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Tiskriwin in Aylan, Algeria: revitalising traditional neighbourhood committees for modern challenges

Tiskriwin w Aylan, Algieria: rewitalizacja tradycyjnych komitetów sąsiedzkich w obliczu współczesnych wyzwań

Abstract

This article takes as its geographical context the M'Zab, a region known for its social, doctrinal and historical particularities, but also for its own institutional organisation. These institutions include *tiskra/tiskriwin*, the traditional version of neighbourhood committees that have been adapted to modern forms of association. The aim is therefore to look back at these neighbourhood committees, their origins, their organisation and their role in a Mozabite town. The research underscores the integral role of *tiskriwin* in promoting local solidarity and cultural continuity in the M'Zab valley. Despite evolving under national policies, these associations retain traditional wisdom and community support, ensuring their ongoing relevance in neighbourhood governance and social cohesion. To achieve this, in addition to documentary research, we carried out field surveys. The survey took place mainly in the *ksar* of Ghardaïa, with some return visits to the town of Béni Isguen. The aim was to find out how these *tiskriwin* were structured and managed, and what roles they fulfilled. By analysing all these sources, interviews and documents, we were able to understand how the *tiskriwin* were organised and what role they played within their communities.

Keywords: Aylan, Imzabiyen, Tiskriwin, institutional, organisation

Streszczenie

Artykuł ten osadza swoje rozważania w kontekście geograficznym M'Zab, regionu znanego ze swoich społecznych, doktrynalnych i historycznych szczególności, ale także z własnej organizacji instytucjonalnej. Instytucje te obejmują *tiskra/tiskriwin*, tradycyjną wersję komitetów sąsiedzkich, które zostały dostosowane do nowoczesnych form stowarzyszeń. Celem jest zatem przyjrzenie się tym komitetom

sąsiedzki, ich pochodzeniu, organizacji i roli w mieście Mozabitów. Badania podkreślają integralną rolę *tiskriwin* w promowaniu lokalnej solidarności i ciągłości kulturowej w dolinie M'Zab. Pomimo ewolucji pod wpływem polityki krajowej, te stowarzyszenia zachowują tradycyjną mądrość i wsparcie wspólnotowe, zapewniając ich ciągłą istotność w zarządzaniu sąsiedztwem i spójności społecznej. Aby to osiągnąć, oprócz badań dokumentacyjnych, przeprowadziliśmy badania terenowe. Ankieta miała miejsce głównie w ksarze Ghardaïa, z kilkoma powrotnymi wizytami w mieście Béni Isguen. Celem było zrozumienie, jak te *tiskriwin* były strukturalizowane i zarządzane oraz jakie pełniły role. Analizując wszystkie te źródła, wywiady i dokumenty, udało nam się zrozumieć, jak były zorganizowane *tiskriwin* i jaką rolę odgrywały w swoich społecznościach.

Słowa kluczowe: Aylan, Imzabiyen, tiskriwin, instytucjonalne, organizacja

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Introduction

The geographical setting of this research was the M'Zab valley or , in the terminology used by the Mozabites to designate the M'Zab, the *aylan*. It is a region of southern Algeria located in the Wilaya of Ghardaïa occupied by an ethnic and doctrinal minority, the Imzabiyen or Mozabites, of Zenet Berbers, who are Tamzabt-speaking and adepts of Ibadism (Merghoub 1972, Ibn Khaldoun 1999, Masqueray 1878, Ersilia 2002, Aillet 2012, Cherifi 2015, Prevost 2017, Gueliane 2019). In addition to its social, doctrinal and historical particularities, the region is known for its exceptional built heritage, which led to its classification as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982. It is also known for its own institutional organisation, promoting a time-honoured self-organisation and strong social solidarity, which have played a key role in the group's survival.¹ One of the various forms of organisation, are the *tiskra/tiskriwi*, a traditional Mozabite version of neighbourhood committees.

This research work aims to explore the history, structure and impact of these neighbourhood committees within the Mozabite community. In order to achieve this, both documentary research and a comprehensive field survey were conducted, the latter taking place mainly in the *ksar* of Ghardaïa (a *ksar*, plural *ksour*, is a fortified Saharan city; cf. (Gueliane 2019, Mahrouf 2011, ChekhabAbudaya 2012 and 2018), with some insights into the town of Béni Isguen. During our visits to the town, we had meetings with the presidents of three associations: the Ba Ayoub Amimoun neighbourhood association, the *taskra* neighbourhood association, and the Tađamoûn wa Tarqiya (Solidarity and Promotion) association of the Salem Ou'issa neighbourhood. It should be noted that this is not a monograph on associative work in the M'Zab, but rather a focus on

¹ The M'Zab has a hierarchy of religious and customary institutions that are still in place even today, in parallel with state institutions (Merghoub 1972, Cherifi 2015, Gueliane 2020).

the neighbourhood associations known as the *tiskriwin* and their dynamism. The aim was to find out how these associations were structured and managed, and what roles they fulfilled. By analysing all these sources, interviews and documents, we were able to understand how *tiskriwin* were organised as institutions and how they promoted the idea and practice of social solidarity.

