

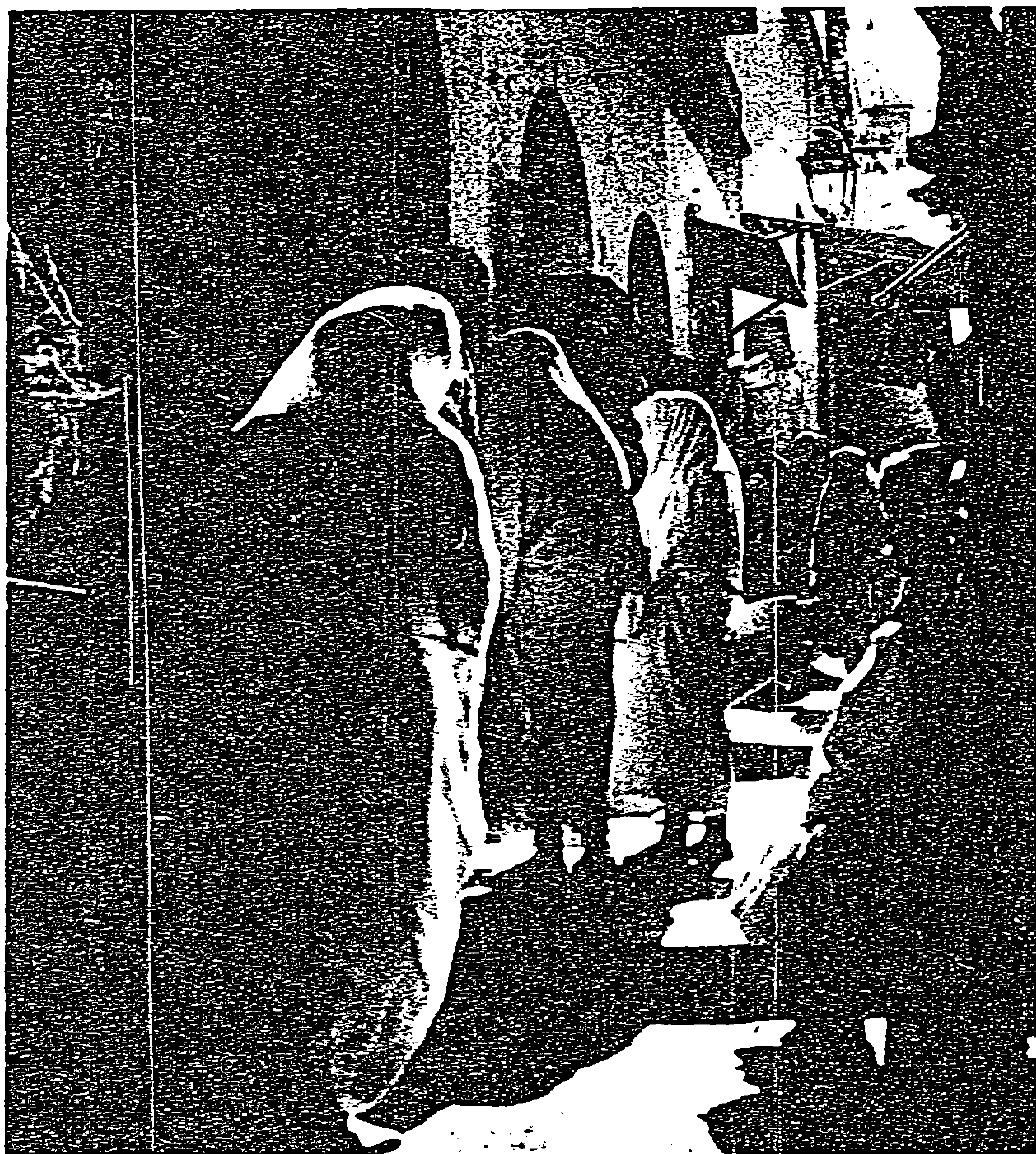
# Battle of the Veil in Algeria: An ancient symbol of subservience is ...

By HAL LEHRMANALGIERS.

New York Times (1923-Current file); Jul 13, 1958;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index

pg. SM14



UNVEILING—Though the veil is still general in Algeria (left, a scene in the Casbah), more and more Moslem women are forswearing it, as in the ceremony (right).

## Battle of the Veil in Algeria

An ancient symbol of subservience is falling away as traditionalists and modernists war over bringing the Moslem woman into the twentieth century.

