

Gnaouiya Identity as a Minority in Algerian Society: A Field-Based Model Reading of *Diwan al-'Abid* and in the City of Mascara

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Abstract

This scholarly paper presents an analytical reading of identity as a sociocultural construct, focusing on the understanding of Black individuals or Black communities through their practices and collective memory, viewed as both a model and a minority within Algerian society. The study examines their specific customs and traditions through an objective research approach, relying primarily on qualitative fieldwork techniques, notably participant observation and interviews.

Preliminary and unstructured questions were addressed to members of the research sample, with particular attention given to selected local groups in the city of Mascara, chosen for being among the most committed to preserving this traditional heritage in western Algeria. The paper aims to highlight the active role that members of *Diwan* as they identify themselves play in engaging with and safeguarding their cultural heritage according to prevailing communal norms. At the same time, it seeks to assess the extent to which these ritual practices and cultural expressions continue to be upheld in contemporary times.

Keywords: Identity - Black community - *Diwan al 'Abid* - Religion - Culture.

1. General Framework of the Research Problem:

Human beings are, by excellence, cultural entities: they are both producers of culture and products shaped by it. Culture is not an individual construct freely chosen or arbitrarily directed; rather, it is formed within natural, historical, social, and political conditions. As such, culture represents an accumulated heritage across generations and may be

understood as a philosophy of life, encompassing all forms of intellectual activity and social practice.

This reality necessitates interaction among individuals as social beings. The profound transformations currently affecting political, cultural, and social systems serve as clear evidence of this dynamic, particularly within the religious sphere, which many scholars regard as a fundamental analytical reference. Human communication and interaction are thus built upon shared systems of meaning; however, prior to all these elements lies a central and foundational component in the formation of the individual: identity.

Identity remains one of the most debated and complex sociological concepts. Despite extensive scholarly engagement, it has yet to be fully articulated in a clear and comprehensive manner. When addressed, identity is often treated as a philosophical abstraction rather than a concrete social reality, leading to its confinement within narrow analytical frameworks and increasing its conceptual ambiguity.

Within this context, the present paper seeks to offer a reference-based reading of the identity of a minority group within Algerian society by examining its cultural dimensions and exploring the ambiguity surrounding its formation and continuity. This study adopts a sociological field-based perspective to investigate this community, which possesses distinctive practices and rituals shaped by its environment and historical experience, setting it apart from other social groups.

Accordingly, the central research question may be formulated as follows:

What is meant by *diwan al-'Abid*, and what are the celebratory and ritual practices associated with this tradition within Algerian society that allow it to persist as a form of cultural heritage across generations ?

2. More specifically:

- What is the significance of identity in relation to the identity of the Black individual, their history, and collective memory?
- How is this identity perceived and represented within the social imagination of the group?
- How is it preserved and protected?
- To what extent is it threatened in contemporary contexts?

3. Research Hypothesis:

Diwan al-'Abid functions as a cultural reservoir that contributes to the preservation and continuity of Black identity within Algerian society.

4. Operationalization of the Study Concepts:

a- Black Identity:

Blackness remains an identity constructed and divided on the basis of skin color, particularly among individuals of Black complexion, across all societies, including developed societies such as Europe and America, as well as Arab societies. When this concept is directly invoked, it often evokes in the Algerian collective imagination the image of the Black man originating from the African continent namely Sub-Saharan Africa or that of the enslaved individual brought from those regions during and prior to the colonial period. The term “slave” here refers to a servant under the authority of a master.

Within the studied area, this Black minority differentiates itself from other Black individuals based on degrees of skin darkness or on ethnic lineage. One interviewee, for instance, asserted a distinction between the “free Black man” and the “enslaved Black man,” the latter being affiliated with lineages of enslaved populations brought from the western and southern regions of the African continent for purposes of trade or service to masters. This differentiation was particularly emphasized by a respondent when referring to groups located in southern Algeria, specifically in Adrar, where a distinction is drawn between

members of this community and individuals originating from southern African regions.

