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The Socio-cultural Symbols and Concepts of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' Between Appropriation and Preservation

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Abstract

The 'Tlemcenian Chedda', a UNESCO-listed intangible cultural heritage, embodies the socio-cultural identity of Tlemcen, Algeria, through its intricate bridal attire laden with historical and symbolic significance. Originally crafted by the bride's family and steeped in rituals to ward off the evil eye and symbolizing purity, the dress has undergone widespread democratization through rental practices. This ethnographic study, conducted across Tlemcen, Sidi Bel Abbes, and Mascara, examines how the Chedda's adoption beyond its native context has led to the erosion of its cultural symbols. Findings reveal that in host cities, the dress is stripped of its geographical affiliation ('Tlemcenian') and reduced to a commercialized wedding costume, with altered aesthetics and neglected rituals. While Tlemcenians sustain the dress's symbolic integrity, its appropriation elsewhere reflects a disconnect from its socio-cultural roots, exacerbated by the absence of institutional preservation efforts. The paper argues that without urgent documentation and revitalization of its traditional practices, the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' risks becoming a hollow emblem of fashion rather than a living heritage.

Keywords

'Tlemcenian Chedda'; cultural symbolism; social concepts; appropriation; preservation

الرموز والمفاهيم الاجتماعية والثقافية 'للشدة التلمسانية' بين الاستحواذ والمحافظة

الملخص:
تُجسّد 'الشدة التلمسانية'، المُدرجة في قائمة اليونسكو للتراث الثقافي غير المادي، الهوية الاجتماعية والثقافية لمدينة تلمسان الجزائرية، من خلال زيّ الزفاف المُتقن المُحمّل بدلالات تاريخية ورمزية. يُصنع هذا الزيّ في الأصل من قِبل عائلة العروس، ويتضمّن طقوسًا لدرء العين الشريرة ورمزًا لنقاء العروس، وقد خضع لدمقرطة واسعة النطاق من خلال ممارسات التأجير. تبحث هذه الدراسة الإثنوغرافية، التي أُجريت في تلمسان وسيدي بلعباس ومعسكر، إلى تبيان كيف أدى تبني الشدة خارج سياقها الأصلي إلى تآكل رموزها الثقافية. تكشف النتائج أنه في المدن المُضيفة، جُرّد هذا الزي من انتمائه الجغرافي (التلمساني) واختُزل إلى زيّ زفاف تجاري، بجماليات مُعدّلة وطقوس مُهملة. وبينما يُحافظ التلمسانيون على سلامة رمزية هذا الزيّ ، فإنّ استيلاءه من قبل دن أخرى يعكس انفصالًا عن جذوره الاجتماعية والثقافية، وهو ما تفاقم بسبب غياب جهود الحفاظ عليه في المؤسسات. أخيرا تزعم الورقة البحثية أنه بدون توثيق عاجل وإحياء ممارساتها التقليدية، فإن 'الشدة التلمسانية' قد تصبح رمزًا فارغًا بدلاً من كونها تراثًا حيًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية:
'الشّدّة التلمسانية'؛ الرمزية الثقافية؛ المفاهيم الاجتماعية؛ المحافظة؛ الاستحواذ

Introduction

There is no fixed or rigid culture, but as there is tradition and modernity, there is a give and take process. The traditional dress is a form of art that Algeria abounds with because it carries a cultural and social dimension. Therefore, wearing dresses has been a manifestation of the development and sophistication of societies through the ages. As an ancient city, Tlemcen tends towards the old more than towards the new, so that customs and traditions are the cement with which bridges are built between generations. The lives

of the Tlemcenians are based on those cultural modes among which the custom of wearing the bride's dress, inherited from generation to generation: the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'. In order to reach the set goals, the survey began with participant observation, because, the best way to go into this type of research is fieldwork in order to completely negate any approach based exclusively on hypotheses; however, obtaining data while delving into the topic was a challenging task due to the reluctance of women (the informants) to provide me with the necessary information.

The process of observation, questioning, and recording took four months in two western Algerian cities, Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara. These two cities were chosen, due to the prevalence of the phenomenon of wearing the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' on the one hand, and the fact that the word 'Tlemcenian' was omitted (disappeared) and the dress is simply referred to as the 'Chedda', compared to Oran, Constantine, Annaba or even Algiers where it is still called the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'. Tlemcen is mentioned as a reference city regarding the topic matter.

The tradition of wearing the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' holds in its folding many symbolic meanings whether in relation with some superstitious aspects or socio-cultural ones. Thus, the aim of the research is to demonstrate that despite the overwhelming efforts to raise awareness about the popularization of 'Tlemcenian Chedda', this latter has undergone changes in both form (aesthetics) and symbolism. To do so, this paper will try to answer the following questions:

- ✓ What are the factors that led to the mutation of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'?
- ✓ Does the host society make any efforts to preserve its traditional form and purity or did it empty the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' from its cultural concepts and symbols?
- ✓ Will the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' survive long after its cultural symbols disappear by playing a role in shaping a national cultural identity, or has it just become a wedding dress?

