

Nineteenth-Century Mzabite Marriage Customs and Traditions

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Abstract:

This study aims to elucidate the marriage customs and distinctive features of marriage in Mzabite society during the nineteenth century. Mzabite norms and traditions constitute a distinctive model among Saharan societies, particularly in matters of family formation. That distinctiveness is evident in rites and practices that draw largely on Islamic law and are overseen by local religious and social bodies. These institutions safeguarded the integrity of the family and enabled it to withstand both internal and external challenges.

Keywords: customs and traditions; family; Mzabite society; Mzabite marriage.

1. Introduction:

Marriage is as ancient as humankind's presence on earth. It is a natural, instinctive human inclination toward forming a family and having children. When God created the universe, He created beings in pairs—female and male—to ensure the continuity of life. He also set rules, constraints, and conditions governing relations between men and women. Among these is marriage, a binding covenant founded on union and mutual consent. Islam places strong emphasis on the formation of the family as a core pillar of society. Accordingly, the family occupies a central place in Islamic teaching, and it comes into being only through marriage between a man and a woman who are two complementary and interdependent partners.

Marriage customs vary across societies. The Saharan Mzabite community differs from other urban contexts. Marriage is a pivotal stage in the life of a Mzabite man, and local religious institutions have long worked to preserve and administer it in accordance with the prescriptions of Islamic law and local custom.

This study examines the rites and practices that governed the marriage contract and its administration by the supreme religious bodies—specifically the Azzaba system. The research follows the process from selecting the bride and arranging the betrothal, through the marriage and wedding festivities, and, in some instances, to cases of divorce. The research problem can therefore be stated as follows: What were the marriage customs and traditions in Mzabite society during the nineteenth century? To address this question, the study considers the following sub-questions:

- What were the steps and stages of betrothal in Mzabite society?
- How was a prospective bride selected for marriage?
- What were the ceremonies and rites of weddings in the Mzab Valley?
- What regulatory controls did the Azzaba Council establish for managing marriage?
- What distinguished Mzabite weddings from those of other communities?

1. Geographical and Historical Overview of the Mzab Valley

1.1. Geography of the Land of Mzab:

Mzab lies in the northern Algerian Sahara, approximately 630 km south of Algiers. Its surface is predominantly limestone with sparse vegetation and grasses (Moufdi, 2010, p. 69). It has also been called the “Land of the Network” because a web of interlacing wadis runs through the settlements of the Mzab Valley (Belhaj, 2018, p. 57). These valleys rarely exceed 100 meters in depth. The region covers about 40,000 km² (Ben Bakir, 2017, p. 1). Major wadis in this network include Wadi Metlili, Wadi Mzab, Wadi al-Nisā’, Wadi Blouh, and Wadi Zgheghir (Aouchat, 1991, p. 20).

Historically, access was difficult: caravans and horsemen could enter only via steep, winding, and narrow tracks. Vegetation was largely absent across the network, with the notable exception of *shih* (Artemisia) growing along ravine beds (Saidouni & Saidouni, 2019, p. 390).

As for the toponym “Mzab,” it is traced to the Mzabites who settled the land—Banu Muṣ‘ab. The current form “Mzab” is understood as a phonetic deformation of “Muṣ‘ab / Muṣāb / Muḍāb,” owing to the local shift of the letter ṣād to zāy in Mzabite pronunciation (Ouadi, 2016, p. 10).

1.2. The Land of Mzab Historically:

Following the fall of the Rustamid state at Tāhert to the Fatimid (Isma‘ili Shiite) dynasty in Shawwāl 296 AH / 909 CE, after 152 years of existence (al-Saghir, 1985, p. 23), surviving Ibādī subjects fled persecution and

displacement. They sought remote areas beyond Fatimid reach, such as Djerba, Jabal Nafūsa, and Warglān (present-day Ouargla), a Rustamid dependency. There they settled (Debouz, Al-Maghrib al-Kabir, 2010, p. 535) and founded the city of Sedrata, building fortified *quṣūr* and substantial dwellings.

