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The Original Sin and the Collective Lie

The text we are about to read is a translation, which is as literal as possible, of the discourse of a Kabyle emigrant recorded in France in 1975 on two different occasions: before and after a holiday in Kabylia. The commentary that is offered on it is not there to attenuate, thanks to linguistic or ethnographic notes, the opacity of an authentic discourse that mobilizes all the resources of an original language and culture in order to express and explain experiences of which that culture and language know nothing, or which they reject. The opacity of a language that is not immediately comprehensible is perhaps the most important piece of information – or at least the rarest kind of information – we could hope for at a time when so many well-intentioned spokesmen are speaking on behalf of emigrants.

'I was orphaned at a very young age. In reality, I am the son of an old man – or, as the saying goes, a "son of a widow"'.¹ It was my mother who brought me up, that's nothing to be ashamed of. My father "left" me when I was eight – so I am the last of the brood – Even then, before my father died – he was very old – it was my mother who took care of everything; she was already "the man of the house"! In any case, an old man's wife is always an old woman! I don't know how old my mother is, but she is much younger than my father, she's younger even than my elder sisters [who are in fact his half-sisters]; my father was married three times, I think, or at least had children by two different women.'

'I am the son of a widow'

'As far back as I can remember, I've always seen my mother working both inside and outside the house – and that's the way it is to this

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very day: she never stops. I remember my father only as an old man who never went any further than the doorstep.

'My mother is difficult; that's what they say, that's the reputation she has, but I think she needed to gain that reputation to defend herself, so as not to be "eaten" alive by others. A widow who remains at the mercy of her brothers-in-law, who has to wait for her son to grow up for there to be a man entering and leaving the house, is definitely not in a good position. If she doesn't defend herself, they eat her, rob her. For her part, she didn't do anything to humour them. I can say it now: which of my uncles hasn't at the very least insulted her? How many times has she been beaten? And always by her closest relatives, not by strangers. If the man who is most closely related to you doesn't harm you, a perfect stranger is not going to harm you. Where would someone who isn't a close relative come from? As for a complete stranger, it's not worth talking about; he would be afraid, because she is still the Xs' woman. But what does a relative have to fear? He can always say: she's our woman; and it then becomes something between relatives: the closer he is, the more he can let himself go. A lad like El – and it has to be said that he's calmed down a lot – what's there to hold him back? Do you think that "shame would eat his face," that he would say to himself: "My uncle [the immigrant's father was still alive at this time] is old, he has nothing, he has nothing, he can do nothing, he's only got her and, fortunately for us, she's there, it's she who makes sure 'his house is full' "? Not a bit of it ...

'When I compare the earliest years of my childhood with a few years later, I can even say that perhaps they showed my mother greater respect after my father died than during his lifetime. It's true, you'd think that "hearts" have changed since then ... That's what the life of a "son of a widow" is like! At a very early age, I had my fair share of troubles, cares and worries. It's not age that makes men, it's what happens over their heads; a man makes himself through his actions, and not because he's received a name from his ancestors. He may well be so and so – and yet, what if there is nothing inside him, what if "his market is empty"?'

'You didn't get up early, so why are you going to the market?'

'... Do you think that in their day [the allusion is to events going back to the years 1942–4 and to people who died, one in 1954 and the other in 1958] my uncles M.E. and N.L., who robbed my father of the only bit of land he owned, and which he ceded to them as a security against his debts, during the hard years of *elboun* [i.e. the years during the Second World War, when the system of ration cards was in force], so as to be able to buy, according to what people say – it was before I was born – barley in order to survive; do you think that

they would have done what their children are doing today? "You want to build a house?" "OK, here's half a plot of land, we'll give you it, go and dig the foundations." With them, such a thing would have been impossible. Is it because hatred has left their hearts, or because stomachs are fuller these days? First, now that you can find no one to quarrel with, there is no more reason to quarrel. The insults, the screams, the hatred, the blows of the past – what was it all about? Someone walked through someone else's field, broke down the fence around his neighbour's field or diverted water from the canal when it was his turn to irrigate his own field. That was what fuelled the quarrels "part already there, part added". All that, all the hatred, all the ill feeling, those rages, those ancestral enmities handed down from father to son, as they say – it was all about land. Now that there is no one left to take care of the land, there are no longer any pretexts for quarrels. Why hold anything against a woman these days? Especially when you then have to go and ask her to take care of land that no one wants any more. All those who, in the past, couldn't tolerate my mother going near their trees, the fences around their fields, now beg her to work their land even though she doesn't even own a chicken. Peace has returned to earth; even though there are still reasons for men to quarrel, the women are kept out of it.

'The mother of a "son of a widow" is forgotten only when he has proved himself to be a man; otherwise, he will always be the son of such and such a woman. Under those conditions, how do you expect him not to be in a hurry? But when you are in a hurry, you can't do anything: you don't know where you're going; it might be "light" [success, happiness], just as it might be "darkness" [failure, misfortune]. It takes courage. How do you put an end to this situation? how do you get out of it?

'All I could do was work. At the beginning, I worked a lot. I could see that my mother never stopped working, and I started work as soon as I could. I've worked everywhere, for everyone, done everything, for money, for charity [without being paid]; I've ploughed, I've harvested the fields for all my relatives; I didn't even wait for them to come and ask me, I offered my services myself. What could I lose? I was paid in one way or another. Better do that than twiddle your thumbs. And I really was paid for my trouble; I've been paid in money, in services rendered, in kind, and especially in food. I could bring in the harvest for all my relatives; they couldn't refuse me that because I didn't spare any effort. I was encouraged on all sides. On all sides, they used to say: "M. is a worker – he still takes care of the land."

