

# THE SOCIOCULTURAL IMPACT OF THE *DJEMAA* ON THE ORGANIZATION OF THE Ksour (SOUTHWESTERN ALGERIA)

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## 1. Introduction

The ksour<sup>1</sup> of Southwest Algeria housed a community life marked by the solidarity and cohesion of its members, strongly attached to the arable land and the palm grove. Despite the austerity of the desert and the severe climatic conditions, ksour society was able to establish a spatial structure in response to its socio-cultural needs and the way of life of the community, as well as the physical environment. [1].

If the spatial organization of the ksour obeys the culture and tradition of the society, the *djemaa* would be the institution that deals with the management of collective interests. The authority of the *djemaa* represents the central power of the ksar<sup>1</sup>.

The attributions of the *djemaa* encompassed questions of public law and some of private law, applied according to the custom (carefully preserved in writing) "The competence of the *djemaa* is very broad, it extends not only to the status of persons and property, but to all matters of private and public law, thus touching on the question of the sacred" [2]. "In the ksour, it will deal in particular with the organization of water sharing, the system of cultivation in the palm grove" [3]. The settlement of local conflicts in terms of land ownership, organization of water distribution and personal conflicts was so complex that the colonial power could not revoke the *djemaa*.

Today, the *djemaa* has lost not only most of these prerogatives, but also its traditional organization: its only prerogatives today are limited to the hydraulic field (distribution and management of water). According to the researcher Soltani Hadj Mokhtar, "The *djemaa*, whose role had declined or disappeared with the arrival of the French settlers, lost most of these prerogatives. Today it is limited to the distribution and management of water and the sharing of collective land."

## 2. Methodology

In order to identify the socio-cultural involvement of the *djemaa* in the organization of the ksour environment, this study mobilizes the following investigation methods:

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a qualitative research method, supported by a comparative analysis between the *djemaa*s inherent in the different ksour of the Bechar region (case study), which will help us determine to what extent the *djemaa* was an institution allocated to the management of community interests, as well as to the socio-spatial organization of the ksour.

In other words, to highlight the socio-cultural impact of the *djemaa* on the logic of the configuration of the ksour heritage in the region of Bechar, we adopted:

A socio-historical approach.

A morphological reading of some ksour specimens.

A comparison based on the reading of written and graphic documents relating to the spaces called *djemaa*s.

Interviews with some of the notables, old people, and specialists (historians and anthropologists) all locals from the ksour.

### 3. Presentation of the case study

#### 3.1. Field of investigation

In order to deepen knowledge on the role played by the *djemaa* in the management and configuration of the ksour, the region of Bechar was investigated; it is rich in traditional establishments and was formerly managed by the institution of the *djemaa*.

Located in the south-west of Algeria, 980 km from the capital Algiers (see Figure 1), Bechar is the capital of the *wilaya* (prefecture: governmental administrative division of the territorial organization of the Algerian state that exists in many countries), which is made up of 12 *dairas* (subdivision of the wilaya or prefecture in the Algerian territorial administration which groups together several communes) and 21 communes (the basic Algerian territorial collectivity, and the smallest administrative subdivision in the territorial organization of the Algerian state) enclosing the ksour (traditional settlements) (Figure 2).

As part of this study, we investigated the *djemaa* inherent in the ksour of Kenadsa, Taghit, Beni Abbes and Beni Ounif.

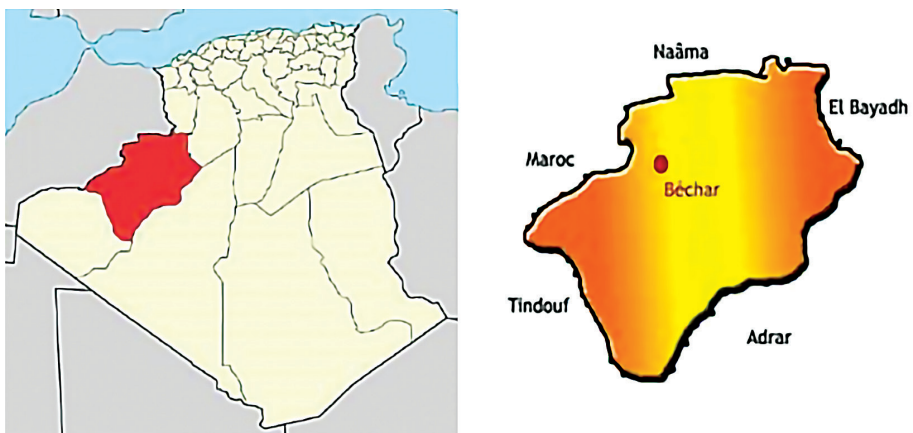


Figure 1. Geographical location of the Saharan region of the town of Bechar [4].