By the early seventh century AH, however, sustained raids and prolonged drought drove Ibādīs toward the Mzab Valley (Aouchat, 1991, pp. 59–60). Migration arrived from Tāhert, Jabal Nafūsa in Libya, Djerba in Tunisia, Sijilmāsa, and elsewhere. The seven Mzabite *ksour* then took shape: Tajnint (El-Atteuf), Beni Izguen, Ghardaïa, Melika, and Bounoura; later, Guerrara and Berriane (al-Madani, p. 110). These seven towns emerged between 1012 and 1632 CE (403–1042 AH) (Moufdi, 2010, p. 71).

To secure stability within and around Mzab, Ibādīs concluded peace treaties with neighboring tribes—among them the Arbā' and Metlili. They also instituted a religious-social system functioning much like a constitution to regulate communal life. Established by Shaykh Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Bakkār in 471 AH / 1079 CE, it took the form of a religious council known as the Azzaba system (Ouadi, 2016, p. 21). The Azzaba was the highest authority, composed of twelve members with jurisdiction over religious and social affairs: maintaining order, caring for orphans and widows, sanctioning offenders, and supervising weddings to curb ostentation, wastefulness, and inflated dowries. Owing to these controls, marriage did not become a prohibitive financial burden for young men: the council set upper limits on the *ṣadāq* (dowry) and on wedding expenditures (Nasser, 1989, p. 12).

2. Stages of Marriage

2.1 Betrothal

2.1.1. Selecting the Bride

Marriage is a pivotal life stage. In Mzab, the marital path begins with the choice of a spouse, governed by local custom under Islamic legal norms. Girls are enrolled from a young age in *kuttāb* (Qur'ānic schools) to memorize short surahs and the formulae of prayer; those who show aptitude continue further. Early training also prepares girls for domestic responsibilities—spinning, weaving, and household tasks. Upon reaching thirteen, they don the *melḥafa*, which marks puberty in the Ibādī community (Moufdi, 2010, p. 181).

Women in Mzab occupy a respected social position. Debouz notes that Mzab views women through the lens of Islamic teaching, placing them in

the dignified rank that Islam accords, and granting their legitimate rights. In this view, woman is not merely an instrument of pleasure and procreation, nor a subjugated person without social standing; rather, she is regarded as the very foundation of society and the source of its rectitude, progress, and well-being (Debouz, 1965, p. 227).

Selection of the bride typically falls to the guardians, who seek a morally upright match for the son. The young man often has no say, and in some cases does not see his future wife until the wedding night. Marriages are commonly endogamous—within the extended family or clan (Belhaj, 2018, p. 211). If the girl's family consents, the young man is informed of her qualities, including her appearance, by one of his parents. He may incidentally glimpse her in public—during a family visit or at her doorway—since an unmarried girl at that age does not cover her face. Notably, filial refusal is rare; sons seldom reject parental choice. Moreover, beauty is not an essential criterion. Greater weight is given to piety and character, provided the girl's appearance is acceptable (Moufdi, 2010, pp. 178–179).

The request for the girl's hand is commonly conveyed through one of her relatives, or a relative of her family, to maximize the likelihood of acceptance. In parallel, the girl's family inquires about the suitor before replying with approval or refusal (Belhaj, 2018, p. 211).

2.1.2. *Ṣidāq* (Dowry / *Mahr*)

Once the two families reach an understanding, the betrothal is formalized in the presence of witnesses and the judge. The dowry amount is standardized and binding on all, within the limits set by the *Azzaba* (Adwan, 2021, p. 59). The agreement covers all components of the dowry—clothing for the bride and her jewelry, with specifications that differ for a previously married woman and a virgin—regardless of lineage or beauty; similar uniformity applies to the groom, whether rich or poor. Dowry levels are calibrated to the social conditions and economic capacity of the residents of the *ksour*, thereby protecting young men (Nasser, 1989, p. 26).

Traditionally, the groom's family presented one or two earrings—worn in the ears—made of silver or copper, since Mzabites did not use what is now known as an engagement ring (Moufdi, 2010, p. 180).

Illustratively, during French colonial rule, the dowry in 1862 consisted of 15 riyāls for a virgin and 8 riyāls for a previously married woman, plus a silver head ornament, a white silk *melḥafa* and a green silk *melḥafa*, half a sheep, and wheat (Belhaj, 2018, p. 192). Gold was not part of the dowry at that

time. Over the twentieth century, however, gold entered Mزابite dowry practice, a shift linked to changing socio-economic conditions (Belhaj, 2018, p. 200).

