

Yennayer : Celebrating Amazigh Cultural Heritage: Between Representation and Application - A Sociological Study

Celebrations of Families from Oran and Tlemcen as a Model

العنوان باللغة العربية : يناير نحو: الاحتفال بالثراث الشعبي الامازيغي بين التمثيل و التطبيق-دراسة
سوسيولوجية

احتفالات العائلات الوهرانية و التلمسانية " أنموذجا

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Abstract

The study of the folk heritage of Algerian society is a purely research-oriented topic in Algerian history that reveals various rituals and celebratory practices. Among these, the Yennayer celebrations hold a special place in the Algerian society, as they are one of the ancient rituals that bear symbolic meanings, particularly related to agricultural activities. Despite the significant importance of this ritual, it has not garnered substantial academic attention, with the majority of existing literature adopting a folkloric approach. Popular celebrations represent a crucial form of folk expression, encompassing standardized practices that embody religious, social, and cultural dimensions. The Yennayer celebrations are governed by a set of prescribed rules that must be followed, including preparatory measures, the preparation of specific culinary dishes for the occasion, and adherence to entrenched customs and traditions within families. This adherence is vital for the preservation of cultural identity across various regions.

Keywords: Heritage, Celebration, Yennayer, Amazigh New Year.

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Introduction

The celebration of the Amazigh New Year has become one of the greatest concerns in the Algerian folk heritage, revealing various rituals and practices associated with this significant occasion. We may find ancient celebratory rituals of Yennayer that have dimensions and connotations that carry significant symbols related to the land and agricultural produce. This is particularly relevant given that the Maghrebian individual is intrinsically linked to agriculture, akin to ancient agricultural societies. Consequently, there is a concerted effort to serve and protect these agricultural practices through various means. Although this topic holds considerable significance, it has yet to be the subject of thorough academic investigation. Accordingly, this research paper, attempts to include some previous studies by a number of scholars who have highlighted the cultural aspects of human societies. This idea is supported by Destaing, who relied on the observations of "Al-Abdari Al-Maghribi" in his book, who presented an approach suggesting that the Yennayer celebrations have Christian origins due to the influence of Latin Roman culture. He also asserts in his book that these celebrations were known in Egypt during the Islamic era, alongside other festivities such as the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Festival of Olives, and the Maundy Thursday Festival (Destaing, 2011).

In Algeria, the Aurès region, as examined in "Echaramskri's" study, exemplifies the traditional values upheld by several Aurès tribes that celebrate Yennayer, referred to as "Yenar." The celebrations last over eight days following the first day of the new year, known as "Bouini". During this time, households undergo a symbolic transformation, marked by the renewal of old belongings and the performance of purification rituals on the evening before the celebration. Special meals, often including meat and eggs, are prepared, and customs of

greeting, reconciliation, and mutual recognition are practiced, resembling traditions observed during religious festivities.

The study conducted by "Destaing" confirms the presence of these celebrations in western Algeria, particularly in Tlemcen, Oran, and the Beni Snous region. In these areas, the festivities are characterized by a rich cultural heritage and a variety of symbolic rituals and practices. Destaing highlights these aspects in the rare Amazigh texts pertaining to these celebrations, emphasizing their significance within the broader context of regional cultural identity (Ibid).

Numerous regions in eastern Algeria have historically celebrated this occasion and continue to accord it significant importance. Notable areas such as Constantine and Sidi Aïch are among those where the Yennayer festivities are deeply embedded in local cultural practices, reflecting a sustained reverence for this traditional celebration (Goudry, 1998).

The month of January holds a considerable significance to the populations of North Africa, as it denotes the commencement of the new year. This period is frequently accompanied by precipitation and snowfall, which enhance the fertility and agricultural productivity of the land. Moreover, the twelfth day of January is particularly noteworthy as it represents the even number that symbolizes the twelve-month solar calendar, thereby underscoring its cultural and agricultural relevance within the region (Louezen, 1981). As for the Moroccan population, they have also participated in the celebration of the Amazigh New Year by organizing various forms and manifestations that reflect Amazigh traditions. During these celebrations, delectable dishes are prepared, and people perform traditional dances accompanied by popular songs. Additionally, cultural and artistic activities are organized by governmental institutions and civil organizations that advocate for the preservation of tribal traditions.

