



***Cinema and Cultural Identity in Algeria: The Role of National Film in Zafira:  
The Last Princess***

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**Abstract:**

In an era of globalization and digital connectivity, cultural security has become a key pillar of national identity and resilience. Beyond entertainment, cinema acts as a medium that preserves and transmits collective memory. This study examines the role of the film industry in promoting cultural security through the Algerian cinematic experience. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, it analyzes *Zafira: The Last Princess* (2014) by Belkacem Hadjadj as a reflection of efforts to safeguard heritage and reaffirm identity in postcolonial Algeria. Findings show that, despite structural and economic challenges, Algerian cinema remains a site of cultural resistance and creativity. Strengthening this role requires coherent policies, education, and digital innovation to reinforce Algeria's cultural sovereignty.

**Keywords:** *Cultural security; Algerian cinema; national identity; postcolonial heritage; Globalization; Zafira: The Last Princess;*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, culture has become an indispensable pillar of national security. As globalization accelerates the transnational circulation of information, imagery, and values, the boundaries of cultural identity have grown increasingly porous. This dynamic poses new challenges for nations seeking to safeguard their distinctive heritage while remaining engaged with a rapidly integrating world. Within this context, cultural security emerges as a critical concept — denoting the protection of a nation's cultural identity, symbols, and values from external domination, distortion, or erasure (UNESCO, 2017).

Among all cultural industries, cinema occupies a singular position in shaping collective consciousness. Films are not merely artistic artifacts; they serve as mirrors of collective memory, ideology, and identity. Through cinematic storytelling, societies reconstruct myths, reinterpret historical experience, and envision their collective futures. As UNESCO (2017) underscores, safeguarding cultural diversity and creative expression constitutes a cornerstone of sustainable development, social stability, and intercultural dialogue.

In Algeria, the film industry has historically played a decisive role in consolidating national identity, particularly during and after the struggle for independence. Early postcolonial cinema—marked by revolutionary narratives and themes of resistance—helped forge a shared memory that celebrated liberation, dignity, and cultural authenticity. Yet, in recent decades, Algerian cinema has encountered profound structural and ideological challenges, including limited production capacity, insufficient funding, and the pervasive dominance of imported media content. These constraints have diminished its capacity to contribute effectively to cultural security.

Nevertheless, Algerian filmmakers continue to experiment with new aesthetic and narrative forms that reconnect audiences with their historical consciousness and moral values. A prominent example is *Zafira: The Last Princess* (2014), directed by Belkacem Hadjadj. The film revisits a neglected episode of Algerian history, weaving together myth, legend, and historical reconstruction to illustrate the resilience of Algerian culture in the face of colonial erasure. Through its poetic imagery and symbolic narrative, *Zafira* becomes a cinematic metaphor for cultural endurance and national self-awareness.

Accordingly, this study examines how the Algerian film industry—through works such as *Zafira*—contributes to the enhancement of cultural security. It seeks to address three guiding research questions:

1. In what ways does cinema function as a mechanism for cultural preservation and identity reinforcement?
2. What structural and ideological barriers impede the role of Algerian cinema in fostering cultural security?
3. How does *Zafira* illuminate the relationship between art, history, and cultural sovereignty?

The study adopts a descriptive–analytical and interpretive approach, integrating theoretical reflections on cultural security with a contextualized reading of the selected film. It argues that national cinema can serve as a vital instrument of cultural continuity and resilience—provided it is supported by coherent cultural policies, integrated into educational frameworks, and strengthened through digital innovation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

### 2.1. Understanding Cultural Security

The concept of cultural security has progressively evolved within the broader discipline of human security and cultural policy studies. It refers to a society's ability to preserve its cultural identity, traditions, and symbolic systems amid the threats of homogenization and external domination. As UNESCO (2017) defines it, cultural security involves “the protection and promotion of cultural diversity as a condition for peace, sustainability, and human dignity” (p. 16). This idea emerged as a critical response to the pressures of globalization, which tend to universalize consumption patterns and erode local distinctiveness.

