

## The Rites and Customs of Celebrating January: Social and Cultural Dimensions and Mechanisms of Continuity

الطقوس والعادات الاحتفالية ليناير: "الأبعاد الاجتماعية والثقافية وآليات استمرارها"

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### Abstract

January is a month filled with celebrations that hold deep cultural and social significance. These rituals reflect collective identity and traditions that have been passed down through multiple cultures. This article aims to analyze these rituals, exploring their social and cultural dimensions and the factors that ensure their continuity across generations. It reviews diverse celebrations, including religious rituals, folk festivals, and family traditions, and their roles in strengthening social bonds, reviving heritage, and reinforcing shared values. Additionally, it discusses the mechanisms that contribute to the survival of these customs, such as media, education, and community practices. Finally, it addresses the challenges these customs face in light of social and technological transformations. Ultimately, the article concludes that January's celebrations reflect a deep-rooted cultural identity, underscoring the importance of studying them to preserve heritage and cultural specificity.

**Keywords:** January; festive rituals; cultural identity; cultural diversity; spiritual heritage.

### ملخص:

يُعد يناير فترة زاخرة بالاحتفالات ذات الدلالات الثقافية والاجتماعية العميقة، إذ تعكس طقوسه الهوية الجماعية والتقاليد المتوارثة عبر ثقافات متعددة. يهدف المقال إلى تحليل طبيعة هذه الطقوس واستكشاف أبعادها الاجتماعية والثقافية، مع التركيز على العوامل التي تضمن استمرارها عبر الأجيال. يستعرض المقال تنوع الاحتفالات، مثل الطقوس الدينية والمهرجانات الشعبية والتقاليد العائلية، ودورها في تعزيز الروابط الاجتماعية وإحياء التراث وترسيخ القيم المشتركة. كما يناقش الآليات التي تسهم في بقاء هذه العادات من خلال الإعلام والتعليم والممارسات المجتمعية، إضافة إلى التحديات التي تواجهها في ظل التحولات الاجتماعية والتكنولوجية. ويخلص المقال إلى أن احتفالات يناير تعكس هوية ثقافية راسخة، ما يجعل دراستها ضرورية للحفاظ على التراث والخصوصية الثقافية.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** يناير؛ الطقوس الاحتفالية؛ الهوية الثقافية؛ التنوع الثقافي؛ التراث الروحي.

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## 1. Introduction

The culture of nations has always been a fundamental pillar of their cultural identity and a symbol of their pride in their own civilization. Its cultural importance lies in the diversity of the cultural heritage of nations and peoples, and in the rich features this heritage contains. Popular cultural heritage, in particular, represents a fertile and rich field that requires further research and exploration of its hidden aspects, as it remains an untapped and abundant domain full of mysterious practices that need analysis and interpretation. It is a rich reservoir closely tied to human beings, refusing to be separated from them, as it recites their deep-rooted past in its various forms. It is the vessel that encompasses types of comprehensive social phenomena that reflect a form of sociological awareness expressed by individuals to understand their world and to find mechanisms of communication within it.

As Jean Copans puts it, cultural heritage derives its specificity from the uniqueness of the local society to which it belongs. Thus, it becomes a broad field that includes many diverse cultural elements created by the popular imagination. Among the forms of this cultural fabric is the celebration shared by North African countries in general, and the Algerian society in particular, known as Yennayer or Ras El Aam (the beginning of the Amazigh agricultural year). It is a popular cultural event that represents one of the most prominent heritage practices in Algeria and one of the most important popular celebrations. Its significance stems from the beliefs and rituals it carries, which are rich with deep symbolic meanings.

As we know, the field of rituals and beliefs is among the issues that have sparked intellectual debate, particularly in the field of anthropology. It has long been and continues to be classified within the series of symbolic systems rich in anthropological meanings and connotations, as they reflect the concerns of the popular society and serve as a link between the past and the present.

Through this study, we will attempt to approach the subject of Yennayer celebratory rituals, which are manifested as implicit cultural systems hidden behind the mask of customs and traditions. We aim to provoke this systemic act through the lens of popular imagination and to analyze it in accordance with socio-anthropological approaches. This will involve delving into its semantic dimensions and accessing the profound meanings it contains—meanings that draw their value from the unique representations of the members of the society that embraces them and the ritual space that frames them.