3. Marriage and Its Rites

3.1. Marriage: Lexical and Terminological Definitions

Lexically: Classical Arabic dictionaries record several senses for *zawāj*. *Al-Muʿjam al-Wasīf* glosses *zawwaja al-ashyāʾ* (to pair things) and *zawāj* as “joining one thing to another”; hence marriage denotes the coupling of husband and wife, or male and female (Madkour & et al, p. 460).

Terminologically (sociology): The *Dictionary of Sociology* defines marriage as a socially sanctioned sexual relationship between two adults of different sexes, expected to endure over time, within which spouses may beget children and undertake their social, ethical, and religious upbringing in ways recognized by the community (Dinkel, 1986, p. 138). In a similar vein, Mustafa al-Khashshab describes marriage as a legitimate bond between the sexes, concluded only within boundaries set by society and according to approved norms (al-Khashshab, 1981, p. 79).

Tamazight (Mزاب): In the Mزاب Valley, the Tamazight term for marriage is *Amlāš*, meaning “coupling” (Belhaj, 2018, p. 204).

Accordingly, marriage is a lawful union between a man and a woman, validated by the Sharīʿa and accepted by society.

3. 2. Wedding Rites

Elders of the clan meet with the groom’s family to set the program. They appoint attendants—known as “ministers” (*wuzarāʾ*)—who accompany the groom throughout and instruct him on religious duties, including what is permitted and prohibited in Islamic law. If the groom is poor, relatives and clan members apportion the wedding expenses among themselves (Belhaj, 2018, p. 227).

The Azzāba Council stipulates binding conditions for both spouses:

The husband must not steal, drink wine, or commit adultery; he must not abandon prayer; he may not take another wife without his spouse’s consent; and he must not be absent from her for more than two years. If he violates any of these terms, the wife is entitled either to divorce herself or to remain, at her discretion (Belhaj, 2018, p. 206).

As for the wife, she should not leave the house without her husband’s permission; she must respect his kin; and she should not impose demands he cannot meet—such as costly jewelry, clothing, or expenditures beyond his

means (Adwan, 2021, p. 58). These provisions applied across all *ksour* of the Mzab.

It is notable that a husband may wish to take another wife but cannot do so without his current wife's consent and approval; this applies only in specific cases, such as the wife's illness or advanced age. Moreover, dissolving the marriage is not straightforward, given the clauses stipulated in the marriage contract (Gachon, 2019, p. 93).

In regard to the wedding, three days before the designated day, invitations are reiterated and the date is publicly confirmed. Preparations begin in both households. The bride sends her trousseau—textiles and bedding she has woven with her family—to the new room; one of the carpets is laid to cover the floor (Adwan, 2021, p. 60).

The items the bride sends are known as the trousseau, called among the Mzabites the “bride's basket” (*sallat al-arous*). It includes jewelry, perfumes, cosmetics, clothing, and small provisions to be consumed during the days of celebration. Specifically, the basket contains dried figs, peanuts, chickpeas, and almonds; dried meats and dried fava beans; dried flowers, plant-based perfumes, henna, incense, kohl stone, and alum. It also holds a set of colored glass balls to decorate the marital room, a set of wooden combs, and rings made of silver—or gold when available. As for garments, the bride takes an abaya locally called the *qandoura*, a *melhafa*, a shirt, a colored scarf, a headcover with embroidered edges, and a set of silver bracelets (Gachon, 2019, pp. 98–100).

The groom, spends most of his time with friends in the clan house known as *al-hajba*; each Bani Mzab clan maintains such a space (Belhaj, 2018, p. 233). In the Eve of the wedding, friends apply henna to the bride's hands and feet. Her hair is dressed in a special coiffure called *Takkenbušt*, performed by a Black woman known in Mzabite as *Tāyā*, who attends to the bride throughout the festivities. The evening features Qur'ān recitation and traditional Mzabite chants.

On departure for the marital home, the bride wears a white dress under a red wool *melhafa*, with a red head-veil—the distinctive Mzabite bridal costume (Adwan, 2021, p. 61). She proceeds on foot (Belhaj, 2018, p. 230), wrapped in a white silk *ḥā'ik* that covers body and face. Upon arrival, the welcoming matron offers a vessel of water so the bride can wash her right hand and right foot; a little water is then thrown behind her back—an explicitly Mzabite custom (Adwan, 2021, p. 62).

