

The Intangible Folklore of the Djelfa Region

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Abstract

Folklore, or popular arts, is a body of ancient arts, stories, tales, myths, material culture, and visual arts that are specific to the customs and traditions of a particular population group within a country. Knowledge related to folklore is typically passed from one generation to the next through oral narration. Each generation may add or omit elements to ensure the folklore aligns with its contemporary reality. This creative process is not the work of a single individual but is rather the product of the human collective within a society.

Heritage is that which is transmitted from one generation to the next, encompassing customs, traditions, sciences, literature, arts, and so forth. We speak of "human heritage," "literary heritage," and "folk heritage." The latter includes all popular arts and traditions, such as poetry, song, music, folk beliefs, stories, anecdotes, and proverbs commonly used by the general populace, as well as the customs and inherited forms of performance, dance, games, and skills associated with marriage and various other occasions.

The Djelfa region, with its own distinct folk heritage, is a case in point. This article investigates the contribution of folklore to popular literature within this region.

Keywords: folklore, popular, intangible, Djelfa.

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Introduction

Popular literature is that which is written in a vernacular language, closely aligned with the daily speech of the people. It is a form of literature that accurately depicts the past, present, and future manifestations of popular life, expressing the people's needs, emotions, feelings, and interests. As Hussein Nassar states: "I do not think anyone would disagree that the most precise and pure representation of popular literature is that which encompasses the literature expressing the feelings and emotions of the people. Popular literature, therefore, is the literature produced by the people, which expresses their collective consciousness, represents their thinking, and reflects their civilizational orientations and levels."¹

Defining Folklore

The term "popular literature" is an equivalent to the Western term "folklore." The latter is used to express the creative faculties that originate from a collective, particularly in areas that rely on spoken or oral expression. It consists of stories, songs, proverbs, and certain dramatic phenomena, among other elements that fall under the umbrella of popular literature.² The term "folklore" is a compound of two words: "folk," meaning "people," and "lore," meaning "popular tradition" or "popular culture." The author Telli Ibn al-Sheikh notes in his book *Starting Points for Thinking on Popular Literature* that this term, "folklore," was introduced into the Arabic language as part of cultural influences from the West. It continues to be widely used by many Arab writers, especially in journalism, radio, and theatre, which has contributed to its spread and use throughout the Arab world.³ This awareness of folk studies has been a long-standing interest in the West, leading to efforts to collect, care for, define, and delimit the material of folk heritage.

The term "popular literature" is Western in origin but Arabic in development. It is a compound of two words: "literature" (*adab*) and "popular" (*sha'bi*). "Literature" is a broad concept with multiple meanings and vast horizons, defined as "aesthetic, artistic discourse of a high caliber, whether poetry or prose, produced by a writer or

poet, and subject to a specific linguistic and artistic logic."⁴ The word "popular" (*sha'bi*), derived from "people" (*sha'b*), refers to a population living in a specific, distinct region who share common characteristics. The term simultaneously points to two different concepts:

- **a)** A large audience or group of people belonging to one country and subject to the same laws, or more broadly, a group of people who share a similar marker such as religion, state, origin, or land.
- **b)** A segment of a nation considered distinct from other social classes, either due to greater wealth or greater knowledge.⁵

Nabila Ibrahim believes that "popular literature stems from collective consciousness and the collective unconscious."⁶ The customs, traditions, and beliefs prevalent in any region or nation are derived from their folk heritage, which, in turn, originated from the people themselves. In another context, she states: "When we say 'popular literature' or 'folk heritage,' we are fully aware that we mean the product of a specific group, not the entire people."⁷ Popular literature is the creation of an individual or a group of individuals who come together to compose a story, a proverb, a riddle, or other forms. It serves as the memory of peoples and a mirror that faithfully reflects their past and their oral consciousness, with all the accompanying customs and religious and social rituals.

