



Arab Reform Initiative

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# **Black Algerians: Voices from a Community that is Still Too Invisible**

→ Stephen J. King & Salim Khiat.



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Three generations after independence, the Algerian state is still resisting the open public debate and civil society engagement needed to reflect the country's pluralism and to begin to reckon with the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination. Instead of trying to impose a white Arab-Muslim identity on all Algerians, national unity and stability are more likely to be found in recognizing and accommodating diversity. Black Algerians need to be a part of the conversation about identity and belonging in Algeria. All Algerians need to be educated about slavery and anti-black racism in both schools and through consciousness raising by the government and civil society. A campaign to combat the banalization of racist language is urgently needed. Affirmative actions by the state are necessary for more black Algerians to emerge from the shadows of slavery, especially in the Saharan regions of the country.

In light of the 2019-present Hirak protest movement which seeks democratic transformation in Algeria and fairer accommodation of the country's ethnic, racial, and cultural pluralism, I spoke to Salim Khiat, a black Algerian anthropologist who has researched Negrophobia in the Maghreb.

### Who is Salim Khiat?

I am a researcher in anthropology at the CNRPAH (National Centre for Prehistoric, Anthropological and Historical Research) in Algiers. I specialize in the ritual practices and ceremonies of Blacks in Algeria. I also study the representation and stigmatization of Blacks as the “other” in the Algerian imagination. My publications include, “Negrophobia in Algeria: An Autopsy of Words that Say Evil in Color”,<sup>1</sup> and “Blacks in Algeria: Ours and Theirs. Indigenous Blacks and sub-Saharan migrants: Otherness in Circulation.”<sup>2</sup>

### What are the most frequent forms of discrimination black Algerians face in your opinion?

Discrimination in marriage. In one form, it's a sort of “positive” discrimination, in folkloric terms, that black Algerian women face, which still rejects them as equal

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ordinary Algerian citizens:

- Black women have a symbolic status as protector
- Black women serve as intermediaries between families in the marriage proposal process
- In the collective imagination of Algerians, Black women are essential members of the nuptial bath, due to their perceived knowledge and mastery of the sensual body; akin to being with someone with superhuman strength able to face the spirits and invisible inhabitants of the *Hamams* (baths).<sup>3</sup>
- Black women are active participants in the "*Tassdira*": the dress show (traditional and luxury) of the married.
- Black women serve as symbols of confidence with access to kits and jewellery and other valuable items.

More negatively, intermarriage is still frowned upon, unless the white woman has harmed family honour. Black women are never flirted with; they are hissed at and even shunned in the streets, as if they do not exist. The negative treatment of Black women is worse if a day outing is preceded by a televised appearance of Blacks which are often represented in popular imagination as embodying evil. Young black girls most often marry their own. In Kabylia, in Eastern Algeria, white girls accused of engaging in illegal sex (premarital sex is illegal in Algeria) customarily are married to Blacks. In southwest Algeria, the social rule is clear: no mixing. That is to say, a *Hartani* (enslaved or recently freed Islamicized and Arabized Blacks) does not mix with and cannot afford a "Chrifa" a noblewoman and also a white woman in my region.

I can add that it is white men in the South who perpetuate this relationship of domination of white over black. During religious ceremonies or other local festivities (*Ziyara*) Blacks, who are called *Hartani* because of their dark skin and ex-slave status, are responsible for bringing water in a "Ghassel" or mobile hand wash so that the guests of religious mark (*chorfas*, *Tolbas*, etc.) and administrators can wash their hands before starting to eat collectively.

In the North, it is the other way around: that is to say, it is women of my late



mother's age for example (who died at the age of 83) who preserved and maintained these barriers. I remember her, when she met a neighbour, a local man belonging to a family of the old Algiers bourgeoisie, or a family that had a lot of land, because our locality had an agricultural vocation, she was always the first to say hello by adding "Sidi," and to find out about his wife's news she would say "Lalla" or "La" followed by the female first name: Fatouma, Hanifa, etc.

