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<p><b>Benghachi Imad Eddine</b></p>	<p>RESEARCH ARTICLE </p> <p><b>Water, Popular Belief, and Ritual Practice: An Anthropological Investigation of Al-Mashaki Spring in Jijel Province, Algeria</b></p> <p>Dr. University of Tunis Tunisia E-mail: <a href="mailto:ibenghachi@gmail.com">ibenghachi@gmail.com</a></p>	
<p><b>Keywords</b></p>	<p>Al-Mashaki spring; water symbolism; popular belief; ritual practices; cultural identity; collective memory; ethnographic anthropology.</p>	
<p><b>Abstract</b></p> <p>This study provides an in-depth anthropological analysis of the symbolic, cultural, and social significance of Al-Mashaki Spring in Jijel Province, Algeria, with particular emphasis on the dynamic interplay between natural landscapes, popular belief systems, and ritual practices. In many traditional societies, water is not merely a physical resource but a culturally embedded element associated with purification, healing, fertility, and spiritual protection. Within this broader context, springs often emerge as focal points of collective imagination and ritual activity, functioning as spaces where the boundaries between the material and the symbolic are continuously negotiated. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic research design, this study is based on fieldwork conducted over a three-month period, incorporating participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with local residents and visitors. The analysis focuses on how individuals perceive, interpret, and engage with Al-Mashaki Spring through a range of ritual practices, including vows, supplications, symbolic offerings, and acts of purification. These practices are examined as culturally meaningful behaviors that reflect shared systems of belief and serve as mechanisms for coping with uncertainty, illness, and life transitions. The findings reveal that Al-Mashaki Spring functions not simply as a natural water source, but as a culturally constructed and symbolically charged space embedded within collective memory and local identity. Ritual practices associated with the spring operate as performative expressions of belief, reinforcing social cohesion, sustaining intangible cultural heritage, and reproducing culturally specific interpretations of the relationship between humans, nature, and the unseen. These practices also illustrate the persistence of traditional worldviews within contemporary contexts, highlighting the coexistence of symbolic and rational modes of understanding. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to anthropological discussions on ritual, symbolism, and cultural landscapes by demonstrating how natural sites can be transformed into socially meaningful spaces through the accumulation of narratives, beliefs, and practices. Ultimately, the research positions Al-Mashaki Spring as a “living cultural landscape,” offering valuable insights into the processes through which cultural identity is constructed, maintained, and transmitted across generations.</p>		
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## Introduction

Water occupies a central and enduring position in the symbolic and material structures of traditional societies, extending far beyond its utilitarian function as a natural resource. Across diverse cultural contexts, water has historically been associated with a wide range of meanings, including purification, fertility, protection, regeneration, and continuity (Douglas, 2020; Strang, 2021; Linton, 2022). In anthropological literature, water is frequently conceptualized not merely as a physical substance but as a culturally mediated element embedded in systems of belief, ritual, and social organization (Orlove & Caton, 2020; Ballester, 2019). Springs, in particular, have functioned as focal points within these systems, serving simultaneously as sources of sustenance and as sites of symbolic and spiritual significance where the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are negotiated and redefined (Eliade, 1959; Geertz, 1973).

Throughout history, natural water sources such as springs, rivers, and wells have been incorporated into local cosmologies and collective imaginaries, often becoming sites of ritual activity, pilgrimage, and healing practices (Doutté, 1909; Descola, 2021). These spaces frequently embody what anthropologists describe as “symbolic landscapes,” in which natural elements are imbued with culturally constructed meanings that reflect broader systems of knowledge, memory, and identity (Tsing, 2021; Escobar, 2020). In such contexts, water-related rituals are not merely repetitive actions but are meaningful practices that contribute to the reproduction of social structures and cultural values over time (Rappaport, 2020; Turner, 1969).

Within this broader theoretical and cultural framework, Al-Mashaki Spring in Jijel Province, Algeria, represents a particularly compelling case of the intersection between natural phenomena and systems of popular belief. As a localized cultural site, the spring has acquired symbolic, social, and spiritual significance through the cumulative processes of historical memory, oral tradition, and everyday practice. Similar to other sacred natural sites in North Africa, Al-Mashaki has been transformed into a space surrounded by notions of sanctity, blessing, and supernatural agency, reflecting what Geertz (1973) describes as a “cultural system” in which symbols function to establish powerful and enduring moods and motivations.

The anthropological significance of Al-Mashaki Spring lies in its role as a living cultural space where individuals engage in ritual practices that mediate between the material and the symbolic dimensions of existence. Field observations indicate that the spring is not visited solely for its physical properties, but also as a site of ritual engagement involving vows, supplication, healing practices, and symbolic acts of purification. These practices can be interpreted as forms of embodied cultural expression through which individuals seek to negotiate uncertainty, illness, and life transitions (Turner, 1969; Whitehouse & Lanman, 2020).