At the *hajba*, the groom receives relatives—some newly arrived from the Tell or northern cities—making the wedding an occasion for renewing social ties; banquets are served (Belhaj, 2018, p. 234). The “ministers” escort him home to bathe and dress: a white silk *qandūra* and a white silk turban, secured with a dark red silk band called (in Mzabite) *Lejnār*; a leather belt holding a sheathed knife; classic shoes and socks; and, finally, a brown *burnous*. Once dressed, he returns to the *hajba* with his attendants, remains past midnight, and then goes—accompanied by one attendant—to the marital chamber, where the bride awaits. At dawn, the attendants take him to the mosque for the fajr prayer before returning him to the *hajba* (Adwan, 2021, pp. 62–63).

On the following day, the bride’s family prepares *al-‘āda*: a meat dish served at dinner and then, for five subsequent days, at lunch. Notably, Azzaba regulations address food as well as decorum. To curb ostentation and waste, they prohibit displays of luxury—such as the use of saffron in dishes (Belhaj, 2018, pp. 228–229).

On the third morning, the groom takes dates and milk, with bread, honey, and butter; at midday he eats meat with vegetables prepared in the bride’s family home. In the evening, guests listen to religious chants (Adwan, 2021, p. 64) performed by a choir of former pupils with fine voices selected by the Azzaba (Debouz, 1965, p. 207).

Also on the third day, the groom and his attendants visit the cemetery to pray for the dead and distribute *al-ma‘rūf*—dates and bread—to the poor. On the final day (the seventh), the bride receives gifts from her husband’s family (e.g., a bottle of perfume, an embroidered dress). She reapplies henna to hands and feet, adopts a new hairstyle called *al-Maḥḥūl*, and wears a traditional red *melhafa* (Adwan, 2021, pp. 64–65).

4. The Woman after Marriage

In the early years, a wife spends most of her time at home. She goes out only when strictly necessary—for example, to attend a relative’s wedding or a funeral—and, even then, she is accompanied by her mother or her mother-in-law, leaving after dark and returning at night (Moufdi, 2010, p. 181). When she leaves the house, she must be veiled. Moreover, if her husband is away, she is not to wear perfume or adorn herself.

Her role in sustaining the household is not merely domestic. Mzabite women contribute economically by assisting their husbands through skilled textile work: weaving carpets and garments for sale (Moufdi, 2010, p. 185). Their craftsmanship shows in the clothing they produce for husbands and

children and in the bright, finely patterned *zarābī* (carpets). Typically, weaving begins late morning, after the day's early chores have been completed (Debouz, 1965, p. 229).

5. Birth and Early Childhood

As delivery approaches, the expectant mother dons a red *haik*. Two women, together with her own mother, attend to her during labor. Once the child is born, he is given a well-chewed paste of cumin and dates to swallow, while the mother remains lying on the bed. On the first day, the newborn is adorned in simple, symbolic ways: a mixture of salt and oil is applied along the eyelid margins, and a paste of dates is placed on the forehead. The umbilical cord is tied with a clean thread of roughly three centimeters in length.

The baby's name is usually chosen before birth—boys are often named after a grandfather. There is also a customary Qur'anic practice: the *ṭalib* (Qur'an teacher) writes two or three verses on a cup or vessel using *al-simagh*, a gum-based ink said to be prepared from sheep's wool. The ink is then washed off and the child is given the wash-water to drink when he cries. On the third day, the mother is honored with a small family gathering attended by her friends; they bring eggs to help her regain strength. On the seventh day, henna is applied to the child's ankles and wrists, saffron mixed with oil is rubbed on the chest and head, and the baby is then swaddled (*al-qamata*). On the fortieth day, the mother performs ritual washing and purification, and the infant receives his first bath: he is placed on an inverted wooden basin (*qas'a*), and lukewarm water is poured over him without scrubbing (Gachon, 2019, pp. 39–44).

