

Daisy Marsh: Missionary to the Kabyles

Effective Christian Kabyle Radio Ministry in the Light of Discriminatory Algerian Language Policies: 1973-2002

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt, 2006

Daisy Marsh's radio broadcasts from Southern France to Algeria (1973-1990) played an important role in the initial growth of the Christian faith amongst Algerian Kabyles. Kabyle is the native language of about six million people in Algeria and Europe. Estimations of the present number of Kabyle Christians range from 7,000 to 100,000 (2006). This article focuses on the radio ministry of Marsh and its context, content, and impact. Marsh would immediately correct this opening sentence and give credit to the work of the Holy Spirit in effecting change in the hearts of many Kabyles.



Born and raised in Algeria: until 1970

Daisy was the daughter of British career missionaries and grew up in Algeria and spoke the Kabyle language fluently. After having studied nursing in the United Kingdom she returned in 1953 as a *Plymouth Brethren* missionary to the Kabyles. She lived in Tazmalt village for 18 years through the war of independence which had begun in the 1950s. After independence in 1962 many missionaries were forced to leave by the revolutionary *National Liberation Front (Front de Liberation Nationale, FLN)* government.

However Daisy 'wanted to be with the people in their suffering' and so remained.¹ Later when the revolutionaries came to Tazmalt, the villagers told them that Marsh was 'one of them' and thus protected and extended her time.² However, in 1970 Daisy was forced to leave when her missionary visa was withdrawn:

I lived in the village Tazmalt where people had heard the Gospel for 70 years. They wanted my medicine, and they were happy with me teaching them sowing

and knitting. They were glad with the baby clothes I was able to get for them, and that I was teaching 150 children of the village.

The villagers were glad with the material blessings that I gave them in the name of Jesus, but they did not want Him. An important reason why the people of Tazmalt were not open to the Gospel was the presence of the graves of 8 Kabyle Christians in their village. These converts were not allowed to be buried in the cemetery as they were outcasts. I concluded that God had given them the message and I wanted to go somewhere else. Before I left I went to the main homes in the village and told them that they now knew the truth, but as they did not want Jesus, I left to go back to England. That was hard for me, after 18 years, but I did it with great conviction.³



When Marsh left Algeria, most other missionaries had left the country long before. In 1970 her father wrote about the disastrous effect of the FLN takeover on mission work. He had left the Algerian city of Lafayette in 1968:

Many Christians are distressed by recent news from Algeria. [...] Workers are expelled, Christians are tracked down, threatened, intimidated and persecuted. [...] Algeria is quickly becoming a closed land. [...] The foreigners leave, but the work of God continues. [...] Communications with suffering Christians may cease as letters are intercepted. The only way to help these brave, privileged men and women is by prayer. [...] As one door closes we must be prepared others that are open, if not as full time missionaries, then in other ways.⁴

Two years later, in 1972, Daisy Marsh went out again as a missionary to work amongst Kabyle immigrants in Marseille (France).

1. Daisy M. Marsh in an interview with the author (4 September 2004).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

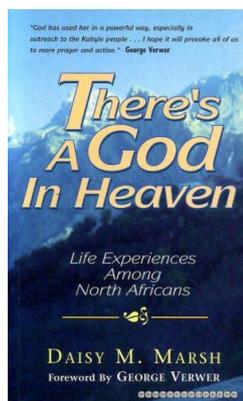
4. C.R. Marsh, *Too Hard for God?* (Bath, 1970, 1978), p. 180.

Radio Programs: 1973-1990

In 1972 Mildred Swan, a missionary with *Gospel Missionary Union* (GMU, now called *Avant Ministries*) who had been producing radio programs in the Tamazight language since 1969, challenged Marsh to make Kabyle radio programs.⁵ Marsh had never even contemplated the idea and was 'scared to death. I was a nurse, a midwife!' Marsh however accepted the challenge because she realized that her perfect knowledge of the Kabyle language made her the right person to do this.⁶