'I was a sharecropper – I even had a pair of oxen, and that had never been seen before in the house; no one could remember ever seeing an ox cross the threshold, and I'm not talking about the door that is there now. I mean the door of our ancestors. So in the space of a few years, I became a real fellah. But that did not last long, only until I woke up and realized that even the condition of a fellah [*thafalahth*] was my lot only because it had been neglected

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by all the rest of them. As the saying goes: "You didn't get up early, so why are you going to the market?" So I said to myself: "Have a rest!"

'I became a "casual fellah"'

'I was overcome by lassitude. Why should I make such an effort? I'm just like everyone else. Am I any better than all those people who own land, but who look at it only from afar, and entrust it to me to work it? Their arms aren't paralysed, after all. There are moments when I catch myself saying: "You're the biggest fool of all; while you are wearing yourself out, he [the owner of the field] is living a life of ease, a comfortable life, doesn't give a damn ('a hundred come in and a hundred go out'). And what do you get out of it?"

'I was surprised to find myself behaving like everyone else. I became a casual fellah, working just as a last resort, when I was forced to do so. Bit by bit [gradually], I found myself, in only a short time, in trouble because of all the habits I'd got into, all the past commitments, all the land I'd accepted. For her part, my mother started following me around too; she was furious with me, and never stopped complaining, day or night, to my face when we were together, behind my back when she could find a sympathetic ear. She thought she could put pressure on me by giving up a lot of the outside jobs she did. "If you don't want to do anything any more, I'm fed up with it too; it's no longer worthwhile working myself to death all by myself. When you were little I made you a house, but now that you are grown up, it's up to you; whether you want to have a full house or an empty house; it's up to you. I don't want to do it any more." She actually got rid of all the patches of land she was renting, keeping only the garden and a little patch of land close to the house. That became her domain, and she looked after it by herself.

'Our country is fine for anyone who asks only to live [feed himself], as long as they are willing to live "according to the state of the land": you work all the days without counting, all the days that God sends, you bring in what you need to live on and what you bring in is all you have to live on. Everything else is ruled out. If you are satisfied with that, so much the better; if not, you have to start running. It's not as if it was just a matter of a hungry belly. It's true that no one goes hungry these days; but hunger is not just about what you need to put in your belly; it is also a hungry back [which has to be clothed], hungry feet [which need shoes], a pain in the stomach [which has to be cured], a hungry roof [which has to be mended], a hungry head [children who have to go to school]. It's not just a matter of: if you have no salt you eat tasteless food, or if you have no kerosene you go to bed in the dark! So you mustn't want anything, and above all you mustn't need money. But it is money that everyone needs; even in the

village, you have to buy everything, like in the city. It's become the *elfilaj* village.'

'France is the only door'

'It wasn't because I'd got rid of everything to do with agriculture, sold the oxen and the donkey and handed back the land to its owners, that it was all over and that I stopped work altogether. No, I went on working, but in a different way – different things, anything. If I have to work in someone else's fields, it's either because I want to do him a favour and work one, two or three days; or, it's as a day labourer and then, in the evening, he has to put down my day [day's wages] in front of me. It's obvious. Working on the land is like any other kind of work, so long as it brings in some money. It's no harder than working with the masons, or on a truck, and I've already done that... What haven't I done to earn money? I've even gone so far as to accept slaps² because it earned me 11,000 francs [he still reckons in old francs, even when he is talking about dinars].

'My mother also got involved; it's as though she wanted to follow me in everything I did; she got out her sewing machine again, even though she said she was sick of it; she went back to her prosperous trade with the women, and started selling anything: eggs, the material that her brother – another "real snake" – brought back for her from France, jewellery, sometimes real, sometimes fake, but usually "copper and lies".³ We too began to "glean small change"; our only problem was how to pick it up.

'Despite all the effort my mother and I put into chasing after money, we were always short of it. I never stopped working, I had calluses on my back, but I still didn't have any money, I didn't even have enough to buy cigarettes. Why work when that's all you get out of it? My head was full of troubles, and not much money was coming in. I was smoking more and more, I needed more and more money, and I had less and less of it. In no time at all, and without knowing how, I found myself with debts of 450,000 francs. 450,000! Just 50,000 more, and it's half a million! That's a lot of money. At that point, I became frightened, I felt totally discouraged! What could I do? Where could I find a place to lay my head? Where could I find the money to repay my debts? There was no way out of this situation; no escape, the only "door" that was left was France – it was the only solution left. All those who have money, those who have done anything, bought anything, or built anything, it's because they had money from France.'

'France is all they talk about'

'That is how France gets under your skin. Once you've got that into your head, it's all over; you can't work in the fields any more, you

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have no desire to do anything else: leaving is the only solution you can think of. From that moment on, France is inside you, and it will never go away. It's always before your eyes. It's as though we were possessed. If someone said to you "If such and such a *cheikh* wrote something for you, you could leave",⁴ of course you would go and see him. It's madness! That's the way it is with the young people who want to leave nowadays. As soon as one of them begins to "refuse" [to be disobedient], to cause a bit of trouble: he refuses to work, gangs up with the rest of them, and is always in "places that are not full" [outside the village]; you can be sure of it, he's plotting to go away. In the past, people used to do that so as to get married when their parents were a bit too slow about making the arrangements. Nowadays, if you are married and want to leave for France, you sulk to the point of repudiating your wife. It's madness, there's no other word for it, it's like drinking or gambling, it's a little worm that "burrows tunnels inside us, like in the mine". When I think now of all the running around I've done, all the things I expected, all the journeys I've made, all the people I've begged, you really have to be mad to put up with all that, just to be able to get to France.