Scholars identify three main dimensions of cultural security:

**Identity Preservation** — ensuring that national symbols, languages, and traditions remain vital and transmitted across generations;

**Cultural Sovereignty** — maintaining autonomy in cultural production and dissemination, especially under conditions of global media hegemony; and

**Creative Freedom and Resilience** — empowering local creators to express their culture authentically, thereby reinforcing collective confidence and innovation (Kerr & Flynn, 2020, pp. 54–56).

When cultural security is weakened, societies risk losing continuity, belonging, and meaning, which may result in cultural alienation and social fragmentation. Thus, fostering cultural security has become a strategic imperative for states seeking both stability and soft power influence (Nye, 2004, pp. 78–80).

### 2.2 The Film Industry as an Instrument of Cultural Security

Cinema holds a privileged position among the cultural industries because it unites narrative, emotion, and visual imagery to construct powerful representations of collective identity. Shohat and Stam (2014) observe that films “serve as cultural mirrors through which nations narrate themselves to themselves and to others” (p. 22). Accordingly, the film industry functions not merely as entertainment but as a domain of symbolic power—one that shapes perception, builds memory, and transmits national values (Deuze, 2020, pp. 141–143).

- The relationship between cinema and cultural security operates through several interrelated mechanisms:
- **Cultural Representation:** Films encode and project national myths, historical experiences, and moral values.
- **Identity Affirmation:** Cinema allows societies to assert their uniqueness and resist homogenization.
- **International Visibility:** A dynamic film sector functions as a vehicle of soft power, enhancing a nation's cultural image abroad.

Countries such as the United States (Hollywood), India (Bollywood), and South Korea (Hallyu cinema) have leveraged film to reinforce national pride and global influence. For developing nations like Algeria, however, the challenge lies in cultivating a sustainable cinematic ecosystem that harmonizes artistic expression with cultural preservation (Abderrahmane, 2023, p. 67).

## 2.3 Algerian Cinema and the Quest for Identity

Since independence in 1962, Algerian cinema has been instrumental in constructing and sustaining national identity. Early filmmakers such as Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina and Mohamed Chouikh used cinema to commemorate the liberation struggle and expose colonial oppression. Their films gave rise to what is often described as *cinéma de résistance*, a movement devoted to the defense of collective memory (Bouamari, 1999, p. 84).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Algerian cinema remained closely aligned with state institutions, serving as both ideological and educational apparatus. Productions emphasized themes of patriotism, solidarity, and social justice. Yet, the liberalization of media in the 1990s—combined with political instability and diminishing public funding—precipitated a decline in film output. Imported foreign media began to dominate local screens and digital platforms, limiting Algerian cinema's role as a cultural vehicle (Chibane, 2012, p. 74).

In recent years, a new generation of filmmakers—including Belkacem Hadjadj, Mounia Meddour, and Djaffar Gacem—has redefined Algerian cinema by engaging themes of identity, gender, memory, and post-colonial trauma. Their works explore the intersections of religion, history, and modernity, articulating the cultural tensions of a society negotiating its place in a globalized world (Boulayoun, 2023, pp. 62–65).

## 2.4. Theoretical Lens: Semiotics and Cultural Discourse

To analyze the cultural significance of *Zafira: The Last Princess* (2014), this study draws upon semiotic and discourse-analysis frameworks. Semiotics, as developed by Barthes (1977), conceptualizes film as a system of signs—a “language” that generates meaning through images, sounds, and symbols (pp. 31–32). This approach enables researchers to decode how cinematic elements such as costume, setting, dialogue, and lighting produce ideological meanings associated with national identity and cultural memory.

Likewise, discourse analysis helps uncover the power relations and cultural narratives embedded in cinematic texts. Within this perspective, *Zafira* functions as a cultural discourse that reconstructs Algeria's historical consciousness and reclaims the symbolic domain of the nation from colonial frameworks (Assmann, 2011, pp. 130–132).

Through this dual framework, Algerian cinema is situated within broader debates on media, culture, and identity politics—affirming the role of film as both a mirror that reflects and a medium that shapes cultural security.