Critics and specialists have been interested in the term "popular literature," attempting to provide a comprehensive and unified definition. However, critical opinions have varied for several reasons:

- **The nature of folk material:** Folk material is in constant flux, carrying different symbols and connotations that can be added to or removed depending on the circumstances and the era in which it was spoken.
- **Each researcher's perspective:** Some give complete importance to the content, while others focus on the form. A third group combines both.
- **The richness of popular literature:** It spans intellectual fields such as literature, history, psychology, sociology, and others, which has led to a multiplicity of definitions.

Some scholars consider popular literature to be that which is transmitted orally, not in writing. It is vernacular in expression, traditional in origin, and its author is anonymous. It is an oral form contrasted with official literature. "The popular literature of any human society is the traditional, oral, vernacular literature of its

people, with an unknown author, inherited from generation to generation."⁸ Others focus on the linguistic aspect: if the language used is a formal, eloquent literary language, it belongs to official, classical literature; if it uses a simple, vernacular language, it belongs to popular literature. Still others have focused on the content rather than the form. Izz al-Din Jalawji states: "Popular literature is the literature of the people, expressing their feelings and emotions, representing their thinking and civilizational orientations, and circulating among its members. It is simple in its language and imagery, whether narrated orally or written, and whether its author is known or unknown."⁹

The Folk Literary Heritage of the Djelfa Region

The Djelfa region possesses a rich literary heritage. Its environment played a major role in its emergence and enrichment, and it has been orally transmitted by narrators. However, in the present day, this heritage needs to be collected, documented, and subsequently studied and analyzed for its content, forms, and creative elements, especially since it is at risk of being lost due to the disappearance of the circumstances that helped it spread among the people. The popular literature of the region can be divided into four types:¹⁰

1. Popular Stories

A primary observation about this literary form is that most of its preservers are, first and foremost, elderly women in their homes, followed by "storytellers" (*al-qawwaloun*) or "praisesingers" (*al-maddahoun*) who wander through markets and recount the stories they have memorized. These stories served as a means of moral instruction, entertainment, and evening gatherings, especially with children, who would eagerly gather around the old woman—often a grandmother—after everyone had settled down, to listen to her tales with great passion and interest.

As for the *qawwal*, he would take advantage of the market setting and the large crowds to tell heroic stories. He would sometimes perform like an actor, interacting with the events of the tale through movements and gestures with his hands and staff, immersing his listeners in the story. These tales might also be accompanied by popular poems or proverbs relevant to the context.

There are several types of popular stories circulating in this region, which can generally be divided into: heroic tales, mythical or "fabulous" tales, and humorous short stories.

- **Heroic Tales:** The most prominent stories of this type prevalent in the region are extended narratives from the “*Sirat Bani Hilal*” (Epic of the Banu Hilal). This serves as a testament to their arrival and settlement in the area. The Hilalian presence has left us with several names that appear in popular heroic tales, such as "Al-Khalifa Al-Zinati," "Dhiyab bin Ghanim," "Ahmad al-Hilali," and "Bint al-Khass."¹¹ All of these are well-known Hilalian heroes. We also find the names of other heroes known in Arab-Islamic history, such as Imam Ali (may God honor his face) and Caliph Harun al-Rashid.

These heroic tales tend to extend from Arab-Islamic history, which demonstrates the pride of these people in their history and heritage and their desire to preserve it as a part of their identity and culture. The Bedouin environment also helped in the spread of these heroic stories, given the similarity between the features of this life and the elements described in their tales. Moreover, the focus on this type of story in the past, before independence, was undoubtedly a way to revive the glorious days of ancient Arab heroes. This provided the listeners with a dose of enthusiasm, a means to find strength to resist the control and domination imposed upon them. It also strengthened their will to defend their identity, which had been marginalized. From this, the glories of the ancestors remained a source of popular enthusiasm and a crucial factor in arousing national pride and saving the people from the debilitating social state they endured for a long time under occupation.¹²