'Like everyone else, I've said the same things about France, day in, day out, night after night, year after year: "Would that God would get me out of this country." The country of "narrowness", the country of poverty, the country of wretchedness, the "twisted", "inverted" country, the country of opposites, the country of decline, the country that inspires scorn for its people, the country that is incapable of keeping its own people, the country that has been abandoned by God. And we swear, we promise: "The day I get out of here [this country], I will never again speak your name; I will never look back at you; I will not come back to you." I've said it too, when I think about it, the number of times I've invoked, not good fortune and all the good omens you wish upon someone who has to take to the road, but the strength of demons. I was more likely to say: "Let me be taken away, kidnapped" than to use the expression used to invoke blessings: "May God open or 'ease' the way."

'In reality, all that is just a lie, as the saying goes: "one lie after another". How bitter you can be, my country, when one dreams of leaving you. And how desirable you are, oh France, before one knows you! All because our village is full of France and nothing but France – France is all people talk about.

'From our village, we have more people in France than in the village. Much as I try to count and "keep a tally" [check], I always find there are more men in France than in our village. When I was back there in the village, there were moments when we [the men of the village] were filled with "wild solitude" [fear]. I was on the point of leaving, and everyone would say to me: "You are the only one who has stayed, and now you are going to join them. You will leave us 'emptiness'." There aren't many of us at home; all our people are in France; we are "filling" France and emptying the village. But what

is there in the village? All the "broken" men, "twisted" men who are good for nothing. That's all.

'The only men in the village are French veterans [who have come back from France]. They came back from France because they were tired of it, or perhaps because it was France that was tired of them, if it was up to them alone – they haven't expelled it [France] from their hearts. On the one hand, there are those men; on the other, there are those who are getting ready to leave one day or another. And a small number, there are a few – they are all young men of my age – would get no one's approval if they too began to get the idea of leaving "into their heads". And in their heart of hearts, perhaps they too would like to go: those are the ones who have jobs somewhere or other in Algeria. So that is all – these are our men at home. There are those they talk about, the way they talk about the guardian of the hearth, the "*cheikh* of the *kanoun*", "his name is there, but you never see him" [meaning that he is like a ghost]; there's a whole army of them, the army of men – and I am one of them – who never stop coming and going between here and France; going and coming, that's all they do. They are a category apart; when they get older, some of them really do end up renouncing France, but those who replace them, here in France, are in the majority; there are more who come to France than there are who go back home. Some will end up dying here in France, I don't know why, but in the village they are counted as village men: the villagers count on them, their "heads are counted" every time [they are enumerated whenever taxes have to be paid or reimbursed according to how many men there are in the family], they are not forgotten although they themselves have forgotten their village, their relatives. Some of them have been in France for at least twenty years. S. – he's a relative – did not know his son until he had become a man; he left when his son was born, his wife died in the meantime, and when he came home he found his son, married, "with his house" – he found a daughter-in-law. It's like being in a fairy tale.

'The men who do live in the village – you could say that almost all of them have already worked in France. If you had to count the men in the village who have never been to France in their lives, I don't think you would find a dozen – I am not counting the young men of today, those who are my age. Who in our house [kinship group] hasn't been to France? One man! Because the machine [the train] left him behind [he missed the bus]. All the others are men that France has beaten up; they came home all "shaken up", all shaken with a pole [like olive trees]. In any case, they can no longer work; they are no longer either workers inside the house [in other words, at home] or workers outside [meaning in France]; all they are good for is staying in the village and doing nothing else. You see them wandering about, coming and going in the streets of the village, it is they who are "filling" the village. You can't understand what they are, they are whatever you want them to be: if you like, they are the village's wise men, even though they are still young, they are the

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village's "idle men" in their *gandouras* and turbans [the costume of men who are generally out of work], they are in the village as though they were on holiday all the time; at home, in their own houses, they like to be [treated] like permanent guests. But they are also, if you like, the labourers the village counts upon.

'Fortunately, it's no longer the way it used to be, there is no reason to fear the big brawls of the past because, if you were attacked, there wouldn't be a man you could count on these days. They are good for neither work nor fighting, they've all settled down, all they are good for is sleeping until "the warmest part of the middle of the day". This country suits them, now that they have brought their carcasses back from France; that's all France has left them; a pile of bones they've preserved; that's all they have left, they've left the important, living part of themselves behind in France. Besides, they've all come back [from France] with something: some have a retirement pension, others an invalidity pension. They've brought back with them "their share of France". France continues to "help" them and what France gives them is enough. It's better than nothing, like "finding a piece of fat in the bean soup". It is said of them that [their affairs] are "settled": they have no more major worries.

'The only thing all these French veterans don't have now is the ability to leave when they like, when the path is clear; to leave just like that – from time to time, as tourists, for a month, two months.⁵ Each of them has a son, a brother, and a son-in-law or even a daughter they would like to go and see, to spend some time with them, to have a change of air and then come home, bringing back money, things, presents. That's what a tourist does! That's what holidays are like. If it was always like that, there would never be an end to it; it would be a circus, a perpetual coming and going: those in France would go back on holiday, in the summer; those back there would go to France on holiday, in the winter. Even in conversations, what do all the men in the village talk about? France! The veterans of France keep going on about their memories. Those "on leave" talk about France, in the middle of their village; they believe they are still in France; the young men who are waiting to leave dream of France. France is all you hear them talk about: France is like this, France is like that; so and so in France said this or that, did this, did that; bought a taxi [meaning a car, the French term is used in contrast to *camion* or truck], a motorbike and so on. Our village is a village that has been "eaten" by France; no one escapes it.

