

**"Daily Life Routine of Residents living in a Slum Settlement  
in Algeria"**

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**Abstract:**

This paper tends to describe the everyday life of a poor community living in an undesirable living conditions which characterize an important section of population living in the slum sites (better known as Gorbiville) which are scattered in the outskirts of Algerian large cities, a phenomenon which is widely applicable in many cities of the Developing Countries. The research attempts to demonstrate how the residents of the settlement with their rural background and conservative life style, happen to live and somewhat cope with the unbearable living conditions. Thanks to their quasi-cultural identity which has developed through day-to-day life experience. In this context, a detailed analysis of men, women, and youth in the settlement, have been considered, showing the scope of changes and challenges which these categories of population are reflecting.

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### **Origins of Gourbiville Residents:**

In rural communities from which the residents of the gourbiville settlement were originally drawn, daily routines were largely determined by an agrarian environment and by the traditions and norms of an age-old system of extended family and kinship obligations, and of mutual support between neighbors who were commonly bound to each other through a dense network of multiplex relations(1). This way of life was to an appreciable extent either transformed to, or recreated in, the gourbiville neighborhoods in which the rural migrants initially settled.

Some elements of the rural way of life persisted in the gourbiville neighborhoods for a number of reasons. Firstly, the gourbiville residents attempted to maintain the cultural practices associated with the rural areas from which they originated. Secondly, but associated with the first reason, the residents made every attempt to settle next to relatives thus furthering the former aim, and creating social networks which were originally rooted in the countryside and were then given expression in the urban environment. Consequently, the urban way of life was kept at a distance and its influence minimized within the community life of the gourbiville. A further notable feature of this process is to be found in the layout of the gourbiville dwellings.

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Although the gorbivilles are located within the urban boundaries of the city and provide sufficient living space for their members, they do not have any of the urban services which make urban living more attractive, nor do they have access roads to link them to the surrounding neighborhoods. Their inhabitants live in relative physical as well as social isolation from other neighborhoods and this further militates against integration into the urban way of life. Thus rural traditions have to some appreciable extent been maintained in the community life of the gorbivilles.

### **Daily life activities of the gorbiville inhabitants:**

Housewives are expected to rise first at dawn to begin the tasks which will keep them occupied throughout the day. The first of these is to prepare breakfast for the head of the household and any other members who leave the settlement as early as possible. Most of the men are impatient and so eager to leave that some do not even bother with breakfast. Instead, they may rush to the mosque for prayer before making their way to their daily destination in the city center. They normally walk there, which take them about an hour, and they usually do so in groups, having assembled near the mosque or on the main road near the settlement. These "walking groups" normally consist of colleagues at work or associates who operate together in black market activities. These groups are loosely formed and members of one may merge with members of another, thus adding to the topics of conversation en route to the city center and enlivening the daily walk. But the groups are often noisy to the extent that they disturb the peace of inhabitants of the more prosperous neighborhoods along the road and are at times the subject of complaint.

The men's arrival at the city center coincides with the opening of the coffee shops to which some resort to relax and to drink a cup of strong black coffee. By then, the city's day is

underway, with traffic and pedestrian congestion beginning to build up. The cafes' entrances flow with movement as customers enter and leave, providing a distinctive start to the day's activities.

Men of the settlement with regular jobs then leave the group for work. Those who have no permanent employment tend to linger on the hope that they may be offered work as casual laborers by wholesalers and retailers who commonly visit the cafes looking for the labor they require to lift and distribute goods to and from various localities (e.g. between shops, warehouses, market places, railway stations, ports and airports). Such work varies greatly in terms of the length of time involved. Some men are recruited for a couple of hours only; others for a few days or even for weeks and months. The work may be confined within the city's boundaries, or it may demand travelling to other cities in various parts of the country. This means that the men so employed may have to spend a number of days away from home.

For the men who find that this is not their lucky morning and who therefore remain unemployed, there are a number of ways of passing the day. The most common is to remain at the coffee shops until mid-morning, the time when state supermarket stores open and black market activities begin. There may then be the opportunities to make some money through re-sale of the goods bought from state supermarkets in the black market where the prices are much higher. However, neither the government shops nor black market dealings can guarantee a satisfactory income, especially for those whose previous experience and network connections are limited. Some men therefore remain in the coffee shops all day in the hope that some casual work may yet turn up.

