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Aspects of Cultural Construction and Folkloric Diversity in the Gourara Region–Timimoun: An Anthropological Study

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Abstract

This study aims to introduce the Gourara region from geographical and historical perspectives and to examine its cultural structures and their manifestations as expressed through intangible cultural heritage. It also addresses the widespread folkloric forms represented by Hadra, Baroud, Tbal, and Ahellil. The study shows that the people of Gourara continue to preserve their cultural heritage through the practice of these diverse folkloric forms.

Keywords: cultural construction; Gourara region; folklore; Ahellil.

1. Introduction

Thanks to the routes and pathways crossing the Sahara, some of the earliest human groups—Berbers, Arabs, and Black Africans—settled in the Gourara region. They brought with them their knowledge, culture, and customs. These communities were highly active, linking the markets of the south with those of the north through commercial caravans travelling in different directions. Gourara thus became a point of contact and exchange between the various peoples living in the north and those in the south. This article discusses cultural construction, folkloric diversity, and their manifestations in the Gourara–Timimoun region, as well as the cultural relations between Gourara and some neighboring regions. It also seeks to provide a closer understanding of social and cultural life in Gourara by addressing the following questions: What mechanisms formed the basis for the construction of cultural structures in Gourari society? What are the most prominent folkloric forms

practiced by the inhabitants of Gourara? The method adopted in this study is descriptive. I sought to adapt this approach to the scientific material available to me, drawing, whenever necessary, on an analytical approach and relying on previous studies concerned with the social and cultural history of the region.

2. Location of the Gourara Region, Timimoun Province

Sources and manuscripts indicate that the Gourara region has served as a meeting place and area of human settlement since ancient times. Owing to its strategic geographical position among the southern Saharan oases, it constituted an important central point linking the cities and urban centers of the Islamic Maghreb in the north with the civilizational centers located south of the Sahara in what was known as the lands of Western Sudan.

The geographical extent of the Greater Touat region, with its three subregions, is bounded by the Tademaït Plateau to the east, the Grand Erg Occidental to the north, Erg Chech to the west, and the Tanezrouft Desert to the south. Historically, the area comprises three geographically extensive zones: Gourara in the north, Tidikelt in the south, and Central Touat, or Tsouat, in the middle. Geographers and researchers have used the name Touat to refer collectively to all three regions (Houtia, 2004, p. 6).

The Gourara region was formerly called Tingourarine by Berber tribes, a term meaning “camps” in Berber (al-Wazzan, 1983, p. 133). It lies north of the Touat region and is bordered by the Grand Erg Occidental to the north and northeast, the northern slope of the Tademaït Plateau to the south, and the Saoura Valley and OuedMessaoud to the west. Its center is the city of Timimoun, and most of its ksour are located within a circle approximately 80 km in diameter, the most distant being the ksour of Tabelkouza in the north. OuedM’Guiden terminates in this area, forming a large salt flat known as the Sebkhia of Gourara (BISSONJ, 1957, p. 7).

3. The Gourara Region in Historians’ Writings

Gourara, or Tigourarine, is mentioned by Ibn Khaldun. The term is Berber; its singular form is Tagourart, and it denotes communities, residential settlements, or camps. In any case, the region was known by this name among most historians. It is difficult to assume that its constituent parts were Berber while the whole bore an Arabic name, just as it is not logical to suppose that these areas remained unnamed until the arrival of the Arabs, especially since the Arab presence in the region dates to the Islamic conquests at the end of the first century AH and the subsequent Hilalian migrations. Many historians referred to the region as Tigourarine or Tingourarine, meaning residential settlements or camps in the local Berber dialect, as noted above. The name was later Arabized as Tigourarine and gradually became known as Gourara (Haida, 1977, p. 240). The

Gourara region lies approximately 200 km north of the city of Adrar and was situated along the trans-Saharan trade route that became renowned in the medieval period between North African countries and the lands of Western Sudan.

What distinguishes Gourara from other parts of the wider region is the presence of salt flats, together with numerous rocky elevations and hills. Its population is composed of Zenata, Arabs, and Black Africans (Pietro-Laureaux, 1987, p. 2).

Researchers also maintain that the Black population came as a result of Africans being brought from their original homelands and sold as slaves, a process that continued into the twentieth century. The Berber population, by contrast, came from the north. Linguistically, however, it is difficult to distinguish between the Black and Berber populations because both speak the Zenati dialect, whereas Arabs can be distinguished through language (M-mameri, 1956, p. 242).

