

## Aspects of the Economic and Social Life in Metlili during the Second Half of the 19th Century and the Beginning of the 20th Century

Nafisa Belkhader <sup>1</sup>, Dr. Salah Boussalim<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>South Algerian Research Laboratory for Islamic History and Civilization, University of Ghardaia (Algeria).

<sup>2</sup>South Algerian Research Laboratory for Islamic History and Civilization, University of Ghardaia (Algeria).

The Author's E-mail: [nafissahist@univ-ghardaia.edu.dz](mailto:nafissahist@univ-ghardaia.edu.dz)<sup>1</sup>, [boussalim.salah@univ-ghardaia.edu.dz](mailto:boussalim.salah@univ-ghardaia.edu.dz)<sup>2</sup>

Received: 10/09/2024

Published: 05/03/2025

---

### Abstract:

This research paper aims to highlight the city of Metlili during the colonial period, considering it a link between the north and south, in an attempt to showcase some economic and social aspects of the city during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We also addressed the economic lifestyle of the region's inhabitants from various perspectives, such as agriculture, industry, and trade, reaching up to cultural and social conditions without neglecting the discussion of the most important prevailing social customs and traditions in the city. This was based on various Arabic and foreign writings, particularly the accounts of European travelers and explorers who visited Metlili and prepared reports on it, given its significance as a location on the caravan routes crossing the desert. The Châamba people stood out for their expertise in desert roads and paths, serving as guides and controllers of desert caravan trade for the exchange of Sudanese and Maghreb goods alike.

**Keywords:** Metlili; The Châamba; customs and traditions; desert caravan trade; Algerian desert; economic life.

---

### Introduction:

The Metlili area, located in southern Algeria, is one of the desert regions that had a significant presence in the trade of desert caravans due to its geographical location on the

route leading to the commercial centers in southern Algeria and Sudan. Additionally, the activity of the Chaamba tribe, known for its expertise in trade routes and its leadership in desert caravan trade for many years, played a crucial role.

To explore the aspects of this topic, the researcher is prompted to pose the following questions: What was the economic and social situation in Metlili during the study period? What were the most prominent features of economic activity in the city? What role did the Chaamba tribe of Metlili play in desert caravan trade? How was social life characterized among the city's inhabitants?

To answer these questions and others, we will attempt to provide responses by employing a range of historical methodologies, structured according to the nature of the topic. In preparing this research paper, we relied on several French writings, considering them as some of the most important sources of local history in Algeria during the colonial period, due to the scarcity and limitations of local writings.

### **1. The City of Metlili: Geographic Background and Origin of the Name**

Regarding the geographic location of the city of Metlili, it is situated in the northern part of the Algerian Sahara and is one of the municipalities of Ghardaia Province, approximately 45 km away from it and 650 km from the capital, Algiers. It is bordered to the north by Ghardaia, the municipalities of Beni Dhahou and Benoura, and the town of Al-Atef. To the east lie Zulfana and Ouargla, while to the south is the municipality of Sebseb, and to the west is the province of El Bayadh. It is located astronomically between latitudes 17°32' North and longitudes 03°14' East<sup>1</sup>.

The climate of the Metlili area is characterized as a dry continental climate, with significant thermal fluctuations, both seasonally and daily. In winter, the climate is cold, with temperatures averaging around 15°C, occasionally dropping below zero. In contrast, summer temperatures can exceed 35°C, and the region is noted for its low precipitation in winter and its rarity in summer<sup>2</sup>, sometimes leading to years of drought, similar to other desert regions<sup>3</sup>.

Metlili is situated on a plateau composed of compact limestone rocks of a gray color with crystalline veins, rising to 800 meters in the north and gradually descending to 400 meters in the south, covering a total area of about 17,000 km<sup>2</sup><sup>4</sup>. Ibn Dīn al-Aghwāti noted, "The surface of the earth in Metlili is not a flat sandy expanse but rather a plateau covered with sharp rocks like knives."<sup>5</sup> This plateau is interspersed with a series of valleys, ravines, and moderate elevations, which the locals have named "Al-Shabaka" due to the intricate and similar valleys that penetrate it<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup>- P. Passager : Metlili des Chaamba (Sahara Algérois), Institut Pasteur d'Algérie 1958, p513.

<sup>2</sup>- Abdelkader Hilimi: Geography of Algeria, Natural, Economic, Human, Vol. 02, Al-Inchaa Press, Damascus, Syria 1968, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>- Abdelkader Hilimi: The same reference, pp. 76-77.

<sup>4</sup>- Abdelhamid Masoud Ben Waleha: The Chaamba and the Stages of Civilizational Development of the Network Region, Socio-Culturally, Ideologically, and Architecturally, Vol. 01, Sobhi Press and Publishing, Metlili - Ghardaia, Algeria 2014, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>- See: Ibn al-Din al-Aghwati: The Journey of Ibn al-Din al-Aghwati, Edited by Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, International Knowledge Publishing, Algeria, 2011, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup>- Abdelkader Hilimi: Geography of Algeria..., Previous reference, pp. 219-222.

Among the prominent valleys in the area is the Metlili River, which serves as a vital artery for the region, with smaller valleys branching off from it, such as the Sebseb River, the Long River, the Shoukat River, and the Fahl River, where the water level rises to irrigate camels and livestock, the primary source of livelihood for the Châamba tribe before they took up agriculture<sup>1</sup>.