By HAL LEHRMAN

ALGIERS.

**T**O hear veiled Moslem women call out "Kif-kif la française!"—strife-torn Algeria's latest war cry—may have a bloodcurdling effect on alien ears, but there is, in fact, nothing really sinister about it. Liberally translated, it means, "Let us be just like the French lady!"—a sentiment that is menacing only to the immemorial superiority of the Moslem male.

The sentiment is not brand new; for the walls around Algerian Moslem women have been gradually crumbling since the end of World War II, and especially since the outbreak of rebellion in 1954. But what might be called the "revolt of the women" in Islamic Algeria has apparently picked up velocity since the night of May 13, when the European populace stormed and took the seat of government and proclaimed liberty and equality for all.

There was a flurry of veil-burning after that momentous night. But what is perhaps more promising, the wom-

en's "insurrection" got help from *la française* herself, in the form of a "Feminine Solidarity" movement. A network of Feminine Solidarity centers, set up by the French generals' ladies—with a precise chain of command—is now mushrooming across the land.

The wife of five-star Gen. Raoul Salan, top representative of Paris in France's province of Algeria, directs these centers for matronly aid and encouragement of the emancipation drive. Under her—each of them commanding one of Algeria's four great geographical divisions, including the Sahara—are the spouses of appropriately distributed generals with lesser clusters of stars. At operational level in any large town, the local president of the *Solidarité* is likely to be the consort of a major; a captain's wife is the vice-president, a lieutenant's wife the secretary and a *sous-lieutenant's* lady the treasurer.

**A**T the centers, the officers' wives are intensely executing educational programs that range from visits to museums and factories to intimate chats about colic and the boiling of

milk. "Nourish the mind and the veil will wither by itself," says the sprightly, half-American wife of Brig. Gen. Jacques Massu, who directs the Feminine Solidarity movement in Algiers itself. (The thing can boomerang, however. One hundred native women recently picketed the *Préfecture* here with placards demanding the release of internees and news of other men who have "vanished" since Gen. Massu smashed a Casbah terrorist ring last year.)

The customary Algerian plan for living—increasingly modified in European-influenced urban centers, but still common even there and endemic in the rural vastnesses—has stipulated abysmal inferiority, ignorance and exclusion as woman's lot, despite the Prophet's injunction that Paradise is to be found at the feet of our mothers.

The severity of this tradition varies according to locale and family. There are houses whose woman or women have never emerged since entering as brides. In the village *soukh*, only men do the marketing. If a woman does come out of her abode, she usually carries the burdens and toils in the fields while her man rides the donkey, dozes

or puffs his hubble-bubble pipe at the coffeehouse. By the classic mode of Islam, a female knows two masters during her life-span—her father and then her husband (or, more practically, her tyrannical mother-in-law, under whose roof she arrives as a virtual servant when wed). This often applies even to a girl who has been permitted schooling until the age of 14, after which she retires from the playground to await the unknown husband chosen for her. Essentially, her approved functions are service, pleasure-giving and the bearing of male children. The average Moslem does not count his daughters when reporting his progeny.

**I**N the native courts that administer disputes within Moslem communities—which the French have left strictly alone—a man's testimony is equal to that of two women. A daughter inherits half as much as a son. A father has authority to select his daughter's husband—to the extent, if he wishes, of selling her like an animal. A man is entitled to four spouses, though usually he is too poor to afford more than one, and may repudiate any or all of them simply (Continued on Page 16)

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(Continued from Page 14)

by "breaking the card" on which the marriage-contract is written or by telling a wife three times that she is to him "like the back of my mother." if she wants a divorce, the woman must bring formal suit and prove specific grievances.

Women, being considered impure and lowly, are forbidden to mingle with men in their assemblies or to hold such offices among the faithful as imam or muezzin, caliph or *cadi*—a judge of the Moslem courts. All these injunctions presumably have absolute support in the holy writ (although, on closer inspection, the alleged sanctity of these discriminations falls away with speed), and in particular the case for intrinsic female inferiority rests on two Koranic passages, "Husbands have priority over their wives" and "Men are superior to women because of qualities by which God has raised the former over the latter."