3.1. Cultural Construction

Culture has attracted the attention of researchers across different fields of knowledge. Because of the breadth of the concept, its meanings have expanded both linguistically and terminologically, while also acquiring particular characteristics in each field. From a sociological perspective, culture concerns the processes of individual socialization that shape interactions, perceptions, and actions within the cultural environment to which a person belongs. From an anthropological perspective, culture refers to patterns of life and the ways in which individuals behave in specific situations within the groups to which they belong, such as performing particular rituals on social or festive occasions or wearing distinctive forms of dress. These practices express the cultural patterns of specific social groups. This cultural mosaic shapes the lives of such groups in their ways of living, eating, dressing, and using the social space to which they belong. Culture therefore gives these groups their identity within the sociocultural sphere. Accordingly, the actions and perceptions of groups cannot be understood independently of the culture they bear.

3.2. Taylor's Definition of Culture: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs, traditions, habits, and all other capabilities that a human being is able to acquire as a member of society."

3.3. Malinowski's Definition of Culture: Malinowski is among the most prominent scholars who contributed to deepening the concept of culture. He argued that culture includes, among other things, "inherited crafts, goods, technical processes, ideas, customs, and values." Malinowski also introduced the concept of social structure within the framework of culture, stating that "it is difficult to understand the term social structure properly except by treating it as part of culture."

3.4. Bois's 1930 Definition: "Culture includes all manifestations of social habits within a group, all individual reactions influenced by the habits of the group in which the individual lives, and all products of human activities determined by those habits."

3.5. Linton's Definition: "Culture is the totality of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior acquired by members of society through instruction or imitation and shared by them to a greater or lesser extent" (1).

4. Folklore

Folklore, folk heritage, and popular culture are all terms applied to the folk legacy that seeks to instill good conduct and virtuous morals in individuals. Among its characteristics is that it is collective rather than individual; it encompasses human life wherever people exist in society and serves as an educational guide for all ages (al-Khashali, 2010, p. 332). Folklore also constitutes an entry point for studying human civilization because it embraces the value-based, moral, aesthetic, and creative dimensions expressed by human beings throughout their long history. Appreciation of folklore arises from people's understanding and perception, which result from individual characteristics combined with social value. If a person's expression of concern for others, whoever they may be, is socially associated with understanding their feelings, popular expressions move beyond this subjective domain to reach a broader public. The word "folklore" is Saxon in origin and English in usage; it consists of two parts: "folk," meaning the people, and "lore," meaning knowledge or study. It was initially used to denote popular arts, and its use later became widespread to designate the discipline that studies popular customs, traditions, and arts. In the Arab world, interest in folklore was initially limited to individual efforts that preserved these arts from loss or distortion. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, interest increased, and policies and programs were established that included the study, analysis, classification, organization, and preservation of forms of popular art across the world. Analytical studies focused on understanding the philosophy of peoples through the interpretation and analysis of the contents of these arts (al-Akhras, 2001, p. 86).

4.1. Theoretical Origins of Folklore

Some scholars view folklore as an independent discipline with its own theories and links to the social sciences. William Bascom sought to clarify the fundamental issues of this field through a historical review of its theories from the beginning of the nineteenth century. He held that the most important issues raised by these theories concern the integrated psychic unity of humankind and the question of how to explain similar folktales in different societies. The factors invoked to explain such similarities include theories of the psychic unity of humankind; other theories explain them through

diffusion, borrowing, migration, or invention; and a third position argues for the independent emergence of such tales (al-Akhras, 2001, p. 87).

4.2. Main Functions of Folklore

The functions of folklore range from simple entertainment to socialization, the transmission of culture from one generation to another, and forms of social control. It can provide praise for those who conform to norms and warnings for those who deviate from them. Some folklore researchers argue that certain schools neglected areas such as folk medicine, folk dance, and popular customs. They also overlooked another important dimension by focusing on texts without attending to the cultural and social context in which those texts were produced and used. Others point to the interest of contemporary anthropologists in studying folklore within its sociocultural context and in understanding folklore as a cultural system characterized by integrative principles that are open to investigation and analysis. Any study of the functions of folkloric elements that directs attention only to their texts without considering context remains static and incomplete. There is a fundamental relationship between text and context: context is treated as the background to the text, which remains the core of the study. The researcher therefore begins by recording the texts and then describes the cultural context in which they were produced.

4.3. Domains of Popular Folklore

Some scholars locate the domain of folklore in the study of popular literature, while others restrict it to unwritten popular literature—that is, oral material emerging from the people and circulating among their social strata rather than being confined to writers and intellectuals. This includes folktales, songs circulating orally among the public, proverbs, chants, myths, riddles, puzzles, and all expressions used by people in different situations. Memorizing and studying proverbs is regarded as a means of acquiring culture because proverbs are brief, easy to remember, and rich in meaning (Maqdisi, 2010, p. 137).