However, when there are few friends around, the coffee shop can become boring and some men may therefore go for a

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walk around the city's main square. The walk may simply be for fresh air, but sometimes results in a chance meeting which may be turned to good account either by consolidating a friendship through, say, a visit to the cinema, or by leading to a new venture on the black market. Whatever the case, a return to the coffee shops later in the day is most likely. This may lead to participation in a game of cards or dominos, often until late evening when the coffee shops close and the men return home to goubiville.

Elderly men who may not be fit enough to walk to the city usually opened the day on the goubiville site hanging about outside the gourbi structure, or around the mosque, or in the surrounding open spaces.

Housewives activities as a daily routine in the goubiville:

Immediately after the men have left their homes, housewives first make breakfast for the children and prepare them to leave the school. Even when the schools are closed, however, children are encouraged to leave their homes in the goubiville so as to make it easier for the housewives and their teenage daughters to carry out daily cleaning. This is followed by the regular daily washing of clothes, kitchen utensils, etc. At the same time, all water containers have to be filled for later use as water is highly rationed especially during Summer time.

Such intensive housework may well continue throughout the morning until school children and a few men return home for lunch, thus keeping up the pressure on housewives who now begin another session of cooking and washing up. With no modern equipment (e.g. washing machines), with a constant shortage of water, and with limited space for washing and drying, many housewives, and especially those with large families and with no teenage daughters to help, find their daily tasks extremely difficult to bear.

Apart from short periods in mid-morning and mid-afternoon when they may have brief chats with their neighbors, most housewives are working all day. A few occasionally go shopping or visiting in the city, but the majority spend their days almost entirely in their gourbis. While they appear to exercise control over the settlement during the day, they have very little "freedom" and their authority over their own domains is immediately surrendered to their men as these return from the city in the early evening. By this time the women go indoors and are scarcely seen around the settlement; they are engaged in cooking the evening meal and the weary returning men take firm control of the settlement. The men now congregate in various places in small groups, conversing with each other, keeping an eye on the children playing outside, and ensuring that their wives and teenage daughters stay indoors. In this way the final sequence of the day is played out until the men go inside for their meals and for the night. However, in an attempt to explore the sets of social relations between the inhabitants of the settlement, it is important to shed lights on the most important groupings in the settlement which involve: the gatherings of men, contacts between housewives, youth encounters and leisure activities, children's schooling and play groups, and visits to the mosque.

**The gatherings of men:**

Social gatherings of men are prominent feature of everyday life in the gourbiville settlement. Men frequently constitute themselves into scattered groupings around the settlement. There are particular times when these gatherings take place, varying to some extent according to the seasons. During the colder periods of autumn and winter, gatherings take place mainly in the early evenings (5 p.m. onwards) and are usually of fairly short duration. Gatherings generally take place at this time because this is when the men return from work, shopping, etc. It is also

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the time when householders feel they should be in the settlement in order to keep an eye on the activities of their children which sometimes get out of hand and are liable to cause bitter rows between their parents.

As dusk approaches, the presence of men round about the settlement when their wives are expected to be indoors is considered important to maintain some degree of security and harmony between and within households. Some men would prefer to be indoors after a long day of work or of hanging around the city, but they consider it an obligation to stay out for a while. In any case, the cramped accommodation demands that the housewives should be given some space to cook their evening meals. In winter, however, these outside gatherings are usually short, as the severe weather disrupts both the gatherings of men and the children's games.

In spring and summer when temperatures are higher, the rains less, and the daylight hours longer, the scope and opportunities for social gatherings are much better, and the men may stay outside talking late into the evenings and at weekends such gatherings may even last until dawn.

Throughout the hot days of the summer season – and apart of course from the early evening and during the nights – the men rarely gather in groups. This is due to the lack of trees, walls, or any buildings which could provide protection from the fierce heat of the sun. Cafes, which are mainly situated in the city center and in certain neighborhoods, and the city's main squares and public institutions are commonly the alternative place for the gatherings.