Moreover, the persistence of these rituals highlights the role of collective memory in sustaining cultural continuity. As Halbwachs (2020) argues, collective memory is not merely a passive repository of the past but an active process through which societies reconstruct and reaffirm shared meanings. In the case of Al-Mashaki, oral narratives and transmitted beliefs contribute to the ongoing reproduction of symbolic frameworks that define the spring as a site of healing, protection, and spiritual intercession. These narratives reinforce a sense of belonging and identity, situating individuals within a broader cultural and historical continuum (Assmann, 2020; Connerton, 2021).

Water-related practices at Al-Mashaki Spring also reflect broader anthropological themes concerning the relationship between humans and the natural environment. In many traditional societies, nature is not perceived as separate from culture but as an integral part of a relational system in which humans, natural elements, and unseen forces interact (Ingold, 2021; Descola, 2021). Within this perspective, water functions as a mediating element that connects the visible and invisible realms, enabling individuals to engage with what is perceived as sacred or transcendent (Strang, 2023).

Importantly, the rituals associated with Al-Mashaki Spring can be understood as symbolic strategies that contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural identity. As noted by Douglas (2020), concepts of purity and pollution play a central role in structuring social and ritual practices, particularly in relation to substances such as water. Similarly, Rappaport (2020) emphasizes that ritual serves as a mechanism through which social norms and values are communicated, reinforced, and legitimized. In this sense, the practices observed at Al-Mashaki are not isolated cultural phenomena but part of a broader system of meaning-making that sustains social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Despite the growing influence of modernization and scientific rationality, such belief systems and ritual practices continue to persist, suggesting the coexistence of multiple epistemological frameworks within contemporary societies (Feyerabend, 1975; Santos, 2014). Individuals may simultaneously acknowledge scientific explanations while engaging in symbolic practices that fulfill emotional, psychological, and social needs. This duality reflects the resilience of cultural traditions and their capacity to adapt to changing socio-historical contexts (Escobar, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore the relationship between popular belief and ritual practice at Al-Mashaki Spring, with a particular focus on how these practices contribute to the construction and preservation of local cultural identity. Rather than treating the spring as an isolated phenomenon, the study situates it within a broader system of beliefs, narratives, and social interactions that give it meaning.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following primary research questions:

- How does Al-Mashaki Spring reflect the reciprocal relationship between popular belief and ritual practice?
- What role do the rituals associated with the spring play in the preservation of local cultural identity?

In addition, the study addresses the following sub-questions:

- How is Al-Mashaki Spring perceived within the local cultural imagination?
- What are the main ritual practices performed at the site?
- How do these practices contribute to the reproduction of collective memory and social cohesion?

### 1.1 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the symbolic and social dimensions of Al-Mashaki Spring as a site of interaction between popular belief and ritual practice. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify and document local representations of the spring and its symbolic meanings within the popular imagination;
- Examine the forms and functions of ritual practices associated with water at the site;
- Analyze the role of these practices in the reproduction of cultural identity and the reinforcement of social belonging within the community.

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to anthropological and sociocultural research by providing an in-depth, field-based analysis of a relatively underexplored cultural site in Jijel Province, Algeria. By focusing on the intersection of natural landscapes, belief systems, and ritual practices, the research offers valuable insights into the processes through which meaning is constructed and maintained within local communities.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of intangible cultural heritage associated with water and popular belief, emphasizing how natural sites can be transformed into symbolic fields that reflect the cultural structure of society (UNESCO, 2003; Strang, 2021). In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on cultural preservation, identity formation, and the role of traditional knowledge systems in contemporary contexts.

Ultimately, the research provides a framework for understanding how everyday practices, narratives, and symbolic actions contribute to the continuity of cultural identity, offering implications for both academic scholarship and cultural policy development.

**Table 1. Summary of Research Design and Methods**

Component	Description
Research Design	Qualitative ethnographic study
Study Location	Al-Mashaki Spring, Jijel Province, Algeria
Fieldwork Period	June - August 2025
Sampling Method	Purposive and snowball sampling
Number of Participants	18 participants
Data Collection Methods	Participant observation; semi-structured interviews; informal conversations
Interview Duration	30-60 minutes per participant
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis (coding and categorization of themes)

Ethical Considerations	Informed consent; anonymity; cultural sensitivity

**Table 2. Main Ritual Practices Observed at Al-Mashaki Spring**

Ritual Practice	Description	Symbolic Meaning
Bathing in the spring	Individuals stand under flowing water	Purification; healing; renewal
Making vows (supplication)	Visitors express wishes or requests	Hope; divine intervention
Hanging cloth pieces	Small colored fabrics tied to trees	Protection; warding off evil
Offering “tammina”	Traditional sweets thrown into the spring	Gratitude; symbolic offering
Collective chanting	Group prayers and invocations	Social cohesion; shared belief
Visiting with family	Ritual visits during specific days	Reinforcement of tradition

