

Violence, exclusion, death.

It is hard to start this article any other way when there have been so many deaths in Algeria over the past year. Tragedy is ripping apart the body and mind of this long-suffering country, once again plunged into torment, once again gone astray.

When he arrived at the first oasis, some men who were sprawled around after quenching their thirst let their dogs loose on him and fired off their rifles. And with his stomach churning he went off far away under the setting sun.

Tahar Djaout, Solstice barbelé

These deaths seem strangely inevitable, there is a kind of continuity of destruction in a society that has lost its bearings. Poet, scholar, writer, university professor, doctor, journalist: these were the professions of the assassinated citizens. These are the kinds of people who have been and may be put to death through a carefully prepared execution, coldly carried out.

But how can one not mention the others, the anonymous ones? Who remembers the young man of Kouba whose throat was slit? Because his brother was a policeman. Who remembers the young fiancée, 21 years old, who was assassinated in front of her home, because she was a stenographer in a police station? Do we remember the little girl of three burned alive in 1990 by the butcher of intolerance, not far from the city of Tlemsen? Crime: her mother lived alone. How can one not talk about

these abominations, bloody and humanly intolerable ? Every day, for the past four years, these crimes have magnified and crystallised the antagonisms that cut across society, that cut across families. One can only ask: who profits from the crime? The least we can do is to pose the question of the origin of the liquidation of a part of the intellectual class. Who gave the orders? The least we can do is to doubt the versions put forth. The Algerian tragedy is unfolding in a climate of extreme political confusion, with enormous conflicts of interests at stake behind the scenes, and everything we see happening takes place against a backdrop of power struggles, clan rivalries, strategic political concessions, unnatural alliances, strange bedfellows, and the co-optation of History.

But this doesn't mean that we should close our eyes when, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, crimes are claimed, justified, explained or encouraged, ideologically, through the media, by the leaders, activists and symphatizers of political Islam, whatever its other tendencies might be.

The intellectuals who have been lost were competent, creative, hard-working, socially irreproachable. They were rooted in the reality of their country and their society – contrary to the hostile propaganda, spread by supposedly serious people. These intellectuals refused to conform.

Their analyses, their interests, their approaches were different, as is necessarily the case when there is a plurality of ideas. But a common goal brought them together. They believed in a democratic, pluralistic, modern Algeria of liberty, in a society and a state of law. Their writings and the positions they took bear witness to a refusal of fatalism. They refused the ineluctability of regression, the supposedly "fertile regression" inherent in the theocratic program. A totalitarian system, the theocratic program is based on "world guilt," and... can only function through the symbolic and physical exclusion of individuals. With the assassination of these men, Algeria has entered into a vicious circle – the liquidation of intelligence. From now on, what can it mean to "think"? How can we think when ideas themselves are sticky with blood? Public discourse – the universe of debate, of criticism, of discussion, based on the

"principles of reason," placing the "individual at the centre of the exchange" – is already imperfect. What reflection can occur, what ideas can be put forth, when this universe of discourse is confronted by wide-spread violence?

"The Mahdi, the founder, escaped me, took advantage of my exhaustion, broke the bars of my mind. How can I stand this coma?"

Tahar Djaout, L'invention du désert

On June 2 1993, after seven days in a deep coma, after having fought with all of his rare and ultimate energy against death, Tahar Djaout, journalist, writer, the "mathematican-poet," "born for friendship," succumbed to the bullet which had perforated his skull. One of the accomplices of the "volunteer assassins" declared after his arrest: "He (Djaout) had a formidable pen. He had an enormous influence on Muslims." This is similar to the discourse put forth on June 28th, live on Radio France International: "The pen of the spirit is a greater assassin" (than the gun). Tahar Djaout is accused of "thought crimes," something the poet had foreseen years before:

"Kill them, my son. They are hatching a subversive verb."

T. Djaout, L'Arche à vau-l'eau

Tahar Djaout was born in 1954 in Oulkhou, a tiny village 400 meters from the sea as the crow flies and 15 kilometres from Azzefoun (the "Windy Cape" in Berber, ex-Port Gueydon), in the province of Tizi Ouzou.