Although historical accounts describe this minority as descending from enslaved populations during the medieval period, beginning in the sixteenth century, originating mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa especially West Africa, formerly known as Western Sudan (Abdelaziz, 2014, p. 62) this self-perception continues to shape the cultural and religious identity of the respondents. It also informs their perception of others within their own community, their musical groups, and related Gnawa communities within the local context of the city of Mascara in particular, and neighboring regions more broadly.

b- Diwan al-'Abid:

This concept, as embedded within the fieldwork context, carries multiple meanings and symbolic dimensions. It refers to a type of nocturnal gathering or celebration accompanied by ritual practices that include a formal opening and a closing sequence. It also comprises a set of musical pieces or compositions known as *al-Abraj*, which follow a specific structure and style. Each group maintains its own distinctive approach, yet these practices are collectively identified as the “Gnawa way,” “Gnawa path,” or *diwan al-'Abid*, with the established and inherited pronunciation as expressed by practitioners themselves.

The occasions on which a *Diwan* is held vary according to its purpose or the reason for its organization namely, for whom the gathering is intended, in which spiritual or social context it takes place, and how it is performed. These ceremonies typically extend over long hours, beginning after nightfall and continuing until dawn; generally, they start after sunset (Maghrib) and conclude in the morning.

The *diwan* operates according to a set of principles and a specific methodology that must be adhered to and respected. It encompasses a range of ritual practices, including dance, trance (*jadba*), singing, instrumental performance, and *hadra*, among others. These rituals are conducted within a designated space, arranged in a circular seating formation known as *al-Tarh* or *al-Qa'da al-Gnawiya*.

5. The Technical Fieldwork Framework of the Study:

describing this phenomenon through a social lens renders the topic an empirical transfer of field realities as reflected in the practices of the respondents, subsequently translated into an academic form to clarify the significance of the study. The primary research tool employed was participant observation, considered the most effective method for recording and documenting key elements (Abdullah, 2004, p. 44). This technique was applied specifically with four groups of troupes located in and around the city center of Mascara, situated in western Algeria, drawn from various provinces, as they constitute a suitable sample for interpreting sources of information. At the same time, the researcher's residence within the region facilitated familiarity with local customs and traditions.

In addition, the **interview technique** was adopted as a means of communication with the respondents. Accordingly, it was used as the second research tool in the form of oral interviews conducted with approximately twenty-six participants, comprising twenty-one males and five females, whose ages ranged from eighteen to seventy years. The interviews included direct questions related to the main thematic axes addressed in this article.

Each troupe consisted of organized members, beginning with the leader (*al-Muqaddam*), who functioned as the principal decision-maker and executor of complex tasks. This was followed by the *Ma'allam*, who acted as the session director, managed the *Tarh*, played the primary instrument, and served as the conductor of the gathering. Next were the vocal performers, known for their strong and resonant voices, responsible for chanting and repeating verses. Finally, the *Qanādiz* participated as accompanists, playing metal instruments such as castanets (*qraqab*) to produce intense and resounding rhythms.

6. The Sociology of Black Identity- Gnawa Identity in Algerian Society:

The concept of identity currently occupies a central position across various fields of inquiry. It has come to be used in scientific discourse to denote general and self-evident phenomena, often resulting in a dilution of its original analytical meaning. Due to its inherent

ambiguity and complexity, identity has been subjected to extensive scholarly investigation across multiple disciplines. In this regard, several sociologically oriented studies have focused on cultural identity and national identity as ideological tools employed by the state, particularly in contexts where developmental trajectories encounter failure.

Malek Chebel notes that "the question of identity remains in its early stages and was largely neglected by researchers until a relatively late period. It has remained vulnerable to distortion... and is highly complex; engaging with it reveals that it belongs to debates occurring at the level of public forums and conferences" (Mustafa H. , 1996, p. 24).

Sociological writings further reveal a divergence in approaches to understanding the issue of identity, with many researchers directing their analytical focus toward ethnic or collective identity. This orientation did not emerge arbitrarily; rather, it reflects the difficulty of defining the cultural conditions necessary for the reproduction of a society. Collective identity thus emerges as a mechanism that ensures the continuity of the group or society, while simultaneously delineating its boundaries over time within its social and natural environment (Mustafa H. , 1996, p. 28).

Based on the interviews conducted with respondents, it appears that they genuinely experience feelings of cultural and social inferiority. The Black individual, through his celebrations and rituals performed in public spaces, asserts Blackness as both an identity and a social marker within the local community. This assertion takes multiple forms, including the expression of an authentic self through loud and powerful drumming, amplified rhythmic sounds directed toward others, hand clapping, and vigorous foot movements within folkloric performances. Such behaviors resemble a symbolic return to what may be described as a "forest and desert" identity or an "ancient Sudanese lineage."