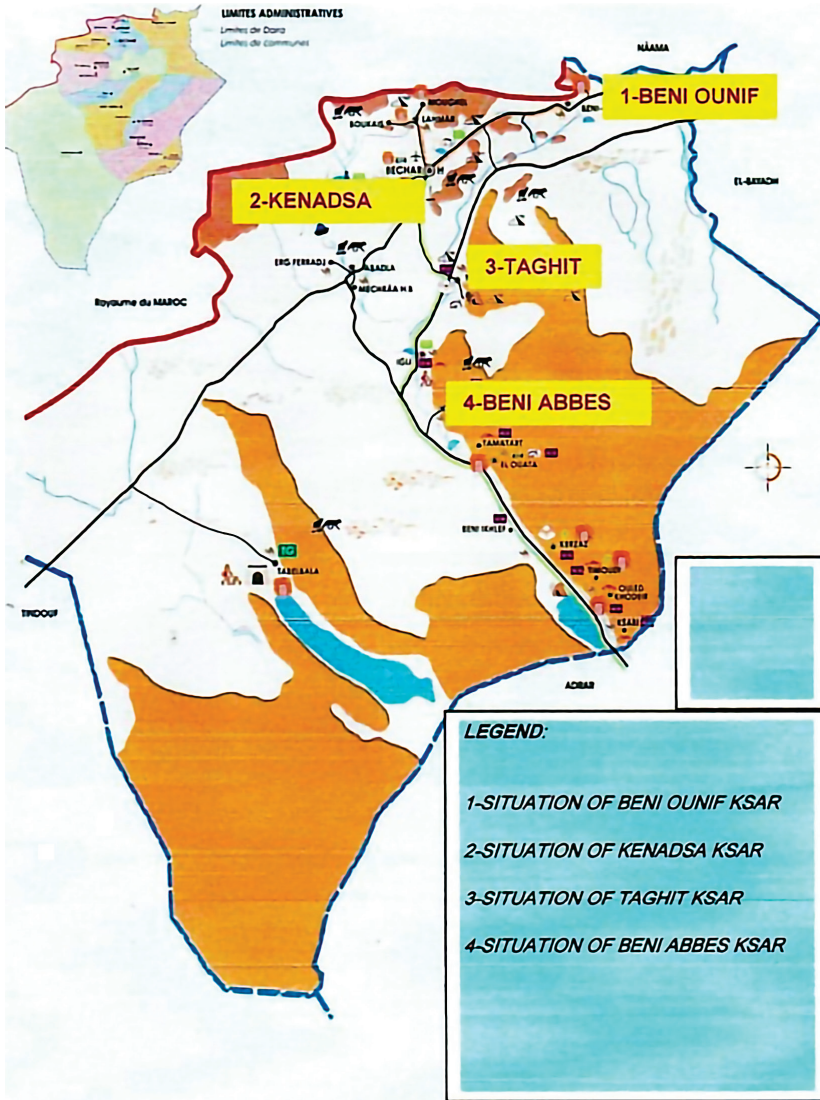


Figure 2. Plan of the ksour, Kenadsa, Taghit, Beni abbes, and Beni ounif [5].

#### 4. What does the term *djema* mean?

According to a researcher-historian from the Bechar region, “the *djema*, a traditional organization in the form of a local assembly, is a council of wise men whose role is to manage the daily life of the ksar (ksar and gardens), external relations, celebrations, conflicts... Its decisions are indisputably applied”.

The *djemaa* was a kind of municipal council in which each lineage, locally called *achira*, represented a group in society. It is interested in all the affairs of the city; its mission lies in the management and maintenance of water resources, construction, maintenance and the repair of property and, it is responsible for the security of the city.

"The *djemaa* was considered as a para-administrative structure or rather as a real influential power to support the decisions of local ksar officials. Appointed then elected, the *djemaa* was the emanation of the most influential groups at the local level", according to a researcher-sociologist living in Kenadsa. The council of elders of the village or city is at the origin of public morality in this public space known as the "*djemaa*" and is a local assembly of notables who managed the interests of the community, and their "desire to live together" [6].

The *djemaa* therefore, is a traditional organization in the form of a local assembly composed of a council of elders whose role is to manage the daily life of the oases (ksar and gardens), external relations, festivals, conflicts, etc. Its decisions are indisputably applied. Furthermore, the *djemaa* designates an assembly of Muslims gathered to perform prayer, given its proximity to the mosque [7]. Indeed, the *djemaa* is, therefore, always located in the vicinity of a mosque.

According to Isabelle Eberhardt's travelogue [8]: "it is the *djemaa*, an assembly of lineages and ksour, which is sovereign. All political and administrative questions have been submitted to the deliberations of the *djemaa*. Do we need a leader? It is the *djemaa* who appoints him. As long as he retains his investiture, this leader is obeyed, but he always remains responsible to those who have chosen him."

#### **4.1. Organization and attributions of the ksour institution, the "*djemaa*"**

Widespread in the territories of North Africa, typically in the ksour of the Sahara, the institution of the *djemaa* is very old. Each ksar had a *djemaa*. Not far from the main mosque, the *djemaa* is easily accessible from all sides of the ksar. This so-called council of "elders" represented a meeting place: a sort of square equipped with stone benches-punctuated by commercial and artisanal production buildings. As a common place where the members of the *djemaa* gather, it was often treated in a special way to provide shade and to stay cool in summer, creating a sheltered, open spatial unit in the square. The members of the *djemaa* sat, either directly on the ground or, on low niches around this space, most often on the *dokkanat*, which were benches made of mud brick or stone, long enough to allow a person to lie down on them. This customary institution of councils which formed spontaneously within the group was charged not with enacting new regulations, but with ensuring, by general consent, the application of rules dating back to the most distant past. In a culture of oral tradition, only men of advanced age were able to assimilate all the useful knowledge. Even today, older men still have some authority.

The *djemaa* was therefore considered as a para-administrative structure, or rather, as a real influential power to support the decisions of local officials. Appointed, then elected, the *djemaa* was the emanation of the most influential groups at the local level, supported by the local authorities. The notables in the ksour sphere kept their privileges until the departmentalization of the Sahara in 1957. In this new system, the intermediate structures and the *djemaa*s were destined to disappear.

The power of the *djemaa* was weakened with the advent of colonization. Hence forth, it was the colonists who managed the ksar. Deprived of its authority, the *djemaa* had only an advisory role in the various fields of social life.

A researcher-anthropologist from the Bechar region says that “the *djemaa* is finding it increasingly difficult to mobilize the inhabitants and settle conflicts. Its role is limited to the maintenance of a few collective facilities, in particular mosques”, while for a researcher-architect based in Bechar, “its legitimacy is sometimes disputed and sometimes recognized by the administration.” That said, the *djemaa* is not completely off-side. It is called upon by local and even central authorities as well as by the population to mediate in conflicts concerning illegal housing, equipment, roads, water, etc...