**B**ECAUSE of the understandable reluctance of many Moslem males to upset this system, some native progressives think that the best way to speed the movement to emancipate women is to educate the men. "Let the French open enough modern schools for boys, and the problem will disappear even before those boys are out of their teens," one Moslem intellectual assured me peevishly. And, certainly, the illiterate peasant sees no advantage in having his wife cease slaving for him, and the ignorant *casbah* dweller derives satisfaction in his misery from the proud knowledge that his wife is even more miserable and ignorant than he.

But male education is not necessarily the panacea: when the French Parliament, in 1947, gave Moslem women the right to vote and left it to the Algerian Assembly to set up the rules, the Moslem males of that Assembly—nearly all of them handsomely educated—did nothing about it.

**M**OST observers agree that the real block to bringing Islamic women into the modern world is the atmosphere and tradition of Moslem society. Some of this is petty: the ugly mother-in-law who had to wear a veil when she was young; the bogy-ridden husband who fears ravishers will descend upon his wife, no matter how incredibly uninviting, the instant she bares her countenance. On a somewhat higher level, parents are troubled that a daughter who becomes *évoluée* or Europeanized, may acquire a loose reputation and diminished prospects for substantial marriage, (The Moslem equivalent of the drugstore cowboy does automatically calculate that any unveiled Moslem girl is fair game.)

But there is a noble aspect

also to Moslem hesitation—concern for family stability, a doubt that restricted (or sheltered) Moslem womanhood can absorb large doses of liberty without moral vertigo, a passionate desire to avoid recklessly exchanging an ancient heritage for an untried infidel formula.

It is a credit to the French that they have understood these scruples and have never attempted to tamper with the Moslem's "*Statut Personnel*," the intimate law that governs individual relationships in his community. They understand that removal of the veil itself is not a victory. Under the shapeless, bedsheet-like *haik* in which veiled Moslem wo-

## FASHION

The veil, prime symbol of female retirement, actually has no religious basis. The Koran did not impose it. The veil is an article of fashion rather than an article of faith: women in and around Algiers wear the *hajjar*, a white lace mask concealing nose, mouth and chin; women in the countryside expose nose, mouth and chin but cover the sides of the face and ears; women in Blida, scarcely an hour away from the capital, hide everything except one eye.

To the far south in multi-tribed Algeria, among the blue-tinted Tuaregs, it is the men who go veiled and the women who take several mates. Among the Azriates, below the lunar crags of the wild Aurès mountains, the women prefer no husbands at all, cultivating their own rude farmland and casual offspring in Amazonian freedom.

men drape themselves when outdoors may walk a chic *bourgeoise* garbed in the latest European design. On the other hand, the veil can be a solid refuge for a woman unequipped to meet an unveiled world.

The emphasis of French feminists in Algeria, therefore, has been to discourage spectacular gestures and encourage simple, steady advance toward freedom by instruction in it.

French patience is all the more impressive when France's potential gain from swifter enlightenment of Moslem women is measured. Leaving aside political factors, a dreadful impediment to the solution of the Algerian dilemma is the "galloping demography" with which the country is cursed because its women are little more than child-bearing machines.

One out of every ten native girls is married before 15, 7.3 out of ten before 20. The Moslem population of Algeria was 2.5 million a century ago; it is now close to 9 million, as against 1.2 million Europeans.

(Continued on Page 18)

(Continued from Page 16)

At the present rate, the natives will number over 13 million in 1970 and nearly 18 million in 1980, when thirty-six Moslem children will be born for every European child.

**W**HETHER France's remedy for an Algerian solution is to be integration or federalism or federation—or anything short of total independence and total French departure—ushering of Algerian women into the twentieth century is imperative. There can be no coping with welfare costs unless the baby deluge halts, no votes for women unless the women come out of their mental cloisters, no real comprehension between the two communities unless the Moslem mother comprehends something of the modern world and can transmit that comprehension to her children.

Prospects for eventual widespread female emancipation in Algeria have never seemed brighter than now because all the dynamic elements involved—the French, the rebels, the Moslem youth of both sexes, and even many older-generation women—desire it. And only feeble opposition has come from the *oulemas*, who are the traditional theologians, or from a whirling-derwish chain of religious friaries which claim to be guardians of the living Islam.

French efforts, of course, did not begin with May 13, but it did take the prod of the rebellion flaring up four years ago to bring the problem sharply forward. In the beginning, schooling for girls was handicapped by a lack of French financial zeal and by the hostility of tradition-minded parents. But by last November there were over 118,000 Moslem girls in primary and secondary schools and more than 2,000 in university and professional schools—a drop in the bucket, but an ocean compared to the desert of a decade before.

