

## "Culture as a Political Tool for Migrant Activists in France Facing Repression"

In November 1973, the migrant activist group *Révolution Afrique* organized a "Week of action and information for African workers" in Paris and its suburbs. Movies, an important migrant cultural tool besides theater, were an essential part of the week. In one week, the group screened six movies touching the three decisive political contexts for migrant activism. First, movies about the strike movement at a migrant housing site in the Parisian suburb Drancy and the strike movement at the factory of LIP discussed the relationship between the French Left and migrant struggles. Second, movies engaged with global anti-imperialist discourses, showing, for instance, a speech by Guinean anticolonial leader Amilcar Cabral. Finally, one movie engaged with the *circulaire Fontanet*, a set of legal reforms tightening the migration regime in France, shedding light on another central context shaping migrant concepts of culture: material and legal precarity.<sup>1</sup>

State restrictions, legal and material disadvantages for migrants in France pushed activists to use culture for migrant politics. The practices of migrant groups, such as theater plays, film screenings or periodicals shed light on the performative side of an intellectual history. Migrant activists not only turned to culture because it could be organized with little economic resources, but also because other forms were often illegal, and risked police repression and even deportation. The *Association des Marocains en France* (AMF), which had named the development of "cultural and social links" as the organization's first goal, openly admitted that they focused on culture for legal reasons:

"Limited in France by the law of 1939 and the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior, to cultural, social and artistic activities, the AMF is mainly present through: conferences-debates, theater, music, cinema, outings, sports, a periodical publication 'AL JALYA'"<sup>2</sup>

The mentioned law of 1939 forbid foreigners to form associations if they had not received the prior authorization by the minister of the interior. In practice, the French state did not allow foreigners to form political associations in the 1970s. Thus, AMF and other groups such as *Révolution Afrique* portrayed themselves as cultural associations in front of the authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> The archival history of this story also supports the argument. I know about the movies only from the extensive police surveillance records of the events. Among other things, the police compiled a list of all the identified license plates, displaying the enormous level of surveillance and repression migrant activists faced. "Semaine d'action et d'information des travailleurs africains," (November 22, 1973), 143 W 8-805337, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

<sup>2</sup> Association des Marocains en France, "Association des Marocains en France," *Al Jalya*, no. 14 (May 1979): 11.

Others, such as MTA (*Mouvement des travailleurs arabes*), did not declare themselves, and were, thus, illegal with drastic consequences for the organization and especially for non-French citizens involved in their activities.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the different legal statuses, all three mentioned migrant groups claimed that cultural activities were central to them. These declarations were not only lip services to the authorities. In practice, all of them organized music and neighborhood festivals, movie screening, and periodicals. Furthermore, all three groups supported different migrant theater groups. Most famous is the example of *El Assifa*, a theater group close to MTA, only comprised of migrant actors and directors. Their plays, as most migrant plays, were about migrant everyday life and displayed housing and working conditions and daily exploitation and discrimination. In style, interactions with the audience were a central feature. Because of the precarious conditions, *El Assifa* first performed in occupied factories and street festivals. Nevertheless, many migrant theater groups reached wide audiences since the mid-1970s. *El Assifa* even performed at the famous Avignon theater festival and toured together a migrant theater group close to *Révolution Afrique* through France.<sup>4</sup>

Cultural activities became an important political tool because foreigners lacked the political rights of French citizens. Foreigners could, for instance, not participate in elections, be it as candidates or as voters. Thus, when migrant activists claimed traditional forms of politics, their actions were sometimes automatically symbolic gestures. In the 1974 presidential elections, MTA presented a migrant worker under the pseudonym Djellali Kamel as a candidate. The campaign centered on the idea that dominant society silenced the 3.7 million migrant workers who lived in France hindered from participation in political discussions and elections. The lack of legal rights turned the electoral campaign into a symbolic activity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Cottin-Marx, *Sociologie du monde associatif*, Repères (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 18, <https://www.cairn.info/sociologie-du-monde-associatif--9782707199188-p-7.htm>; "Le Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (MTA)," (January 26, 1974), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