Others broaden the concept to include popular culture in its entirety—that is, all aspects reflecting the psychology of the people—and equate it with popular culture: customs, traditions, ideas, patterns of popular behavior, games, arts, folk crafts, celebrations, festivals, and festivities. Others also include marriage customs, circumcision traditions, the weaving of clothing and national dress, traditional industries and crafts, and many social rituals. The field of folklore is therefore broad and extensive, and its elements are diverse and multifaceted. It is a social and civilizational means of expressing heritage that accumulates across generations; the sense of belonging transcends the dimensions of time and place to connect all members of a single society (Safouh, 2001, p. 88).

4.4. Components and Elements of Folklore

4.4.1. Folk Dress

Folk dress is a form of behavior that identifies the person and his or her individual characteristics and then becomes a social tradition representing the civilizational garment of the society concerned. Other elements include the folk song and the folk dance song.

4.4.2. Folk Dance

Dance is a rhythm in which bodily movements are balanced with the musical tune. A third element interacts with movement and melody: collective feelings associated with civilizational heritage. Through the interaction of these three elements, the body's inclination and swaying are shaped so that this pattern of beauty becomes an expression of the social self enacted by the human body. Dance also has an educational dimension because it links the past to the present, elevates inclinations, refines talents, and transforms individual action into collective action.

Each warlike or Sufi folkloric dance in ksour society has its own distinctive clothing, which expresses the identity of the dance. In general, all popular dances share the turban and white cloak, with slight differences created by adding certain decorative garments that give each dance a distinctive feature and identity. In the Qarqabu dance, for example, a special red leather shoe and belt are used, embodying meanings of strength and readiness for work associated with the slave.

Can clothing not embody symbolic and mystical ideas related to the body from the perspective of anthropologists? Wearing clothes is what makes the human body signify and carry signs. As Barthes says: "The veil, insofar as it is a veil, is also a means of revealing what is hidden, considering that the most erotic place on a body is where clothing parts; therein lies the paradox."

In general, Gourari folk dance—whether Baroud, Hadra, or Ahellil—is a popular festive spectacle based on a play of concealment and revelation: concealing the body and revealing it at the same time.

From this perspective, all popular Saharan dances of ksour society can be regarded as performative rituals that rely on the body as an identity and a symbol of existence: "Without the body, the human being cannot be; human existence is bodily existence." The body is the capital of dance.

Some dancers lose control of their bodies and find themselves in a state described as "ill" (a state of general relaxation), immersed in ecstatic experience and reaching the point of nausea. In this way, the old body dissolves and melts into the realm of another world... until another, new body begins to appear—a body filled with energies and senses... flexible, pliable, and capable of shaping a scene within the rahba, the dance space. Through its supple and pliable movements, it creates a theatrical dimension through gestures and kinetic signs produced in relation to emptiness and space.

In the Baroud dance, the body appears as an aesthetic repository with its own language, wandering through the body's labyrinths and dissolving into its geography. In the Hadra dance, which is a popular Sufi dance, the body is elevated and made to soar into purer and more expansive skies. Here, the body exceeds its anthropological dimension and becomes, as in theatre, the body within the festive spectacle. There is not one body but two bodies, or a collection of spectators' bodies. The body thus moves beyond its anthropological dimension to become a body of spectacle directed toward the other body, that of the spectator. In doing so, it condenses its own language, revealing its charms and contours that evoke attraction (Dragure), like the female body during dance.

During the Baroud dance, the dancers' bodies appear to form a circular performative scene. A group of bodies sway to the right and move backward and forward, rising and falling in a compact circular formation. They repeat the formula in continuous alternation, punctuated by words expressing enthusiasm and energy such as "al-hawa, Allah, Rabb, blessings upon you, O Messenger of Allah," voiced by one of the dancers in the center. Melodious chants fill the soul with intense feeling, enthusiasm, and a sense of collective spirit. These men are usually young and middle-aged, with a few elderly participants. In the center of the circle, another group appears in a tightly packed row carrying rifles. They move around the center of the circle and change direction eastward, westward, northward, and southward. They control the circle dances by giving commands. A group of drummers also rotates in the middle of the circle in a compact formation.

If dance has long been regarded as a sacred and magical phenomenon, then Hadra, Baroud, and even Qarqabu express festive popular rituals centered on the body "as a mass of symbols, indications, and iconic signs that refer to universal archetypes (according to the hypothesis of Gustav Jung, Gaston Bachelard, and others), and also as a reservoir of meanings, signifying through both movement and stillness."