- **The Fabulous Tale (*Al-Hikaya al-Khurafiyya*):** The narrator of these tales is often an elderly woman, and the audience is children whose developing imaginations roam the horizons of the world. A popular fabulous tale is a "story invented by the popular imagination, or to which the popular imagination has added a fantastical element, to express a particular belief or an idea that the masses are passionate about."¹³ The content and characters these tales vary. They may be about *jinn*, who are often a source of evil, or about ghouls, who represent the struggle between good and evil. They may also be stories derived from ancient historical reality, influenced by the tales of the prophets and the Quran, but the popular imagination has added elements heavily shaped by the circumstances and social reality of the people. Ultimately, the greatest thing these fabulous stories reflect is the fertile imagination of the simple, ordinary people in the Djelfa region and their ability to make the fabulous tale suitable for the culture and mindset of the people and what they believe in—this is from an artistic perspective. From a content perspective, it is the love for goodness that is shown through the victory of the virtuous hero at the end. Thus, the constant struggle in this

eternal worldly duality of "good and evil" is the central theme around which these fabulous tales in the region revolve.¹⁴

- **The Humorous Short Story:** This type of popular story is more common and less susceptible to being lost or forgotten than the other types mentioned, due to its brevity, simplicity, and its amusing and witty nature. It is shared during gatherings of friends, family, or neighbors for the purpose of entertainment and lightening the mood, all while still containing a moral lesson. It is worth noting that the characters in these stories are either human or animal. In the first type, the name **Joha** is frequently mentioned. He is a humorous, comical character, as Al-Aqqad called him, who has been known among Arab peoples since ancient times. This indicates the transmission and cross-pollination between Arab cultures. Joha is often described in these stories as intelligent and shrewd, and at other times cunning and deceptive, all within a humorous atmosphere. As for the animal characters, they are symbols used to describe prevalent social phenomena in an indirect, symbolic way. For example, the fox or wolf is a symbol for cunning, the lion for strength and tyranny, and the donkey for foolishness and a failure to consider the consequences of one's actions. This genre is a source through which one can understand the simple person's view of life and its manifestations, which often contain unique, insightful observations and folk wisdom.¹⁵ A general observation that can be made about all the types of popular stories mentioned is that the narration differs from one place to another within the region and from one narrator to another, perhaps according to the narrow environment in which they are told and due to the nature of oral transmission itself, where they are subject to change, addition, and omission. Another factor that affects the original text is the narrator's psyche and inclinations, which make them focus on specific elements in the story, as well as the nature of the audience, which may necessitate adding or downplaying certain features of the tale. Unfortunately, the social environment that helped this popular genre survive and thrive—such as the evening gatherings of families, neighbors, or friends in that simple Bedouin or semi-Bedouin environment where such stories were told—has begun to disappear. Other distractions, particularly phones and media (especially television), have taken their place, leaving no time for such gatherings. Even narrators who possess this hobby now feel a great reluctance to tell these stories because they feel as if their time and place have passed. It is very difficult to convince them of the importance, role, and seriousness of studying them.¹⁶

2. Popular Proverbs

"More enduring than poetry, and more honorable than rhetoric." This phrase was uttered by Ibn Abd Rabbih in his book *Al-Iqd al-Farid* when he realized that the world of these simple folk sayings, with their rhythm and harmony—this short structure and great meaning—is a wondrous world of immense value. It is the popular proverb that has transmitted the experiences and wisdom of nations over the course of time, with its continuous recitation ensuring its preservation from loss, despite the passing of days and years. A significant number of researchers have been interested in this popular literary genre that is so closely associated with the people—perhaps more so than any other—because it delineates the intellectual traditions and the ethical and evaluative perspective of the people. In the Djelfa region, it is observed that the most used popular literary genre on the tongues of the common people is the popular proverb. It is frequently repeated in their conversations whenever a situation or event arises that matches a proverb or folk wisdom, serving as an explanation, clarification, and evaluation of situations and their consequences.¹⁷ Two types of popular proverbs can be distinguished in the region: the proverb connected to an event or a story, and the proverbial maxim that is not related to any story [but serves as a form of wisdom].