I can add this about anti-Black racism and discrimination in Algeria. Constitutionally, the problem of racism does not exist. The Algerian Constitution states that all individuals are equal in the eyes of the law. So, I wonder, why every time you [black Algerians] are stopped in a gendarmerie or police roadblock you are always asked the question "where are you from"? Even if you present papers on which the Algerian Republic is mentioned.

**I would like to know about your status as a renowned researcher. Has it changed the perception of you as a black Algerian? Do you experience the same racism as any other black Algerian? Do you experience less anti-black racism because of your status?**

To tell the truth, I don't think that there is a change in perception for any black Algerian. On the contrary, anti-Black racism remains intact for everybody, since there may be someone who attacks you with racial insults without knowing who you are, regardless of status.

I would like to share an anecdote. This happened around the time of my presentation at my doctoral defence, in which the members of the jury qualified my approach as subjective. A few days before the defence in November 2017, I was coming home with my two children driving a BMW 520i (old from 1988). There was a person in front of me in a car but driving very slowly, I wanted to pass him with



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all the necessary precautions, including seeing if he had someone coming in the opposite direction. Indeed, there was a car moving in the opposite direction but which was very far, which gave me time to pass without causing any problems for the one I passed, or for the one who came from far away. With my window open, the guy driving the car yells at me "yal'Abd ", meaning the slave. I said to my children that day, "Fortunately, what I do as an analytical job is not science fiction."

This means that people like me and you, with a distinctive trait [black skin], can be treated as the "other" and face racial hostility. It happens especially when the white person feels threatened (as is the case of being overtaken in a car), attacked, and challenged.

In a passive-aggressive form of racism, for Whites Blacks are: friend or neighbour, colleague,.... his black guy, his own Kahlouch (Blackie), his big potato nose, etc.

The racial hostility occurs during conflicts over power, status, and money. For example, in a letter signed by the president of the researchers' union at our centre, I was elected as president of a joint committee. However, behind the scenes, management asserted that a black person does not have the capacity or the qualifications to carry out an administrative function. So, you see, it is when the white man feels in danger [of losing privileges] that he pulls out his verbal "claws" to do harm.

Let me add that when I was younger, I faced racism. From a young age, I was called *Nigro-batata* (Big [black] Nose) in class, which led to daily fights around noon after each exit from school. A class friend would sell tickets to these fights. It is thanks to my father (peace upon his soul) who taught me that a man must stand up for himself in words and acts, that I ended those daily fights the right way.

In daily life, you can be considered a "lucky charm" or holder of "Baraka" and therefore a positive invisible force. On this level, nourished by legends and myths, of course, Blacks benefit from donations: money, sweets, perfume, etc. Still, Blacks are not just Algerian citizens like everybody else. It's the same racism and discrimination that exists among white people against black people, whether they are intellectual or not.



## What about the experiences of sub-Saharan black-Africans in Algeria?

In present-day Algeria, it is above all Blacks from south of the Sahara who are discriminated against and subject to virulent racism in the streets. They are employed in the black market as they are not issued work permits. They do the hardest jobs for the worst wages. In Algiers, there is not a single family carrying out general construction work which has not employed Blacks as labourers carrying sand and gravel, digging foundations and moving tons of soil on their backs. They also build trenches and unblock sewers in populated areas, all at a price ten times lower than that received by Algerians.

## You write about the language of anti-Black racism in Algeria. Can you share that lexicon with our readers?

Black people in Algeria can be categorized negatively by their colour: *k'hal* (black) becomes *kahlouche* (Blackie), *mer' ouba* (charcoal), *guerba kahla* (black gourde for water made from goatskin), *Nigro-Batata* (big black nose that looks like a potato), *haba zeitouna* (black olive). Or, Blacks can be referred to by an ancient servile status: *khadim* (servant), *ouacif* (domestic slave), *'abd* (slave), *haratine* (freed slave), *babay* (Nigger).