The size of these gatherings tends to vary from one particular situation to another, ranging from 3 to 20 or more. The size of any one gathering usually depends on the popularity of the topic under discussion; the more interesting or controversial the subject, the longer is the gathering likely to last and thus the

greater the likelihood that more men will join in. Events like the one described below (i.e. the quarrel between an elderly man and a girl), or a political event, such as an election, or sporting events, tend to attract larger numbers of men with fairly mixed backgrounds. But the smaller the size of the gathering, the greater the possibility that the participants will have more in common by way of kinship affiliation, occupation, neighborhood, etc. However, within the larger gatherings, there are always smaller distinctive groups who have common interests and views which draw them together. Thus, it is usually the case that a nucleus of householders will express similar views on certain issues, and then challenge other members' views collectively.

Conversations at men's gatherings tend to be about various immediate issues bearing on living conditions in the gourbiville settlement and on the future prospects for the settlement dwellers. But they may also extend to a wide variety of general issues, with religion, politics, and sport being the predominating topics. Whatever the topics under discussion, however, there are invariably a few men in each grouping who participate more readily and intensely than others. Some of the quieter and more reticent participants would appear to join the gatherings mainly as a way of indicating that they belong to the neighborhood community. Others simply use the gatherings as an effective way of supervising their children. From time to time most of the participants glance down the gourbis's outlets and dead-lock, to make sure that there are no strangers around seeking to contact their teen age daughters.

There are a number of issues which recur in the conversations at the men's gatherings. One concerns the best way of liaising with the various authorities to obtain better facilities and amenities for the settlement (e.g. better transport services and a better water supply). The gathering consisting of six men,



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with ages ranging between 20 and 70 years, happened to be fairly representative of the adult male population. Their discussion revolved over a quarrel which had taken place two days earlier, involving an unmarried teenage girl and one of her close neighbors who was in his 60s. The latter is retired and lives with his wife and two unmarried adult sons. He is known to be a strongly religious man and spends most of each day praying in the mosque. He had frequently seen a teenage girl from the settlement talking to a strange boy in the entrance to the gourbis where he lives. He had repeatedly asked them to stop behaving in such an immoral way but to no effect. So on the last occasion he had warned the boy not to come there again as this was against "the moral code of Islamic teachings", and he had told the girl that if her visitor returned he would inform her father. The girl got angry with the man saying that it was none of his business. The argument between the girl and the man was overheard and the dispute spread to include other members of their respective households; and the father of the girl first heard of the incident on his return home on the evening of the conversation. The father's reaction to the incident was still unknown to the men who were discussing it. But the interest of the conversation for us is that it touched upon several issues considered to be of fundamental importance to them.

First and foremost, the men condemned the girl's behavior, expressing the view that it was an insult to the community's religious values. Secondly, they concluded that the main blame lay with the parents whom they considered to be excessively tolerant in allowing their daughter to flout the conventional way of life. They then broadened the discussion, saying that all parents in the settlement should ensure that their teenage daughters were confined within the shelter. Finally, they unanimously expressed the view that the 'community' should take action to preserve the ideals of the gourbis life as previously

maintained in the countryside. They therefore decided that they should collectively exclude and harass strangers coming to the settlement, a task which they wished to see implemented by volunteers who should harass strange young men approaching the settlement.

Typically, conversations also dwell on other issues related to morality, such as the level of crime and the extent to which members of all the settlement observe religious practices. The members of a group exchange news and views of the day and tend to report any fresh information they may have gathered at work or from other contacts and which they are eager to import to their fellows. Daily news items from newspapers, radio and television are also reviewed and discussed, whether bearing on national or foreign affairs. The more experienced and sophisticated members usually take it upon themselves to explain complex issues to the 'ordinary' members, and the younger men of the settlement are frequently invited to join in as they tend to be more educated and to have more knowledge on science matters(2).

The gatherings are thus an important channel for bridging the gap between the older and younger generations who often have different and sometimes conflicting interests. It is in this way that the ideas and practices of many young people come to be properly known to the older men and even to their parents who, sometimes find it difficult to communicate with each other inside their shelters. It is through these evening gatherings that a number of young men have already been fully integrated into men's group, and this in itself serves as a stimulus for other youngsters to join in.

However, irrespective of this tentative prediction, it is clear that the intense and supportive interactions that take place in the gatherings mark them as focal points for the interaction of diverse cultural and occupational elements in the society of men.

