

Gender Dynamics and Male Authority in Marriage Rituals of Sidi Mâamar (Ténès): An Anthropological Study

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Abstract: The present study explores the interplay of gender dynamics and male authority within the marriage rituals of Sidi Mâamar (Ténès), Algeria, with particular attention to the instrumental role of women in protecting the dowry (sadaq) and its significant cultural symbolism. Using qualitative methodology, the study incorporates six months of ethnographic fieldwork, integrating participant observation and semi-structured interviews with local inhabitants to examine ritual practices, including dowry negotiations and ceremonial proceedings. Empirical findings demonstrate that these rituals reinforce patriarchal hegemony, positioning women as modest yet vital custodians of cultural heritage while sustaining social order and familial stability secured in notions of honor and prestige. Although their cultural significance, women's activity remains constrained, reflecting deeply rooted power irregularities. The discussion maintains that these practices summarize broader socio-cultural paradigms, demanding further scholarly inquiry into the evolving gender roles within Algerian familial structures during recent social transformations. By synthesizing a framework that settles the constancy of traditional customs with the variability of emergent gender paradigms, this research explains the adaptive nature of rituals in response to contemporary shifts. It contributes to gender studies by illuminating women's dual function as preservers and potential catalysts of change within patriarchal frameworks, promoting for a re-examination of cultural evolution toward greater equity in Sidi Mâamar and analogous contexts.

Keywords: *Gender dynamics, Male authority, Marriage rituals, Traditions, Algeria.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1954, Emile Dermenghem highlighted a practice he found particularly unique to the northeastern region of the Oran department, with its influence extending as far as Algiers. He referred to this practice as the customary law, the *Orf* of Sidi Mâamar (Dermenghem, 1954, p. 171)

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Pierre Bourdieu describes women as "the pillar of the community" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 10), viewing them as the custodians of cultural traditions, especially oral ones. Furthermore, they are seen as the faithful and active guardians of the Algerian family, occupying a central role within the family institution. Their presence is particularly noticeable during matrimonial ceremonies across the Arab-Berber cultural space, despite regional variations. This is evident among the Mâamria, a community for whom marriage festivities represent a crucial moment in the life of the village, holding significant anthropological importance.

From this socio-anthropological perspective, our aim is to highlight male domination through these customs and traditions, while also showing how women contribute to the reproduction of their own submission. By doing so, they legitimize their status through cultural representations, particularly those tied to the sacred. Through this contribution, we seek to construct a study object from these observed traditions, subjecting it to scientific analysis that challenges the common understanding held by the women interviewed, who uphold this custom as a social value.

This study will focus on the staging of the various roles observed during the wedding festivities of Ouali Sidi Mâamar in Ténès (Chlef)*, a practice commonly referred to as the "marriage of 20 francs (Louis d'Or)" (Ourgouag, 1971, pp. 218-220).

From a methodological perspective, this study relies on participant observation conducted within the community, where members are not bound by agnatic ties but are united by having contracted a "Mâamerian" marriage. This dispersed community claims descent from Sidi Mâamar, which presents an initial challenge, further complicated by the social structure's division between the sexes. Consequently, we limited interviews to elderly women, who served as our primary informants. They not only shared their marriage memories but also facilitated contact with younger women whose recollections remained vivid.

The traces of this figure, whose biographical details remain largely unknown to his followers, are seldom found in writings dedicated to him.

*-Ténès is a coastal city in Algeria, located in the Wilaya of Chlef. It is situated 180 km west of the capital, Algiers, and 50 km north of Chlef. The population was 35,000 in 2000. The city was formerly known as Kartennas, derived from the Phoenician word "kart" meaning city and the name of the place "ennas." It was long believed that "ennas" referred to the river, with the root "ns" expressing in ancient Berber the idea of spending the night in a place, camping overnight. The name Kartennas thus meant "the city of the camp," as the Phoenicians, at the beginning of their conquest, would only stay overnight to the north of the Ténès plateau, fearing nighttime navigation and its dangers. They would replenish their water supply from the many springs of this new outpost

Dermenghem's renowned work on the cult of saints (Dermenghem, 1954, pp. 170-171) mentions the entrenchment of this marriage practice but offers few details about the significant events that contributed to the fame of this "Ouali." Furthermore, it provides no spatiotemporal data that could allow for even a brief reconstruction of his biography. As a result, the emergence of the Sidi Mâamar marriage practice in the Ténès region remains obscure. However, the same author notes that in the 16th century, the Bey of Oran attempted to destroy the Sidi Mâamar sanctuary, but a violent storm on the day he planned to carry out his action forced him to abandon the project. Dermenghem, however, does not elaborate on the reasons behind the Bey's intention to take such action.