Broadcasts began in 1973. Swan initially offered Marsh seven minutes of her weekly program on the MW broadcasts by *Trans World Radio* (TWR) to North Africa. These programs were broadcast through Radio Monte Carlo (RMC).⁷ Soon, Marsh was able to buy 15 minutes per week, on Saturday evenings, which she called 'prime time'.⁸ Initially, Marsh made programs based on the *Jungle Doctor* stories of Paul White. 'These were simple and had a Gospel theme running through them which would be understood by a people that often communicated in proverbs and fables', Marsh wrote in her autobiography *There's a God in Heaven*.⁹ Later, topics treated by Marsh were as diverse as Islamic or animistic beliefs, parables of nature, agriculture, Kabyle arts and crafts such as weaving, pottery and silver work, medical subjects, and recipes. 'The Bible was an alien book to the listeners, so teaching them its truths had to be tackled differently. [...] Otherwise a straight talk from the bible would have caused them to switch off the radio, at least in those days. Now there are many who are really seeking the Lord, and babes in Christ who are anxious to learn His Word.'¹⁰

'I think God has wonderfully timed the commencement of this program', Marsh said nine months after she began her broadcasts. 'Quite unknown to anybody, it has started at a time when young Kabyles, young Berbers, are just longing for recognition of their own people and of their own culture'. During this period there was much unrest amongst the Kabyles.¹¹ The nationalist Arabic government of FLN was endeavoring to Arabize the population by forcing them to adopt the Arabic language and culture. *Radio Algiers* took the Kabyle language off the air. In the capital city of Algiers, Kabyles were



5. Marsh in an interview with the author (4 September 2004).

6. Ibid.

7. Daisy M. Marsh in a letter to the author (12 March 2003).

8. Daisy M. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven: Life Experiences among North Africans* (London, 1997), p. 90.

9. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven*, p. 90.

10. Ibid., pp. 124-125.

11. Daisy Marsh, 'Demonstration of Media Solution - Case Histories' (Marseille, 19 February 1974, p. 1: transcript of a speech, from the Archives of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, Collection 86, Box 27, Folder 28.

forbidden to speak their own language in public. Kabyle youth protested and began an underground movement.

Arabization policies in Algeria

In 1962, Algeria was extensively French-speaking and French-educated. After liberation from the French in 1962, those who defended full *Arabization* were generally Algerians who had not had French education. For those people, progress in society had been blocked under French rule.

In 1963 Algeria's first president, Ahmad bin Ballah (1962-1965), forced primary schools to teach ten out of 30 hours in Arabic each week. The following year this was increased and the total curriculum was taught in Arabic. During that year Algeria imported approximately 1000 Egyptian teachers as it did not have enough teachers who could read and write in Arabic.

Many of these Egyptians were actually manual laborers who struggled to communicate with their students. Their vernacular was Egyptian Arabic and their knowledge of MSA was usually deficient. Resistance against this enforced *Arabization* soon arose from students, Kabyles, writers, secularists and the Francophone press.¹²

After an interval of a few years, the second president, Huwārī Būmadiyan (1965-1979) imposed *Arabization* on the civil service in 1968. The bureaucrats were told that within three years they had to function in Arabic. This had poor success but it did open the civil service to those who did not speak French. After 1970 the *Arabization* of primary and secondary schools was intensified. This not only meant doing away with French as the medium of instruction, but it also stipulated MSA as the medium of oral instruction. Some Algerian teachers pleaded publicly to be allowed to use the Algerian vernacular for instruction in schools. That was to no avail as children had to be taught that their vernacular was wrong and those using it were often accused of unworthy behavior. For the Arabs in Algeria this prohibited the blending of MSA with the vernacular which had occurred to a certain extent in Egypt.¹³

The 1980s, under president Shādhli bin Jadīd (1979-1991), were the years of *Arabization* of higher education. Combined with anger over the lack of economic development and the institutionalization of corruption by the old revolutionary leaders, two opposition movements appeared. One was the Islamic radical movement and the other was the movement of the Kabyles.



12. Gilbert Grandguillaume, 'L'Arabisation au Maghreb', in *Revue d'Aménagement Linguistique* No. 107, Aménagement linguistique au Maghreb (Office Québécois de la langue française, Winter 2004), pp. 12-18.

13. Gilbert Grandguillaume, 'Arabisation et Démagogie en Algérie', in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (February 1997), p. 3. Grandguillaume, 'L'Arabisation au Maghreb', pp. 7-10.