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The social life of the settlement housewives:

Unlike the men who, because of both their ascribed gender roles and status positions are able to gather together as they please, housewives of the gorbiville settlement have very little scope for easy or free association. They are almost exclusively bound to the sphere of home and housework. Under the prevailing codes of conduct stemming from a continuing expected adherence to traditional values, women are subject to strong pressure and restraints and to close supervision by husbands and fathers. This is the case even for the few who have partly escaped the routines of daily domestic work by gaining qualifications and achieving respectable occupations.

For the vast majority of men in the settlement, women are still essentially seen as housekeepers despite any contribution they may make to household incomes. A substantial number of the male householders are religious fundamentalists who are bitterly critical of their immediate neighbors for allowing their wives and/or daughters to go out freely, to travel on their own, or to follow regular occupations comparable to those of men. For the fundamentalists, such behavior is totally out of keeping with from the community life inspired by the Islamic standards which they seek to uphold. Thus the lives of the women in the settlement are not only constrained and regulated by the male members of their own families and kinship groups, but also by disapprobation and concerted pressure by many other members of the settlement and of the wider community.

Despite the form of the restrictions, there are still some regular times when contacts between the women take place. The nature and duration of meetings between housewives depend on three main factors. The first is the degree of restraint imposed on wives by their own husbands, and this varies a good deal. Many husbands try to limit and undermine the contacts between their wives, often viewing them cynically and referring to them in

condemnatory terms. They see no purpose to such meetings other than to gossip and to stimulate hysteria. In their view conversations outside the home may well endanger the stability of their conjugal relationships in that their wives may easily be 'infected' by new trends and ideas which are liable to influence women's attitudes to their husbands, to undermine their conjugal loyalty, and to affect adversely their commitment to housework.

The second factor is the size and composition of the household. It is widely felt by the men of the settlement that the larger the household, the more housework there is to do. This naturally applies mainly to households with large number of young children, as older children (viz. girls) are normally expected to share the burden of housework with their mothers. But in large households with only one active house worker, there certainly little time to spare for making social contacts with other housewives . In large households where there are growing girls, the mother will have helpers but she will nonetheless be required to teach her daughters household skills and to train them as good housewives of the future. In such cases there will, however, be more scope for some leisure time pursuits for the mother as well as for her daughters. Consequently there will be more opportunities for making contact with other women.

The last major factor lies in the nature of social relationships between neighboring households. The cramped conditions in the settlement and deficiencies in the nature of the amenities often lead to friction and tension between housewives who are close neighbors. Such conflicts threaten the integration of the residents into a harmonious community.

In contrast to the men's gatherings which usually take place regularly in the early evenings, social contacts between housewives tend to occur at more irregular times and intervals depending on the demands of housework which vary from one day to another; and also depending in part on whether the men of

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the settlement are present or not. The presence of men tends to have a 'watchdog' effect on the women, who rarely converse at any length when the men are about. Thus, the timing of men's gatherings and housewives' contacts tend to dovetail in a reverse relationship as the women do not feel free when the men are in the vicinity.

As soon as the men are out at work or elsewhere, contacts develop spontaneously. And when most children are also away at school, housewives live in their own world. They have fewer responsibilities of supervision and they are able to move along the road in a leisurely, carefree, and lively way without wearing their formal dresses. For some women, particularly the younger ones, appearing in 'modern' informal dress is important as a symbol of their partial emancipation from traditions of the past and of the fact that they wish to be seen to have greater control over their own sexuality. This is particularly significant in a community where the control of female sexuality remains a constant preoccupation and an issue over which the normally dominant men appear to feel that their power is being challenged. The free circulation of the women and easy contact between them in the absence of men is becoming common, while many housewives, together with their grown-up daughters, even visit the city center in order to do shopping. Thus, such growing involvement by housewives in the public market place has implications for the men who have begun to undertake various types of housework such as cooking (viz. providing lunch for school children and looking after young babies while their wives are away in the city engaged in shopping for the household).

Gradual change in the traditional gender roles means that the usual topics of discussion among housewives are no longer limited to family matters such as marriages and wedding ceremonies. Indeed a great deal of discussion between them is

now about the everyday life experiences such as shopping and its related problems or black market dealings.