- **The first type** originated from an event that occurred at some point, which inspired its speaker. The name of the hero of this event may appear in the text. An example is the proverb prevalent in the region:

«الحاج بلقاسم، واش قاصبو» This translates roughly as: "**Hajj Belkacem, what is his objective?**" This proverb urges against being hasty in one's affairs and instead encourages deliberation.¹⁸

- **The second type**, the proverbial maxim, is widespread. It is not tied to a specific story but still addresses a particular issue and contains a piece of wisdom intended to highlight a certain moral or social value to instill it in the community. This type may use a direct approach to advocate for a specific moral truth, such as their saying (in the region):

«كول ورخم» This means: "**Eat and be merciful,**" a direct call for benevolence.¹⁹ Or it may use a metaphorical approach (or metonymy) like their saying: «اللي عيئو في الغزال؛ ييكرلؤو» This means: "**He who wants the gazelle must get up early for it.**" It is a metaphorical invitation to do things at the right time and not to procrastinate, as that could lead to loss.²⁰ Another example is: «جا يسعي؛ وذر تسعة» This translates to: "**He came to pursue one thing but lost nine.**" This is

a metaphor or a metonym for someone who works hard to achieve one goal but, in the process, loses many other things because he did not plan properly on a sound basis.²¹

3. Popular Riddles

The riddle is an ancient folk verbal art, as old as humanity itself, which demonstrates humankind's fascination and love for discovering the secrets of this universe and its manifestations, whether material or abstract. The riddle showcases the simple person's ingenuity in discovering the precise descriptions of things and the laws that govern their elements.²² In the Djelfa region, there is a great fondness for the world of riddles. Families often sit together in the evening, and a parent will recite a riddle they have memorized, asking the others to answer to show their intelligence and wit. It is observed that females have a greater fondness for this verbal art. These riddles generally concern the environment in which the people live their specific Bedouin lives. We find topics related to the human being himself or his biological makeup, such as riddles about human senses. An example of a riddle common in the region is:

«خَبْتَيْنِ زَرْعُوا بِرْ» This translates literally to: **"Two grains planted in a well."** This riddle refers to the eyes, which are like two seeds planted deep in the sockets of the face.²³ The circle of riddles can also widen to include descriptions of what surrounds a person, both inside and outside their home. For example: «يجي كالحبيب، ويتلاح كالرَّيب» This means: **"It comes like a beloved, and it's thrown away like a stepson."** This riddle describes water, which is precious when it arrives (like a beloved) but is discarded without a second thought after use.²⁴ Some riddles are more expansive, describing the elements of the universe around us, such as their saying in the region: «بيتنا الكبيرة، وغنمنا الكثيره، وخصائنا الصَّهال» This means: **"Our big house, our many sheep, and our neighing horse."** This riddle refers to the night sky, with the house being the sky, the sheep being the stars, and the horse being the moon.²⁵

4. Popular Poetry

Popular poetry is a form of expression within popular literature. It is an oral folk creation and a type of popular cultural expression, like other popular forms. "Popular literature includes poetry, songs, riddles, stories, myths, traditions, and other elements of heritage, to the extent that the concept of popular literature encompasses a collection of verbal arts such as popular proverbs, songs, jokes, and folk tales. Perhaps at the head of these arts is popular poetry."²⁶ Popular poetry is defined as

"any verse written in the people's vernacular dialect, whose texts express the people's feelings and aspirations, transmitted from generation to generation through oral narration. The speaker may be illiterate or educated in some way, just like the audience."²⁷ The term stands proudly, assertively, not allowing anyone to manipulate it or violate its sanctity. It is the master of the situation and controls its own destiny, leaving no room for the speaker/writer but to submit to it. The popular poetry of Djelfa has several purposes. By examining the verses of its poets and the outpouring of their creative minds, we find that they have addressed most of the topics that classical poets wrote about. Their poetry stems from a God-given talent, which grew from their experiences in their society. The purposes of Djelfa's popular poetry are varied and include: praise (*madh*), satire (*hija*'), description (*wasf*), pride (*fakhr*), love poetry (*ghazal*), elegy (*ritha*'), religious poetry, war poetry, travel poetry, and epistolary poetry. For example, in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, Si Ahmed bin Ma'attar says:

