

Clothing: Art, Techniques, And Social Customs

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Abstract:

Clothing has always been the most prominent cultural element that reflects the identity of peoples. Thus, it represents a key practice deeply rooted in the collective social memory, distinguished between social classes and drawn between urban and rural lifestyles. In this light, the current article highlights the most distinctive garments of Algerian culture and their socio-historical development, illustrating their continued presence in daily life and the ease with which they are being reproduced in light of the challenges posed by modernity.

Keywords: Traditional clothing, Algeria, folk culture, heritage.

Introduction

Culture cannot be taken as a logical structure or a form of theoretical thinking, but rather it is a set of practices and representations that provide a homogeneous and repetitive content that objectively observable and scientifically describable. The tangible cultural heritage is represented in three forms: material such as clothing; physical as dance; and daily bodily posture. The intangible one is manifested in language, beliefs, values, and principles. In other words, these are the components of culture which interact, complement, and follow one another, forming an integrated social system.

This anthropological approach to the science of culture clearly emphasizes the empirical content while relatively marginalizes the theoretical aspect of culture. It advocates for a descriptive and objective study, free from preconceived notions that might judge certain values, cultural diversity, modes of expression, or the level of cultural, scientific, and artistic development. Furthermore, it grants culture a historical and social dimension by emphasizing its nature as a socially acquired entity that

evolves over time and is transmitted from one generation to another.

Accordingly, we observe a clear difference in how 19th-century anthropology approached culture compared to German thought which was based on hierarchical gradations and the classification of cultures according to specific value scales. Anthropology opened a new avenue of research by shifting away from the evaluative approach and the German hierarchical model, which prioritized the German people over others.

This shift also moved beyond the Hegelian perspective which viewed history and societies as being granted certain preferences by a divine force (in a metaphysical sense), toward an objective and concrete approach rooted in empirical field studies. What anthropologists call "culture" is not separate from cultural heritage, whether material or intellectual. It is a comprehensive list that encompasses all social practices, beliefs, and representations. This list should not be closed as it is continuously innovating and evolving. However, it can be grouped into temporary units to create a relative framework for its study.

Anthropology provides a diverse and reproducible descriptive comparison unlike German thought which offered a singular ideological perspective based on word translation and theoretical judgments. The anthropological approach to culture is built on observation and the description of the origins of differences, the uniqueness of each social practice, and the formation of local social institutions. It examines how local communities assign value to these institutions and social representations. Therefore, culture is a genuine product of society embedded in the social field and given communities' life, history, and reproduction.

Among the most significant cultural practices accumulated in the social memory of societies is clothing, which is a distinguishing element between social classes and individuals and marks the rural or urban nature of human settlements. "As for food, eat whatever you like for yourself, but let your clothing be as people desire." This saying is translated into Algerian dialect as: "Eat whatever you like, but dress as people desire". This phrase reflects the extent of modernity and the evolution of aesthetic taste, as well as the tendency to judge others based on their appearance.

Firstly, clothing was an instinctive and spontaneous behaviour for protecting the body from the cold, so climate change plays a crucial role in its emergence. As this anthropologically established view was supported by archaeological evidence, it

is not universally accepted. Proponents of the "direct creation" or "spontaneous ionic creation" (créationnisme) perspective completely reject it. The myth goes that the wearing of clothes began with Adam and, more specifically, Eve upon their expulsion from paradise. It was the realization of their nudity and the need to cover them is the cause to their departure.

The question of human origins remains open, but what concerns us is the origin and evolution of clothing. When did humans begin wearing clothes? When did necessity drive them to gather and sew pieces of leather for protection?

Clothing was made to cover parts of the body. The earliest materials used were plant-based, but over time, other materials were introduced to increase delicacy, beauty, and precision. Then, the social aspect emerged to add conditions to clothing that distinguished people: between men and women, the rich and the poor, the noble and the commoner, the religious and the non-religious...

This is not a new phenomenon, scholars have dated the emergence of clothing to approximately 800,000 years ago, and it was coincided with the first human migration out of Africa toward the north. As a result, the human species began covering their bodies from the cold with animal skins. There is no evidence of this because the materials used for covering do not fossilize unless under specific environmental conditions. However, the study of tools uncovered through excavations suggests this was the case.

