



HAL
open science

Wa'da (mawssim) and the Bedouin Heritage in Algeria

Yazid Ben Hounet

► **To cite this version:**

Yazid Ben Hounet. Wa'da (mawssim) and the Bedouin Heritage in Algeria. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 2008, 18 (1), pp.139-156. halshs-02543910

HAL Id: halshs-02543910

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02543910>

Submitted on 17 Dec 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



PROJECT MUSE®

Wa'da (mawssim) and the Bedouin Heritage in Algeria

Yazid Ben Hounet

Journal of Mediterranean Studies, Volume 18, Number 1, 2008, pp. 139-156
(Article)

Published by Mediterranean Institute, University of Malta



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676507/summary>

WAC^CDA (*MAWSSIM*) AND THE BEDOUIN HERITAGE IN ALGERIA

YAZID BEN HOUNET

Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale, Paris, France

Focusing on playful celebrations, the aim of this article is to shed light on the renewal of *wacdat* (*mawssims*—annual festivals of the local saint patrons) in Algeria. Like rituals in Europe, *wacdat* have recently been and are still today under a process of revitalization. On the basis of an inquiry led in West Algeria, the author analyses the evolution and impact of such feasts on local and national identities. The survey shows the importance of playful celebrations and aesthetic pleasure during the feast and explains how and why the *wacdat* promotes particularly the Bedouin heritage and also tourism.

In his article dealing with *festa* (festival) in the Maltese village of Naxxar (and more generally in Malta), Jeremy Boissevain (1992: 151) wrote:

“The growth of play does something for the Naxxarin in two ways. It promotes both identity and a sense of togetherness. Festive celebrations promote individual identity by providing scope for ordinary folk to dress up, to be on stage, to take part as individuals in a public event; neighbourhood identity by celebrating patron saints and so creating a Durkheimian sense of segmentary solidarity around local symbols; village community by elaborating community celebrations that further intravillage solidarity by being performed for local rivals; and national identity by consciously celebrating aspects of Malta’s cultural heritage for foreigners (...). Playful celebrations (...) create, for a few hours each year, a sense of what Turner (1974: 169) has called existential or spontaneous *communitas*, the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as a homogenous, unstructured and free community”.

The aim of Maltese celebrations is, for Jeremy Boissevain, to re-establish identity, contacts, to achieve momentarily the peace of *communitas*, in a context of rapid change. And playful celebrations have, according to this author, instrumental attributes for these purposes. Such a perspective is helpful for the understanding of contemporary Maltese festivals, but also for the *mawssim*, religious festivals occurring in North Africa. Indeed, the

latter shares—in its nature but also in its actual evolutions—numerous similarities with *fiesta*. And a focus on playful celebrations, and their actual role, would give us a particular insight on identity and *communitas* in North Africa, and particularly in Algeria.

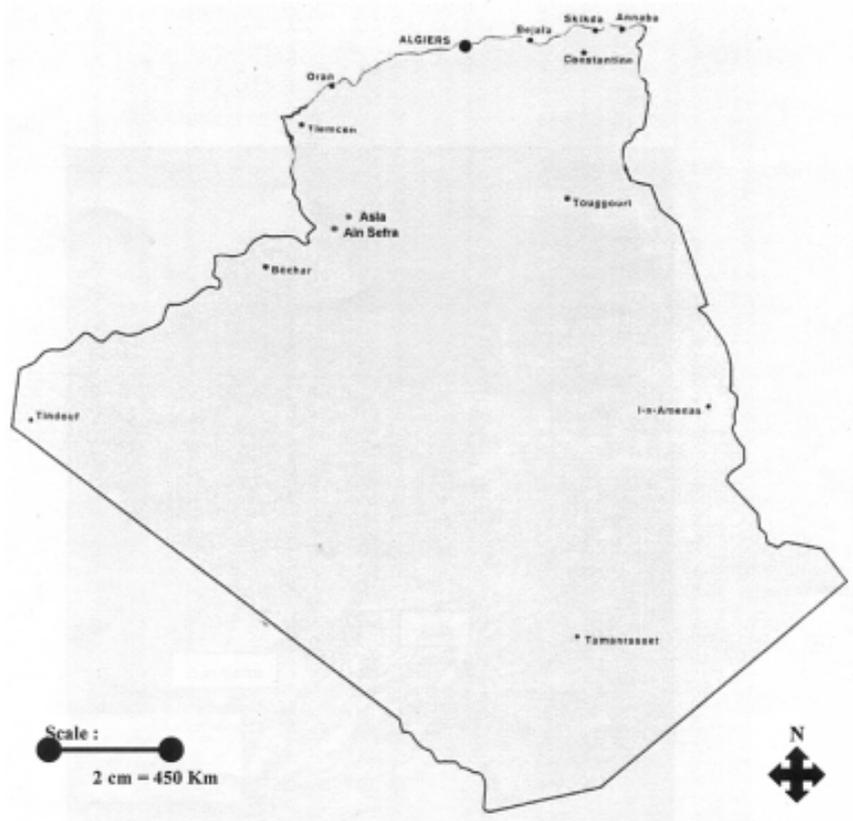
Revitalizing *wa^cda* (*mawssim*) in Algeria

