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	Sacred Shrines, Symbolic Authority, and Gendered Religious Practices: A Socio-Psychological and Anthropological Analysis of Pilgrimage Rituals to the Shrine of Lalla Maghnia in Mecheria (Algeria)	
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Abstract		
<p>This study examines the phenomenon of shrine visitation and the veneration of righteous saints as a deeply rooted religious and cultural practice in Algerian society, with particular emphasis on women’s participation in these rituals. Using the shrine of Lalla Maghnia in Mecheria as an empirical case study, the research explores the psychological, social, and symbolic motivations underlying pilgrimage practices and the continued sanctification of sacred spaces. The study adopts a qualitative analytical approach grounded in sociological, anthropological, and symbolic frameworks to interpret the meanings embedded in shrine-related rituals, such as supplication, offerings, vows, and collective ceremonies. These practices are understood not merely as expressions of popular religiosity, but as socially constructed mechanisms through which individuals negotiate anxiety, misfortune, and existential uncertainty. The saint’s shrine functions as a symbolic mediator between the sacred and the profane, reinforcing collective beliefs in blessing (baraka), intercession, and miraculous intervention. The research further analyzes the concept of sainthood (wilāya) as a source of symbolic domination and spiritual authority, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power. The saint’s perceived moral purity, genealogical prestige, and affiliation with Sufi institutions contribute to the consolidation of charismatic legitimacy and voluntary social submission. Women’s engagement with shrine rituals is interpreted as a form of religious agency shaped by emotional, social, and cultural constraints, offering both spiritual reassurance and communal belonging. By contextualizing shrine visitation within historical, religious, and sociocultural continuities, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of popular religious practices in North Africa and highlights the enduring role of sacred symbolism in shaping collective consciousness and social behavior.</p>		
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Introduction

Definition of the Saint

A righteous saint in Islam is a man known for his upright conduct, worship, good behavior, and love of God, to whom God grants the light of sainthood in his heart, through which he knows his Lord and draws closer to Him. He may manifest miracles and be known for them, or he may live in obscurity. In general, the term “saint” means the loving one, the supporter, the obedient, the guardian over something, or the person entrusted with an affair.

Wilāya, whether with a fatha or kasra on the wāw, is a term built on kinship and closeness and the meanings derived from it. “Waliya” means he drew near to him; “muwālāh” between two things means closeness between them; “waliya” someone means he came close to him; “waliya” a matter means he took charge of it; “wilāya” means authority and governance; “walla” someone means he supported and loved him; “walla” a country means he ruled over it; “awlā” someone over an orphan means he entrusted him with care; “awlā” someone with an affair means he appointed him guardian over it; “awlā” someone a favor means he did him a favor; and in warning and threat it is said: “awlā laka,” meaning evil is close to you, so beware. Wilāya with a kasra means authority. Wilāya and walāya mean support, as in “they are united in support.” Sibawayh said: “Wilāya with a fatha is the verbal noun, and wilāya with a kasra is the noun; the wālī is the guardian of the orphan who manages his affairs; and the guardian of the woman is the one who conducts her marriage contract.”

The name “al-Walī” is one of the Names of God; He is the Supporter who takes charge of the affairs of creation, the Owner of all things and the One who disposes of them. “Tawallāk Allāh” means God supported you. In Arabic usage, walī and mawlā are the same. Ibn al-A‘rabi said: “The son of the paternal uncle is a mawlā, the son of the maternal uncle is a mawlā, the neighbor, the partner, the ally, the friend, and the supporter.” The walī is the loving follower.

The Holy Qur’an contains noble verses indicating wilāya, such as the Almighty’s saying: “And those who believed but did not emigrate—you have no wilāya over them in anything until they emigrate.” And His saying: “There, wilāya belongs to Allah, the True; He is best in reward and best in outcome.” As for the derivatives of the term wilāya, the words “walī” and “awliyā” appear in forty-two places. Some uses of wilāya or its derivatives in the Qur’an describe the servants of God in addition to God Almighty, as in His saying: “Or have they taken awliyā’ besides Him? But Allah is the Walī; He gives life to the dead, and He is over all things competent,” and His saying: “And sufficient is Allah as a Walī, and sufficient is Allah as a Helper.” “Your Walī is only Allah and His Messenger and those who believe, who establish prayer and give zakah while they bow.”