During the pre-colonial period, which was characterized by political instability in the Maghreb, the region of southwestern Algeria lived in insecurity, and travel (caravans in particular) was risky. The region was therefore managed by the *zawyas*<sup>3</sup> (religious organizations), who ensured the protection of the caravaners against attacks, while the management of the ksour was the task of the *djemaa*.

“After independence in the 1970s, the *djemaa* lost its role in ksour society and became an obsolete organization with the refinement of the administrative division, which gave small spatial entities, that were promoted administratively, new institutional power”, according to an interview with a historian.

To make up for this, the *djemaa* established a new principle of aggregation and solidarity, becoming a more elaborate entity. The religious and cultural function marking the *djemaa* of the ksar was at the origin of its subsequent spectacular development, a development which considerably influenced the way in which these human settlements were then organized.

#### **4.2. The *djemaa*: a physical and spiritual core**

The built environment of the ksour is not only the product of rational physical logics and a functional response to objectifiable data, it is also assumed to be the result of the *djemaa*, an institution with spiritual and immaterial beliefs and attitudes. Indeed, the ksour are marked by their religious and spiritual dimension, by the relationship between the *djemaa* institution and the built environment, as confirmed by Moussaoui Abderrahmane [9], when he states, “The mode of organization of this habitat remains very particular and strongly marked by the formation of the places: the ksar owes its existence and prosperity to the *jemaa* which has an important role in the management and organization of the built space.”

In these ksour, the *djemaa* is a space of management par excellence, as evidenced by the elders (residents of the ksour). “The role of the *djemaa* goes beyond that of a simple oratory, it is the socio-political and spiritual center of the community which combines religious and political power”, reports one of the notables of Kenadsa.

A symbol of faith and identity, the *djemaa* is the living space and the central core of the ksour. From a morphological point of view, the *djemaa* is located near the mosque; its layout is governed by the orientation of the wall of the quibla (direction of prayer). From its central position in the ksar, which reinforces its importance, it constitutes a point of articulation between the different entities (ethnic groups and families) organized around the great mosque according to a hierarchical principle. The mosque is therefore associated with an old public square type of *djemaa*, which is a social institution, a place of exchange and where the assembly of notables meets.

The *djemaa*s of the ksour in southwestern Algeria have relative autonomy with respect to central power, as each ksar has an assembly of notables called *djemaa* situated next to the public square. Each *djemaa* manages community interests on all levels (social, economic and political).

According to the *chaykh*<sup>2</sup>, the head of Kenadsa's *zawya*<sup>3</sup>, Hadj Laredj: "the competence of the *djemaa* extended not only to temporal management, not only to the status of persons and property and to all matters of private and public law, but also to the management of the sacred".

### 4.3. Types of *djemaa*, and governing population

The administration of the ksour has always been organized in a clear manner. Its organs are structured according to two types: the *djemaa* of lineage and the *djemaa* of the ksar.

In general, the *djemaa* of the ksar was made up of representatives from each lineage; the number of representatives was not fixed and varied from one ksar to another. The representatives were appointed for life by the population. The basic criteria for fulfilling this role were eloquence, experience, courage and fortune. This system was characterized by the absence of the post of head of the *djemaa*. The powers of the *djemaa* included matters of public law and some questions of private law by applying custom usage, or *örf*<sup>4</sup> (a practice of long standing considered as unwritten law).

The *djemaa* of lineage is an assembly that brings together all the heads of the families of the lineage, each head of family being the family representative within this organization. It regulates the internal affairs of the lineage, enlightens and advises the notables who represent it at the level of the *djemaa* of the ksar, manages the collective goods of the lineage, administers the *makhzen* (the food supply) constituted each year for general utility expenses, and pronounces food confiscation for the benefit of the community.

Civil society, through the various forms of participation and engagement of citizens in the collective life of society, represents an important actor, which often influences political and economic decisions (acting as a counter-power). Thus, "the participation of citizens in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies is no longer just a choice, but a characteristic of advanced democracies. The existence of a strong civil society forms the basis of democracy and indicates a concern for human solidarity" [10].

Today, the *djemaa* has lost most of its prerogatives; its prerogatives are now limited to hydraulics (distribution and management of water) and land (sharing of collective land).

### 5. Reading a sample of *djemaa*s as a key to reading the ksour

Nowadays, many ksour are depopulated due to their physical degradation while others testify to the weakening or downright cessation of the power of the *djemaa* in social life; however, we cannot ignore the role played by this institution in the local governance of the Saharan settlements of the past, nor the secular impact on the socio-spatial organization of the ksour.

The identification of a set of *djemaa*s located in the Saharan perimeter will make it possible to highlight the typology of common traits or differences between them. The selected *djemmas* are situated in the territories of Beni-Ounif, Beni Abbes, and Taghit, located in the wilaya of Bechar (Figures 3 and 4).

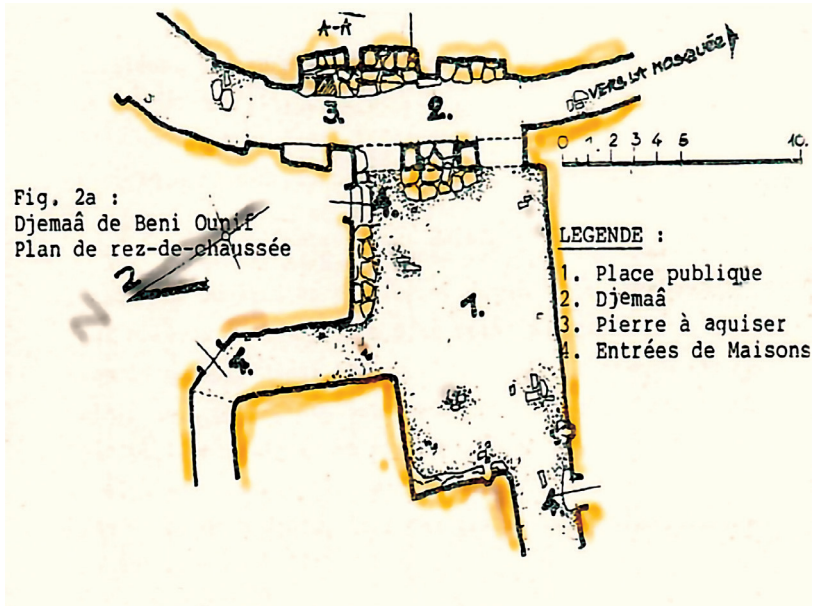


Figure 3. Beni Ounif Djemaâ. Legend: 1. Public place; 2. Djemaâ; 3. Stone base for sitting; 4. Entrance to houses [11].