Groundwater is used for irrigation through wells located along the riverbanks, with depths varying from one area to another, reaching up to fifty or sixty meters in the southern region.

As for the naming of the city as Metlili, prevailing narratives suggest that it was originally known and written as Methlili with the letter “(t). This is “ت” (th) instead of “ث” attributed to the Wadi Lili area located in Fezzan, Libya, inhabited by members of the 'Chaanba tribe who migrated from the Arabian Peninsula. Upon their arrival in Metlili, they noted its similarity to the nature of the Wadi Lili region they came from, leading to the phrase “Methlili” (meaning ‘like Lili’). Over time, the two words merged, and the city became known as Metlili. This was confirmed by a scientific mission from the French Geographical Society during their visit to Metlili in 1859, where they met some educated members of the Cha'anba tribe<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. The Human Framework (Population of Metlili)

The Chaânbas constitute the majority of the population of Metlili. Arab and foreign writings differ in defining their lineage. Some claim they are an Arab tribe descending from Ali ibn Awf from Sulaym ibn Mansur of the Adnan lineage<sup>3</sup>, who migrated to North Africa in the centuries following the Arab conquests<sup>4</sup>.

The origin of the name “Chaânbas,” according to prevailing narratives, comes from the compound phrase “Shaâ' Naba,” meaning “ray of light.” This refers to their practice of lighting fires at night and keeping them burning as a signal of their location, so that a lost traveler could see them and find his way. When a traveler would see the light, he would joyfully say: “Shaâ' Naba,” which, over time, merged into the term “Chaânbas.”<sup>5</sup> European travelers also attempted to estimate the total population; however, these figures were not accurate and were based on their observations up until the late 19th century.

Yves Régnier noted, “The Chaânbas are Muslim Arabs from southern Algeria; we do not know if they descend from Banu Hilal or Banu Sulaym.”<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Cauneille believes that the inhabitants of Metlili are a mixture of Berbers and Arabs from the Banu Hilal tribe, which arrived in the region in the 11th century<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> P. Passager: op. cit., pp. 515-516.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Maury: Bulletin of the Geographical Society, 1859, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Ismail Al-Arabi: The Sahara and Its Coasts, National Book Foundation, Algeria 1983, p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> Boufil and Rubin Halit: Gold Trade and the People of the Maghreb, Translated by Al-Hadi Abu Laqma and Mohamed Aziz, Qaryunis University Publications, Benghazi, Libya, 1988, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Lakhali: The Resistance of the Metlili Chaamba Region to French Colonialism, between 1851-1908, Vol. 1, Sobhi Press and Publishing 2019, pp. 34-35.

Abdelhamid Masoud Ben Waleha: The Chaamba..., Previous reference, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Yves Régnier: The Chaamba under the French Regime: Their Transformation, Paris, Doma Montchrestien, 1938, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Cauneille, A.: The Chaamba, Their Nomadism, National Center for Scientific Research Editions, Paris, 1969, p. 20.

After their initial settlement in Metlili, and due to the increasing population and limited space, as well as the necessities of life, the tribe had to disperse to new areas and regions. Some headed towards Ouargla under the leadership of Bourouba, while others moved towards Menia from the Mougha area, with the Brazqa remaining in Metlili among the Chaânbas<sup>1</sup>.

If we examine the scant information available regarding the population dynamics and size of Metlili, we find significant discrepancies in some figures that are difficult to interpret. According to a census by Cauneille in 1869, the number of Chaânbas was as follows:

- Chaânbas of Metlili: 5,785 inhabitants.
- Chaânbas of Ouargla: 2,394 inhabitants.
- Chaânbas of Menia: 1,623 inhabitants<sup>2</sup>.

In general, the available information about the population of Metlili is scarce and varies significantly. However, the political and economic conditions prevailing in the mid-19th century encouraged the growth of the city's population, which is predominantly composed of the Chaamba tribe<sup>3</sup>, along with Tuaregs and individuals from other oases, such as the Lebid Sidi Sheikh, as well as people from Sudan. This indicates that the city's commercial role has influenced its demographic composition.

The Chaamba of Metlili, also known as the Braziga<sup>4</sup>, constitute the largest group compared to other elements of the population. They are divided into three major branches, each comprising a number of factions, as follows:<sup>5</sup>

- The Throne	The Difference
- The Ouled Allouch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ouled Thamer</li> <li>- Ouled Moussa</li> <li>- Ouled Al-Bahaza</li> <li>- Ouled Ibrahim</li> <li>- Ouled Al-Shalg</li> <li>- Ouled Jarouda</li> <li>- Ouled Isa bin Moussa</li> <li>-Ouled Amirat</li> </ul>
- The Ouled Abdelkader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ouled Hanich</li> <li>- Ouled Awamer</li> <li>- Ouled Al-gamara</li> <li>- Ouled Omar</li> <li>-Ouled Al-Sayah</li> </ul>
- The Palace	- Al-Shourfah

<sup>1</sup>- Yves Régner: op. cit., p. 6. Lieutenant Colonel Dumas: The Algerian Sahara, Geographical, Statistical and Historical Studies on the Region South of the French Settlements in Algeria, Paris, 1845.

<sup>2</sup>- Cauneille: op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>- Ismail Al-Arabi: The Great Sahara..., Previous reference, pp. 164-165.