'In reality, no one knows anything [about France]. People talk about it as though they were comfortable there, and France seems to everyone to be lit up. That's the way it is. Everyone loves France, and France is beautiful in everyone's eyes... But what do you really expect them to say about France? They know nothing about it. They say – they say that it is "the land of happiness", that's all.

'Before I went there, I didn't think that France was foreign [a foreign country]. I thought it was like going to one of the villages in the area, except that it was further – as though you were going to

a country you knew. . . . It wasn't me who invented France, so many went before me, since time immemorial, I'm not the first and I won't be the last. Starting with my brother, he's now spent more than forty years in France. In his day, my father had already been to France; he worked in the coal mines of the Nord [*département*] and even in Belgium; he could remember the days when there were horses down the mines, he always talked about them. . . . Me, I'd heard talk of France since the day I was born, every day, ten times a day. That's why I had a very different image of it. I didn't even think that it might be like Algiers. Even though there were a lot [of men] from the village in Algiers, I didn't think I'd be left [to my own devices]. Even less so, I thought, in France, because the whole village was there; all my relatives, my paternal uncles and maternal uncles were together there. So I thought all I had to do was to get out of Algiers. As for the rest, it was like going to your own house. Having so many men in France and being afraid [to the point of] taking one step forward and one step back, it wasn't worth it!

'I thought that, even though it wouldn't be quite like the village, I would find it a bit like being in a neighbourhood of Algiers, but a neighbourhood where I would find all my relatives. It was no more than going to a neighbouring village; anyone who goes there knows where to go, and what has taken him there; when they see him, everyone knows whose house he is going to; they expect him to turn up and, after that, anyone can invite him. He is not one of those men who expect to be brought something to eat, or to be given directions to the mosque because they have no one on the spot. I expected it to be the same for me in France. Of course, I would start by going to my destination, to the home of my closest relative, or in other words my brother, and then all my relatives would be there. In fact, it did not turn out like that.'

'To be able to leave without having to ask anything'

'...I had great difficulty in getting to France. The formalities you have to go through, the time you have to wait, is nothing;⁶ the hardest thing of all is hearing everything that is said about you whenever you are seen to be doing something. "Who does he think he is? I hope he doesn't succeed. He would do better to stay here; we need him here. He does not lack for bread, what more does he want? In any case, he hasn't a hope. Look how many men before him have asked to leave and who are still waiting years later. He's not going to fly away all by himself; let him stay where he is." I knew all that, and I said to myself: "If you do want to leave, the last thing you should do is go through the 'people here' [the local authority]." They'd already treated me the same way over something else – the things I heard during all the time I was going through the formalities to leave. In the village, everyone had an opinion to offer: they swore I was

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rushing around for no purpose, that I was just throwing money away. "Stay calm", they advised me. I let them talk. Even my uncle, the one I could count on to some extent, never stopped saying: "He'll come a cropper, and to no avail. He's just rushing all over the place. I tell you, he really will wear himself out working L."⁷ I wept so many times. It sickened my heart to hear the mockery; people who have nothing better to do with their time than poke their noses into other people's business. I'd have paid a lot to prove them wrong. I prayed that I would not be dishonoured. I was spared that shame, thank God. I waited a year before I could obtain all the permits I needed, and I needed a lot of support. My great joy, my revenge, was being able to leave without asking anything of the people in the village. Every "paper" I obtained was a real struggle in itself.

'Getting the passport was my first victory! When I had it in my hand, I didn't know whether to wave it or hide it and wait for what happened next. You never know what's going to happen later. Be patient! But the news got around, despite everything.

'I couldn't do things by halves The second victory was when I got my exit visa. Then I could hold my head up high. I said to myself: "Now I can leave." But, in my heart of hearts, I was not at peace, I was more worried than ever: being able to leave Algeria isn't everything by any means; you still have to get over there, and not be sent back. It a gamble; I took the risk. In my own mind, it was all settled: either I would cross the sea, if only for a few days, see my brother and my nephews, and I would be as satisfied as if that was the only reason I had come; or I would be sent back from Algiers or France, and then I would never set foot in the village again, come what may! Where would I find the nerve to face everyone if, no sooner gone, than I had to be back. They would say: "He's brought back the provisions he took with him for the journey"; and all I would hear would be the rumours: "It seems that . . . It seems . . ." The worst of exiles is better than that shameful spectacle. God protected me from such a scandal.

'My mother was already spreading the news that I was leaving wherever she went. I don't know whether she told everybody about it out of joy or sorrow, of if it was a challenge. . . . In the meantime, my debts began to pile up, all the money I'd had to spend to get the papers, the cost of a return trip. In my haste, I bought my ticket the very day I got my [exit] permit. A week later, I was in France.'

'In our France, there is nothing but darkness'

'And what a France I discovered! It wasn't at all what I expected to find . . . to think I'd believed France wasn't exile [*elghorba*]. You really have to come here to France to know the truth. Here, you hear things being said that they never say to us back home; you hear everyone telling you: "This is no life for human beings, this is a life you cannot love; in our country, dogs have a better life than this." I

will always remember this image of my arrival in France, it is the first thing I saw, the first thing I heard: you knock at a door, it opens on to a little room that smells of a mixture of things, the damp, the closed atmosphere, the sweat of sleeping men.⁸ Such sadness! Such misery in their eyes, in their voices – they spoke softly – in their words. That gave me an insight into what loneliness is, what sadness is: the darkness of the room, the darkness in the room... the darkness in the streets – the darkness of the whole of France, because, in our France, there is nothing but darkness.