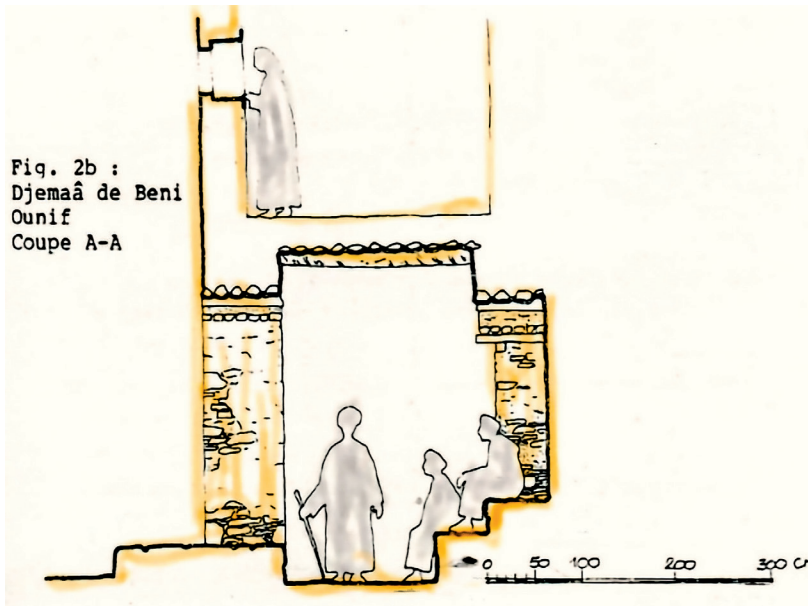


Figure 4. Beni Ounif djemaâ: benches for sitting in the shade [11].

### 5.1. The djemaa of Beni-Ounif

The *djemaa* of Beni-Ounif is located on the axis of a street adjoining the public square onto which it opens, the *djemaa* being an extension of the public square (Figure 5) and consists of a corridor covered by a dwelling. During a *djemaa* meeting, men and women are separated into two physical spaces (outside/men; inside/women). The presence of women at local festivals is made possible by respecting customs based on the separation of the two sexes (male and female).

According to the interview established with the researcher Hadj Mohamed Guili on the *djemaa* of the ksar of Beni Ounif: "Its room for maneuver has become completely obsolete following the establishment of communal assemblies governed by the code of the commune and the development of civil society. Its legitimacy is sometimes disputed, and sometimes recognized by the administration. That said, the *djemaa* is not completely offside" (Figure 5).

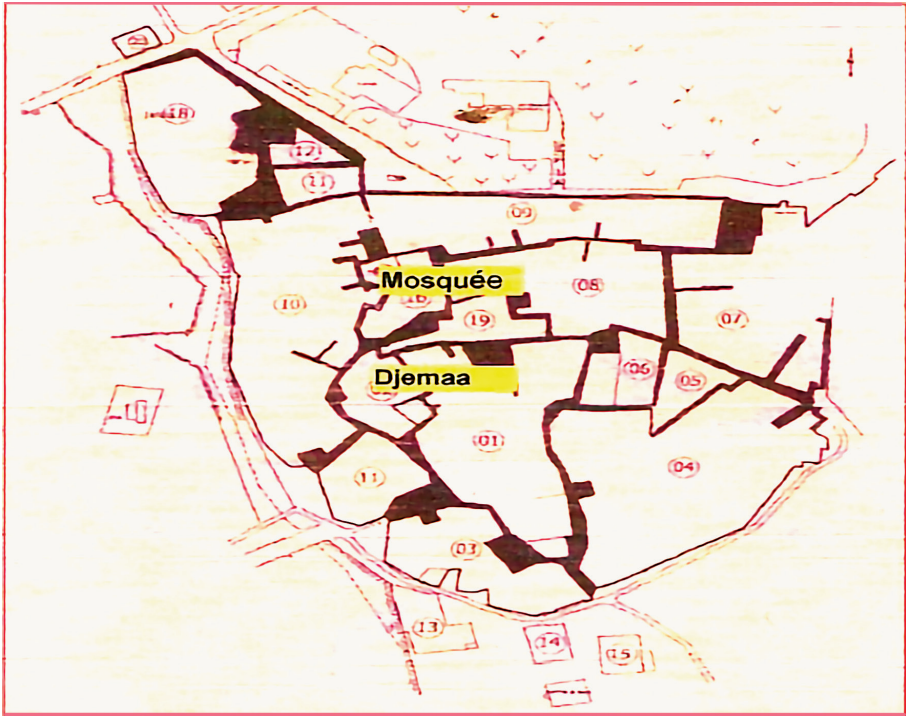


Figure 5. Map of ksar and the djemaa of Beni Ounif [12].

### 5.2. The djemaa of Beni Abbes

According to the interview with the researcher Benslimane Mohamed regarding the *djemaa* of the ksar at Beni Abbes, he states that, "The *djemaa* is made up of 10 members of notables elected for life". He adds, "the *djemaa* is called upon by local and even



central authorities as well as by the population to mediate during conflicts, such as illegal housing, equipment, roads, water, etc. Unquestionably, it continues to embody the moral values of the ksour society and enjoys local popularity.”