According to commonly accepted definitions, the saint is one who knows God and His attributes, persists in acts of obedience, avoids sins, turns away from excessive indulgence in permissible pleasures and desires, and preserves the Sunnah and proper conduct. He is called a saint because he continuously devotes himself to the worship of God, or because God takes care of him with His kindness and grace. He is the pious and righteous person who enjoys, during his life and even after his death, the esteem and respect of people. He is among those distinguished by religion, knowledge, asceticism, and righteous deeds. According to some, saints are divided into: ribāṭ saints of noble lineage tracing back to the family of the Noble Messenger; and saints endowed with miracles. Saints represent the sacred aspect of the shrine, that is, the spiritual dimension associated with the person of the shrine.

The Saint and Symbolic Domination

Belonging to noble lineage is an important factor in acquiring sainthood, as is affiliation with Sufism. The role of the zawiya sheikh in social and economic life in society is among the important factors that lead to the acquisition of sainthood, which grants the sheikh charismatic domination and spiritual authority to be exploited for certain purposes.

Employing sainthood is an important means of enjoying strong influence and a prestigious social status in society. The sheikh or marabout constitutes the basis of spiritual authority, granting him a broad status among the population, such as obedience and material mobilization in order to attain blessing and satisfaction. In this sense, the embodiment of the saint’s self in the collective unconscious comes through a specific model of ideas and perceptions according to a sensory perception expressed through social behavior that translates symbolic domination, as described by Pierre Bourdieu: “The effect of symbolic domination is not exercised in the pure logic of knowing consciences, but through schemes of sensory perception, evaluation, and action.” Domination is constructed from the point of view of those who are dominated, when the schemes, as particularities, are what things are built upon and relationships are established through, which the dominated person uses to perceive himself and to evaluate the saint’s symbolic domination and voluntary and free submission.

It is known that supplications directed toward an authority believed to resolve problems, and the conviction that there exists an unseen power capable of relieving the oppressed person of his crises, spread in the soul a kind of reassurance regarding fate and destiny and instill calm in the distressed person. Thus, popular beliefs related to saints

and their ability to protect the oppressed person become “a practical and successful alternative to the method of force and coercion in social relations.”

Roots of the Human Bond with the Sacred Other

The veneration of the living for the dead is a phenomenon as old as humanity itself. In this regard, the scholar Tylor states: “The worship of ancestors arose from belief in spirits; fathers and ancestors in primitive tribes held the reins of affairs because they were knowledgeable about matters of life. When they died, their spirits hovered over the family to protect it from misfortunes... This belief is what led humans to worship ancestors.” The belief in the necessity of venerating the spirits of the dead explains a set of religious practices that prevailed in historical societies and among some contemporary underdeveloped groups. These spirits have the same desires and inclinations they had when they inhabited the body; therefore, people seek closeness to them through sacrifices and offerings. Moreover, the miracles experienced by people in the saint and witnessed during his life are what drove them to venerate him, such as transforming one thing into another desired one, predicting the future, communicating with jinn, communicating with the dead, calming winds, and others.

Belief in the Righteous Saints and Their Miracles

Since humans are weak and sometimes stand helpless before many situations, they need a force to support and assist them. From this perspective emerged the idea of believing in saints and seeking blessing through them, based on society’s fascination with their miracles and extraordinary abilities in uncovering people’s secrets, informing them of future matters, fulfilling their wishes, relieving the distressed among the desperate, treating the sick with the Qur’an, teaching them the principles of the true Islamic religion and the Sunnah of its noble Prophet, in addition to delivering them from rulers and their injustice and protecting them from bandits. Thus, saints occupied a significant position in contemporary societies through their virtuous qualities and noble morals, through biographies and miracles transmitted across generations as men close to God Almighty, because, in the belief of some, they were pioneering reformers who worked to reform social and religious conditions through various methods and means to rectify what was corrupt in Islamic societies and revive them on strong foundations.

From here, the hearts of many people became attached to the righteous, tongues called upon them, and supplications sought their help in times of hardship to be delivered from tribulations and calamities. People also believed that saints possess spirits that remain after their death. This belief spread and became firmly rooted among the general populace, such that shrines and graves became a refuge for every fearful person and a hospital for every sick person afflicted by distress, illness, or calamity, hoping for the relief of distress and the fulfillment of needs.

