



Destitution, Albert Camus

## Destitution

Before attempting a broad overview of the misery in Kabylia and retracing the itinerary of famine that I have been following for many long days now, I want to say a few words about the economic causes of this misery. They can be summed up in one sentence: Kabylia is an overpopulated region that consumes more than it produces. These mountains enfold in their creases a teeming population, which in some villages, such as Djurdjura, attain a density of 247 inhabitants per square kilometer.

No country in Europe is this crowded. The mean density in France is 71 per square kilometer. Furthermore, the Kabyle people consume mainly cereals such as wheat, barley, and sorghum in the form of flatcakes or couscous, but the Kabyle soil does not support these crops. The region's cereal production meets only one-eighth of its consumption needs. The grain necessary for life must therefore be purchased on the open market. In a region with virtually no industry, this can be done only by supplying a surplus of complementary agricultural produce.

Kabylia is mainly a country of orchards, however. Its two main cash crops are figs and olives. In many places, barely enough figs are produced to meet local consumption needs. Olive production varies from year to year: sometimes there is a shortfall, at other times an overabundance. How is the actual output to be kept in balance with the starving Kabyles' need for grain?

The Office of Wheat increased the price of that grain, and it had its reasons for doing so. But the price of figs and olives did not increase.

The Kabyles, net importers of wheat, therefore paid the tribute of hunger to their splendid but harsh environment.

Like people in other poor, overpopulated regions of the world, the Kabyles responded to this difficult situation by emigrating. The facts are well-known. I will add only that the number of Kabyles living outside the region is estimated to be 40,000 to 50,000 and that in good times, the single district of Tizi-Ouzou was taking in as much as 40 million francs in remittances every month, while the commune of Fort-National received nearly a million a day. This enormous influx of capital, the product of Kabyle labor abroad, was enough to finance Kabylia's trade deficit in 1926. The region was then prosperous, and through tenacity and hard work the Kabyles managed to cope with poverty.

When the Depression came, however, the French labor market dried up. Kabyle workers were sent home. Immigration barriers were erected, and in 1935 a series of administrative orders complicated the procedures for entering France to the point where Kabyles felt imprisoned in their mountainous redoubt. Emigration was effectively blocked by requiring a payment of 165 francs for "repatriation fees" along with countless other administrative hurdles, as well as the unusual requirement that every would-be émigré pay any back taxes owed by compatriots with the same last name. To cite only one figure to illustrate the consequences of these new rules, the commune of Michelet received only one-tenth as much in remittances as it did during the period of prosperity.

This precipitous decline in income plunged the region into misery. Kabyle peasants could not afford to buy high-priced wheat with what they were able to earn by selling their own produce at low prices. They had previously purchased the food they needed, saving themselves from starvation by relying on the labor of their émigré sons. When that

source of income was taken away, they found themselves defenseless against hunger. What I saw was the result, and I want to describe the situation as economically as possible so that readers may experience for themselves its distress and absurdity.

According to an official report, 40 percent of Kabyle families are living today on less than 1,000 francs per year, which is to say, less than 100 francs per month. Think about what that means. According to the same report, only 5 percent of families have more than 500 francs per month. Given that the typical family in the region consists of five or six people, you begin to have some idea of the indescribable penury of the Kabyle peasantry. I believe I can state that at least 50 percent of the population lives on herbs and roots in between government handouts of grain.

In Bordj-Menaïel, for example, of the 27,000 Kabyles in the commune, 10,000 live in poverty, and only 1,000 eat a normal diet. At the grain distribution that took place on the day I arrived, I saw nearly 500 impoverished peasants patiently awaiting their turn to receive a few liters of wheat. On that same day I was shown the local miracle: an old woman, bent double, who weighed only 25 kilograms. Each indigent was given roughly 10 kilos of wheat. In Bordj-Menaïel, handouts occur at monthly intervals, but in other places they take place only once every three months. Now, a family of eight needs approximately 120 kilos of wheat for just one month's worth of bread. I was told that the indigents I saw had to make their 10 kilos last the entire month, supplementing their meager grain supply with roots and the stems of thistle, which the Kabyles, with bitter irony, call the "artichoke of the ass."