Mawssim, mainly called *wa^cda* (pl. *wa^cdat*) in Algeria, is the annual festival of the local patron saint. The word *mawssim* is better known by anthropologists since it is mainly used in Morocco, the laboratory of Anthropology of North Africa (Westermarck, Montagne, Gellner, Geertz . . .). There are a lot of *wa^cdat* in Algeria, particularly in rural areas but also in towns. *Wa^cda* means pledge. The words ‘*wa^cd*’ (pact) and ‘*wa^cid*’ (promise of punishment)¹ share the same semantic origin (*w^cd*). *Wa^cda* is therefore a commitment to give time and possessions in order to thank the saint and attract his grace.

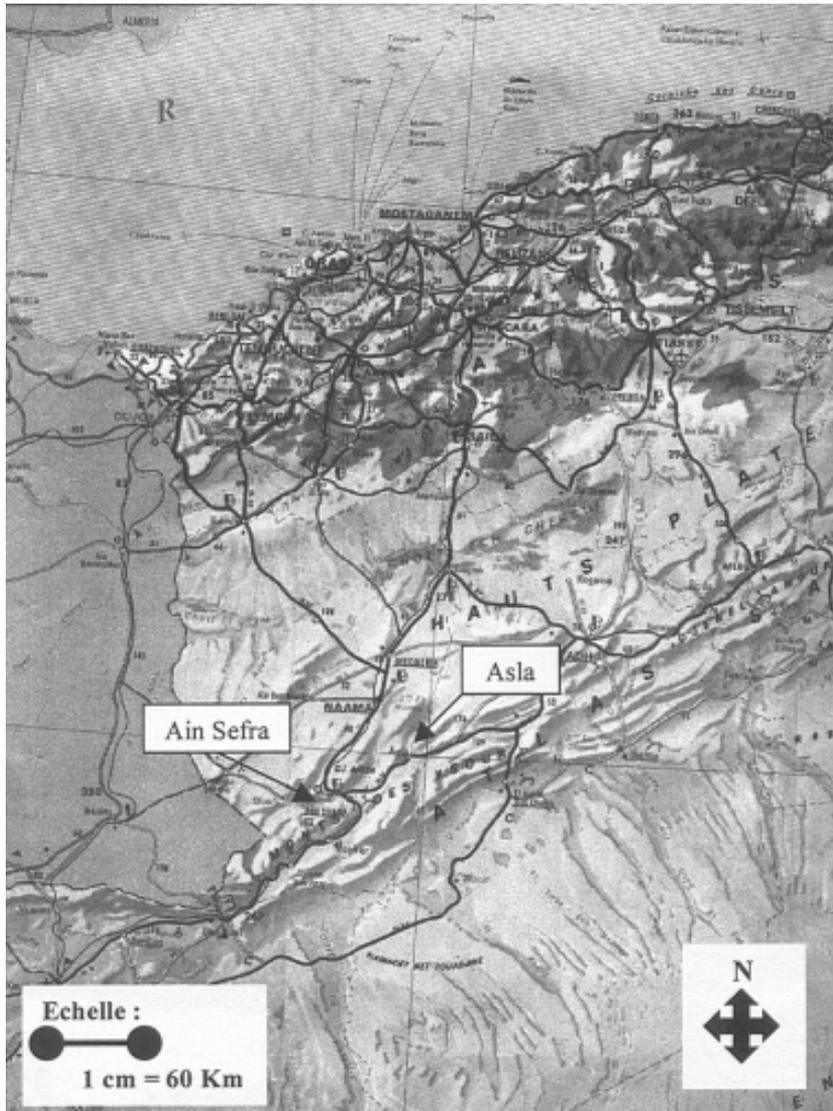
Wa^cdat were formerly, during the FLN² period (1962–1989), considered archaic traditions and orthodox Muslims used to view them as heresies. For both (FLN Party/government and orthodox Muslims), *wa^cdat* were activities of uncultured and uneducated people, activities encouraged by the French authorities (during the colonial period) in order to break the political and national consciousness of the Algerian people.

If such a vision has not totally vanished in Algeria, these festivals have however started recently (in the 90’s) to be valorised by the government, and so, they began to attract more and more people. Like rituals in Europe (Boissevain, 1992), *wa^cdat* have recently been and are still today under a process of revitalization. Some reasons concerning this revitalization can be pointed out: for the government it has been a way to reduce the development of fundamentalist movements; it has also been a means to attract the people’s favours. It has finally been a way to show a more attractive, positive and happy image of Algeria. For people, it offers the possibility to create or recreate social and local ties, collective identities in a context of social change. But above all, it offers them the possibility to play, to laugh and to forget, for a few moments, the difficulties of life (terrorism, insecurity, unemployment, *hogra*³ . . .).

