

Culture and Sustainable Development in the Region of Gurara

with a Special Reference to Ahellil

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Abstract

The region of Gurara in the south-west of Algeria is known by its rich and diverse folk culture which has its roots far back in history. Some of them, like Karkabu, had been brought to the region by the African slaves during the trans-Saharan slave trade era. Others, like Ahellil subject of this research are exclusively linked with the indigenous people of the region. The paper deals with Ahellil as being one of the driving factors of tourists, nationals and foreigners, to the region of Gurara through its annual festivals. The flow of tourists to attend the yearly festival of Ahellil has generated employment in different sectors particularly services including accommodation and catering, transport and craft products. Thus, this cultural event has an increasing economic impact on the region; the number of tourists has steadily been growing since the first national festival

of Ahellil in 2006. The paper also explores the origin of this folk music and the way it is performed and the themes of its poems. Then we examine the factors that made of this folk chant a unique musical genre which attracts visitors from everywhere and therefore helps in boosting the economic development in the region of Gurara.

ترجمة الملخص

الثقافة و التنمية المستدامة بمنطقة قورارة

تراث أهليل أنموذجا

نعرف منطقة قورارة بالجنوب الغربي للجزائر بثناء و تنوع الثقافات الشعبية التي تضرب بجذورها في تاريخ بعيد. البعض من هذه الفنون والرقصات التقليدية مثل القرقابو استقدم من غرب أفريقيا إبان حقبة تجارة العبيد العابرة للصحراء، البعض الآخر مثل تراث الاهليل موضوع هذا البحث مرتبط حصريا بالسكان الأصليين للمنطقة من قبائل زناتة البربرية. تنتول المداخلة تراث الاهليل كعامل جاذب للسياح المحليين و الأجانب إلى المنطقة وذلك من خلال مهرجاناته السنوية. إن تدفق السياح على المنطقة لحضور فعاليات المهرجان الوطني السنوي لأهليل أسهم في توفير مناصب شغل في عدة قطاعات خصوصا المتعلقة منها بالخدمات كالفندقة والإطعام النقل بالإضافة لقطاع الصناعات التقليدية. فقد أصبح لهذا الحدث الثقافي الهام صدى اقتصاديا متزايدا باعتبار أن عدد الزوار من محليين وأجانب في تزايد مستمر منذ المهرجان الوطني الأول لأهليل سنة 2006. نحاول من خلال هذه المداخلة استكشاف أصول هذا التراث الغنائي الشعبي والطرق التي تؤدي بها قصائده، ثم

نتناول العوامل التي جعلت من هذا النمط الموسيقي الفريد من نوعه يجذب الزوار من كل مكان وبالتالي يسهم بدفع عجلة التنمية بالمنطقة

Introduction

The heritage of Ahellil is one of the most important elements of the identity of the inhabitants of Gurara, as it distinguishes the region not only from the rest of the country but also from any other place in the world. The paper examines this heritage and its impact on sustainable development in the region of Gurara. The paper is divided into three parts; the first is devoted to the definition of this musical genre and the etymology and the different interpretations of the word ‘Ahellil’ as well as to the meaning of sustainable development. The second part is devoted to highlighting the rituals that distinguish the nights of Ahellil with a special focus on the three phases that distinguish the performance of Ahellil, which are: *lamserrah*, *el-wagruti* and *tra*, in an attempt to find out the significance of this division. Part three is devoted to shedding light on the impact of this folk music through its annual festivals on sustainable development in the region.

Background

It is very important to understand the circumstances that brought Ahellil to universality after it had been threatened with extinction. According to Moulay Seddik Slimane, known as Moulay Timmi,¹ Ahellil survived and was classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage of Humanity thanks to Mouloud Mammeri. The story of the latter with Ahellil began in the early seventies when Pierre Augier, a musicologist and friend of Mouloud Mammeri, received a phone call from a British woman who had been working on traditional music (Bedouin music). She asked for help to record this kind of music in the Algerian Sahara and especially in the regions of Oued M'Zab and Gourara. The Algerian authorities put a guide (driver) together with Pierre Augier at the disposal of this woman to help her. The driver put on a tape containing songs of Ahellil recorded in the region of Charouine.² Pierre Augier was fascinated by this music and decided to take the tape to his friend Mouloud Mammeri. When the latter listened the tape, he was impressed by what he heard because the songs contained Tamazight lyrics with a unique melody. He asked Pierre Augier to return to Gourara and go to Charouine to

¹ Interview with Moulay Timmi, realized by Tahar Abbou on August 27th 2012 in Timimoun.