In the M'Zab, associative work appeared in its modern form during the 1930s, with emergence of the reform movement (Jomier 2012). Unable to express its ideas within the traditional social organisation of the time, that is, under the domination of the conservatives, the movement found refuge in associative work as the means of organizing and propagating the movement's ideas throughout Algeria (Földessy 1994). In the same vein, Augustin Jomier (Jomier 2012: 184) demonstrates in his work on the reform movement that "the use of associations rather than mosques in the development of reformist action was observed throughout Algeria and in Arabic-speaking countries as a whole". Further on, he adds: "The case of the M'zab, however, provides a remarkable nuance: the associations really appear as are course in the face of resistance and hostility from Mozabite mosques and institutions, whose *sheikhs* so-called 'conservative' opposed there form is tulama" (Jomier 2012: 183).

The associative work of continued under the Algerian state policy of the 1980s, during which it experienced a new lease of life. At the time of the FLN (National Liberation Front), a single party, Algeria had an associative regime and citizens were formally free to create associations of the type governed in France by the 1901 law. Yet, except for sports clubs and other politically neutral types of association, the public authorities almost never gave their approval to citizens' requests. By the end of the 1980s, however, even before the October 1988 riots, certain restrictions on freedom of association had been lifted. The events commonly referred to as "October '88" were riots that occurred in several Algerian cities, including Algiers, Oran, Tizi-Ouzou, and Béjaïa, during President Chadli's term. These events marked Algeria's transition to a more democratic political system. In particular, prior approval was abolished by law 87-15 of 21 July, 1987, and its implementing decree no. 88-16 of 2 February 1988. With the democratic opening of the early 1990s, the situation radically changed. The phenomenon became visible with the opening up of democracy in 1990. Under the name of political associations, numerous political parties were created, immediately attracting the most politicised citizens (Mahé 2010).

Associative work in Ghardaïa is not detached from the above mentioned national context. During fieldwork, were recorded the existence of two types of associations. The first type are ones that would be best described as "functional", dealing with different areas: the environment, heritage (the Tourath-Abu Ishaq Association), education (the El islaḥ Association and the Ammi Saïd Association), etc. This type of association concerns the whole city and is marked by a specialisation of its centres of interest. The second type are the neighborhood associations, of which there are eight in the

ksar of Ghardaïa; they do not have a specific focus, but are concerned with the whole neighbourhood.

What is a *taskra*?

The concept of neighbourhood association is not entirely foreign to the M'Zab. The traditional appellation of a neighbourhood association is *taskra* (plural *tiskriwin*). It means neighborhood, neighborhood committee, or even neighborhood volunteerism. Depending on the *ksar*, the term may mean 'neighbourhood', 'neighbourhood committee', or even 'neighbourhood volunteerism'. In the *ksar* of Ghardaïa (*ayram n Tyardayt*), each district neighborhood had its own committee. This was a traditional institution that existed long before the advent of the nation-state, and its role was to manage the locality. The official recognition of these committees, under republican law, has only served to reinforce their status with the local authorities, while at the same time trying to maintain ancestral know-how in this area. It should be noted that not all neighbourhood committees have sought to integrate into the republican framework through the associative system; some have preferred to operate on the ground without any status. This decision depended on each committee's choice and their perception of the advantages (subsidies) and disadvantages (administrative oversight) of its associative status. One of our interviewees, the president of a neighbourhood association (a former *taskra*), provided testimony regarding this transitional phase:

After independence, we entered a transitional stage; between what is customary law [*orf*; cf. (Gueliane 2020)] and what is official. So we had to maintain the traditional system, while attempting to adapt to the current administrative context, which applies to our neighbourhood committees. We sought to preserve their traditional functions while acquiring official status, by becoming neighborhood associations. In the period from 1962 to 1983, *tiskriwin* continued to operate clandestinely, until the first neighbourhood association was officially created in 1983. Our associations now have official recognition, and benefit from an accumulation of ancestral experience. So, the concept of association is not so foreign to us, it is a concept we have adopted for centuries. Approval has given us legitimacy in our dealings with the authorities. After that, I would like to point out that we have some very active associations here in Ghardaïa, but they do not have accreditation, they don't exist officially, even though they are very active in the field.