**Table 3. Key Thematic Findings**

Theme	Description	Theoretical Interpretation
Water as purification	Water perceived as cleansing force	Mary Douglas - purity and pollution
Healing beliefs	Water believed to cure illness	Symbolic healing system (ritual anthropology)
Collective memory	Oral narratives sustain beliefs	Maurice Halbwachs - social memory
Ritual performance	Repeated symbolic actions	Victor Turner - ritual process
Cultural identity	Practices reinforce belonging	Clifford Geertz - culture as meaning system
Human-nature relation	Nature seen as sacred mediator	Tim Ingold - relational ecology

**Table 4 (BONUS – çox professional görünür)**

**Conceptual Framework of the Study**

Element	Role in the Study
Natural Environment (Spring)	Physical and symbolic space
Popular Belief System	Source of meaning and interpretation
Ritual Practices	Mechanism of expression
Collective Memory	Tool for transmission
Cultural Identity	Outcome of interaction
Social Cohesion	Reinforcing function

**2 Definition of Concepts**

**2.1 Belief**

Belief is defined as one of the earliest forms of collective expression that transitioned from the realm of emotional impulse to the domain of conscious mental construction. The emergence of religious experience at the stage of constructing a belief appears, in essence, to be an urgent psychological need, as belief provides this experience with a rational framework that governs it and organizes its manifestations (Al-Suwah, 1994, p.47). Accordingly, beliefs are not merely individual emotions; rather, they are intellectual and cultural systems that influence both the individual and society.

**2.2 Popular Belief**

Popular belief is a social phenomenon that arises from the interaction of individuals within their social relationships and from their representations of life, existence, and the natural forces that evoke fear or impose their dominance over the course of the

universe. This type of belief is formed through multiple factors, most notably the accumulation of customs, traditions, and ideas over time, until it becomes a commanding and influential force. It directs behavior and obliges individuals in positive contexts but may become a coercive force in negative ones (Al-Sahli and Mohamed, 1988, p. 6). From this definition, it can be inferred that popular belief is not merely a set of inherited ideas; it is rather an active element in shaping social culture and collective identity. This is due to its direct influence on individual and collective behavior and on the organization of social relations, as it becomes part of the cultural structure of society, rendering it difficult to criticize or question as a result of its accumulation over time.

### 2.3 Ritual

The term ritual (rite) is derived from the Latin word *ritus*, which denotes the customs and traditions of a particular society as well as all types of celebrations that invoke beliefs situated outside the empirical framework (Toualbi, 1998, p. 34). The significance of a ritual lies in affirming the continuity of a prominent historical event as it consistently seeks- through the perpetuation and repetition of the rules that establish it- to consecrate the permanence of the social or mythical event that originally gave rise to it. In this sense, 'ritual' represents a recreation, 'ritual' represents a recreation and reenactment of an obscure past; however, it acquires its meaning for those who practice it as a religious act (Toualbi, 1998, p. 34). This is what makes 'ritual' a repeated behavior and action, and a stage through which the individual seeks to attain the supreme goal that is sought by the spirit.

Ritual practices, in essence, constitute means for eliciting and reinforcing popular beliefs among individuals. They function as symbolic tests performed in order to achieve the desired outcomes according to these beliefs, whether spiritual, therapeutic, or related to protection and blessing. Their importance stems from their capacity to express these beliefs within a framework of repetitive movements and behaviors that intersect with individuals' daily activities, allowing rituals to become seamlessly integrated into social and cultural life.

### 3 Research Methodology and Data Collection Tools

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore the relationship between popular belief and ritual practice associated with Al-Mashaki Spring in Jijel Province, Algeria. Ethnography was selected as the most appropriate methodological approach, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, symbolic meanings, and culturally embedded practices within their natural social context.

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of three months (June–August 2025). Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with local residents and visitors to the spring. The researcher engaged in direct observation of ritual practices, including acts of purification, supplication, and symbolic offerings, documenting behavioral patterns, verbal expressions, and material elements associated with these rituals.

A total of 18 participants were interviewed using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Participants included local inhabitants of the Salma and Beni Fougat regions, as well as visitors from surrounding areas. The interviews focused on participants' beliefs about the spring, their personal experiences, and the meanings they attribute to ritual practices. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a culturally sensitive and ethically responsible manner.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns related to symbolism, healing beliefs, collective memory, and cultural identity. The analysis involved coding field notes and interview transcripts, followed by the categorization of themes reflecting the interplay between belief systems and ritual behavior.

Throughout the research process, ethical principles were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was ensured, and cultural norms and sensitivities were respected at all stages of data collection and interpretation.

### Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Al-Mashaki Spring functions as a complex symbolic system where natural, social, and spiritual dimensions intersect. The data indicate that the spring is not perceived merely as a physical water source, but as a culturally constructed space embedded within a network of beliefs, meanings, and ritual practices.