We will not delve into the complexities of the emergence of Homo sapiens, but research has shown that they were the first to consider using whale bone spines, bone or ivory needles, and even plant fibers to pierce the skin. This marked the beginning of the sewing needle.

Marcel Mauss classifies humankind based on clothing styles into two types: the draped type, which belongs to the civilizations of hot countries, and the sewn type (cousu), where clothing is tailored to fit the body through stitching and found in colder regions. Daily activities, such as horseback riding, may play a role in determining how clothing is made.¹

The draped type is widespread among the peoples of the Mediterranean as seen in the artifacts of ancient Greece and Rome. However, this clothing has defied time and the threat of disappearance in North Africa, particularly in Algeria where the

¹ André Varagnac & Marthe Chollot-Varagnac, *Popular Traditions*, PUF, 1978, p. 411.

"bernus" or "burnous" and the "melhfa" are still worn to this day. Before presenting the different types of Algerian clothing, it is important to deal with the weaving loom.

The Weaving Loom

The weaving loom appeared thousands of years ago. It was initially a simple device made of horizontally arranged wooden rods, through which threads of wool, cotton, camel hair, or other materials were passed. The oldest known fabrics date back nearly 10,000 years and were found in Turkey and Palestine. However, the first vertical looms emerged around 1400 BCE.

The traditional loom has not changed much over time; rather larger and more industrialized machines were developed from it with the advent of electricity until the establishment of textile factories. Traditional weaving was not merely a means of livelihood. In ancient times, even queens spent their time weaving. The most famous scene in Greek mythology is the story of Penelope, the Queen of Ithaca and wife of Odysseus (Ulysses), who wove during the day and unraveled the work at night.² This means that weaving existed around the Mediterranean since the time of Homer and was practiced by queens.

Weaving had a dedicated space in the household because it was a difficult task. An entire wall in the largest room, facing the door, was reserved for it as the work required natural daylight. The head of the house would select the most skilled young girls, those who were swift, precise, and delicate in their work, so that they became models of excellence.

Weaving is a daunting task that is why numerous myths and ritualistic practices revolve around it. These traditions vary from one region to another and are women's secrets, only taught to girls through hands-on practice. This made them eager to participate, learn, and perfect the craft under the supervision of elderly women: grandmothers, aunts, and neighbours.

In reality, weaving is a long and complex series of processes that begin in the fields and follow strict practices and rituals: shearing, washing, rinsing, and carding the wool (with the kardash) to transform it into soft fibres, and spinning it (with

² Homer, the poet, existed around the 9th or 8th century BCE. Two monumental works, the first in Western literature and human history, are attributed to him: *The Odyssey*, which tells the story of King Odysseus (Ulysses), and *The Iliad*. However, it is difficult to determine whether Homer was a historical individual or a conceptual figure representing a collective identity of multiple poets.

the spindle) to turn it into threads. The latter are then dyed in colours that must also be carefully prepared. All these steps are physically demanding tasks.

Over time, clothing became a cultural process where necessities transformed into expressions of taste. Curtains evolved into embroidered caftans adorned with gold and hairpins turned into jewellery made of silver, gold, pearls, and precious gems.³

The Algerian Clothing

The Algerian clothing has benefited from discoveries and innovations that have evolved over the centuries. It presents a richly decorated palette of colours and styles that maintain its authenticity across different eras. From a shared historical background to a diversified group that reflects the varied regions and lifestyles of the country with a significant economic impact on daily life. From Algiers to Annaba or Tlemcen, from the north to the south, from urban centres to rural areas, from the snowy peaks of the Kabylie and Aurès mountains to the sands of the Sahara, Algerian attire varies between everyday wear and ceremonial garments, ranging from simple outfits to those adorned with intricate decorations and jewellery, bearing witness to the royal dynasties that once ruled the country.