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### **2. Some Concepts Related to the Yennayer Celebration**

#### **2.1. Rituals**

The *Petit Robert* dictionary defines rituals as: "*Ritus – a set of celebrations within a specific community; a traditional organization of these celebrations.*". (P Robert, 1967, p. 2231)

In ethnology and sociology, rituals refer to a set (or patterns) of practices that are either prescribed or prohibited, and that are associated with magical or religious beliefs, celebrations, and festivals, according to the binary division of the sacred and the profane, the pure and the impure. (Seymour-Smith, 2009, pp. 273-274)

Char Slim also refers to rituals as "*traditional activities and acts, often related to religion and magic, whose reasons are determined by custom. They are always derived from the life of the people who practice them, as primitives believe that these rituals please the gods and supernatural forces.*" (Chaker, 1981, p. 824)

Through some practices that are considered fundamental to the celebration and sacred to those who uphold them, the ritual tends—mainly through repetition and the persistence of the rules that define it—to reinforce the continuity of the social or mythical event that gave rise to it. In other words, rituals are performed to restore the original time, which requires the ritual repetition of the event in its celebratory form, that is, a reproduction and updating of a mysterious past and an affirmation of the continuity of a well-known social or mythological event. (Toualabi, 1988, p. 34)

#### **2.2. Celebration**

In the *Fairouzabadi* dictionary, the word *celebration* in language comes from *ḥafl al-mā'* meaning the gathering of water; *yaḥḥafu ḥuḥūlan wa ḥaḥūlan* means to gather. *ḥafala* and *taḥaffala* mean to adorn or embellish oneself, and *ḥafala al-majlis* refers to a gathering where many people are present. (Firouz-Abadi, 1979, p. 347)

It also represents "*a gathering of several members of a society with the aim of expressing shared viewpoints through organized symbolic activities performed on a specific occasion.*" (Shaker, 1981, p. 161) This concept applies to the Yennayer celebration, the subject of this study.

#### **2.3. Yennayer: Between Mythical Narrative and Agricultural Ritual**

Yennayer is commonly presented in popular discourse as the Amazigh New Year; however, anthropological evidence indicates that it originally functioned as an agricultural seasonal marker rather than an ethnic calendar system. and its arrival coincides with the twelfth day of January, that is, 12 days after the Gregorian New Year. The Amazigh year begins in 950 B.C. and

it was named after *Yennayer* (Janus), the Roman god of gates and beginnings in Roman mythology. The name is derived from Latin and means "door" (*ianua*). Popular celebrations are held on this occasion, accompanied by some beliefs that lean toward superstition and divination in certain customary practices that people have become accustomed to each year during Yennayer. (BenRamadan, 1995, p. 378)

This celebration is linked to various narratives that differ between legendary accounts, such as the heroism of Sheshonq, and others that attribute it to the veneration of the land, agriculture, and the appeasement of nature. This is what we will attempt to explore through analyzing the rituals and practices and interpreting their meanings in reality and within the popular imagination of individuals.

The conception of the Yennayer celebration as a cultural event reveals the authenticity and depth of local communities, as well as the richness of collective memory and thought, reflected in what has been added, lost, or erased over time. In the words of Jean Copans: *"Even if heritage cultures are new innovations or disguised recoveries of past events, we must nonetheless inquire into their historicity and anthropological content in reality, based on the principle that the present was in the past the practical culture of heritage."*

These beliefs and practices allow the members of society to unite, forming a cohesive and harmonious unit governed by their agreed-upon rules and beliefs, which are rooted in their collective memory. Apparently, the Yennayer celebration in Algerian society is a unified cultural practice with widely accepted premises. However, a closer examination reveals that there is a diversity of perspectives regarding its origins, which connect the people to their deep historical and civilizational roots, and to the memory of their collective imagination stretching back to the depths of ancient history (950 B.C.), prompting many to question the true source of this celebration.

### **3. The Historical Perspective of the Yennayer Celebration in Algerian Society**

The celebration of the Amazigh New Year holds a special flavor for the Amazigh people of Algeria and other Maghreb countries that share the same ethnic, cultural composition and even a common history. It is revived with special rituals and customs that reflect the traditions and identity of the Amazigh. The names of the Amazigh New Year celebrations vary between "Yennayer," "Imlellan," or "Aquraran," depending on the different Amazigh dialects in Algeria.

There are two conflicting narratives regarding the origins and references of the Yennayer or Amazigh New Year celebration. The first has a historical

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dimension linked to the legend of Sheshonq, while the second carries a social dimension related to nature, climate, and especially agriculture.

### **3.1. The Legend of Sheshonq (Shishnaq):**

The first narrative indicates that the Yennayer celebration represents the day on which the Amazigh king Sheshonq (also spelled Shoshenq or Shishnaq, as noted in various writings) defeated the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II, the last king of the 21st dynasty. In this view, the Yennayer celebration dates back to a historical event that took place before 950 B.C., when Sheshonq united all the Amazigh tribes west of the Nile and managed to rule over half of Egypt and surrounding Amazigh lands. This war is said to have been triggered by the inhumane and oppressive practices of the Pharaohs against the Amazigh people. Consequently, Sheshonq ruled Egypt, adopted the title of Pharaoh, and founded the 22nd dynasty — the Amazigh dynasty that ruled the land of the Nile. (Kamal, 2016, p. 16)

There is, however, a divergence regarding the nature of his rise to power. Some claim that Sheshonq was a successor of a military leader in Egypt during the Pharaonic era and took advantage of the weakened Egyptian authority to ascend the throne peacefully without military confrontation. Others assert that he became Pharaoh through a victorious battle that allegedly took place near Beni Snous in Tlemcen, or possibly by the Nile River. To commemorate this event, a carnival called *Irar* (meaning “lion,” symbolizing King Sheshonq) is held annually in Tlemcen. Like many nations, the Amazigh adopted their calendar starting from that victorious day — January 12 — and according to the current calendar, they have reached the year 2969 Amazigh. Given their deep connection to the land and agriculture, they made this date the beginning of their agricultural calendar.