First, the study demonstrates that water at Al-Mashaki is symbolically associated with purification, healing, and transformation. Participants consistently described the spring as possessing spiritual qualities capable of restoring physical and psychological balance. However, these perceptions should be understood not as empirical claims, but as expressions of a culturally shared symbolic framework that assigns meaning to natural phenomena.

Second, ritual practices observed at the site—such as bathing, making vows, hanging cloths, and offering traditional sweets—serve as mechanisms through which individuals engage with this symbolic system. These rituals function as performative acts that

reinforce belief structures and provide participants with a sense of control over uncertainty, illness, and life transitions. In this context, ritual can be interpreted, following Turner (1969), as a process that mediates between structure and experience, enabling individuals to navigate critical moments in life.

Third, the findings highlight the role of collective memory in sustaining these practices. Narratives transmitted through generations contribute to the continuity of belief systems, transforming the spring into a site of cultural heritage. In line with Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, these shared narratives reinforce group identity and social cohesion.

Furthermore, the study reveals that the persistence of these rituals in a modern context reflects the coexistence of traditional and contemporary worldviews. While participants are often aware of scientific explanations, they continue to engage in ritual practices because these fulfill emotional, social, and symbolic needs not addressed by modern institutions.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support Geertz's interpretive approach to culture, where rituals are understood as systems of symbols that shape and express meaning. Similarly, Douglas's concept of purity and danger is reflected in the perception of water as a medium of symbolic cleansing and protection.

Overall, Al-Mashaki Spring can be interpreted as a "cultural landscape" in which natural elements are transformed into symbolic resources. The rituals associated with the spring play a crucial role in maintaining cultural continuity, reinforcing identity, and mediating the relationship between humans and the unseen dimensions of their world.

This study adopts an ethnographic approach as it is the most appropriate for providing a dense description of the phenomenon and for understanding the meanings of rituals. Ethnographic research allows immersion in the daily life of the community in its natural, uncontrived setting through the researcher's direct involvement and participant observation of all behavioral events in the field, without any form of prior control (Ammersely, 1995, p.10). This approach aims to achieve an in-depth and detailed understanding of the underlying reasons, beliefs, and motivations as well as a holistic description of the phenomenon under investigation (Qandilji, 2008, p.45). With regard to research tools, the study uses the following:

Participation observation to directly track ritual practices and record details related movement, language, and material tools.

Semi-structured interviews to explore beliefs and folk narratives.

Analysis of folk narratives through the collection of stories and tales associated with Al-Mashaki spring.

Visual documentation, including photographs and audio recordings to support the analysis.

#### **4 Monograph of the Study Area**

##### **4.1 A Reading of the Geographical Setting**

Al-Mashaki Spring is located in the south of the municipality of Salma ben Ziyada- homeland of the tribe of Beni Fougal which has deep historical roots- 23 km from the municipality of Texenna. More precisely, the spring is situated on the outskirts of the highlands of Mechta El-Ayoun along provincial road no. 137, near the northern bank of Wadi Djen Djen, Jijel.

On the right side of the western entrance to the municipality of Texenna stands a rectangular blue sign reading 'Salma 22 km.' This marks the beginning of the road toward Al-Mashaki spring. Upon reaching the municipality of Salma, two routes may be taken: the first is a paved road starting at the village of Al-Kabbaba, passing through Al-Mansoura and Al-Hammassa: the second is an unpaved track descending from the area of Chakhrida, known for its dense oak forest. Both routes meet midway along the path leading to the spring, at a distance of 3.5 km.

The visitor cannot see Al-Mashaki spring until reaching it as it lies at the bottom of the valley, concealed behind trees and thorny vegetation covering the rugged slope that leads down to it. At first glance, and when the spring is dry, it appears to be merely a small vertical fissure in the solid rock, rising a little over two meters above the ground, surrounded by green moss. Beneath it lies a pool from which water continues to flow without interruption (Monograph of Jijel Province, 2021).

##### **4.2 A Reading of the Significance of the Name 'Al-Mashaki'**

Al-Mashaki Spring has been known by several names throughout its historical phases. It was documented by a number of travelers, most notably the renowned Arab geographer Abu Ubayd Abd Allah Al-Bakri in the eleventh century. In his work *Description of North Africa*, Al-Bakri referred to a spring known as "Ayn Al-Awqat" or "Ayn Al-Sa'at" (The Spring of Times or the Spring of Hours). The designation is derived from the regularity of the water flow at specific times during the day and night, particularly in accordance with the five daily prayer times (Al-Bakri, 1968, p33). This characteristic conferred a special status

upon the spring in the perception of the local population, who regarded it as a blessing and a miracle worthy of veneration. Consequently, the spring came to be known as “the Spring of the Gods” reflecting the belief that supernatural forces governed the spring, a notion locally referred to as ‘sullah.’ In a later stage, the spring became known as Al-Mashaki, a name derived from the concepts of complaint and supplication as people traditionally visited the site to voice their grievances and beseech God, seeking relief from affliction or the attainment of desired beliefs, in light of the perceived sanctity and blessed nature of its water (oral tradition).