2. Recent Work on Sidi Mâamar:

Khalifa BEN AMARA recently dedicated an entire book (250 pages) to Sidi Mâamar, titled *Sirat El Boubkria and the Ancestors of Sidi El Cheikh, from Abou Bakr As-Siddiq to Sidi Mâamar Bel Alia*, published by DJOUDI Massoud, Oran, 2002. This title can be translated as *The Descendants of Abou Bakr to Sidi Mâamar Bel Alya*. (Ben Amara, 2002)

It is worth noting that despite the patriarchal nature inherent in Sidi Mâamar's marriage system, this practice has faced criticism, particularly over the last decade with the rise of the Salafist movement. This movement advocates a strict interpretation of sacred texts and the orthodoxy of Sunni dogma, leading to a rejection of Sufi thought and its heretical rituals, especially in relation to the broader concept of family.

Sidi Mâamar's marriage system exemplifies one of those "similar systems, relationships, and rituals that play a crucial role in the development of individuals, communities, and societies, contributing to the realization of their objectives without racial, national, or class prejudice" (Mohammed Hassan, 1985, p. 9). This marriage system offers valuable insights into the status of Mâamrienne women in Ténès, particularly through the intangible heritage conveyed by oral traditions, elements of which come to life during the celebration of this marriage practice.

Here is a refined version of your text, maintaining its academic strength and original meaning, with improvements for clarity and flow:

3. The Symbolic Ancestor of the Mâamerien Group:

To highlight the elements of a specific social group within a cultural area where oral tradition predominates, access to sources, references, documents, and archives is exceedingly difficult, particularly in the absence of a substantial bibliography. This challenge is further compounded by contradictions and

inaccuracies in the available writings. Jacques Berque succinctly captures this difficulty in his article *What is a North African "Tribe?"* where he asserts that the tribe is an "epiphenomenon, somewhat artificial, which can explain a certain vulnerability, as it may disintegrate. Understanding then becomes elusive" (Benslem & Others, 1988, p. 125).

Indeed, what distinguishes the tribe in North Africa is its inability to maintain the homogeneity of its parts. Understanding the processes of genesis and degeneration is challenging, especially for larger tribes, and even more so for smaller social groups without blood ties, as is the case with the Mâamerien group.

Nonetheless, this group is considered a tribe, and its identity is defined not by blood relation but by the fact of having contracted marriage in accordance with the rules allegedly established by Sidi Mâamar, according to oral tradition. However, the limited written sources we have mentioned trace this group's lineage back to Abou Bakr As-Siddiq, the Prophet's companion and the first orthodox caliph.

In practice, people define themselves as Mâamerien or descendants of Sidi Mâamar, not in the sense of being direct descendants of the so-called "Wali," but to signify their affiliation with the Tariqa that instituted the rule that the dowry should not exceed a quarter of a gold dinar (which later became a Louis d'Or) (Zian, 2022, p. 67). Dermenghem states: "It is not a brotherhood; adherents are recruited by paternal or maternal lineage, by marriage, by suckling (a child nursed by a wet nurse from the Orf tribe is part of it), or by vow (a woman might say: 'If my daughter recovers, she will be from Sidi Mâamar,' but her children will only be part of it if she nurses them herself)" (Dermenghem, p. 171)

The accounts passed down by our informants emphasize that Sidi Mâamar observed the escalating dowry prices, which discouraged young people from marrying. Some informants state that certain Andalusian-origin families demanded the equivalent of their daughter's weight in gold, which outraged the saint, who decreed that such a demand was sinful. Tradition adds that, were it not for the fear of public gossip, he would have given his daughters in marriage for a bouquet of palm leaves. This tradition also holds that anyone violating this rule would suffer the curse of the revered figure.