يَنَالُوا مَنَوا المـــــــدد	فَضَلُوا فُوقَ كُلِّ نَبِي
قَالَ تَكُونِي كَأَنَّ أَحْمَد	هُوَ قَبْضَةٌ مِنْ نُورِ رَبِّي

His virtue is above every prophet; from him, they receive support. He is a fistful of God's light, which He said: "Be," and so Ahmad was.²⁸

The poet Mahfoud Belkhiri described a place in the desert in some verses of his famous poem, "*Fat al-Qalb*" (Heart's Passion), in which he says:

مَضْرَبَ مَوْطِي زَيْنَ وَالرَّمْلَ مَعْطِيَةً	مَا هُوَ هَاوِي يَأْكُ وَلَا مِسْرَفَد
مَسْرَطَبَ وَيُوالِمْ الحَافِي رَجْلِيَةً	مَا هُوَ شِي يَحْرَاشُ بِحَمَادٍ مَكْرَكَد
فَصَلَ الحَرَّ مَزَيْتُو نَسِيمٍ يَجِيَةً	مَا هُوَ غَبَارَةٌ يُوَاتِي لِبَسَ الْجَد
طَبَعُو فَصَلَ الصَّرَّ كَافِي عَنْ غَيْرِيَةً	مَرَوْحَ صَيْفُو فِي الشَّنَا مَا هُوَ مُصْرَد
طَبَعَتْهَا مَازَا، الرِّتَمُ تَعَاكِسُ فِيهِ	فِي مَسْدُورَةٍ كَافِيَّةٍ لِلِّي يَبْرَد
امْدَرَقَ وَرَقُوا النُّوَارَ مَخْبِيَةً	حَتَّى الحَرَمْلَ طَابَعُوا رَمَتْ مَرْبَد
إِفْأُولَ لِلْخَيْرِ لِيَيْضُ مِتْخَفِيَةً	وَالْبَاقِلَ يَزِيَّانَ بَزْهَارٍ مَلْبَد
يَتَقَمَّطُ صَاطِي تَقُولُ عَلَى قَانِيَةً	الشَّيْخَ اللَّمَّادَ فُوقُو يَتَعَمَّد

It's neither a low-lying valley nor a desolate wasteland; it's a beautiful, gentle spot covered in sand. It's not harsh or rough with a rocky plain; it's smooth and comfortable for bare feet. It's not dusty, suitable for new clothes; in summer, its beauty comes with a breeze. Its summer is cool, its winter isn't freezing; its nature is enough for anyone seeking shade. In a sheltered nook, it's sufficient for anyone to cool down; its nature is a marvel, as the broom bush stands opposite it. Even the wild rue's nature is like a frothy ramth bush, its leaves are hidden, and its flowers are concealed. And the wild bean plant becomes beautiful with dense flowers, foretelling good fortune with its white cover. The artemisia plant lies over it, wrapped like a boy in swaddling clothes, as if it's on a pillow.²⁹

Finally, we mention some of the best poetry produced by the poet Mohammed al-Qalassa in an elegy for his mother:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ يَا خَالِقِي نَاشِي لِرَوَاحِ	يَا مُوَلَايَ الْحَقُّ كُنْزُ الْأَكْوَانِي
رَانِي نُطْلُبُ فِيكَ كُلَّ مَسَا وَصَبَاحِ	تَغْفِرْ لِي لِمِيمْتِي يَا سُنْطَانِي
حَدَّةُ بِنْتِ عِيسَى لِي كَانَتْ مِفْتَاحِ	زَهَّابِيَّةُ عُمْرِي عَلَى شَاوِ زَمَانِي

In the name of God, my Creator, the Originator of souls, O my True Lord, the treasure of all beings. I pray to You every evening and morning, to forgive my dear mother, O my King. Hadda, daughter of Issa, who was the key, the joy of my life for so long.³⁰

