

## **A Reading of a Letter from the Beni Mzab Community to Dey Ali (1710–1718 CE)**

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### **Abstract:**

This research paper addresses a rare manuscript letter sent by the Beni Mzab community to Dey Ali during the Ottoman period in Algeria. It aims to examine its historical, political, religious and social dimensions, while highlighting the nature of the relationship that linked the Ibadi Mozabites with the Ottoman authority in the city of Algiers. The paper also discusses the circumstances surrounding the writing of the letter and its content, and presents a comparison between its different manuscript versions. In addition, it analyzes the complaints expressed by the community regarding the sectarian harassment they faced inside mosques, while highlighting the economic and social status of the Beni Mzab and their role within Algerian society during the eighteenth century.

**Keywords:** Beni Mzab, Dey Ali, Ottoman Algeria, Ibadi manuscripts, political relations.

### **Introduction:**

The manuscript letter entitled “A Letter from the Beni Mzab Community to Dey Ali,” dating back to the early 12th century AH / 18th century CE, is considered one of the Ibadi Mozabite manuscripts that has not yet undergone scholarly editing and critical study. My motivation for introducing and studying this document stems from my passion and interest, since my undergraduate years at university, in the history of the Beni Mzab during the Ottoman period in general. My graduation thesis focused on the composition of the society of the city of Algiers during the Ottoman era, taking the Beni Mzab as a model. Although the topic had a primarily social dimension, I also addressed the economic and political role played by this community.

This study was also undertaken at the request of the Abbi Ishaq Heritage Association in order to provide a reading of both the letter and the accompanying poem. The letter constitutes a new historical source supporting the relationship that linked the urban Mozabite community residing in the Casbah of Algiers with the ruling authority represented by the Ottoman-Turkish administration. Through this document, we attempt to highlight several religious and political aspects in particular, hoping to

reconstruct the general atmosphere prevailing at the time, which was based on mutual trust between the two parties.

It should be noted that this study does not aim at an in-depth analysis of the letter or presenting it in its definitive scholarly form. Rather, it seeks to introduce the document and draw researchers' attention to its political, economic, and social significance. The letter itself expresses gratitude and appreciation to the Dey, while also conveying requests and appeals accompanied by a threat of departure should their demands not be met. Furthermore, the document may provide answers to certain obscure and unresolved issues that are still awaiting clarification. It also represents an important link in the history of relations between the At Mzab community and the Ottoman authorities in Algeria.

This research relies on three manuscript copies preserved in the libraries of the Mzab Valley. These copies consist of approximately nine folios or fewer, depending on the size of each version, including the copies provided to me by the association. The document raises important issues closely related to the Ibadi community in the capital city of Algiers, particularly concerning its historical geographical presence and its religious, economic, political, and social role within the broader Algerian landscape among various tribal communities. Moreover, the study highlights the value of this letter among the numerous correspondences that connected the Ottoman authority with the Mozabite community in the modern era.

### **1. Description of the Manuscript:**

In presenting this manuscript letter, we relied on two copies. The third copy, preserved in the library of Sheikh al-Hajj Salih La'li in Beni Isguen, was inaccessible to us. As for the fourth copy, preserved in the library of the Institute of Reform (Ma'had al-Islah), it contains a major lacuna. The two copies adopted in this study are designated as follows: the first copy is marked with the letter (A), referring to the copy held in the General Treasury of Sheikh 'Ammi Sa'id, while the second is marked with the letter (B), preserved in the treasury of Sheikh al-Hajj Sa'id Muhammad (Lakhburat). Their descriptive records are as follows:

#### **Manuscript (A)<sup>1</sup>**

**Library Number: 300**

**Treasury Reference: D.G.94**

**Author:** The Beni Mzab Community (12th century AH / 18th century CE)

**Title:** A Letter to Dey Ali

**Extent:** Two folios across three pages, beginning from folio 4 verso to folio 6 verso.

**Dimensions:** 25.9 × 18 cm

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix No. (1).

**Layout:** 27 lines per page, with the number of words ranging between 10 and 23 per line.

**Copying Information:** Undated and without the name of the copyist [relatively old].

**Type and Condition of the Manuscript:**

This copy appears to be the oldest chronologically. The letter follows the response of Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abi al-Qasim to a critic of the Ibadi school from Mazouna, interspersed with poetic verses on the same subject. The letter contains a defense of the Beni Mzab residents of Algiers who had ceased attending Friday and communal prayers. It is written in a legible Maghrebi script, brownish in color with slight greying, complete, and contains some vocalized words.

**Manuscript (B)<sup>1</sup>**

**Library Number:** 319

**Treasury Reference:** 41

**Author:** The Beni Mzab Community (11th century AH / 17th century CE)

**Title:** A Letter in Praise of Dey Ali and a Request for Justice for the Beni Mzab

**Extent:** Five folios across ten pages, beginning from folio 7 recto to folio 9 verso.

**Dimensions:** 20 × 14.7 cm

**Layout:** 24 lines per page, with the number of words ranging between 4 and 8 per line.

**Copying Information:** Copied by Abu al-Qasim ibn Muhammad ibn Abi al-Qasim ibn Yahya al-Mis'abi al-Ghardaoui, approximately in the middle of the 12th century AH.

**Type and Condition of the Manuscript:**

This manuscript follows the epistle responding to al-Mazuni. At the end of the letter appears a poem rhyming in the letter hā' praising the Dey and his army, followed by a request to put an end to the harsh language directed against the Mozabites. The copying information was verified through handwriting comparison. The manuscript is written in a clear Maghrebi script, in black ink, complete, and most of its text is vocalized.

**Manuscript (C)**

**Library Number:** 173

**Treasury Reference:** M166

**Author:** The Beni Mzab Community (circa 1182 AH / 1769 CE)

**Title:** A Letter from the Beni Mzab Community to Dey Ali

**Extent:** Four folios, beginning from folio 10 recto to folio 13 verso.

**Dimensions:** 18.5 × 14.8 cm

**Layout:** 15 lines per page.

**Copying Information:** Undated and without the name of the copyist.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix No. (2).

**Type and Condition of the Manuscript:**

The response addresses the issue of the Beni Mzab community who had ceased attending Friday and communal prayers in the Tell region (Algeria) during the reign of Dey Ali. The letter is followed by a long poetic composition praising the Dey and the Turkish armies. The writer did not explicitly mention his name and merely stated: “From the community of the Beni Mzab.” The manuscript is written in Maghrebi script, in brownish-grey ink, and is complete.

**Manuscript (D)<sup>1</sup>**

**Library Number:** 15

**Treasury Reference:** M.I / D.Gh14

**Author:** Sheikh Hamm ibn al-Hajj (d. 1129 AH / 1716 CE)

**Title:** A Letter in Praise of Dey Ali and a Request for Justice for the Beni Mzab

**Extent:** Two folios, from folio 2 to folio 2 verso.

**Dimensions:** 29.2 × 22.2 cm

Layout: 19 lines per page.

Copying Information: Possibly copied by ‘Umar ibn Musa ibn ‘Umar ibn Ya‘qub on Monday, 17 Rajab 1227 AH / 26 July 1812 CE.

**Type and Condition of the Manuscript:**

The manuscript contains a major lacuna extending from the basmala to the phrase “from the devils of jinn and mankind,” and another gap from the hemistich “The coward fled, while within it raged its flames” to the end of the poem. It includes a hā’iyyah poem praising the Dey and his army, while the accompanying letter defends the Beni Mzab community and requests an end to the harsh language directed against them. The author explicitly identified himself as Hamm ibn al-Hajj. The manuscript is written in a legible Maghrebi script, in black ink, and is incomplete at the beginning and middle sections.