In the High South West, where I did my field research, there are many *wa^cdat*, and among them the one of Sid Ahmad Majdûb is probably the biggest. This *wa^cda* occurs every October in Asla, a small town (around 9,000 inhabitants) located in the Ksour Mounts, the west part of the Saharan Atlas. It is situated around 400 kilometres south of Oran and 70 kilometres east of Ain Sefra (see maps 1 & 2).



Map 1. Algeria.



Map 1. High South West Algeria.

Sid Ahmad Majdûb is a saint who lived in the 16th century. He is also the eponym ancestor of an Arab speaking tribe of around 10,000 persons: the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb (descents of Sid Ahmad Majdûb). Around 40% of the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb live in tents following a semi-nomadic way of life. They used to say that their ancestor, Sid Ahmad Majdûb, is one of the descendants of Abû Bakr Sidiq, the companion of the Prophet Muhammad. They also called themselves Bûbakiyya, in reference to Abû Bakr Sidiq. Sidi Shaykh, well known in Algeria and elsewhere because of the resistance of his descents (the Awlâd Sid Shaykh) in the 19th century, is the nephew (son of the brother) of Sid Ahmad Majdûb. The Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb are also called *mrabtin*⁴ since their presumed ancestor is known to be a saint. The word '*majdûb*' means 'attracted' and it refers to a certain type of saint who are considered attracted by God. They are opposed to the saints '*salik*' (progressing) who become saints after a long progression, a long work. As I formerly wrote, Sid Ahmad Majdûb is a saint 'out of the world', a mystique and a thaumaturge (Ben Hounet, 2003).

The *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb usually starts the third Tuesday of October and ends the Friday after the *zûhr*, the midday prayer, also called the *salat al-jûmû^ca* (the Friday prayer). During these days, lots of activities occur, like the *ziara* (the visit to the holy shrine and his grave), the collective meals and, of course, the playful celebrations. I will here focus on the playful celebrations, even if the *ziara* is often seen as leisure, particularly for women since *ziara* is sometimes one of the few distractions they have (Emile Dermenghem, 1954: 330).

Playful Celebrations during the Festival

There are some important playful celebrations during the *wa^cda*: the dances and music, the collective meals, the storytelling, the cane fighting and the *fantasia*. Among them, *fantasia* is certainly the greatest playful event of the festival. It attracts numerous people, participants and above all spectators. All these playful celebrations share the same origin. They refer to the Bedouin⁵ way of life. And in some manners they participate to the revival of the Bedouin life-style.

Dances and Music: Sharing Bodily Expression

Bedouin dances and music are played all along during the festival (picture 1). In the *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb and more generally in west Algeria, the *alawi* style is the most famous. The word is used for both the dance style



Fig. 1. Dances during the *wa' da* of Sid Ah mad Majdûh, Asla.

and the music. The music is mainly played with *gasba* (reed's flute), sometimes *raïta* (traditional small trumpet), and *galal* (small tambourine covered with goat's skin and which can be carried with one hand). Different small bands, musicians and dancers, play all over the festival's space. Spectators can join the dances and ask for some particular music. Dances and more generally the festival's space are forbidden to women. Thus men dance only with other men. It is a men's leisure. Before or after the dances, money is usually given to the bands. Before dancing, one must usually wear a *lahbaya* (pl. *lahbayat*): the Bedouin tunic. This object and the rifle are very important for the festival. They are regarded as prestigious bestowing possessions and have an important symbolic and political dimension (Ben Hounet, 2008). They contribute to the Bedouin identity and hierarchy amongst nomads and settlers (part of the settlers used to be nomads). The dances, and particularly the *alawi* style, are well standardized. The dances evoke the horse's steps, from slow to rapid steps. And of course, the horse is for the Bedouins the most prestigious animal. Besides the signification of the dance, the role of music and the tunic, it is obvious that this activity has a powerful impact on men, dancers and spectators. It offers them the possibility to play together, to act together and share a moment of bodily expression. In this way, dance is a powerful instrument of communication and reinforcement of human solidarity. Through dances, people (and particularly those who dance) enter in the collective happiness and solidarity of the festival. They experience directly the taste of

the festival and they free themselves, for few moments and in some extent, from usual public behaviours. Through dances and playful celebrations, they begin to consider themselves like being at home. This fact is particularly clear when we see people (and Bedouins in particular) acting as long time friends after having danced together even if they did not know each other before. I remember the first time I participated in a dance during the festival of Sid Ahmad Majdûb. I was dancing with a 20 year old young Bedouin and, each time I met him afterwards, during the festival, he greeted me. This experience occurred several times with other people too. Through the dance I entered in the festival's community.