#### **4.3 A Reading into the History of the Origin of the Spring**

Oral accounts differ regarding the history of Al-Mashaki Spring. Some believe that this spring was discovered in prehistoric times, while other oral narratives hold that its discovery dates back to the Fatimid period, when the Fatimid state settled in the mountains and caves of the Beni Fougal region, which extends from the borders of Setif Province to central Jijel (Oral tradition). Regardless of the debate of how early the spring was discovered, its location between the seacoast and the ancient Silk Road on the Setif side made it, from the earliest periods, a destination for travelers who would stop there to drink and replenish themselves with its naturally fresh water. For this reason, the Ketama tribes that inhabited North Africa considered it one of the most important natural landmarks. (oral tradition).

#### **5 From the Depths of the Earth to the Source of Light: “A Description of Water Emerging from the Spring”**

Al-Mashaki spring is considered one of the miraculous and unique natural phenomena that has puzzled and amazed everyone who has witnessed it. The spring possesses a precise natural system: it becomes completely dry and remains so for approximately forty-five minutes. Suddenly, the sound of water is heard as it rises from deep within the earth, and it begins to flow slowly from the mouth of the spring. Its volume and abundance then gradually increase until reaching their peak for about fifteen to twenty-five minutes. After that, the reverse process begins until the water flow stops completely.

This phenomenon repeats throughout the day and all year round. It is also noticeable that the rate of water flow in the waterfalls changes according to the seasons in order to maintain its freshness: the spring water is extremely cold in summer-unbearable for more than a few seconds-while it is warm, moderate, pure and suitable for drinking in winter.

#### **6 The Scientific Geological Explanation of the Phenomenon of Al-Mashaki Water Emergence**

Scientific attempts have emerged to explain the phenomenon of water flow at Al-Mashaki from a logical perspective that goes beyond the mythical and metaphysical interpretations that have surrounded it. Accordingly, several researchers have visited the spring. Abdelmalek Baghdad (2023), a professor of geology at the University of Jijel, confirms that no precise explanation has been provided for the phenomenon occurring at the spring. He added that Al-Mashaki descends through one of the fissures at the foot of Mount Al-Maida which rises to an altitude of 823 meters. The latter dates back to the Jurassic era, and its mass was formed during the Triassic period. It consists of sedimentary rocks and has become a massive rock that later split into smaller rocky blocks.

Professor Baghdad (2023), though acknowledging the lack of in-depth studies on the spring, links this phenomenon to the cavities and caves present in Mount Al-Maida. Their density and varied shapes allow them to regulate the flow of groundwater and give it a specific rhythm. He, further, calls on various researchers to intensify geological survey campaigns in this area, surrounded by myths, such as the belief that its water is blessed, cures infertility, helps single people to get married, and heals the sick. These are undoubtedly superstitions with no scientific basis.

#### **7 The Source and the Ritual Domain: A Reading of Popular Beliefs and Practices**

Religious beliefs and rituals vary according to religions and their formation. They include rituals of fertility and growth, nature rituals, rain-invoking rituals, as well as rituals of prayer, mourning, pilgrimage, fasting, shrine-related practices, and rituals associated with natural springs such as Al-Mashaki Spring. The latter continues to be a source of wonder and curiosity. What fuels this fascination and draws people to it is its outflow and its gradual cessation- an unusual synchronization that has always puzzled geologists. As a result, local inhabitants have come to regard it as a miracle worthy of veneration, transforming it into a site of pilgrimage for blessing and the search for healing. Consequently, people resorted to weaving narratives that align with their cultural and religious beliefs, deeply imbued with superstition, to the point of speaking of magical properties and asserting the existence of supernatural forces that control the flow of the water.

Before delving into the narration of this ritual, it is necessary to address the most important beliefs associated with the spring. These beliefs gave rise to the protective and therapeutic rituals which in turn enhance its power and cohesion.