'... They were talking about me to my uncle, who had brought me here: "Why've you lured him into this trap, why've you deceived him like this, why've you set this trap for him?" What was I hearing? I didn't understand a thing. So where am I? Am I in France, or is this just an intermediate stage, one more ordeal before I arrive in France? And yet the *aéroplane* [*avion*] did bring me to France. And then there are these men, I know them all; I know that they're in France, I remember them well: I've seen them in the village, not long ago; they were back from France, they were happy. Are these the same men? At the time, they seemed to me to be big, very big, and now they are little, little, hiding in their beds. What is all this? Can you deceive yourself to this extent? Deep in my heart, I was clinging on to something else, I preferred to put it down to jealousy, to the selfishness of men. I said to myself: "It's the same old story, just like home; as soon as someone gets out of a tight spot, he wants to be the only winner." I'm not even in France yet, and here they are doing all they can to make me sick of it, to predict the very worst. Why did you come? I don't know what stopped me from replying: "And what about you, what are you doing here? Have you forgotten? Do you think you're going to be the only winners?" The reason why I said nothing is that my head was all in a muddle, I still didn't know where I was, I wasn't "stabilized" yet, not settled.

'Afterwards, it all went very quickly. When you have seen this one and that one, been to this house and that house, you realize that it's the same every time; what one man has said to you is repeated by the other; what you've seen in one man's home, you find in the next man's home, and finally you reconcile yourself to the obvious. That's the truth. I discovered what exile [*elghorba*] is. When they go back home, they might well joke about "their homeland that has become a foreign land [*elghorba*]", but exile is always exile. Of course they say, "Home has become exile [*elghorba*] to me", when they are "caught in the darkness", but basically no one believes them.'

'Every word we say is a lie'

'No, they never explained to us what France was really like before we got to know it. We see them coming home, they are well dressed, they bring back full suitcases, with money in their pockets, we see

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them spending that money without even thinking about it; they are handsome, they are fat. And when they talk, what do they say? They talk about their work. When they say "I do a difficult job", we admire them. If we suspect them of lying, it's because they boast of doing a difficult job, a hard job; work is always hard, you have to be strong to do it, and that means that they are making a lot of money. That is what you believe when you haven't seen with your own eyes. No one talks about all the rest of it.

'When they come back on holiday, it's summer, with big crowds in the village, joy everywhere, parties. Before I knew, I thought it was always like that in France too, that they were bringing all that joy back with them. No, what do you expect from desolate faces? I realized that it was not *their* joy – quite the opposite – that they came back home to find, no matter what they said. . . . When I go back to the village, I'm like them too, what do you expect me to say? Even if I did talk about my work and told them the truth: "I do a dirty job, the poison gets into my stomach; I'm working myself to death, between the French I work with and us, it's like cat and dog."⁹ It is as though I told them nothing about all that. Telling them that I am working is all that matters to them, and that is all they will hear. So why plunge them into the "darkness"? In any case, nothing will shake their faith. In order to understand anything about France, you have to have been there first. . . . a man who has seen nothing [of France] listens and remains convinced that his happiness is in the "future", that it is waiting there for him, and that all he has to do is to forge ahead. If you have to come here to France in order to know the truth, it's a bit late – too late.

' . . . I too will answer the questions I am asked. What else can I do? It's not lying. But what I mustn't do is exaggerate out of pride or boasting. So, I'd rather keep quiet than say just anything – that is lying! We are to blame, we emigrants, as they call us: when we come back from France, everything we do and every word we say is a lie; it's our fault. If we attached any value to our money, it wouldn't be like that. We are too free with our money, it's as though it jumped out of our pockets all by itself: we throw it away as though it was pouring in through the doors and windows. Everyone is free to imagine that we earned it effortlessly. And now, the story they told you before comes true: it seems that over there, you have only to bend down to pick up notes of 10,000 francs. In fact, if they saw how we earn that money, the squalor we live in order to save money, it's enough to make you hate that money, it's too bitter, it really is oleander.¹⁰ We are here, we remember nothing. When you have eaten, you forget that you were hungry, you spend "like someone who has come back from France", as they so aptly put it. When you need something, it's as though the need made you forget everything you have been through. If it weren't for that, why return to France, when you already know what France is like? It really must be a question of need. We are all the same; it's as though God had "struck" us; no sooner do we find ourselves in one place than God immediately

makes the other place softer for us. No sooner have we got off [disembarked, in the sense of arriving back home], than we forget it all. We start all over again and go back to France as though nothing had happened.