The study follows the ethnographic method that allows the description of the tradition related to wearing the 'Chedda' as a socio-cultural phenomenon. It also relies on the historical approach in order to trace the historical origin of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda',

thus reaching a deep understanding of the development that occurred on each of its constituent. Finally, the study uses the descriptive method to study the cultural and social characteristics and specificities of the ‘Tlemcenian Chedda’.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Historical and Cultural Significance of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'

The 'Tlemcenian Chedda' is not merely a bridal garment but a cultural artifact embedded with historical, social, and symbolic meanings. Its origins trace back to the Ottoman influence in Algeria, particularly in urban centers like Tlemcen, where the kaftan—a central component of the 'Chedda'—was introduced (De Paradis, 1898). Bencheneb (1956) elaborates on the kaftan’s role in matrimonial customs, noting its inclusion in dowries and its association with social status. The 'Chedda' thus serves as a tangible link to Algeria’s Ottoman-Andalusian heritage, reflecting the interplay of indigenous and imported traditions (Ouagouag-Kezzal, 1970).

Recent scholarship has emphasized the Chedda’s UNESCO recognition in 2012 as a pivotal moment, elevating its status from a regional tradition to a global intangible cultural heritage (Gamouh, 2022). However, this recognition has also precipitated its commodification and diffusion beyond Tlemcen, raising questions about cultural authenticity and appropriation (Boudehane, 2015).

1.2. Theoretical Frameworks: Cultural Preservation vs. Appropriation

The tension between cultural preservation and appropriation is a central theme in anthropological and sociological discourse. Balandier (1985) argues that cultural practices risk dilution when detached from their institutional and societal moorings, a phenomenon observable in the Chedda’s adoption by non-Tlemcenian communities. Ruth Benedict’s (1935) concept of

"cultural patterns" further illuminates how borrowed traditions often lose their original symbolism when divorced from their foundational contexts.

Lenclud (1987) critiques the static view of tradition, positing that cultural practices are dynamic and subject to reinterpretation. This perspective aligns with the observed mutations in the Chedda's form and symbolism in cities like Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara, where its ritualistic elements are often reduced to aesthetic or economic considerations.

1.3. Semiotics and Symbolism of Bridal Attire

The 'Tlemcenian Chedda' is a semiotically rich ensemble, where each component—from the '**zraref**' (forehead ornaments) to the '**lḥayek**' (bridal veil)—carries specific cultural codes. Sebbouh (2001) highlights how such symbols function as communal rites of passage, reinforcing social hierarchies and gender roles. For instance, the '**lʿker**' (virginity marker) and the ritualistic changing of shoes underscore the bride's transition from paternal to marital authority, a theme echoed in Adel's (1995) analysis of matrimonial rituals as societal regulators. However, as La-Tchoutchouka (2014) notes that the professionalization of '**negafats**' (bridal dressers) in urban centers has shifted focus from symbolic fidelity to commercial pragmatism, accelerating the erosion of the Chedda's traditional meanings.

1.4. Methodological Precedents

This study builds on Blumer's (1986) symbolic interactionism, which prioritizes fieldwork to decode the social meanings embedded in cultural practices. Labov's (1976) sociolinguistic methods further validate the use of oral histories to capture vernacular knowledge, particularly in contexts like Tlemcen, where the Chedda's symbolism is transmitted intergenerationally through practice rather than text.

1.5. Gaps in the Literature

While existing studies have documented the Chedda's aesthetic and historical dimensions (e.g., Ouagouag-Kezzal, 1970; Gamouh, 2022), few address its socio-cultural mutation in diaspora or non-native contexts. This review underscores the urgency of interrogating how globalization and commodification impact intangible heritage, a gap this paper seeks to address.

1.6. The 'Tlemcenian Chedda' as a Form of Clothing

The bride's 'Chedda', which consists of a wide range of clothing and jewellery accessories, is considered as the most luxurious dress among the traditional costumes in the Algerian city of Tlemcen. Due to its artistic, aesthetic and historical value, the UNESCO recognized it in 2012 as a common human heritage (Gamouh, M., 2022).

1.7. Definition of the 'Chedda'

Oral accounts differed as to the reason for naming this dress 'Chedda'. There are those who say that the reason lies behind the ornaments and jewellery inlaid with it and gives it an intense shine, hence it was called 'Chedda'. While other sources assert that the real reason for this designation is that its threads and jewellery are tight and stick together with strength and tight (the word 'Chedda' in dialectal Arabic means 'tighten'). But the most common explanation for the name 'Chedda' is that it tests the bride's patience on her wedding night by carrying this dress that weighs more than 15 kilograms; from the time she left her family's house until she reached her husband's house (Boudehane, Y., 2015).

1.8. The Component Parts of the 'Chedda'

The 'Tlemcenian Chedda' is one of the garments known for its quality and elegance. It is a masterpiece that reflects the originality of the city of Tlemcen, with its customs and traditions. Traditionally, the colour of the caftan (which is the main piece of

'the Chedda') is red cochineal or carmine, but nowadays the bride chooses the colour that suits her.

The 'Tlemcenian Chedda' is divided into two distinct parts: the first is the body part and the second is the head part. As for the pieces that make up the body, according to the sequence of wearing, they are (See photos 1 and 2):

✓ '**lebluza**' a piece of cloth made of woven-silk thread, called '**lmensu>dj**'.