<sup>4</sup>- Dahma Bekar: Revolutionary Activity in the Ghardaia Region against French Colonialism in Algeria 1956-1962, Thesis Submitted for a Doctorate in Modern and Contemporary History, History Department, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Ghardaia, Academic Year 2019-2020, pp. 26-27.

<sup>5</sup>- Auguste Cauneille, The Chaamba, Their Nomadism, Ed. du C.N.R.S, Paris 1968, pp. 42-45.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Bani Marzouk</li><li>- The Murabitin</li><li>- Ouled Ismail</li><li>-Bani Ibrahim</li></ul>
--	---

Other population groups have also settled in Metlili, such as the Zway who arrived in Metlili and became kin to the Sha'nbah with the arrival of their ancestor Sidi Sheikh at the end of the 16th century, followed by his son Sidi Haj Bouhafs<sup>1</sup>, as well as some Black individuals who were assigned specific agricultural tasks<sup>2</sup>.

The Sha'nbah tribe is considered one of the tribes formed on the basis of alliance and loyalty. This type of tribe begins as ethnic groups in the initial stage before gradually accepting families or individuals of different origins. They seek refuge in it due to the tribe's strength and influence among other tribes, eventually merging into a unified entity against their enemies.

### 3. Economic Activity

Economic activity in Metlili primarily relied on pastoralism, trade, and agriculture. However, livestock herding was the dominant profession in the region, and some residents still engage in this practice<sup>3</sup>. The inhabitants of the Metlili oasis were more invested in agriculture and trade, which provided more lucrative returns compared to pastoralism. Additionally, herding required vast expanses of suitable land that could provide fodder and grazing for livestock year-round.

#### A. Agriculture

The city of Metlili, home to the Châamba tribe, is one of the main agricultural regions in southern Algeria that flourished during the 19th century. It features numerous date palm groves extending approximately four kilometers<sup>4</sup>, with the most notable being the Hadour oasis.

Date palm cultivation is considered one of the most important agricultural practices in Metlili<sup>5</sup>, as it serves as a vital source of the local economy. All parts of the palm complement each other; the fruits are used as food, the leaves serve as carpets and roofing materials, and wood is employed in home construction and fuel. Additionally, fibers and ropes are made from them. The dates produced here are of higher quality than those from other desert regions, constituting the main food source for oasis inhabitants and their primary means of livelihood. However, they typically do not remain fresh for more than

<sup>1</sup>- See also: Abdelhamid Masoud Ben Waleha: The Chaamba..., Previous reference, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>- Sheikh Lakhel: The Relationship of the Metlili Chaamba with the Sons of Sidi Sheikh during the 19th Century through French Writings, *Rawaef Journal for Research and Studies*, University of Ghardaia, Vol. 14, 2018, pp. 109-110.

<sup>3</sup>- Passager: op. cit., p. 525.

<sup>4</sup>- Sheikh Lakhel: The Resistance of the Metlili Chaamba to French Colonialism..., Previous reference, p. 68. Dahma Bekar: Previous reference, pp. 34-35.

<sup>5</sup>- Tromly: *The French in the Desert, Diaries of a Campaign on the Borders of the Algerian Desert*, Translated by Mohamed Al-Miraji, National Center for Studies and Research in the National Movement and the November 1 Revolution, Granada Publishing and Distribution, 2013, p. 419.

two or three months, necessitating a drying process. Their orchards contain about thirty different varieties of dates<sup>1</sup>.

It is well-known that rainfall in the region is very scarce, and it may occasionally face prolonged drought periods. However, the area possesses abundant groundwater reserves that facilitate irrigated agriculture, usually sourced from shallow wells. Consequently, farms, orchards, and date palm trees are plentiful in the Metlili oases. Each season brings its own crops. In winter, some areas are dedicated to cultivating wheat, barley, tomatoes, and various vegetables and fruits, such as turnips and carrots<sup>2</sup>. In summer, crops like corn (referred to as “Sudani”), pomegranates, and grapes are planted<sup>3</sup>.

Due to the limited rainfall in Metlili, its residents have resorted to digging wells to extract groundwater<sup>4</sup>. Animals, whether donkeys, horses, or camels, are used to draw water with buckets, overseen by a person known as the “jabled” or “saqai.” Orchard owners often enlist individuals to assist with plowing and harvesting, known as “haratha” or “khadama.”

## **B. Pastoralism**

Pastoralism has been the predominant activity practiced by the Châamba tribe for a long time<sup>5</sup>, as the region’s desert environment necessitates a lifestyle based on both nomadism and settlement. The inhabitants own a significant livestock wealth, estimated at around 5,500 camels and 8,000 sheep. The Châamba would move their herds of camels, goats, and sheep to various areas where water and grass are available, heading towards Wadi Zarqoun in spring and autumn, and to Tajerouna and Aflo in summer and winter. They return to Metlili during the fruit harvesting season in September and December<sup>6</sup>. Due to the importance of pastoralism for the Châamba, large celebrations are held the night before they embark on their search for grazing lands. During these gatherings, the town comes alive with activity as men gather around fire pits to discuss and negotiate livestock prices. Elders and experienced travelers offer valuable advice to the younger members of the tribe, drawing from their own experiences to assist them in their journeys<sup>7</sup>. The Châamba are also known for their exceptional skills in poultry farming, riding, and their desire to possess various birds<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, they engage in hunting gazelles, rabbits, and ostriches, often using trained cheetahs that were still prevalent in the region during the French occupation<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup>- Abu al-Qasim Saadallah: *Research and Opinions on the History of Algeria*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, Lebanon, 2005, p. 253.