Religious and popular celebrations and ziyara occasions provide the body in ksour society with an opportunity to break through the wall of repression, express itself, and articulate its identity in all its symbolic and animistic extensions after having remained constrained within traditional popular culture according to a closed social conception. This condition caused it to experience many states of absence, and it found no space for liberation except during certain festive occasions, such as ziyara days and popular celebrations.

4.5. Types of Folkloric Forms in the Gourara Region

Among the cultural and artistic forms of heritage for which Gourara is renowned are several dance traditions with religious, social, or combined religious and social characteristics. The inhabitants have long practiced these forms, especially during festive occasions such as ziyara visits, weddings,

seasonal festivals, and religious and national celebrations. These include Baroud, Hadra, Qarqabu, Tbal, and Ahellil.

4.5.1. Baroud (al-Faza')

The Baroud troupe is among the heritage traditions present at all religious seasons and ziyara occasions held in the Gourara region, and its presence is highly significant. From the beginning of the celebrations, Baroud groups appear in organized collective circles and offer engaging folkloric performances involving the firing of gunpowder and the recitation of religious panegyrics known in the region. Together with inherited popular dances, they form long-established folkloric scenes that create an atmosphere of joy, delight, and activity in the city of Timimoun and its ksour. Baroud troupes accompany each participating group representing the various ksour in the celebration.

4.5.2. Hadra

Hadra consists of Sufi chanting and religious praise performed by a group of people according to a specific rhythm created by the bearers of "tarat" (percussion instruments), who stand in the middle of the circular formation created by the participants.

The origins of Hadra are traced to the corpus of popular Sufism in Morocco, specifically to "Dar al-Damana," also called "Dar al-Saqf." This house is regarded as a center of Sufi orders because the shaykh of the order resides there and manages the affairs of his order and followers from it.

The arrival of this form of Hadra is also attributed to the shaykh of the order, who sent two muqaddams from among his followers—the brothers ShaykhMoulay al-Tayyib and Shaykh Bin Abd al-Sadiq—to the Touat region. He assigned each of them a geographical area in which to work, introduce the order, and teach its litanies to those wishing to join it.

These two muqaddams, in turn, appointed successors in the areas they visited. Locally, such figures are known as "muqaddams." Each supervises a relatively small group belonging to the same Sufi order, known as the "fuqara" (the poor). The group's task is to memorize and preserve the litanies transmitted to them. For this purpose, they organized meetings in which they recalled and repeated those litanies. They differed, however, in how they performed them: the followers of Shaykh Bin Abd al-Sadiq perform them while seated, whereas the followers of ShaykhMoulay al-Tayyib perform them while standing.

Hadra is one of the practices that, from its beginnings, was associated with a single social category, namely the White population, especially the "marabouts." Their participation remains strong even in ksour where they constitute a minority, despite the participation of Black people.

Because Hadra was historically associated with Sufism and Sufi orders—the relationship between the shaykh and his disciples, and the reverence, honoring, and special reception accorded to him—the distinctive presence of the White population in it may be seen as reinforcing this religious and sacral dimension, from which they benefited more than others because the shaykhs of the orders and the saints came from among them. Accordingly, in this view, those considered deserving of such reverence and glorification are the White population alone.

In terms of leadership, there are prominent figures among the sharifs and marabouts in the areas where they live and over which they exercise supervision, both internally and externally. In other cases, the sharifs and marabouts remain at the forefront, assisted by some individuals from among the Haratin and slaves.

Hadra is among the most striking rhythmic forms used by disciples and followers of the Sufi order while performing religious panegyrics containing remembrance of God, supplication, and prayer with sincerity and a humble heart filled with love for God. Hadra is performed collectively. The group stands in two facing rows, while the leaders of the troupe advance in the middle and recite the religious praises repeated by the group behind them. The rhythm begins slowly and heavily, then soon becomes lighter, allowing all members of the troupe to move in harmony and bringing them into a state of spiritual and devotional dissolution expressed through specific bodily movements. With regard to the upright posture and bending of the two facing rows of dancers, as well as the forceful stamping of the foot on the ground during the dance, “the movement of becoming erect is fundamentally a movement of penetration that acquires its symbolic character within the act of erection as an expression of a desire for rape; every movement of erection thus becomes a movement of rape. Since the ritual body is a body without a penis, the erect movement becomes a symbolic and substitutive form of the original act of rape. What lends sacredness to this desire for rape is that it is accompanied by a movement of bending or prostration, which constitutes a kind of symbolic prayer that gives the first act its symbolic character.”