✓ **'ʔarfţa>n**' (Tlemcen) and '**qerfţa>n**' (Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara) is simply the kaftan.

✓ '**lekma>m**', literally the sleeves

✓ '**lfu>ţa**' also called '**ʔsetra**' which is worn after marriage consumption (See photo 2).

✓ '**leḥzam**' which is made of the same fabric from which '**lebluza**' and '**lfu>ţa**' were made. Measuring approximately two meters in length, the piece terminates with a '**leʾriʿet bel leftuʾl**'—a decorative filament extending from the '***taʾl***', characterized by its distinctive ball-shaped formations ('**leʾriʿet**').

✓ '**ljuher**', which are strings hanging from the shoulder filled with pearls, covering the chest area up to the knees.

Photo 1: Body parts of the 'Chedda' (without '**lfu>ţa**' nor '**leḥzam**')



Source: Credit photo © L. Benhabib (July 2024)

The following photo focuses on the remaining parts of the Chedda.

Photo 2: Body parts of the 'Chedda': '**lfu>ṭa**' and '**leḥzam**'

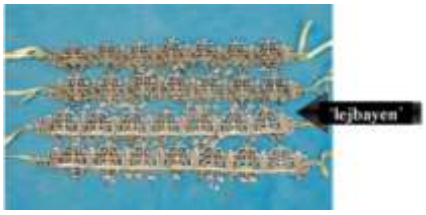


Source: Credit photo © L. Benhabib (July 2024)

As for the 'Chedda' pieces that make up the head, according to the sequence of wearing, they are listed as follows (See photo 5):

✓ '**šašiya**' which is considered one of the headwear that Algerian women are famous for. It is a conical hat with a height of about 20 cm. It is made of velvet and embroidered with '**medjbu>d**' (gold or silver strings) (Ouagouag-Kezzal, C., 1970: 253).
✓ '**lʿašaba**' (literally, the headband) which is a piece made up of the same fabric as '**lebluza**' and used to protect the bride's head and forehead from the sharpness of the gold pieces which can be painful at times due to their weight. It also helps to fix the veil over the head.
✓ '**lejbayen**' (plural of '**lejbi>n**') which is composed of two to three pieces to increase the bride's elegance and help hold the '**zraref**' in a vertical position (See photo 3).
✓

Photo 3: '**lejbayen**'



Source: Credit photo © L. Benhabib (September 2024)

✓ '**zraref**' (plural of '**zerru>f**') which are golden pieces seven in number starting from the bottom of the head in the region between the eyes going up towards the top of the head (See photo 4).

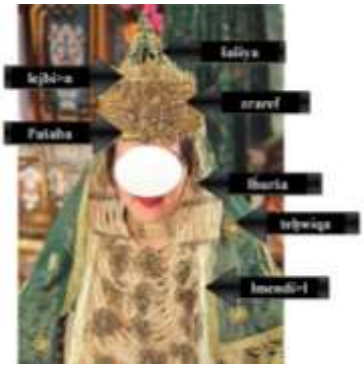
Photo 4: '**zraref**'



Source: Credit photo © Personal photo (August 2024)

✓ '**lḥurśa**' which comes in pair, it contains a semi-circular handle that passes under the '**šašiya**' and is placed above the ear(s).
✓ '**teḥwiqa**' (pronounced '**teḥwiʾa**' in Tlemcen) which is a piece of cloth of the same type of fabric from which '**lekma>m**' are made. Having a triangular or rectangular shape, it is always inlaid with agate stones, encrusted with sequins, and worn on the wedding day.
✓ '**lmendi>l**' which is made of the same fabric from which '**lebluza**' is made. The bride is not allowed to wear '**lmendi>l**' until after the marriage is consummated.

Photo 5: Head's parts



Source: Credit photo © Benhabib L. (July 2024)

✓ '**mendi>l ʿel mejla**' which is a piece of cloth made of the same fabric from which '**lebluza**' is made, unlike the previous '**mendi>l**', this one is used to cover the face of the bride on the wedding day until the arrival of the groom who will unveil her face (See photo 6).

Photo 6: 'mendi>l ʿel mejla'



Source: Credit photo © Benhabib L. (August 2024)

✓ '**lḥayek**' which is a piece of cloth made of silk that can be embroidered with gold threads to cover the bride when she leaves her parents' home (See photo 7).

Photo 7: 'lḥayek'



Source: Credit photo © Benhabib L. (July 2024)

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample Characteristics

Sample Size: The data were obtained through ethnolinguistic interviews. Eight women—recognized as both 'bearers of knowledge' and 'depositaries' of the Tlemcenian Chedda's cultural heritage—were selected for their deep expertise. All were born and long-time residents of Tlemcen, chosen for their unparalleled recognition, respect, and experience with this tradition. The second actors, called '**negafa**t', a profession reserved exclusively for women which "consists of preparing the bride [...] and above all, ensuring that all the rites are scrupulously respected" (La-Tchoutchouka, 2014: p.75) comprises four women each from Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara, who were surveyed because they are the most consulted among those who practise the business of renting, selling and/or dressing brides with the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'.