<sup>4</sup> El Assifa, "Qu'est-ce que Assifa ?" (n.d.), Fond Saïd Bouziri Cote 18-19, Odysséo, des ressources pour l'histoire de l'immigration, <http://odysseo.generiques.org/ark:/naan/a011484578504LvmntI>; El Assifa, "La troupe AL ASSIFA présente : « ça travaille, ça travaille et ça ferme sa gueule. »" (n.d.), Fond Saïd Bouziri Cote 18-19, Odysséo, des ressources pour l'histoire de l'immigration, <http://odysseo.generiques.org/ark:/naan/a011484578504LvmntI>; Gilles de Staal and Patricia Tang, "*Mamadou m'a dit* : les luttes des foyers, "Révolution Afrique", *Africa fête*, 1 vols., Des paroles en actes (Paris: Éd. Syllepses, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> (French: "Des million d'hommes sont aujourd'hui enchaînés dans le Marché Commun de l'esclavage : on ne leur reconnaît que leur force de travail avec en prime : LE DROIT AU SILENCE, LE DROIT DE SE TAIRE ! silence autour des crimes racistes, silence autour de leurs conditions de travail, silence autour de leurs conditions de logement, mépris et rejet de leur culture et de leur traditions. [...] Pour parler en leur nom, ils ont choisi l'un d'eux : DJELLALI KAMA[L] ouvrier tunisien, nettoyeur à la SANEMA, ex gréviste [SIC] de la faim de la rue Dulong") "Pourquoi un candidat immigré aux élections présidentielles," (1974), Fond Saïd Bouziri Cote 18-19, Odysséo, des ressources pour l'histoire de l'immigration,

As many scholars have pointed out, the 1970s have been a turning point in France's migration regime, and new laws further restricted foreigner's activism.<sup>6</sup> In early 1972, the right-wing government issued several new restrictions that fundamentally changed migration in France. The so-called *circulaires Marcellin-Fontanet* (named after the two responsible ministers of the interior and work) broke with the more open migration rules that had allowed for workers to move to France to secure workforce in times of the postwar economic boom. The *circulaires Marcellin-Fontanet* introduced several measures that signaled the end of the *trente glorieuses*' migration policy. Most importantly, the residence permit became tied to the work and housing contract for most foreign workers. Without work, workers lost their house and their permission to stay in France. The new laws created "irregular" migrants, later often called *sans-papiers*. The French state enforced the new rules and started deporting the illegalized migrants in the 1970s. Authorities used political activism as a reason for expulsions in this tightening migration regime.<sup>7</sup>

Migrant activists were often personally affected by the tightening migration regime. An important foundational moment for the MTA (*Mouvement des travailleurs arabes*) was, for instance, the hunger strike of Saïd Bouziri and Faouzia Bouziri, one of the first strike movements against the deportations following the *circulaires Marcellin-Fontanet*. Saïd Bouziri was born in 1947 in Tunis in a family of renown merchants and came to France in 1966 to study economics. His wife Faouzia Bouziri was also Tunisian and came in 1970 and studied sociology at the new university in Vincennes. Like other MTA members who had enjoyed academic training they did not find academic work in France and shared the experience of *déclassement*.<sup>8</sup> The same year, the Bouziris, both active members of the MTA, protested successfully with a hunger strike in Barbès in Paris for their regularization and against their deportation. In the following years, MTA activists repeatedly used hunger strikes to protest deportations. Despite the successful protest in 1972, the French authorities gave Saïd Bouziri again in 1976 a "severe

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<http://odysseo.generiques.org/ark:/naan/a011484578504LvmntI>; Cf. "Monsieur le Président" (1974), Fond Saïd Bouziri Cote 18-19, Odysséo, des ressources pour l'histoire de l'immigration, <http://odysseo.generiques.org/ark:/naan/a011484578504LvmntI>.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, *Les immigrés et la politique cent cinquante ans d'évolution* (Pr. de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1988), 165–69.

<sup>7</sup> Danièle Lochak, "Les circulaires Marcellin-Fontanet," *Hommes & migrations. Revue française de référence sur les dynamiques migratoires*, no. 1330 (July 17, 2020): 14–17, <https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.11351>; The reasons for the tightening migration regime are still heatedly discussed. Some scholars have pointed at the economic crisis, other have underlined the construction of the so-called "immigration problem" by state officials. See Sylvain Laurens, *Une Politisation Feutrée Les Hauts Fonctionnaires et l'immigration En France ; (1962 - 1981)*, Socio-Histoires (Belin, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the *déclassement* of migrants in postcolonial France see Johanna Siméant, *La cause des sans-papiers* (Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 1998).

and final" warning, threatening him with deportation if he did not stop his political activism. Nevertheless, Saïd Bouziri stayed in France and shaped migrant activism in the next decades.<sup>9</sup>