From an anthropological perspective, the narrative of Sheshonq functions as a myth of origin rather than a verifiable historical foundation for a calendrical system. The absence of any ancient Amazigh source establishing January 12/13 as a New Year indicates that this narrative represents a retrospective symbolic construction rather than historical continuity.

### **3.2. Yennayer as a Celebration of Agriculture and Appeasement of Nature:**

The second narrative presents Yennayer as a symbolic celebration of the land and agriculture — a tradition rooted in optimism for a prosperous year, abundant harvests, and a happy beginning. According to this view, the origin of the celebration lies in an agrarian calendar that farmers have observed until today. It represents a social, ritualistic, and spiritual phenomenon dating back to pre-Islamic times. The Amazigh calendar is thus connected to ancient beliefs, where celebrating Yennayer was believed to bring good fortune.

As Filali Abdelaziz (2014, p. 161) notes, "Ancient societies, including the Amazigh, were completely unable to comprehend nature, the universe, and their hidden mechanisms, or to explain the phenomena that would periodically appear according to their beliefs, mentalities, and cultural perceptions." These societies viewed rainfall as a blessing from the heavens that revived the earth, which in turn provided them with crops and vegetation. On the other hand, natural disasters such as storms, floods, earthquakes, and strong winds evoked fear and anxiety.

Because they could not understand these sudden natural changes, ancient communities sought to appease nature and come closer to it through offerings and various rituals. As a result, they established symbolic relationships with the unseen forces of nature in their quest to survive and live in harmony. These beliefs and practices eventually took root in the collective imagination and became an inherited tradition passed down through generations to the present day.

Furthermore, this day marks a seasonal shift between two natural phases: from cold to mild weather. It is also considered the true beginning of the agricultural year, which is why January 12 was designated as the Amazigh agricultural New Year (Nizar, 2022). This version of the origin is the most widespread and commonly accepted among Amazigh communities.

This date typically coincides with the renewal of nature's life cycle, as it marks the transition from the "white nights" (December 25 to January 13) to the "black nights" (January 14 to February 2). According to the traditional agricultural knowledge of the study's regional population, the soil is unfit for planting during the white nights but becomes fertile and ready for sowing with the arrival of the black nights.

This brings to mind a local proverb frequently recited by my grandmother: *"In the black nights, every branch lives and turns green."* In this spirit, farmers begin preparing their lands and fields, and celebratory practices are held to honor nature and attract what is believed to bring good fortune and productivity.

Additionally, January 12 is viewed as a cautionary milestone, drawn from a popular myth — the tale of the "Old Woman and Yennayer" — which is shared across communities. Its events suggest that this celebration traces back to the legend of the old woman who underestimated the forces of nature, defied the winter, and harnessed it. According to the story — widely shared among Amazigh communities — the old woman, who was a goatherd, rejoiced at the end of the harsh winter season marked by heavy rains, snow, and biting cold, all of which pose challenges for farmers. Feeling triumphant, she mocked the departing winter with words of ridicule and scorn.

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Offended by her disrespect, the month of Yennayer (January) became enraged and turned to the following month, February (Furar), asking to borrow a day to restore its dignity, famously saying: *“Oh Uncle Furar, lend me a day and a night to teach that foul-mouthed old woman a lesson.”* February agreed, and that is why Yennayer now has 31 days.

On that extra day, the old woman proudly ventured into the mountains with her goats, bragging about the calm weather. But suddenly, the skies darkened, heavy rains poured, snow fell fiercely, and the cold returned with vengeance. Unable to withstand the freezing weather, the old woman and her goats perished. Thus, Yennayer reclaimed its honor and earned the respect and fear of the villagers. The tale quickly spread across various regions, becoming a moral lesson against mocking nature’s power.

As a result, people began to treat Yennayer as a day of caution, recognizing that nature’s moods can shift unexpectedly. To avoid misfortune, the Yennayer celebration became an annual tradition, aimed at appeasing natural forces and preventing their wrath.

A common saying among the community in the study area reflects this awareness: *“Uncle Yennayer with the rainstorms”* — a phrase that alludes to the abundant rain at the start of January. Another proverb says: *“If it rains in Yennayer, eat less bread and dig more grain pits,”* which reflects the wisdom of experienced farmers.