'After what I've seen, I swear that I will never deceive anyone again! This summer, for the first time I've been back to the village – it hasn't even been a year – I saw them all arriving, I was back there long before them, I was back there in August. They found me in the village, as in previous years, I was in working clothes, I'd been harvesting, as in the past. Nothing had changed; it was the village's old Mohand, that's all. When it so happens that you all meet up as a group like that, those who have come back and those who have not yet gone away: just listen to them! Boasts, lies: "I've done this, I've done that; I've got this, I've got that", and so it goes on. I let him talk and when he has nothing left to add, I nettle him and make him jump: "I've come back too." A lot of people still don't know I'm in France; here in Paris, there aren't many of them [immigrants from his village] and in Lyon [where most of the emigrant population from the village is concentrated] only those who are close to me know. In my own mind, I tell all the rest of them: "Right, I'll 'bring out' all your lies; it's no good dressing things up and using fancy words." And the more wretched they are, the more they exaggerate. "Look, you, I know what goes on, I know what you've been up to, and how you live – I've seen you over there." "You're joking, how could you see me, have you got binoculars that can see from here to there?" "Because I've been there too, and you know it. I've just come back, I've only been here for a few days, that's all. So, don't tell lies, lie to the others, but not to me because I've seen it. Or do you think I'm going to cover up for you and take your side? Now, since that's what you want, we're going to tell the truth to those who are listening to us, who haven't seen. You boast about how much you earn – the truth is that you don't even earn half that. You don't even manage to make "two shares" of what I earn. Your room, which isn't yours, but B.'s, he took you in, didn't he? Are you denying it? How many times have you not had enough to pay for it? Either he or D. had to pay for you, otherwise you'd have found your suitcase in the street; you eat on credit in the café, I'm sure that even today, now that you are here among us, you still have debts: you haven't paid for what you ate last month. I take you all as my witnesses, go and ask Ch. at Y. if he paid for the journey that brought him here with his own money. If he paid, I'm the liar, and not him." Because, both over there and back here, your hair's always all over the place. He lets his hair grow long, and he goes to the barber's when he gets to Algiers. Two days after he gets his wages, he still has a little money in his pocket; but after two days, you mustn't ask anything more of him. After that, when he wants anything, even a cigarette, unless he can beg it from someone, he won't get it. That's the "little man" we have in France, that man there who is deafening everyone with his din. Back there, when monsieur has money, off he goes, because I've seen him go off like

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that and people have told me about his exploits, he is here and there, going from café to café, and the first guy he meets can get him to go anywhere. And so it goes on until his pockets are empty. Shake them, turn them inside out, and not a centime will fall out. And then you see our man coming back to the neighbourhood where everyone lives, head down, not a word to say, hugging the walls; he goes back to his room and never comes out – because he hasn't a bean in his pockets. And now he's like an "ascetic believer". And now that he's at leisure, now that "the situation is easy for him" he begins to ramble on and on.'

A spontaneous theory of reproduction

Mohand A. is a young immigrant aged 21 who came to France little more than a year ago. Originally from a village which, as he himself says, has 'many more people in France than at home', he belongs to that generation of young countrymen who, in a region with a very old and very strong tradition of emigration (the mountains of Kabylia), have no other future prospects and, initially, no ambition but to leave. Indeed, because, on the one hand, he was not of the right age to benefit from the recent education campaigns in rural areas (to use his own words, he did little more than 'slip furtively' into 'the makeshift school' that was opened in the premises where the *djemaâ* or local assembly met), he could not, unlike those young men with a minimal level of education (a primary education certificate or a vocational training certificate), hope to find a stable job either in the city, in neighbouring villages or even at home, that might prevent him from having to emigrate. And because, on the other hand, he did not belong to any of the traditional great peasant families who owned fields, trees and livestock, he could not, quite apart from the general disaffection that has hit traditional agriculture, and which not even members of land-owning families escape, resign himself to his condition as a sharecropper, or in other words a *fellah* working someone else's land for their benefit.

Being acutely aware of the peculiar position he occupies amongst all the other men of the village, and because he refuses to do anything that could be seen as a challenge, or to make any response that might look like a challenge, Mohand A. will, in the space of a few years, experience in a surprisingly short space of time and very directly all the upheavals that have overtaken the old peasant social order. The rural community is completely disintegrating and, as a result of various factors (primarily emigration and all its implications, which are not solely economic),

it is not only traditional agricultural tasks that are being neglected because their archaism and futility are becoming obvious. The entire peasant spirit has been seriously damaged and all the old values are being undermined. To go on believing (or pretending to believe), if only for a while, in the peasant condition, and to go on clinging (or pretending to cling) to the land with all the strength of the neophyte, can in the circumstances only be a defiant attitude.

Indeed, attempting the impossible by working what he himself recognizes to be 'fields that, not so long ago, he was forbidden to cross', acquiring a pair of oxen 'in a house which, for as long as anyone can remember, has never seen an ox cross the threshold' – these are not the result of some desire to make himself stand out. Still less do they constitute some archaic desire to rejoin the clan of the 'farmers of the past' – survivors from another era who struggle to work the land as though nothing had changed, the naive *bou-niya*, 'men of a different time' – and of all the old widows who are inconsolable as they see the lands of their house lying fallow or being farmed so carelessly.

For this 'son of a widow', as he likes to call himself, who is from a 'family which has never owned a field or an ox', who boasts of having 'become a man by himself, through his actions and not through his name' (which was handed down to him like the rest of his heritage), making an entry into adult life and making a name for himself in accordance with the traditional norms that define peasant excellence (*thafallahth*) is, in a certain manner, his way of taking revenge on the old landed 'aristocracy'. The aristocracy, whose own sons are turning away from the land, are now, just like all the other men in the village, either local wage-earners or emigrants, or quite simply 'idlers' (*marthab*) of a new kind. Unlike those men (usually heads of families) whose social position ensured them the status of 'men who have the leisure to be at rest' and who were liberated from working on the land (or at least from the most onerous tasks) and could therefore devote themselves to prestigious functions that might be said to be 'representative', today's 'idlers' in fact tend to regard themselves as 'unemployed', when, in order not to have to admit to what they are, they do their utmost to come up with all sorts of alibi: illness, or the ambiguous status of being a former or future emigrant.