Azzefoun is a small village, disinherited, "insignificant" and ignored by the powers-that-be. It is also the native land – "Thammourth Naagh" (Berber for "our land") – of the artist-painter M'hamed Issiakhem; of the great, unparalleled master of *chaaâbi* popular music El Hadj M'hamed el-Anka, who was beaten down by the bureaucracy and the ignorance of his time; of the poet-martyr Bachir Hadj Ali; of the great composer Mohamed Iguerbouchen; and of so many other artists and national creators. But Azzefoun is also the country of Moumeri, honorable outlaw of the beginning of the century, who was relentlessly hunted and then put to death by the colonial administration.

Some years after the birth of Tahar Djaout, his family established itself in the Casbah of Algiers, as have many families

from Azzefoun for more than a century. There Djaout passed part of his childhood and adolescence, there he must have discovered the laughter of the endless stairways, the light of "Nila" (a kind of blue dye mixed with lime that covers the walls) and the infinite terraces of the mountain, "El Djebel," as its oldest inhabitants still call the Casbah.

In 1971, T. Djaout was 17 years old. He began his poetic search. Like his "shining brothers" Kateb Yacine and Arthur Rimbaud. A troubled time, difficult, marked by arrests and repression of progressive groups (high school and college students, union activists, leftists). A time of hope, when a generation of young poets appeared and flourished (with and around Jean Sénac). Poetry of revolt, of negation, of the unacceptable, of the refusal of resignation, "of the desperate desire to live and the will to be."

*I hear rising in you
The murmur of rivers
And welling up in your breasts
In your stubborn bones
The refusal to hoist up
The colors of silence*

L'Arche à vau-l'eau

After studying mathematics and getting a degree in Information Science, Djaout went into journalism. He stayed there almost twenty years. First of all, he worked patiently at literary criticism in the cultural department of El-Moudjahid. The cultural supplement of this semi-official daily enjoyed a relatively free range of expression during that period. This freedom was only relative, for not everything was admissible, and during those times the "barbarian axe" – the censor – inevitably cut off the head and the heart of the word.

Then his first texts and poems appeared, in poetry journals like *Le journal des poètes*, *Marginales*, *Alif*, *Promesses*, and then in collections: *Solstice Barbelé* appeared in 1974, *L'Arche à vau-l'eau* in 1975. In 1977, he began to write under a pseudonym for the review *Actualité de l'émigration*.

Starting in the 1980s, in the weekly *Algérie-Actualités*, he became one of those shaping a new journalism of cultural

opinion. Through articles, dossiers, and interviews, he set out to make known, to reveal, creative people – poets, novelists, artists, painters. He brought back memory and filiation to Algerian culture, claiming that it had been “created on the margins of power.” Names long forgotten were heard again: Jean Amrouche, Jean Sénac, Mouloud Ferraoun. And later Mouloud Mammeri, Bachir Hadj Ali.

After the tragedy of October 1988, Tahar Djaout carried his struggle more directly into the social arena. Although he refused any partisan political association, he involved himself in politics as an expression of civic responsibility, as an apprenticeship in citizenship. In his weekly column in *Algérie-Actualité*, he took sides: “Those who refuse to accept the defeat of reason and the somnolence of thought, those who raise their voices today, who organise to defend liberties, who sound an energetic warning against totalitarian tendencies, these men and these women are the honour of Algeria.” And he himself was one of them – with his fine features, his gentle gaze, and his voice which murmured like a spring in his native land. He discretely joined the Gathering of Artists, Intellectuals, and Scientists (*Rassemblement des artistes, intellectuels et scientifiques – R.A.I.S.*), and in November 1989, he spoke at a colloquium on intolerance. His talk was a thorough and unstinting reflection on an educational system that transmits prohibitions, produces fanaticism, castrates childhood.

In the same month of November, he signed and lent his support to a “Manifesto for Democracy and Tolerance” launched by the R.A.I.S. This Manifesto was a warning cry against “the rise of terrorism in everyday life, a terrorism clearly related to fascism, all the more dangerous in that it appropriates religion and benefits from an unacceptable complacency on the part of the public powers. This can be seen by the all-too-long list of its misdeeds since March 1989: crimes perpetrated against women, children, adolescents, union activists; artists, intellectuals, scientists (insults, calls to hatred and murder, death sentences, and the carrying out of these threats, attacks by fire and by gunfire, vigilante activities).” He called on every citizen to create the conditions for true democracy.