<sup>2</sup>- Henry Duveyrier: *A Glance at the Land of the Beni-Mezab and that of the Western Chaamba*, Letter to Mr. President of the Geographical Society, Excerpt from the Bulletin of the Geographical Society of Paris, Laghout, 1859, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>- Edmond Gouvion: *The Kharijism. Monograph of the Mzab*, Reum Us Printing Press of the Moroccan and Little Moroccan, 1926, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>- Yves Régnier: *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>- Rabih Ramadan: *Aspects of Social and Economic Life in the Algerian Desert through the Journey of the Aghwati*, in the Proceedings of the Second National Conference on Social and Economic Life during the 13th-12th Hijri/19th-18th Century through Local Sources, University of El Oued, January 24-25, 2012, p. 200.

<sup>6</sup>- Yves Régnier: *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup>- Ismail Al-Arabi: *Previous reference*, p. 166. See:

Dr. Eyme: *Monograph on Metlili*, Fundus of the Saharan Documentation Center, n019000007, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup>- Yves Régnier: *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup>- Ibrahim Ben Saleh Baba Hamou Azam: *The Branch of the Bay Tree in the History of Warjlan*, Edited by Ibrahim Bahaz and Suleiman Boumakhl, Global Printing Press, Ghardaia, Algeria, Vol. 1, 2013, p. 232.

### C. Crafts and Handicrafts

Most industries in Algeria during the 19th century were traditional artisanal crafts, with practitioners inheriting their customs and practices over generations. Each craft or profession was typically organized in a specific area, overseen by a chief who managed the interests of its members and protected them from fraud and manipulation.

Although information about industries in Metlili during the study period is scarce, it is evident that they were less developed than those in northern Algerian cities such as Algiers, Oran, and Constantine. The local industries were characterized by their traditional local elements.

The Châamba practiced various crafts and handicrafts, including textile production. Women would prepare wool from goat hair and camel fur, weaving it into various forms such as cloaks, blankets, tents<sup>1</sup>, and woolen coverings to store food, as well as bedding for horses. These textiles were dyed in different colors according to demand<sup>2</sup>, using henna, pomegranate peels, and other herbs, making this craft a source of income for them<sup>3</sup>. They also utilized goat, camel, and sheep hides to make saddles, buckets, and bags for carrying water and milk<sup>4</sup>.

Due to the abundance of the bulrush plant in hot and arid regions, it, along with palm leaves<sup>5</sup>, was used to make ropes for tying camels and horses, as well as for drawing water from wells. Other crafts also flourished, such as blacksmithing for making knives, sickles, hoes, horseshoes, and tools for shearing rams, in addition to some pottery industries<sup>6</sup>.

### D. Commercial Activity of the City of Metlili

The city of Metlili serves as a vital link between the cities and desert oases in southern Algeria, connected by a network of desert pathways that facilitate communication among the oases. This connection has fostered economic integration between the markets of the southern oases and other regions. Trade between these markets occurred smoothly and without obstacles, as most goods were exchanged through barter.

Generally, the Châamba are known for their commercial activity, which can be divided into two main categories: internal trade within the desert and external trade towards Ghaddames, Tunisia, Morocco<sup>7</sup>, and Sudan<sup>8</sup>. Trade played a significant role in their economic life. Locally, many residents would come to the Qasr market in the afternoon to

---

<sup>1</sup>- Ismail Al-Arabi: *The Great Sahara...*, Previous reference, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup>- The tent was the primary dwelling of the nomadic Chaamba in the desert; it was made of goat hair and distinguished by its white and black colors. See: Mokhtar Chenina: *Symbols on the Chaamba Carpet*, *Journal of Studies in Economy, Trade, and Finance*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2017, p. 489.

<sup>3</sup>- Tromly: Previous reference, p. 421.

<sup>4</sup>- Omar Ben Qaid: *The Social and Economic Status of Women in Southern Algeria Before the Liberation Revolution - Women in Metlili at the End of the 19th Century and the Beginning of the 20th Century*, *Rawaef Journal for Research and Studies*, University of Ghardaia, Vol. 2, 2021, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup>- Dumas: *The Algerian Desert*, Translated by Qandooz Abad Fawzia, Granada Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2013, p. 412.

<sup>6</sup>- D'armagnac Lieutenant: *The Mzab and the Chaamba Land*, Baconnier Editions, 1933, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup>- Dumas: Previous source, pp. 313; Tromly: Previous source, p. 305.

<sup>8</sup>- Jalloul Ben Qomar: *The Chaamba Tribe through the Book of the Chaamba in Their Nomadism, The Development of the Tribe since French Administration*, *Rawaef Journal for Research and Studies*, University of Ghardaia, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 237. Saleh Boussalim and Abdelkader Aloun: *The Trade of Desert Caravans between Algeria and Tripoli during the Ottoman Era*, *Mediterranean Dialogue Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, University of Sidi Bel Abbes, December 2017, p. 146.

sell their products, such as vegetables, fruits, carpets, and furnishings made by their women, while also purchasing household necessities. Some would travel to the Ghardaïa market to sell wool, firewood, butter, and fat, while acquiring wheat, tea, textiles needed for their families, and various goods available from the local merchants<sup>1</sup>.