If he is not to lapse too quickly and too readily into this widely shared disaffection with traditional activities, he must first convince himself, and then others, that he can and will conform to the old ideal of the man of honour and the accomplished peasant. Proving to himself and others that he can, even though he started out with

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nothing, build a 'full house' in the old sense of the term – meaning a house with land, animals and produce – is of course still an eminently praiseworthy accomplishment that just has to be admired; but he has to do so at an inopportune moment, and that inevitably leads to disillusionment, especially because he has invested too late in a market that has lost its value. Indeed, because of the demonstrative value that has been assigned it, it is in the very nature of the task he has undertaken that, as soon as it has been successful and because it has been successful, its very function should disappear. There then follows a whole process which, as one thing after another is abandoned, leads to an awareness of the futility of trying to perpetuate agriculture in its old form. It leads to the accumulation of debts and, in the same way that one challenge leads to another, to emigration being seen as the only resort, as the final solution that can break the infernal circle of rural proletarianization, and as the 'emancipatory' act *par excellence*. 'Let he who wants to be a man go to France.' There is now no point in proving that one can work the landowners' lands 'better than they could do it', or that 'you can live off it as well as they did in the past'; that, like them you can own your flock, when what matters if you want recognition is 'showing what you are made of' in a different domain, outside the village and, in accordance with a different logic, other than by working the land.

The village from which Mohand A., together with the entire group of his patrilineal relatives, originates has been strongly influenced by emigration. Like other emigrants, A. likes to count how many men from his village are in France and how many have remained in or returned to the village: he says that his village has seen 92 families and 197 men leave for France. As a result of this, only 146 men are now at home, 105 of whom are former emigrants. If we exclude those men who have, with their families, emigrated to towns in Algeria itself, the agnatic group to which A. belongs has 33 men in France (13 of whom have emigrated with their families), leaving only 18 in the village. Within the minority that guarantees the group's presence in the village, only 10 men have never lived in France, and if we exclude the youngest of them, there is only one, now in his fifties, who has, for health reasons, never emigrated. Of the others, who are all under 30, only two can be considered possible candidates for emigration because, unlike the others, they have been unable to find relatively stable waged jobs at home.

The village has a long tradition of emigration. Of the total of 51 men who now constitute the same kinship group (*adhrum*), 38 have a father who either emigrated to France (when he was still capable of working there) or who was, at some stage, a worker there (or even in

Belgium, as was the case with Mohand A.'s father), and 11 have a grandfather who emigrated. That this migratory movement has a long history emerges even more clearly if we attempt to reconstruct the evolution of the number of men who left successively from 1913 onwards – that, it seems, being the date of the first emigrant's departure from the village (it goes without saying that account is taken only of those emigrants who, for one reason or another, are remembered): between 1913 and 1920 (in other words during the whole of the First World War), 11 men emigrated to France; between 1921 and 1928, 10 more followed; there was no further emigration until 1936, when 7 men emigrated between then and 1939. The Second World War interrupted the process, but it is from 1946 onwards that we find the greatest number of departures: in the space of three years, 15 men, all under the age of 20, emigrated; and in 1952–62 and 1963–73, respectively, 15 and 10 cases of emigration are recorded.

It is not simply that the length of stay outside the home country increases as time goes by (in some cases they might last more than ten years) and that they are now almost continuous (there are many emigrants who, over a period of some twenty years, have returned to the village only once or twice, and only for the duration of their annual holidays). The emigrant condition itself is becoming permanent, and the status of the emigrants is in a sense becoming more stable. Indeed, taking only the category of the youngest emigrants who arrived in France from 1946 onwards (their average age when they first emigrated was very young, the oldest of them being under 24), of a total of 34 men (excluding those who had died in the meantime, all the deaths having occurred in France), only 5 returned to the village for good and 3 settled in towns after their return to Algeria.

Of the emigrants of long standing who are still in France – they are also the oldest – some have spent almost their entire active lives in France; some of them are even beyond retirement age (two brothers who emigrated in 1919 and 1937 and who are now 73 and 61 years old respectively; two other emigrants aged 67 and 59, who came to France in 1928 and 1938 respectively, etc.).

It is not surprising that the entire life of the village should eventually become closely dependent upon the life of the emigrants; the entire local community 'hangs on' its emigration, which it calls 'France'. The village is constantly on the alert and listening to that part of itself from which it has been separated. It is responsible for amplifying in its own way the gossip that gets home. It adopts the rhythms of emigration as they are forced upon it by the news – letters and postal orders – that comes from France, as well as by the return of its emigrants, which occurs periodically.

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At a more basic level, it is the very position of each family or group of families within the structure of the village that is determined by the age and size of its emigration. The first families to have ‘delegated’ emigrants to France were also the first to have monetary capital at their disposal. Those families that are sufficiently rich in men to be present both in the village and abroad are now in a good position to combine the advantages and signs of both kinds of capital on which the social hierarchy is based: economic capital (which is increasingly supplied by emigration) and symbolic capital (which depends upon the ‘good use’ the men who have stayed at home can make of that economic capital).