***Collective Meal and Storytelling:
Tasting Salt and the Bedouin Way of Life***

During the *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb, people are also invited in big tents to share meals. Each fraction (*farqa*) of the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb has its own tent where its members welcome people. The meals offered— which were prepared by women—are considered as *sadaqa*, a pure gift in honour of Sid Ahmad Majdûb and, through him, to God. Sheep are sacrificed for the collective meals which are organised all along the festival, for lunches and dinners. Sharing the collective meal—‘dûg al-malh’, ‘taste the salt’ as one says locally—, and particularly sharing the sacrificed meat has an important meaning in North Africa (see Rachik, 1990) and in a large part of the Mediterranean area. It signifies the entrance into the community. A collective prayer or sermon (*ma^crûf*) always follows the collective meal. The *ma^crûf* is in fact the conclusion of the collective meal. It is a prayer distinct from the five prayers of the day which involves all the persons who are present and shared the meal. This ritual gives to the collective meal a sacred meaning or aspect. It also gives the persons who participate in it a feeling of sharing much more than a meal. Do they share symbolic and/or social link(s)? I would suggest both.

Storytelling is also another activity which attracts lots of people during the festival. The popular poesies (*shi'r al-malhûn*) are really appreciated. They mainly deal with the Bedouin way of life or the stories of local saints, and particularly those of Sid Ahmad Majdûb. They mostly commemorate the ancient time: when Bedouins were told to be free and numerous (before colonisation) and when saints were powerful and listened to. Love for the woman, for the country, considerations for the *fursan* (Bedouin horse rider), saints and God are the main topics of the stories of popular poesies. They also commemorate the Bedouin resistance to French imperialism: particularly those of the Awlâd Sidi Shaykh (1860 decade) and of Sidi Abu ^cAmama

(1880 decade) which occurred in the region and in which the Awlad Sid Ahmad Majdûb have participated. Remembering and exalting these events make Bedouins, and among them the Awlad Sid Ahmad Majdûb, proud of their past and origins. Some Bedouins are particularly involved in storytelling and they are often paid by people in order to thank them for the stories or poesies they told. Through storytelling and poesies, the taste of the Bedouin way of life is revitalized for a few moments.

Cane Fighting and Fantasia: Revitalizing the Bedouin Strength

Cane fighting is a leisure well appreciated during the festival. The fighter's equipment is really light: usual clothes and a wooden cane. Fights are non violent. The aim of this game is to show dexterity by touching the sparring partner with the cane. It is a revival of Bedouin fights which formerly took place with Arab swords. But this game is less appreciated than the *fantasia*, the competition of the Bedouin cavalries (picture 2). Without contest, *fantasia* is the main playful celebration during the festival. It attracts numerous people. The *fantasia* of the Sid Ahmad Majdûb's festival is the most impressive one. Several cavalries come from the entire west Algeria in order to participate in it. The *fursan* (horse riders) are organized by fraction (of tribe) or by village. They all compete during the festival. Thus cavalry's competitions are also, in some manners, inter-fraction, intertribal or inter-village competitions. The cavalries of the Awlâd Nhar—a tribe located south of Tlemcen (north of Asla)—are considered the most impressive ones. *Fantasia* is a competition between tribes or villages but it symbolizes also the resistance's history of the region. As it was said, numerous insurrections occurred in



Fig. 2. *Fantasia, Asla.*

the region: those of Abd al-Qadir (between 1832 and 1847), 'the Awlad Sidi Shaykh (1860' decade) and of Sidi Abû 'Amama (1880' decade).⁷ *Fantasia* thus is a revival of these heroic moments.

Festival as Aesthetic Pleasure

Anne Marie Green (2004) defines the festival as an aesthetic pleasure (*la fête comme jouissance esthétique*). She emphasizes that aesthetic pleasure is always present during festival and that it refers to sublimation and to the idea of a 'sensible knowledge'. She writes:

« Dans les situations de fêtes, il y a un dépassement de la répétition de la vie quotidienne et une tentative de manipulation du quotidien afin de se trouver dans un mouvement qui n'a plus prise sur le réel mais sur le symbolique, pour le seul plaisir ou la seule jouissance » (2004: 36).⁸

She also argues that studies of the social identity constructions during festivals must necessarily include the aesthetic pleasure's analysis. Her approach is useful for the analysis of the festival's 'sensible knowledge' and it sheds light on a topic not so much covered by anthropologists: the aesthetic dimension of festival.

'A society can neither create nor recreate itself without at the same time creating ideal(s)', wrote Emile Durkheim (1925 [1912]: 603).⁹ Festivals and rituals are important moments in order to create or recreate ideal(s). But anthropologists have probably and mainly emphasized the values ideal(s) and not so much the aesthetic ideal(s). However, if festival is a moment when society creates or recreates ideal(s), we must also include aesthetic ideal(s), and, of course, aesthetic pleasure associated to it. Festival and above all playful celebrations promote identity and a sense of togetherness wrote Jeremy Boissevain. But they promote such things because they offer also aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic ideals.