Based on the aforementioned and the examination of some previous studies on this topic, it becomes evident that daily practices among individuals and families from different tribes continue to activate these traditions. Many families still adhere to deeply rooted symbols and customs from their ancestral culture. However, as observed in the sample families studied, some have integrated contemporary modifications, such as blending the traditional Amazigh attire with elements of Oran-style sewing. This fusion not only reflects aesthetic preferences but also embodies the social and cultural connections between generations, illustrating a dynamic interplay between heritage and modernity.

The interviews conducted with the studied sample revealed that the majority of these families engage in the rituals associated with "Yennayer," albeit with distinct customs and interpretations. Notable variations include the types of dishes prepared, the traditional attires worn, and the purchasing of various nuts and dried grains, which are typically prepared a day prior to the celebrations. In various dialects, this preparation is referred to as "el sherm," a term predominantly utilized in the western region of the country, particularly in Oran.

The Algerian government has officially recognized the celebration of the Amazigh New Year, particularly following the presidential decree issued in late December 2017, which designated this event as an official holiday since 2018. This decision is part of the state's extensive efforts to promote Amazigh heritage and language, as outlined in the presidential announcement. This official recognition underscores the importance of cultural diversity and the state's commitment to preserving and celebrating the rich traditions of the Amazigh community within Algeria.

Accordingly, it is evident that these customs and traditions are integral to the majority of the Algerian population, as indicated by the responses of the studied groups. The

celebration is perceived primarily as a commemoration of the annual agricultural calendar. However, a significant portion of the surveyed community views it as a traditional practice aimed at preserving social bonds among Algerian families. One of the interviewees highlighted the significance of this day as one that is eagerly anticipated by rooted Amazigh families, serving as an opportunity for reunion and reconciliation among individuals and families experiencing conflict. These insights were derived from the analytical techniques employed in the research data analysis, where the daily lives of this demographic were examined. We utilized interviews with members of Amazigh families alongside individuals from diverse backgrounds, allowing each participant to express their behaviors and practices associated with this day. This multifaceted approach illustrates the rich tapestry of cultural significance surrounding the celebration of the Amazigh New Year.

Based on the aforementioned, a fundamental question arises: Can we expect this celebration to occur in all Algerian regions, excluding the Kabyle areas?

From this question, the following hypotheses arise:

- Only Amazigh regions celebrate the New Year.
- Various regions of Algeria celebrate this day.
- The social status influences an individual's decision to celebrate these rituals associated with "Yennayer."

Methodology

The current study applies a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the cultural dimensions of Yennayer celebrations in Algerian society. Fieldwork in the research predominantly consisted of semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of Amazigh families from various regions, i.e., the Aurès, Oran, Constantine, and Sidi Aïch. Participants were selected on the basis of their participation in Yennayer

rituals to enable grounded understanding of both traditional and contemporary celebratory traditions.

Each researched topic is selected for specific reasons, and as a native of this country, I attribute significant importance to this subject. I celebrate it according to the traditional ways of the western region, such as buying nuts and preparing dinner, among other customs. This cultural dimension has motivated my exploration of the topic, with the objective of illuminating certain symbols and activities that are frequently absent from the celebratory context. Furthermore, it encompasses concepts that have the potential to enhance joy among marginalized communities.

1- Geography of Yennayer Celebrations in Algeria

The celebrations of Yennayer are not limited to a specific region within Algeria, as some studies have attempted to assert. These festivities are rather widespread and take place across various areas, including those where Arabic is predominantly spoken.

During the Yennayer celebrations, a variety of dishes are prepared. In the lead-up to Yennayer, men typically go to the market to purchase essential items and visit the mill to obtain semolina. Meanwhile, women spend five days gathering firewood in preparation for the festivities.

In the past, men of the "Senous" community would gather early in the morning for a hunting trip, bringing rabbits and partridges to be cooked and consumed the following day. However, customs have evolved; they now commonly slaughter a sheep or goat to ensure that families have meat available on the second day of the celebrations. Additionally, chicken is also served in every household.