Moreover, it should be noted that members of this community situate themselves within Algerian society through a foundational myth of affiliation with the righteous Companion Bilal ibn Rabah, the companion of the Prophet

Muhammad and the first muezzin of Islam, as affirmed by the majority of respondents.

At the outset, the emergence of the roots of this religious thought is anchored in the designation of Islamic identity, reflecting the simple and ordinary life experienced by the Black individual. What respondents referred to as the “Sidna Bilal Troupe,” the “Bilaliyyah Troupe,” or other varied designations represents nothing more than a desire to symbolically appropriate an identity inscribed within Black skin. Through these multiple groups within society, there emerges an attempt to situate themselves within the margins of Arabness and religion, particularly after these “Bilalis” perceived their identity as having been lost in the heart of Africa and, moreover, as being absent within their lived national context. Their sense of self thus resembles a train stalled in a barren desert, from which emerged the practice of chanting prophetic praises and invocations of righteous saints, heroes, and historical figures.

In this context, reference must be made to Frantz Fanon, a prominent figure in postcolonial studies. Although his analyses were not widely welcomed within Arab intellectual discourse, Fanon ultimately conceptualized identity through the framework of mutual recognition between the self and the other, emphasizing the necessity of liberating oneself from imposed and illusory stereotypes constructed by colonial domination. Fanon viewed violence as a potential remedy within this process; however, his most influential analytical contribution lies in his examination of the dialectic between the master and the Black subject, articulated as a theory of symbolic and material justice in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon’s philosophical writings particularly his analysis of the politics of recognition constitute a highly relevant entry point for the study of identity, a theme to which he devoted substantial intellectual effort.

during his years working as a psychiatrist at the Blida Hospital in Algeria (Frantz, 1986, p. 63), Fanon came to perceive racism as a visible phenomenon manifested in forms of alienation and dispossession. He described the Black individual as one who “does everything possible, upon arriving in France, to deny his

Black identity, proudly declaring that Africans are Negroes, whereas he is a civilized human being who has absorbed European culture, even if he is colored” (David, 1970, p. 115). This suggests that such an individual minimizes the significance of skin color by metaphorically wearing a white mask. In this context, the behavior of the Black subject may be interpreted as a search for compensation for an inability to achieve masculinity in economic, social, and political terms compensation that may instead be sought through sport or sexuality. This condition exemplifies the intended alienation described by Fanon, from which the Black individual and those in similar subordinate positions suffer.

Accordingly, the Gnawa community and all that it embodies whether in terms of distinctive ceremonial attire, material heritage, or intangible cultural expressions clearly articulates the symbolic indicators and dimensions of both cultural and religious identity. For this community to sustain itself, it must continually reproduce a hybrid and reconciliatory identity by returning to African roots while simultaneously embodying an Islamic identity, one that is inscribed in drum rhythms, bodily movements in dance, and lyrical expressions.

7. The Sociology of the Black Diwan (*Diwan al-‘Abid*):

By returning to the social positioning of this community, the Gnawa group considers its entire heritage to be a cultural and religious art form characterized by African origins. Its dimensions lie in the interweaving of Sub-Saharan Africa particularly as distributed across the Maghreb with original African roots and Arab-Islamic influences. This *diwan*, described as an institution, draws upon references rooted in a syncretic culture shaped by the wounds of a painful past, deeply embedded in its artistic practices and ritual performances. It represents a composite cultural product that reconstructs a tragic and dramatic framework, expressed through sequences resembling performative scenes or narrative segments that recount stories of heroic figures and foundational events.

At the same time, the *Diwan* embodies psychological states of certain individuals who seek it for physical, spiritual, or even social

healing. It also serves as a space for the enactment of Islamic religious identity through the invocation of righteous saints, the remembrance of the pious predecessors, and the mention of prophets and messengers. Furthermore, traces of other belief systems and cultural references appear within its practices, reflecting older modes of life once lived in African societies.

Thus, this institution may be understood as a complex and cumulative whole, composed of classified and sequential elements, encompassing segments of singing, music, instrumentation, dance, and both material and immaterial cultural expressions. Collectively, these components narrate a series of mythological models.

Within the same context, the *diwan*, as an institution, functions as a mechanism for preserving and reclaiming a lost or fragmented identity, perceived by its adherents as a dispossessed right. This “diwanic institution” embodies a comprehensive system that includes customs, traditions, customary law, singing, dance, trance (*jadba*), and other ritual elements. Its spatial and temporal setting is a terrestrial site known as the *Mahalla*, typically a dwelling characterized by the green color commonly associated with religious lodges (*zawayya*), sometimes surmounted by a dome symbolizing Islamic religiosity. Although the *Mahalla* holds the status of a sacred place (*maqam*), field research indicates the absence of an actual tomb, revealing a form of identity-based contradiction within this community.

