

## SOME COMMENTS REGARDING DEBATES ABOUT PIERRE BOURDIEU'S "THE KABYLE HOUSE"

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The "Kabyle house" was the subject of an initial investigation conducted by Pierre Bourdieu in Kabylia starting in 1958, after his military service, marking the young philosopher's entry into ethnology. The context in which this research was conducted is often misunderstood, leading to many misinterpretations. This research is based on materials collected during a pivotal period (1958-1964), first in a conflict situation, then at the end of the war, and finally during the early stages of independence. It draws on a wealth of ethnographic, sociological, historical, and statistical knowledge — not to mention many photographs.

Breaking with the primitivism prevalent at the University of Algiers in the 1950s, the description of the Kabyle house is rooted in a structuralist perspective<sup>1</sup> that engages binary systems of oppositions: the divisions of the house (*akham*), the bright and dark areas, the dry and humid zones, the spaces for humans and animals, for women and men, the inside and the outside, etc. Read and analyzed belatedly in France as a completed study, "The Kabyle House" is actually an evolving sketch aimed at highlighting the basic unit of society. To grasp the *modus operandi* of the group in preserving its integrity, Bourdieu cross-referenced the analytical categories of his time (mainly derived from structuralism) with indigenous classifications. His goal was to make visible the anthropological and sociological structures (economic rationality, symbolic and cultural dimensions, etc.) denied by the colonial system. In other words: to restore the native vision while subjecting it to critical distance. The house is both the smallest and most determinative segment on which the entire structure (social, economic, political, symbolic) is based. Thus, *akham* represents this foundation, this core (*ighs*) that underpins the social world, and it takes on this meaning because it is inscribed within a set of concentric circles evolving from the

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<sup>1</sup> This description was published in 1970 in a tribute book to Claude Lévi-Strauss (Bourdieu, 1970), before being included in *Esquisse d'une*

*théorie de la pratique* (Bourdieu, 1972) and later in *Le Sens pratique* (Bourdieu, 1980).

smallest to the largest (*adrum, afrag, taxxerubt, taqbilt*, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1972). This same taxonomy refers to both the structures represented in space and the kinship structures.

Moreover, the study of the house is a work in progress that fits within an ambitious monograph project on the Ait Hichem (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 11), who belong to the At Yahia tribe. Ait Hichem is a famous location for Kabyle carpets situated in the high mountains; as early as 1882, a school was established there, and it had a weaving workshop set up by the “White Sisters” (Laoust Chantréaux, 1990). During the War of Independence, its population was not evacuated; the army took up residence there, replacing the former workshop with an administrative section. In 1958, despite the military presence, the village had retained its social integrity.<sup>2</sup> This monograph, though not an end in itself, was also intended to serve as a basis for a comparative analysis of other groups in Algeria (Djemaa n Saharidj or Aghbala): sedentary peasants in the lower mountains; semi-nomads from the Aurès and, further afield, city dwellers from the M'zab (Bourdieu, 2003). He was then concerned with studying structures on

an even larger scale: the Mediterranean countries.<sup>3</sup>

In the foreword to *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, Bourdieu warns against a reading that would adhere to “the appearance of an undue autonomy of the symbolic order” because the analysis of the house is, according to him, “a fragment (to which, however, the homology between the house and the cosmos gives a central position) of an analysis of the structure of the mythico-ritual system.”<sup>4</sup> Also in this foreword, he notes that these two early texts, “already old,” were carried out under extremely risky and particularly difficult conditions. To interpret them, it is therefore necessary to place them in the “complete system of objective relations” within which they take on their meaning. The best way to reveal the uniqueness of the study on the Kabyle house is to focus on constructing a model for understanding the relationships between symbolic structures and social structures: this “microcosm organized according to the same oppositions and homologies that order the entire universe — the house has a relationship of homology with the rest of the universe” (Bourdieu, 1972). For example, *Ikanun* is both the fire, the hearth,

<sup>2</sup> Archive drafts show the genealogies of the Ait Hichem, a sketch of the village with inhabited areas, the mosque, the fountain, and the cemetery where Bourdieu highlights the relationship to space.