On the first day of January, medium-sized bread is prepared, with an egg placed in its center. This bread is distributed among friends, who respond with gifts in return. Another

type of sweet is prepared, made from dried figs, pomegranates, oranges, and walnuts. These ingredients are crafted into decorative garlands.

In the village of El-Kaf in Beni Snous, celebrations last for four or five days. Meanwhile, in the village of Khemis, festivities extend for seven days, during which people consume only cold food.

For dinner, a dish called "berkoukes" is prepared with milk, avoiding the use of spices, especially red pepper, to prevent the year from being "red" or dry. Some of the grains are placed on the stones of the fireplace and on the roof beams. The pots used for cooking, as well as the crumbled bread and the grains, are not washed until a later time (Destaing, Op. Cit., P.02-03).

2- Rituals to face the New Year with Optimism

On the morning of the celebration of Yennayer, before sunrise, some families in the Aurès region scatter certain herbs known as "Cherchem" on the trees to ensure a good harvest. In other regions, such as Beni Snous, the New Year is welcomed by bringing green plants into the home on the first morning of January. Women and children go to the forest in the village of El-Kaf to gather date palms, olive branches, rosemary, wild thyme, carob, and other herbs. The women then place these herbs on the roof of the house to dry.

These celebrations are also associated in certain regions with optimistic magical practices. On the evening of December 31, before going to bed, each resident secures their tent to a central support pillar, which is a small column marked for identification purposes. The condition of this column the following morning serves as an indicator of the future well-being of the tent's occupant. A prevailing belief holds that if an individual's column falls, it may signify an impending death (Ibid).

3- Prohibited Practices in Yennayer Celebrations

The Yennayer celebrations are marked by a variety of rules that must be observed in specific regions. On this day, it is advised against lending fire, salt, dough, or kitchen utensils, as well as purchasing or borrowing a broom, as such actions are believed to invite misfortune and jeopardize prosperity. Furthermore, any dish that is burnt is regarded as an ill omen. Additionally, it is customary for women to refrain from visiting the *Hammam* during the festive days, and cutting children's hair is typically prohibited.

In Tlemcen, women avoid changing bed linens or clothing, and nail trimming is also prohibited during these days. This practice is rooted in traditional Arab customs, which dictate that household pests should not be exterminated for fear that the family may be afflicted by tragic circumstances.

4- Children's Games on the Day of the Celebration

Children engage in a variety of celebrations and eagerly anticipate this day. They often ascend the mountains, carrying food items such as bread, sponge cake, figs, and olives. After engaging in play, they reconvene to share a meal together.

In Beni Snous, the nature of play is intricately linked to weather conditions. On hot days, girls retreat to caves where they create dolls from reeds, adorning them while singing and dancing until sunset.

In Beni Snous, Tlemcen, children adorn themselves with masks and visit the homes of families, soliciting fruits through lyrical performances referred to as "Boumenani (Ibn Bashkuwal, 2003). In the same region, children imitate livestock by walking on all fours and producing loud vocalizations that mimic the sounds of herds returning from pastures. Concurrently, mothers wait at the entrances of their homes, awaiting the children's return and urging them to enter with forceful and loud calls. This practice is rooted in the belief that

such behaviors will attract prosperity and dispel negative influences from the household, highlighting the interplay between cultural traditions and communal well-being.

There is also a tradition of wearing clown costumes to imitate a lion, where children don animal skins and create a false lion to frighten others. Families come to protect their children, bringing food offerings. The false lion retreats when presented with some of the offerings, while the remainder is gathered for charity. This practice is often accompanied by prayers to God for the blessing of rain, illustrating the interconnection between cultural performance, community protection, and spiritual beliefs regarding sustenance and agricultural prosperity (Ibid.).

The night of the New Year's Eve is known as "Thaburtasghas," meaning "the door of the year," among the Amazigh tribes residing in Algeria. It is also referred to as "Aïd al-Sqas" among the Amazigh tribes in Morocco. This nomenclature reflects the cultural significance of the celebration within these communities, marking the transition into a new year and embodying various traditional practices and beliefs associated with renewal and abundance.