## Have black Algerians mobilized in civil society organizations to combat anti-Black racism? If not, why not?

There are no organized efforts to fight anti-black racism in Algeria. No attempts to mobilize to form a front with leadership and militants, an office, etc. for several reasons, among which there are two which seem to me to be fundamentally more determining.



First, the religiosity of most Black Algerian plays a role. In the Arab-Islamic World faith dictates and guides human behaviour. Blacks, among others, are aware that the Prophet Mohammad said, "That there is no difference between Arab and pagan, between white and black other than by faith or piety." These are values guided by God the Almighty. Loaded with meaning, this Hadith, and many Quranic verses, are "egalitarian". Human difference is discerned at the level of the relation to the divine and the choices that individuals make. Among the choices that humans make, there are those who do not hesitate and stop at nothing when it comes to displaying social rank, family status, tribal origin, the distant past of their existence, pride in their race and language, etc. However, the religiosity of most Black Algerian prevents them from seeing socially rooted, but politically unacknowledged discrimination, as an issue and as a motivation to create a social movement against anti-Black racism.

**Are you saying that since everyone is equal in Islam, it is not necessary to organize against the discrimination black Algerians face, or maybe black Algerians do not face discrimination? If they are facing it socio-economically, can you provide more details and examples? Are you saying that the high level of religiosity of black Algerians prevents them from knowing that they are discriminated against?**

Black Algerians know that they are discriminated against. They also know that the practices and conduct of individuals differ from the Quranic Text and other religious literature. It is not Islam that blocks them from organizing into an anti-black movement, but they use Islam to establish justice, since a racial insult is



considered insulting God Himself, as the Creator. I witnessed a scene where a black woman was discriminated against during a Gnawa ritual. She begged God for justice against her aggressor who was a woman who had called her "ugly" and "dirty", while she was in a trance and crying. This means that here, and unlike in the Western world, Blacks believe in divine justice and we give it a wide margin to operate against racism.

In other cases, this margin is reduced to zero. There are men, young blacks who do not let this kind of aggression pass; in the moment, they take forceful action and defend their honour and dignity. But in general, these situations of discrimination are verbal and necessitate a response on the same scale, like, "the slaves of the palaces 'took sexual advantage' of the women of the palace; insinuating that the white aggressor can carry in him or her the features of the Blacks of yesteryear."

On the socio-economic level, there are a few Blacks engaged in the army or occupying administrative positions (elected officials in communes in the South-West) who have made an effort to confront discriminatory attacks and prejudices, but being old, and in the minority, they are no match for the majority.

The second point covers the level of education and socio-economic conditions of the black masses in Algeria. The means and socio-economic conditions of black Algerians are unfavourable for the creation of an anti-black racism civil society organization. Even if there are now university-educated Blacks in Algeria, issues of representation, inclusion, and discrimination will not emerge, because of the "Codes" which govern social life in the North and the South, in particular.

### **What are the “codes” that govern social life in the North and in the South in particular that you mention? Why are they accepted?**

The "codes" which govern social life in the North as well as in the South in terms of the barrier between black and white are: the history and status of marabout families, Zaouias confreres, families of former trade corporations of wealth or



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nobility (jewellers, goldsmiths, in fabrics, pure wool rugs, etc.) in urban areas as in the Sahara, these codes determine the relationship with Blacks. These codes act as barriers and limits that must not be crossed.



## Endnotes

1. Salim Khiat, "De la Negrophobie en Algerie: Autopsie des mots qui dissident le Mal en couleurs" in Stephanie Poussel editor, *Noirs au Maghreb: Enjeux Identitaires* (Paris: Karthala, 2012).
2. Salim Khiat, Les Noirs en Algerie: Les Notres et Les Leurs: Noirs autochtones et immigres subsahariens. L'Alterite en Circulation, *Naqd* 2015/1 (N 32) pp. 207-225.
3. Editor's note: this is part of the Collective Imagination in Algeria.



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## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

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