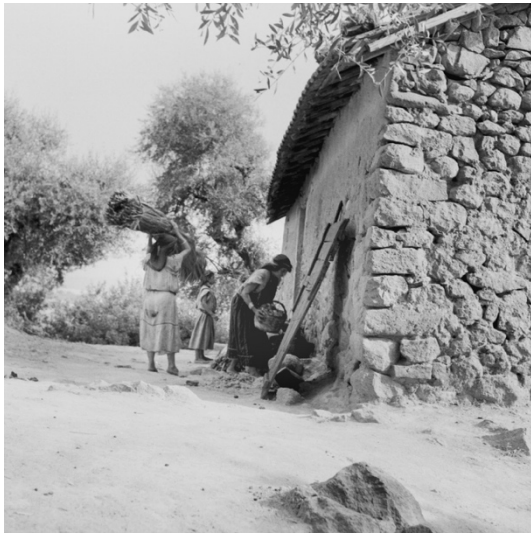
<sup>3</sup> In 1958, Bourdieu and Germaine Tillion considered establishing a research center focused on the Mediterranean.

<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, the house is comparable to the agrarian calendar “which reproduces in the transformed form of a coherent symbolic system the rhythms of the agricultural year” (work, plowing, sowing, harvests, etc.).

and the representation of the universe, and therefore destroying the hearth is to destroy the family, the house, and the cosmos.

Hence, one must have a non-anthropological reading to emphasize “the feeling of unreality” (Pouillon and Bensa, 2017, p. 155) that would emerge from the text, reducing it to a “professional exercise” when it is precisely the opposite: to reveal and make visible what was about to disappear imminently. This exercise, which would be part of the “identity toolkit of conventional ethnology,” would testify to a “nostalgic attachment to supposed intact worlds that many ethnologists of the time still cherished” (Pouillon and Bensa, 2017). This kind of critique was already formulated by Camille Lacoste-Dujardin in the 1970s: “It is precisely in the name of the dynamism of this same uprooting (research from the end of the war) that one can reproach the first two chapters of the book, *The Sense of Honor* and *The Kabyle House*, for appearing to sacrifice a now bygone past: the Kabyle society described by P. Bourdieu in these two texts is still that of a tradition that perhaps even dates back to the pre-colonial era” (1976). Silverstein's critique aims to be more contextualized, although he draws somewhat hasty conclusions from his second-hand readings (he has not been in the field and bases himself on a very limited number of testimonies from young Parisian immigrants disconnected from

the reality of their countries): “Bourdieu's presentation of the *akham* as a space of social reproduction constitutes an example of what Herzfeld called ‘structural nostalgia.’ (...) The nostalgia for the integrity of the house and the Kabyle village life was not simply a facet of Bourdieu's political critique or his own ethnographic bias but rather a direct emanation of the self-magnified presentation by his informants of a frozen image of an intact and forever lost past” (Silverstein, 2003).



From top left to bottom:

- Pierre Bourdieu, *Images d'Algérie*, 1957 - 1961. Archive No. N\_092\_808. © Fondation Pierre Bourdieu / Courtesy: Camera Austria, Graz, Austria.

- Pierre Bourdieu, Beni-Zmenzer (Kabylie), *Images d'Algérie*, 1957 - 1961. Archive No. R\_105. © Fondation Pierre Bourdieu / Courtesy: Camera Austria, Graz, Austria.

- Pierre Bourdieu, Ain Aghbel (Collo), *Images d'Algérie*, 1957 - 1961. Archive No. N\_088\_786. © Fondation Pierre Bourdieu / Courtesy: Camera Austria, Graz, Austria.

- Pierre Bourdieu, Cheraia CdR, *Images d'Algérie*, 1957 - 1961. Archive No. N\_025\_735. © Fondation Pierre Bourdieu / Courtesy: Camera Austria, Graz, Austria.