In the Tizi-Ouzou district, some women walk as much as 30 or 40 kilometers to receive similar handouts. Without the charity of a local pastor, these poor women would have had no place to spend the night.

There are other signs of desperate poverty as well. In the Tizi-Ouzou "tribe," for example, wheat has become a luxury good. The best families eat a mix of wheat and sorghum. Poor families have been known to pay as much as 20 francs a quintal for wild acorns. The usual menu of a poor family in this tribe consists of a barleycake and a soup of thistle stems and mallow roots with a small amount of olive oil. But last year's olive harvest was small, so this year there is no oil. The diet is similar throughout Kabylia; not a single village is an exception to the rule.

Early one morning in Tizi-Ouzou, I saw children in rags fighting with dogs over some garbage. To my questions a Kabyle responded: "It's like that every morning." Another resident of the village explained that during the winter, the ill-fed and ill-housed people had come up with a way to keep warm and get some sleep. They formed a circle around a wood fire, moving about occasionally to avoid getting stiff. So the circle of bodies was in constant motion, creeping along the ground. But this expedient probably isn't enough to keep everyone alive, because the forest regulations prohibit these poor people from picking up twigs where they find them, and it is not uncommon for the authorities to punish offenders by seizing their only worldly possession, the crusty, emaciated ass they use to carry home their bundles of twigs.

In the Tizi-Ouzou area, moreover, things have gotten so bad that private charity had to step in. Every Wednesday, the subprefect pays out of his own pocket so that 50 young Kabyles can enjoy a meal of bouillon and bread. With that they can hold out until the next monthly

grain distribution. The Soeurs Blanches (Sisters of Our Lady of North Africa) and Pastor Rolland also help out with these charitable dinners.

Some readers may be thinking, "But these are special cases.... It's the Depression, etc. And in any event the figures are meaningless." I confess that I cannot understand this way of looking at the matter. I concede that statistics are meaningless, but if I say that the resident of Azouza whom I went to see belonged to a family of 10 children of whom only 2 survived, I am not giving you statistics or abstract arguments but a stark and revealing fact. Nor do I need to mention the number of students in the schools around Fort-National who fainted from hunger.

It's enough to know that they did and that it will happen again if these poor wretches do not get help. It is enough to know that teachers in the school at Talam-Aïach saw their students come to class this past October completely naked and covered with lice, and that they gave them clothes and shaved their heads. It is enough to know that among the students who leave school at 11 A.M. because their village is so far away from the schoolhouse, only 1 out of 60 eats barleycakes, while the others lunch on an onion or a couple of figs.

When grain was distributed in Fort-National, I questioned a child who was carrying a small sack of barley on his back.

"How many days is that supposed to last?"

"Two weeks."

"How many people in your family?"

"Five."

"Is that all you have to eat?"

"Yes."

“You have no figs?”

“No.”

“Do you have olive oil to put on your flatcakes?”

“No, we use water.”

And with a suspicious look he proceeded on his way.

Is that not enough? When I look at my notes, I see twice as many equally revolting realities, and I despair of ever being able to convey them all. It must be done, however, and the whole truth must be told.

For now, I must end this survey of the suffering and hunger of an entire people. The reader will have seen, at least, that misery here is not just a word or a theme for meditation. It exists. It cries out in desperation. What have we done about it, and do we have the right to avert our eyes? I am not sure that anyone will understand. But I do know that after returning from a visit to the “tribe” of Tizi-Ouzou, I climbed with a Kabyle friend to the heights overlooking the town. From there we watched the night fall. And at that hour, when the shadows descending from the mountains across this splendid land can soften even the hardest of hearts, I knew that there was no peace for those who, on the other side of the valley, were gathering around a spoiled barleycake. I also knew that while it would have been comforting to surrender to the startling grandeur of that night, the misery gathered around the glowing fires across the way placed the beauty of this world under a kind of ban.