Conclusion

In the end, the folk heritage of the Djelfa region retains its rituals and its unique perspective, as seen by the many researchers who have studied it. This heritage should serve as a model for every researcher in this field, as it represents the nation's identity, its present, and its future. From it, one can anticipate the expected and the unexpected. Despite this, folk heritage, with its various types and numerous branches, carries a wealth of content and connotations that deeply and truthfully express its authenticity and its connection to the consciousness of the Algerian people. It has touched the depths of this consciousness in all its expressions, through moments of joy and sorrow, hope and despair. This heritage has been embodied by segments of a society thirsty to know its present-but-absent heritage, particularly in the face of cultural globalization.

Endnotes

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^٣ Ben al-Sheikh, Al-Telli. *The Role of Folk Poetry in the Revolution (1830-1945)*. National Publishing and Distribution Company, Algeria, 1983, p. 71.

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^٥ Kasmi, Kahina. *Popular Proverbs in the M'heir Region: A Historical and Descriptive Study*. Master's Thesis, University of M'sila, 2009, p. 10.

^٦ Ibrahim, Nabila. *Forms of Expression in Folk Literature*. Gharib Publishing and Printing House, Cairo, 1981, p. 3.

^٧ Ibid., p. 4.

^٨ Jalawji, Izz al-Din. *Algerian Folk Proverbs from Sétif*. Sétif Directorate of Culture, p. 8.

^٩ Ibid., p. 9.

^{١٠} Qanshuba, Ahmed. *Folk Poetry in the Djelfa Region (1940-1990): An Artistic and Analytical Study*. Previous reference, pp. 21-22.

^{١١} de Villaret, François. *Jalons pour l'histoire de Djelfa*. Ibid., p. 80.

^{١٢} Quraish, Rosalind Leila. *The Algerian Folk Tale of Arab Origin*. Algeria, 1980, p. 103.

^{١٣} Ibid., p. 104.

^{١٤} Qanshuba, Ahmed. *Folk Poetry in the Djelfa Region (1940-1990): An Artistic and Analytical Study*. Previous reference, p. 23.

^{١٥} Ibid., p. 24.

^{١٦} Qanshuba, Ahmed. *Folk Poetry in the Djelfa Region (1940-1990): An Artistic and Analytical Study*. Previous reference, p. 23.

^{١٧} Ibid., pp. 25-26.

^{١٨} What makes Hajj Belkacem rush his affairs

^{١٩} Eat and pray for mercy upon the one who fed you.

^{٢٠} He who wants to hunt the gazelle must rise early to stalk it.

^{٢١} Qanshuba, Ahmed. *Folk Poetry in the Djelfa Region (1940-1990): An Artistic and Analytical Study*. Previous reference, p. 26.

^{٢٢} He came to pursue one matter, but instead, he lost nine others.

^{٢٣} Qanshuba, Ahmed. *Folk Poetry in the Djelfa Region (1940-1990): An Artistic and Analytical Study*. Previous reference, p. 27.

^{٢٤} "Two grains that planted the wilderness." This refers to the eyes that see the entire world.

^{٢٥} "It comes like a lover and is discarded like a stepson." This riddle refers to a plate; it is loved when it is full of food, but its value diminishes, and it is thrown away when empty.

^{٢٦} This refers to the sky, the stars, and the moon.

^{٢٧} Qanshuba, Ahmed. *Folk Poetry in the Djelfa Region (1940-1990): An Artistic and Analytical Study*. Previous reference, p. 27.

^{٢٨} Rifaat, Salam. *A Study of Folk Heritage: A Critical Methodological View*. Al-Farabi, Beirut, 1989, p. 196.

^{٢٩} See: Ben al-Sheikh, Al-Telli. *The Role of Folk Poetry in the Revolution (19830-1945)*. Previous reference, p. 395.

^{٣٠} Qanshuba, Ahmed. *Folk Poetry in the Djelfa Region (1940-1990)*. Previous reference, p. 333.