Hadra, with its dance and praise, therefore forms a type of Sufi dance that plays an important role in drawing closer to God Almighty. It acquires the quality of worship as a primary feature of kinetic Islamic art, aided by movement and sound as two principal factors in reaching a state of ecstasy and attaining divine truth. The dancer loses awareness of the material world, and the body, no longer experienced as his own, enters a mysterious spiritual realm. Although dance has long been regarded as a sacred and magical phenomenon, it has acquired specific dimensions according to each civilization to which it belongs. Its fundamental purpose, however, is the search for the sacred, movement toward the horizon where heaven and earth meet, and a means of union with other dancers and with the supreme metaphysical unity (Hassan, 1995, p. 99). Popular dance in the many

celebrations of ksour society, whether at weddings or ziyara visits, is thus a popular performative component of ksour culture: a dance with multiple significations and meanings, and a visible bodily discourse that says what the tongue cannot utter. In addition, it is an eloquent and expressive choreographic language spoken by all parts of the body.

If the display of the body in Hadra is permitted within ethical conditions defined by society, the wall of repression is broken here through a collective state filled with vitality and enthusiasm.

Dance movements appear like words, forming a silent symbolic world and a mysterious expression of inner tension. In this way, the body expresses its cultural integration into space and time. The extension of the arms can symbolize nothing but eternity and immortality, while movements of the head refer to the world of memories and the return to the past. Likewise, the intertwining of the fingers accompanies the upward extension of the arms.

4.5.3. Tbal (Drum)

Tbal varies according to social categories and differs by age and gender. Leadership of the drum belongs to the categories of the zawayia and free people. There is a strong similarity between Tbal and Hadra because both belong to the religious domain. The essential theme of Tbal is praising the Prophet, peace be upon him, and invoking blessings upon him. According to the convictions and practices of this society, such a role cannot be assumed by just anyone; priority therefore belongs to the sharifs and marabouts. Social classification thus appears in a setting in which no one dares to break away from or oppose the group, because the gathering possesses sanctity and a religious dimension.

4.5.4. Ahellil

Ahellil is one of the rhythmic and musical folkloric forms of the Gourara region. It encompasses various literary and artistic purposes and recounts stories from different aspects of the life of the Zenati Gourari community—economic, social, and cultural—with religious and human dimensions. UNESCO recognized and classified it as intangible heritage in 2005, considering it one of the folk arts of the Gourara region.

a. Definition of Ahellil

Ahellil is regarded as a faithful mirror reflecting the life of the people of Gourara. It accompanies all social and religious celebrations and is not limited to poetry alone; rather, it consists of songs, music, and dances.

The term Ahellil is itself comprehensive, encompassing different concepts and covering varied fields. Researchers have therefore differed regarding the origin of the name.

1. Ahellil is a compound word consisting of ahl, meaning people or a group, and layl, meaning the period between sunset and dawn. Accordingly, the word Ahellil means "the people of the night" or "night people."
2. Ahellil is said to derive from the verb tahlil, meaning the utterance "There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah," because Ahellil poems commonly begin with the basmala and prayers upon the Messenger of Allah.
3. Ahellil is said to be derived from hilal, meaning the birth of the moon or the crescent; Ahellil thus suggests the beginning of a new month.

b. Temporal Stages of Ahellil Performance

1. The Masrah Stage

This stage is characterized by simplicity and clarity in its poems and by a simple rhythm, making it easy for beginners to perform. In addition, most of its poems are religious in character and begin with the remembrance of God and prayers upon the Prophet. It is performed during the first third of the night.

2. The Aougrouti Stage

This stage is named after the Aougrout region. Its poems recount old memories associated with the Gourara region and evoke the ruins of the past. This stage extends from the end of the first third of the night to the beginning of the final third. Its poems are predominantly lyrical and include erotic love poetry.

3. The Ithran Stage

The name of this stage comes from the Zenati dialect word ithran, meaning "stars" in Arabic. It was given this name by analogy with the long period during which the stars continue to shine until dawn. Its poems are characterized by long verses and difficulty of performance (Tigourarine, 2012, p. 7).

5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion shows that the construction and functioning of culture are necessary for all social life. Culture is therefore embedded in the fabric of the social system. A person raised within a particular cultural framework feels at ease within that system, whereas moving to another cultural system entails a profound transformation in that person's life, habits, and independent patterns of behavior. Human beings are products of their time and society and bear the different social relations within which they were raised. Human culture reflects the social and natural environment and contributes to shaping both. The relationship between culture and the individual is multifaceted:

culture influences human personality, while the individual also influences the culture of society. This study clearly shows that, over past centuries, the Gourara region experienced considerable cultural activity, reflected in its extensive folkloric diversity and in the large number of customs and traditions that the Gourari people continue to preserve.

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