This contradiction is further underscored by the fact that this group did not historically exist in parallel with the presence of the revered Companion Bilal ibn Rabah, as these ritual practices were not historically documented as expressions of a Black ethnic identity during that period. Nevertheless, members of the community symbolically link their rituals to these legendary narratives, invoking such figures during performances, particularly in praise chants and the calling of names to which they associate themselves.

The *Maqam* of “Sidi Bilal,” rather than a tomb, is regarded as the supreme reference and the spiritual father of the Gnawa. In every *zawiya* or *mahalla* examined during the fieldwork, no physical shrine was found; instead, these

spaces host a nocturnal celebration held on the twenty-seventh night of the month of Sha‘ban, marking the annual season of the Gnawa order. The rituals open and close with the advent of the sacred month of Ramadan. Accompanied by intense and fervent musical rhythms performed by affiliated groups, selected followers embark on tours between cities to collect donations and alms for the *zawiya* (*mahalla*), wearing distinctive folkloric attire marked by vivid colors particularly red, blue, black, and occasionally white.

Accordingly, this community continues to perceive itself as seeking refuge in an ancient and authentic identity with deep historical roots an identity they feel compelled to reclaim. For this reason, they strive to reinforce it through the revival of religious and seasonal celebratory rituals, such as popular festivities (*wa‘da*), in ways that align with the customs and traditions of the local society. Examples include visits to shrines, the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday (*al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*), as well as the observance of the *Sha‘baniyya* and *Ramadaniyya*, in reference to the lunar months of Sha‘ban and Ramadan.

Most importantly, these two months constitute fundamental gateways for the opening and closing of the ritual year both Gregorian and Hijri within the Gnawa worldview. In this context, the month of Sha‘ban represents the closure, marking the cessation of ritual practices, whereas Ramadan signifies the opening or reactivation of rituals that were previously sealed at the beginning of the new cycle. More precisely, Ramadan is understood as a month of prohibitions and restrictions governing ritual conduct.

What is meant by this process of “opening” is the engagement in ritual practices that facilitate contact with the invisible external world namely, the metaphysical realm within their cosmology. This involves establishing relationships with supernatural beings in order to welcome them onto earthly space, fostering a peaceful coexistence with these intangible and unseen entities. Such practices are also intended to avoid their harm or to achieve specific goals and fulfill human needs related to everyday life, including healing, marriage, the treatment of infertility, childbirth, alleviation of pain and psychological distress,

physical therapy, or illnesses that conventional medicine has been unable to diagnose or cure. Turning to the broader social context of this minority within Algerian society, it is undeniable that its members have historically experienced racism and discrimination, often being regarded as a second-class group. Historical records and documentation attest to this reality (Mustafa A.-S. , 1999, p. 117). Nevertheless, this did not prevent *Diwan al-'Abid*, as an institution, from encompassing musical segments known as *al-Abraj*. Each *Burj* is associated with a specific tribe from which the members believe they descend, considering themselves its descendants to this day. Over a period exceeding six centuries, these affiliations have been preserved through musical chants and choreographic patterns, governed by a set of rules that must be strictly followed to avoid errors, harm, or misfortune consequences believed to affect either the individual performer or the community at large.

In this context, the term *dardaba* is a vernacular expression: *al-dārib* refers to the drummer, *al-dardāb* to the sound of the drum, while *dardaba* itself signifies submission or surrender (Mukhtar, 2008, p. 782).

Researcher Salim Khiat, in his synchronic analysis of identity construction in *Diwan Sidi Bilal*, explains that the racial discrimination experienced by this minority was largely a consequence of colonial policies in African territories. Simultaneously, the emergence of movements, orders, and Sufi brotherhoods operating at the ideological level of religion gave rise to institutions that contributed to the reconstruction of traditional society. Within this framework, religion became a primary solution and an effective channel for confronting colonial elites. One such institution, as identified by Khiat, is the institution of the Blacks (*Institution des Noirs*) (Khiat, 2003, p. 73).