“Let’s go down now, shall we?” my friend said.

One evening, while walking in the streets of Tizi-Ouzou after traveling around the region, I asked one of my companions if it “was like this

everywhere.” His answer was that I would soon see worse. We then walked for quite some time around the native village, where faint light from the shops mingled with music, folk dancing, and indistinct chatter in the dark streets.

And in fact I did see worse.

I knew that thistle stems were a staple of the Kabyle diet, and I discovered that this was indeed the case everywhere. What I did not know, however, was that last year, five Kabyle children from the Abbo region died after eating poisonous roots. I knew that not enough grain was being distributed to keep the Kabyles alive. But I did not know that the distributions were actually causing them to die, or that last winter, four elderly women who had gone to Michelet to collect grain handouts froze to death in the snow on their way home to their remote douar (village).

Yet everything is as it was meant to be. In Adni, only 40 of 106 schoolchildren eat enough to stave off hunger. Nearly everyone in the village is unemployed, and grain distributions are rare. In the douars of the commune of Michelet, the number of unemployed per douar is estimated to be nearly 500. And in the poorest places, such as Akbils, Aït-Yahia, and Abi-Youcef, the unemployment rate is even higher. In the entire commune there are some 4,000 able-bodied workers without jobs. Thirty-five of the 110 students at the school in Azerou-Kollal eat only one meal a day. Four-fifths of the people in Maillot are said to be destitute, and grain is distributed there only once every three months.

In Ouadhias, there are 300 indigents in a population of 7,500, but in the Sidi-Aïch region, 60 percent of the people are indigent. In the village of El-Flay, above the center of Sidi-Aïch, some families go two or three days without eating. Most of the families in this village supplement



their daily diet with roots and cakes of pine seed picked up from the forest floor. But when they dare to gather pinecones, they often run afoul of the law, because the rangers mercilessly enforce the regulations.

If this litany of horrors is not convincing, I will add that 2,000 of the 2,500 Kabyle residents of the El-Kseur commune are paupers. For their entire day's ration, agricultural workers carry with them a quarter of a barleycake and a small flask of olive oil. Families supplement their roots and herbs with nettles. If cooked for hours, this plant can complement the usual pauper's meal. The same is true in the douars around Azazga. The native villages in the vicinity of Dellys also number among the poorest in the region. In Beni-Sliem for instance, an incredible 96 percent of the population is indigent.

The harsh land there yields nothing. Residents are reduced to gathering fallen wood to burn for charcoal, which they then try to sell in Dellys. I say "try to sell" because they do not have vendor licenses, so that half the time their charcoal is seized along with the ass used to transport it. Villagers have therefore taken to sneaking into Dellys by night, but the rangers remain vigilant around the clock. When animals are seized, they are sent to the pound. The charcoal burner must then pay the pound fee in addition to a fine in order to retrieve his ass. If he cannot pay, he is arrested and sent to prison, where at least he can eat. So it is in that sense and that sense only that one can say without irony that the sale of charcoal feeds the people of Beni-Sliem.

What could I possibly add to facts such as these? Mark them well. Imagine the lives of hopelessness and desperation that lie behind them. If you find this normal, then say so. But if you find it repellent, take action. And if you find it unbelievable, then please, go and see for yourself.

What remedies have been proposed to alleviate such distress? Only one: charity. Grain is distributed, and with this grain and cash assistance so-called “charity workshops” have been created.

About the distributions of grain I will be brief. Experience has shown how absurd they are. A handout of 12 liters of grain every two or three months to families with four or five children is the equivalent of spitting in the ocean. Millions are spent every year, and those millions do no good. I do not think that charitable feelings are useless. But I do think that in some cases the results of charity are useless and that a constructive social policy would therefore be preferable.