**Comparison of the Manuscript Copies**

At the outset, we excluded both manuscripts (C) and (D) from the comparative analysis. Manuscript (C) was omitted because it appears to be identical to the copy designated as manuscript (B), as indicated to me by from the Abu Ishaq Heritage Association. This is evident from the complete correspondence between their descriptive records. As for manuscript (D), it was excluded due to the numerous lacunae affecting several of its sections. Consequently, the study and comparison rely primarily on manuscripts (A) and (B).

The two manuscripts, (A) and (B), were arranged according to their relative importance. An initial collation revealed an almost complete correspondence between them, with only minor discrepancies

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix No. (3).

in the of words and letters. In addition, manuscript (A) contains two concluding lines absent from manuscript (B), which may be attributed to the copyist’s omission of those lines, though this does not significantly affect the overall meaning of the text. It also appears that the copyist committed certain scribal distortions (taṣḥīf), likely due to limited mastery of the Arabic language, leading him to write words according to what he believed to be correct. Furthermore, his lack of strict accuracy in transcription resulted in omissions that occasionally disrupted the meaning.

Although the dates of the copies are relatively close, manuscript (B) is attributed to the 11th century AH / 17th century CE, without a precise or even approximate date within that century. Manuscript (A), on the other hand, dates back to the 12th century AH / 18th century CE, likewise without a specific year. As for manuscript (C), the available information indicates that it was copied around 1182 AH / 1769 CE. Accordingly, the chronological order of the manuscripts would be: (B), then (C), then (A), followed by manuscript (D), dated 1227 AH / 1812 CE. Since manuscript (C), which resembles manuscript (B), was unavailable to us, manuscript (B) remains the oldest among the accessible copies, as stated in the catalogue of the Reform Library. Nevertheless, this conclusion remains hypothetical, pending confirmation or refutation by future editors and researchers.

Returning to the process of comparison, I observed a strong resemblance between manuscripts (A) and (D), particularly in the conclusion of the letter. The similarity is clearly evident in the passage beginning with: “And the Beni Mzab entered your land under protection...” and ending with: “...and the last of our supplications is praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.” Manuscript (D) is distinguished from the other copies by explicitly mentioning the name of its copyist. It is followed by a prayer for its author and versifier (whose name is not mentioned) as well as for the Muslim community. The manuscript also records its copying date fully according to the Hijri calendar. Moreover, the copyist requests readers to correct and amend any mistakes found in the manuscript. This strongly suggests that the copyist, Hammu al-Hajj, transcribed his version directly from manuscript (A).

Order	Copy Date	Copyist	Library / Collection
(A)	12th AH / 18th century	No copyist indicated	Public Library: No. 300, ref: D.G 94
(B)	11th AH / 17th century	Abu al-Qasim ibn Muhammad ibn Abi al-Qasim ibn Yahya al-Mas‘abi al-Ghardaoui	Haj Said Library: No. 319, ref: 41
(C)	Around 1182 AH / 1769 CE	No copyist indicated	Haj Saleh Laali Library: No. 173, ref: M166
(D)	17 Rajab 1227 AH / 26 July 1812 CE	Probably: Omar ibn Musa ibn Omar ibn Ya‘qub	Al-Islah Library: No. 15, ref: M.I / DG14

I identified forty-six points of variation between manuscripts (A) and (B). These differences appear in the form of letters, words, or omitted expressions, which nevertheless indicates a high degree of correspondence between the two copies. Manuscript (A) also contains more corrections and erasures than manuscript (B). This may suggest that the copyist of manuscript (A) transcribed it from oral dictation, whereas the copyist of manuscript (B) copied it from another written exemplar and may have attempted to correct what appeared in manuscript (A) or in the source from which he copied. I therefore dispensed with manuscript (C) because of its close similarity to manuscript (B), and with manuscript (D) because of the major lacunae it contains, leaving these matters for future critical editors to address. Since this study does not aim at producing a full critical edition of the letter, we shall instead present in the following table the principal variants illustrating the differences between the two manuscripts after an initial comparative reading:

Version B	Version A	Version B	Version A
<b>In poetry</b>		<b>In praise and commendation (poetry)</b>	
-Peoples that preceded it -Possessed kingdom -Kingly -In the beginning, so is there... -A people among them -The victorious power -Prince Ali the Dey knows him -The enemies -God guided opinions -Lions of the den -Their ranks are clear -They are the free men -On the highest positions -They do not fear -Rather they advance -Established claws/traditions	-Not reaching it -Possessor -Kingdom In the beginning, so why... A people from among them -The victory of the Mighty -Prince Ali, as he is known -The enemies -God guided opinions -Fortress of the Mighty -Their ranks... structures -And the free men -On positions/ranks -They do not flee -Rather they rise -Established its victorious tradition	-The basmala without the initial blessings -And peace and blessings -Continuous prayer -The lion -Sons of Shem and Ham -The one who seeks refuge -God raised his rank -Joys -Winds of care -Makers of the Ottoman state -Bārdiyya of his grace -And it inclined toward him -It reached him	-The basmala then blessings upon the Prophet -Peace and blessings -Continuous prayer -The mighty lion (al-ḡihm) -All sons of Shem and Ham -Like the one who seeks refuge -May God elevate his rank -Happiness -Winds of care/providence -Maker of the Ottoman state -Bārādiya of his grace

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-They are not isolated groups</li> <li>-They are in battle</li> <li>-You see the dust</li> <li>-Their leader is one</li> <li>-Then departure in order</li> <li>-With insight</li> <li>-From the oppressor to the oppressed</li> <li>-You have taken their rights</li> <li>-You did not condemn</li> <li>-Their action</li> <li>-They become</li> <li>-From those who enter</li> <li>-omitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-So they advance as scattered groups</li> <li>-They, they in battle</li> <li>-Dust rises</li> <li>-Their leader is one</li> <li>-Then departure in order</li> <li>-With insight</li> <li>-For the oppressed against the oppressor</li> <li>-You have taken their rights</li> <li>-What you said</li> <li>-Your action</li> <li>-They become</li> <li>-Among those who enter</li> <li>-Said God Almighty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-For interests/benefits</li> <li>-Devils of the jinn</li> <li>-Say</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-And it inclined toward him</li> <li>-God became closer to him</li> <li>-To interests/benefits</li> <li>-Devils and jinn</li> <li>-So say (Amen / declare it)</li> </ul>
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From the examples presented above, it becomes evident that the expressions and vocabulary found in manuscript (B) are generally more accurate than those appearing in manuscript (A). This leads us to believe that the copyist of manuscript (B) possessed a reasonably good level of education and proficiency in the Arabic language, as he corrected numerous words and letters according to his own understanding. It is also possible that another person dictated the text to him or assisted him in the copying process.

By contrast, the scribe of manuscript (A) appears to have had only a limited command of Arabic. He may have been the secretary of the Beni Mzab community, one of his assistants, or perhaps even a craftsman or merchant. It seems that he drafted the letter either through dictation from certain individuals or by copying from a rough draft in his possession, as indicated by the many errors found in the text.

### 3. Identification of the Author (Owner of the Manuscript)

It is extremely difficult to determine the true author of the manuscript. His name does not appear either at the beginning or at the end of the letter, nor is he referred to within the text itself. What is found instead in the descriptive records of the four manuscripts is the expression: “The Beni Mzab Community” as the author of the letter, as though the document had been issued officially in the name of the body supervising the Beni Mzab community. It is possible that the author’s name was deliberately omitted—or omitted inadvertently—or that this was simply the customary manner in

which such letters were written and circulated between the barrānī communities (such as the Beni Mzab, the Djouajla, and the Biskris) in the city of Algiers and the ruling Turkish authority.

We tend to favor the latter hypothesis for several reasons. First, the letter was not necessarily written in the capital itself; it may have been drafted in the Mzab Valley. Second, there may have been fear that the document could fall into the hands of enemies along the route to and from Algiers, a road known to be plagued by bandits who endangered travelers. For this reason, the author's name may intentionally have been omitted. Other circumstantial motives may also have played a role.