In the first expression, “rainstorms” (المطائر) 'Almṭāyr' refers to frequent rains. In the second, the term denotes **grain pits** (مطامير) 'Maṭāmyr' — traditional underground silos used for storing crops. The message is clear: if Yennayer brings plentiful rain, a bountiful harvest is expected. Therefore, people should prepare by digging more storage pits and working hard instead of being idle — symbolized by the phrase “eat less bread,” meaning reduce leisure and be productive.

This version of the legend remains popular among rural communities, who celebrate Yennayer every January 12 in the hope of a year filled with blessings and prosperity. The story is also recorded in the *Dictionary of Algerian Myths*, where it states that the old woman mocked Yennayer saying: *“Curse you, Yennayer! I went out and took my sheep with me — I’m finally free of you and your cold!”* Enraged, the month unleashed seven days of storms, snow, and cold, eventually freezing the old woman and her flock to death. Since then, people believe that the cold intensifies at the start of Yennayer.

Some versions even claim that a statue of the old woman still stands atop one of the high mountains of Djurdjura.(Bouzida, 2005, pp. 63, 150).

This agricultural interpretation constitutes the most anthropologically consistent explanation of Yennayer rituals.

Empirical findings from Brahim Benarfa's doctoral dissertation strongly support this anthropological framing of Yennayer as an agricultural seasonal ritual. Drawing on extensive fieldwork on ritual and festive practices related to agricultural activity in several Algerian regions, the study demonstrates that these rituals—such as animal sacrifice, communal feasting, blood symbolism, fertility rites, the use of henna, stones, and food offerings—are primarily structured around agricultural productivity and natural cycles rather than ethnic self-definition (Benarfa, 2019). Moreover, the research shows that analogous, and in some cases identical, ritual practices are observed among non-Amazigh rural communities, which challenges claims of exclusive ethnic ownership and reinforces the agrarian and Mediterranean character of these practices. Consequently, Benarfa's empirical evidence provides decisive anthropological support for interpreting Yennayer as a ritual regulating the relationship between humans and land, rather than as an ethnic New Year or identity-based calendrical marker (Benarfa, 2019).

#### **4. The Social and Cultural Dimensions of the Yennayer Celebration**

The social and cultural dimensions are embodied in a set of Yennayer rituals, practices, meanings, and symbolism, represented in the following:

##### **4.1. Purification Rituals :**

These are conducted by some communities to purify individuals, ensuring they are not subjected to curses from supernatural forces—what sociologist Auguste Comte termed as metaphysical forces (Chaker, 1981, p. 788). Housewives, especially in rural areas, carry out the cleaning of the house and the emptying of the hearth, known as "*Cheminou*" or "*Chemini*" (pronounced with a silent "sh", a kasrah on the "m", and a dammah or kasrah on the "n", depending on the local dialect of the study sample). The ashes are thrown far away, and children are warned not to cross over them. Sometimes, women cover the ashes with soil out of fear of hidden spirits—expressed in their belief as "madness"—that appear immediately after the ashes are discarded and may harm anyone who defies the taboo and steps on the now-defiled ashes.

Here, a definitional form by Émile Durkheim comes to mind, in which sacred things and totems are those protected and isolated by prohibitions, while defiled things are those to which prohibitions apply and must be kept away from the former. Moreover, the new year must not begin with ashes from the previous year still in the hearth.

After cleaning the hearth, the three stones (called *manasib*) that form the hearth base are replaced. These stones must always be three—no more, no

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less—according to local belief, though the reason is unknown to the people who regard it simply as a custom inherited from their ancestors and continue to practice it.

This can be explained through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which he describes as: “Habitus is a system of lasting and transferable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures—principles that generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or mastery of the operations necessary to attain them” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 88).

Applying this to the lack of knowledge people have about certain practices, yet still engaging in them as inherited customs, reveals that they possess an unconscious disposition to perform them. They do not seek a specific objective behind these rituals because the goals were already defined by ancestors—what remains is to follow them through to achieve the greater goal: to enact all Yennayer's sub-rituals aimed at satisfying nature, appeasing invisible forces, and ushering in a blessed agricultural year.

This purification ritual is carried out on the evening of the last day of the current year. If the housewife does not perform it then, she is obligated to wake before sunrise on the 12th of Yennayer to clean the hearth and change the *manasib*, lest the new year bring with it the misfortunes and sorrows of the past one. This ritual purifies the individual from the past year's negativity. If not performed, these negativities will cling to them into the new year, and they will never see good. (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 89)

This ritual can be classified as one of the **rites of passage** (*Rites of Passage*), a term coined by Van Gennep in 1909. His theory suggests that humans pass through various stages in life, each accompanied by specific rituals varying by society and life stage. This concept took a new turn with Theodor Gaster, who emphasized **seasonal rituals** in his study “*Myth, Ritual, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*.” These rituals accompany significant transitions that change an individual's social status, with the purpose of acknowledging this shift and moving from one status to another. (Chaker, 1981, p. 824)

This classification of rituals can thus be applied to the transitional phase individuals undergo from one year to the next, within the seasonal ritual system of Yennayer—which remains mysterious in many respects.