Accordingly, the *Gnawa Night* is structured around several ritual thresholds, beginning with what is known as the *Istirād* a ceremonial parade and celebratory dance announcing the start of the night. Musically, this phase is limited to the use of iron castanets (*qraqab*) and the *gimbri*, an instrument endowed with a heavy symbolic charge. Strict adherence to the

hierarchical order of the *Abraj* that is, the ritual pillars or musical segments is required. These segments recount the virtues of righteous figures, the merits of saints, and the heroism of revered masters. The music itself is characterized by powerful rhythms laden with ancient myths and beliefs, deeply imbued with lived African and Arab cultural heritage.

This musical tradition is known in Tunisia as *Stambali*, in Morocco as *Gnawa*, in Algeria as *Diwan* or *Gnawa*, and in Libya and Egypt as *Zār*, among other regional denominations.

The GOMBRI instrument, regarded here as the *princess of musical instruments*, dates back more than five centuries. It is made from primary materials such as wood and animal skin and is fitted with strings. It may be described as a resonant box with a wooden neck approximately one meter in length and about 15 centimeters in width. A metallic rattle made of iron is fixed at the end of the neck, producing a vibrating sound synchronized with the movement of the gombri and the rhythm of its strings.

Its shape varies from one region to another: in western Algeria, both in the north and south, it takes a rectangular form, as found in cities such as Mascara, Bel Abbès, Tlemcen, Oran, Tiaret, Mostaganem, Saïda, Béchar, and others, as well as in the Kingdom of Morocco. In eastern Algeria, however, it is circular in shape, as in Constantine and Biskra, and similarly in Tunisia. At the top of this instrument's hierarchy stands the performer known as the Ma'lem, the master musician.

Accordingly, the available field reality within this specific cultural environment continues to live and persist, granting it the status of a symbolic marker of identity. Within these ritual practices of the local community, the Black Gnawa man appears actively and powerfully present in most public occasions. This has rendered the present study more complex in terms of attachment to local identity, as well as to lost religious and cultural identities, which have contributed to the construction of relationships and interactions within both the group and the wider community. The institution of the Diwan has played a central role in reproducing this process through a set of practices whose functions ensure its continuity and stability. There is no doubt that

the Diwan represents a mirror reflecting the group's identity. The Black man referred to locally as *al-'abd* has embraced his traditional practices and found within them a vast cultural reservoir that serves as a non-verbal carrier of people's concerns and burdens. It also encompasses oral creativity with its African dimension, incorporating beliefs, customs, traditions, rituals, and popular practices, constituting a lost treasure that is being retrieved in the present era from a painful past. This perspective implicitly indicates that the modern individual's recourse to rituals aligned with the founding myth emerges as a response to a condition of instrumental incapacity. These mythical beliefs summarize, for them, the stages they have historically experienced. It is therefore worth emphasizing the explicit symbolism embedded in the principle that there exists a strong and arbitrary relationship between the identity of the Black Gnawa man and the emerging institution dedicated to preserving it.

8. Conclusion :

In conclusion, it can be stated that the collective memory of the Black man constitutes the powerful mechanism that ensures the continuity of this process and protects it from erosion and disappearance. Through this mechanism, the Gnawa community reconstructs and reshapes the formation of identity in the present. This means that a dispossessed identity needs to rediscover itself and to be recognized along with its rights. In this context, identity is partially formed through recognition or its absence, as well as through the misrecognition or distorted perceptions held by others. Recognition thus enables identity to recover part of its self-awareness.

The Diwan consequently represents a vast cultural repository, rich in meanings, customs, and traditions embodied in its ritual practices. Through it, the African dimension of the group emerges as an expression of a lost identity or as a reference to ancestral origins. It also affirms multiple, diverse, and sometimes conflicting beliefs among the bearers of this heritage, distinguishing them from others through the revival of ceremonial occasions and the preservation of these practices from disappearance.

These practices are also known under various names, such as the *Diwan of Sidi Bilal*, the *Diwan of the Slaves*, or the *Diwan of the Gnawa*. What unites these designations, despite their differing identities, is their affiliation with the Companion Bilal ibn Rabah, associated with the Prophet Muhammad, alongside the African identity originating from the south and embodied by the dark-skinned Black man. This identity also reflects his historical status as an enslaved person and the social stratification resulting from colonialism and slavery in general. Finally, the validity of the previously stated hypothesis has been empirically confirmed through fieldwork, as demonstrated by the study of the Gnawa man in his rituals and practices. This research highlights that the "Diwan of al-'Abid" functions as a cultural reservoir for preserving Black identity within the local Mascara community, based on their own distinctive and adopted methods.

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