## 3. Algerian Cinema and Cultural Identity: Historical Context and Contemporary Challenges

### 3.1. Cinema as a Memory of Resistance

The Algerian film industry was born out of the crucible of anti-colonial resistance. During the struggle for independence (1954–1962), cinema functioned simultaneously as a weapon of documentation and a tool of liberation. Films produced by revolutionary movements — such as *Les Fusils de la Liberté* and *Patrouille à l'Est* — played a crucial role in exposing colonial injustices and reinforcing national unity among Algerians (Aït-Benali, 2003, pp. 42–45).

After independence, the newly established state recognized cinema as both a political and cultural instrument. The creation of the Centre Algérien de la Cinématographie (CAC) and other national institutions reflected a vision of cinema as a medium for education and social

transformation. Early post-independence masterpieces such as Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina's *Chronique des Années de Braïse* (1975) — which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes — symbolized the global recognition of Algerian creativity and resilience (Larbès, 2024, pp. 290–293).

Cinema thus became a repository of collective memory — a space in which the nation narrated its own story. Through images of struggle, dignity, and sacrifice, Algerian cinema anchored national identity within its historical experience, ensuring that colonial narratives would never again silence the Algerian voice (Djiair, 2009, p. 187).

### 3.2. Shifting Paradigms: From Ideology to Identity

The 1980s and 1990s marked a period of transition in Algerian cinema. As state funding declined and private media began to emerge, filmmakers diversified their themes and production styles, moving beyond ideological discourse to explore personal and social issues such as gender roles, youth aspirations, and post-colonial identity conflicts (Chibane, 2012, p. 74).

This evolution reflected a broader cultural transformation — an effort to redefine identity beyond the trauma of colonialism. Cinema became a laboratory for national self-reflection. However, the “Black Decade” of the 1990s silenced many creative voices and disrupted film production, leading to the closure of theaters and stagnation in cultural policy (Youssef, 2018, pp. 7–8).

As globalization intensified, Algeria faced an influx of foreign media content from Western and Middle Eastern markets. Although this exposure provided opportunities for exchange, it also marginalized local production. The lack of coherent cultural policies and digital infrastructure further weakened the domestic film ecosystem, highlighting the urgent need to redefine cinema's role as a guardian of cultural security (Sharpe, 2023, pp. 110–111).

### 3.3 Contemporary Challenges in the Algerian Film Industry

Today, Algerian cinema confronts multiple structural and systemic challenges that constrain its contribution to cultural security: chronic underfunding, institutional fragmentation, weak distribution networks, and the overwhelming dominance of foreign content (Boulayoun, 2023, p. 56). Despite these barriers, Algerian filmmakers continue to produce works celebrating the richness of Algerian culture and its deep historical roots. Often operating with limited resources, their artistic resilience itself becomes an act of cultural resistance (Larbès, 2024, pp. 300–301).

### 3.4 Towards a Culturally Secure Cinema

To fulfill its role in strengthening cultural security, Algerian cinema must embrace three strategic imperatives:

**Policy Support** — the recognition of cinema as a component of national security through funding, training, and institutional reform (Djiair, 2009, pp. 198–199).

**Educational Integration** — incorporating film literacy into national curricula to nurture critical and culturally aware audiences (Youssef, 2018, p. 9).

**Digital Innovation** — leveraging technology through digital archives and streaming platforms to expand global visibility (Boulayoun, 2023, pp. 60–61).

As Algerian filmmaker Merzak Allouache aptly observed, “Cinema must speak the language of its people before it can speak to the world,” a reminder that authentic national storytelling remains the foundation of global cultural engagement (quoted in Sharpe, 2023, p. 125).

## 4. Case Study: *Zafira: The Last Princess* — A Cinematic Reading of Cultural Resistance

### 4.1 Context and Synopsis

*Zafira: The Last Princess* (2014), directed by Belkacem Hadjadj, stands as one of the most ambitious efforts in contemporary Algerian cinema to reconstruct national historical memory through myth and legend. Set in sixteenth-century Tlemcen, during the decline of the Zayyanid dynasty and the ascent of Ottoman influence, the film recounts the tragic fate of Zafira—the last princess of Tlemcen—who becomes a symbol of resistance, dignity, and betrayal (Hadjadj, 2014).

