave home at this time for fear of being arrested as FIS supporters.) The armed wing of FIS—the Islamic Salvation Army—along with the guerrilla organization Islamic Army Group (Groupe Islamique Armée, or GIA), resisted the new regime, leading to a violent political struggle with high civilian casualties (more than 150,000 dead) throughout the 1990s. The military regime maintained control with support from the French government in this period, and an amnesty in 1999 heralded a reduction in the violence.

The end of the Civil War and politics in the new century On assuming office in 1999, President Bouteflika pledged to end the bloodshed that characterized the 1990s and restore national harmony. Accordingly, thousands of Muslim militants were released from custody and an amnesty announced, which was accepted by many militants. In the wake of the amnesty, FIS's Islamic Salvation Army disbanded and violence generally declined. A second amnesty followed as part of the president's "charter for peace and reconciliation" put forward in a 2005 referendum. Nevertheless, random attacks continued into the new century, including a series of bombings against government and Western-interest targets by a group spun from one of the Islamic militias of the 1990s and now calling itself Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghrib. (More under Algeria Today, below.)

ALGERIA TODAY:

A petroleum-based economy Oil and gas reserves were first discovered in Algeria in the 1950s and today, with new finds occurring since then, energy exports are the backbone of the Algerian economy, amounting to an overwhelming portion of the export market. In particular, the country remains a significant supplier of natural gas to Europe. These impressive resource reserves have attracted much interest from foreign oil firms and have been a key economic compensation given the turmoil and destruction of the civil war years. But despite the profits from this sector, Algeria remains mired in poverty, with high levels of unemployment disproportionately affecting the country's youth. Dissatisfaction with the status quo remains widespread, therefore. Further aggravating this popular discontent are government corruption and poor public services. There has been some investment in the agricultural sector (Algeria grows potatoes, citrus fruits, wheat, and cereals, among other crops, mostly in the more fertile north), but the country is not self-sufficient in its food production and highly vulnerable to drought. There is also significant export in minerals. Overall, however, a need to diversify Algeria's petroleum-based economy has been voiced from various quarters.

Politics of reconciliation, and a legacy of political violence in the 21st century The actions of militant extremists are an ongoing problem facing Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a former foreign minister and veteran of the independence struggle against France who assumed the presidency in 1999 (in an election rigged by the military regime), and garnered a landslide "reelection" victory in 2004, in the first truly democratic elections since independence. (According to Algeria's constitution, the executive is directly elected for a five-year term. A bicameral legislature is made up of the 380-seat National People's Assembly (al-Majlis al-Sha'abi al-Watani), with members directly elected for five-year terms, and the 144-member National Council (al-Majlis al-Umma), two-thirds of whose members are elected by communal councils and the rest appointed by the president. In 2008, the Algerian parliament formally removed presidential term limits, paving the way for Bouteflika to run for a third term in 2009.) On assuming office in 1999, Bouteflika pledged to end the bloodshed that characterized the 1990s and restore national harmony. Accordingly, thousands of Muslim militants were released from custody and an amnesty announced, which was accepted by many militants. Violence declined afterward, and a second amnesty followed as part of a "charter for peace and reconciliation" in a 2005 referendum. Bouteflika has been a strong backer of the West's "war on terror," and he is credited at home with an increase in security, though violence has not completely disappeared and attacks by Islamist militants began to increase again in 2006. In April 2007, a series of bombings in Algiers targeted a government facility and police stations, killing 33 people. In July of the same year a suicide bomber killed eight soldiers at a military barracks in the Kabylie region, and a pair of suicide attacks in December 2007 destroyed the UN headquarters and the Constitutional Council in Algiers, killing at least 60 people. Other longstanding issues gripping the country include widespread unemployment, government corruption, a chronic housing shortage, faulty electric and water systems, and the aforementioned petroleum-based economy that has not managed to direct profits toward the various social problems plaguing the country.

Berber nationalism After the 2001 death of a Berber youth in police custody in Algeria's Berber-heavy Kabylie region, activists began a campaign against perceived government oppression against the minority Berbers, some 20% of the population as a whole, staging demonstrations and initiating strikes in Kabylie and beyond, including Algiers. Demands included some degree of regional autonomy and recognition of the Berber language (Amazigh) as a national language. As protests continue, various factions of this Berber movement have engaged in discussion with the central government, which has thus far granted limited concessions, including official recognition of Tamazight, the Berber language.

Women in Muslim societies and in Algerian society There are more than half a billion Muslim women in the world today, with most residing in Muslim-majority countries like Algeria. But despite prevailing Western impressions that tend to homogenize the picture of women and Islam, there is enormous variety within and between countries in the status and circumstances of Muslim women. Current scholarship on women and Islam tends to show religion as subordinate to other factors more determining of the status and conditions of Muslim women—factors such as economics structures, national policies, and local cultural patterns. That said, women in Muslim societies, like many others, face gender-based inequalities arising from traditional patriarchal social orders. General features of such patriarchal systems include male domination and early marriage, restrictive codes of female behavior, and a close association between family honor and female virtue. In Muslim societies, segregation of women and public veiling are also common.