Other migrant activists did not escape expulsions. MTA leaders such as Driss El Yazami, Maurice Gaubage, Mohamed Najeh were deported because of their political activism and participation in demonstrations and strike movements.<sup>10</sup> Other migrant activists close to the group *Révolution Afrique* were deported for similar reasons. AMF activists, which was a legal association, were threatened with deportations when authorities suspected "political" activism. The repression, experienced by many personally, was, thus, a factor migrant activists always had to consider.<sup>11</sup>

The high number of deportations and repression pushed migrant activists to hide much of their political actions or call the "cultural", cautious of police surveillance. The police noted in an almost admiring tone how discrete and prudent MTA organized its activities. The group issued political calls and orders only shortly before events.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, MTA changed their correspondence addresses once letters were lost, fearing that they were intercepted. And rightfully so. The police were shortly after the change of addresses informed about them. Moreover, their files contain many personal information. Regarding MTA leader Abdelmajid "Amar" Daboussi, the police even knew that he received money from his family and in which bank. The police also compiled lists of license plates at MTA and *Révolution Afrique* meetings and knew of inner circle MTA meetings on the same day, and even received information by former MTA members about a possible planned bomb attack against the Moroccan consulate.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Le Comité de soutien à Saïd et Faouzia Bouziri, "Non à l'expulsion de Saïd et Faouzia" (Paris, November 14, 1972), Fond Tracts Politiques, Archives de Sciences Po; "Comité de soutien à Saïd et Faouzia Bouziri" (n.d.), Arch/0105/24, La Contemporaine; "Un travailleur immigré"; Abdallah, "Saïd Bouziri et Mohamed 'Mokhtar' Bachiri"; For a detailed report on Bouziri's life in France see the police record "Le « Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes » (MTA)" (September 1974), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de Police; One of the followers of the Bouziris was Rabah Saïdani. He had joined them during the hunger strike in Paris and used the same strategy together with 18 Tunisians threatened with deportation in Valence in December 1972. See Burleigh Hendrickson, *Decolonizing 1968. Transnational Student Activism in Tunis, Paris, and Dakar* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2022), 149–50.

<sup>10</sup> "Point de la campagne contre les récentes mesures d'expulsion prises à l'encontre de MM. GOURBAGE et NAJEH" (August 4, 1975), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de Police; *Entretien avec Driss El Yazami*, Histoire et mémoire de l'immigration : mobilisations et luttes pour l'égalité 1968-1988, 2013; More were warned. Such as Abdelmajid "Amar" Daboussi "Untitled" (March 5, 1974), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

<sup>11</sup> Staal and Tang, *Mamadou m'a dit*, 70–71; "Le président de l'Association des Marocains en France fait l'objet d'une procédure d'expulsion," *Le Monde*, April 11, 1974, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1974/04/11/le-president-de-l-association-des-marocains-en-france-fait-l-objet-d-une-procedure-d-expulsion\\_2524707\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1974/04/11/le-president-de-l-association-des-marocains-en-france-fait-l-objet-d-une-procedure-d-expulsion_2524707_1819218.html); "Vive le premier Mai !," *Al Jalya* 12, no. 12 (April 1978): 2.

<sup>12</sup> "Le Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (MTA),"

<sup>13</sup> "Pour éviter que son courrier ne soit intercepté par la police, le «Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (MTA) va choisir de nouveaux correspondants" (February 20, 1974), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de

In contrast to MTA, *Révolution Afrique* and AMF worked (partly) as legal associations, but nevertheless underwent state repression, especially after 1976. That year, the French state intensified its repression against migrant activism. In July 1976, the government passed a circular that ended certain rights for people from former French colonies, for instance, in relation to the law of 1939 restricting foreigners' rights to form associations.<sup>14</sup>

In 1977, both *Révolution Afrique* and AMF became object of political and legal affairs because of their political activism and the association laws. The activists behind *Révolution Afrique* decided in 1976 to found the *Organisation des Communistes d'Afrique* as an official legal association. In late December, the ministry of the interior declared the *Organisation des Communistes d'Afrique* to be illegal, referencing the association law of 1939. The prohibition hit *Révolution Afrique* hard, and, for instance, aggravated its financial difficulties. At the same time, the prohibition ignited a large protest movement. Activists distributed leaflets at Parisian metro stations, informing and protesting the prohibition. Additionally, several human rights organizations and trade unions expressed their solidarity in a large meeting. January 6, 1977, the prohibition of the *Organisation des Communistes d'Afrique* made the headline of the leftist daily *Liberation*.<sup>15</sup>