However, when we return to the copy preserved in the Reform Library, designated as manuscript (D), we find the author's name clearly mentioned by the copyist, who states: "The book of Sheikh Hamm ibn al-Hajj has ended, with praise to God and by His gracious assistance." It is therefore highly probable that the composer of the text was Sheikh Hammu al-Hajj—whose biography will be discussed later.

On the other hand, the dominant narrative perspective throughout the letter is the third person. Nearly all the verbs refer to the Beni Mzab as spoken about by someone external to the group. One example appears at the end of the letter: "And the Beni Mzab entered... and they serve... and if you do not grant them their rights, then allow them to depart." Had the writer himself belonged to the group or been among them, he would more naturally have employed the first-person plural. This suggests that the author was geographically and socially distant from the Beni Mzab<sup>1</sup> community residing in the capital.

It may therefore be said that the letter begins with personal praise and ends with collective criticism simultaneously. The praise is directed toward Dey Ali, while the criticism targets those who stirred discord because of the Beni Mzab's absence from Friday and communal prayers. Had the letter fallen into the hands of opponents of the regime or those hostile to the ruling authority, it could have caused serious difficulties for the Beni Mzab community—difficulties they could well have done without.

It is also important to identify the name of the Amīn (representative or head) of the Beni Mzab community<sup>2</sup> during the reign of Dey Ali in the city of Algiers. After examining the available sources,

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<sup>1</sup>On the role of the Amīn (head) of the Beni Mzab community, see: Aïcha Ghattas, *Crafts and Craftsmen in the City of Algiers (1700–1830): A Socio-Economic Approach*, PhD dissertation, supervised by Moulay Belhamissi, Department of History, University of Algiers, 2001, pp. 43 and 181. Mohamed Weqqad, *The Beni Mzab Community and its Economic and Social Interactions in the City of Algiers during the Late Ottoman Period (1112–1246 AH / 1700–1830 CE)*, Master's thesis, supervised by Prof. Fella Moussaoui al-Qashsha'i, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers, 2010, pp. 169–173.

<sup>2</sup> On the role of the Amīn (head) of the Beni Mzab community, see: Aïcha Ghattas, *Crafts and Craftsmen in the City of Algiers (1700–1830): A Socio-Economic Approach*, PhD dissertation, supervised by Moulay Belhamissi, Department of History, University of Algiers, 2001, pp. 43 and 181. Mohamed Weqqad, *The Beni Mzab Community and its Economic and Social Interactions in the City of Algiers during the Late Ottoman Period (1112–1246 AH / 1700–1830 CE)*, Master's thesis, supervised by Prof. Fella Moussaoui al-Qashsha'i, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers, 2010, pp. 169–173.

I was able to compile a list of several names of community leaders from different periods, most of them belonging to the first three decades of the nineteenth century CE.<sup>1</sup> However, I was unable to determine with certainty the identity of the individual who held this office at the time the letter was written. The only name I found was that of Sa'id Sharīf al-Ḥamāymī, who served as head of the community in 1698 CE.<sup>2</sup> It remains unclear whether he was indeed the community leader during the period of the letter or someone else, and the matter still requires further scrutiny and research.

The epithet al-Ḥamāymī in his name may suggest two possibilities: either that he was the head of the bathhouse guild (ḥammāmāt),<sup>3</sup> or that he simultaneously held two responsibilities, namely that of chief over the guild leaders themselves, since every craft or profession had its own amīn. Above all, these stood the head of the community, who usually acted as intermediary between the community and the Dey. In effect, he functioned as a political ambassador for them, conveying the concerns of his people and members of his community whether residing in the city of Algiers or in the eastern and western Algerian towns. He also coordinated between the Majlis al-ʿAzzābah and the members of the community living in the Tell cities, and served as an arbiter in disputes, conflicts, violations, and minor offenses.<sup>6</sup>

The copyist mentioned in the manuscript is Sheikh Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥājj Abī al-Qāsim ibn Yaḥyā ibn Abī al-Qāsim al-Muṣʿabī al-Ghardaoui, better known as Sheikh Ḥammū wa-Lḥājj (or Ūlḥājj) (1635–1716 CE). He was a scholar of Ghardaïa who grew up in a distinguished scholarly family. He studied under his father, Sheikh Abū al-Qāsim ibn Yaḥyā al-Muṣʿabī, both of whom formed part of a long chain of religious scholarship. He became a member of the Majlis al-ʿAzzābah, was later entrusted with the imamate of the old mosque of Ghardaïa, then assumed the leadership of the scholarly circle, and was eventually appointed head of the Council of ʿAmmī Saʿīd.<sup>7</sup>

He maintained a circle of learning from which emerged scholars who later led intellectual activity in their respective regions, including both Ibadi and non-Ibadi scholars. Among his students were Sheikh

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<sup>1</sup> Among those who held the leadership of the community were:

Bakir ibn al-Hajj Muhammad ibn Bakir al-Maliki (1518), Sa'id Sharif al-Hamāymī (1698), Muqṣīn (1769), ʿĪsā al-Mzābī (1780), Baba ʿAmmī ibn Musa (1789), Ibrahim ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman (1792), Hammu ibn Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAlī (1798), Sulayman ibn Bāḥmad al-Yazqani (1799), Sa'd Allāh Baba Hammu (1800), Ibrahim ibn Musa (1805), Ṣāliḥ ibn Sulayman (1821–1824), Sa'd Allāh ibn Ahmad (1828), Mawlud ibn Ahmad (1832), Bāḥmad al-Qahwājī (1835), and Bakir (1850).

Aïcha Ghattas, *op. cit.*, p. 44; ʿAbd Allāh al-Shuwayhid, *The Market Regulations of the City of Algiers*, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muhammad al-Shuwayhid, *The Market Regulations of the City of Algiers* (1103–1117 AH / 1695–1705 CE), edited, introduced, and annotated by Nasser al-Din Saïdouni, al-Baṣāʿir al-Jadīda Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2012, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Venture de Paradis, Alger au XVIIIe siècle*, Fagnan, Adolphe Jordan, Algiers, 1898, note no. 1, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Venture de Paradis, op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed Weqqad, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> Collective Authors, *Dictionary of Ibadi Figures – Maghreb Section*, 1st ed., Arab Printing Press, Ghardaïa, 1999, p. 760.

Bass ibn Mūsā al-Warjalānī, Ba‘ammūr ibn al-Ḥājj Mas‘ūd al-Malīkī, and Bākkah ibn Ṣāliḥ al-‘Aṭfāwī, among others. He was also active in authorship, and among the works that survive are: A Refutation of a Critic from Mazouna, A Treatise on the Impurity of Animal Urine, as well as various letters and poems. He also composed numerous didactic poems in jurisprudence and panegyric <sup>1</sup>. literature. In addition, he became known for establishing the system of water distribution in the <sup>2</sup>. orchards of Būshamjān in Ghardaïa. He died and was buried in the cemetery of Sheikh Baba Ṣāliḥ in Ghardaïa, and was elegized by his student Ba‘ammūr ibn al-Ḥājj Mas‘ūd <sup>3</sup>.

Accordingly, it seems plausible to suggest that the original letter may have been written by Sheikh Ḥammū wa-Lḥājj, given the intellectual level reflected in its content, even though it contains some colloquial expressions. Furthermore, scholars and learned men in the Mزاب Valley were relatively few, and it was customary for official letters and correspondence to be written by individuals possessing at least a competent command of the Arabic language and its stylistic conventions. Nevertheless, we cannot affirm with certainty that the letter should be attributed to him; the matter ultimately remains for future editors and researchers to confirm or refute.