The Cha'anba also played a role as commercial intermediaries between the traders of Beni Mizab and the regions of Gourara and Tidikelt<sup>2</sup>. Henry Duverger mentioned a list of goods and products that the Cha'anba would bring from Tuat and Timimoun to supply the local market in Ghardaïa. These included slaves, henna, dried roses, kohl, ostrich leather, and lead<sup>3</sup>. Their commercial activities extended to other kasbahs located in the northwest desert, particularly to supply sugar sourced from Gabes<sup>4</sup>.

Externally, the Cha'anba had complete control over caravan trade between the shores of Algeria and Timbuktu, as well as regions along the Niger River<sup>5</sup>. These caravans operated regularly and freely from southern Oran to Sudan through Gourara, Tuat, and Tidikelt to the west, and Gabes and Ghaddames to the east. They were armed to conduct their commercial activities; in contrast, those caravans heading south had to pay tolls to the Tuareg for protection.

Given that trade routes were fraught with risks, the management of caravans relied on professional traders with expertise and experience in commerce and its pathways. They were responsible for leading and managing the caravan, choosing the route, and determining the times for departure and rest<sup>6</sup>.

As West Sudan experienced significant commercial activity, the Cha'anba frequented it for trade due to its importance. At that time, a saying circulated: "The cure for mange is tar, and the cure for poverty is Sudan<sup>7</sup>." They would export goods from the coasts of Algeria and Tunisia, along with locally produced dates, and import gold, henna, slaves, peanuts, and corn from Sudan<sup>8</sup>.

#### **4. Social Situation in the City**

The inhabitants of Metlili have inherited a variety of social customs and traditions over generations. The flow of trade between Algeria and Metlili, as well as between Metlili and the desert cities and Sudan, has revealed an important truth: the desert has never been a barrier between the peoples of the same continent. Evidence shows that commercial relationships were accompanied by flourishing social and cultural ties.

The Metlili community is characterized by many social customs and traditions, with the most notable being:

##### **A. Celebrations and Occasions in Metlili**

---

<sup>1</sup>- Charles Amat: *The M'zab and the M'zabites*, Challamel et Cie, Publishers, Paris, 1888, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>- Eymee: *op. cit.*, pp. 20-23.

<sup>3</sup>- Paul Soleillet, *West Africa: Algeria, Mzab, Tidikelt*, Avignon Imp., Paris, 1877, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup>- Henry Duveyrier: *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18. And Paul Soleillet: *West Africa Algeria - Mzab - Tidikelt*, Avignon Imp., France, 1871, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup>- Ismail Al-Arabi: *Same reference*, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup>- *Same source*, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup>- *Same source*, p. 168.

<sup>8</sup>- Eugène Dumas: *The Great Desert or the Itinerary of a Caravan from the Sahara to the Land of the Blacks*, Paris, Chaix et Cie, 1848, p. 4.

The traditions of the Metlili community closely resemble those of the desert cities in southern Algeria, as they are customs passed down through generations. Even though there are minor differences, they are generally quite similar.

### **1. Religious Celebrations**

These include religious occasions and festivals that are consistently celebrated, mostly not differing from those observed in other desert oases:

#### **-Ashura:**

The residents of Metlili celebrate several special occasions, particularly Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, which holds a special significance for them.

#### **- Mawlid al-Nabi:**

The community gathers on the night of Mawlid to listen to readings of the Prophet's biography in mosques, recite the Quran, and engage in takbir (praising God)<sup>1</sup>. They often recite the "Qasidat al-Burda" by Al-Busiri alongside other religious praises.

#### **- Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha:**

Celebrating religious occasions has a special character, especially concerning Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha (the small and large Eid). Everyone, both young and old, wears new clothes and heads to the mosque to engage in takbir, tasbih, and tahleel (praising God). Afterward, they return home, exchange visits and greetings, and serve tea and sweets.

Celebrations and Joyous Occasions

### **2. Engagement and Marriage:**

One of the prevalent social customs among most inhabitants of the desert oases is the early marriage of girls, typically between the ages of 15 and 18. Young men marry around the age of seventeen if they come from wealthy families; however, those from poorer families often marry before the age of twenty-five. The sons of the Cha'anba usually know their future wives prior to marriage, as they belong to the same tribe or lineage. It is not uncommon for families to arrange engagements for their children from a young age.

The father of the young man approaches the girl's father to propose marriage. Initially, they sit together, enjoying mint tea while discussing camels, pastures, and the prices of wool. As they pour the third cup of tea, the young man's father suddenly suggests, "Isn't it wonderful for our families to unite?" Following this, the girl's father slaughters a ram, the women prepare a feast, and witnesses are called to agree on the necessary dowry. Once an agreement is reached, the imam recites the opening chapter of the Quran (Al-Fatiha) for blessings and acceptance.

The dowry is specified in dirhams and a number of camels, as the dirhams are used to purchase essentials such as tents, mats, perfumes, and jewelry. Two days before the wedding, the young man presents his future father-in-law with a qantar (a measure) of wheat, along with tea, sugar, henna, and clothing<sup>2</sup>.

### **Wedding Celebration**

---

<sup>1</sup>- Mohamed AbdelHalim Bishi: The Development of the Algerian Revolution in the Ghardaia Region 1954-1962, Master's Thesis in Contemporary History, History Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers, Academic Year 2001-2002, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>- Eyme: p. 38.