Through Zafira's journey—torn between loyalty, love, and the collapse of her kingdom—Hadjadj explores the tension between political power and moral integrity, as well as between historical loss and cultural endurance. The film's poetic dialogue, allegorical imagery, and meticulous historical reconstruction evoke a sense of national nostalgia and spiritual continuity (Boulayoun, 2023, pp. 88–90). In this respect, *Zafira* transcends the limits of historical drama to become a cinematic meditation on identity, memory, and the persistence of Algerian culture.

### 4.2 Semiotic Analysis: Signs of Identity and Memory

Viewed through a semiotic lens, *Zafira* constitutes a filmic text saturated with symbols and metaphors articulating the collective anxieties of a post-colonial society.

**The Character of Zafira:** As the final princess, she embodies the wounded yet dignified spirit of Algeria. Her defiance of political betrayal symbolizes the resilience of national culture against colonial erasure (Assmann, 2011, pp. 127–128).

**The Palace of Tlemcen:** Its decaying architecture operates as a metaphor for lost grandeur and a reminder of the necessity to reconstruct cultural sovereignty (Djiair, 2009, p. 193).

**Costume and Color Symbolism:** The chromatic palette—earthy browns and gold—invokes both the opulence of Algerian heritage and the melancholy of its decline (Sharpe, 2023, p. 118).

**Language and Dialogue:** By blending Classical Arabic with poetic registers, Hadjadj reclaims linguistic authenticity as a cornerstone of cultural identity (Youssef, 2018, p. 9).

Through these aesthetic signs, the film constructs a visual grammar of memory linking Algeria's past with its ongoing struggle for cultural self-definition.

### 4.3 Cultural Discourse and Historical Consciousness

At a deeper interpretive level, *Zafira* functions as a discourse on the politics of memory. By revisiting a pre-colonial epoch, the film challenges Western-centric historiographies that marginalize Maghrebi narratives, reconstructing an indigenous account that honors local heroes and moral values (Said, 1993, pp. xiii–xiv).

Hadjadj's directorial focus on the feminine voice situates women as moral agents within national consciousness. *Zafira* is not portrayed as a passive victim but as an ethical subject whose endurance represents both personal and collective resistance. This portrayal aligns with cultural-memory theory, which regards women as key custodians of historical continuity (Assmann, 2011, p. 132).

The film's deliberate pacing, panoramic landscapes, and intimate lighting invite contemplation of the interdependence between land, memory, and identity, transforming the natural environment of Tlemcen into a spiritual landscape (Boulayoun, 2023, p. 94).

#### 4.4 Cinematic Technique and Cultural Aesthetics

From a formal perspective, *Zafira* distinguishes itself through aesthetic sophistication and symbolic composition. Its *mise-en-scène* fuses historical realism with lyrical abstraction, encouraging audiences to experience history not as static chronology but as living emotional heritage (Monaco, 2021, pp. 212–214).

Sound design plays an equally vital role. Traditional Andalusian motifs interwoven with moments of silence establish a sonic continuum linking Algeria's Andalusian cultural roots with its contemporary identity (Larbès, 2024, pp. 300–301).

Hadjadj's sustained attention to female subjectivity and moral courage constitutes a subtle post-colonial critique: heroism is re-imagined not through warfare but through ethical steadfastness and cultural fidelity (Sharpe, 2023, pp. 125–126).

#### 4.5 Interpretation: Cinema as Cultural Reclamation

Ultimately, *Zafira: The Last Princess* exemplifies cinema's capacity for cultural reclamation—recovering history from silence, language from erasure, and identity from fragmentation. By transforming the forgotten legend of a princess into a national allegory, Hadjadj forges a dialogue between Algeria's past and its post-colonial present, affirming that cultural security begins with self-knowledge (Boulayoun, 2023, p. 97).

Despite limited production resources, *Zafira* demonstrates how Algerian cinema can operate as a form of cultural diplomacy, education, and internal cohesion. It rekindles pride, informs younger generations of their heritage, and deepens emotional belonging to the nation. The film thus stands as both aesthetic achievement and patriotic statement—merging beauty with moral responsibility, the essence of culturally conscious cinema.