According to Gilbert Grandguillaume, a French *savant* of the language policies of Algeria, the Kabyles were the main victims of the postindependence language policies of Algeria:



The Kabyles principal vice is that they prove the existence of an Algeria pre-dating the Arab conquest. Furthermore, they have nothing in common with Arabic dialects. Their disappearance is programmed into the very logic of Arabization, as well as the practices of government. This has the unfortunate consequence that large sections of the population, whose identities are partly dependent on local languages feel excluded from the new project of nation building.¹⁴

For the Kabyles, *Arabization* meant cultural and socio-political marginalization. It was no wonder that in such a climate, radio broadcasts in the Kabyle languages attracted much attention:

It was then that many, tuning into their favourite commercial radio station of Monte Carlo, heard their language! Surely someone was boosting their cause! This resulted in hundreds of letters of encouragement from those thinking that this was a political move on the part of enthusiasts in France. [...] Slowly but surely, one after another expressed interest, followed a Bible correspondence course, and came to faith in Christ! All over Kabylia little groups of Christians were forming, those who rejected Islam, embracing the religion of their ancestors, yet knowing little or nothing of the meaning of being a disciple of Christ.¹⁵

Marsh describes her programs as a ‘message of liberty to a people anxious to be free from the political and religious shackles that bind them. [...] Young people hungry for freedom and reality what more could we bring than that found in Jesus Christ.’¹⁶ When Marsh started broadcasting she was unaware of the political unrest amongst the Kabyles in Algeria. ‘All this was quite unknown to me, as I was not living in Algeria, and I certainly had no desire to enter into anything political. My desire was to share the Gospel message.’¹⁷

Native Kabyle speakers could not hear that she was not a native speaker.¹⁸ Her father wrote that Daisy as a young girl already spoke French, Kabyle and Arabic ‘quite fluently’.¹⁹ She had a strong sense that her years in Algeria had prepared her for her radio ministry:

Having been born in Algeria, having suffered with the people through eight years of rebellion, living closely to them in that village 259 kilometers from

Algiers, gave me a knowledge and insight that few could experience other than Algerians themselves. I counted myself as one of them; my thoughts and interpretations, my way of thinking and expressing myself, fitted this eastern culture, and I realized that God had been preparing me over the years [...] for such a time as this!²⁰

Marsh was convinced that radio ‘played the major role in stirring up an interest in the Gospel. When all missionaries were gone, who were seen as Europeans, radio was a neutral voice. Radio allowed them to listen to a Kabyle voice in the field, alone in their room’.²¹

Cooperative Enterprise

Marsh read her programs in the studio of *Radio School of the Bible* (RSB) of *North Africa Mission* (NAM).²² This organization is now called Arab World Ministries (AWM). The choice for working with RSB was logical as Marsh lived in Marseille where RSB was based. The programs were made by RSB at the request of GMU. That organization had a focus on producing programs in the vernaculars of North Africa.



NAM initially had a similar focus on the vernaculars of North Africa as GMU. Francis Steele wrote in 1981 why NAM originally focused on the *Imazighen*, and why that had changed subsequently:

The thought underlying this concept was that since the Berber people were indigenous to North Africa they, as the basic people, should be the main target of evangelism with the hope that they would become the foundation for a Christian people in North Africa. [...] Today, little work and less fruit has resulted from efforts to reach Berbers and establish a national Christian witness in the Berber culture and language. Right now, the arabization program of the government of Algeria has led them to view with suspicion any emphasis on Berber work as an effort to encourage the development of Berber culture as alien to their desire to create a unified Algerian (Arabic) culture.²³

Steele was right in his comment that the Algerian government wanted to Arabize the Kabyles. It is not clear why that led him to no longer favor working towards the

14. Grandguillaume, ‘Arabisation et Démagogie en Algérie’, p. 3.

15. Marsh, *There’s a God in Heaven*, p. 91.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

17. Marsh in a letter to the author (12 March 2003).

18. Ali Arhab in an interview with the author (26 January 2003).

19. Marsh, *Too Hard for God?*, p. 99.

20. Marsh, *There’s a God in Heaven*, p. 124.

21. Marsh in an interview with the author (4 September 2004).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

23. Francis R. Steele, *Not in Vain; The Story of North Africa Mission* (Pasadena, 1981), p. 146.

conversion of the Kabyles; the broadcasts of Marsh were already producing fruit when he wrote these words exactly because of the Arabization that was going on in Algeria.

No statistical information is extant to show the relative impact of Christian radio in unleashing the movement of Christ among the Kabyles however there is much anecdotal evidence. Many Kabyles who became Christians before 1990 testify to the role that Marsh's radio broadcasts played. The programs made her into a celebrity in Kabylia.