Clothing has diversified and numerous traditional dressing customs have emerged, particularly in women's attire and the rituals associated with it. What distinct the Algerian women's clothing is a garment that covers the body from head to toe in a single piece that fastened with a simple technique and held by a belt around the waist. The name of this garment varies by region, and it is known as: K'sa – Haïk - M'laya – Mlehfa – Maqroun-Amelhuf.⁴

The Mlahfa

It is the oldest known garments that still worn by some elderly women today. In legend, the Mlahfa is described as the garment that no needle stitches. It is a traditional women's outfit. It consists of a single piece of fabric that can be up to 14 meters wide. It can be wrapped multiple times around the body to cover all parts. Women often needed the help of others to put it on. It is typically worn over a simple inner tunic.

³ Leila Belkaïd, *Algerian Costumes*, Layeur, 2003.

⁴ Samira Menad, Noria Aissa Abdi, *Semiotic Denotations in Traditional Mostaganem Clothing : Chedda of Mostaganem As an Example*, psychology and education, 2024.

The Mlahfa has several names, including the Amazigh (Berber) attire, Timelheft, Akhlal, Lizar, Alhaf, Kisa, and Tisgnest in the southern regions. It was the daily attire in rural life and serves for all tasks both inside and outside the home. It was also worn for celebrations and special occasions with the accompanying jewellery that reflects the importance of the event. The fabric could be plain or adorned with floral patterns inspired by the colours of nature during springtime.

The Mlahfa is fastened with two pins on the shoulders, while the waist is secured with a belt which usually handmade from coloured or plain threads, known as Afthroun in the Amazigh language. Gold or silver belts are not suitable for the Mlahfa; rather, they are associated with urban outfits such as the Tlemcenian Chedda or the Gandoura of Constantine.



The Mlahfa

Tisgnest



Photo from the Archive

Except for Tisghnest, it is still prevalent in the south though it excludes schoolgirls and working women, it is difficult to maintain the mlehfa which requires several meters of fabric and hours to wear. In this fast-paced era, women need clothing that can be worn quickly.

Today, the closest thing to the mlehfa is the attire of the Aurès region, with its customs and traditions, rich in cultural heritage. From the Chaoui mlehfa, various styles have emerged that still resemble the original garment while other regions have moved away from it. What makes this attire unique and luxurious is the white silver jewellery even though gold trading has also flourished in the same region.

The Haïk and Sarwal Eshilka

A true symbol of the city, the Haïk may have replaced the Mlehfa in modern life as people began moving into cities, especially after the independence. Women who dressed elegantly at home needed a lightweight and quickly worn garment when they had to go out.

The Haïk, sometimes has the same names of the Mlehfa such as Lehaf or K'sa, is a piece of white fabric that often made of silk and known as "Haïk L'mramma". However, it can be made from more affordable fabrics. It is found in all northern cities, especially in Algiers and the western regions while the black M'laya was more common in the east. It is accompanied by the "Ajar", a small triangular piece of fabric placed over the nose and tied behind the hair, leaving only the eyes visible.

		
Haïk of the Early 20 th Century	Haïk of the 60s/70s	The M'laya of Eastern Algeria

All that remains of the Haïk are the memories of a few elderly women who wear it out of nostalgia for the "golden years," and their numbers are steadily declining. Most women, even those between 70 and 80 years old, prefer the Abaya or Kachabia (with or without a hood), or the Hijab which is worn by women of all ages in various styles.

We cannot forget the trousers that accompanied the Haïk. It represents another side of the traditional city woman when she abandoned the Mlehfa. It is unclear whether its origin is masculine or feminine as it was worn by both of them, especially since their designs were initially quite similar.

The Sarwal Medawar or Tseffifa was very wide. Over the centuries, it evolved in women's fashion, gradually reducing in width until it became the Sarwal Eshilka or Sarwal Echqa, a more fitted style with slits on the sides to allow for flexible movement. This style of trousers became an essential piece in various Algerian fashion trends, including the Karako, Badroun, and Gouit, all of which are forms of Algiers' traditional fashion.