##### **7.1 Beliefs**

There are stories circulating around the local population, transmitted orally, about Al-Mashaki spring. Among these accounts is the belief that it was visited by revered religious figures who claimed that its water is sacred and blessed. The reputation of the spring then stems from the blessed creatures (humankind or jinn) ‘Sullah’ living there, through its blessing and its extraordinary ability to heal and cure illnesses. As a result, the local population has come to believe that:

- The spring possesses sanctity and blessing that distinguish it from other springs, making it capable-by God’s will- of curing many chronic and intractable physical and spiritual diseases. Physical ailments include infertility among married couples and certain skin diseases, due to the mineral properties of the water. Spiritual ailments include the treatment of sorcery, the evil eye, and envy. It is also narrated that during the Hafsids and Ottomans’ rule, celebrations were held at the spring while people used to confide their troubles to the spring which led to it being named “Al-Mashaki.” This name has stuck with the spring to this day (Oral tradition).
- The spring has power to fulfill wishes such as fostering marriage for single people, providing employment for the unemployed, helping students achieve academic success, and transforming poor people into rich ones (Oral tradition).
- The spring serves as proof of innocence or guilt, as individuals accused of committing crimes are brought beneath the spring. If the water does not flow shortly thereafter, the accusation is considered proven against them (Oral tradition).
- The spring indicates a person’s righteousness or sinfulness. It is believed that the water refuses to flow in the presence of sinful people while it gushes forth the moment other people stand beneath its outlet and pours over their heads. Those who wait long would rejoice upon receiving the ‘acceptance’ (the coming of the water) upon them. ‘Acceptance’ is a local term used by the inhabitants of the area as a sign of divine approval (Oral tradition). For this reason, among the Beni Fougale -the indigenous inhabitants of the Salma region- the spring was transformed from a natural phenomenon into a divine sign surrounded by myths. The elders of the tribe claim that Al-Mashaki is a blessed spring whose water is only accepted for the Beni Fougale or for righteous and good people. The inhabitants cite dozens of cases in which people came from distant places waiting for more than three hours without any water flowing from the spring. One such story tells of an old man who came from one of the regions of Jijel at six o’clock in the morning and not a single drop of water flowed during his waiting. The man then pleaded with families from Beni Fougale who had just arrived to go ahead of him to the spring, hoping that Al-Mashaki would accept so that he could bathe and not return home disappointed. The man finally got what he wished for (Oral account).
- The ‘Sullah’ live at the spring. These are righteous beings from the Jinn or from humankind who do not reveal themselves, yet they possess hidden and extraordinary powers through which they support righteous people and control the times when the water flows or stops. Among the stories narrated by the local inhabitants of the region is that of a man who arrived at Al-Mashaki at the afternoon prayer (Asr) returning from one of the villages beyond Wadi Jen Jen. He was alone, performed ablution and began to pray. When he reached the final unit of prayer and was about to pronounce the closing salutation, a beautiful woman adorned with gold and jewelry appeared before him, holding in her hands a tray of vessels gleaming like gold. He saw her approach him slowly with a smile. Overwhelmed by astonishment and amazement, he raised his hands toward her to receive what she was carrying. Suddenly, a voice from atop the rocks cried out: “Do not give it to him. He has not completed the prayer.” In the blink of an eye, the beautiful woman and the gold-for whose sake the man had interrupted his prayer-vanished. The man returned to his home leading his cow accompanied by disappointment and regret. He remained bedridden with illness for two months and continued to retell his experience until the day he died (Oral account). This story is still retold to this day to visitors coming from all various provinces of Algeria.

## 7.2 Ritual Practices

The uniqueness of Al-Mashaki spring has led some to cloak it in an aura of sanctity. The halo of sacredness bestowed upon this spring by the popular imagination has, in turn, given rise to certain customs and ritual practices that have been passed down through generations, as Si Ahmed, a native of the municipality of Salma, Beni Ziyada, states: “the older inhabitants of the region grew up believing in the sanctity of the place because the water disappears and then returns- vanishing only to come back in the form of a very powerful and extremely cold water. Therefore, it became a destination for seeking blessings and hope, in the expectation that wishes would be fulfilled.” Si Ahmed adds that “it is no strange that visitors come to it accompanied by their children, including those who suffer from disabilities or incurable illnesses (Oral account).

The evocation and revival of beliefs through the practice of specific rituals is nothing more than a form of popular healing for certain illnesses, operating from within a “symbolic system.” In this context, the ritual at the spring derives its social sanctity from the role it plays within social representations such that the sacred, in its various forms, becomes an act of purification (Toualbi, 1988, p. 175). These beliefs are still prevalent among the region’s inhabitants particularly the elderly who prefer to continue weaving their myths around this unique and distinctive spring and reviving them through the practice of certain rituals.

Until recently, the villagers used to choose Saturday mornings to gather at the spring to perform their rituals, chanting the refrain “O Beni Fougale and our masters, have mercy upon us.” Women would sing it individually or in groups at the spring’s opening. The chants were accompanied by the hanging of small cloth bundles-most of them red-on the branches of fig tree.

Women have traditionally hung them for cutting off the evil eye or envy, driving away misfortune, facilitating the path toward marriage and childbirth, and seeking healing from incurable illnesses. This process is further marked by ululations and the casting of the traditional sweets 'tammina' into the spring's opening, accompanied by ritual chants until the water bursts forth in a powerful, cold flow used for ablution. Only a small number of individuals are able to remain beneath it for longer than one minute.