#### **4. Identifying the Dey of Algiers during the Composition of the Letter**

During the period of the Deys, Algiers was ruled by five governors bearing the name “Ali.” These were: Ali Chaouch (1710–1718 CE), Baba Ali Nekkiche—known as Bousba‘ (1754–1766 CE), Ali al-Ghassal (1808–1809 CE), al-Hajj Ali (1809–1815 CE), and Ali ibn Ahmad, known as Ali Khodja or Ali Loukou (1817–1818 CE). Through investigation and examination of the historical context surrounding the letter, it appears that the Dey governing the Regency of Algiers at the time was either Ali Chaouch or Baba Ali Bousba‘ (Nekkiche), both of whom ruled during the first century of the Deylik era in Algeria. The question that remains, however, is which of the two “Ali”s was the actual recipient of the letter: the first or the second?

This can be clarified by revisiting the life and achievements of each ruler during his period of government. Beginning with Dey Ali Chaouch, who ruled for eight years from 1710 to 1718 CE, his origins are traced either to Kabylia or to the Kouloughli community, and he belonged to the Ṭā’ifat al-Rayyās (the corsair captains). He implemented important political reforms, succeeding in resolving many of the problems that Algeria had experienced under the previous Dey, Ibrahim. He also reformed the governmental council (Dīwān al-Ḥukm), reorganized it, and relied upon the corsair captains to revive Mediterranean naval activity and increase state revenues.

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<sup>1</sup>Collective Authors, Dictionary, p. 761.

<sup>2</sup>Yusuf al-Hajj Sa‘id), History of the Beni Mزاب: A Social, Economic, and Political Study, 2nd ed., Arab Printing Press, 2006, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup>Collective Authors, Dictionary, p. 762, biography no. 791, vol. 4.

More importantly, he enabled Algiers to enjoy a degree of autonomous rule independent from the decisions of the Ottoman Sublime Porte in Istanbul, following his attempt to secure greater independence for Algeria from direct Ottoman control. He is also credited with weakening the power of the Janissaries in Algiers after carrying out a major massacre against their leaders. In this endeavor, he received support from the Arab and Amazigh populations of the capital and its surrounding areas, as well as from the corsair captains of the sea.<sup>1</sup>

He was the first Dey to abolish permanently the office of the Pasha, refusing to maintain alongside him a representative of the Ottoman Sultan, even though the function of the Sultan's representative had long remained in local politics as a merely honorary position deprived of any real authority. He succeeded in convincing Sultan Ahmed III of the disadvantages inherent in the duality of power. In doing so, he initiated a political transformation that helped free the Regency of Algiers from Ottoman tutelage and granted its political system an officially autonomous character owing to its particular geopolitical position. Consequently, he enjoyed considerable popularity among the inhabitants of Algiers.<sup>2</sup>

Baba Ali Chaouch further consolidated his authority as head of government at both the central and provincial (beylik) levels. The administration under his rule was well organized, with clearly defined functions assigned to each institution. Thereafter, Dey Baba Ali came to be regarded by European consuls as a sovereign ally rather than a subordinate dependent upon Ottoman protection.

By contrast, Ali Bousba<sup>ç</sup>, who ruled for twelve years from 1754 to 1766 CE, carried out hydraulic and urban works in the capital, Algiers, traces of which remain visible in the inscriptions adorning several of the city's fountains. Nevertheless, he was heavily criticized in historical writings after his election following the assassination of his predecessor and chief minister (Khaznaji). He is often portrayed as lacking political wisdom and administrative competence. His popularity stemmed mainly from his encouragement of renewed corsair activity; he declared war on the Dutch and led military campaigns against Tunis, which he delivered over to plunder.

After reviewing some of the most prominent characteristics associated with both Deys, we arrived at the conclusion that the praise and commendation expressed in the letter of the Beni Mzab community correspond more closely to Dey Ali Chaouch. Several considerations support this view. First, the letter and its introduction refer explicitly to the "people of the army" (ahl al-<sup>ç</sup>askar), while Ali Chaouch himself belonged to the corsair captains (riyas al-ba<sup>ç</sup>ır). Furthermore, he succeeded in suppressing enemies both internally and externally, which is reflected in the expressions found in the

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<sup>1</sup> Mustafa Ben Ammar, Political Reforms in Ottoman Algeria (1710–1830), *Haqā'iq Journal for Psychological and Social Studies*, no. 6, University of Djelfa, June 2017, p. 423.

<sup>2</sup> Mustafa Ben Ammar, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

letter such as: “May God grant him victory over all enemies and devils, the possessor of the pen and the sword whose generosity overflows,” and “May the banners of his victory remain exalted,” as recorded in manuscripts (A) and (B).

In addition, much of the poetry contained in the letter alludes to his struggle against enemies and praises both him and his troops, as in the verse: “He fights the Europeans—may God disgrace their nation... on land and sea, may their armies never prevail,” found in both manuscripts. He also carried out numerous reforms within the Regency, which is reflected in the phrase “builder of the imperial state” in manuscript (A), and “constructor of the institutions of the state and the sultanate” in manuscript (B). Moreover, he appears as a benevolent protector of the populace in the supplication: “We ask God to preserve him for the welfare of the people,” in manuscript (A), and “for the benefit of the people,” in manuscript (B).

These, then, are the characteristics through which Dey Ali was praised, and they constitute some of the indications confirming that the letter of the Beni Mzab community was indeed addressed to Dey Ali Chaouch. Although we have not been able to determine the exact date of the manuscript’s copying, it is almost certain that it was composed during the reign of Dey Ali Chaouch, that is, between 1710 and 1718 CE, which therefore represents the chronological framework of the letter.

As is well known, the seat of the Dey’s authority was the city of the Casbah in Algiers, the capital. The letter was not directed to one of the provincial Beys of the beyliks, but specifically and exclusively to Dey Ali himself. Consequently, the geographical setting of the letter is the city of Algiers, where the Beni Mzab community was settled and actively engaged in various crafts and trades, alongside other groups belonging to the barrānī communities.

The society of Algiers at the time was distinctly cosmopolitan in character, comprising diverse social groups such as Turks, renegades (a‘lāj), Kouloughlis, urban notables, Jews, slaves, and captives, among others.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore essential to return to that historical period—both in its temporal and spatial dimensions, namely early eighteenth-century Algiers and its Casbah—in order to grasp the prevailing conditions and daily life of the era, and thereby better understand the circumstances surrounding the letter and the implications arising from it.<sup>2</sup>

## **5. Previous Studies on the Manuscript**

It is not possible to assert definitively that no previous study has ever been conducted on this letter. However, based on my review of available sources and references—particularly academic dissertations, articles, and conference papers—I have not found any work that has addressed this manuscript either through a descriptive study or a critical scholarly edition.

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<sup>1</sup>Aïcha Ghattas, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Mohamed Weqqad, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

I therefore consider this work to be a preliminary contribution that may pave the way for future researchers to read and edit the text in a proper academic manner. Indeed, by collecting and collating its various copies, one may uncover significant aspects of the Mozabite presence within the walls of the guarded Casbah during the Ottoman period, as well as the social, economic, and political activities that clearly left their imprint on it.

## **6. Circumstances of the Composition of the Manuscript**

The Beni Mzab have long inhabited the region of the Mzab Valley, known historically as the “networked land” (*bilād al-shabaka*). However, the harsh desert conditions—both climatic and environmental—compelled them to migrate in search of alternative sources of livelihood beyond agriculture, especially after prolonged periods of drought and the drying up of the valley. This led to successive waves of migration toward northern urban centers (*al-Tell*), where they engaged in various professions. Among these destinations, the capital Algiers was the most important center of settlement.

In Algiers, they established a respected position among the different population groups composing the society of the city, including indigenous urban dwellers and nomadic populations. Their presence within the walls of the Casbah dates back to the pre-Ottoman period. Their distinction derived largely from their specific Ibadī Islamic identity and their Amazigh Maghrebi heritage, which they preserved across generations.

Nevertheless, throughout history, they were not spared criticism from certain groups who differed from them either in doctrinal or ethnic terms. Despite this, they generally maintained a position of defense, peace, and coexistence toward others, in accordance with their religious beliefs and their social organization.