The Burnous

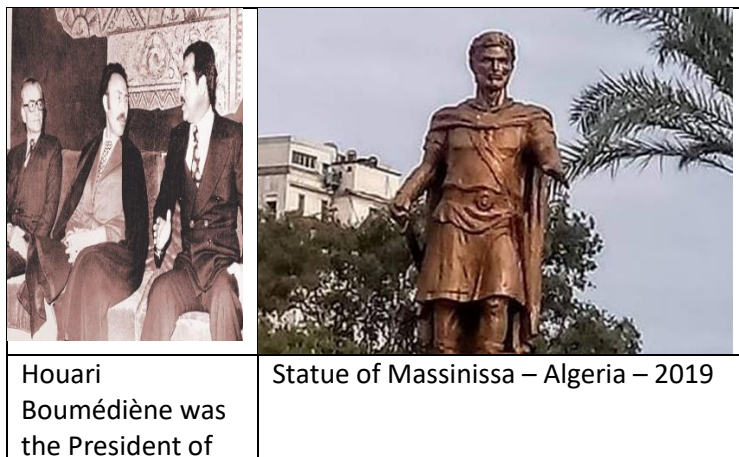
The Burnous is not different from the Mlehfa or the Haïk. It is a semi-circular piece of woven fabric without stitching, except for the Khennaq which fastens the two sides around the neck. It can be made of wool, regular fabric, or even woven with silver or pure gold threads. The Qalmoona, which covers the head, is directly woven into the garment, making the craftsmanship of the Burnous highly intricate and difficult.

The Burnous is deeply embedded in social customs and rituals. While worn in everyday life, it is also part of wedding attire for both the groom and bride. Ibn Khaldoun described it as a defining feature of Algerian and North African men. It was worn by Massinissa in his wars, Saint Augustine in his church, Sheikh El Mokrani in his battles, Emir Abdelkader on his travels, and Mohammed Ben Cheneb in his university, spanning a period of over 22 centuries.

The colours of the Burnous indicate the social status of its wearer: white for ordinary people, green for religious figures, and red for noblemen. It was worn by great leaders on significant occasions, such as Houari Boumédiène,⁵ who wore a black Burnous at a United Nations summit of world leaders.

However, the word "Burnous" or "Bernous" is not clear. Some said it is derived from the Latin (Burus), meaning "coat," or the Greek (Birros), meaning "hood."⁶ However, if we examine the Amazigh language, we find that the expression "Yefren" is rooted in (VRN), means "to wrap around," "twisted around," or "curled up." This refers to something that is wrapped around an object just like the Burnous which is draped over the shoulders with each end thrown over the opposite shoulder, enveloping the body.

The Burnous also has other names such as Bediou, Alaou, Selham, H'doun, and Kheidous. It is always made from local materials like wool in the north and camel hair in the south, after undergoing labour-intensive processing and several transformations. the Burnous has not lost its significance, but its use has declined in modern times where it has been replaced by the coat in the north and the Kachabia in the south as they are more practical



⁵ Houari Boumédiène, a politician and President of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria from 1965 to 1978.

⁶ <https://encyclopedieberbere.revues.org/1883>

Algeria from 1965 to 1978.	
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Head Covering

Before the rise of the Islamic movement in the 1980s and the Iranian Islamic Revolution where head covering was considered a “religious obligation”, it had long been one of the oldest Algerian traditions for both men and women. There was no social ceremony without a head covering. When a bride left her parents' home on her wedding day, she would wear a Burnous with her face covered. In all cases and in every region, the bride entered her new home fully covered. Her attendants would also wear a scarf, known in Algiers as “Mhremet Lefthoul” and in the Kabylie region as “a silk Mendil”.



The Henna Moment



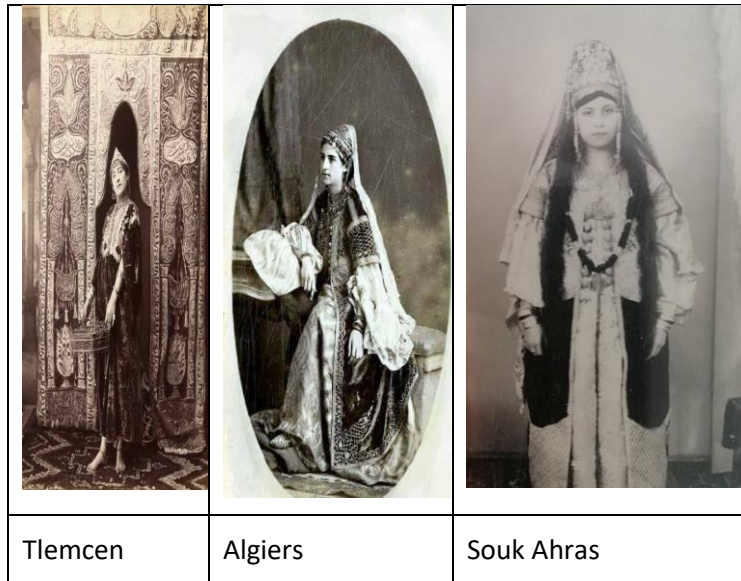
Oil Painting "Coffee on a Kasbah Balcony" (Émile Deckers, Algeria 1834)