- **Gender:** Women only
- **Age Range and Means:** They are between 28 and 80 years old, regardless of whether they are literate or illiterate.
- **Ethnicity:** All of them are Algerians living in the region of Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara (not necessarily natives of this part of Algeria). For Tlemcen, all the women were Algerian natives of the city.

3.2. Material

Since our research is based upon the study of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' where the words were produced in the Tlemcenian, Belabesian, and Mascarian dialects and accents that resemble those of Classical Arabic. The paper adopts a transliteration system of symbols consisting in replacing the letters of the dialectal Arabic by English letters keeping the same sound (Little, *et al.*, 1980: p. 2347) to interpret the utterances. These symbols will help the non-Arabic speaking readers to decipher the terminology relating to 'Tlemcenian Chedda' used in this paper. Hence, the terminology retated to the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' has been transliterated (See table 1). The symbol > follows the three long vowels (a, i, u).

Table 1. Transliteration symbols

ء	ب	ت	ث	ج	ح	خ	د	ذ	ر	ز	س	ش	ص	ض	ط
ʔ	b	t	ṯ	j	ḥ	ḫ	d	ḏ	r	z	s	š	ṣ	ḍ	ṭ
ظ	ع	غ	ف	ق	ك	ل	م	ن	ه	و	ي	دج	تش	ڤ	v
ḏ	ʕ	ġ	f	q	k	l	m	n	h	w	y	ʤ	ʧ	p	v

Source: (Holes, 2018: p. viv-xv)

3.3. Procedure

The survey was carried out in Tlemcen from June to September 2024 during which women with knowledge (not necessarily cultural, for Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara) in the field of 'Tlemcenian Chedda' were interviewed and accompanied during their activity.

To avoid merely collecting linguistic data devoid of any meaning (concerning the 'Tlemcenian Chedda') in a given geographical context, the survey adopted Blumer's principle, which states that 'for any study to have scientific value, a direct examination of the research subject is required—that is, conducting field research (field survey) to bring out the results' (Blumer, 1986, p. 130). Hence, the corpus was collected through physical proximity (direct interaction) and the recording of the informants who provided the data. At the request of participants, the survey was conducted anonymously, since "consent is the cornerstone of ethical research practice" (Podesva, and Sharma, 2013: p. 14). It is worth mentioning that some informants refused to participate this is why a relative (L. Benhabib, a woman who found no difficulty in collecting data) surveyed the women who responded spontaneously and positively. This facilitated the collection of sufficient material related to the phenomenon of wearing the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' that only the natives or locals know (Léglise, 2004). The participants were selected and sampled according to their hometowns, sex, age, and job; ensuring that our study should be "generalizable, reliable, and valid"(Moyer, and Wei, 2010: p. 29).

All the informants from Tlemcen shared their knowledge with great precision. Given the absence of written documentation, this study relied primarily on recorded oral sources, aligning with William Labov's (1976) principle of prioritizing "the largest amount of natural, correctly recorded speech" (p. 288) to capture authentic cultural knowledge. The selection of eight Tlemcen-born women—acknowledged as both 'knowledge bearers' and 'cultural depositaries'—ensured that the collected data reflected deeply rooted, firsthand expertise in the Tlemcenian Chedda tradition.

4. Cultural Symbols of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' in Tlemcen

All the "customs and traditions are the cement on which bridges are built between generations. People's lives are based on those cultural practices inherited from one generation to the next. Hence, it is not possible to imagine a society "totally devoid of such cultural wealth" (Sebbouh, 2001: p. 2). The marriage customs vary from culture to culture, but the importance of the institution is universally recognized. In some societies, the societal interest in children, family ties, and property rights created by marriage led to traditions and practices aimed at preserving these values. In this context, Lenclud (1987: p. 111) explains that the past is constantly re-incorporated into the present, and the present is merely a repetition of the past.

An examination of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' reveals its status as one of the most significant communal rituals within Tlemcenian culture. In this regard, the bride's wearing of the 'Chedda' is a social act rich in symbols, as the wearer of the 'Chedda' and her family consider it the most important social act in her future marital life. Thus, the richness and widespread use of the 'Chedda' is evidence that it constitutes an essential element in the regulation of the marriage ceremonies. As a result, the individual is< obligated to submit to this regulation. Accordingly, the symbolic density and the number of cultural and social connotations that surround it are direct evidences that society ascribes to the necessity of wearing the 'Chedda' to the extent that the bride has no choice but to follow the traditions of wearing the 'Chedda'. Hence, Tlemcen remains a model for preserving the eternity and continuity of this socio-cultural practice.

The 'Tlemcenian Chedda' has symbols and connotations non-Tlemcenians may overlook. It is a semiotically rich ensemble, where each component—from the '**zraref**' (forehead ornaments) to the '**lḥayek**' (bridal veil)—carries specific cultural codes. In addition to being one of the main requirements for the bride's outfit, it expresses the natives of Tlemcen's attachment to the authenticity of the traditional dresses and an attempt to revive a part of the past through the brides-to-be.

Concerning the symbolism of each part of the 'Chedda', the survey reveals that:

✓ The seven '**zraref**' that are clasped on the forehead represent, according to belief, protection of the bride from the bad eye.