Note, too, that the selection of beneficiaries of these handouts is usually left to the discretion of the local caïd (village chieftain) or municipal councilors, who are not necessarily impartial. Some say that the most recent general council elections in Tizi-Ouzou were bought with grain from the distributions. It is not my business to investigate whether or not this is true, but the mere fact that it is being said is itself a condemnation of the method of selection. In any case, I know for a fact that in Issers, grain was denied to indigents who voted for the Algerian People’s Party.

What is more, nearly everyone in Kabylia complains about the poor quality of the grain that is distributed. Some of it no doubt comes from our national surplus, but part of it is outdated grain disposed of by army warehouses. So that in Michelet, for example, the barley that was given out was so bitter that even the animals wouldn’t eat it, and some Kabyles told me with straight faces that they envied the horses of the gendarmerie, because they at least ate food that was inspected by a veterinarian.

To deal with unemployment, many communes have organized charity workshops, where indigents do useful work for which they are paid 8 to 10 francs a day, half in grain, half in cash. The communes of Fort-National, Michelet, Maillot, and Port-Gueydon, among others, have organized such workshops, which offer the advantage of preserving the dignity of the men receiving assistance. But they also have one important drawback: in communes where all the grain available for assistance goes to the workshops, invalids who are unable to work receive no aid.

Furthermore, since the number of workshop jobs is limited, workers must be rotated, with priority for those who are able to work two days straight. In Tizi-Ouzou, workers are employed for 4 days out of every 40, for which they receive 20 liters of grain. Once again, the millions that are spent amount to spitting in the ocean.

Finally, I must say something about a practice that has become widespread but which should be the object of vigorous protest. In all communes except for Port-Gueydon, back taxes owed by indigents (because indigents are subject to taxation even though they cannot pay) are subtracted from the cash component of their wages. There are no words harsh enough to condemn such cruelty. If the charity workshops are meant to help people who are dying of hunger, there is a reason for their existence—an honorable reason, even if the results are risible. But if their effect is to make people work in order to die of hunger, whereas previously they died of hunger without working, then the workshops are nothing more than a despicable device for exploiting misery.

I do not want to end this portrait of penury without pointing out that it does not give the full measure of Kabylia's distress. To add insult to injury, winter follows summer every year. Right now, nature is treating these poor people relatively kindly. No one is cold. The donkey paths are still passable. Wild thistle can still be harvested for another two months. Roots are abundant. People can eat raw greens. What looks to us like extreme poverty is a blessed time for the Kabyle peasant. But once snow falls and blocks the roads and cold gnaws at malnourished bodies and makes rudimentary huts uninhabitable, a long winter of unspeakable suffering begins.

So before moving on to other aspects of wretched Kabylia's existence, I would like to dispose of certain arguments often heard in Algeria, arguments that use the supposed Kabyle "mentality" to excuse the current situation. These arguments are beneath contempt. It is despicable, for example, to say that these people can adapt to anything. Mr. Albert Lebrun<sup>1</sup> himself, if he had to live on 200 francs a month, would adapt to living under bridges and surviving on garbage and crusts of bread. When it comes to clinging to life, there is something in man capable of overcoming the most abject miseries.

It is despicable to say that these people don't have the same needs we do. If they don't, then it is high time we showed them what they are missing. It is curious to note how the alleged qualities of a people are used to justify the debased condition in which they are kept, and how the proverbial sobriety of the Kabyle peasant lends legitimacy to his hunger. This is not the right way to look at things, and it is not the way we will look at things, because preconceived ideas and prejudices become odious when applied to a world in which people are freezing to death and children are reduced to foraging like animals even though they lack the instincts that would prevent them from eating things that will kill them. The truth is that we are living every day alongside people

whose condition is that of the European peasantry of three centuries ago, and yet we, and we alone, are unmoved by their desperate plight.

1. The president of France from 1932 to 1940.—Trans.

The End