- Pierre Bourdieu, Ain Aghbel (Collo), CdR, *Images d'Algérie*, 1957 - 1961. Archive No. N\_082\_705. © Fondation Pierre Bourdieu / Courtesy: Camera Austria, Graz, Austria.

Pouillon and Bensa also take up Paul Silverstein's thesis (2003) but de-historicize it even further: for example, by claiming that the Kabyle house no longer existed when Bourdieu was in Kabylia, which is a manifest falsehood, as evidenced not only by the photographs taken by Bourdieu in other villages but also by various field studies conducted well after Algeria's independence,<sup>5</sup> traces of which can still be found for instance in Akfadou Bibans villages of Maritime Kabylia.<sup>6</sup>

The testimony of Jacques Budin, a young investigator close to Abdelmalek Sayad and Salah Bouhedja, provides further refutation: Bourdieu was taking photos on-site at the time when the population was being displaced from the mountains to the camp and was documenting the facts.<sup>7</sup> The decisive transformation of a coherent peasant world structured into a fragmented and deconstructed “society”

(that of the camps) was not at all a nostalgic or “self-magnified” vision but expressed the reality of a world that was disappearing before the powerless gaze of the investigators:

“I found in Bourdieu's very beautiful book of Algerian photographs the ones he took in my presence. I witnessed something quite harsh but very interesting, which was a regrouping operation in Kerker. I saw with my own eyes (...) people who were in a small hamlet in the mountains dismantling the roof of their house, removing the tiles, taking everything down to go and settle in the Kerker regroupment camp where there were huts – it was quite terrible, and this was later described in *Uprooting* by Bourdieu and Sayad. I kept this memory of people who dismantled the roofs of their houses in the mountains – very pretty little houses with these *ikoufan* (earthen storage jars for food products) decorated

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance works of Michel Cornaton (1967), Ramon Basagagna and Abdelmalek Sayad (1973), Mohand Abbouda (1985) or Mohamed Dahmani (2022). Numerous theses and dissertations have been conducted on Kabyle houses in architecture and ethnology, some of which were defended at the University of Mouloud Mammeri in Tizi-Ouzou. Additionally, Kabyle associations are mobilizing to preserve the Kabyle houses still present in some villages.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Jebba in the *wilaya* of Bédjaia has been fully restored. In Abbès, At Wihdan, Boudjellil, At Sidi Braham, M'zita, Zemmoura, Guenzet, etc., the exterior architecture has been maintained. However, interior arrangements have begun to change only since the 1970s due to the decline in agriculture, the absence of animals, male emigration, and more generally, the predominance of the urban model over the rural

one, which had already been initiated in the regrouping camps.

<sup>7</sup> It was by observing these roofless houses and their jars, violently destroyed by the army – jars that contained all the Kabyle and Mediterranean memory – that Bourdieu declared becoming aware, beyond the visible structures, of the importance of rituals and the entire unconscious dimension, in fact an *habitus* that is passed down from generation to generation without the intervention of agents (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 10). According to some specialists (Moreau, 1976), Kabyle craftsmanship has preserved the major symbols of antiquity. Bourdieu, aware of this relationship, had also frequented Père Devulder, a White Father and ethnologist, who lived in the Ouadhias tribe for practical knowledge of the symbols painted on the walls by women.

with snakes inside. Sayad explained to me all these symbols.” (Budin, 2022)

The dehistoricized critique of Bourdieu's Algerian studies is problematic because it offers a biased perception of the situation. It is not only false (Kabyle houses had not disappeared by the late 1950s, and they can still be found even up until the 1990s), but it also tends to obscure the specifically political rupture that these studies operated in a historical context that the sociologist had incorporated from the beginning of his work.<sup>8</sup>

The study of the Kabyle house was therefore not carried out based on indirect testimonies by displaced people in relocation camps, ignoring the real situation of the populations, as has been claimed.<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore risky to suggest that the study was conducted after the fact, meaning after the displacement when it

was actually carried out simultaneously in a village that had not been emptied of its population. It remained “standing” long after independence, just like Aghbala,<sup>10</sup> where Bourdieu verified information<sup>11</sup> and in the group of Ouadhias, as evidenced by the numerous photographs of richly decorated interiors.<sup>12</sup> The field studies that allowed Bourdieu to write the articles “The Kabyle House” (1979 [1972]) and “The Sense of Honour” (1979 [1972]) even preceded those that led to *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963) and *Uprooting* (2020 [1964]). The first set of studies was of personal interest to Bourdieu, while the second was part of collective work from a public field study requiring administrative authorization. The chronology and events related to the political situation are crucial here: understanding the former allows one to make sense of the latter.