Ultimately, each individual’s status is defined only in relation to emigration. The village men stand out only when, in very rare cases, they can avoid having to emigrate (or can, at the very least, find a relatively stable waged job) or when, on the contrary and in the majority of cases, they are forced to emigrate or experience their repeated emigration as having been forced on them. The latter are further divided into those who, because they can meet the demands made of anyone entering and remaining in France, have the institutional possibility of emigrating at a date and for a time that suits them and, on the other hand, those who, because they cannot conform to the regulations, can only sustain the illusory hope of becoming possible emigrants one day. Both groups (with the exception of those who have deliberately excluded themselves from the pool of potential emigrants) in fact live in the village only on a ‘temporary’ basis, rather as though ‘they only spent their holidays there’, because their day-to-day practice is largely determined by the emigration project. They are called ‘stop-gap men’ or ‘men of the moment’, as opposed to the life force that has deserted the village; or ‘men of the house’, ‘inside men’, i.e., those who perform the thankless and lowly task of working the land, as opposed to the ‘outside men’ who are involved in public relations, relations with the outside world, the market and, of course, work outside – in other words, in France. As they count only because they are physically present in the village, they are ‘emigrants at home’. Having been freed from the need to emigrate, the youngest of them are inclined to break with, or have already broken with, the traditional peasant condition, precisely because of the stable and sufficiently prestigious jobs they have. Even if they returned from France a very long time ago, the others continue to behave as ‘emigrants’, or in other words as ‘guests in their own house’ or as ‘masters of the house who have returned home only in order to leave sooner or later’, but who insist on perpetuating a situation and making it look as comfortable as they can for ‘as long as the money from France lasts’.

When asked to describe his experience as an emigrant, and especially the contradiction he discovers between the reality of his emigrant condition and the enchanted image he previously had of France (because that was the picture his group painted for him), the informant reveals the social conditions that produce that contradiction. Because he is constantly moving between one world and the other, his whole vision of emigration – what he calls ‘France’ – and the discourse through which he communicates that vision are both condemned to borrowing from the two worlds in which all emigrants are involved. Being an expression of this awkward situation, language itself ‘plays on’ the possibility of having recourse to both the registers available to it. Quite apart from the many borrowings, some used in their original sense and others reinterpreted, it makes from French (which are emphasized in the text), the very structure of the language appears to be the result of ‘strange’ combinations of form and content that, apparently, do not seem to be in perfect harmony.

At times, it is by using new expressions, borrowed from the French and then reinterpreted, that the informant best succeeds in describing an experience which, even when it appears to be new, still relates to the traditional mode. Thus, *thajarnat* (day) refers to a day of waged work, or the day’s wage, as opposed to a day of work performed as an act of charity or barter (*ass urattal*). At other times, and conversely, traditional forms of discourse – sayings, proverbs, ways of speaking and turns of phrase – are used to express a new content: *elghith* (help), which is part of the rain ritual in which one ‘begs pity (from heaven) by sacrificing a victim’, is used to refer to small incomes paid to former emigrants (they are homologous with the rain which, in peasant tradition, assured prosperity throughout the year).

The experience of emigration itself is both organized and described in accordance with traditional schemata: the informant describes ‘France’ by resorting to the vocabulary of the mythico-ritual system. Descriptions of emigrants’ conditions of existence borrow from the great traditional oppositions: inside-outside, full-empty, light-dark, etc. No matter whether it is described as the direct opposite of the homeland (in which case it is credited with having qualities that are denied the homeland, or, conversely, it is blamed for many ills that are unknown at home) or, on the contrary, as its equivalent, at least in some respects (the presence of many relatives), France is always characterized by a series of attributes which constitute the series antithetical to that applied to the homeland, a set of homologous oppositions (see table 1). All that is needed to make the same series express the converse experience is a change of sign or, more directly, an invocation of the vocabulary of reversal which, as is well known,

Table 1

Kabylia	France	Kabylia	France
Narrow	Broad	Weak	Strong
Twisted	Straight	Evil	Good
Wrong	Right	Poor	Rich
Inverted	Upright	Dark	Light
Backward	Forward	Accursed	Blessed
Contrary	Favourable	Loneliness	Company
Difficult	Easy	Fear	Confidence
Fall	Rise	Sadness	Joy
Scorn	Value	Etc.	Etc.

plays its role in ritual practices of inversion (*aqlab*); hence the use of a whole vocabulary with mythical connotations (*abdel*, ‘change’; *a’waj*, ‘twisting’, ‘inversion’; *aqul*, ‘turn inside out’, etc.) and the inversions to which the opposition between the land of exile (*elghorba*) and the native land (*elghorba* becomes *le pays*) is subjected: ‘the land of our birth has become *elghorba*’.

The entire discourse of the emigrant is organized around the triple truth of *elghorba*. In traditional logic, *elghorba* is associated with ‘sunset’ and ‘darkness’, with going away and isolation (amongst foreigners, and therefore exposed to their hostility and scorn), with exile and fear (the fear inspired by night and the fact of getting lost in a forest or a hostile natural environment), with being lost (because you have lost your sense of direction), or with misfortune, etc. In the idealized vision of emigration as a source of wealth and a decisive act of emancipation, *elghorba*, intentionally and violently denied in its traditional meaning, tends (without completely succeeding in doing so) to bear another truth which identifies it, rather, with happiness, light, joy, confidence, etc. The experience of the reality of emigration dispels the illusion and re-establishes *elghorba* in its original truth. It is the entire experience of the emigrant that oscillates between these two contradictory images of *elghorba*. Being unable to resolve the contradiction in which he is trapped, because he would have to abandon emigration, his only option is to mask it.

It is by using the resources of the mythical tradition that the informant produces an actual model of the mechanism by which emigration is reproduced, and in which the alienated and mystified experience of emigration fulfils an essential function. The collective misrecognition of the objective truth of emigration is the necessary mediation that allows economic necessity to exercise its power. And the misrecogni-

tion is sustained by the entire group, by emigrants who select the information they bring back when they spend time in their country, by former emigrants who 'enchant' the memories they retain of France, and by candidates for emigration who project their most unrealistic aspirations onto 'France'.