The roles and impact of *tiskriwin* in neighborhood governance and cultural preservation

The role of *tiskriwin* is to organise activities in the neighbourhood, such as vigilance or the activities for women, young people and children. During the recent events in Ghardaïa (i.e. conflicts that took place in most M'Zab towns over the eighteen months from November 2013 to early 2015, cf. Gueliane 2019, Chaouchi 2015, Oussedik 2015, Bettache 2004, Daddi Addoun 1990, Dufresne Aubertin 2017), they mobilised

by setting up intervention centres for traumatised persons, reinforcing guard units, and providing educational support to ensure that the interruption of schooling during the weeks of street demonstrations and social conflict did not affect school children's results. The *tiskriwin* are also responsible for the maintenance of the neighbourhood, cleanliness, repairs, monitoring the progress of works carried out by municipal workers, and monitoring the works carried out by residents. In addition, they monitor residents' behaviour in the neighbourhood (the respect for the *ksar* traditions), as well as changes to the external appearance of houses or the conversion of functions in alleyways, for example the establishment of shops in alleyways not intended for the commercial activity. In the latter case, the associations approach the *ksar's* institutions, and even the authorities, to prohibit such endeavours, since the *ksar* is a protected area.

The president of the *taskra* Association testified that in one of such cases his association took legal action against a shopkeeper (originally from Bounoura) who transformed a house located in the *ksar* of Ghardaïa into a department store, even though the alleyway in which the house was situated was not a commercial area. As this was a protected area, the courts ruled in favour of the association and prohibited the transformation of the house. In the cited circumstances, however, it was evident that the reasons invoked exceeded the requirements of a protected area. In fact, during the interview, our interlocutor brought up the term *ħorma*, 'honour': opening a business affected the *ħorma* of the alley's inhabitants. This was because a commercial activity automatically entailed people from outside entering the alley, which was likely to damage the honour of its inhabitants. Our interlocutor explained his recourse to the concept of *ħorma* suggestively, saying that the shopkeeper from Bounoura acted in the way he did "because it is not his *ksar*. He could have set up his store in Bounoura, but no, he preferred to come to Ghardaïa since he does not want to cause problems at home". As to the question of *ħorma*, we refer to Alain Mahé's work on Kabylia. Mahé sees *ħorma* as the moral and material integrity of the village. Thus in Kabylia, as in the rest of the Maghreb, the term has been used to designate multiple orders of facts: the *herma* as a domain that is both sacred and forbidden, that of the sexual intimacy of the home (the *harem*), that of the village *herma*, by way of the *herma* of a saint's shrine" (Mahé 2001).

When the problem (or activity) concerns two or three neighbourhoods at once, the *tiskriwin* concerned collaborate with each other. This is the case when preparing for a festival or cleaning up the *ksar* and the *wadibed*. Thanks to their official status and flexibility, they are also called upon to collaborate with, and even carry out the work of, the *ksar's* traditional institutions. As pointed out by the president of the *taskra* Association:

The associations are more dynamic and flexible and cover more area. I will give you an example: I am from one community 'achira [a fraction, families with a common ancestor] and Nacer [a colleague present at the interview] is from another 'achira. His 'achira cannot help me, mine cannot help him,

because their prerogatives [to designate their members] stop at their children. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to be active in the same association, which will defend people's interests. It does not matter to *'achira* they belong. Another example: here in the neighbourhood, there has been a water cut. Which *'achiras* will the residents turn to, since they have several? Whereas the neighborhood association easily drafts a complaint and lodges it with the relevant public authorities and the problem is solved. So, you see the difference. The association is more flexible, and its official status facilitates correspondence with the authorities. So it can work with both the authorities and customary institutions. After that, although complementary, each institution has its own field of intervention. It is only by each doing its own job that the puzzle becomes complete.

Asked about the collaboration that can take place between the *tiskriwin* and the institutions of the *ksar*, our interlocutor, who insisted on their complementary role:

Associations are indispensable, especially with the urban and demographic fragmentation, and the internal and external issues that society is experiencing. The *'achira* is no longer enough to meet people's varied needs; it's a battle on several fronts. In fact, associative work has taken over some of the *'achira*'s prerogatives, if not supporting it. For example, we have associations for the disabled that join the *'achira* efforts to take care of this group.