As it was said, the most important leisure moment during the festival is *fantasia*. People are attracted by *fantasia* because it gives them some pleasure. When I watched *fantasia* for the first time, I was impressed but I did not understand why people watched it during one, two or more than two hours. After twenty minutes, I got bored by it since it is a repetitive event. Bedouin cavalries alternatively race (a coordinate race) on the *fantasia* ground, and finish with a coordinated firing. I did not understand that spectators were not only interested by the race or the firing, but that they were in fact much more interested by the aesthetic aspect of the race, of the horse riders (*fûrsan*) and

of their horses (*fûrs*). The discussions of spectators, and particularly of old men, dealt mainly with the coordination of the cavalry, of the race and of the firing. They also mainly talked about the aspect of the horse riders and of the horses. Aesthetic is thus one of *fantasia*'s main topics of discussion. It affords comparisons, detailed observations and judgement of the horses, the horse riders and the rifles (*mukahla*). It offers also the possibility to discuss and compare judgements; what is a beautiful race, a beautiful horse or a beautiful horse rider? In such a perspective, horse rider's objects play a great role too, and particularly the *mukahla* (rifle). Each Bedouin horse rider parades in front of the spectators after his race and generally shows his rifle to the public. Three sorts of rifle (*mukahla*) exist locally: the *garda*, the *zwija* and the *tubji*. The *garda* defines the rifle which is bent in order to place the cartridges; the *zwija* is the rifle with double cannon; and the *tubji* is a rifle filled up with powder and iron wires (Ben Hounet, 2008). *Fantasia* is also an aesthetic competition. It gives people pleasure and a 'sensible knowledge' of the festival since it offers them the possibilities not only to have emotions but above all to share them. This fact is particularly clear when we listen to the reactions and discussions of spectators.

The approach of festival as an aesthetic pleasure is also obvious when we observe dances and music. Dances and music are entertainments and thus normally offers pleasure to people. But they also give aesthetic pleasure, a beauty's impression. As said formerly, before dancing, dancers dress a *lahbaya* (traditional tunic). The tunic's undulations are particularly appreciated and make the dance more aesthetic and the dancers more handsome.

Revitalizing the Bedouin Heritage and Identity

Playful celebrations, leisure and aesthetic pleasures afford people a delicious taste and opinion of the Bedouin way of life. They promote the Bedouin identity and heritage. But what is the purpose of such a promotion? Why are Bedouin identity and heritage promoted during the *wa'dat* and particularly during the *wa'da* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb? My own view is that the revitalization of Bedouin heritage and identity can be explained by three facts: the important size of Bedouins in the region; the history of the region; and the government's valorisation of the Bedouin Heritage.

The Bedouins Today

As I formerly wrote, around 40% of the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb live in tents and follow a semi-nomadic way of life. Furthermore, around 20% of

the entire inhabitants of the department (*wilaya* of Naama) live in tents and pastoralism is the first economy of the region. Of course nomads, Bedouins, do not have the same life today. Nomadism has declined and the movement of sheep is now mainly done by sheep trucks, the famous GAKs. Furthermore, the population living in tents increases in the department (*wilaya* of Naama), but more slowly than the settlers. Thus even if they increase Bedouins are more and more marginalized whereas they represented the majority of the population of the department before the Independence (Ben Hounet, forthcoming 2009). However, numerous people still live in tents and the Bedouin way of life still persists today. For nomadic people, festivals are thus good occasions to meet again and to share moments together. They are also the occasion to promote their heritage and identity. During the *wa'da* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb, almost all the tents of the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb are brought together around the festival's place. They are organized following the fraction they belong to. The Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb semi-nomads are used to saying that they must come to the festival every year. That is the '*wa'd*' (the pact). But semi-nomads from other tribes and towns' inhabitants also join the festival. Numerous towns' inhabitants were Bedouins before or have (or had) a Bedouin kin or origin. Traditions, and particularly the festival's traditions, have an instrumental role. Tradition is an interpretation of the past contingent on contemporary purposes, as Lenclud puts it (1987). The contemporary purposes can here be viewed as the progressive marginalization of Bedouins, the progressive change of the economy and of the socio-cultural organization of the region (towns and administrations concentrate more and more power; pastoralism is more and more dependant of the evolution of national economy and of the prices fixed by intermediaries).

Festival is thus a means for Bedouins to promote their cultural and social identity in a context of progressive marginalization. It is also for the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb a means to promote their holy origin and thus their social prestige. *Mrabtîn* (descendants of saints),¹⁰ in Algeria today, are not enjoying the same consideration as before. If Sid Ahmad Majdûb is an appreciated saint, his descents are not considered prestigious people anymore. Festival is for them the occasion to promote their prestige.