✓ '**lḥayek**' is not just a piece of silk cloth placed atop of the 'Chedda', but its white colour (and never in any other colour) symbolizes purity of the bride. It is the cover under which the bride and some of her female relatives gather (when she arrives at the husband's house or party hall to be made up), so that they can affirm the family relationship before handing her over to the new family. This act is known as the '**lmejla**' also called '**lʿker**' (See photo 8)

Photo 8: '**lmejla**' or '**lʿekr**'



Source: Credit photo © Benhabib L. (July 2024)

✓ '**lmejla**' is the process of forming a red circular drawing on the bride's cheeks with some white dots as well as on her lips (this is what is known as '**lʿker**' (See photo 9). It is the key symbol to distinguish between the bride and the rest of the women who wear the 'Chedda' on the same wedding day. , the symbolism of '**lʿker**' extends beyond this. It is a mark that the bride is still a virgin. A divorced or widowed woman who remarries does not traditionally use '**lʿker**', unless she has not lost her virginity yet.

Photo 9: ‘**lmejla**’ or ‘**lʿker**’



Source: Credit photo © Benhabib L. (July 2024)

It is worth mentioning that all the informants said that if the bride is divorced or widowed and the groom is single (neither divorced nor widowed), the bride is presented to him with ‘**lmejla**’.

✓ The ‘**lfu>ţa**’ is worn only after the wedding, provided the marriage has been consummated. It symbolizes the fact that the bride is no longer a virgin, but becomes a woman like all other married women.

✓ ‘**leḥza>m**’ is used to secure (tighten) ‘**lfu>ţa**’. It is a piece that cannot be used without wearing ‘**lfu>ţa**’, and therefore carries the same symbolism as the one of ‘**lfu>ţa**’.

✓ The shoes: The bride goes from her parents' house to her husband's house (or the party hall) with shoes that were given to her by her father, and during the act of ‘**lmejla**’, she takes them off and wears the shoes that her husband gave her as part of the ‘**lmejla**’ ritual. They are presented with the adornments in the tray of ‘**lmejla**’. This ritual indicates that she is under the protection of a man, who will meet her daily needs, replacing her father.

✓ ‘**mendi>l ʿel mejla**’ (See photo 6) is a veil that covers the bride's face after the act of ‘**lmejla**’ until the the groom arrives and reveals her face by pulling or lifting that veil. This reflects the shyness that can afflict the bride within the new family, the fear of the bad eye, as well as the surprise of the groom when revealing the face of the bride whom he has not seen wearing makeup before.

✓ The groom's wiping of '**lʿekr**' with a handkerchief is one of the major symbols of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'. This cultural act symbolizes the bride's transition to her husband's car

These are, in short, the most important cultural symbols reported by the participants in the survey in the city of Tlemcen, and they all agree on the same symbols and concepts related to the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'.

5. Cultural Symbols of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' in Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara

Unlike most of the cities in Algeria and even abroad, the 'Chedda' has become one of the indispensable garments in both the cities of Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara. Although it is a borrowed garment to the local (host) culture of these two cities, it has known unparalleled popularity despite the high price of renting one 'Chedda' during one evening. No bride was seen wearing the kaftan with the ancient and real requirements of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'. Despite the fact that the 'negafat' in these two cities are just businesswomen owning an informal trade whose purpose is the quick profit, they merely provide services that have relationship with the symbolic of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' or the status for wearing it.

By observing the rituals of wearing and using the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' in the cities of Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara, the first thing that caught attention lies in the fact that it is known by the word 'Chedda' only, as if the dress had been stripped of its geographical affiliation: Tlemcen. Likewise, no bride in both cities had made the main dress (the kaftan) by a craftsman specialized in sewing this type of clothing. Rather, all of them obtained it by loan or rent, or from women (often called '**negafat**' – singular '**negafa**'). '**Negafat**' were often former slaves (Haratins) or marginalized women, but the role evolved into a respected, competitive profession (Boulay, 2014: p. 756). These are traditional wedding specialists who play a central role in organizing and beautifying the bride during wedding ceremonies. '**Negafat**' serve as both stylists and cultural stewards, overseeing every aspect of the bride's presentation. Their multifaceted role encompasses: (1) bridal styling—selecting and coordinating the bride's outfits; (2) cultural preservation—ensuring

proper observance of traditions like the '**ḥenna**' ceremony; and (3) emotional guidance—soothing the bride's anxiety and seamlessly facilitating her transitions between ceremonial stages (WediPedia, 2021). They also practise the profession of fixing the 'Chedda'. Moreover, the kaftan used is of poor quality (with washed out colours), and sometimes it does not even suit the bride's size, but what about the symbolism that accompanies the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' in these two cities?

The first alteration noticed is that the number of '**zraref**' used, contrary to what is practised in Tlemcen, may reach fifteen or even sixteen '**zerru>f**', moving thus from its cultural symbol to an outward sign of wealth. The '**negafa**' does not give any advice regarding this act, She just charges the bride according to the number of '**zraref**' and other pieces provided hence simply fulfils the desire of the bride's family to show off.