### **4.2. Blood Rituals:**

Among the rituals that are notably repeated in the region are those related to blood, which “is given great attention because it is considered equivalent to

the soul by the ancients” (Edmond, 1909, p. 85). The man is responsible for choosing the sacrifice or offering that will be presented in celebration of this occasion. He goes to select a rooster or a hen deemed appropriate for the status of Yennayer, to be slaughtered as the sacrificial animal of the new year. Here, the offering represents a legal, ceremonial, and sacred ritual death that must be carried out due to religious considerations and in accordance with the popular proverb that says: *“In the beginning of the year, he who eats the head, remains the head”*, meaning that whoever slaughters and offers a sacrifice in January will keep his head held high among his peers, relatives, and clan. This is a metaphor for high status and a prestigious position in society, and for good fortune and an elevated status greater than the previous year.

It is required that the offering be from poultry, not other animals, and it is not preferred to purchase it ready; rather, it must be slaughtered in front of the house's courtyard and the blood must be shed as a blessing for the new year. The locals believe in the necessity and inevitability of slaughtering a rooster or hen (for reasons unknown to them, inherited only from their ancestors). According to their belief, the blood shed on such occasions helps expel the evil eye, envy, and all things that could hinder or worsen a person's life. This is done at the thresholds of homes while repeating the saying: *“We must shed blood at every new threshold”*. The term *“threshold”* here refers to both the entrance of the new year and the entrance of newly built homes. One must not enter them without first performing the sacrificial ritual. In this case, the type of offering is not fixed; it depends on the individual's means and ability—whether poultry, sheep, or others. This contrasts with the offerings for the Yennayer celebration, which specifically require poultry, as a form of psychological comfort and protection from envy and the evil eye.

Since these rituals are considered sacred, one must act toward them with caution. In this regard, E. E. Evans-Pritchard states: *“Rituals are rules of behavior that determine how one should act in the presence of the sacred”* (Saidi, 2006-2007, p. 183). Furthermore, Edmond Doutté notes that the concept of blood “denotes a tribal or national bond that appears on various occasions such as Eid al-Adha” (Saidi, 2006–2007, p. 184), whether these occasions are religious, social, or folkloric. The origin of this ritual can be traced back to totemic worship, which suggests that the main reason for offering sacrifices lies in the desire of people from primitive societies to unite with their gods and appease the hidden forces (the metaphysical). The belief associated with this ritual is that blood drives away evil. Marianne Barley considers the offering to be *“a symbol of closeness to hidden spirits”*, and the act of sacrifice in ancient times symbolized human acknowledgment of the supremacy of the gods. (Marian, p. 140)

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- ✓ **Salt as a Symbol of Blood:** This refers to the practice or ritual closely associated with blood, where salt is sprinkled on the blood after the slaughtering process, and it is strictly forbidden to step over or pass through it, out of fear of evil spirits (madness). This ritual is considered a type of taboo, prohibiting any contact or interference with it. We have found this sanctifying view of salt in several studies, where the blood that has been spilled cannot be passed without the sprinkling of salt over it. Despite the repetition of this practice, it is still considered an incomprehensible ritual. However, individuals believe that this causes the hidden spirits to flee, thus protecting themselves and their sacrifice. If a family member passes by the blood without sprinkling salt on it, they believe it will harm them by possessing their body and taking control of their soul.
- ✓ **Earth as an Alternative Symbol:** There is another symbol for blood that replaces salt if it is absent. If the slaughter occurs outside the house, the man throws some earth on the blood. Accepting the opposite of this belief causes its significance to fade, potentially leading to its obliteration, or to entering the realm of the unknown. Blood is, quite simply, a binding factor between humans and jinn, and to gain immunity, one must commit to its protection, ensuring it is not wasted or forgotten. Salt plays a protective role in this ritual, guarding against anything that could harm or cause corruption (Roni, 2012, p. 14).

We can conclude that salt represents a protective ritual, safeguarding individuals from hidden spirits and preventing harm to them, as well as preventing the violation of the sacrifice or offering. We can also categorize it as part of purification rituals, as it has various uses according to the beliefs and customs of individuals. There is a form of purity associated with salt through several other rituals. The belief that salt is a purifying and protective agent has become deeply ingrained in the minds of those raised on it, cementing it in the collective imagination of the people, so much so that it has become a belief that cannot be abandoned, elevating it to the level of the sacred. As Roni Bassi points out, the spread of blood is a preoccupation in all societies. Thus, the act of sprinkling salt will not be a trivial matter, as it is an ancient tradition. These events and rituals can only be interpreted within their social and historical context, and since they arise from the needs of society, they are subject to change or adjustment depending on the awareness and needs of individuals (Roni, 2012, p. 17).