“The square was equipped with a portico where the council of village elders (*djemmaa*) met, and through which one accessed the imam’s house. It was also the meeting place for the population of the ksar on feast days. Each tribe had its *chaykh*; everyone met in the *djemmaa* to discuss the problems of the ksar (water supply, harvest, justice...)”

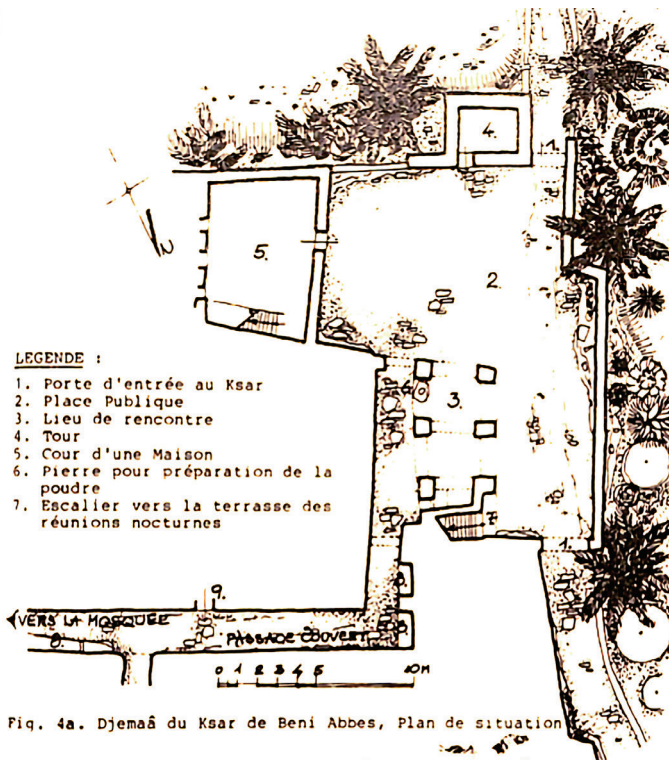


Fig. 4a. Djemaâ du Ksar de Beni Abbes, Plan de situation

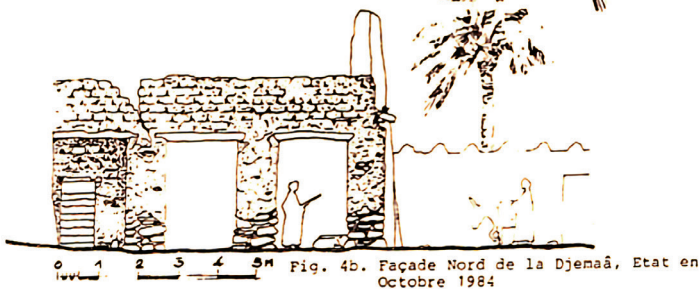


Fig. 4b. Façade Nord de la Djemaâ, Etat en Octobre 1984

Figure 6. Plan and section of the *djemmaa* square in the ksar of Beni Abbes [13]. Legend: 1. Entrance gate to the ksar; 2. Public place; 3. Meeting place for the *djemmaa*; 4. Tower; 5. Courtyard of a house; 6. Powder preparation stone; 7. Staircase to the evening meeting terrace.



Figure 7A. Photo of the ksar of Beni Abbes [14].

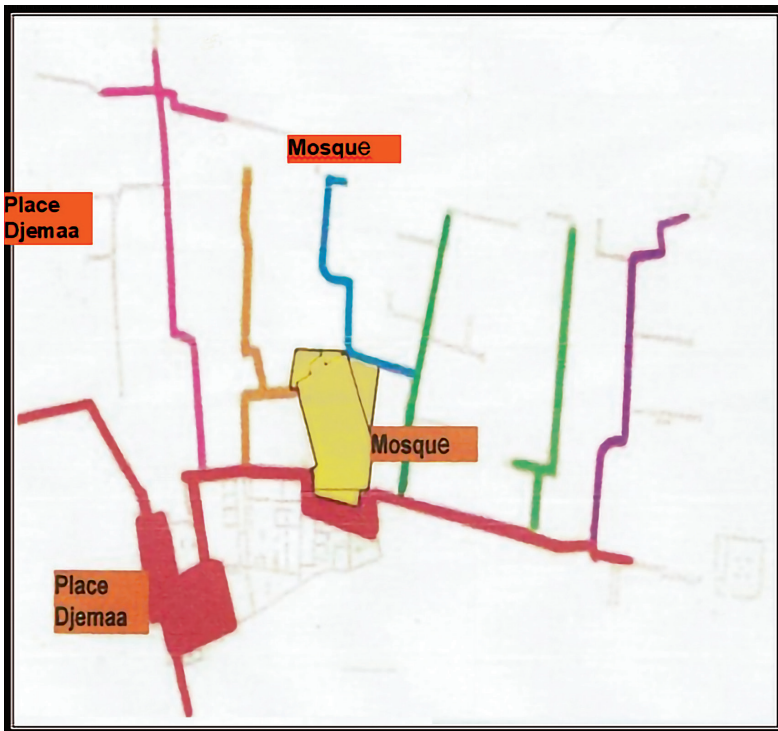


Figure 7B. Plan of the ksar of Beni Abbes [14].

Contiguous to the two doors of the main entrance of the ksar, the *djemaa* was adjacent to the public square. The interior had a ceiling designed with trunks of palm trees and was formed by a space bounded by two rows of stone pillars leading to an adjacent corridor which led to the houses. The members of the *djemaa* had to sit directly on the sand or on improvised seats (Figure 6).

The *djemaa* in Beni-Abbes benefited from an extension on the upper floor, the terrace being accessible by an external staircase. This upper level of the *djemaa* could serve as a place for nocturnal meetings during the hot season, in order to benefit from the coolness of the night (Figures 7A and B).