On the night of the wedding, the bride visits her friends, touring the tents and receiving many gifts such as perfumes, silver clasps, and colorful handkerchiefs. The groom wears a new shirt and a white woolen cloak (woven by his mother). He ties a green thread around his head, wears a red silk handkerchief on his chest, and dons yellow leather slippers. His eyes are lined with kohl, and his hands are decorated with henna.

The groom is given the titles “Moulai” or “Sultan,” and he is accompanied by two ministers: one responsible for carrying the sword and the other overseeing the wedding details. The groom also visits his friends, receiving gifts and dirhams from them.

On the day of the consummation, starting from noon, members of the tribe gather around the wedding tent. Women wear colorful clothing while men form circles, holding their rifles. A gunpowder dance is performed, and if the groom comes from a wealthy family, several gunpowder bands may be invited to participate in the wedding festivities.

A dinner feast is prepared, featuring couscous, roasted lamb, tea, and peanuts. Each guest’s right hand is adorned with henna as a sign of joy and celebration. Men sing “Aidi” songs while women dance inside the tents. The celebration lasts for three days among the tribes of Ouled Alouch and Ouled Abdelkader. Late at night, the wedding concludes with gunfire<sup>1</sup>.

### **Naming Ceremony for the Newborn**

The family of the newborn celebrates by sacrificing a ram on the day of the naming ceremony, a task usually performed by the father or grandfather. A feast is held, to which relatives and friends are invited. The name for the child is chosen in a specific manner: a male family member sits with the student (imam) outside the tent, while the mother remains inside, in front of a dish made from palm fronds containing dates, on top of which are placed three sticks.

The dish of dates is brought to the men gathered outside the tent, who eat one-third of the dates. The student then picks one of the sticks, and the dish is returned inside the tent. The mother eats a few dates from it before it is taken outside again for the men to eat, and the student picks another stick. The dish is returned to the tent once more, and the mother holds the remaining stick, saying, “This third stick, which hasn’t been discarded, represents in my mind this name, which will, God willing, be our son’s name.”

A known custom among the Cha’anba is for the father or grandfather to give the newborn a she-camel, a ram, or a palm tree, tying the umbilical cord to it to signify ownership<sup>2</sup>.

### **Circumcision**

Circumcision is considered an important milestone in a child’s life. When a child reaches the age of seven, a circumcision ceremony is held, accompanied by a feast attended by family and relatives. In some families, circumcision may occur as early as the fortieth day after the child’s birth<sup>3</sup>. If the family has other children under the age of ten, all of them may be circumcised on the same day, performed by a designated individual known as “Al-Tahar.”

---

<sup>1</sup>- Ibid, pp. 151-152.

<sup>2</sup>- Yves Régnier: op. cit., pp. 154-155.

<sup>3</sup>- Yves Régnier: pp. 147-148.

Following circumcision, the child is expected to begin performing prayers and fasting<sup>1</sup>. Sometimes, this occasion involves a collective circumcision event that includes several boys from the city. It is customary to perform circumcisions in winter to facilitate the healing of wounds. After circumcision and until the age of fifteen, the child is kept separate from gatherings of women and begins learning new skills such as horse riding, weapon handling, and hunting. He may also participate in herding and trade caravan journeys<sup>2</sup>.

### **Mourning**

Mourning is one of the social phenomena in the Metlili community, where they bury their dead according to Islamic practices. After washing and shrouding the deceased in a white burial shroud, their face is left uncovered. The deceased is then carried on a bier to the cemetery by relatives or volunteers, who recite praises of God and read from the Quran<sup>3</sup>. After the burial is completed, people gather at the deceased's home to offer condolences, and neighbors take it upon themselves to prepare meals for the bereaved family<sup>4</sup>.

### **5. Cultural Conditions in Metlili**

The social structure has facilitated the development of a cultural framework that has enriched cultural activities, including education and its various stages, reflecting on cultural engagement through the presence of several influential figures who played a prominent role in revitalizing cultural life, disseminating religious knowledge, and combating superstitions, myths, and innovations.

The majority of the inhabitants of Metlili adhere to the Maliki school of thought and use the Arabic language correctly<sup>5</sup>, as it is the language of the Quran. The activity of Quranic schools and "kuttabs" (traditional schools) is closely linked to this, with young children attending to learn reading, writing, and memorizing the Quran, along with other religious rituals under the supervision of a "talib" (Quran teacher), who was among the most prominent and influential figures in the community<sup>6</sup>.

The ancient Maliki mosque in Metlili (built in 550 AH / 1156 AD) is considered the only cultural and scientific institution in the town. It was staffed by scholars and teachers who were graduates of religious schools and affiliated with the prevalent Sufi orders of the time. The mosque included a Quranic school dedicated to teaching various religious sciences, such as Quranic studies<sup>7</sup>, interpretation, rules of recitation, language sciences like grammar and morphology, hadith studies, and legal texts according to the Maliki school through the study of the "Muwatta" of Imam Malik and the "Sahih" of Boukhari and Muslim<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup>- Eyme: op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>- Yves Régnier: p. 149.

<sup>3</sup>- Ibid, pp. 150-151.

<sup>4</sup>- Eyme: op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>5</sup>- Passager: op. cit., p. 541.

<sup>6</sup>- Eyme: op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>7</sup>- Ibid, pp. 38-39.

<sup>8</sup>- Sheikh Lakhel: The Resistance of the Metlili Region..., Previous reference, pp. 100-101.