### **4.3. Food Rituals:**

The field of food has garnered significant attention from anthropologists due to its value and its role as a symbolic and cultural element in maintaining

the social structure, as well as expressing shared and distinctive cultural identities.

- ✓ **New Year's Breakfast... Tamina and Pastries:** Food rituals in the celebration of Yennayer are varied, as is commonly known. Women prepare several traditional dishes and meals from the morning of the new year until sunset. They wake up early and prepare specific dishes for breakfast, starting with making *kesra* (homemade bread), *fata'ir* (pastries), and *tamina* (a mixture of dates with a little homemade bread, which is made without yeast, and various available nuts, kneaded with butter and honey, then shaped into discs). This is because *fata'ir* and *kesra* contain yeast, which is considered a symbol of abundance, as it causes the dough to rise, thus symbolizing the increase of blessings in the new year. As for *tamina*, it symbolizes sweetness, and the people of the region begin their first day of the year with it to transfer the sweetness of the dish to the new year. According to the belief of the locals, preparing these dishes is considered a good omen and a way to ensure a prosperous farming year.
- ✓ **Yennayer: A Unifier for the Community through Food:** Women take great care in preparing the special dish of *charcham* during Yennayer, which is traditionally served with couscous. The preparation of couscous, or *kuskus* as it is known in the community, is done at home rather than buying it ready-made, and the process of preparing it is referred to as *fetil* (with a silent *f*, broken *t*, and a final silent *l*). As researcher Samir Zamal mentions, "Couscous is a dish with deep historical roots, made from wheat flour in the form of small grains. It is eaten with spoons or by hand, cooked by steaming, and meat, vegetables, milk, butter, or sugar are added, depending on taste and occasion. It is prepared by cooking in a pierced pot called *kaskas* placed over a boiling pot, allowing the couscous to cook by steam". (Smir, 2013, p. 163)

Preparing couscous by hand is essential for this blessed day, and it is considered one of the most important customs of the Berbers, holding a special place in various occasions, whether joyous or sorrowful (such as during mourning). This food contributes to the unity of the community, acting as one of the factors that bring blessings and unity with every grain of couscous. It is mandatory in some regions, as the bond created through blood relations and tribal ties brings individuals closer together, and the shared bond of food does the same, especially during celebrations and seasons.

Claude Lévi-Strauss points out that dealing with food is not isolated from the cultural system to which the food practitioner belongs. Every food,

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according to belief, is based on a cultural process involving several symbols and rituals that contribute to the interpretation and understanding of the dominant or collective culture. As the most prominent ritual distinguishing the Yennayer celebration, the main dish must consist of two primary foods: couscous and *charcham*, made from cooked wheat and cooked in a special broth containing ingredients mainly produced by the land, gifted by nature from both animal and plant sources. The dish includes cooked wheat (which must be from the previous year's harvest, not from years past), with added chickpeas and *fermas* (dried apricots or plums with a hint of acidity). Another animal-based ingredient added is *kelila* (a preparation of boiled milk with some salt until it forms a mass like cheese, then strained and dried for storage to be used in specific dishes). The previous ingredients are cooked with chicken (the offering), adding available vegetables and other common kitchen ingredients. In the final stage of cooking, boiled milk is added to the mixture, and it is then called *charcham*, served over couscous or sometimes on its own for those who prefer it individually.

The uniqueness of the food served during Yennayer is that it symbolizes wealth, fertility, and abundance of crops. According to their belief, anyone who does not feel full on that night will not feel full throughout the year, in accordance with the saying: "*Who doesn't fill up on the first night of the year... will not fill up for the entire year.*" Therefore, they insist that children eat the Yennayer dinner, which consists of *charcham* as previously mentioned, so they feel satisfied and sometimes even overly full, ensuring a year of goodness and blessings, with nothing lacking throughout the year. There is also an ancient belief with mythological interpretations, where individuals believe that if there is no food left for the second day of Yennayer, they will be sad and consider it a year of sorrow and evil, a farming year marked by drought and scarcity. On the other hand, if the opposite happens, they rejoice and expect good things.

This means that couscous is a custom of the region, holding great importance and special affection. When the couscous is in the pot (the *kaskas*), they are filled with joy, and the year will be one of goodness. However, if the pot is empty, it signifies a bad year. This dish is then shared with neighbors and family, or they are invited to have the Yennayer dinner together, which strengthens bonds of love between individuals. By practicing this food-sharing ritual, they align themselves with a single culture, one that is intertwined with the re-production of ancestral values and the continuity of the community's identity. This celebration has its origins in religious rituals and ancient cultural remnants, with Yennayer dinner preparation linked to cultural rites that vary by region, tracing their roots to pagan beliefs. For instance, women would place small amounts of food in different corners of the house to approach the

hidden spirits and gain their favor. With the arrival of Islam, these beliefs gradually disappeared.(Douch, 2012)

#### **4.4. Fertility rituals**

are “magical practices widely spread among primitive peoples who link their myths between the production of agricultural crops by the earth and the processes of production and birth in humans”(BenRamadan, 1995, p. 204). They are related to the fertility and production of the earth, but do not contain magical acts; rather, they are linked to ancient popular myths that have been inherited from their ancestors.