Another interviewee emphasised the flexibility and freedom that associations enjoy thanks to their status:

"Associations have a certain freedom and therefore greater independence than other institutions in the *ksar*, especially with the social and administrative evolution our society is undergoing. Indeed, associations were created to adapt to a particular context. The fact that they are approved makes it easier for them to gain access to administrations and ministries, to draw up their correspondence and to apply for state aid. Whereas, for example, notables are recognised, they can write letters, but it is more practical to do this through an association. At the end of the day, it is more operational to have a status in front of an administration".

Finally, others insisted on the collaboration between the notables and association for the well-being of the citizens:

In Béni Isguen, associations are represented on the council of notables, because they play an indispensable complementary role. They do everything that the *'achira* cannot: promoting sports, preserving cultural heritage and protecting the environment. But they do not take precedence over the *'achira*, nor do they exceed the authority of the notables. Associations are an area of activity in society that can scarcely be ignored. Just like the *'orf* institutions, they contribute to the social development of society. The fundamental difference is that associations have fixed objectives, unlike *'achira*, for example, which work with people on an ongoing basis. Another aspect not to be overlooked is that the *'achira* represents blood ties; it is the same family. So, it's not surprising that some people lean more towards the *'achira*.

Transition from a traditional *taskra* to a modern neighborhood associations

In the past, a *taskra* was presided over by the oldest man in the neighbourhood, who expected to know everything about its inhabitants: widows, families whose master worked outside the valley, orphans, and the poor. He was also in charge of organizing volunteer work and *twizas* (Maunier 1926), neighbourhood maintenance and water distribution. Nowadays, a oldest man of *taskra* is replaced by the president of the association and its executive committee. *Twiza* or *thiwizi* is a practice known throughout Algeria and North Africa. The word *twiza* is derived from the Berber root *wiz* or *Iwaz*, meaning 'to help'. Thus, the association's scope of activity corresponds exactly to that of the former *tiskriwin*, with a modernisation of means and techniques for working in the field. On this subject, one of our interviewees mentioned his association:

My association is responsible for 413 houses. Some of the houses are occupied by people who live outside the M'Zab region and only return during the vacations. The houses are vacant and in a state of disrepair. Around 80% of the houses are actually occupied, either by their owners or by tenants. So my association's aim is to find out what's in each house. Sometime ago, the association drew up a questionnaire to gather information about the occupants (the number of families living in the house, whether they own or rent, whether there are disabled persons, widows, divorcees, the elderly). Then we did another questionnaire related to the house itself is it supplied with gas, electricity, water, the condition of the house, the number of rooms, how the rooms are used, etc. We also recorded the contact details of the inhabitants or of the *wakil* when the occupant is a woman. This is to facilitate contact with local residents should the need arise. We then set up a computerised database for all the information collected. All this data is useful to us during our interventions, but also to understand the situation of the families. An example: for a while now, we have been noticing that children from vulnerable families, with a disabled or absent father, a small house are more likely to do things out of the 'orf than others, and even to fall prey to delinquency. As neighbourhood associations, we interested in these cases. On the one hand, to find a correlation between, for example, the reduced surface area of housing and delinquency. On the other, to find solutions and intervene advance to prevent our children from going astray. These data are also useful, because if the association receives state aid or donations, we will know exactly where to put them.

Regarding their structure, an association's board is composed of eleven members. In principle, this is the case for all associations throughout Algeria, a status required by the commune (APC) under the new law on associations of June 2012. Under this law, the association's prerogatives have been reduced to being a mere coordinator between the citizen and the administration. Before this law was introduced, it was up to the association to draw up its own statutes; nowadays, these statutes are standardised, leaving only very limited independence for those who run them. This is seen by all our interviewees to as a restriction on freedom of association. Some expressed astonishment, given that a simple neighbourhood association has no political role whatsoever.

In the field, associations try to broaden their functions and the number of people involved to ensure the success of their missions. The Ba Ayoub Oumimoun Association covers 800 houses. Officially, its board is composed of eleven members, but in practice there are around forty members. “A neighbourhood of 800 houses cannot be managed by ten persons, it is impossible”, said one of the interviewees. Another interviewee explained:

As I said, our neighbourhood is composed of 413 houses, so, it is impossible to cover the whole neighborhood with eleven members, we added ten deputies. Each neighbourhood has a old man, who knows details that even the president of the association does not, since he is a resident there. It is the neighbourhood leaders who are in charge of statistics and information gathering, before handing them over to the association’s office. They are also responsible for updating the database. In some cases, a consultation council made up of local elders is set up. They are not members of the association, nor are they deputies, but we call on them when we need help and guidance. Once, for example, our association offered to organise an open-air event for children inside the *ksar*. This was a first, as the public space in the *ksar* is managed quite strictly by our institutions. If the association is not careful, it can get into trouble with the town’s notables, especially the conservatives. So, as an association, we setup an advisory board and asked them [the notables] whether we could organise the activity or not. It was only after receiving their approval that we organised the event.”