Recently, the celebration of Yennayer has gained additional significance as a means of preserving Amazigh cultural identity. This celebration not only marks the beginning of the new year in the Amazigh calendar but also serves as a vital expression of heritage, allowing communities to reaffirm their traditions, values, and connection to their history. As such, it plays a crucial role in the ongoing efforts to sustain and promote Amazigh culture in contemporary society.

5- The Legend of the Amazigh New Year

Some historians believe that the beginning of the Amazigh calendar dates back to the day when the Amazigh king Sheshonq I defeated the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses III, around 950 BC. This victory came after a long battle thought to have taken place in the city of

Tlemcen, Algeria. Following his triumph, Sheshonq was able to establish a monarchy that extended its rule from Libya to Egypt, as previously mentioned.

Historically, the Amazigh years were not systematically counted until the 1960s. At that time, the "Académie Berbère," a cultural association of Amazigh heritage based in Paris, made the decision to commence the Amazigh calendar from 950 BC. This date was chosen to correspond with the ascension of Sheshonq I to the throne of Egypt. This initiative represented a significant effort to formalize and promote the recognition of Amazigh history and identity within a broader cultural context. Sheshonq I was one of the prominent figures in Amazigh history and a symbol of strength in ancient North Africa.

6- Celebrations of Yennayer and Their Connection to the Stubborn Old Woman

Many beliefs, myths, and narratives are widespread, and Amazigh mythology tells of a stubborn old woman who underestimated the power of nature. She went out to wander with her goat among the fields on the last day of January, challenging its cold and snow. January felt insulted by the old woman's audacity, so he asked February to lend him an extra day to force the old woman to sleep in the cold, snowy field as a punishment. He said to him:

أتخيلك اعمي فورار ارضلي ليلة ونهار
نرمي العجوز في النار

Here, according to the myth, January was asking February "*Ami fourar*" for an extra day and night so that he punishes the stubborn old woman and throws her into the fire. So, January got what he wanted, and thus February was reduced to 28 days. When the old woman went out with her goat to the mountains, rain and snow fell, and the old woman and her goat perished (Laadjal, N., 2014).

In some regions, it is believed that celebrating January helps ward off the evil eye and the misfortunes of time. January is also considered an occasion for various local rituals that vary by region. For instance, some families in Algeria prefer to prepare couscous, which represents the quintessential dish for festivities on this day, accompanied by other traditional dishes previously mentioned.

7- The Social Role of Jennayer Celebrations

From this point, the importance and benefits of analyzing the representations and practices of the January celebration become clear, taking into account two factors that will influence these representations. These factors are the social environment we mentioned as a hypothesis and its impact on primary socialization, as well as the role of preserving inherited customs and traditions. This concept implies the existence of socially acquired habits that are deeply rooted in the collective social consciousness, guiding individuals' choices regarding their tastes and interactions during this occasion. Generally, these factors shape values that, in turn, influence their representations, but this process varies according to the mindset and specific characteristics of each family's unique journey.

Thus, each family has its own specific customs and traditions that guide them during their celebration of this day. Consequently, when the extended family gathers, it imparts its customs and traditions to the younger generation, making these practices a transitional phase between individuals. This concept is referred to as socio-cultural properties, commonly known as “**habitus**” (Strategor, 1993).

However, cultural learning, as envisioned by "Sansoulieu," represents another factor that will affect individuals through the process of imparting new standards, rituals, and rules. This can involve multiple cultures rather than just a single culture, indicating the existence of different social identities derived from independent and variable perceptions of one another.

8- Conclusion

This research examined the celebratory rituals of January within the context of social and economic transformations observed in the country. Through a comprehensive study involving a diverse array of families, we sought to enrich our analysis with socio-cultural indicators that provide enduring impressions and symbols, memorialized by history and acknowledged by successive generations. The transformations in the rituals associated with this celebration cannot be dissociated from their effects on social and cultural structures. Indeed, these shifts reflect broader changes in societal norms and values, highlighting the intricate interplay between cultural practices and the evolving socio-economic landscape. Such an analysis underscores the significance of understanding how cultural rituals adapt and respond to contemporary influences while continuing to serve as vital components of community identity.

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