

Marc Schade-Poulson, *Men and Popular Music in Algeria*, Modern Middle-East Series No. 20 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999). Pp. 250. \$35.00 cloth, \$12.76 paper.

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Rai is a form of popular music most closely associated with the city of Oran (Waharan) in the northwestern corner of Algeria. Marc Schade-Poulson's book considers the social significance of the genre in its place of origin and, in particular, its role in describing the complex gender relations prevailing there

The first part of the book is rightly concerned with the cultural and political contextualizing of the field in question. Research was carried out over several visits to Oran in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period of increasing political instability that developed into a protracted war between the government and various factions of armed rebels who challenged its authority in the name of Islamic reform. The resulting cultural polarization, invoking often incompatible discourses on nationhood, modernity, and morality, inevitably influenced all expressive media and social practices in a profound way. Because popular music is often as responsive to economic and political developments as it is to nuances of taste, such studies can serve as valuable barometers of social change. In this case, *Rai* itself was a "problematic" idiom, drawing as it did on highly eclectic cultural sources, yet frequently employing the language and sentiments of the Oranaise *demimonde*.

Schade-Poulson's ethnography goes on to describe in detail the local processes of production and consumption of *Rai* music. We see the working relationships among singers, record

producers, and musicians in Oran's studios. It is convincingly suggested that, because of the close physical distance between producers and consumers, the local distribution network is a crucial economic factor shaping the local recording industry. In music (as in other areas of the Algerian economy), it may be the personal negotiations between the record producers and the kiosk sellers that determine the commercial success of recordings, especially when new artists are involved. Obviously, one of the underlying reasons for the importance of personal transactions is a lack of faith in more extended systems of distribution and payment, which might, in turn, be linked to the ubiquitous inefficiency of formal economic systems in Algeria.

Rai is undoubtedly most consumed in its recorded form, and Schade-Poulson describes the social contexts in which young men relax and listen to and discuss music of all kinds. Apart from rare music festivals, live *Rai* is most frequently performed at wedding parties and in the "cabaret" nightclubs found outside Oran. These environments have very distinct moral connotations in Algeria, and Schade-Poulson does well to capture their flavors and show how they influence the performance and content of the songs in each context.

The larger part of the book analyzes the text of *Rai* songs, which the author divides into "dirty" and "clean" categories according to their thematic and linguistic content. The "dirty" songs, on the whole, were recorded in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the early years of "pop-*Rai*," when the genre's repertoire was drawn from the cabaret circuit and contained uncensored references to sex, drinking, and hashish-smoking. These recordings were often of very poor technical quality, many having been made in makeshift studios behind record shops. Propelled by initial commercial success from this private domain, songs were rapidly "cleaned up" in order to achieve approval for public broadcast and performance. Another impetus to this development was the increasingly conservative political environment resulting from the larger conflict taking place in the country.

Schade-Poulson argues that the song words, which frequently contain oblique and even contradictory imagery, are best understood in the setting of informal men's gatherings, where seem to make sense of exclusively male experiences. In particular, Schade-Poulson has through his textual analysis a typology of women (which includes "good," "bad," and pean," among others), and describes the kind of relationship and expectations that men with each "type." The author shows how he developed his thesis by comparing severalings" of a fixed selection of recorded songs. Various male informants provided these interpretations. *Rai* song texts, it emerges, are replete with expressions of desire, remorse, guilt, betrayal and similarly employ a mixture of folk-religious imagery in which women are cated in sorcery as well as duplicity. In a cultural context such as Algeria's, where most men were both economically and politically powerless, where social expectations and dence in institutions had been dashed, and where the country seemed headed for civil war, perhaps unsurprising that half-held superstitious discourse gained credibility. On the other similar sentiments can be found in music produced across the border in Morocco, and they have connections with other local genres of music. Perhaps it is more realistic to suggest these ways of describing gender relations and emotions were an established part of the vernacular that had been drawn into the public domain for a combination of contextual reasons.

Although I certainly agree with the author's premise that studies of the consumption popular culture can contribute to anthropological understandings of a society, I am less vinced that the balance of topics Schade-Poulson has employed always does this the best vice. Although Schade-Poulson looks in some detail at the content of the song lyrics themselves (an approach to *Rai* that is already exemplified by the works of Marie Virolle and Hadj ani), we do not learn as much about the music itself, its eclectic sources, and any significance that might be attached to its inclusion or exclusion. Perhaps this is because listeners "notice" musical and linguistic elements that are unusual rather than typical.

Schade-Poulson's focus on the experience of informants themselves is enlightening, does not answer all the questions that anthropologists may wish to ask—such as, Why people read different things into the same text? What is the relationship between popular and place? And how does music communicate non-verbal meanings in this context? Although this work is undoubtedly painstakingly researched, I would suggest that *Rai* bears more diverse meanings than are discussed here. To a large extent, Schade-Poulson's focus on issues is a result of the relatively narrow range of informants he has involved, and in a gated society such as Algeria's this situation is almost inevitable. Nevertheless, even within group of young men he was closest to, issues such as *Rai*'s problematic eclecticism, its references to specific sites in urban Oran, and the obvious political issues it came studiously (or did it, perhaps, obliquely allude to them?) were not raised here. The ways which other, less enthusiastic local people felt about the music could have been explored greater detail, even without going into the depth that was possible with these main informants.

In my own sojourn in Oran, I found not only that people employed clever or humorous from recent *Rai* songs in their everyday conversations, but that *Rai* songs very quickly rowed" the latest slang or pun from the street. Just as the record producers formed close ing relationships with the distributors of the music, so the songs themselves reflected immediate way the local "in" jokes, which could never be directly translated out of Even Oran's most famous son, the singer Khalid, who was greatly admired for his success talent, was accused of having "lost touch" with the people. His song words had become how less meaningful since he had left the country. Obviously, a record produced months ago on a different continent had a meaning to local listeners that was different that of the one made a week earlier in a neighboring quarter. Elsewhere in Algeria, the accent and dialect was considered a quite distinct marker of identity, and indeed the city "liberal" reputation nationally that brought other connotations to the consumption of *Rai* that cannot be read directly from the "text" or be very salient to local

consumers. In a period of extreme political division, when culture, identity, and language had become highly charged issues, I might have expected aspects of musical signification to have been afforded a little more weight than is apparent here.

What Schade-Poulson does extremely well is challenge the discourses about *Rai* that have emanated from the Western "world music" industry. *Rai* has often been "sold" in the West as a medium of resistance against the oppression of intolerant political, religious, or familial regimes. I agree wholeheartedly with the author that this view has much more to do with Western strategies to sell music to "youth" groups than anything from the North African experience of *Rai*. Schade-Poulson discusses in useful detail the influence, beneficial and otherwise, of the world-music industry on *Rai* and the negotiations its local producers have adopted to stay in business.

This book clearly fills an important ethnographic gap in the field. Few non-indigenous anthropologists have been attracted to the region (except Morocco), and the results of their research are rarely published in English. Schade-Poulson's work, which sympathetically illustrates the experience of inhabiting a cultural space just beyond the margins of industrial Europe, sheds considerable light on indigenous morality and gender issues. For anthropologists, musicologists, and those interested in the current political and social landscape of the Maghrib, this book introduces important new terrain and will serve as a valuable introduction to Algerian popular culture.