Saints accompanied the inhabitants of the city of Algiers in their daily lives, and their influence on them was great in various social aspects. This influence was not limited to a particular group but encompassed all groups, poor or rich, ignorant or educated. We see that Hamdan ibn ‘Uthman Khoja, one of the city’s educated and affluent inhabitants, believed in their blessing and the sanctity of their graves. He says: “...the marabouts teach people morals and explain them as much as possible; they also teach them prayer and guide them to noble character. In return, they reap absolute obedience, and the inhabitants believe that all their supplications are accepted by God, in whose sanctity and majesty they believe.” In another place, in his memorandum to the French Minister of War in 1833, Hamdan Khoja emphasizes the status of saints, saying: “...the requirement of our religion and our policy is to respect the saints and respect their resting places. Even if someone upon whom legal retaliation is due takes refuge there, we do not remove him from the resting place, but wait for him to leave on his own, out of respect for that saint and reverence for one who obeyed God. They are like mosques in respect and in people’s shared visitation and seeking refuge in them.” These ideas of Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman Khoja indicate the importance of the righteous saint in people’s lives and the extent of his influence on their souls and their submission to his blessing.

In this context, we find that zawiyas and shrines held a distinguished status, as they served as sanctuaries to which fugitives from punishment and killing would flee, regardless of their crimes. Governors and common people alike believed in the inviolability of the sanctuary of the zawiya and the shrine. It was sufficient for the offender to flee to this sanctuary for no one to pursue him, nor would any authority touch him. Incidents of fleeing to Wali Dadda, Zawayat al-Qal’a, al-Tha’alibi, and others occurred, whether involving governors themselves or common people, due to their belief in the righteousness of the saints and their ability to unleash their wrath upon anyone who violated their sanctuary.

The Arabs in the pre-Islamic era regarded the graves of their great figures as places of visitation sought by those in need, who would be answered, and as refuges for the fearful, who would find safety. Examples include Tamim Jad ibn Tamim and the grave of ‘Amir ibn al-Tufayl. The pre-Islamic view of the grave was a sacred one, accompanied by rituals and practices. They shaved their heads at the grave as an act of veneration, because hair symbolized life and strength, and shaving it carried the meaning of sacrifice. Shaving the head or shaving the two locks was among ancient customs performed as an honor and veneration of their deities, during pilgrimage to the houses of gods, and they did so before the grave, elevating it to the level of a deity.

Due to the sanctity of the saint, he is buried in an elevated place and placed in a wooden coffin or a rectangular structure resembling a wooden coffin, which is covered with a carpet and flags of different colors. All of this is called the shrine. A dome is built over this shrine, which is a square structure with a bulging roof. This structure, together with the dome, is called the pilgrimage site or the status. However, it is observed in many regions that the same

shrine exists for the same saint despite the absence of the saint from that place, or perhaps he merely stayed there or rested, and thus the place became sacred.

The sacred may occupy a space contiguous with the worldly domain and, in turn, receive a spatial designation, such as places of worship: the church, the temple, the mosque, the monastery. Here, the sacred imposes a status unique to itself—a symbolic status that is nevertheless not abstract, which makes it visible, readable, and tangible. These places are sacred spaces that do not belong to the spatial domain upon which they were built; they belong to another place beyond the earthly plot or the city in which they are located. Only the gate or threshold represents the boundary open to the sacred domain. It is the dwelling of the deity, the house of God, the threshold that separates the two worlds, and the place that allows communication—the passage between the worldly world and the sacred world. As a sacred place belonging to the profane domain, its interior belongs to the heavenly world, while its surroundings lie on profane earthly ground. It represents a gateway through which the sacred and the profane communicate.

The sacred may occupy a space immanent to the worldly sphere and, in turn, acquire a spatial designation such as places of worship: the church, the temple, the mosque, the monastery. Here, the sacred imposes a status that is exclusively its own—a symbolic status that is nonetheless not abstract, which makes it visible, readable, and tangible. These places are sacred spaces that do not belong to the spatial domain upon which they were built; they are from another place, other than the patch of land or the city on which they stand. Only the gate or the threshold represents the boundary open onto the sacred domain. It is the dwelling of God, the House of God, the threshold that separates the two worlds; it is the place that allows communication, or the passage between the worldly realm and the sacred realm. As a sacred place belonging to the profane domain, its interior belongs to the heavenly world, whereas its surroundings lie on profane earthly ground; it represents a gateway of communication between the sacred and the profane.