“The square and the public buildings being open spaces, foreign visitors could access them without having to enter the alleys serving the private dwellings, and this was only possible thanks to their design, which created a system of separation from the rest of the building [15].

### 5.3. The *djemaa* of Taghit

In the preponderant role in the community life of the inhabitants, the *djemaa* has a dual function; on the one hand it is an assembly of notables and wise *chouyoukh*, who manage the interests and the conflicts of the community and, on the other hand, it is the place where they hold their meetings. It is made up of the juxtaposition of three squares: the Souk (market) square at the entrance to the ksar, the mosque square and a meeting square for men (Figure 8A). Hard benches made of stone slabs are arranged on either side of the passages that link the three squares (Figure 8B). Occasionally, during local festivals, women stand back to attend and participate in the festivities.

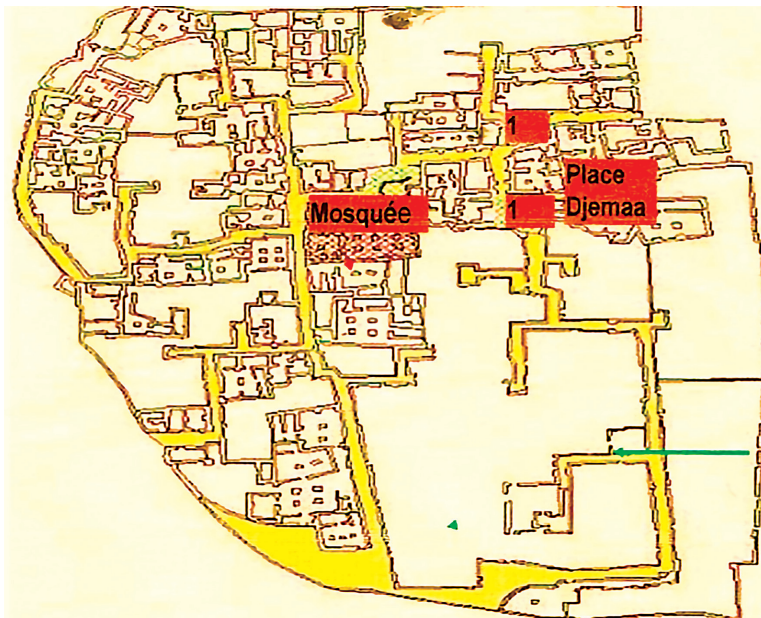


Figure 8A. Plan of the *djemaa* of the Taghit ksar [16]



Figure 8B. Photo of the djemaa of the Taghit ksar [16].

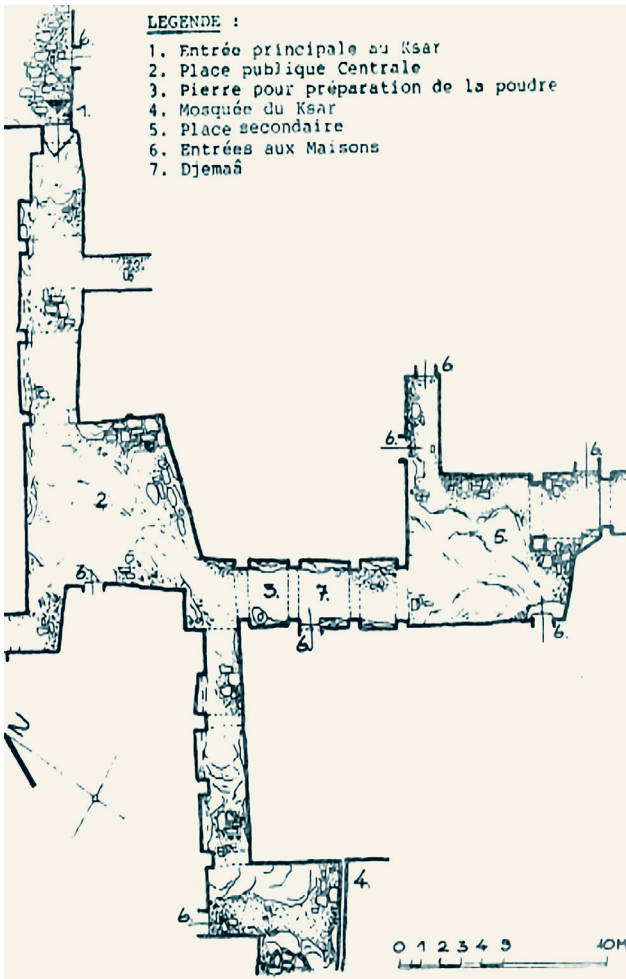


Figure 9. Map of the djemaa of the ksar of Taghit.

Legend:

1. Main entrance to the ksar.
2. Central public square.
3. Stone for preparing events.
4. Ksar Mosque
5. Secondary seat.
6. Entrance to the houses.
7. Djemaâ [17].

The researcher Nadhour Mohamed, ex-President of the APC of Taghit, evokes aspects about the *djemaa* of the Taghit ksar regarding its representatives who “were appointed for life by the “voxpopuli”; the basic criteria to fulfill this role were, eloquence, experience, courage and fortune.” He adds, “Today the role of the *djemaa* is limited to the maintenance of some collective equipment (the Koranic school and the mosque) and the perpetuation of the festivities of the Mawlid and Saint Sidi Mohamed Ben-Abdeslam (Figure 9) (which have now completely disappeared”).

#### 5.4. The *djemaa* of Kenadsa

Among the people of Kenadsa, the *djemaa* represents the assembly of lineages, or ksour, which is sovereign. All political or administrative questions are submitted to the deliberations of the *djemaa*. It is the *djemaa* which appoints the chief (Figures 10-12).



Figure 10. Photo of the *djemaa* integrated into the mosque and places of gathering of the faithful at the ksar of Kenadsa [18].