To mobilise residents, the associations make phone calls, use the association notice boards (set up in neighbourhoods) or distribute announcements directly to homes. In very rare cases, the message is conveyed at the mosque during prayers.

Finally, when it comes to financing these associations, they often receive annual subscriptions from residents. For the *taskra* Association, it is 100DA (less than one USD) a year. Others, such as the Ba Ayoub Oumimoun Association, do not require any contribution or membership fee, but do collect donations and appeal for funds when necessary. Some associations use auctions to collect donations (a practice similar to *tarwsa* in Kabylia, in that it calls on the honour of donors (Mahé 1994). In Kabylia, the *tarwsa*, is a festive ceremony during which the initiator of the feast receives gifts from his guests in return. It is only organized for specific events, such as birth, circumcision or marriage.

These are auctions for charitable purposes, raising funds to maintain a neighbourhood. Auctions are often preceded by a traditional meal called *nfach*, after which one man a good speaker, of course encourages the audience to buy the food left over from the collective meal. The challenge is to obtain the highest bids, which are obviously unrelated to the market price of the food being auctioned. The amount is then allocated to the project for which the auction was organised. “In some cases”, one of our informants explains, “the buyers return the product so that it can be auctioned off again”. The donation takes the form of a purchase/sale, in which the buyer is aware not only of the symbolic value of the product he is buying, but also of the prestige he

has acquired through the act of making the purchase. It should be noted that the sale takes place solemnly and in public.

Thus, while the very form of the donation a sale removes the possibility of restitution, it nonetheless enables the buyer to acquire prestige among the local population. In his analysis of the work of Mauss (Mauss 2007) and Maunier (Maunier 1926), Alain Mahé explains that “the feast is a factor of extraordinary emulation, which leads the protagonists to challenge each other in assaults of generosity that are ‘battles of ostentation’, during which the protagonists assert their individuality and compete for the palm of excellence by trying to crush each other - and at the same time give themselves over to manifestations of attachment to the communitarian values of the group. It’s as if the only way to stand out as an individual is to outdo each other in conforming to group ideals” (Mahé 1994). Public donations are only used for projects requiring large sums of money. For this reason, staging becomes a tool of emulation and a competition for generosity that involves both a religious and a social dimension.

This practice brings to mind the question of the convertibility of symbolic capital in to material capital, as developed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1980), recalling donations and offers made directly to institutions. Although the names of the donors are not known to the recipients, they confer prestige on the donor, enabling him or her to attain a particular social rank later on. Thus, “the major contribution of Bourdieu’s analysis was to show how, thanks to multiple strategies for accumulating the symbolic capital of honour, those concerned eventually managed to reconvert their symbolic capital into economic and land capital and, conversely, maintained this symbolic capital through ostentatious investment and expenditure of material capital. This dual strategy enabled them to combine the authority of the man of honor with the economic power of the wealthy landowner” (Mahé, 1994). Symbolic power to consolidate political leadership within the group.

In addition to membership fees, donations and auctions, associations receive grants from the authorities, either at the association’s request or automatically, mainly on the occasion of special events, such as the month of fasting. One of our interviewees attests:

State aid often comes regularly, for example during the month of Ramadan. The problem is that the aid is not really consistent. So our role as a neighbourhood association is to encourage people to make donations to supplement the aid. We advertise or go directly to well-off people in the neighbourhood. We adapt the aid to the situation of each family. For example, a family with two children receives less than a family with five children, so the portion doubles”.

Conclusion

The conclusion arising from our research that the role of associations in promoting solidarity on an urban or local scale cannot be ignored, as amply demonstrated by the above examples. However, what particularly distinguishes these *tiskriwins* is

their deep-rooted traditional expertise passed down through generations. They have evolved from an existing network crucial for overcoming regulatory challenges, such as limitations on the number of board members. These *tiskriwin* benefit from both community and state support, enhancing their operational effectiveness. Their ability to intervene strategically, informed by a close understanding of local social realities, further enhances their impact.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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