The History of the Region

Festival also promotes the history of the region, and particularly the part played by the Bedouin tribes. As I formerly wrote, numerous Bedouin insurrections and resistances occurred in the region. Abd al-Qadir was the first resistant and one of the state's founders (founder of the first Algerian

state, 1832–1839).¹¹ His resistance started in West Algeria and some tribes of the region of Asla participated in it. Some tribes of the Awlad Sidi Shaykh also organized the resistance in the region from 1850' and Sidi Abû °Amama continued it. In the beginning of the 20th century, Mohamed Ould Ali (who belonged to the °Amûr confederation)¹² started an insurrection in the Ksour Mounts, near the Moroccan frontier and was killed with his sons. *Ghazw* (razzias) regularly occurred against French authorities and interests. Today, these acts of resistance still make the inhabitants of the region proud of their history and ancestors. All these acts make Bedouins particularly proud because the resistance fighters were Bedouins. Of course some Bedouins (from different tribes)¹³ also collaborated with colonial authorities, but people prefer to remember and talk about the heroic moments notably through festivals and particularly *fantasias*. The actual *fursan* (horse riders) are dressed like the former Bedouins who participated to the insurrections or *ghazw*. Such a vision of history fits to the Bedouin perception of honour and courage (Stewart, 1994). These insurrectional events have also important meanings for Bedouins today. In the context of their marginalization, such events can be used to legitimate their participation in the nation and State building, and thus their legitimate rights to be helped by the state and local authorities.¹⁴

The government's valorisation of the Bedouin Heritage

The Algerian State constructed itself on the national liberation war's myth (Moussaoui, 2006). The national liberation war and the acts of resistance which preceded it have great importance for the legitimization of the State and for national imaginary. For the government, Abd al-Qadir was the Algerian nation's founder and the acts of resistance such as the Awlâd Sidi Shaykh and of Sidi Abû °Amama were among the first attempts of the Algerian nation to struggle and defeat colonization and French imperialism. The national liberation war is considered as the glorious, the last and victorious attempt to defeat colonization and to recover freedom. In such a perspective, Bedouin heritage, particularly the *fantasia*, is valorised by the State. *Fantasia* is actually seen as a commemoration of the first acts of resistance and insurrection. Furthermore, *wa°da* and particularly *fantasia* are rituals which enhanced both the Bedouin heritage and the myth of the Algerian nation foundation. They promote both local and national identities. Thus, the significance of this festival has also changed. Formerly, it was only the festival of the patron saint. But it appears more and more as a local festival which also enhances both Bedouin and national heritages and identities.

Honouring the patron saint is not today's only purpose of the festival. The meaning of the festival is thus adapted to actual contingencies. That is the reason why many of the State representatives, like national deputies or ministers, come every year to assist the *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb.

Heritage and Tourism

Festivals and Tourism

The *wa^cdat* are now also valorised for tourism purposes. On the posters of the *wilaya* of Naama's tourist office, one can see pictures of wall engravings,¹⁵ one of the thermal source of Ain Ouarka, one of the ksour (q^sûr—traditional fortified villages)¹⁶ and one of the *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb. The one of the *wa^cda* shows a horse rider (*fûrsan*) during a *fantasia*. The *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb is thus not only valorised as a tourist activity but also as regional heritage. It has its place among the wall engravings, the natural sources and the traditional villages. The fact—that the *wa^cda* is considered a cultural heritage by the regional authorities—suits the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb. It promotes their festival and thus their saint and ancestor. More generally, it suits all Bedouins of the region because it is considered as a recognition of the Bedouin regional identity and as a recognition of the Bedouin traditions.

The *wa^cda* also enhance tourism's proposals of the region. Tourists during the festival are mainly Algerians. There are few tourists coming from outside the country. This is due to the fact that Algeria is not a country where tourism is well developed. Moreover the security situation did and does not encourage foreigners to come. But national tourists are quite numerous during the *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb.¹⁷ And thus, the festival also promotes the economy of the region. Numerous tradesmen come to the festival and a big market is organized around the celebration's space. Does tourism have an impact on the festival? Certainly, in the sense that it publicizes it around the country and that the inhabitants, the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb (semi-nomad and sedentary persons), and the local council of Asla must organize themselves in order to welcome outside people. Playful celebrations attract people, but numerous persons come also for religious purposes—people still come for the *ziara* (visit of the shrine and his grave) and the *baraka* (god blessing) of the saint.

Through playful celebrations and entertainment, religious sentiments and feelings can be developed among people. The repetitions of the *ma^crûf* after the collective meals and participation in the big *ma^crûf* which occurs at the

end of the festival, give people a feeling of the sacred. Many people know that all playful celebrations are in honour of the saint and that everything that happens during the festival is under his patronage. Finally, as tourists are mainly Algerians, tourism does not really transform the organization of the festival. Tourism is not here an anti-structural activity since cultural behaviours and values of tourists are mostly the same as of the inhabitants of the region. Furthermore, the *wa'da* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb attracts more and more religious people and particularly *shaykh* (honourable men) and *muqaddam* (masters) from different Sufi orders (Ben Hounet, forthcoming).