For men, head coverings—whether a cap, a Chach (turban) commonly worn by farmers, or a Chachia (traditional hat) found in cities—were considered a symbol of humility. Until the 1960s, they were an important indicator for sociological analysis, distinguishing between the north and south, the rich and poor, and married and unmarried men.

	
<p>The Chach (Turban), from 2 to 25 meters, Tegloust</p>	<p>Chachia (traditional hat)</p>

The Evolution and Diversity of Women's Clothing

The diversity of women's clothing may make us believe that there are numerous and distinct styles. However, when looking at old images from less than two centuries ago, we find a common foundation. While the Mlehfa unifies villages and represents rural life in general, the Gandoura unifies garment for cities. Three urban bridal attire models from Tlemcen, Algiers, and Souk Ahras reveal many similarities.



The Gandoura is a broad term that may have an Amazigh origin, derived from Taqendourth, which refers to various forms of both women's and men's clothing. For example, we say "Thtqendourth El-Kabayel" (Kabyle Gandoura), "Gandoura Qassentina" (Constantine Gandoura), and Gandoura of Western Algeria. Similarly, Aqendour is used to refer to "the men's Gandoura".

Men's Gandoura has a single design: a square-shaped garment with simple stitching on the sides and shoulders. It has struggled to maintain its presence due to the increasing availability of Eastern-style shirts from Afghanistan and the Gulf in the Algerian market. As for women's Gandoura, it comes in various styles that differ from region to another and evolve over time. It can also reflect the standard of living, with its craftsmanship varying from the harsh climates of the Aurès and Djurdjura mountains to the royal heritage of Constantine and Tlemcen.

The Royal City Attire: Constantine's Gandoura, Tlemcen and Mostaganem's Chedda, and the Karakou

The Gandoura of Constantine or the Jebba of Constantine is a traditional garment made of thick velvet. It is now most commonly in deep burgundy. In the recent past, Constantine brides proudly wore it in seven pastel shades that represent the colours of the rainbow. Like the Mlehfa, the Gandoura of Constantine is sleeveless and adorned with gold-thread embroidery, which is applied directly to the fabric before wearing.

This luxurious attire is embroidered with gold or silver thread though modern variations sometimes incorporate regular

thread dyed in gold or silver tones. Similar to Constantine's dress, the Chedda of Tlemcen features dozens of bands of gold or silver thread over a base of heavy velvet, complemented by an inner layer of natural silk, traditionally hand-woven on a home loom. This elaborate outfit is accessorized with strands of pure gold beads and precious jewels, bringing the total weight of the ensemble to nearly 20 kg.

The Chedda of Mostaganem is a traditional bridal outfit consisting of a headscarf (Mendil) and a conical-shaped hat made of red velvet, known as the Sultani Chachia. This hat is placed on the bride's head with the forehead adorned by Zrir (gold beads) and a silver-gilt headband. On top of this, a crown (Taj) and Raachaash—gold-plated silver ornaments shaped like four flowers with a bird in the centre—are added.

The bride also wears golden earrings called Onaïs and Maqafel, encrusted with red gemstones and are attached to the hat alongside two Nwashat (decorative pins), one in silver and the other in gold, as well as red and gold flowers known as Chedda or Taqriva.

In addition, the bride dons a garment woven with golden thread called Mansouj, layered with a Kaftan—a vest-like jacket extending to the hips, crafted from red velvet and embroidered with intricate Mjeboud golden thread-work. The sleeves are also richly adorned.

