

A HEIR TO TRADITION AND "FATHER" OF MODERNITY.

Tassadit Yacine, December 1995. Translated by M. Stoffel

We cannot but find strange Cherif Kheddam's life trajectory! Born an aristocrat cut out for handing down the scholarly Koranic tradition, he has become the undisputed master of modern Kabyle song.

Ahead of his time and open to creative trends from all over the world, he is nevertheless deeply rooted in the cultural mould of, the Algerian community, particularly in its Berber trends. Not only has Cherif Kheddam been a poet, but he has also always loved the tunes heard in his village when he was a child, having then no foreboding they would ever come to life again in his adult life and build the very core of his real self. How could he actually imagine, in a world where music was not studied but only taught orally by an initiate, that he would once become a professional musician.

Cherif was born in 1927 at Ait Bou Messaoud in Grand Kabylia. His family had but modest incomes. First he attended a local Koranic school, then a Zawia in Boudjelil (Lesser Kabylia). In 1947 he left Algeria for France where, until the end of Algeria's War of Independence, he earned his living in smelting works and other factories.

It was as an immigrant in France he began to compose and sing. Published at author's expense, his first song *Yellis n tmurt iw* (girl of my native country) was considered as a masterpiece by the public. In spite of difficulties of all sorts he decided to go on, encouraged as he was by such friends as Mrs Sauviat, a record-dealer particularly interested in Oriental songs. Thanks to her he came in touch with Pathé Marconi, well-known for their recording Arab and Maghrebine music. He met also Ahmed Hachlef who was going to play an important part in the artist's career.

His homesickness as well as the difficulties he met with during the War of Independence induced him to retire within himself and devote himself to music. It looks like a paradox that it was then he began to think of becoming a professional musician and singer. Contrary to what had been publicly extolled, at the Cairo Congress of Arab Music held in 1932, by a number of scholars who wanted "Arab" music to be protected from all changes, Cherif was convinced music could but benefit from artistic and cultural cross-breeding and thus come to flourish anew.

A first success as a singer did not put an end to the hard life of a young man who had great difficulties in earning his living and wanted to master artistic creation at the same time. In spite of his musical shortcomings at the outset, he decided, notwithstanding his age, he would learn sol-fa, harmony and more about singing so as to acquire a real musical culture.

Fully aware that a musical heritage fenced in petrified traditions must sooner or later become anaemic, he has always tried to enrich and revive it without defacing its century old specificity. He is to be thanked for opening a field for modernity, yet he has always insisted upon the necessity of meeting strict requirements in the process of creation, an approach he instilled into the mind of the many young singers he has formed. A number of the singers who presently sing modern songs have been taught by him and are proud to be considered his disciples. Some of them are known for singing those *amazigh* songs that fight for certain ideas. They are: the Yugurten ensemble, Imazighen Imoula, Idir, Ait Menguellet, Malika Doumrane, Nouara, Ahcen Abassi...

In his songs, words and music are closely linked. Forgetting about the mournfulness common in songs of yesteryear, he has imagined, and methodically explored, all new poetic and musical ways.

It is easy to detect the revolutionary themes in the more than one hundred songs he is known to have written.

His work is grounded on four main themes closely linked in the poet's mind: love, the native land, social changes and the promoting of Kabyle particularism. One might have expected that since he was born in a traditional family, he would keep to conventional songs with moral and religious connotations. Now it so happens that the poet has ventured beyond the traditional ways, transgressing century old taboos. To him there are no forbidden subjects any longer so, in his repertoire, the love theme takes a leading part.

I'd be so happy if only you were my neighbour
(Mennagh a kem sawgh d ljar)

Love is really the leading theme with alternate moments of elation and dejection as it happens in all love affairs. Such is the case with:

We are both right
(Nesàa lhêq)

There is generally a keen sense of reality in his work but when he is heart-broken or confused we find him dreaming about meeting his beloved one again however impossible it seems:

Hope is what I must live on now
(Anef ad ddregh)

Cherif Kheddami is among those Berber poets who have given love a great place in their repertoire straight out, but not as a conventional theme any longer. He tackles the subject so as to help promote social changes in a society still considering love as a forbidden subject. – True, it is possible sometimes to speak of love without mentioning the word, just giving people a hint of it. – Most young Algerians feel just as the poet does when he describes the attraction exerted on a man by a woman, particularly when, besides her beauty, she has got a bright mind:

She who is spelling words
(Tin ihêdjjan tghera)

The poet is sure there is no happiness except in a beloved woman being near.

Happy is the man who can say you are his
(Amarezg b wikem isàan)

In his work, as well as in his life, Cherif Kheddami has also developed a new approach to social and political problems.

When, taking sides with the young, he asks for more freedom in love relations, it is just another form of his political contention. No sooner had the War of Independence started that, in his own way, he would sing about taking a pride in being an Algerian, with a right to have a free independent home-country.

I need only bear that name
(Djurdjura)

To him “Djurdjura” is both a symbol of revolution and a reality since he was born in that region of Algeria where he also spent his childhood. The Djurdjura mountain range, which has given him his cultural background, is often called “tamurt”, a word which means country but also home-country, two meanings expressed by one and the same word. Cherif deplores his lost memories in the song:

I have forgotten the paths I once followed,
(Anda lulegh)

This song is a hurt emigrant's complaint pining away for lack of family ties. We see a lonely man fretting his heart out and calling upon his friends

Oh my friends, I beg your forgiveness.

(A lâhbab)

To amend forgetfulness, he wants to put his compatriots on their guard against the general carelessness which has been gaining ground in the Algerian community:

Now, snap out of it

(Zwi iman-ik)

Yearning for full freedom of speech, he speaks in favour of Berber culture and tongue, both being denied in official Algeria. Many are the songs in which he denounces the harnpering of the poet's freedom of speech. A poet's voice is the voice of the people. Where there is no "Word" there is only Death.

When you took my "word" from me

(Tekkes d iyi awal)

Of course one of Cherif's major concerns has been the Algerian women's status. He has composed a number of songs urging women to throw off the crushing yoke of obsolete traditions (cf. The veil of a free woman).

Deeply rooted in the culture of his native land he has been greatly influenced by the common sense and prudence often found among country people, their wise attitude towards the changes and disorders of the world.

Let the waves break

(Anef i lemwej)

In his songs the poet often connects the idea of the course of time with the story of his personal life and the gone for ever hours. Time is man's foe, undermining his strength, killing his youth...

If only youth could come back!

(Amer d ittughal temzi)

Either sticking to tradition, or following modern trends, he has innovated all his life. In combining tradition and modernity he has gradually achieved a meaningful coherence, his specific creation. Thus, in his lifetime, Cherif Kheddami has already become one of the great ancestors whose office it was, on the one side to hand down the musical heritage, and on the other side to venture beyond it to find new ways. So, without ever being aware of it, Cherif has always been a Sheikh, a maestro and an *amusnaw* (wise man).

This album is being released to pay homage to a great master and celebrate a forty year old career now at its acme. Cherif Kheddami is more than ever well received in his country, his culture, by all the young in quest of their history and wanting to know who they are.

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