Festivals in Algeria and in the Mediterranean: Promoting Heritage

Wa'da and more generally local festivals have increased in Algeria. More and more people participate in them and more and more localities organize their own festival. We observe in Algeria, but also around the Mediterranean area, a revival of local festivals and particularly of festivals in honour of saints. These festivals were analyzed by so many anthropologists (Westermarck, Dermenghem, Reysoo, etc.) that it seems difficult to add any new element for the understanding of these rituals. But I think that the significations of these festivals have changed and that their revivals can be explained by new facts. Valorisations, constructions, reconstructions, affirmations, reaffirmations of local identities are a means for the local or national authorities but also for people to create territorial values and specific identities in a context of rapid transformation and competition due to Globalization. I started this paper with the quotation of Jeremy Boissevain. And above all, I focused on one of his sentences: "Festival promotes identity and a sense of togetherness". But this sentence leads us inevitably to ask other questions: who promotes the identity and the sense of togetherness, and, for what purpose? Why do we actually observe a revival of these festivals? I suggested some answers concerning the Algerian case in the beginning of this paper: *for the government it was a way to reduce the development of fundamentalist movements; it was also a means to attract the people's favours. It was finally a way to show a more attractive, positive and happy image of Algeria. For people, it offers the possibility to create or recreate social and local ties, collective identities in a context of change. But above all, it offers the possibility to play, to laugh and to forget, for a few moments, the difficulties of life.*

But a comparison with the Mediterranean area leads us to suggest other reasons concerning these festivals' revivals. Rapid changes due to Globalization have led to a competition and specialisation between territories.

Each territory, in order to promote itself, must valorise its own heritage. Here heritage can be seen as bearing an economical value directly linked to cultural and tourism functions, especially when promoted by authorities. Festivals are experiencing this patrimonial process as it promotes local identity and specificity thus adding value to the territory and making it more attractive and better known on the national and even international scene. It is also interesting to note that the development of heritage comes along with the Globalization process. In fact, this sudden heritage promotion or interest brings up another point which is the relation men have with time and history (Choay, 1999; Hartog, 2003). As Françoise Choay explains it in her book *L'allégorie du Patrimoine* (1999: 181), the interest of promoting heritage can be seen as a defensive act against the frenetic rhythm of Globalization, a means to reassure oneself by sending a positive image.

Conclusion

Festivals (*wa^cdat*) in Algeria promote the Bedouin Heritage and local identities. These festivals are actually under a process of revitalization for different purposes. In the case of the *wa^cda* of Sid Ahmad Majdûb, the revitalisation of the festival promotes local identity; it valorises the Bedouin peoples and particularly the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb. It also promotes tourism and the heritage of the region. In the context of Globalization, it offers the region of the High South West a specific value and identity. Playful celebrations and aesthetic pleasure are important aspects for the understanding of the festival. It gives to the people who participate in it a “sensible knowledge” of the festival. And through playful celebrations and aesthetic pleasure people share emotional moments and a sense of togetherness. Playful celebrations and aesthetic pleasure finally make the festival, and more generally the locality of Asla and the region more attractive. But the increase of leisure moments, of play and pleasure does not necessarily signify that religious aspects of the festival have vanished (Ben Hounet, forthcoming). Through playful celebrations, aesthetic pleasure and a sense of togetherness, people come to religious moments, notably in collective prayers (*ma^c rûf*).

Notes

1. If one does not respect the *wa^cd*, the pact.
2. Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front). Between 1962 and 1989, the FLN was the only party in Algeria. The government was thus a FLN government.
3. Aggression, humiliation.

4. The word comes from *ribat* (fortress). It refers to the fortresses of the saints and of Sufi orders who led the resistance against the *Reconquista*. See Jacques Berque (1978). *Mrabtin* is sometimes translated as marabou.
5. The word Bedouin (*badû*) is used in Algeria for the Arab speaking nomads, semi-nomads and settlers which used to be nomads and still share the Bedouin culture (*badwaya*). Bedouins are distinct from the Berber speaking nomads, like the Touareg. I prefer to use the expression 'Arab speaking' and 'Berber speaking' since the distinction between 'Arabs' and 'Berbers' makes no sense in North Africa. See François Pouillon (1993, 37–49).
6. See Danziger, 1977.
7. See also Dunn R. E., 1977.
8. 'During feasts, one may find an overtaking of ever day life's repetitions and an attempt to manipulate the routine in order to be in an action which has no grasp on the real but on the symbolic, only for pleasure or joy' (My translation).
9. Quoted in de Coppet (1992: 2): 'a society can neither create nor recreate itself without at the same time creating ideal(s). This creation is not a sort of work of supererogation for it, by which it would complete itself, being already formed; it is the act by which it is periodically made and remade. Therefore when some oppose the ideal society to the real society, like two antagonists which would lead us in opposite directions, they materialize and oppose abstractions. The ideal society is not outside of the real society; it is part of it. Although we are divided between them as between two poles which mutually repel each other, we cannot hold to one without holding to the other; for a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use, and the movements which they perform but above all is the idea which it forms itself' (Durkheim, 1925 [1912]: 603–604).
10. And also *shurfa*, the descents of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter.
11. Some researchers consider that the state founded by Abd al-Qadir started in 1832 and ended in 1847. I here refer to the dating of Jean Claude Vatin (1983: 137).
12. The °Amûr is a tribal confederation consisting of three big tribes: the Swala, the Awlâd Bûbkar and the Awlâd Salim. Each tribe has three fractions (*farqa*). In 1957, the Swala were 3765, the Awlâd Bûbkar 3,908 and the Awlâd Salim 1,500 (Bison, 1957: 16). We can estimate the number of the °Amûr being around 40,000. It is the most numerous population living in the south area of the Wilaya of Naama (mainly around Ain Sefra). We can also estimate that around 25% of the °Amûr live in tents (*khaima*) and live a semi-nomadic way of life (part of the year or the all year round).
13. And also from the tribes I mentioned such as the °Amûr and the Awlâd Sid Ahmad Majdûb.
14. Nomads and semi-nomads of the region received help in sheep, sheep trucks, well's drilling or advantageous credits by the State.
15. In the Ksour Mounts region, and more generally in the Saharan Atlas, there are many wall engravings.
16. About the qsûr of the region, see Ben Hounet Y. & S. Guinand (2007).