**The everyday life of boys and young men:**

A question of particular interest in regard to social life in the goubiville settlement concerns the relations between young people in the late adolescence and early adulthood, and their parents and elders. The overall view is that the youth of the goubiville are caught between two cultures, that of their parents rooted in their background of traditional rural life, and the developing youth culture rooted in the experience of being born and brought up in the social milieu of a modern city.

The young people under discussion consist mainly of teenage school leavers (14 to 18 years of age), a fair number of whom were expelled for failing to meet the requirements of school standards and discipline. The group consists of both boys and girls, who have difficulties in mixing with each other and who are without proper jobs. A perplexing problem for them is that while they have acquired a level of education undreamed of by their parents (despite their relative failure at school), they are still unable to find work or to establish a respectable status for themselves in the city which is the only milieu they know. Furthermore, many older residents regard them as little more than trouble makers. This is partly due to their constant breach of traditional values, combined with their attempts to establish a quasi-independent life style for their own. The poor living conditions in the goubiville and the total absence of leisure facilities inevitably mean that, when these young people come together in attempts to create their own social milieu, they face difficulties in keeping to the norms of the wider society and that they are often in conflict with older age groups.

Both the times and places of the gatherings of young people are dictated by several factors. Some of these are connected to the seasons and weather conditions, whereas others

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are a function of the presence or absence of their parents from the settlement. Thus, in winter the gatherings on the settlement site are few. By mid-spring up until early autumn the time is quite right for the gatherings in the surrounding fields of the settlement, which they virtually turn into their own domain where they hold long conversations, drink(3), entertain, and even sleep without being interrupted by their parents or the police. Such an easy going life style seems to hold great attraction for a number of under-age boys, especially those with unhappy home lives and those who are less than enthusiastic about their schooling(4). Just as some young adolescents are attracted by the freedom and escape which the fields permit, other boys of the late adolescence who have already gone through a long period of excessive drinking, and who have come under the influence of the religious elements of the settlement, tend to show a gradual reluctance in joining their mates in the fields and elsewhere.

Daily life of teenage girls between restriction and sanction:

On the everyday life of the teenage girls, little can be added to the earlier description on the daily routines of their mothers, except to stress the strength of gender divisions and the strict control exercised over young girls. With the exception of the short but regular contacts with their peers living in the gorbiville sites, and very occasional visits to the city with their mothers during the men's absence, there is little to relieve the monotony of the life of teenage girls or to provide an escape from housework . However, it is of interest to note that while communication between the sexes in general is less frequent and more difficult, as such communication often results in conflicts which can involve other people , and in the forefront of course are parents and relatives. This may be the result of anxiety on the part of members of the family of the girl who are intensely concerned to preserve the honor of the family, and are afraid that if the girl is the center of the attention of a group of boys, this

will affect her reputation and in turn the reputation of the family. One common outcome is that the girl may henceforth be restricted from going out, or she can only do so when accompanied by a member of her immediate family or wider kin group. In either case the teenage girl is subject to sanctions which limit her choices regarding going out in the way she might prefer.

**Religious life and religiosity:**

Though it is small and modestly built, the mosque is much appreciated as other larger mosques in the city are a good distance away. It has a significant effect on the lives of the inhabitants, and is of particular value for the elderly men. Indeed, for them the mosque is not only a place for worship, but also a retreat where they sometimes spend most of the day and night to escape from the undesirable aspects of everyday life in the gorbiville.

Praying can of course take place at home, at work or elsewhere, but devout Moslems consider it most desirable to pray collectively in the mosque, especially on Fridays and on religious occasions. Going to the mosque to pray is in itself seen as an important act through which one's character and status judged by other members of the community. In general, the stronger one's religious commitment is, the higher one's status is likely to be amongst the residents. In practice there are several categories of men who visit the mosque and pray together and they seem to do so for a variety of reasons. The first and largest category is made up of men whose prime motive stems from their own self-understanding. These men are the true believers and their visits to the mosque are consistent with their beliefs. The second category consists of men who are primarily directed by outside pressure more than being self-motivated, and hence their impact on the settlement is minimal. The third category comprises those men who tend to be committed to religious



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practices, but in most cases they merely pretend to be good Moslems in order to gain trust of their fellow residents.