She described a five-day visit to Tazmalt where she had worked before:

There no cultural or political barriers divided the people, as they are all Kabyles. [The] welcome I received was overwhelming! Cars would draw up in the street; windows were wound down, so that the drivers could tell me that they were listening regularly to the radio programs. They had recognised my voice! Men in the market place and women at the fountain all spoke of their interest in the broadcasts, and youth asked eagerly for literature.²⁴

This experience encouraged Marsh to continue her work and was coupled with the realization that, 'however poor, every family had its transistor radio'.²⁵ In the early days, the audience response was good. Among the first 11 letters Marsh received, most were from her own village of Tazmalt. 'The people had recognized my voice. You can just imagine how thrilled I was when receiving those, as it confirmed all the work I had done', recalled Marsh.²⁶

During her first nine months of broadcasting Marsh received 150 letters and that number increased.²⁷ These figures should be seen in the light of the rampant illiteracy among the Kabyles; they resisted Arabic education and could no longer go to the French schools they had initially attended.

Marsh translated a series of booklets with the *Living Bibles International* for follow-up. The first books were transliterated in the Kabyle language using the Roman script since the old Tifinagh script was forbidden in Algeria. In the 1990s however the program began to use material from a Kabyle Christian organization producing literature in Tifinagh.²⁸ All follow-up literature was originally sent by mail from France to Algeria although later, this became impossible.²⁹

For Algerians, to write to Marsh would also become a problem due to government intervention. The Algerian police knew the addresses of the broadcasts and would at certain times arrest and mistreat Kabyles writing to Marsh.³⁰ When she found out that mail was intercepted

by the Algerian authorities, she changed the response address. Marsh asked listeners to write to an address in Grenoble (France), or in a village close to Marseille, and later in Enfield (England).³¹

In 1976 Marsh received enough funding 'from praying friends' to pay for a second program. This money came 'through prayer. I never once asked for money!'³²

This second program was broadcast late at night, with 'subjects for deep thinkers.'³³

A series based on the book *Balance of Truth (Mizān al-Haqq)* was used concerning the differences between the *Qur'ān* and the Bible. Marsh also used a translation and adaptation of the Arabic Bible Correspondence Course (BCC) that Tawfīq Ghūrī of NAM had produced.³⁴

In 1976 Marsh moved back to England to care for her parents in Enfield. She continued to do her radio work and correspondence from England and used a TWR studio close to her home.³⁵ Daisy's parents often helped her with creative ideas for her programs.³⁶ They were convinced of the power of radio having lived under German occupation in Algeria during World War II. Radio had been their only means of staying in touch with London.

Throughout those long dark years of war, when almost all postal communications with the United Kingdom were severed, they carefully locked the outside gate each evening and had placed heavy blankets over the windows. Then they had tuned in to London, turned the wireless set down to a mere whisper, and listened to the news.³⁷

Marsh produced her programs all alone during the first four years. 'It was a daunting experience to be the sole producer of this broadcast for a number of years, for at that time God had prepared no one else for this work.'³⁸ She specifically prayed for a man to join her in the broadcasts. In 1978 Idir became involved. In her autobiography Marsh asked for prayer for him:

[God has] been using him mightily for His glory. His voice is not only heard on [...] radio programs each week, but it also figures prominently in the 'Jesus' film, for it is he who gives the final challenge to the viewers to give their lives to Jesus. [...] Pray that God will keep Idir's voice, strong and clear, and his heart in tune with God's heart.³⁹



24. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven*, pp. 100-101.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 129.

26. Marsh in an interview with the author (4 September 2004).

27. Marsh, 'Demonstration of Media Solution - Case Histories', pp. 4-5.

28. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven*, p. 105.

Marsh in a letter to the author (12 March 2003).

29. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven*, p. 103.

30. Marsh in a letter to the author (12 March 2003).

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven*, p. 125.

34. *Ibid.*,

35. Marsh in a letter to the author (12 March 2003).

36. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven*, pp. 125, 147.