This narrative, with slight variations but no change in the overall meaning, represents an *Orf*—a customary legal rule imposed in the marriage contract under the penalty of being cursed in this world or the afterlife. Tradition credits the saint patron with the power to enforce this rule against anyone who violates it, as such a practice is seen as an absolute evil that the community must guard against. Indeed, the high price of dowries and associated marriage expenses discouraged families

from marrying off their young people, exposing their children to vices and indulgence, which could lead to the disintegration of society and moral corruption. In the face of this threat, the wisdom of the "Wali" could not avoid prohibiting the practice of high dowries, even though such a practice is not prohibited by Sharia or Sunnah. However, the group's adherence to this rule gave Sidi Mâamar's precept the force of law.

3.1 Sidi Mâamar's Role as Mediator and Protector:

Sidi Mâamar's role extended beyond the preservation of the rules established by the group; he also served as a mediator during conflicts between tribes over issues such as land ownership, water distribution, and matters of honor. This is particularly evident in the ancient conflict between two large tribes from the Chlef region: Beni Ouragh and El Heumsia. According to the accounts passed down by our informants, the primary cause of the conflict was a woman named Halima.

Halima, from the El Heumis tribe, was invited on the day of her wedding to spend the night with the Beni Ouragh tribe, under the sunset. Her beauty captivated the son of the Beni Ouragh tribe leader, and he fell in love with her. The young man decided to keep her in his quarters, which led to the ongoing conflict between the two tribes, prohibiting any alliance between them. It is worth noting that the marriage between Halima and the leader's son did not take place (forbidden love, taboo). The saint intervened to mediate between the parties, evicting the Beni Ouragh tribe and prohibiting them from returning to the area except for one day per year (Zian M. , 2019, p. 75).

This story portrays a negative image of women, casting them as potential threats. In this case, Halima is seen as the cause of the dispute between two tribes that were once united. She is depicted as a character who uses her beauty in a forbidden manner, a negative, suspicious force that must be avoided.

3.2 Sidi Mâamar as a Warrior:

Other followers of Sidi Mâamar present him as a fierce warrior. Hamza Boubeker states that Sidi Mâamar Bel Alya "was given this name for his great experience in war; his spear was above all others" (Boubekour, 1990, p. 11). Oral tradition recounts his military exploits against various Berber and Arab groups, highway bandits, and particularly impious individuals. He is also believed to have worked towards consolidating the Maliki rite in Ténès during the 16th and 17th centuries. The preservation of religion and the fight against paganism and various heresies were among his primary concerns (El-Himyari, 1984, p. 137).

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These statements suggest that Sidi Mâamar was intellectually notable, perhaps even a scholar, although no concrete evidence of his educational background has been found, adding to the mystique surrounding the saint.

4. Women and Mâamrienne Marriages:

4.1 Choosing a Spouse and Tribal Lifestyle:

Endogamous marriage was the primary feature of marital relationships for several reasons. Among the practical reasons for endogamous marriage, the most important was the economic consideration of preserving land ownership within the group. Kinship rules favored marrying a first cousin, as this did not fall under the incest taboo, thus reducing dowry costs and marriage expenses. Paternal cousins lived within this system, which emphasized solidarity among them (Tillion, 1966, p. 5).

Exogamous marriage gradually replaced endogamous marriage. While marrying outside the tribe was once considered shameful, this type of marriage became dominant due to the fragmentation of land ownership, which shifted from communal (indivisible) land to private property, and the weakening of blood ties.

As for the choice of a spouse, it was not obligatory for the woman to be from the Mâamrienne community, but it was marriage to a Mâamrienne that granted her full legal status within the group.

4.2 Women and the Sacred Character of Custom:

Tribal custom, or *Orf*, is defined as "a charter that regulates the group in the interest of its members. It governs all situations arising from a marriage contract, such as divorce, food expenses, clothing, crimes and offenses, etc. *Orf* is a practice derived from biographical or hagiographical accounts that recount the life and deeds of ancestors, imposed by the group on its members" (Bouchiche, 1998, p. 240).

The sacred character of this tradition is underscored by the words of the saint Sidi Mâamar, who promises, "Anyone who violates this custom will be cursed." This prohibition plays a key role in the socialization process, which aims to ensure the stability of normal life and exclude any desires for change through a renewed threat that targets both wealth and descendants.