In June, the group organized a massive gala in support for the organization with several thousand visitors, starring the African ballet group Lemba and the famous French singer François Béranger. The connections during the campaign and at the gala produced several notable pop cultural side products, such as the famous song *Mamadou m'a dit* written by former *Révolution Afrique* activists and sung by Béranger and the festival series *Africa fête*, which became an important annual event during the French "world music" boom around 1980. The most important political consequence was wide attention for the campaign that demanded the abrogation of the law of 1939, and the right for foreigners to form an association.<sup>16</sup>

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Police; "Activités politiques du Tunisien DABOUSSI," (July 7, 1973), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de Police; "Réunion des principaux responsables du « Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes »" (October 13, 1973), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de Police; "Sur les activités du Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (MTA)" (November 27, 1973), 77 W 6948- 746825, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Philippe Dedieu, "Associations subsahariennes : de la liberté d'association à la liberté surveillée," *Plein droit* 89, no. 2 (2011): 32, <https://doi.org/10.3917/pld.089.0032>.

<sup>15</sup> "Préfecture de police" (January 13, 1977), 143 W 8-805337, Archives de la préfecture de Police; "Le Commissaire Principal Chargé du 18ème Arrondissement à Monsieur le Directeur Général de la Police Municipale" (January 14, 1977), 143 W 8-805337, Archives de la préfecture de Police; "Document de Travail" (January 18, 1977), 143 W 8-805337, Archives de la préfecture de Police; "Les dirigeants de l'OCA interdite s'adressent aux travailleurs africains," *Révolution Afrique* Special issue (January 1977); Cf. Staal and Tang, *Mamadou m'a dit*, 139–202.

<sup>16</sup> "Gala de soutien au journal « Révolution Afrique » le samedi 25 juin" (June 26, 1977), 143 W 8-805337, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

*Révolution Afrique* was not alone in this fight, but its campaign coincided with a very similar one around the AMF. In February 1977, a senior official of the ministry of the interior informed the Parisian police that according to his information the AMF did not respect the association laws and had in the last years participated in several political activities, such as demonstrations. He asked the police to summon the AMF for an interview and articulate a last warning that the associations would be prohibited if it did not obey to political neutrality. The police followed his demand.<sup>17</sup>

In April, several leftist political groups started a campaign against the threats made by the police against AMF. A socialist city counselor of Paris, wrote a letter to the Parisian police, asking them to stop threatening AMF. He argued that association had not intervened in French politics and expressed the disagreement of all Socialist city officials with the police methods. At the same time, the two major trade unions CGT and CFDT also protested publicly against the police's threats to AMF. The trade unions, however, did not even respond to the alleged allegation of political activism but rather demanded the abrogation of the outdated law of 1939. Both trade unions supported AMF and observed a campaign of state authorities against the "political and union freedoms of French and immigrant workers"<sup>18</sup>.

The debate surpassed the Parisian realm and made it to the French national assembly, and even back to the ministry of the interior. In June, a Socialist MP asked the minister in parliamentary debate about the threat against AMF. The minister answered that AMF could implement cultural and social activities as an association but was like all foreigners not allowed to intervene in politics, especially French domestic politics. Although the government did not change its position, and AMF's political space remained limited to cultural activities, a debate about the association law had been started. The affairs of *Révolution Afrique* and AMF started a campaign that would ultimately change the law after the leftist electoral victory of 1981.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, both affairs show that migrant cultural activities were an answer to the limited political possibilities non-French citizens had. Both AMF and *Révolution Afrique* argued that they focused on culture rather than politics. These cultural activities were quite successful in reaching both migrant and wider audiences, and inherently political. Nevertheless, they were the result of the state's strict limits for migrant activism.

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<sup>17</sup> "Le Directeur de la réglementation et du contentieux, Ministre d'État, Ministre de l'Intérieur, to Le Préfet de police de Paris," February 18, 1977, 80 W 39-11690, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

<sup>18</sup> "L'association des Marocains en France" (n.d.), 80 W 39-11690, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

<sup>19</sup> "Extrait du Journal Officiel, Débat parlementaires" (June 4, 1977), 80 W 39-11690, Archives de la préfecture de Police.