

AUTOS

Replanted in France, Algerian Arts Bloom

By ALAN RIDING
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As Algeria's civil war escalated through the 1990's, the demise of the country's cultural and intellectual life seemed almost anecdotal compared to a civilian death toll rising above 50,000 and an economy in disarray. Culture, however, was not an accidental casualty of war. In a carefully orchestrated campaign to smother intellectual freedom, artists, movie and theater directors, writers, singers and journalists were singled out for death threats and murder.

Compounding the terror, it was never clear who was ordering the killings. Islamic fundamentalists who took up arms in the early 1990's were blamed for most attacks on what they considered decadent Western-influenced culture, but the army-backed regime and its shadowy allies were also infamously intolerant of criticism. "Not only the Islamists kill, that's for sure," Karim Sarroub, a young **audacious** Algerian novelist, said in an **interview**. "Neither side likes intellectuals."

The Algerians' choice of France as a safe haven is logical. For one thing, it is Algeria's former colonial ruler and already home to close to one million Algerian immigrants. For another, educated Algerians are French-speakers and familiar with French culture, which, even after independence in 1962, continued to exercise influence in Algeria. "The French I speak is part of my Algerian cultural identity," said Karim Sarroub.

France also has other attractions. While cultural activity in Algeria was limited as much by the economic crisis as by political threats, France provides huge government subsidies for the arts, above all for museums, the movie industry, theater, classical music and dance.

Exile is of course a path taken by generations of independent artists determined to escape persecution and preserve their creative freedom. Just this century, for example, untold thousands fled Hitler's Germany, Communist governments in Europe, Cuba and China and right-wing dictatorships in Spain, Latin America, Greece and South Africa. Some, like the black American writers who came to Paris in the 1950's, simply felt more welcome abroad. And frequently their best work was done in exile.

Further, French publishers have shown special interest in foreign authors writing in French. In France, Algerian artists have found a structure within which to work.

Alan Riding

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