Women claim to follow the path of their ancestors as symbolized by this saint. They actively participate in upholding the prohibitions and taboos, as expressed by Sidi Mâamar (the *wali*), who can show his displeasure with any transgressions. It is noteworthy that the punishment for breaking the *Orf* tradition only affects women, not men. As demonstrated by the story of Halima's

misfortune, deviation from the *Orf* is seen as stemming solely from the woman. Women thus serve as the spokespersons for the group, condemning those who dare to transgress these taboos. This condemnation intensifies the punishment, potentially leading to psychological distress or even mental illness.

According to Hadja Fatma (67 years old), women who violate the custom often face frequent health and social consequences, including:

- Chronic diseases.
- Paralysis or disabilities (deafness, aphonia, blindness, etc.).
- Morphological changes (e.g., skin color changes, hair loss, etc.).
- Physiological changes (e.g., infertility, etc.).
- Accidents (e.g., fires, traffic accidents, etc.).
- Recurrent miscarriages. (Zian M. , p. 80)

4.3 Mâamrienne Women and the Value of the Dowry:

In line with Sharia, "Mâamrienne people believe that a marriage without a dowry is, from a religious standpoint, null and void; the dowry is a *sine qua non* condition" (see the Quran, Surah IV, verse 4). The presentation of the dowry is a pivotal moment in the wedding ceremony, marked by a solemn event during which the goods constituting the dowry (the value of which was determined when the young woman's hand was first requested) are displayed in a festive atmosphere. Women often sing songs praising the exceptional qualities of the patron saint and perform dances in rhythm with the music, all in the presence of guests who witness the event.

The dowry holds significant economic value in every society. Among the Mâamrienne, it can take various forms, including money, silver or gold jewelry, clothing, livestock (sheep or goats), metal tools, household items, and small objects. However, it must never exceed the financial capacity of the groom's family. Over time, the amount required for the young woman's trousseau has decreased, and it now becomes more of a symbolic act, where a few dresses, blankets, and pieces of gold jewelry are presented. In modern times, families often agree on a monetary amount, a shift driven by changing living conditions.

The value of the dowry varies depending on the social status of the groom's family and the young woman in question. To fully understand the role of the dowry, it should be considered not just as a means of creating a new household but also as part of matrimonial strategies, as aptly described by Pierre Bourdieu. Furthermore, women often emphasize that the most important consideration is the quality of the man who will make their offspring happy, with the saying "we buy the man" often repeated.

The relatively low value of the Mâamrienne dowry should not be seen as a sign of devaluation, regardless of the social status of the future spouses. Instead, it reflects an inherited tradition. For example, the fiduciary value of the Louis d'Or currently reaches 4000 Algerian dinars (Zian M. , p. 81).

5. Rites of Male Domination in the Mâamrienne Community:

5.1 The Fiancée Avoids Consuming Her Husband's Wealth:

Tradition dictates that the fiancée refrain from consuming anything from her future husband's wealth, while the latter is free to do so. This taboo, which applies solely to the woman, raises questions about the underlying reasons for this privilege. Field research indicates that it is primarily women who uphold and enforce this prohibition, believing that any violation would incur Sidi Mâamar's wrath, manifesting as illness. This perception is tied to the belief that such illnesses are punishments from the spirits that guard the sanctity of the taboo, thus legitimizing male superiority. As M. Touahri notes, "The conservatism that characterizes this order makes women the benevolent guardians of the supernatural. Their concordance with this world helps maintain their status" (Touahri, 2009, pp. 198-199). Additionally, the refusal to accept gifts from the future spouse can be interpreted as a means of maintaining the relationship in a state that is easily severed, should disapproved circumstances arise.

5.2 The Symbolism of Walking Barefoot:

On the wedding day, the bride is required to leave her parental home barefoot (Pruvost, 2002, p. 68), accompanied by her mother-in-law, who, through this rite, offers her protection against malevolent forces. She wears her father's *burnous*, symbolizing *Setra* (protection against evil spirits), as she heads to her husband's home. This act also symbolizes her submission to virility, marking the transition from one social role to another and from one space to another. There are numerous rites, particularly magical ones, associated with the threshold crossing. Walking barefoot signifies the woman's acceptance of all that comes with her new life and her readiness to endure any adversities that may arise in her marriage.

5.3 Rite of the Bride Being Carried on the Back:

This time-honored ritual (Photos 1 and 2) carries a profound symbolic significance, often seen as a re-enactment of an abduction. However, some informants interpret it as a ritual of appeasement, believing it brings prosperity and joy to the community, particularly through the birth of male children. A first pregnancy is often expected to result in a son, considered a sign of good fortune.