17. More generally *wa'da* (or *mawssim*) is one of the first tourist destinations for North African people. Mohamed Berriane (1991) considers that *mawssim* (*wa'da*) is the first tourism activity of Moroccan (national tourism).

References

- Ben Hounet, Yazid 2003. « Analyse anthropologique d'un saint maghrébin : Sid Ahmâd Mâjdûb ou 'l'individu hors du monde' ». In *Insaniyat*, n° 21, revue du Centre de Recherche en Anthropologie Sociale et Culturelle (CRASC) d'Oran, 61–85.
- 2008. Valorisation d'objets bédouins et redéfinitions identitaires lors d'un moussem en Algérie. *Anthropos* **103**: 423–434.
- 2009. « Le poids du nomadisme dans les steppes algériennes : évolutions et adaptations », to be published in *Etudes Rurales*.
- Forthcoming. « *Wa'da* (moussem) en Algérie : dimensions religieuses et touristiques. Le cas de la *wa'da* de Sid Ahmad Majdûb (Asla, Haut Sud-Ouest algérien) ». In IRMC Programm on *Tourism and Religion in North Africa*, (ed.) Katia Boissevain.
- Ben Hounet, Yazid & Guinand Sandra 2007. « La restauration des *ysûr*. Institutions du patrimoine et enjeux de mémoire » *Espaces et Sociétés*, n° **128–129**, avril/may, 151–169.
- Berque Jacques 1978. *L'intérieur du Maghreb*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Berriane, Mohamed 1991. « Le tourisme des nationaux au Maghreb : le cas du Maroc (essai de géographie sociale) », *The Maghreb Review* **16(3-4)**: 146–164.
- Boissevain, Jeremy (ed.) 1992. *Revitalizing European rituals*. London, New York: Routledge.
- de Coppet, Daniel 1992. Introduction. In *Understanding rituals* (de Coppet ed.), London, New York: Routledge, 1–10.
- Choay, Françoise 1999. *L'allégorie du Patrimoine*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Danziger, R. 1977. *Abd al-Qadir and the Algerians, resistance to the French and internal consolidation*. New York and London.
- Dunn, Ross. E. 1977. *Resistance in the Desert, Moroccan Responses to French Imperialism 1881–1912*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Green, Anne-Marie (eds) 2004. *La fête comme jouissance esthétique*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Hartog, François 2003. *Régimes d'historicité : présentisme et expérience du temps* Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Lenclud, Gerard 1987. « La tradition n'est plus ce qu'elle était... » *Terrain*, Numéro 9 – *Habiter la Maison* (octobre). <http://terrain.revues.org/document3195.html>.
- Moussaoui, Abderrahmane 2006. *De la violence en Algérie. Les lois du chaos*. Paris: Actes Sud, MMSH.
- Pouillon, François 1993, « Simplification ethnique en Afrique du Nord : Maures, Arabes, Berbères (XVIIIè–XXè siècles) ». *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, **129, XXXIII-1**: 37–49.

- Rachik, Hassan 1990. *Sacre et sacrifice dans le Haut Atlas Marocain*. Casablanca: Afrique Orient Editions.
- Stewart, Frank. H. 1994. *Honor*. University of Chicago Press.
- Vatin, Jean-Claude 1983. *L'Algérie politique, Histoire et Société*. Presse de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.

Les *Wa'da* (*mawssim*) et le patrimoine Bédouin en Algérie

Partant de l'analyse des célébrations festives, l'objectif de cet article est d'éclairer le renouveau des *wacdat* (*mawssims* – fêtes annuelles dédiées aux saints locaux) en Algérie. A l'instar des rituels en Europe, les *wacdat* font depuis peu l'objet d'un processus de revitalisation. A partir d'une recherche menée dans l'Ouest algérien, l'auteur analyse les évolutions et impacts de telles fêtes sur les identités locales et nationales. L'étude montre ainsi l'importance des célébrations festives et du plaisir esthétique durant ces fêtes et explique comment et pourquoi les *wacdat* promeuvent en particulier le patrimoine culturel Bédouin, mais aussi le tourisme.