37. Marsh, *Too Hard for God?*, p. 107.

38. Marsh, *There's a God in Heaven*, p. 123.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

While Idir lived in Paris, a Bible school in that city helped him record programs in their professional recording facilities. His tapes were then sent to Marsh who would use them from time to time in the broadcasts.⁴⁰ Another Kabyle helper was Abdenour who came to Christ through the broadcasts. When Marsh heard him preaching on a cassette, she was impressed by ‘his gift of interpreting God’s word simply and winsomely and in a way that his fellow Kabyles could not help but accept. He often expressed himself in poetry as they did; his spiritual parables were superb and so unusual’.⁴¹

Mourad became involved before Abdenour, but was too busy initially with his studies in France. Later however, when he returned to Algeria in 1983, he arranged a room in his parents’ house as a recording studio. Mourad, along with a group of believers, would sing self-composed Gospel songs. These were then smuggled by hand out of the country and mailed to Marsh.⁴² As more Kabyle men became involved in the programs, Marsh’s voice was only used for the introduction and closing announcements of the programs. All the voices in the programs were native Kabyles by this stage.⁴³

Marsh described her work as the work ‘He called me to do at a time when the need arose, and whilst He was preparing nationals to take my place. I would never have imagined that this would have spanned 18 years, because I am a nurse and a midwife and not an intellectual. My only qualifications were that I was born in Algeria, and knew the mentality of the people and could talk to them as they understood.’⁴⁴

Thru the Bible (TTB): Since 1990

In 1990 the donations had dried up and Marsh stopped her broadcasts. At the same time however, *Thru the Bible* (TTB) began to sponsor Abdenour and Idir to produce their five-year course of Bible teaching. TTB was founded in 1973 by J. Vernon McGee. He became known for his verse-by-verse Bible teachings. TTB entrusted its entire internal radio outreach to TWR. In the early 21st century, TTB’s programs were broadcast in over 100 languages, including Arabic.⁴⁵ In 2002 TTB broadcast these Arabic programs through RMC.⁴⁶

From 1990 TTB paid for five broadcasts of 30 minutes each week on TWR in the Kabyle language. Abdenour and Idir produced these TTB programs in Abdenour’s own studio in Paris. In 1997 they received about 50 letters per month for these programs.⁴⁷

40. Ibid., pp. 141-142

41. Ibid., p. 143.

42. Ibid., p. 144.

43. Ibid., pp. 144-145.

44. Marsh in a letter to the author (12 March 2003).

45. Glenn Sink, ‘Straight from the Heart’ in *Transworldradio* Vol 24, Number 1 (February 2003), p. 7.

46. www.ttb.org/newsite/Intlog.htm#ARABIC (11 December 2002).

47. Marsh, *There’s a God in Heaven*, p. 126. Marsh in a letter to the author (12 March 2003). ‘Les Programmes radio en Tamazight seront diffusés’ (n.p., 2002): unpublished information sheet.

In the meantime, Marsh also came across capable, literate, Kabyle Christian women. One of those, Zwena, began to produce programs of at first 15, and later 30, minutes per week for broadcasting over TWR. These programs were produced in Algeria. Initially no audience response was received by mail reflecting the high illiteracy rates amongst Kabyle women. Later however when the telephone was used as a tool for response, the responses increased.⁴⁸



Final Observations – Food for Thought

Daisy Marsh did not look for ‘strategic’ missionary work, but she served Christ through her nursing skills during her 18 years in Tazmalt and later used her language skills when urged to produce Kabyle radio programs. The impact of her radio programs on the village of Tazmalt, after 18 years of seemingly unsuccessful work in the same village, is a testimony to the importance of having a long-term view in mission, to the importance of speaking the language well, and to the impact of Christian radio.

The programs of Marsh were effective because they were aimed at a concrete people group in its own vernacular at a time when that people group and its language were culturally and politically oppressed by the Arab majority of the country. This suggests that there is wisdom in targeting concrete people groups in mission in the Arab World, and to especially target those groups that feel oppressed by their Muslim Arab governments. When these groups are addressed in a manner that shows appreciation for their language and culture, that is their identity, they are more likely to be open to the Christian message than other groups.

In the context of the Arab World, the Kabyle church growth is unique in its size. Study is urgently needed concerning both the history and methods of mission among the Kabyles in Algeria as well as the growth of the church among the Kabyles in the last few decades. Media played an important role in mission among the Kabyle, and the work of Christian radio in the Kabyle language needs further study. Useful lessons may be learnt from this case study for mission to other people groups in the Arab World.

48. Marsh in an interview with the author (4 September 2004).