The mosque on the other hand has a multifunctional role in that it provides teaching classes by religious figures of the mosque, making it possible for the many illiterate members to learn to read and write at least. The growing interest in learning displayed by illiterate men has made the mosque a place of regular attendance during leisure time(5). This has created opportunities for wider contact with many religious figureheads whose teachings certainly have an influence on local ideas and attitudes to life, death, heaven, etc. For some religious beliefs and teachings are only associated with, and confined to, spiritual matters. But for many others spiritual matters are considered to be of little value unless they are incorporated into social norms in day –to-day life(6). In keeping with this perspective, and in apparently combative response to what perceived as the widespread existence of moral decline in the settlement, a number of men visiting the mosque have become religious fundamentalists, which initially resulted in their imposing severe restrictions on their households and relatives, and then attempting to extend their power to cover the whole settlement.

There are two fundamental factors which underpin this trend. The first is associated with the widely held conventional belief that a man in the responsible position of householder ought to practice religion in order to be fully trusted by others. The second factor is linked to the poor standard of living in the gorbiville settlement, and in particular to its communal character which leads people to lose their tempers quickly and which can lead to aggressive behavior towards the members of the community. In order to avoid the dangers involved, people tend to turn to religion as a source of help in co conducting themselves in a disciplined way. A growing number of teenage school leavers, who are unemployed, and widely seen as

'perverted elements' due to their usually rough and uncouth behavior, have turned-quite suddenly, it would seem- from their 'freedom-loving' state into a more self-controlled and religiously-inspired one(7).

Obviously, there are a number of explanations for this change: first, of particular significance, is the limited opportunities for leisure activities; second, there is the constant and pressing expectation from household members and relatives for young men to do something useful and constructive; third, and most significantly, there is the positive attraction of the mosque, which according to some young people is the place which offers all forms of spiritual satisfaction which in addition to being durable is freely available for everybody, and keeps them away from all sorts of trouble. It is worth noting here that these young newcomers to the mosque or, as they often call themselves 'Young Moslem Activists' have a relatively high level of education and now see themselves as serving a useful purpose by teaching and explaining the Quran to many who visit the mosque. In performing such a role they gradually gain the respect and trust of the inhabitants, and soon become known as symbol of self-sacrifice and exemplars of the traditional way of life in the gorbiville. Their potential as moral leaders is enhanced by their youth, by the fact that most are still unmarried, and by their varied experiences in different walks of life. They are thus emerging as the most effective force to preserve tranquility and security, and most of all to curtail the 'invasion of strangers' to the settlement(8).

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Notes:

1- The use of term 'multiplex' in the sense developed by Mayer to denote multi-standard as opposed to single-standard relations (cf. Mayer, P., Townsman or Tribesmen, 1971:192-293).

2- This is so due to the poor educational opportunities available to the older generation, not least because of the War of Independence when people had little chance to attend school; whereas since Independence in 1962, school attendance has been more regular at a time when science teaching became an integral part of the school curriculum.

3- Though Algeria is a Moslem country, drinking alcohol has never been prohibited by law. This partly due to the large- scale public consumption of alcohol which took place throughout the colonial era, and partly because a large quantity of good quality wine is home produced.

4- This is by no means exclusive to the youth of the gorbiville. It is also a salient phenomenon in some other neighborhoods; but what is most significant in this respect is its scale.

5- A fact which also leads to severe congestion inside the mosque, to the extent that on various occasions when the mosque is full, prayers and teaching sessions alike are held outside, especially when weather conditions are favorable.

6- In this respect, it has always been claimed by the religious elements and the Imam of the settlement in particular, that religious inspiration and fulfillment provide the individual with a spiritual dimension which broadens his perspectives and takes his mind away from the problems of the present into the spiritual world and therefore afford a sense of practice, peace and care for others.

7- This statement is based on the views held by a number of householders and by the teenagers themselves. The latter, who had from an early stage in their adolescence been actively engaged in an easy- going life style, had at a later stage gradually

become integrated into community life, and some now rank among the most religiously committed members of the gourbiville.

8- These are mainly represented by teenage boys who come from other neighborhoods with the intention of trying to make contact with the teenage girls of the gourbiville.

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