### 7.3 The Relationship between the Region's Inhabitants and the Saints and their Miracles

The rituals practiced within and around shrines and water springs carry a symbolic, semiological significance for the researcher studying the phenomenon; however, for the practitioner, these rituals possess a concrete, lived meaning and give rise to tangible effects. This is because the practitioner believes in the presence of the unseen power that is active and effective within the elements of nature, particularly those located in and around the spring. It is believed that the saints or righteous figures known as 'Sullah' associated with the spring remain present as an influential force in people's lives, continuing to intervene on behalf of those who seek them by curing illnesses, warding off misfortune, and inflicting punishment upon their enemies through what is known as 'karama' (saintly miracle). The Sufi scholar Ibn Arabi subsumes this concept under the term 'kharq al awaid' (the suspension of customary norms), which he divides into three categories: miracle (mu'jiza), saintly miracle (karama), and magic (sihr). Miracles pertain to prophets, saintly miracles to 'sullah', and magic to the general populace (cited in Khawaldiya, 2015, p.27).

According to the father of modern Sociology, Max Weber, who addresses the concepts of charisma and charismatic authority, saintly miracle (karama) appears as an inherent element in the Sufi definitions of charisma. Weber defines the concept of saintly miracle as the extraordinary and exceptional qualities possessed by a specific individual, whether these qualities are real or not. Charismatic authority is the legendary power that relies on the worship and veneration of a leader by the people. Admirers believe that the charismatic leader is divinely sent and brings prosperity to his people and followers, deriving his authority from popular belief. The charismatic leader also inspires the people who submit to his extraordinary authority because he possesses supernatural traits and unusual abilities through which he manifests his personality (cited in Awadah, 2013, p. 272). Everything that happens in this world is inevitably the work of divine will; yet this does not prevent this divine will from acting through the intercession of saints (sullah) or at their request, as Hajjah Fatima says: "We know that the intercession comes from God, glory be to Him, and we pray for the well-being of those who live at this spring because God wills it and has honored them with us, and He has granted them many miracles."

The mediation that has historically formed, and continues to form, the foundational basis of popular Sufism is an integral part of Islam as understood and experienced by these people, despite the objections and criticisms of some jurists. The relationships that connect people with the unseen closely resemble, in their pattern, the relationships believed to govern the social structure of the local community. The only difference between the two lies in the belief that the unseen is more powerful than humans, as its actions are always difficult to predict. What people call 'blessing' (baraka) and frame in a religious context is an extension and embodiment of the vitality that humans have believed in since the dawn of history (Madfoun, n.p).

## 8 Anthropological Symbolism

### 8.1 Symbolism of Al-Mashaki Spring

Al-Mashaki Spring represents a prominent example of the continuity of water rituals with ancient roots in North Africa. The local population treats the spring as a site of pilgrimage where bathing, seeking blessings, and making vows are performed in pursuit of healing or protection from calamities. An analysis of the practices associated with this spring reveals deep symbolic layers that echo ancient Amazigh beliefs which confer a central role on water within systems of fertility and spiritual purification. The rituals associated with Al-Mashaki Spring function as a rite of passage that visitors carefully observe through practices such as 'touching the water, bathing in it or collecting it in small vessels.' These rituals establish a symbolic relationship in which water is seen as a mediator between humans and the unseen world. They reproduce the idea of purification long attributed to water in pagan heritage where the spring is regarded as a boundary between dualities: illness/misery and health/blessing. This symbolic framework still persists in Al-Mashaki rituals, especially among women and the elderly who view water as a transformer of fate or as the 'bearer of the power of symbolic washing' that frees a person from harm.

This conception resembles what the founder of the anthropology of religion in colonial Morocco, Edmond Doutté (1909) describes as 'sympathetic magic' in which rituals operate on the principle that symbolic acts can produce real effects. According to Doutté (1909), rituals are "imitations of the desired ends" (pp.307-313). Stated differently, they are symbolic enactments of intended goals-whether spiritual or practical- based on the belief in a sympathetic or analogous relationship between the symbol and what it represents. Likewise, making simple offerings such as throwing traditional sweets (tammina) into the spring's opening and hanging amulets and small red cloth bundles on the branches of the fig tree also represents a continuation of what

Doutté describes as talismans (p.144). In this context, talismans are popular rituals that combine Islamic symbols with ancient magical practices.

### 8.2 Symbolism of Tammina (the sweet made from wheat)

Wheat is considered the main ingredient of Tammina, and the consumption of wheat can be attributed to its sacredness among all North African populations. Wheat also holds a special position among other cereals in various human civilizations. This is reflected in world mythology where symbolism expert Philippe Sergent (1992) notes that “the first ears of the harvest were offered to the Gods... in the divine ear of grain lies the best and richest natural food” (p.311). In some cultures, wheat is also seen as a symbol of prosperity. During Yennayer celebrations in Algeria on January 12 each year, traditional dishes made from wheat-like *cherchem* and *couscous* are consumed along with sweets decorated with sugar derived from wheat. The father of French ethnology, Marcel Mauss, explains that “the gift has a profound cultural effect as it creates a continuous state of obligation among individuals, motivating them to exchange positive interactions through giving and receiving” (qtd in Coneihan, 2013, p.31).