It is worth noting that these rituals are not associated with exclusive ethnic meanings, as analogous practices can be observed among non-Amazigh rural communities, thereby emphasizing their agrarian and universal nature.

#### **4.5. Henna Ritual:**

Henna is applied to women and children (both boys and girls). If a guest arrives that night, henna is applied to their finger if the guest is a boy (only on the finger). However, men only adhere to the henna ritual during their wedding ceremonies. If the guest is a girl, henna is applied to both her hands and feet. This is a custom of the Amazigh region, symbolizing hospitality and reinforcing bonds of love. According to their belief, “henna is a fruit from paradise that our father Adam brought with him in the form of a crown that he wore in paradise. When he descended to earth, he planted a leaf from that crown, which grew, but did not bear fruit, because the earth’s soil is different from that of paradise, and its fruitfulness is limited to returning to paradise. It was named henna because it yearns for the soil of paradise”(Seymour-Smith, 2009, p. 48). This belief is rooted in ancient myths related to the origin of the plant and its growth on earth, all resembling the henna myth. Therefore, it is considered a blessed plant with many benefits. To honor this plant, almost all the people in Algerian society use it in their celebrations. It is also used when entering a new, newly-built house, where it is scattered in the corners of the house and a mixture of it is placed with sugar at the top of the house’s front wall, believing that it brings good luck and wards off the evil eye. Since it is a symbol of fertility and growth, the homeowner will experience an increase in livelihood and the development of their home. It is also taboo for women to consume it, as it causes infertility. Thus, henna is considered a fertility-preventing ritual, meaning its use is limited to external application only for the purpose of increasing fertility. According to their belief, any manipulation of this ritual is prohibited; henna must not be thrown in an unclean place, as it is sacred. Therefore, when only a little henna remains, women dissolve it in water and pour it into the garden to water the trees. They also believe that the one who applies henna should sleep with it overnight, wrapped properly, and remove it the next morning. If it is red or has an acceptable color, the wearer

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will have a year of much goodness and will be fortunate. If it is yellow or barely visible, the wearer is considered to have little luck, and to avoid a bad year, they add several other ingredients to make the color more pleasing, which could be natural ones from home (sugar, drops of lemon) or chemical ones they buy. This reflects on the fertility of the earth, thus ensuring a good yield.

From this, we conclude that the use of henna is not only for adornment but also carries mystical meanings, possibly based on myths that individuals may be unaware of. For them, referring it back to the traditions and beliefs of their ancestors is sufficient.

### **4.6. Stone Turning Ritual:**

This ritual can be classified as one of the fertility rituals, and it is performed by men on the morning of the first day of the new year. It is a ritual exclusive to men, with women not participating, and its reasons remain unknown. It has been inherited from their ancestors. The man wakes up early and, before performing the blood and slaughter rituals mentioned above, he heads to his land where he turns over a stone. In other words, on the morning of the new year, men turn over stones on their land. If they find insects (ants, worms) underneath, it brings them joy, and they predict a good year ahead, with increased wealth and the addition of new family members through the birth of children or the marriage of a son. The presence of living creatures is seen as a sign of fertility and good life. According to the beliefs of the people in the region, the one who turns over the stones in this case will be fortunate throughout the year and will live a long life to see his grandchildren and possibly even his great-grandchildren. However, if the stones are turned over and there are no insects, the new year is considered to be a bad year with little goodness, as it indicates a lack of life and fertility. They also believe that if someone finds a hole under the turned-over stone, it is a sign of death, either their own or that of a family member, in that year. The hole is believed to symbolize a grave, and thus, the person returns home sad, living the year in anticipation of their death or the death of a loved one.

Another fertility ritual, once practiced by women on the morning of January 12th, has recently been abandoned and no longer holds significant importance in the celebration of the New Year. The women would bring a green plant (rosemary) and place it in the center of the house, symbolizing fertility and hoping for a green and fruitful year. Women would avoid bringing the wormwood plant due to its bitterness and their belief in its negative influence on the new year.