² Charouine is a district with a Berber majority, it is located at 60 kilomètres to the south-west of Timimoun.

record more songs. Arriving there, the Zenete refused to deal with him because the community is very conservative and reluctant to establish any contact with foreigners. Disappointed, Pierre Augier returned to Timimoun and decided to see the local Governor to help him in his mission, the latter advising him to do his recordings in Timimoun since Ahellil also exists there. After he finished his recordings with the help of Moulay Timmi, he left back to Algiers. When Mouloud Mammeri listened to the recordings brought by Pierre Augier, he decided to go himself to Gourara to examine this heritage closely.³

The first voyage of Mouloud Mammeri to the region of Gourara was in 1971, where he visited Timimoun and met Moulay Slimane Timmi for the first time, and became his guide and his intimate friend during the seven years he spent in the region working on the Berber culture, particularly Ahellil. This initiative opened the doors wide open to academic research on the Berber heritage in the region of Gourara, an important result of which was his book, "The Ahellil of Gourara," published by la Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris in 1984. This book includes a large number of Ahellil poems

³ Zahia Mounsser, The daily newspaper al-Fadjr, Report entitled : "Timimoun, where the state is absent and Independence has not yet been reached ... from here , Mouloud Mammeri drove Ahellil to universality , and here Ben Bella spent his last days" , 26/01/2013

collected from old masters whom he met during his travels among the ksour of Gourara. The book consists of the original texts in Gourara Berber (Taznatit) and the translation in French. According to Hadj Barka Foullani⁴ Mouloud Mammeri recorded the lyrics of Ahellil poems directly from the mouths of his masters namely, Da Mahmi and Da Ba' Sud from Timimoun, Si Brahim el Kial from M'Sahel, Ba Budjemaa Aghiati from Kali, Lalla Meryama from Fatis, Si Maamar Zaoui from Ouled Said and others.⁵ It should be noted that Mouloud Mammeri engaged in collecting and writing Ahellil poems after he found that almost one third of their heritage had been lost. He concluded that "the rapid and decisive transformations that hit Algerian society had crucial effects on Ahellil."⁶

It is also important to note that Ahellil poems have, for the first time, been transformed into written form by Mouloud Mammeri which constituted a very important step in preserving this heritage after it had been transmitted along generations

⁴ One of the Masters of Ahellil, born in Timimoun in 1948. He had been taught Ahellil at his early age by his Master Cheikh Dahmane Moussa Echarouini. He continues transmitting this heritage to the new generations. Source Review of the the National Festival of Ahellil n°8, 2014, p. 15.

⁵ Mouloud Mammeri, L'Ahellil du Gourara, Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, 1984, pp. 46 - 57

⁶ Said Bouterfa, L'âme du Gourara Ahellil - Un trésor musical universel, El Watan le 31/01/2008.

through the oral tradition which exposed them to distortion and extinction. This may explain the reasons for the existence of differences in the text of the same poem from one region to another. Mouloud Mammeri's efforts brought to light the Ahellil heritage from the ruins of neglect and time and gave it a position worthy of an authentic art expressing a deeply rooted Berber identity in the region of the Gourara. Mouloud Mammeri, along with together with Pierre Augier, realized the first professional recording of Ahellil in the Atlas Music collection, which was then produced by the National Center for Prehistoric, Anthropological and Historical Research (CNRPAH) in cooperation with UNESCO.