Regarding '**lḥayek**', it is not used when the bride leaves her parents' house, but the she prefers to go out bareheaded so that everyone, including the neighbours and the relatives, can see her. When '**lḥayek**' is worn, it is nothing but a piece of silk that tends to turn yellow due to the abundance of dirt that has accumulated on it, until it has lost the symbolism of purity and pureness for the bride.

The strange thing is that '**lmejla**' or '**lʿker**' is carried out by '**negafa**' in the house of the bride's family, and '**lʿker**' comes out of her parents' house, as if it were just a sort of 'makeup' that was put on for decoration, regardless of the bride's position (virgin or not). When the groom arrives, one of bride's relatives (a woman) wipes '**lʿker**' from her cheeks.

Most of the informants said that the bride's family insists on the fact that all pieces of the 'Chedda' must be worn all together regardless of their symbolic meaning, so the bride wears '**lfu>ţa**' and '**leḥza>m**' on the wedding day, even if she is still a virgin. Likewise, the shoes are not often changed during the arrival at the husband's house (or the wedding hall), but rather the bride keeps her shoes until the 'Chedda' is removed and the dress is changed.

The bride is presented ('**teṡdira**') in front of the attendees without the '**mendi>l ʿel mejla**' which is a kind of bragging about the social status of the bride's family and her beauty wearing the 'Chedda'.

But does this serve the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' or is it the

beginning of the end for this dress classified in 2012 by UNESCO within the common human heritage?

6. Discussion and Results

6.1. Discussion

The study reveals a complex interplay between cultural preservation and appropriation in the context of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'. While the dress has gained widespread popularity beyond Tlemcen, its adoption in cities like Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara has led to a dilution of its socio-cultural symbols. The findings highlight several key issues:

a. Cultural Appropriation vs. Democratization

The Tlemcenian Chedda's transformation reflects a tension between democratization and cultural erosion. Once a deeply symbolic garment prepared by the bride's family, it has become a commodified item rented for weddings—a shift that, while increasing accessibility, risks reducing it to a mere aesthetic object stripped of its original meanings. This process mirrors a broader detachment from cultural roots, particularly in cities like Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara, where the dress is often referred to generically as 'Chedda', omitting its Tlemcenian origin. Such linguistic erasure not only reflects but accelerates the garment's disconnection from its symbolic heritage, compounding concerns about cultural appropriation.

b. Symbolic Erosion

The anthropologist Adel, (1995: p. 65) says that "all the rituals that precede or accompany the wedding are intended to remind the place and role of each member of society." However, the inhabitants of the cities of Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara abandoned the rituals of their local cultures and adopted the 'Tlemcenian Chedda', not as a cultural garment that has a symbolic and historical dimension, but merely as a sign of wealth or a sign of the external beauty of the bride. As the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' transitions from sacred bridal tradition to globalized fashion trend, its deep cultural meanings face progressive dilution through commodification. This Algerian heritage piece, increasingly detached from ceremonial contexts,

illustrates the fundamental tension between cultural preservation and modernization, where sacred elements become reduced to mere aesthetic or status symbols. A striking example emerges in the transformation of traditional symbols: the seven '**zraref**'—originally representing protection from the evil eye—are now frequently exaggerated to 15-16 pieces, their spiritual significance overwritten by displays of wealth. Such alterations demonstrate how commercialization not only modifies the garment's physical form but fundamentally reinterprets its cultural language, privileging visual impact over ancestral meaning. Rituals like '**lmejla**' (symbolizing virginity) and '**lḥayek**' (symbolizing purity) are performed mechanically or omitted, losing their original socio-cultural functions.

c. Commercialization and Loss of Craftsmanship

The rising global demand for the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' has triggered mass production that prioritizes profit over traditional artistry, marginalizing the painstaking hand-embroidery and artisanal techniques preserved across generations. This shift not only endangers artisans' livelihoods but also degrades the garment's status from cultural symbol to generic commodity. These consequences materialize through two disruptive changes: first, the ascent of profit-driven '**negafat**' as intermediaries has sidelined the traditional craftsmen who once imbued the 'Chedda' with cultural precision; second, the substitution of original materials—such as replacing handwoven silk with imported fabrics—severs the dress from its authentic form. Together, these transformations exemplify how commercialization erodes both the tangible and intangible heritage embedded in the Chedda's creation.

d. Institutional and Generational Gaps

Balandier (1985: p.156) explains that whether or not the dynamic of social change depends on the extent to which cultural practices are linked to the internal institutions of society that organize them, they can disappear if there is no sense of belonging to social models and the confirmation of the official theories that justify them. Unfortunately, the preservation of the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' confronts two interrelated threats: insufficient institutional protection for its artistry and an expanding generational divide

regarding its cultural significance. As elder artisans face increasing difficulty passing down centuries-old techniques, younger generations frequently approach the tradition as a commercial commodity rather than a living heritage—a perspective that jeopardizes both the garment's authenticity and the intricate knowledge system behind it. These vulnerabilities appear most acutely beyond Tlemcen's borders, where two symptomatic trends emerge: first, unlike in Tlemcen where oral traditions actively maintain the dress's symbolism, recipient cities fail to establish institutional frameworks for transmitting its cultural meaning to new generations; second, youth in these areas consistently prioritize modern aesthetics over traditional practices, dramatically accelerating the erosion of symbolic customs. Together, these patterns reveal how the Chedda's survival depends not merely on conserving physical artifacts but on sustaining the cultural infrastructure that gives them meaning.