## **5. Mechanisms for the Continuation of the Yennayer Celebration as a Cultural Heritage:**

- Rituals and repetitive (routine) cultural practices serve as proof of the continuity and preservation of the Yennayer celebration as a popular cultural heritage, as many anthropologists have focused their studies on uncovering the ways and means through which the cultural elements and systems of the Yennayer celebration operate in continuous interconnection and mutual support.
- Through the practices of the Amazigh community members and in various Arab societies that still adhere to the rituals and beliefs of this phenomenon, they remain hopeful for a new year filled with goodness and abundant rain. Therefore, they always seek, through various methods, to preserve its existence and identity through these distinguished celebrations.
- The Yennayer rituals, from this perspective, work to strengthen the connection and unity of the celebrants, involving them in a single belief and a shared history, and making them proud of it.
- Rituals are the reconstruction of a distant past in the present time, i.e., the rebuilding of the past within new rules that predict a better future. Researcher Nour Eddine Talabi points out that the call of the ritual lies in proving the famous historical and mythical event. The ritual in Yennayer celebration mainly tends, through the repetition and sustainability of the rules that validate it, to solidify the permanence of the social and mythical event. The Yennayer rituals have a collective character that changes the psychological and mental state of individuals. This character renews their enthusiasm and gives them a sense of unity in their beliefs and history, as well as their solidarity through some of its rituals, which carry within them unity and solidarity, such as the exchange of Yennayer food offerings, the Yennayer harvest for the fields and mountains, collective prayers asking for mercy and blessings from Allah. This also reflects the religious character of this celebration, which made the repeated rituals aim to establish the foundations of beliefs that form the principles of social organization and solidarity.
- The necessity of focusing on both tangible and intangible heritage (with Yennayer celebrations as a model) and its enhancement and preservation.
- Raising awareness of the vast tourist potential of the Amazigh regions and promoting this celebration both within the country and abroad.

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- Emphasizing the need to activate scientific and academic studies on Yennayer celebrations and their integration into development plans.
- Attempting to introduce Yennayer celebrations through multimedia platforms, especially media outlets, and expanding the culture of local tourism while promoting it globally.
- Attempting to integrate Yennayer celebrations into general and special education programs, particularly at the primary, middle, and secondary education stages.
- Efforts to document these celebrations as part of Algeria's intangible cultural heritage under the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- Encouraging the conduct of scientific, technical, and artistic studies, as well as research methodologies, to ensure the effective safeguarding of Yennayer celebrations.
- Establishing institutions dedicated to documenting intangible cultural heritage and facilitating access to them.

The shortcomings of national mechanisms in protecting local folk heritage, which necessitated Algeria's joining and ratifying related international agreements that established many mechanisms to ensure greater and more comprehensive protection of the folk heritage of all the countries that join them.

### **6-Epistemological Note: Ritual, Myth, and the Invention of Tradition**

Anthropological analysis requires a clear epistemological distinction between ritual as a functional social practice and myth as a symbolic narrative that produces meaning without necessarily validating historical events. Rituals are not primarily interpreted through their narrative origins, but through their social, economic, and symbolic functions within the cultural systems in which they operate. Consequently, the presence of mythological narratives accompanying rituals does not confer historical legitimacy, but rather reflects the workings of collective imagination in explaining natural and social phenomena and symbolically legitimizing them.

Within this framework, the reinterpretation of seasonal agricultural rituals as ethnic or foundational traditions exemplifies what epistemology describes as the invention of tradition, whereby contemporary identity-based meanings are retroactively projected onto older practices with different original functions. This perspective does not deny the cultural or symbolic value of such rituals; instead, it calls for their analysis within their original functional context, and for a clear distinction between verifiable history, myth as

symbolic construction, and ritual as a repetitive social practice primarily aimed at regulating the relationship between humans and nature and ensuring social continuity.

## **7- Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can affirm that the Yennayer culture is one of the most prominent local characteristics that reflects the spirit of national unity and cultural diversity in Algeria. It represents an important part of the spiritual heritage that brings individuals together within a comprehensive national framework. The celebration of this occasion is not limited to a specific region, but its manifestations are clearly evident throughout the country, as it has been recognized as an official annual holiday. This reflects its transformation into a shared national tradition, not just a cultural heritage specific to communities most closely linked to Amazigh culture. Yennayer has become a symbol of fertility and generosity, influenced by myths and references that converge in the veneration and celebration of the earth, reflecting the shift in the relationship between humans and nature from suspicion and fear in traditional societies to appreciation and honor in a deeply rooted cultural context.

From this, we present a set of suggestions to preserve this cultural event, which include:

1. Spreading knowledge about the importance of Yennayer celebrations as a cultural heritage that reflects Algerian identity through educational curricula and media outlets.
2. Organizing annual festivals and events at both the local and national levels to strengthen social bonds and instill the values of unity and cultural diversity.
3. Documenting the customs and rituals associated with this occasion to preserve them from extinction and ensure their transmission to future generations.
4. Supporting scientific research that addresses the historical, social, and symbolic dimensions of this celebration and highlighting its impact on national identity.
5. Utilizing digital media and social networks to promote the manifestations of the celebration and introduce young generations to its cultural value.
6. Supporting traditional crafts, food, and arts that reflect the spirit of Yennayer, as they play a role in enhancing the cultural economy.

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7. Linking the celebration to sustainable environmental practices, such as tree planting and campaigns to preserve natural resources, in harmony with the symbolism of the earth in this tradition.
8. Encouraging active citizen participation in official events and promoting social solidarity and cohesion through collective celebrations.

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