### 8.3 Symbolism of Saturday ('Isbas' in the Amazigh language)

Saturday does not have a specific symbolic significance in Amazigh culture that distinguishes it from other days of the week. However, the celebration of the Amazigh New Year, 'Yennayer,' traditionally took place on a Saturday. This marks the start of the new year in the Amazigh calendar dating back to 950 BC, which represents the beginning of the agricultural year. Therefore, Saturday became a symbol of fertility and prosperity. This day also came to symbolize the continuity of Amazigh culture which places special importance on the relationship or interconnectedness between humans and nature. This interconnectedness can be summarized as:

- Human beings/ visitors
- Nature/Al-Mashaki spring
- Fertility and agriculture/ healing from infertility and childbirth

It is noteworthy that Saturday also holds a significant importance in Christianity. It is believed that Jesus performed many acts of healing on this day. According to the Bible, seven people were healed by Jesus on a Saturday, profoundly affecting the society in which he lived. This influence led to a new understanding of Saturday's value, associating it with good deeds such as helping those in need. Among the seven people who were cured by Jesus is the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The Gospel of John (Chapter 5) recounts the story of a man who had been sick for 38 years and lived near a pool called Bethesda. This pool had a bubbling spring which people believed had healing properties. People used to go to the pool seeking healing, which led to the construction of five covered porches around it to shelter those who wanted to benefit from the water when it bubbled. Chapter five from the King James version of the Bible says:

... there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem... there is at Jerusalem... a pool which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches... And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath. (1:9)

Al-Mashaki spring serves as a living example of the enduring symbolic structure of water in Algeria where popular Islamic practices merge with ancient pagan roots or other religions without losing the core meaning of the ritual: water as a source of healing, transformation, and protection.

### 9 Analysis of Results

Some visitors to Al-Mashaki spring still believe that its water carries blessings or protection. It is regarded as a blessed water with the power to heal any illness, ward off the evil eye, magic, or disease. The spring is also believed to grant health and fertility. This is evident in the ritual practices that some visitors continue to perform when they visit the spring.

Field studies reveal that the rituals practiced at the spring are not a substitute for religion, nor do they compete with its rulings. Rather, they constitute a parallel symbolic system that organizes the human relationship with the surrounding world through language, memory, and the body. Despite the social changes affecting the region, these rituals remain alive because they meet psychological, social, and spiritual needs not fulfilled by modern institutions.

The symbolic analysis of water shows that Al-Mashaki spring is not merely a natural resource. It is a space rich in symbols and meanings, embodying a form of 'popular metaphysics' where nature and the sacred merge to create a symbolic structure

encompassing concepts such as creation, passage, fertility, healing, blessing, and memory. This profound symbolism explains the continuity of ritual practices at the site despite social transformations, and it illustrates how popular belief maintains its role in daily life.

The widespread rituals affirm that water occupies a central place in the local population's understanding of the world and in the organization of their daily and ritual practices.

### Conclusion

Al-Mashaki Spring represents a rich and symbolically dense anthropological case, offering a revealing model of the ongoing interaction between popular belief and ritual practice within the local context. It cannot be reduced to a mere natural site where water flows; rather, it is constituted as a living symbolic space that embodies the collective memory of the community and expresses its profound need for meaning, protection, and healing in the face of life's material and symbolic uncertainties. The significance of the spring is shaped through the representations and meanings projected onto it by individuals, transforming it into a locus for the embodiment of the sacred, the invocation of blessing, and the restoration of spiritual reassurance.

Through the rituals performed in and around the spring, whether individual or collective, people demonstrate their capacity to reinterpret nature and incorporate it into their cultural and spiritual system, thereby converting a natural element into a symbolic mediator of protection and healing. These practices also contribute to the reproduction of collective memory and the strengthening of social bonds through the repetition of ritual acts and their transmission across generations. Consequently, the study of this space becomes a crucial entry point for understanding popular mentality and modes of symbolic thought, as well as for revealing the processes through which local cultural identity is formed and sustained within the community.

### Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for social science and anthropological research. Participation in interviews and field observations was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The researcher ensured that participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from participation at any stage without any consequences. Personal identities and sensitive information were treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity to protect participants' privacy. The research respected local cultural values, traditions, and community norms throughout the fieldwork process. All collected data were used exclusively for academic purposes.

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### AI Use Statement

The author declares that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the generation of the research data, field observations, or primary analysis presented in this study. AI-assisted tools were used only for minor language editing and grammar refinement to improve clarity and readability. All interpretations, arguments, and conclusions are the original work of the author.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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