Definitions

Ahellil is an Arabized word to the Berber word Agrud and Izelwan, which are Zenete names that refer to the oral cultural heritage of Tin Gurarin or Tin Kurarin.⁷ It is one of the traditional musical types in southern Algeria and one of the most important identity components of the Zenete community living in the

⁷ Tin Gurarin and Tin Kurarin were used by Ibn Khaldun to refer to Gurara, the region extending from Tinnerkuk in the north to Tsa-bit in the south. The region is also mentioned by Leo Africanus in his book *Description de l'Afrique*. Sources: Jean-Leon L'Africain, *Description de l'Afrique*, Nouvelle Edition traduite de l'Italien par A. Epaulard, Librairie d'Amerique et d'Orient, Maisonneuve, Paris, 1981, p. 436.

⁷ عبد الرحمان ابن خلدون، ديوان العبر وديوان المبتدأ والخبر في أيام العرب والعجم والبربر ومن عاصرهم من ذوي السلطان الأكبر، ج 6، دار الفكر، بيروت، لبنان، 2001، ص. 131.

Gourara region in southwestern Algeria. Performed during nightly collective ceremonies, Ahellil is poetic and musical and is a unique genre of the Zenete population of Gourara. Over 50,000 inhabitants of Berber, Arab and Sudanese origin populated some one hundred oases in Gurara. Ahellil, which is specific to the Berber-speaking people of Gourara, is regularly performed for religious celebrations and secular festivities such as pilgrimages, circumcision, wedding ceremonies community events in general. Ahellil is closely linked to the Zenete way of life and its oasis agriculture, symbolizing the cohesion of the community living in a harsh environment and, at the same time, transmitting the values and the history of the Zenete community in a language that is at risk of disappearing.⁸

Using simple traditional handmade musical instruments, Ahellil fascinates listeners even those who do not understand the lyrics. Its magical effect of relaxation is felt by all people whatever their beliefs, cultural backgrounds, social classes or educational levels. A mixture of singing and dancing, Ahellil was officially added to the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the UNESCO in 2005.⁹ This brilliant achievement

⁸ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ahellil-of-gourara-00121>

⁹ https://www.academia.edu/4138544/Le_patrimoine_culturel_immat%C3%A9riel_au_Maghreb, pp. 25-26

was followed by the establishment of the annual festival of Ahellil by the Algerian Ministry of Culture in December 2005.¹⁰

This art is performed in two styles. The first takes the name of Ahellil and it is performed collectively in a form of a circle in a standing position. The circle is composed of about one hundred people or more and in the middle of the circle stands a man called *Abshniew*, which means maestro, and who moves forwards and backwards in harmony with the sound of the beat. In this style two musical instruments are used; the first is called locally *Aqellal*, which means drum, and is only played by advanced musicians. The second is called *Tamja*, which means flute. The second style is called *Taguerrabt* and it is performed in a sitting position using three musical instruments: *Taqellalt* and *Aghaf n Shihet*. The first is a small drum and the second is composed of two parts; the millstone and the upper part of the hand mill called *Adgha n Twunt*, an item traditionally used to crush cereal and the nuclei of dates to feed animals. The third instrument is called el-Bengri, which looks like a guitar with two strings.

¹⁰ Arrêté du 26 Mars 2006, portant institutionnalisation du festival national de l'Ahellil, Journal Officiel N° 23, 2006.

The analysis of Ahellil poems reveals the abundance of the poetic purposes of this heritage. In this respect, Pierre Augier says “few poems which do not address death and the hardships of life and narrate the hard environment in which the Zenata grew up. There are also some social and religious values which enrich Ahellil poems such as bravery, loyalty, parents’ obedience, God glorification, laudation and extolment”.¹¹

The Three Phases of the Nightly Ahellil Performance

Ahellil is generally performed at night through three phases known as *Lemserrah*, *al-Wagruti* and *a-Thran* and each of these phases is distinguished by its time and the theme of the poems sung.