The act of carrying the bride on the back is symbolic of the reinforcement of male dominance in the social structure. The rhythmic drumming of the derbouka, accompanied by the sharp youyous (ululations) from the women, breaks the quiet and expresses the community's excitement. At the groom's house, the atmosphere is calmer, although the men remain focused on ensuring the departure happens at the right time. The bride's family mourns her leaving, creating the illusion of abduction, while the bride herself weeps, feeling responsible for the perceived failure of this rite of passage.



5.4 Rite of Request for Forgiveness (*Lamssaoussa*):

When a woman transgresses the taboos imposed upon her, or when she faces health or familial troubles, she may visit the saint's mausoleum to seek his forgiveness. This pilgrimage rite requires her to leave her home barefoot, as she did when she first arrived, and to travel without combing her hair, devoid of jewelry, and dressed in the humblest attire, typically a *Haïk* (a white veil that covers the entire body, leaving only the face visible and preserving the integrity of her private space). Instead of jewelry, she wears a braid of palm leaves tied around her neck and big toe, carrying magical significance that reminds her of the debt she owes to the *wali* (saint) (Photo 3). In another variation of this rite, the woman, accompanied by a *Khedima* (the servant who tends to Sidi Mâamar's mausoleum), knocks on doors with a reed rather than her bare hand, which is considered defiled. She wears the same humble attire and requests charity on behalf of Sidi Mâamar, saying to the women who open the doors, "We are here to take the right of Sidi Mâamar" or "the *maruf* of Sidi Mâamar in the name of Allah and His Messenger Muhammad." The women respond by praying for God to accept the woman's sacrifice. The alms collected are then donated to the mausoleum for the benefit of the poor. This rite symbolizes the woman's symbolic reintegration into the community, as she is absolved of her transgressions and freed from her defilement (Zian M. , p. 85).



Photo 3

This rite appears to be ancient, with roots in pre-Islamic times, as part of Berber belief systems. It serves to affirm the subordinate status of women,

providing them with a form of comfort in situations where their grievances are otherwise unsupported. In times of major troubles, when women seek assistance but find none, the only recourse left to them is the prayer they offer to Sidi Mâamar. The practice of this ritual is often triggered by violence against women within the marital home, whether by the husband, his sister, or the mother-in-law. When a woman is unable to find support for her suffering, she turns to the saints, trusting in their supernatural power to intervene. Despite the societal changes that have taken place, women continue to turn to justice to claim their rights. However, it remains a challenge for them, as they often lack the strength to confront patriarchal authority.

6. Conclusion:

Women are regarded as the intangible cultural bearers of Algerian society, serving as devoted guardians of its cultural and symbolic heritage. They are the heirs to the values and norms that shape society. In this study, we have sought to understand how marriage practices in Sidi Mâamar perpetuate mechanisms of domination, rooted in internalized values that are often seen as self-evident. The Mâamrienne marriage ritual serves as a warning against violating taboos, which women staunchly defend, with the curse of the saint acting as a deterrent to anyone who dares to breach them.

As previously noted, women in Mâamrienne society, who play a significant role in family life through their control over marriage rituals, employ palliative measures to restore their psychological and social balance. These practices are not exclusive to the women of Ténès but extend to other regions such as Cherrhell, Relizane, Tipasa, Bouira, Béjaïa, and Tizi Ouzou, raising important questions about the social values at play.

However, the persistence of these traditions must be analyzed against the backdrop of Algeria's rapidly evolving social landscape. Over the past decade, significant transformations in gender dynamics, family structures, and societal norms have posed challenges to the stability of long-standing practices. This instability reflects a tension between maintaining traditional values and adapting to new realities, which is reshaping the foundations of the family and introducing new complexities into marital customs.

Future research should focus on these dynamics, exploring how shifting societal structures influence the role of women in upholding or challenging traditional practices. Such studies can provide deeper insights into the intersections of gender, tradition, and modernity in Algeria, contributing to a broader understanding of cultural continuity and change.

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In conclusion, this work represents only a small part of a broader project that other researchers will need to undertake. Nevertheless, we believe that we have addressed, albeit modestly, one aspect of the popular mental structure, specifically focusing on family and confessional ties, around which many ritual practices converge.

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