The written agreements between the Mzab community and the central authority further confirm the relations between both sides. It appears that these were primarily economic privileges, manifested in granting them monopolies over certain crafts and commercial activities. Pellissier notes, for instance, their control over “the baths and mills of the city of Algiers,” privileges which were most likely granted at a later period.<sup>1</sup> These included what is known as the craft of the *farrānīn* (bakers),<sup>2</sup> the *ḥammāmiyya*, responsible for supervising the city’s public bathhouses, as well as the *ḥarqāmājiyya* (management of inns and lodgings), the *qaṣṣābiyya* (butchery), the *saffājīn* (production of sponge cakes *sfendj*), and other minor crafts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Shuwayhid, *op. cit.*, p. 50. Belhaj Nasser, *Customary Systems and Laws in the Mzab Valley during the Modern Period*, Heritage Association, Guerrara, 2018, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Shuwayhid, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Statistical records indicate the existence, during the Deylik period, of approximately 176 places of worship, 54 markets, 32 inns dedicated to economic activity, 69 bakeries,<sup>1</sup> and 74 public bathhouses distributed across the city of Algiers, its gates, and the Casbah. In addition to these, there were <sup>2</sup>. numerous cemeteries, mausoleums of saints, and Sufi lodges (*zāwiyas*).

The Casbah itself hosted a highly diverse population structure, resembling a true mosaic of both local and foreign groups. Focusing only on Muslims, one finds that they belonged mainly to three legal schools: the Hanafī, Maliki, and Ibadi rites. They shared the mosque for prayers at different times, yet doctrinal differences—particularly in ritual practice—sometimes led certain individuals, whether commoners or elites, to raise questions and criticisms toward members of other schools, especially the Ibadis. This situation created a sense of discomfort among the latter, who were often subjected to pressure when attending mosques for congregational or Friday prayers.

It was under these circumstances and due to these social tensions that the Beni Mzab community hastened to send an urgent letter to Dey Ali Chaouch, in the hope that he would render justice regarding the injustices and abuses they were suffering at the hands of certain individuals. Hence their appeal to the ruler: “Consider carefully what has befallen the Beni Mzab in terms of grave slander, insults, and abuse.” Their grievances had reached a breaking point due to practices far removed from the teachings of the Islamic faith.

It is most likely that the letter was a response to an inquiry from the Dey—or from one of his close officials—regarding the reason for their absence from Friday and communal prayers. It is also plausible that complaints submitted by other people to the ruler played a direct role in prompting such an inquiry. Consequently, the Beni Mzab community was compelled to respond to these grievances and to clarify the reasons behind their reluctance to attend the mosques of the Hanafī, Maliki, and other schools.

## **7. Content of the Manuscript**

### **1.7. Title**

As previously noted, the manuscript does not contain a fixed or explicit title in any of its three copies. What appears instead varies from one version to another: in manuscript (A) it is referred to as “A Letter to Dey Ali,” in manuscript (B) as “A Letter in Praise of Dey Ali and a Request for Justice for the Beni Mzab,” in manuscript (C) as “A Letter from the Beni Mzab Community to Dey Ali,” and in manuscript (D) as “A Letter in Praise of Dey Ali and a Request for Justice for the Beni Mzab.”

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<sup>1</sup> On the bread-making industry in Ottoman Algeria and the role of the Beni Mzab therein, see: Mohamed Bouchnafi, *The Bread Industry and its Components in Algeria during the Ottoman Era (1520–1830)*, *Al-Mawaqif Journal*, no. 10, Mustapha Istanbulin University, Mascara, December 2015, pp. 41–58.

<sup>2</sup> Mohamed Zerrou, *Algerian–French Relations (1791–1830)*, Dahleb Press, Hussein Dey, Algiers, p. 24.

It does not appear that the letter originally carried a clear or stable title. Rather, what we have are descriptive designations derived from the general content of the text itself. This is a natural feature of administrative or judicial correspondence of this type, which typically consists of petitions for redress on behalf of a group rather than formally titled documents.

This is further supported by the honorific expressions used to describe the Dey, such as: “the one to whom all dignitaries resort,” “the value of justice in his time is precious,” “consider, O prince... among the judges of truth and governors of honesty,” and “God has made you vicegerents on earth to reform what is corrupted in the world.” Such administrative letters generally do not carry titles but rather take the form of petitions, requests, inquiries, or responses to prior questions. The document under study clearly belongs to this category.

Moreover, the letter is explicitly addressed to the Sultan or Dey Ali and no one else, as is evident from its opening formula: “From the Beni Mzab community, who are devoted to the Turks in past times, to the people of the victorious army.” The term “people of the army” refers to the Dey and his military forces, with the Dey himself being singled out through numerous descriptive epithets, reaching up to thirty-two attributes in the prose sections alone, in addition to those found in the poetic part. In the ninth verse, he is explicitly named: “I mean the prince Ali, the Dey.”

There is therefore no surprise in the observation that “the foundation of the Ottoman presence in Algeria and its consolidation of power was primarily based on a religious bond, whereby the Ottomans were held in esteem and respect by scholars and religious figures, who regarded them as protectors of the faith and of Muslim lands.”<sup>1</sup> Under the umbrella of the Ottoman Caliphate—the successor of the Abbasids—various nations, peoples, tribes, and communities, both Arab and non-Arab, found themselves united by Islam across the East and the West

## **2.7. General Description of the Manuscript Content**

The letter is composed of two main parts, or it may be divided, according to its content, into two sections. The first part consists of praise, commendation, gratitude, and acknowledgment directed toward Dey Ali and his army. The second part contains the grievance and complaint, which represents the core of the document. It should be noted that most of the correspondence between the Beni Mzab community and the ruling authority follows this same structure: it opens with praise and concludes with a petition or request.

This pattern may be understood as a form of reminding the recipient of the favorable treatment accorded to the Mzab community by previous rulers, in recognition of the important services they provided at the political, security, economic, and social levels within and outside the walls of the city

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<sup>1</sup> Mustafa Ben Ammar, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

of Algiers.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the ruler is implicitly encouraged to follow the example of his predecessors and maintain the established tradition.

Through a brief comparison, it becomes evident that most administrative letters—if the term may be used—follow the same formal structure. They typically begin with a lengthy preamble containing praise of the Sultan and his army, often in prose introduced by the *basmala* and *ṣalāt* (invocation upon the Prophet), and concluded with further invocations and praise (*taṣliya* and *ḥamdala*), followed by an extended poetic section. After this comes the main petition addressed to the authority.

It appears that any letter which does not conform to this established format was likely considered formally unacceptable. For this reason, most correspondence adheres closely to this administrative and courtly model without deviation.

The praise and expressions of gratitude are composed in a refined literary style, characterized by short rhymed phrases that are fluid and clear, enriched with numerous rhetorical embellishments. The text makes use of allusion and wordplay, with a careful selection of vocabulary that reflects the true nature and qualities of the addressee. The style clearly reveals both political and religious influences .

An example of this style is the following passage: “In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate. Praise be to God who has made the Turkish sultans in all lands as anchors preventing them from tilting, for they stand therein like firm mountains. He has enabled them to rule its East and West according to His will. Glory be to Him who conceals the mysteries of His servants; none can repel what He wills and ordains. And blessings and peace be upon the one sent as a mercy to mankind, described by noble character in every gathering.” This passage reflects the high cultural level of its author.

If we hypothetically accept that the author is Sheikh Hammu al-Hajj, then this would not be surprising, as the Sheikh is well known for his mastery of Arabic language and its literary forms, as previously indicated in his biography. The only exceptions are some linguistic imperfections or the use of vernacular expressions, whether by him or by a scribe to whom he may have dictated the text. It is possible that errors occurred because the scribe wrote what was dictated without carefully verifying the exact wording, resulting in occasional colloquial expressions. This is particularly evident in his substitution of the hamza with the letter *yā'*, as in expressions such as “*ṣalāt dāyima*” (continuous prayer), “*lawā'ih al-sa'ādāt*” (manifestations of happiness), and “*al-kamāl al-fāyid*” (overflowing perfection). This may simply reflect the orthographic conventions of his time, as he did not always adhere to strict standard spelling.