The Châamba of Berzqa in Metlili prioritized education, reflecting their significant regard for the educated class in society. Wealthy families often employed a teacher during their travels to educate their children, compensating him with a tent, carpets, dates, sheep, and other goods<sup>1</sup>.

Many Sufi orders, such as the Qadiriyya, Sanusiya, and Sheikhiyya, flourished in Metlili, giving rise to a rich scientific and literary heritage that celebrated their sheikhs and extolled their virtues<sup>2</sup>.

The Cha'anba also focused on composing poetry and creating diwan (poetic collections) to narrate the history of tribes, their news, and areas of settlement. Most of this poetry falls into two main categories: the glorification of God by mentioning His names and attributes, and praising the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his companions, as well as poetry for invective and responding to enemies<sup>3</sup>.

Among the most notable poets of the Cha'anba who gained fame are:<sup>4</sup> Qaddour Ben Lakhdar Beitor, Abdelkader Al-Shara, Muhammad Zita, Ahmed Haiba Bhinisa, Ibrahim Al-Nawasir<sup>5</sup>, and others.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research paper has yielded a set of findings, summarized in the following points:

- The city of Metlili served as the initial nucleus for the settlement of the Cha'anba tribe in the Algerian desert, which later expanded into other areas of the desert, such as Menia and Ouargla, due to increased population pressure resulting from its limited space.
- The primary activity practiced by the Cha'anba was pastoralism, given their vast livestock wealth, including goats, sheep, and camels. Additionally, the Cha'anba engaged in various activities, including agriculture, herding, hunting, and several crafts and artisanal industries, such as weaving, pottery, metalwork, and leather production.
- The Cha'anba of Berzqa (the Brazaqa) in Metlili emerged as pioneers in desert caravan trade due to their extensive experience in preparing and managing trade caravans and their knowledge of the desert routes leading to West Sudan. The influence and control of the Cha'anba tribe extended over large areas of the desert, from Ghat and Ghadames in the east to the Saoura and Touat in the west, and from Metlili in the north to Ain Salah in the south. The markets and trading centers frequented by the Cha'anba included both domestic and foreign destinations, such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Sudan, where they played the role of commercial intermediaries between the Mozabites and the regions of Touat and Tidikelt (Ain Salah).
- The social and economic conditions significantly influenced the colonial policy in southern Algeria and Algeria as a whole, as the French focused their settlement efforts on

---

<sup>1</sup>- Abdelhamid Ben Waleha: Previous reference, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup>- Yves Régner, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>3</sup>- Mohamed AbdelHalim Bishi: Previous reference, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>- Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup>- Abdelhamid Ben Waleha: Previous reference, p. 173. For more information on some aspects of cultural conditions in Metlili at the beginning of the 20th century, see: Mohamed Abdel Halim Bishi: Cultural Life in Metlili at the Beginning of the 20th Century – Imam Masoud Belhour as a Model, *Rawaef Journal for Research and Studies*, Experimental Issue, University of Ghardaia, June 2016, pp. 51-70.

plundering lands that constituted the core of the tribe through various means, adversely affecting the tribes by diminishing their influence and disrupting social relations among their members.

- The Cha'anba of Metlili adhered to their social customs and traditions related to religious holidays and occasions, placing great importance on celebrations such as Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Mawlid, as well as social events that also received special organization and preparations, including wedding ceremonies, circumcision, and naming events.

- The Cha'anba placed a significant emphasis on religious education, which took place in Quranic schools and kuttabs, where various subjects were taught, including Quranic studies, language, hadith, and obligations, under the supervision of the Quran teacher known as the "talib."

### **List of Sources and References**

#### **A) Arabic and Arabized Sources:**

1. Ibn Khaldun, Abdel Rahman: *The History of Ibn Khaldun*, Vol. 1, Part 6, Scientific Library, Lebanon, 1992.
2. Azam Ibrahim Ben Saleh Baba Hamou: *Branch of the Bamboo in the History of Warjilan*, edited by Ibrahim Bahaz and Suleiman Boumaql, Al-Alami Printing, Ghardaïa, Algeria, 1st edition, 2013.
3. Al-Aghawati, Ibn Al-Din: *The Journey of Ibn Al-Din Al-Aghawati*, edited by Abu Al-Qasim Saad Allah, International Knowledge Publishing, Algeria, 2011.
4. Troumly: *The French in the Desert: Diaries of a Campaign in the Algerian Desert*, translated by Mohamed Al-Maraaji, National Center for Studies and Research in National Movement and the Revolution of November 1st, Granada Publishing and Distribution, 2013.
5. Dumas: *The Algerian Desert*, translated by Qandouz Abad Fawziya, Granada Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2013.
6. Al-Awamer, Ibrahim Muhammad Al-Sasi: *The Faces in the History of the Desert and Souf\**, commentary by Al-Jilani Ben Ibrahim Al-Awamer, Talla Publications, Algeria, 2007.

#### **B) Arabic and Arabized References:**

1. Ben Waliha, Abdul Hamid Masoud: *The Sons of the Châamba and the Stages of Civilizational Development in the Land of the Network: Socially, Ideologically, and Architecturally*, 1st edition, Dar Al-Sobhi for Printing and Publishing, Metlili Ghardaïa, Algeria, 2014.
2. Boufil and Rubin Halit: *Gold Trade and the Inhabitants of the Greater Maghreb*, translated by Al-Hadi Abu Laqma and Muhammad Aziz, Publications of Qariyounis University, Benghazi, Libya, 1988.
3. Beishi Rahima and Thabet Jamila: *Jews of the Wadi Mizab Region during the 13th Hijri/19th Century*, Dar Sobhi for Printing and Publishing, 1st edition, Metlili Ghardaïa, Algeria, 2014.