A free man, a critic of power and of the powers-that-be, Djaout was a "disturbing" intellectual. In one of his last published articles, written at the end of 1992 in *Algérie-Actualité*, he wrote: "These last two years, paradoxically just at the moment when Algeria opened itself to pluralism, the country, rudderless, went way off course... It would have taken little for it to veer right out of History. Lax to the point of complicity, the public powers allowed Algerian society to be violated and humiliated by the most unacceptable discourses, the most hypnotic and fascinating doctrines, the most extravagant theories. Few people spoke out with enough indignation and energy to denounce this fascism in everyday life."

Soon afterwards Djaout left *Algérie-Actualité*, and near the beginning of 1993, with a group of talented journalists, he founded the weekly *Ruptures* and became its editor-in-chief. Two months after Djaout's death, *Ruptures* was forced to close down when the printer refused to continue.

And now, what can we say, how can we respond to the lies and calumnies put forth by those who justify the murder of Tahar Djaout by calling him a "legitimator," a "manager," an "intellectual auxiliary of power." What can we say when they go on to affirm categorically that "the revolver is the natural choice when there is no space for democratic expression." Then they explain their murderous remarks: "These (assassinated) intellectuals symbolize nothing. They symbolize alienation."

"Intellectual auxiliaries...," "alienation," "sins of the spirit," "traitors of the spirit..." In 1974, Roland Barthes wrote: "The accusation which is periodically made against intellectuals is a magical one: the intellectual is treated like a witch might be by a clan of merchants, business men, and jurists: he is the one who disturbs ideological interests. Such a trial excites the gallery, like any witch hunt.. This shouldn't fool us about what is at stake. Quite simply, it's fascism that always and everywhere makes its first goal the liquidation of the intellectual class."

"Quite simply," it's fascism, whatever its color, that "liquidated" Tahar Djaout.

He leaves behind three little girls, and a widow pregnant with a fourth child he will never see, who will never know him.

*"Then even the idea of the oasis will be covered with sand,
and the only thing that will remain will be the touch of the reefs
tossing us about in a black and uncountable wandering"*

Tahar Djaout, Insulaire, 1980

Tahar Djaout

Born in Oulkhou, circle of Azzefoun, province of Tizi Ouzou. Married, three children. Degrees in Mathematics and Information Sciences. Reporter for the cultural supplement of *El-Moudjahid*, 1975-1977, and the weekly *Actualité de l'émigration*, Cultural section of *Algérie Actualité*, 1980-1992, Editor-in-chief of the weekly *Ruptures*, 1993. Assassinated on 2 June 1993 in Bainem, a suburb of Algiers.

Paris, July 1993

CISIA, Comité International de Soutien aux Intellectuels Algériens

105, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris

Face à la situation dramatique que connaît l'Algérie actuellement, un groupe d'intellectuels de différentes nationalités s'est réuni à Paris le 17 juin 1993. Il a décidé de créer un Comité international de soutien aux intellectuels algériens.

Cahier n°1 Tahar Djaout

Le Cahier du CISIA n°1, entièrement consacré à **Tahar Djaout**, est disponible. Il contient les écrits de presse de l'écrivain et des hommages de ses amis parus dans la presse algérienne.

Les adhérents du CISIA peuvent se le procurer au prix de 25 F (chèque à l'ordre du CISIA, à envoyer 105 bd Raspail, 75006 Paris, en mentionnant "Cahier n°1" sur la partie correspondance. Le prix public est fixé à 50 F (frais de port inclus).

Cahier n°2 Mahfoud Boucebc

Le Cahier du CISIA n°2, entièrement consacré à l'œuvre du psychiatre **Mahfoud Boucebc**, peut être commandé aux mêmes conditions.

Des extraits de ses travaux, des témoignages d'amis et de collègues, mettent en évidence dans ce Cahier la perte que son lâche assassinat instaure parmi ses proches, dans la communauté scientifique internationale où il avait de nombreuses responsabilités, et enfin pour son pays. Engagé dans la défense et la construction d'une société moderne et démocrate, il a toujours visé la réduction des phénomènes d'exclusion des malades mentaux, mais aussi des enfants abandonnés, des femmes et de toutes les minorités.