The letter is addressed to Dey Ali, who was not a native Arabic speaker. It is likely that he would have read the letter—either in its original form or through translation—through one of his advisers

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<sup>1</sup> On the role of the Mzab community in Ottoman Algeria across various domains, see: Mohamed Weqqad, *op. cit*

proficient in Arabic. Moreover, the presence of some grammatical errors in the text, such as “wa-saddad Allāh āraā’ā” and “hum al-ramāt... hum al-ḥumāt”, represents minor slips that any attentive reader could notice, yet they do not affect the overall meaning or coherence of the message.

When we examine the titles and descriptions attributed to the Dey in the manuscript, we notice a clear tendency toward exaggeration. This reflects an evident political influence, even though the Dey was not a Sultan of the Ottoman Caliphate but rather the governor of the Regency of Algiers.

For example, the text describes him as: “the valiant king, the roaring lion, the brave and deadly storm, the life-giving rain upon the heads of mankind, the shadow of God on the descendants of Shem and Ham, the fortified stronghold of God, the refuge of all nobles, the Imam Sultan... the possessor of the pen and the sword whose generosity flows in every season of winter and summer.” Such expressions clearly demonstrate a strong rhetorical and honorific inflation.

The religious influence is equally visible in the supplicatory expressions embedded in the text, such as: “May God elevate his rank above all sultans and grant him victory over all enemies and devils... We ask God Almighty to preserve him for the benefit of the people and to protect him from the plots of enemies, from harm, and from the devils of both jinn and mankind.”

We also encounter extended narrative sentences within the prose section of the praise, which carry deep historical implications and deserve closer attention. Among them is the passage: “He made the Turkish rulers in all lands like firm anchors preventing them from shifting, for they stand therein like mountains, and He enabled them to rule its East and West.” This reflects the circulation of news about the Ottomans across all territories under their authority, and indicates that the Beni Mzab—both in the capital and in the valley—were highly attentive to the achievements of the Ottoman state and stood firmly by its side, supporting it with both loyalty and sacrifice.

Another significant expression is: “From the Beni Mzab community, who have been devoted to the Turks in past ages,” which is crucial for identifying the sender of the letter. The Dey’s awareness of such identification would have drawn special attention to the content of the message, as this community was not like other barrānī groups. Letters were not usually addressed to the Dey’s council except for matters of great importance. The Beni Mzab are thus portrayed as long-standing supporters of the Turks since the establishment of their rule.

The phrase “in past ages” (*fī sālif al-aḥqāb*) further suggests that the Beni Mzab were already present in the city of Algiers before the arrival of the Ottomans. This point is also supported by Venture de Paradis, who stated that “they were residing in the city before the arrival of the Ottomans by a considerable period of time.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abd al-Qadir Saadallah, *The Cultural History of Algeria*, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 2nd ed., 2005, Beirut, vol. 1, p. 190.

On the other hand, the Beni Mzab community aligned itself with “the Ottoman system, which revealed its intention of jihad in the protection of Islam... and it became a religious duty to support this system and to show obedience and loyalty to it.”<sup>1</sup> This stance is clearly reflected in the opening passage of the letter: “He who adorned the people of his time with the garments of his bounty and benevolence, and who drove away enemies to the farthest deserts and brought near the rival opponent.” This is an explicit reference to the glorious historical achievements of the Ottomans, who elevated the banner of Islam and the Muslims, defeated their Christian adversaries on land and sea, and managed to subdue and attract enemies through their authority and strength.

The expression “Say, O listeners, amen; for whoever says it, God will protect him from the schemes of oppressors, and whoever refuses it will be struck by the arrows of the shooters” suggests two important points. First, that the letter was likely read aloud in the presence of the Dey and his entourage by one of his advisers. The formula obliges those present to respond with “amen” to the supplication contained in the text, thereby reinforcing the authority of the message and drawing the attention of the Dey and his council to the urgency of the request. This also reflects the rhetorical intelligence of the author, as the Dey’s court typically included senior commanders, judges, and ministers.

This structure is comparable to the statement attributed to Ibn Mas‘ūd (may God be pleased with him): “When you hear God say: ‘O you who believe,’ then listen carefully, for it is either a command of good or a prohibition of evil.”<sup>2</sup>

The poetic section consists of 29 verses, written in the singular form, as though a single individual representing the Beni Mzab community is addressing the Dey on their behalf. The first ten verses are entirely dedicated to praising Dey Ali, followed by fourteen verses concerning the army, and the final five verses devoted to supplication for victory and empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

The poetic content can be classified within the genres of praise (*madḥ*), encomium (*taqrīz*), description, pride (*fakhr*), and martial exhortation (*ḥamāsah*). Despite the presence of some unclear lexical items whose meanings could not be established—such as “*mālūka*” and “*rass*”, which appear consistently across all manuscript copies—it is likely that these were widespread and familiar terms in their historical linguistic context, commonly used at the time.<sup>4</sup>

The style of the preceding prose closely resembles that of the poetic section, as both display a rhythmic and rhymed harmony between the opening hemistich and the closing hemistich, whether in

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<sup>1</sup> Venture de Paradis, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Haj Moussa Ben Omar, *Mzab Merchants in the Dar al-Sultan: Backgrounds of Economic Presence and Political Influence*, *Al-Hayat Journal*, no. 19, July 2015, Heritage Association, Guerrara, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> Reported by al-Bayhaqī in *Shu‘ab al-Imān*.

<sup>4</sup> On encomiastic writing (*taqrīz*) and letters and their contribution to Algerian Ottoman history, see: <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/164292>

what is dedicated to the Dey or to his troops. At first glance, the reader perceives that the author is describing a fierce battle between the Ottomans and their enemies in a dramatic scene familiar within the Muslim historical imagination, portraying with precision their dominance over their adversaries and their eventual victory over them. This creates an intertwined literary and religious discourse<sup>1</sup>. rich in enthusiasm, courage, and boldness.

It appears that the verses with which the letter opens are nothing more than a form of appeasement and an attempt to win the Dey's favor, as well as to remind him of the conduct of his predecessors in confronting enemies, urging vigilance against sectarian divisions that could lead to discord. In doing so, the authors seem to suggest that certain parties—driven by their own interests—had already preceded them in submitting complaints against the Beni Mzab, motivated not by anything other than envy of their economic success and their high standing with the ruler.

After praise comes criticism; thus, the letter moves from commendation of authority to reproach directed at certain groups associated with religious discourse. In the second part of the letter, which follows immediately after the poetic section, we find strongly worded expressions from the Beni Mzab community. These clearly reflect the verbal mistreatment they endured from certain parties. Since the Mozabites—and Muslims in general—consider religion a primary priority, they could not remain silent in the face of anything affecting their faith.

Returning to the expressions used, we note the direct address to the Dey (“O prince, you...”) and to his entourage (“and the people of your inner circle, including every scribe, minister, treasurer, guard, and every distinguished scholar among the judges of truth and the governors of justice”). This formulation brings together all the major figures of the court and allows us to understand the political organization during the Deylik period, including senior statesmen, members of the government, and what may be described as the Dey's private advisers.

What is particularly striking is the repeated use of the imperative “look” (*unzur*), then “look all of you”, as if the Beni Mzab were addressing a respected elder or an ordinary interlocutor rather than a sovereign ruler. However, this does not indicate a lack of respect, as the lengthy praise preceding the grievance clearly demonstrates the opposite. Rather, it reflects the nature of the relationship between the Dey and the Beni Mzab community, and the trust placed by the ruling authority in them.