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<sup>8</sup> See the numerous texts on sociology in the context of colonial war (Bourdieu, 2008; Bourdieu, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Entire villages remained intact because, in these cases, it was the army that moved among the population. Bourdieu and Sayad themselves distinguished the “regrouped” from the “confined” – the latter having retained their houses. The “confined” were allowed to work in the fields under military surveillance, which was a considerable favor (Yacine, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> The village of Sayad, where Bourdieu stayed. Sayad's house still exists and is regularly visited by students from the University of Bédjaia.

<sup>11</sup> In Ait Hichem, Bourdieu focused more on the external structures of the houses. In Aghbala, in Lower Kabylie, his attention was on the interior of the house and its symbolic dimension, which

he refers to as structural homologies. As mentioned previously, Père Devulver provided him with insights into the meanings of the symbols carved on the walls.

<sup>12</sup> In 1958, four years before independence, the establishment of camps was not yet widespread throughout Kabylie; it was implemented gradually. Initially, villages suspected of collaborating with the *maquisards* were grouped together. Furthermore, these camps were kept secret until 1959, and access was prohibited without administrative authorization, as Michel Rocard details (2003 [1959]). Due to his incorporation into the General Government during his service, Pierre Bourdieu was acquainted with the military practices within the country.

In reality, if Bourdieu focused on describing the “inherited” old house, the archetypal and ancestral model, it was not at all out of nostalgia but because he was witnessing a “programmed pathological change” (Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964) carried out by the army, whose goal at the time was to “uproot” the peasants from their own land and erase the memory of everything that characterized the pre-colonial world. Thus, the establishment of a new form of habitation is not synonymous with progress<sup>13</sup> but with social regression and, more precisely, repression imposed by the political situation. It is evident that understanding the mode of living “after” (that of the soldier, which is considered modern and comfortable)<sup>14</sup> can only be intelligible in opposition to that of “before” (that of the peasant rooted in a collective cultural habitus). This is precisely where the bias in this controversy lies: the absence of field experience leads to imposing supposed universal theories on a specific subject at a very singular moment in its history.

In reality, it is the interpretation of “indigenous” divisions that is raised, in the sense that Bourdieu incorporates in his interpretation categories and systems of oppositions still heavily

influenced by a certain scholastic point of view: “In French colonial sociology as in contemporary anthropological theory, the Kabyle house (or *akham*) constitutes the touchstone where Algerian cultural distance (exteriority) meets the particular relations of domestic distinction (interiority)” (Silverstein, 2003). His analysis was also an epistemological rupture: it was necessary to break free from scientific stagnation, perceived as a political position by the academic world of the University of Algiers.

It is this analysis of a “unified symbolic order” that Bourdieu would later contest: because he himself found his first “structuralist” analysis of the house somewhat “naive” and because he realized that the constitutive practices of the *akham* should be considered within strategies of reproduction that do not merely obey the rules of this symbolic order. This critique of structuralism, which led him to move “from rule to strategies” (Bourdieu, 1987) was conducted during the study of matrimonial exchanges in Kabylia but also in Béarn.

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<sup>13</sup> Military propaganda aimed to present the camps as places of “well-being” where the population would be protected from the National Liberation Army and would experience social progress (care, schooling) with access to “modernity”.

<sup>14</sup> Produced by military propaganda, the regrouping camps are, for some, concentration camps. Jean-Marie Robert, a fervent Gaullist and deputy in Akbou, reported very interesting testimonies about the reality of the camps (2022). See also Fabien Sacriste (2022).

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