During the first years, the child sleeps in a bed about 25 centimeters above the floor. A mat folded several times—or a woven rug made from fabric cords—is laid on top, with additional covers to keep the space warm and prevent colds. Clothing follows clear gendered models. A young girl dresses like her mother: a shirt with embroidered sleeves for winter (removed in summer), and a square black shawl of cotton and wool trimmed on one edge with a red ribbon, usually made at home. Girls also wear earrings, known locally in Mzab as *'iyyasha*. A boy, by contrast, wears a *qandoura* in summer and adds a *burnous* in winter; if the family is well-off, he may also have leather shoes.

The major rite in early childhood is circumcision, called *Tira*, typically performed between ages two and five. For the occasion, the child wears a white *qandoura* known as *Tabarsamt*, decorated in saffron with motifs of

palm trees, stars, and similar designs. On the eve of the rite, students gather at the family home to chant hymns and verses. After they depart, the *mughassalat* (women attendants) apply henna to the child, in the presence of relatives and neighbors, and place a drop of oil and a dab of gypsum on his face.

Early the next morning, shortly before the operation, a basket is brought with cooked meat and boiled eggs. After these are set on a platter, the child is passed over it seven times in one direction and seven times in the other. The circumcisers then perform the procedure. Afterwards, the meat and eggs are shared out among adults and children. The circumcisers eat fava beans and *rfis*, and they receive five francs—or more—depending on each family's means (Gachon, 2019, pp. 57–62).

6. Divorce

Causes of divorce in Mzab vary, and the process is bounded by explicit rules. Sometimes the wife petitions for dissolution—*khul'* in Islamic law—while in other cases the husband initiates termination for specified reasons. Notably, a frequent ground on the husband's side is his taking another wife at his place of work or permanent residence. Another recurrent cause concerns the discovery that the bride was not a virgin. In such cases, female examiners—*al-ghassālāt*—are tasked with verification. If the husband's claim proves true, he may either divorce or continue the marriage. If, however, the suspicion is unfounded—attributable to the husband's ignorance and clarified by the *ghassālāt*—the wife may request *khul'* or remain; should divorce occur, she retains the full *ṣadāq* (dowry). Adultery also constitutes grounds for dissolution. Additionally, the wife may seek divorce if the husband violates a contractual condition—such as remaining away for more than three years (Belhaj, 2018, pp. 235–240).

Because divorce harms children and risks family breakdown, Mzabite authorities—especially the Azzaba Council—imposed strict restraints to limit both divorce and *khul'*. A wife who seeks *khul'* may not leave the marital home; if she departs and the husband divorces her, she forfeits her claim, as her departure is deemed disobedience. More generally, the Azzaba urge spouses to resolve disputes through conciliation and to avoid dissolution where possible (Belhaj, 2018, p. 240).

Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence indicates that custom plays a decisive role in regulating betrothal, marriage, and divorce in Mzabite society. Local usages

operate as a “constitution” of practice: they order family life through rules grounded in Islamic law and enforced through community institutions.

Unlike many other Algerian regions that have abandoned older forms, Mzabite weddings have largely retained their inherited character. The core features are transmitted within families across generations; continuity is not accidental but the result of deliberate communal governance.

Institutionally, the Azzaba Council has legislated to shield the vulnerable—especially the poor and orphans—from competitive display in wedding matters. Accordingly, it curbs ostentation and class signaling, caps the *ṣidāq* (mahr) and overall wedding expenditures, forbids imported or showy practices, and polices waste. The Council even supervises the nature of the feast and what is served to guests. The objective is straightforward: keep weddings modest and financially light for those with limited means, thereby protecting both the social fabric and individual households.

Moreover, marriage in earlier times was marked by simplicity and little ostentation. That very economy helped it endure and succeed despite the difficult circumstances in Mzab under French colonial rule. By contrast, contemporary marriages are often dominated by material considerations and display—driven by modernization, globalization, imitation, and imported customs—at the expense of Islamic principles and teachings. The result, visible today, is a rise in prolonged singlehood and a broader reluctance among youth to marry.

A policy implication follows. Setting an enforceable ceiling for dowries nationwide would lower entry costs to marriage for young people who currently refrain because of expense. The Mzabite experience—standardizing the *ṣidāq* and simplifying ceremonies—has reduced avoidance strategies and, in practice, has encouraged timely marriage. It is therefore a model worth formal adoption and local adaptation across the country.

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