The ensemble is further embellished with long gold necklaces such as Kravache Boulihya, Shanshouf El-Ouisa, and Zrir. Another gold-threaded chain is studded with golden beads with a clove placed between every seven beads, culminating in an engraved gold piece known as Meskia.

On her wrists, the bride wears multiple gold bracelets, including Louis pieces, Tachka, and Moussabiat—a set of seven bracelets connected by a golden piece. On her ankles, she wears two large twisted gold anklets called El-Brim, and her feet are adorned with gold-embroidered shoes. This traditional attire closely resembles the Chedda of Tlemcen and Nedroma. It is a highly cherished heritage that officially recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage tradition in 2012.⁷

The Algiers Karakou is also made of velvet and adorned with gold or silver embroidery. However, skilled seamstresses have excelled in modernizing it and introduced new designs and colours. Today, brides across the country want to include a Karakou in their wedding trousseau. The heritage status of the Gandoura, Chedda, and Karakou is strong as they still an

⁷ Samira Menad , Noria Aissa Abdi, *Ibird*,p135.

essential part of a bride's wedding ensemble that proudly worn by young women.

			
The Chedda of Mostaganem	Gandoura	The Chedda of Tlemcen	Karakou

However, not all traditional garments have been as fortunate as these examples. Outfits such as Leqwiat, Badroun, El Ghlila, and El Jebdouli have nearly disappeared. Although some artisans have attempted to preserve and revive these old styles, their efforts have been in vain.

The Rapid Evolution of Gandoura in Oran and Kabylie

Some cities have undergone rapid changes and their traditions have followed the same way. For instance, the Blouza Wahrania is relatively recent. For centuries, the Gandoura was the prevailing garment, but modifications were introduced and led to the development of new styles. Similarly, the Amazigh dress, originally made of simple fabric reflecting the colours of nature, has seen significant diversification in recent decades. Skilled seamstresses are working to adapt this outfit for modern urban life. They have realized that the biggest challenge facing the Algerian traditional clothing is its primarily domestic and local nature, making it less suitable for professional or outdoor settings.

		
<p>The Blouza Wahrania</p>		<p>The old Oran Gandoura</p>

		
<p>Cities outfit</p>	<p>Bride's outfit</p>	<p>The traditional Kabyle outfit</p>

There is no doubt that traditional Algerian women's clothing is the most diverse in terms of appearance compared to men's one. Each type of clothing is suited to a specific occasion, with everyday wear differs from festive and ceremonial outfits. Algerian women's clothing is generally linked to religious teachings that emphasize loose-fitting garments, particularly for daily wear. Additionally, traditional attire varies by region, with colours and materials chosen not merely for aesthetic reasons but as a response to customs and rituals. These garments, along with their designs, patterns, and embellishments, play an essential role in different social events. Beyond serving as mere clothing, traditional Algerian attire fulfils deeper functions like jewellery, which is believed to attract good fortune, ward off misfortune, and symbolize relationships and social bonds.⁸

Conclusion

The Algerian clothing is diverse and these are just a few examples from different regions, such as Bou Saâdi, Naili, Chaoui, Laghouati, and Sétifi. Some remains unchanged, others evolve with time and events, and many struggle to survive due to the effects of globalization and the rapid societal changes affecting both work environments and traditions. For example, the shift of wedding celebrations from homes to event halls has introduced new customs that influence traditional attire.

The strong connection between traditional clothing and social memory makes it an essential element that helps individuals reconnect with their cultural identity. An individual can only truly understand themselves if they recognize their place within their community—essentially registering the self within a specific time period and linking various collective memories of the group.

Every memory, even an individual one, “is the result of collective cooperation shaped by social frameworks”.⁹ This perspective, which minimizes the impact of individual participation in the process of memory, reinforces “Halbwachs” view that every group constructs its unique memory, whether mythological or symbolic, effectively explains the social bonds that develop over time. Therefore, collective memory is neither stable nor fixed; rather, it is in a process of reproduction that shaped by the present needs imposed on the community.

⁸ Ben Hilal Sarah El-Aaliya, Traditional Algerian Women's Clothing in Colonial Advertising Posters, *Jamaleyat Journal*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 2022, p.179.

⁹ Collective, Dictionary of Sociological Thought, PUF, Paris, 2005.

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