4. Miyasi Ibrahim: *On Issues of Contemporary Algerian History*, University Publications, Algeria, 1999.

**C) Articles in Arabic Journals:**

1. Saad Allah, Abu Al-Qasim: *Research and Opinions in the History of Algeria*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, Beirut, Lebanon, 2005.
2. Chenina Mukhtar: *Symbols on the Châamba Rug*, *Journal of Studies in Economics, Trade, and Finance*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2017.
3. Al-Arabi Ismail: *The Sahara and Its Coasts*, National Book Institution, Algeria, 1983.
4. Lakhhal Sheikh: *The Relationship of the Châamba of Metlili with the Sons of Sidi Sheikh during the 19th Century through French Writings*, *Journal of Rwaafed for Research and Studies*, Ghardaïa University, No. 14, June 2018.
5. Lakhhal Sheikh: *The Resistance of the Metlili Châamba to French Colonialism between 1851 and 1908*, 1st edition, Dar Sobhi for Printing and Publishing, Metlili - Ghardaïa, 2019.
6. Beishi Muhammad Abdul Halim: *Cultural Life in Metlili at the Beginning of the 20th Century –Imam Masoud Belhour as a Model*, *Journal of Rwaafed for Research and Studies*, Experimental Issue, Ghardaïa University, June 2016.
7. Boussalim Saleh and Aloun Abdulkader: *Trade of Desert Caravans between Algeria and Tripoli during the Ottoman Era*, *Mediterranean Dialogue Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Sidi Bel Abbes University, December 2017.
8. Ben Qaid Omar: *The Social and Economic Status of Women in Southern Algeria before the Liberation Revolution–Women in Metlili at the End of the 19th Century and the Beginning of the 20th Century*, *Journal of Rwaafed for Research and Studies*, No. 2, Ghardaïa University, 2021.
9. Ben Goumar Djeloul: *The Châamba Tribe through the Book of the The Châamba and Their Bedouin Life: The Development of the Tribe since French Administration*. Vol. 7, No. 1, *Journal of Rwaafed for Research and Studies*, Ghardaïa University.

**D) Conferences and Seminars:**

- Rabah Ramadan: *Aspects of Social and Economic Life in the Algerian Desert through the Journey of Al-Aghwati*, article presented at the Second National Conference on: *Social and Economic Life in Southern Algeria during the 13th-12th Hijri / 19th-18th Century through Local Sources*, University of El-Oued, January 25-24, 2012.

**E) Theses and University Dissertations:**

- Bishi Muhammad Abdul Halim: *The Development of the Algerian Revolution in the Ghardaia Region, 1954-1962*. Master's Thesis in History, Department of History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers, Academic Year 2001-2002.
- Dahma Bekkar: *the Revolutionary Activity in the Ghardaia Region in Confrontation with French Colonialism in Algeria, 1956-1962*, Thesis submitted for a Doctorate in Modern and Contemporary History, Department of History, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Ghardaia, Academic Year 2019-2020.

### **List of Sources and References in Foreign Languages**

#### **A) Sources:**

1. Amat Charles: *The M'zab and the M'zabites*, Challamel et Cie Publishers, Paris, 1888.
2. Daumas Eugène: *The Great Desert, or Itinerary of a Caravan from the Sahara to the Land of the Negroes*, Paris, 1848.
3. Duveyrier Henry: *A Glimpse of the Land of the Beni-Mezab and the Western Cha'anba*, Letter to the President of the Geography Society, Extract from the Bulletin of the Geography Society of Paris, Laghout, 1859.
4. Maury Alfred: *Bulletin of the Geography Society*, Vol. 18: Year 1859, Paris: Geography Society, 1822-1899.
5. Paul Soleillet: *West Africa: Algeria, Mzab, Tildikelt*, Avignon, Imp., Paris, 1877.
6. Daumas (Colonel): *The Algerian Sahara: Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Studies on the Region South of the French Establishments in Algeria*, Paris, 1845.

#### **B) References:**

1. Boyer P.: *The Odyssey of a Saharan Tribe: The Djeramna (1881-1929) Review of the Muslim West and the Mediterranean*, No. 10, 1971, pp. 27-54. C.N.R.S, Paris 1968.
2. Cauneille Auguste: *The Châamba: Their Nomadism*, Ed. du Cauneille-A: *The Cha'anba and Their Nomadism*, National Center for Scientific Research, Paris, 1968.
3. Couvion Edmond: *Kharijism: A Monograph of the Mzab*, Printing Presses Reum Us de la Marocain et Petit Marocain, 1926.
4. D'Armagnac Lieurenant: *The Mzab and The Châamba Lands*, Editions Baconnier, Algiers, 1934.
5. Paul-François-Michel Passager: *Metlili of The Châamba: Algerian Sahara: Historical, Geographical, and Medical Study* Pasteur Institute of Algeria, 1958.
6. Régnier Yves: *The Châamba under the French Regime: Their Transformation*, Paris, Doma Montchrestien, 1938.