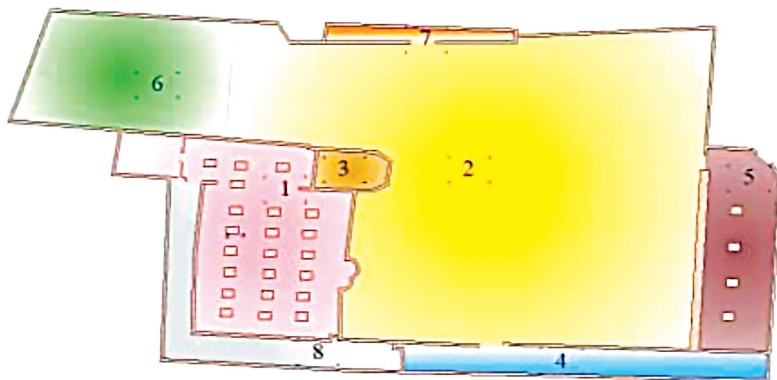


Figure 11. Map of the *djemaa* integrated into the Ben Bouziane Mosque in Kenadsa and places of gathering for the faithful. Legend: 1. Prayer room. 2. Courtyard. 3. Minaret. 4. Ablution room. 5. Place de la *djemaa*. 6. Garden. 7. Cemetery. 8. Passage [19].



Figure 12. Photo of the djemaa integrated into the Ben Bouziane Mosque in Kenadsa and places where the faithful gather [20].

In Kenadsa, it is the chief of the *zawya* who is the sole hereditary lord of the *ksar*. He decides all questions. Sidi M'hammed-Ben-Bouziane, the founder of the brotherhood<sup>5</sup>, wanted to make his disciples a peaceful and hospitable association. The *zawya* enjoys the right of asylum, but the role of the *djemaa* is both a central power, and relay of the *zawya*. Even when the central power is strong, its representative is obliged to go through the *djemaa*. "The *djemaa* is here a very important space in the structure of the *ksar*, since it also articulates the most important routes within it, such as the *derb* (alleys), the arrangement of the souk (market), the routes from the *dwiriyat* (houses) to the palm grove. It is a space for communication and the development of social relations, all the more reinforced by the role of the Mosque of M'hammed Ben Bouziyane" [21].

The historian Hadj Mokhtari Soltani informs us about the *djemaa* of the *ksar* of Kenadsa which, he claims, "after independence, the *djemaa* of Kenadsa lost its role in society, to the detriment of an organization without prerogatives. It finds itself replaced by a new institutional power in the local community of the municipality. The *djemaa* is finding it increasingly difficult to mobilize the inhabitants and settle conflicts. It no longer fulfills its role of managing community affairs and the problems of society, it is only content to preserve the mosque and organize the festivals of Mawlid and the holy Sidi M'hammed-Ben-Bouziane".

According to the teacher-researcher Tahri Mebark, "in the southern regions they deal in particular with the organization of water sharing, which is essential for crops and the palm grove. Even when the central power is strong, its representative is forced to go through the *djemaa* on a fiscal level."

According to the current *chaykh* of the *zawya*, Hadj laredj Laredj, "in Kénadsa, it is the chief of the *zawya*, the only hereditary lord of the *ksar-zawya* who renders criminal justice, while civil cases are judged by the Cadi. But here again the Marabout is the last instance, and it is to him that we appeal judgments that come from the Cadi. Sidi M'hamed Ben Bouziane, the founder of the Zianiya brotherhood, wanted to make his disciples a peaceful and hospitable association. The *zawya* enjoys the right of asylum: any criminal who has taken refuge is sheltered from human justice. If he is a thief, the Marabout makes him return the stolen property. If he is an assassin, he must pay the price of blood. Under these conditions, the culprits do not incur any punishment, as soon as they have entered the enclosure of the *zawya* or even land belonging to him. The death penalty is not applied by the Marabout. If it happens that a criminal is put to death, it is by the parents of the victim or sometimes even by his own, never by the Marabouts."

According to the teacher-researcher Tahri Mebark, "...Thanks to the *zawya*, misery is unknown in Kénadsa. There are no beggars in the streets of the *ksar-zawya*; all unfortunate people take refuge in the friendly shade, and they live there for as long as

they please. Most make themselves useful as servants, workers, or shepherds, but no one is compelled to work. No one dares to raise their voice and criticize the acts of the master. We bow; we repeat the opinions of Sidi Brahim.”

## 6. Interpretation and discussion of results

The socio-cultural involvement of the *djemaa* in the organization of the ksourian environment according to the socio-historical analysis reveals that the *djemaa* manifests itself as an organization that influences and shapes the structure of the ksour fabric, contributing to the socio-cultural and spatial core of the ksar. It offers a meeting place for the heads of families who manage the affairs of the tribe as well as being a place of commercial exchange, and a gathering place for all the inhabitants of the ksar (Table 1.).

Table 1. Comparative table

Ksar	Position in the ksar	Position in relation to the mosque or the zawya	Socio-historical role and power
Kenadsa	Central.	Near the mosque.	<b>Social:</b> management of community life. <b>Cultural:</b> cultural and spiritual power. <b>Spatial:</b> organization of the environment, structuring and management of land in the ksour space
Taghit	At the entrance of the ksar.	Near the mosque.	<b>Social:</b> management of community life. <b>Cultural:</b> cultural and spiritual power. <b>Spatial:</b> organization of the environment, structuring and management of land in the ksour space.
Béni -Abbes		Near the mosque and the medersa (Koranic school).	<b>Social:</b> management of community life. <b>Cultural:</b> cultural and spiritual power. <b>Spatial:</b> organization of the environment, structuring and management of land in the ksour space.
Beni -Ounif		Near the mosque and the medersa (Koranic school).	<b>Cultural:</b> cultural and spiritual power. <b>Spatial:</b> organization of the environment, structuring and management of land in the ksour space.