Durkheim emphasized that the sacred is a product of collective consciousness, considering it to be “the sum of persons, objects, and actions that the social group has decided to place outside the ordinary or the natural. Sacred things possess nothing in themselves that makes them so; they acquire the character of sanctity because society grants it to them by setting them apart from the ordinary or by adopting them as sacred symbols.” Therefore, he considers that the group, by virtue of its power over the individual, obliges the latter to submit to the sacred through the sacred objects it creates for its members and imposes upon them respect for them. Durkheim continues by stating that the sacred is “a sociological and collective category in which the shared feelings of the group accumulate.”

In this regard, Durkheim holds that “all religious beliefs, simple or complex, contain a common general characteristic: they presuppose a division of all things, whether perceptible or imperceptible, placing them into two classes—the sacred and the profane. This division is reduced to two factors: one contains everything that is sacred, and the other everything that is profane. It is the fundamental distinguishing feature of religious thought. Religious representations are nothing but means of expressing the nature of sacred things and their relations with one another, or their relations with profane things.”

The phenomenon of visiting shrines is a living translation of the mythical, illusory mind that has accompanied human thought for a long time and still lives alongside it, keeping pace with social, political, and cultural systems. Popular reality speaks of the extraordinary speed with which this phenomenon has spread and the extent to which members of society cling to it to the point of sanctification and veneration. Thus, the saint's shrine has come to resemble a specialized medical worship, to which anyone afflicted with harm in any part of the body or experiencing psychological distress turns.

Women's recourse to the shrine and their representation of it has made them conceive of it as a space to them, to which they resort in escape from male authority and the domination exercised by men over women. It has thus become for them a symbolic authority they need. This need appears particularly in patriarchal societies, where the dominant force is the male element, which constitutes the basis of the authority upon which these societies are built. “Rituals are considered compensatory for life circumstances, as the group that is overpowered practices them as compensation for states of deprivation imposed upon it by superior groups... For example, female groups in patriarchally inclined societies resort to magical ritual to avenge themselves against the domination of the male group. The woman always seeks to escape the effects of male authority in all areas of social life.” This shrine thus constitutes a means of achieving predominance and ensures her distancing from the pressure of male authority; it is a defensive means through which the woman defends her femininity and her role in society, attempting thereby to assert herself, and a space through which she seeks recreation. “The underlying motives behind visiting righteous saints were closely related to the female body, which sought an outlet or the saint's magical relief, or both together.”

Among the reasons that led to the spread of popular beliefs among the general public is the visitation of righteous saints, for gathering around the shrine, the mausoleum, or the dome led them over time to believe everything that happens after the visit. From the experiences of visitors is their belief that the visit charges them with positive energies, solves difficult life problems, treats magic, unties binding spells, and so on. Sayyid Qutb sees that “visiting the graves of saints and the righteous represents a suitable place for the spread of superstition, indeed for the proliferation of its strange details, because those graves attract large crowds for many reasons, and the group of visitors seizes the opportunity of the visit to repeat the stories woven around those saints regarding their fame, piety, and the extent of their influence on those who believe in their wondrous power.”

The Shrine of Lalla Maghnia:

The Shrine of Lalla Maghnia is a mausoleum site, sacred for visitation and blessing, in the Jabal Antar area of the municipality of Mecheria (Naama Province) in southwestern Algeria. It is considered one of the religious and heritage landmarks of the region and is usually visited for blessing and remembrance of the righteous woman to whom the shrine is attributed. There is no precise information about it; rather, people have come to recognize the existence of this sacred shrine, and women have been visiting it for several years.

The shrine is located at the foot of Jabal Antar, far from noise. It is a simple, square-shaped structure. Its exterior walls are white and it is topped with a small dome, situated in the middle of a small courtyard elevated by one meter, with four small openings for lighting and ventilation. The grave is covered in different colors; for example, the white color, when referring to the history of Islam, is found to be a Prophetic tradition symbolizing purity and is often used during the celebration of the Prophet's birthday. The green color distinguishes the descendants of the Prophet and is a symbol of hope.