**E**NTRY to civil service jobs was eased for Moslem women (and men) by requiring only an appropriate diploma instead of competitive exams against European applicants. A weekly half-hour for Moslem women over *Radio Algérie*, conducted by a young classical Arabic actress named Nadira, who lectures on women's rights and reads ardent letters from listeners, has had thumping success; she gets a fat bag of mail for each program, all of it plugging for emancipation, plus some letters that sound like bids to a lonely hearts club ("I would like, dear sister Nadira, to correspond with a young progressive Moslem gentleman, 20 to 21 years old, with job, to exchange ideas in French. But do not send letters to my home; I will come and get them from you").

Out in the *bled*, or hinterland, the army has long been smiting rebels with one hand and striving to conciliate their

relatives and co-religionists with the other. Some 600 administrative (Section Administrative Spéciale) units around the country build roads, lay water pipes and do other chores for backward rural settlements; nearly all of them have a woman welfare worker to help the "pacification" on the distaff side.

The army *Cinquième Bureau*, concerned with "psychological action," sponsors fifty-five itinerant medico-social teams—each consisting of two Moslem girls and one French girl—which give free pills and injections to babies and women, along with hints on such miscellaneous subjects as hygiene, sewing and female juridical rights under Koranic law.

The F. L. N. (*Front de Libération Nationale*) also has ac-



complished considerable "psychological action," though its purpose in stimulating female enlightenment has been less social than military. Veils are not convenient in the Army of Liberation, except when transporting small arms and ammunition under voluminous *haiks* through French-patrolled sections of the *maquis*.

An F. L. N. note to militants at Batna in the Aurès mountain area last year counseled female patriots to "take intelligent inspiration from examples of progress by women in developed countries, when these are compatible with our liberating struggle and the national emancipation."

Perhaps the most positive omen of all is the growth of impatience among ordinary young men with wives who are chosen for them or wives who have had no schooling to match their own. Said one such to me: "I married the empty-headed girl my parents picked because I did not wish to displease them. But then, having been obedient, I was free. I divorced her and took a wife with whom I can exchange thoughts."

His case is not unusual. One young father, the nephew of a *cadi*, told me firmly while another young father, the son-in-law of an imam, wagged his head in agreement: "I want to take the veil off my wife, but her family and mine are resisting. I don't dare af-

front them. . . . But *my* daughter will never wear the veil!"

There are, finally, the women themselves—women in urban casbahs, women in the mud-baked huts of remote *douars*, women even in tents under palm trees fringing the deserts. Wherever they are reached by the message, their enthusiasm is as great as their astonishment, and is exceeded only by their curiosity. One itinerant nurse of the *Cinquième Bureau* relates how her team moved into a village deep in the south Oranie:

"It was the first time the women had seen a motor vehicle, or women in European dress. The first day they hid; only the children stole out, and we gave them candy. The second day the children were waiting for us, with cakes in their hands as gifts. The third day the children pulled us into their homes. The women stared at us in wonder. They felt us, to see if we were made like them. They were especially fascinated by our undergarments. They let us examine their children and give a few of them a scrubbing. The fourth day they took rides in our truck and sang, '*Kif-kif la française!*'"

**I**N the last analysis, true equality cannot be achieved between the sexes so long as such institutions as polygamy are legal and wives may be repudiated at a husband's whim. These are formidable privileges in the "Personal Statute" of the good Moslem and, it must be conceded, are rooted in the sacrosanct Koran, however much the Prophet tempered them by restrictions that have been mainly ignored.

Yet, not a few sincerely religious Algerian Moslems are already beginning to ponder a possible distinction in the Koran between its lessons on divinity, which are eternal, and its prescripts on jurisprudence, which were fitting to the day but perhaps not intended to endure when the day was long over. Such students know of other Moslem countries where changes have been made—notably Turkey and Tunisia.

**T**O be sure, they are independent Moslem states, which Algeria is not. No European legislators would or should invade so intimate an area of another creed. Nationalists point to this inhibition as a further reason for speedy independence. But others suggest that nothing would bar a purely Algerian Moslem congress of savants and religious judges—free of political considerations and restraints—from opening the debate or even drafting a reform.

One may doubt that such a bold move is imminent. But one cannot doubt that any bold progress toward equality for Moslem women in Algeria would also constitute a giant step toward equality for Algeria.