The First phase: It extends from around 10 p.m. to midnight and is called *Lemserrah*, a word which means in the local dialect, simple and easy. The relationship between the signifier and the signified can easily be noticed given the fact that the themes and poems sung in this first part of the night are easy to understand by young and ordinary people. These poems are composed in a simple style without metaphoric pictures or

¹¹ P. Augier, « Ahellil », in 3 | Ahaggar – Alī ben Ghaniya, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud (« Volumes », no 3), 1986 [En ligne], mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2012, consulté le 22 décembre 2014. URL : <http://encyclopedieberbere.revues.org/82>

ambiguous interpretations because they aim at teaching people the principles of Islam. The inaugural poem in this phase is entitled ‘*Ennabi Salla Allahu Alyk a Sidna*’ which means ‘Oh Prophet of Allah Prayer be Upon You, Oh Lord’. This poem is followed by others from the same register, like ‘*Bismi allah li ma yedarruna*’ (By the name of God those who cannot harm us), ‘*al-Ghani ya Allah* (Oh Lord, the Rich), *Muhamad al-Hashimi, al Ali Limam ez-Zawya*, ect. The poetic purposes of these poems evolve around glorifying and praising Allah, the eulogy of Prophet Muhamad (PBUH) as well as filial obedience and virtues of morality.

The Second Phase: It is called *al-Wagruti*, a word derived from the Berber word *Tamgrawt* and means the meeting point. It starts around midnight and ends by the beginning of the last third of the night. Here again the relationship between the signifier and the signified can be understood from the name of the phase which refers to the meetings and the theme of the poems of this phase which evolves around the meetings and separation between lovers. These poems are full of revelations, symbols and metaphors. Among the poems sung in this phase; *Dada Bihi, Addayem Allah a-Yulinu, Salamu, Mama Lazari, al-Wahid a-Mulana*, etc.

The Third Phase: It starts by the beginning of the last third of the night and extends until dawn. This phase is called *a-Thran*, derived from the Berber word *ithran*, which means stars. The relationship between the signifier and the signified can be interpreted by the rise of a star called *Thuraya* at this time of the night. The musical instruments are adjusted to fit the poems of this last phase of which theme evolves around begging Allah mercy and forgiveness, and praising Allah to open the clemency doors and make them happy in this life and in the Day after. Amongst the poems sung in *a-thran*; Sidi Laaziz a-Mulana, Sidi al-Ali Ahellal, Allah Mulana al-Alem, Salat al-en-Nabi wa es-Salam, etc.

Ahellil and Sustainable Development

What does sustainable development mean? According to the Brantland Report, known also as “Our Common Future,” “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.”¹² How can Ahellil contribute to sustainable development in the region of Gurara? As has been mentioned, the increasing number of visitors (nationals and foreigners) have had an economic impact on the

¹² <https://www.iisd.org/topic/sustainable-development>

region of Gurara. According to Ahmed Djouli, the Commissioner of the National Festival of Ahellil: “During the three first editions of the festival the nightly concerts used to be in a traditional arena called *Akhbu n tghoni* where the number of attendees did not exceed 1000 people. Now, the nightly concerts take place in the open air theatre where average nightly attendance reaches 3.500 people”. He added: “Timimoun, the capital of Gurara, has been changing thanks to the Ahellil annual festivals. For example, more jobs in the sector of services have been created to meet the increasing demand of visitors. Statistics provided by the Department of Tourism in the Adrar show that the number of hotels and camps have doubled during the past twenty years to meet the increasing demand for accommodations.¹³ Moreover, traditional workshops have flourished and transportation means have also developed.”¹⁴ This statement shows the important role that the National Festival of Ahellil has played in the economic development of the region of Gurara without compromising the future of the coming generations. In other words, investing in similar festivals like “the Festival of the Carpet in Ghardaia”, “the Festival of the camel in Bordj el-Mokhtar”, “the Festival of

¹³ Report on tourism in Adrar, Department of Tourism and Handcrafts, 2018

¹⁴ Interview with Ahmed Djouli, realised by Tahar Abbou on June 3rd 2019, in Timimoun

S'biba in Illizi", ect., has no serious consequences on the environment or on the natural resource reserves.

Conclusion

It can be assumed that culture in its different components can contribute to sustainable development. The National Festival of Ahellil has been changing different aspects of life in the region of Gurara thanks to the increasing numbers of visitors, which has then generated jobs in different sectors to meet those needs. The inhabitants of Timimoun, the capital of Gurara, have shown great satisfaction in the economic benefits of the National Festival of Ahellil since its first edition in 2007. I think that it is high time for the Government to invest in such a project for the safe and harmless effects on the environment, which do not in any way compromise the ability of the future generation.

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