### 5. Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

#### 5.1 Discussion: Cinema as a Strategic Dimension of Cultural Security

The findings of this study reveal that the Algerian film industry, despite its structural fragility, holds a profound potential for strengthening national identity and promoting cultural security. Through symbolic storytelling and historical reconstruction, films like *Zafira: The Last Princess* become platforms for reimagining Algeria's cultural selfhood.

Cinema functions as a symbolic battlefield where competing narratives of identity are negotiated. In the case of *Zafira*, the film reclaims historical memory not through ideological slogans but through aesthetic and emotional depth. This approach humanizes the notion of resistance — transforming it from political rhetoric into a moral and cultural act.

Moreover, Algerian cinema illustrates that cultural security is not merely about protection, but also about participation — the ability of a society to contribute actively to the global cultural conversation while preserving its distinctive voice. The evolution of digital platforms and global festivals offers new opportunities for Algerian filmmakers to reach wider audiences and assert the richness of their heritage. Yet, such opportunities require coherent cultural policies and an ecosystem that values cinema as a national asset rather than a luxury.

#### 5.2 Challenges and Lessons Learned

The analysis of *Zafira* and the broader Algerian cinematic landscape highlights several lessons relevant to both policymakers and cultural practitioners:

**Narrative Fragmentation:** Many Algerian films remain disconnected from their audiences due to weak storytelling and limited distribution. *Zafira* shows that emotionally resonant narratives can bridge this gap by reconnecting cinema with cultural identity.

**Funding and Production Models:** Sustainable cultural security demands stable financial mechanisms, including public–private partnerships and incentives for independent filmmakers.

**Cultural Diplomacy:** International co-productions can serve as vehicles of soft power if they remain faithful to authentic Algerian narratives.

**Education and Research:** Integrating film studies and cultural security into university programs can generate a new generation of scholars and creators aware of cinema’s strategic value.

**Digital Transformation:** Embracing streaming services and digital archives can preserve cinematic heritage while making it accessible to global audiences.

### 5.3 Recommendations for Enhancing Cultural Security through Cinema

1. **National Cinema Strategy:** Establish a long-term cultural policy that recognizes cinema as a strategic dimension of national security, not merely as entertainment.
2. **Cultural Infrastructure:** Rehabilitate theaters, film schools, and cultural centers to foster creativity and dialogue among young filmmakers.
3. **Regional Collaboration:** Strengthen partnerships with Maghreb and African film industries to enhance collective cultural resilience.
4. **Women in Cinema:** Support female filmmakers and narratives that explore gender, identity, and memory, as these contribute deeply to the humanization of cultural discourse.
5. **Digital Archiving and Promotion:** Develop a national online film archive to preserve historical works and promote Algerian films globally.

Such measures would not only sustain creative production but also reinforce Algeria’s soft power by positioning cinema as an ambassador of its culture and values.

## 6. Conclusion

This study confirms that the film industry can serve as a powerful instrument for promoting cultural security, especially in nations with rich yet contested histories like Algeria. By blending artistic vision with historical consciousness, films such as *Zafira: The Last Princess* demonstrate that cinema can heal memory, renew identity, and inspire collective pride.

Cultural security, therefore, is not achieved through isolation but through creative engagement. Algerian cinema must continue to look inward — to its heritage, languages, and landscapes — while also looking outward, participating confidently in global cultural exchanges.

In a world increasingly dominated by digital images and transnational media flows, preserving Algeria’s cultural sovereignty requires not censorship, but creativity; not nostalgia, but renewal. As *Zafira* reminds its viewers, “those who forget their story, lose their soul.” The future of Algerian cinema lies in remembering — beautifully, courageously, and together.

This research emerges from a deep personal conviction that cinema is not only a creative industry but also a vessel of memory, identity, and belonging. As a scholar and educator in communication and cultural studies, I believe that films can bridge generations, revive forgotten histories, and inspire collective reflection.

The story of *Zafira: The Last Princess* resonates with Algeria's own journey — a nation that has endured loss but continues to rise through culture, knowledge, and resilience. My hope is that this study contributes, however modestly, to the recognition of cinema as a strategic pillar of cultural security and as a mirror through which societies rediscover their humanity.

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