6.2. Results

One of the main results concerns the persistence of its symbols in Tlemcen. In this ancestral home of the 'Chedda' tradition, the garment maintains its full symbolic integrity through rigorous preservation of time-honored rituals. The ceremonial practices of '**lmejla**', '**lḥayek**', and the use of exactly seven '**zraref**' are observed with unwavering precision, unlike their diluted interpretations elsewhere. This steadfast adherence does more than maintain aesthetic traditions—it actively reinforces communal identity, serving as a living bridge between generations. Each stitch and ritual becomes an act of cultural transmission, ensuring that the 'Chedda' remains not merely a garment, but a tactile archive of Tlemcen's social history and collective memory.

Moreover, the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' symbolism is emptyed in the host cities. In cities like Sidi Bel Abbes and Mascara, the 'Chedda' has been largely reduced to a decorative object, its symbolic vocabulary either neglected or distorted. Where '**lḥayek**'—once a sacred emblem of purity—is treated as a mere accessory (often worn soiled or out of context), and '**lfuţa**' is donned indiscriminately, disregarding its traditional association

with marital status, the dress loses its function as a cultural text. This semantic decay stems from a critical absence: unlike in Tlemcen, these communities lack cultural guardians—elders, master artisans, or institutional frameworks—to curate and transmit the garment's embedded knowledge. Consequently, the Chedda's transformation from a ritual object to a fashionable commodity in these regions mirrors a broader pattern of cultural amnesia, where aesthetic appeal supersedes ancestral intentionality.

Besides, this garment is subject to hybridization and external innovation(s). A growing trend sees brides consciously blending the traditional 'Tlemcenian Chedda' with foreign elements—Moroccan belts, Turkish headpieces, or European-style veils—creating sartorial fusions that reflect globalization's cultural permeability. While some view this as innovative self-expression, others argue it dilutes the garment's regional specificity, transforming what was once a codified tradition into a customizable aesthetic. These hybrid adaptations reveal tensions between cultural preservation and individual reinvention in an increasingly interconnected world.

The Chedda's expansion reveals contradictory outcomes: its growing national popularity has successfully promoted Algerian cultural heritage, yet this very visibility carries unintended consequences. Its UNESCO recognition has elevated the garment's prestige but failed to protect its deeper symbolic meaning beyond Tlemcen's borders. As the 'Chedda' spreads geographically, it increasingly risks being stripped of its cultural specificity, transforming from a ritual object rich in meaning to a generic wedding costume valued more for its visual appeal than its ancestral significance. This paradox highlights the challenge of preserving cultural authenticity amidst mainstream adoption.

Finally, the bride imitates a social model that is not closely related to her identity, trying to take possession of the civilization of the other ('Tlemcenian Chedda') without referring to the components that generate its symbols. In fact, civilization is "something beyond being the outcome of scattered effects" (Benedict, 1935: p. 44). So that it is not enough for a person to be the same, but he/she must be familiar with all the cultural

components of that borrowed practice. Thus, despite technological development, beliefs and myths still control large segments of the human society.

7. Future Implications and Recommendations

7.1. Future Implications

The 'Tlemcenian Chedda' stands at a cultural crossroads, where globalization, generational shifts, and commercialization threaten to erode its rich symbolism. To unpack these challenges systematically:

✓ First, future research could explore how digital platforms (e.g., social media) accelerate this trend by commodifying traditional attire for global audiences, further disconnecting it from its original context.

✓ Second, younger generations may increasingly view the 'Chedda' as a relic of the past rather than a living tradition, especially if institutional efforts fail to engage youth in its preservation. This could lead to a loss of intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

✓ Third, comparative studies with other UNESCO-listed intangible heritages facing similar challenges (e.g., Japanese kimono, Indian sarees) could provide insights into sustainable preservation strategies.

✓ Fourth, the commercialization of the 'Chedda' may prioritize profit over craftsmanship, marginalizing traditional artisans. This could erode the quality and authenticity of the garment, turning it into a mass-produced commodity.

✓ Fifth, future implications include the potential for counterfeit or low-quality reproductions to dominate the market, further distancing the dress from its cultural significance.

7.2. Recommendations

To safeguard the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' from cultural erosion and ensure its enduring legacy, targeted strategies must bridge tradition and modernity through institutional, community-driven, and innovative interventions. To do so, institutional frameworks must:

✓ Create a digital repository of oral histories, rituals, and craftsmanship techniques associated with the 'Chedda' to safeguard intangible knowledge. Collaborate with UNESCO to expand its safeguarding measures.
✓ Implement copyrights to ensure only authentic Tlemcenian-made ‘Cheddas’ are marketed under that name, preventing misuse.
✓ Partner with local artisans to train younger generations in traditional sewing, embroidery, and ritual practices. Integrate the 'Chedda' into school curricula to foster cultural pride.
✓ Organize annual events in Tlemcen showcasing the 'Chedda' with live demonstrations of its rituals, reinforcing its symbolic meanings.
✓ Encourage designers to create modern adaptations of the ‘Chedda’ that respect its symbolic elements (e.g., retaining the seven ‘zraref’ while updating fabrics). This could appeal to younger brides without eroding cultural integrity.
✓ Use social media to educate non-Tlemcenian communities about the dress’s history and symbolism, promoting respectful adoption rather than appropriation.
✓ Expand research into the socio-economic impacts of the ‘Chedda’s’ commercialization, involving anthropologists, economists, and fashion historians.
✓ Collaborate with other cultures facing similar challenges to develop global best practices for preserving intangible heritage amid modernization.