These shrines and graves are usually located on elevations because mountains are sanctified for being close to the sky and thus facilitating communication with God. The prophet dwells on a mountain in order to oversee, proclaim, and inscribe sanctity.

What is known about this shrine is that women visit it by the dozens every Friday after prayer, seeking blessing from this righteous saint. They offer foods and drinks, light candles, present the visit to the caretaker, and pay some money. Visiting shrines is among the customs that have become entrenched in Arab society in general and Algerian society in particular.

According to what the women who visit the Shrine of Lalla Maghnia in Mecheria mention, although they do not know the history of this shrine or the identity of the person buried there, they resort to it as a result of illness that affects the woman and her children. The aim of the visit is to seek healing, request offspring, or even the righteousness of children, to find job opportunities, and to fulfill all needs. These visits are originally customs that have become rooted through daily practice, as well as the spread of news that some have recovered from illness after repeated visits to the shrine, or that they gave birth after failing in treatment. Some believe that everything associated with the saint is characterized by extraordinary power. Others find in these visits a refuge for rest and recreation and for meeting other families and exchanging news; they are also exploited in electoral campaigns by women, and this occurs in the surroundings of the shrine rather than inside it, because the place is sacred and cannot be defiled by such news.

Women enter the shrine barefoot, then light candles and burn incense so that the visit may bring them benefit and they may obtain blessing and satisfaction. These customs are perhaps ingrained in the psyches of individuals “since pre-Islamic times, for the pagans used to burn incense for their gods and idols as a means of supplication to achieve their aims and to seek their pleasure. After the advent of Islam, this custom remained in effect, and Muslims continued to burn incense in mosques and shrines and in places of blessing in order to perfume them as a means of drawing closer to God and the righteous prophets and to please the jinn.”

In this regard, Mubarak al-Mili sees that this seeking of blessing expresses drawing support from the spirits of the righteous, believing that they are alive in their graves, acting in the world and fulfilling the needs of those who seek them. Those who argue this cite what is mentioned regarding the life of spirits. Among the manifestations of seeking derived blessing are kissing the walls and rubbing against them and everything added to that place. He adds: “They thus believe in benefit and harm residing in inanimate objects and in non-righteous servants, or believe that someone other than God resembles God in creation and origination.” He continues: “They bring down rain whenever they wish, cure whomever they love among the sick, grant to whomever they wish males and females, marry them to males and females, and render sterile whomever they are angry with. Whoever opposes these people and contradicts them, they accuse him of denying sainthood and label him with withdrawal and Wahhabism.”

In another context, however, we find the population's adherence to visitation and its etiquette. Algerians, since ancient times, have regularly visited the shrine of al-Tha'alibi, located in the popular Casbah district in the center of Algiers. Visiting his shrine has, over the years, become a tradition that has acquired its significance, as Algerians consider al-Tha'alibi their role model. They elevated his status among them in the past and carried love and appreciation for him in their hearts over centuries until he became a symbol of their capital, following his role in spreading knowledge among Algerians. Thus, they acknowledge the man's status and favor upon them, which further entrenched al-Tha'alibi in the local popular imagination as one of the eternal golden keys of the ancient Algerian

memory. The city of Algiers has long been associated with the symbol of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Tha‘alibi, and it is not surprising if a local resident addresses you by saying: “Our capital is the city of Sidi ‘Abd al-Rahman.” Al-Tha‘alibi is also strongly present in popular songs and chants as a symbol of the city of Algiers and its cultural and urban flourishing.

Conclusion:

It becomes clear from this study that visiting shrines and mausoleums is a phenomenon deeply rooted in Arab and Algerian society and remains prevalent to this day, despite centuries having passed since its emergence. This indicates its continuity through its being instilled in people by daily practice and revived through a set of rituals. The accompanying belief persists as a result of human incapacity, which is the motive for resorting to these rituals.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on cultural, historical, and theoretical analysis of religious practices and does not involve direct experimentation on human or animal subjects. All interpretations are presented with respect for religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and social sensitivities. The research adheres to internationally recognized ethical standards in social sciences, ensuring academic integrity, objectivity, and cultural respect.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares **no conflict of interest** with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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