## 7. Conclusion

The organization of the ksar is hardly the result of chance or of an “architecture of spontaneity” without rules or models. The anthropological bases of the human habitat show that the ksour space cannot be explained solely by the climate, the materials, the site, and the economy. Other irrational parameters dictated by the management of the *djemaa* where local governance, which is difficult to quantify and more complex,

is projected onto the cultural and spiritual order. The organization of the ksar therefore responds to logic, a well-defined order governed by the institution of the *djemaa*. Hence the *djemaa* represents local governance in the participation, and consultation of ksourian citizens in the management of their urban space and community life.

The attributions of the *djemaa* concern the maintenance of the general order of the group and the organization of economic and social life, the reconciliation of the interests of the group and the settlement of economic questions. As such, the *djemaa* administers and settles disputes relating to the collective domain generally by way of conciliation, appealing to notables, because of their in-depth knowledge of customary law and the natural authority they enjoy in the group. It is in the light of this socio-cultural register that we were able to understand the logic and the mode of organization of the space and to grasp in what way the habitat is specifically structured.

If the *djemaa* plays the role of ordering mediator of the traditional ksour community, its members influence the structure of ksour society and arrange the ksour space in different ways in response to their needs and way of life.

However, we note that the majority of the *djemaa*s studied obey an identical design, as an organizing element, structuring all the spaces of the ksar. In practical terms, the principle of management and power is the same, with some differences in management from one ksar to another (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative table of the role of the *djemaa*s in the four ksour of the wilaya of Bechar.

Ksar	Settlement of social and family conflicts	Settlement of inter-tribal disputes	Management of the ksar	Organization of water distribution	Settlement of land disputes
Kenadsa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Beni ounif	Yes	/	Yes	Yes	Yes
Taghit	Yes	/	Yes	Yes	Yes
Beni Abbas	Yes	/	Yes	Yes	Yes

### **Common characteristics of the *djemaa***

- Their central position in the fabric.
- Their function as places of management of daily problems.
- Their spatial composition which takes into account the presence of both sexes without disturbing the cultural order and customs.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> ksar: a fortified place or village in the southern part of North Africa; ksour: several ksar (plural form).



<sup>2</sup> chaykh: head of a brotherhood, a spiritual father of the brotherhood.

<sup>3</sup> zawya: seat of the religious brotherhood (seat of the brotherhood called Zianiya).

<sup>4</sup> orf: customary rules in ksour society.

<sup>5</sup> brotherhood: Sufi path in Islam. It generally bears the name of its founder (here the case of the zianiya in Kenadsa is Sid Ahmed Ben Bouziane).

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### Biographical notes

**Abdelmalek Benaradj**, has a PhD in Architecture; he is a teacher-researcher at Tahri Mohamed Bechar University, Algeria; his doctoral thesis is entitled "Impact of the sacred on the configuration of the ksour (case of the ksour-zawya of the wilaya of Bechar, ksar-zawya of Kenadsa and ksar-zawya of Kerzaz)".

His research interests focus on the ksour and vernacular heritage in southern Algeria. He has published articles on ksour architecture and on cities in the Sahara. He was a member of the commission for the feasibility project of the tramway in the city of Bechar and a member of the commission for the architectural competition for 6,000 educational places at the University of Tahri Mohamed Bechar, before being a founding member of the review of architecture at Tahri Mohamed Bechar University.

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### Summary

The ksour (vernacular human settlements) of southwestern Algeria, founded on the site of the Saharan area called Saoura, are integrated into the modest dunes which run along the rocky escarpments (limiting them). They take the form of a harmonious heap of cubic volumes, of gray ocher color which merges with the natural landscape. Their architecture proves to be the fruit of the spirit of mutual aid and community participation, coordinated by the institution of the "djemaa": a public space extending from the mosque, which brings together notables in order to solve problems in ksour society.

This paper focuses on the characteristics of the "djemaa" space. In addition to a privileged place of rest, meeting and exchanges, this institution once brought together all the notables who judiciously concerned themselves with the management of community interests, as well as the socio-spatial organization of the ksour (situated in the southwest of Algeria). It was a local assembly for the management of collective interests, whose powers were extremely broad. As council of the ksar, the djemaa played a primordial role in the organization of the community life of these ksour.

This study highlights the socio-cultural impact of the djemaa on the logic of the configuration of ksour heritage in the Bechar region. For this purpose, a socio-historical approach was adopted, which was then followed by a morphological reading of some ksour specimens.

## Riassunto

Gli ksour (insediamenti umani vernacolari) dell'Algeria sudoccidentale, fondati sul sito della parte sahariana chiamata Saoura, sono integrati nelle modeste dune che corrono lungo le scarpate rocciose (limitandole). Si stabiliscono sotto forma di un armonioso ammasso di volumi cubici, di colore grigio ocra che si fonde con il paesaggio naturale. La loro architettura si rivela frutto dello spirito di mutuo aiuto e di partecipazione comunitaria, coordinato dall'istituzione "djemaa": uno spazio pubblico che si estende dalla moschea, che riunisce notabili per risolvere i problemi. della società ksouriana.

Questo articolo si concentra sulle caratteristiche principali dello spazio "Djemaa". Questa istituzione, oltre che luogo privilegiato di sosta, incontro e scambio, riuniva un tempo tutti i notabili che si occupavano con giudizio della gestione degli interessi comunitari, nonché dell'organizzazione socio-spaziale degli ksour (dall'Algeria sud-occidentale). Si tratta di un'assemblea locale per la gestione degli interessi collettivi, i cui poteri erano estremamente ampi. In qualità di consiglio dello Ksar, il Djemaa ha svolto un ruolo primordiale nell'organizzazione della vita comunitaria di questi ksour.

Per evidenziare l'impatto socioculturale della djemaa sulla logica della configurazione del patrimonio ksouriano nella regione di Bechar, si è adottato un approccio socio-storico, seguito da una lettura morfologica di alcuni esemplari di ksour.