Media and censorship Television and radio stations are state-controlled in Algeria, but a private press thrives alongside it. While Algeria's newspapers (including more than 45 dailies, published in French and Arabic, with a combined circulation of over 1.5 million copies) are generally considered the freest in the region, the government has put significant pressure on the press since amending the provisions on defamation and slander in the Penal Code in 2001. Press harassment increased particularly after the 2004 presidential election, and press self-censorship increased under these conditions. More recently, a presidential pardon in 2006 directed at all journalists convicted of insulting or defaming state institutions led to the dismissal of charges against some 67 people, and this move was seen as a step toward democratic reform.

City and country life Algeria is a predominately desert land, with 91% of the population clustered along the Mediterranean coast, an area comprising only about 12% of the entire country. Migration to the cities is an ongoing process begun especially during the war of independence (see above), and it increases despite efforts by the Algerian government to reduce urban migration. Today, roughly 45% of Algeria's population lives in cities. A second major wave of rural settlement (following that brought about as a result of the 1954–62 war) took place in the 1970s via the government's agrarian reform program, which led to the building of several hundred "socialist villages." In the 1980s, the program was eclipsed in favor of privately funded efforts at rural settlement. The Saharan Desert region, meanwhile, is still home to about one and a half million Bedouin, who lead either fully nomadic or semi-nomadic lives. Pure nomadism has been greatly reduced since the 20th century, however, owing to the combined effects of drought and government policies encouraging settlement.

The Algerian Diaspora Algerians facing unemployment and other impediments to advancement in their native country had the option of emigrating to France during the colonial and postcolonial periods, beginning after World War I, when French war casualties and a postwar industrial boom left a labor shortage Algerians were encouraged to fill. French settlement of the Algerian countryside also pushed displaced native Algerians abroad, if only on a temporary basis. After World War II, another wave of Algerian emigration to France came about with postwar economic growth and liberalized immigration policies. This emigration was slowed by restrictive French immigration policies put in place in the late 20th century. Illegal immigration continues, driven largely by economic pressures at home, amid some recent relaxation of visa rules by France and the European Union. Today a large population of Algerian origin, totaling several million, exists in France and other western European countries.

REFERENCES FROM THE FILM:

Wilaya Mounir, Hamza, and Rédouane are returning in the car from a visit to some landless shepherds. They are elated at their success in swindling the innocent men out of a large sum of money the shepherds believed would buy them influence in the state bureaucracy, where their efforts to obtain the necessary permits to buy needed pastures had been stymied. As they talk excitedly, Rédouane says, “I’d love to be there when they get to the Wilaya.” Generally speaking, a *wilaya* is an administrative division, or a “province,” though the precise definition varies somewhat across the Arabic-speaking world. Algeria is divided up into 48 wilayas, or provinces, enjoying a certain measure of economic and diplomatic autonomy. Each is governed by a political entity called a Popular Provincial Parliament (or an APW, “Assemblée Populaire Wilayale, in French), headed by a “Wali,” or governor, chosen by the country’s president; the wilaya is also headed by an APW president, elected by the APW’s membership, which is itself elected by the larger population. Beyond the wilaya, Algeria is further divided into 553 daïras (circles, or counties) and 1541 baladiyats (communes, or municipalities).

Mufti The kindly elderly gentleman who arrives at El Hadja’s to perform the marriage ceremony joining Rym and Khlifia is addressed as “Mufti.” A *mufti* is a Sunni Islamic scholar. An interpreter and expounder of Islamic law (Sharia), a mufti is generally a well-respected and trustworthy figure of authority to whom people are often wont to turn for advice or a fine point of law or custom.

Marriage and love in Algeria The plot of *Masquerades* evolves from the tension between two views of marriage: Mounir’s view of marriage as a measure of, and means to, social status; and Rym’s view of marriage as the fulfillment of romantic love. This tension exists at large in Algerian society, as in many others. Marriage in Algeria encompasses both views. Although arranged marriages, and marriage as a vehicle of social climbing, is certainly permitted by custom, love and marriage are by no means mutually exclusive propositions in Algeria’s Muslim society. A woman, therefore, can reject a prospective mate even if the family desires the union. According to custom, the respective families must approve the marriage partner, but otherwise men and women can choose whom they will marry. Usually, a man will tell his mother of his interest in a particular woman and the mother will take it upon herself to determine the suitability of the other family. (The legal age to be eligible for marriage in Algeria is 21 for a man and 18 for a woman, although in some cases a judge can allow younger unions.) If the other family is deemed suitable, then the prospective groom’s family approaches the woman’s family to propose a union. If agreeable to all, then a visit to the mosque begins the process of planning the event. The engagement entails a great deal of preparation that, among other things, allows the couple to get to know one another. This is especially important because the couple will be expected to make mutual, consensual decisions in the operation of their household. As for the wedding itself, generally the more money spent on the affair the more the prestige accrued to the family. (The families involved may choose to have two ceremonies, with each responsible for one, or to collaborate on one big ceremony together.) The wedding feast in particular reflects directly on the perceived generosity of the hosts, and the preparation of the feast often begins weeks in advance.

Law and marriage While endowed with religious significance, marriage is also a legal contract in Algeria and conforms to the Algerian Family Code (enacted in 1984), which is based partly on Sharia, or Islamic law, and which specifies the basic requirements and rights of each party in a marriage contract. According to the code, for example, a man may have up to four wives but he must treat them equally. Unequal treatment is grounds for divorce. A man may divorce more freely than a woman—one source of the criticism that has met the Family Code in Algeria—but there are several grounds for a woman’s divorcing her husband, including impotence or failing to provide for her welfare.

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