By addressing these implications and implementing targeted recommendations, the ‘Tlemcenian Chedda’ can evolve as a dynamic cultural symbol rather than a static artifact, ensuring its survival for future generations.

Conclusion

The study underscores the urgent need to balance cultural democratization with preservation, lest the ‘Tlemcenian Chedda’ lose its soul in the pursuit of modernity. The ‘Tlemcenian Chedda’, has gained global visibility, sparking debate over whether its widespread adoption represents cultural democratization or appropriation. While some celebrate its growing popularity as a form of cross-cultural appreciation, others argue that

commercialization risks stripping it of its historical and symbolic significance. This tension highlights the fine line between sharing heritage and exploiting it. The survey has revealed an important black corner regarding the near future of 'Tlemcenian Chedda'. This dress that has gone through the ages without undergoing any major (neither aesthetic nor symbolic) modification in the city of Tlemcen is now emptied and stripped from all its cultural symbols. This phenomenon is not as an immediate result of its appropriation by non-Tlemcenians, but rather because it is a victim of the natives of Tlemcen abandonment. Indeed, even if it remains a living tradition, embodying cultural pride and identity. the Tlemcenians ceased of taking care of and preserving it.

Many efforts have been made to elevate this traditional garment to national and international prominence. In fact, people have committed a crime against this intangible cultural heritage when the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' was exported without a 'user manual'. Therefore, what afflicted it internally (modification of its symbolic meanings) was accompanied by a noticeable change in its general form (introduction of new elements), because of our greed to move with this dress from tradition to modernity (fashion). For example, '**lebluza**', made up of the woven-silk thread 'a Tlemcenian handcraft know-how', was replaced by the 'Indian Saree' fabric, as well as many 'accessories' imported from Morocco or Turkey that were added to the original 'Chedda' components.

Besides, women from all walks of life have become skilled when it comes to renting the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' and accompanying the bride to dress her—charging huge sums of money for a single rental. Unfortunately, they are all pseudo-skilled in its cultural aspect. Thus, the true art masters in mounting and styling the 'Tlemcenian Chedda', who practice this craft out of passion rather than greed, are marginalized. Hence, it risks becoming an empty shell, celebrated for its beauty but divorced from its heritage.

Last and not least, we cannot reconcile what has befallen the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' in terms of the alteration of its cultural symbols and the change in its historical (conventional) form, this is why it becomes urgent to make an inventory and a record of everything related to this dress. This will be done by encouraging the associative and cultural work and giving an opportunity to the

'guardians of collective memory' (the custodians of the collective memory: old women, craftsmen...) to provide us with the necessary material to record academically this fragile heritage. Record oral histories and rituals associated with the 'Chedda' to preserve its intangible cultural heritage. This will allow researchers and those interested in this field to carry out sociolinguistic, sociological and even semiotic surveys, with the aim to collect and classify all the terminology and concepts related to the 'Tlemcenian Chedda'. This can also be achieved by the inclusion of a specialization related to the 'Tlemcenian Chedda' within the vocational training institutes.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table 2: The transliterated words in Arabic alphabet

Transliterated word	The word in the Arabic alphabet	Transliterated word	The word in the Arabic alphabet
lebluza	البْلُوزَ	**lʿaṡaba**	لْعَصَبَ
lmensu>dj	المَنْسُوجْ	**lejba>yen**	لَجْبايَنْ
ʾarfṭa>n	أرْفْطَانْ	**lejbi>n**	لَجْبِينْ
qerfṭa>n	قَرْفْطَانْ	**zraref**	زْرَارَفْ
lekma>m	لَكْمَامْ	**zerru>f**	زَرُوفْ
lfu>ṭa	لْفُوطَ	**lḥurṡa**	لْخُرْصَ
ʾsetra	سَتْرَ	**teḥwiʾa**	تَحْوِأ
leḥza>m	لَحْزَامْ	**teḥwiqa**	تَحْوِقَ
leʾriʿe>t bel leftu>l	لَأرِيعَاتْ بَلْفْتُولْ	**lmendi>l**	لْمَنْدِيلْ
ta>l	تَالْ	**mendi>l ʿel mejla**	مَنْدِيلْ المَجْلَ
ljuher	لْجُهَرْ	**lḥayek**	لْحَايَكْ
lmejla	لْمَجْلَ	**lʿker**	لْعْكَرْ
teṡdira	تَصْدِرَ	**medjbu>d**	مَجْبُودْ
šašiya	شَشِيَ		