This also implicitly suggests the existence of a long-standing agreement between both parties, whereby the Beni Mzab were authorized to lodge complaints directly with the Dey regarding any party—individual or group—that might harm them, without passing through intermediaries such as judges, ministers, or other officials of the state apparatus.

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<sup>1</sup> Abd al-Qadir Saadallah, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 197.

The complaint appears in two main passages. The first is expressed in general terms and states: “regarding what has befallen the Beni Mzab in terms of grave slander, insults, and abusive language.” This passage presents a general account of the mistreatment the Beni Mzab were subjected to when attending prayer in the Hanafi and Maliki mosques, whether for congregational prayers or Friday. The letter does not specify a particular mosque or legal school. In some copies the word “mosque” appears in the singular, while in others it appears in the plural. This variation may indicate that the mistreatment came from opponents across different schools without exception.

Such behavior placed them under constant questioning regarding the details of their ritual practice—such as raising the hands, folding them, or moving the index finger—since their practices differed from those of other legal schools, based on their own interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah. This may well have been the main reason for sending the letter to Dey Ali. The phrase “they said: when we enter the mosque for prayer, they begin to distract us and address us with rude speech” further reinforces the earlier complaint. The expression “they said” here reflects the voice of members of the Beni Mzab community residing in the city and practicing various crafts and trades, who regularly attended the mosques of the Casbah.

The perpetrators of this harm are not identified in the letter: were they ordinary individuals or mosque scholars? Moreover, the type of harm described is purely verbal rather than physical. This invites us to imagine the broader context of sectarian relations within the Ottoman Casbah and the daily reality of different legal schools during the Deylik period—a subject worthy of further study.

The first clear request then follows: “Consider with insight... and grant justice to the oppressed against the oppressor.” The Beni Mzab thus appeal to the Dey and his officials, including governors and judges, to investigate the matter carefully. They position themselves as victims of injustice at the hands of others, whether individuals or groups.

The second request states: “and prevent those who disturb them,” and if this is properly fulfilled, “they will join the people in the houses of God among those who pray.” This condition was set by the Beni Mzab for their return to attending congregational mosques.

It is worth noting that the city’s public bathhouses and purification facilities were under the management of the Beni Mzab community. These were operated by them and under their responsibility; therefore, their operation could be suspended if the Dey did not respond to their demands—an issue of great importance, since there is no prayer without ritual purification.<sup>1</sup> In addition, they also held a significant share of various crafts and trades within the city.

Here, we reach a historical point that raises an existential question. It is well known that the Beni Mzab, wherever they settled, established their own mosques, prayer spaces, and cemeteries. All

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<sup>1</sup> On the importance of baths and their monopoly by the Beni Mzab, see: Mohamed Ouqqad, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–111.

indications suggest that their presence in the capital predates the Ottoman period, with some sources dating it back to the 8th century AH / 14th century CE.<sup>1</sup>

This leads us to ask: did the Beni Mzab perform their prayers for all those centuries in the mosques of others? And if they already had their own places of worship, why would they expose themselves to such treatment in the mosques of other communities? Or was it, perhaps, due to the distance of Ibadi mosques from the areas where craftsmen worked, forcing them to perform their prayers in nearby mosques belonging to Malikis or Hanafis?

The latter hypothesis appears more plausible, especially by analogy with the present situation. Today, the distance between Ibadi mosques and workplaces often compels traders and workers to pray in the nearest mosques, a practice that likely existed in the Ottoman period as well. This practical reality may have made them more vulnerable to provocation from others.

In my investigation, I searched for the mosque or mosques frequented by the Beni Mzab community and found that the city of Algiers contained a mosque known as the *Jāmi‘ al-Barrānī* (the “Outsider Mosque”). It was so named to distinguish it from the inner mosque of the Casbah. Located outside the Ottoman citadel, it was attended by various *barrānī* groups such as the Biskris, Mzabis, Kabyles, and Ghawatis, among others. These groups were not permitted to pray in the inner Casbah mosque for security reasons, as mentioned in the sources. The mosque was established around 1653 CE and is located at Bab Jdid in the upper part of the Casbah.<sup>2</sup>

From this, we may better understand the source of the insults and harassment experienced by the Mzabis in mosques—assuming, hypothetically, that they were indeed attending the *Barrānī* Mosque alongside other outsider communities. In that case, the hostility would likely have come from fellow *barrānīs* rather than from the urban inhabitants of the city itself. However, this remains a hypothesis that requires further research and verification.

Following the complaint comes the urgent appeal to the Dey to grant justice against those who wronged them, reminding him of his position as the caliph-like authority of the Muslims, to whom the grievances of the subjects are ultimately addressed as the highest judge. They place full trust in him to restore their rights and put an end to such mistreatment.

At the same time, they affirm that if he fails to fulfill his duty, they will entrust their affair to God alone, without resorting to violence or inciting public unrest against him, which could otherwise lead to sedition and the loss of innocent lives. They are clearly aware of the serious consequences of such actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Aicha Gattas, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Abdelkader Saadallah Abu al-Qasim, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, pp. 59–60. It is located in the Kasbah district at the corner of Mohamed Taleb Street and Mosque Street. It was converted into a church in 1839 under the name “Sainte-Croix”, then later reconverted into a mosque.

The other complaint appears to be attributed to the Dey himself: “And as for what you have objected to regarding the Beni Mzab’s absence from Friday prayers and congregational worship in the mosques and places where supplications are answered...” In manuscript (B), however, the phrase appears as: “And as for what you have said...”

This variation allows for two possible interpretations. Either the Dey himself objected to the Beni Mzab’s absence from Friday and congregational prayers, or the objection came from certain Maliki or Hanafi jurists and scholars. The second interpretation appears more plausible. In other words, the manuscript under study may have been preceded by another letter in which the Hanafi or Maliki scholars—or one of them—complained about the Beni Mzab community. The response therefore uses the expressions “what you have said” or “what you have objected” as a reply to those jurists and religious scholars.

What is particularly noteworthy is that the issue was not limited to absence from congregational prayers, but also extended to what the text calls “places where supplications are answered.” This clearly refers to *zawiyas* or shrines of saints visited for blessing and intercession. Such practices are generally considered impermissible within Ibadi doctrine, as well as in other Islamic schools.<sup>1</sup>

The author does not deny this accusation, stating: “your statement in this regard is indeed true,” followed by the admission that “their actions are not sound.” He then provides the explanation: “they said: when we enter the mosque for prayer, they begin to engage us and address us with rude speech.” This account appears to contrast with what William Shaler reported in his memoirs, where he noted that “the Beni Mzab refused to perform prayer in public mosques and had their own private mosque... where they held their meetings and performed prayer.”<sup>2</sup>

It is also worth noting that the Mzab community possessed three mosques in the city: one located within a mill belonging to members of the community, another inside the “Furn al-Shu‘ba” (the communal bakery), and a third within Dar al-‘Arsh, designated for accommodating Beni Mzab travelers. There was also the mosque of Sidi Bennour, which contains a cemetery dating back to before 1640, and the Old Mosque on Tangier Street (now Ahmed Chayeb Street), whose construction is believed—according to oral tradition—to have taken place between 1810 and 1816. It is well known that the Beni Mzab do not object to praying behind an imam from any legal school

Through my limited readings, I came across an earlier letter dating back to 971 AH / 1563 CE, which addresses the same subject as the manuscript under study. It was written during the reign of Pasha Hassan ibn Khayr al-Din and sent by some ‘azzāba to the qā’id Yahya, who had led a harsh campaign

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<sup>1</sup> William Shaler, *Memoirs of the American Consul in Algiers (1816–1824)*, translated and introduced by Ismail al-Arabi, National Company for Publishing and Distribution, Algiers, 1982, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Mohamed Ouqqad, *op. cit.*, p. 202, citing William Shaler, p. 112, and Hamdan Khodja, *The Mirror*, p. 227.

toward the Mzab Valley in order to collect a tax amounting to twenty thousand gold and silver coins. It is unclear whether this was an annual tax or merely a pretext to conceal the true motive behind the campaign.<sup>1</sup>

In the text of that letter, the ‘azzāba state: “...that certain informants are placing in your heart and in the hearts of people the idea that the Beni Mzab are not upon correct doctrine, that they do not follow any of the imams, and that they reject the Companions and do not perform Friday prayer, along with other forms of slander against Muslims.”<sup>2</sup>This clearly indicates that the phenomenon was not new during the Deylik period; rather, it had existed since the early Ottoman presence in Algeria.

There is also another text addressed to Pasha Hassan al-Doulatī, dated 1206 AH / 1792 CE, concerning the granting of the Mzab region to the Eastern Beylik under the authority of Salah Bey. At the end of this letter, there is a formulation similar to that found in the two manuscripts under study, stating: “...then release our people who are living safely in the city of Algiers, those who serve its crafts with kindness... and the earth of God is vast...” The letter also includes a poetic section concluded with two Qur’anic verses.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to the style and method of the manuscript’s author, we observe a relative simplicity in vocabulary and sentence structure, despite the presence of rhymed prose in the opening section—a common stylistic feature of the modern period that reflects the cultural level of its author. This raises the question of the level of education and intellectual development in the Mzab Valley compared to the Beni Mzab communities in the northern urban centers (al-Tell) during the 18th and 19th centuries. We find that the Mzab oases experienced significant scholarly flourishing in the modern period, largely due to eminent scholars and religious leaders. In contrast, the communities of the Tell region were mostly composed of merchants and artisans, many of whom had limited education and were driven—often by necessity or compulsion—to migrate in search of lawful livelihood.

This comparison further reinforces the conclusion that the author of the letter was most likely one of the scholars of the Mzab Valley.

The author of the letter does not cite Qur’anic verses or Prophetic hadiths as direct evidential proof, except insofar as he employs them through interpretive adaptation and rhetorical incorporation into the structure of his discourse. In the first section, he uses Qur’anic expressions in a way that serves the rhythmic balance of his prose, such as: “so that it might not incline with them” and “until it became closer to him than the jugular vein.” In the second section, he includes the phrase: “He has made you vicegerents on earth.”

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<sup>1</sup> Belhadj Nacer, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Qur’an, Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 10.

The following Qur'anic verse appears at the conclusion of the letter, serving as its closing seal: "The believers are but brothers, so make reconciliation between your brothers and fear Allah that you may receive mercy."<sup>1</sup> Through this verse, the author reminds the Dey 'Ali not to be drawn into the fire of discord, and to strive—as his predecessors did—to act in accordance with divine command without sectarian or group bias. This reflects the broader Islamic principle that there is no distinction between Arab and non-Arab except through piety, as affirmed in the verse: "O mankind, indeed We created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you."<sup>2</sup>

We also pause at the final passage of the letter in manuscripts (A) and (D), which is omitted in manuscript (B). In two concise lines, it states: "The Beni Mzab have entered your land in faith, and they serve your crafts with benevolence. If you do not grant them their rights, then release them so that they may depart, for the earth of God is vast. Do not expel them. Peace, mercy, and blessings be upon you at all times. And our final supplication is: praise be to God, Lord of the worlds."

In this passage, the author addresses Dey 'Ali by recalling the contributions of the Beni Mzab to the Ottoman presence in Algiers, particularly their social and economic role in the city. This coexistence spans approximately two centuries, from the arrival of the Ottomans in 1518 CE until the period of the letter in the early 18th century.

The text then introduces a form of implicit pressure, culminating in the suggestion of a voluntary collective migration from Algiers: "If you do not grant them their rights, then release them so that they may depart, for the earth of God is vast." This constitutes a veiled warning regarding the consequences of ignoring their demands. However, it is also likely that Dey 'Ali would ultimately respond positively, given the significant economic weight of the Beni Mzab community, whose absence would seriously affect the economic structure of the capital and the wider Regency.

Thus, the Beni Mzab appear to negotiate from a position of strength, fully aware of the implications of their potential departure from Algiers and its consequences for the city's social, economic, and political balance.

What strengthened their position within the Ottoman court was their well-known discipline, the rigidity of their internal organization, and the strength of their mutual solidarity. Added to this were their historical stances and services—most notably their heroic resistance to the Kouloughli revolt of 1629. All of this enabled them to attain a respected economic status and to deepen their political influence, eventually securing representation within the advisory bodies of decision-makers at the center of power.

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an, Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13.

<sup>2</sup> Haj Moussa Ben Omar, *op. cit.*, p. 85

After this brief overview drawn from the Beni Mzab letter to Dey Ali, and having focused primarily on the second part of the text as its substantive core, several important questions naturally arise. Why did this situation persist without resolution? In other words, why were no rulers—from the time of the Beylerbey Khayr al-Din to Dey Hussein—able to put an end to such misconduct against one of the most important barrānī communities of Algiers?

Was this due to weakness in the face of Hanafī and Maliki jurists, or a form of administrative negligence? Or perhaps the authorities were only offering temporary, ad hoc solutions that quickly faded, out of fear that Ibadi doctrine might spread more widely among the population? After all, the official school of the state was Hanafī, while the majority of the population followed the Maliki school, and tension between these two legal traditions persisted until the end of Ottoman rule. Addressing the grievances of the Beni Mzab might have been perceived as indirectly legitimizing a third competing doctrinal presence—something the ruling elite may not have been willing to accept. On the other hand, another question remains: were the demands of the Beni Mzab ever officially addressed? And if so, where is the formal response from the Dey to this community? The recurring nature of mistreatment and negative interactions against the Ibadis may have ultimately led them to establish their own places of worship and prayer spaces, away from the attention and interference of those who frequently harassed them.

### **Conclusion**

The letter of the Beni Mzab community addressed to Dey Ali represents one of dozens—if not more—of administrative correspondences exchanged between the Mzab community in Algiers and the Ottoman ruling authority during its period of control over the city. These documents generally reflect the complaints of a marginalized group whose rights were perceived as being violated either by the central authority or by other social groups. The Mzabites, as shown in this case, typically resorted to correspondence only when defending their interests against such infringements.

From the analysis of the letter, several key elements emerge:

Sender and recipient: The Beni Mzab community, one of the most important barrānī groups in Algiers, addressed Dey Ali, the highest authority in Ottoman Algeria.

Content: The letter is divided into two main sections. The first consists of prose and poetry combining praise of the Dey and his army, while the second contains a formal complaint regarding the behavior of certain individuals and groups toward the Mzab community during their attendance at congregational and Friday prayers.

Significance of the letter: The document effectively reflects the fate of a socially and economically active community whose presence in the city dates back to earlier periods. Their continued presence

was closely linked to the Dey's response to their grievances. The implicit condition contained in the letter suggests the possibility of collective migration should their demands not be addressed.

The interest shown by Mzabi scholars in preserving and copying this letter, despite the loss of some parts, is itself evidence of its historical value. It also reflects the continuity of earlier positions and serves as a reference for addressing similar issues in the future, as later seen in correspondence addressed to Dey Hassan al-Doulatli.

General context: The letter highlights the extent of Ottoman power and control across the Mediterranean basin, both on land and sea, as well as the sectarian landscape of early Deylik Algiers and the tensions between different religious affiliations. It also reveals the degree of respect and recognition that the Beni Mzab community was able to secure from the ruling authority—not by chance, but through their recognized contributions and historical services.

Finally, I do not claim to have fully exhausted all aspects of this manuscript. Each reading reveals new dimensions and details. I therefore encourage researchers to further investigate such documents, as they contain invaluable historical material that cannot be overlooked. I also particularly recommend further study of Ibadi-Mzabi religious architecture in Algiers, as well as its political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions during the Ottoman period.

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