

## Algerian Cinema And Religious Discourse: Representation Of Sufism And Popular Rituals Between Memory And Modernity”

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### Abstract

The themes of Algerian cinema have diversified and multiplied from its inception to the present day, addressing various aspects of daily life in Algerian society. What is particularly interesting in our study is the theme of religious discourse in Algerian films, represented primarily by the themes of Sufism and religious rituals prevalent in Algeria. Filmmakers have dealt with this theme in many of their works, as it is part of the beliefs of the Algerian people, inherited from French colonialism, following processes of ignorance and erasure of Arab-Islamic identity.

**Keywords:** cinema, Algeria, discourse, religion, representation, Sufism, memory.

### Introduction:

Since its inception, cinema has been not only an art form for entertainment, but also a cultural tool that reflects the contradictions of societies and shapes their collective consciousness. In the Algerian context, cinema carries a double burden: on the one hand, it serves as a living record of the struggles of colonial memory; on the other, it is a platform for embodying the social and political transformations that the country has undergone since independence. At the heart of these transformations is religious discourse as a problematic field that intersects with national identity, popular heritage, and the stakes of modernity.

Algeria is a unique cultural space that combines a path-based Sufi Islam, solidified over centuries of tradition, ritual, and the blessings of dervishes, with Sunni religious currents influenced by regional and global conflicts. This duality makes the representation of religion in Algerian cinema a complex issue, oscillating between preserving spiritual memory and facing the challenges of modernization.

Despite Algeria's rich religious culture, full of customs, traditions and popular heritage, the representation of religious discourse in post-independence cinema has been governed by complex political and social contexts that are not easy to navigate. During the 1970s and 1980s, revolutionary narratives dominated Algerian cinema, where the element of religion was used as a discourse of resistance against French colonialism, but it remained stripped of its spiritual complexity and what this dimension represents for Muslims.

With the transformations of the third millennium, especially after the Black Decade (1992-2002), Algerian cinema began to explore religion from more realistic angles, but it faced two main challenges:

### The first challenge:

- The rise of Salafist discourses that reject the representation of religion in the arts and impose self-censorship on filmmakers.

The second challenge:

- The influence of globalization and the shift of religious identity towards modern individualism, especially among younger generations.

In this context, the research problem is as follows:

How has Algerian cinema been able to reconcile the representation of Sufism and popular rituals as part of the collective memory with the necessities of modernization imposed by social transformations?

The main objective of this study is to uncover the relationship between religious discourse and current social contexts in Algeria, such as the impact of the Black Decade on the representation of religion as a space of conflict or reconciliation. On the other hand, it will explore the role of cinema in reproducing or deconstructing religious memory, especially in light of the rise of digital platforms that provide wider access to information but threaten the cultural privacy of Algerian society.

## 1. Concept of Discourse: Linguistically and Terminologically

### A. Linguistically:

The term “discourse” has several definitions. According to the author of “Lisan al-Arab,” it states: “Khatab: the discourse is the matter or affair, whether small or great. It is said: what is your affair? meaning what is your matter. And you say this is a significant affair, and that is a minor affair. Discourse is the matter in which addressing occurs, and the situation and state. They say: ‘the matter is great,’ meaning the affair is significant. Discourse and addressing are the revisiting of speech, and he addressed him with speech, addressing and discourse.” (Mansour, 2005)

The term “discourse” in the “Al-Mu’jam Al-Wasat” is defined as follows: “He addressed him, conversed with him, and he spoke to him: he directed speech to him and they conversed. Discourse is speech, and discourse is a message. Plural: khutub; and the speaker on the pulpit is delivering a discourse. That speech is also called a sermon, which includes prose and similar forms. A speaker is one who has a good delivery.” (Arabic Language Academy, 2002)

Some define it as “a mutual dialogue between at least two people; it is a vital verbal process in time and space managed by two or more people through speech and non-verbal communication.” (Al-Misawi, 2013) Thus, we can say that discourse is a process that requires at least two individuals in a specific place and time for it to occur.

The concept of discourse varies in Western dictionaries. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as:

- Communication and conversation among people and the ability to discuss various topics.
- Discourse is the process of understanding from the beginning of a topic to its conclusion or result.
- An individual can engage in discourse, meaning they can speak, exchange words, and discuss a subject.
- Discourse can be written or spoken. (Oxford University Press, 2010)

### B. Terminologically:

The concept of “discourse” is considered a complex term with varying meanings across different fields of knowledge (linguistics, philosophy, cultural criticism, sociology). However, it can be defined terminologically as follows: Discourse is a system of linguistic or symbolic signs organized according to specific rules, aimed at conveying meaning or framing a certain reality. It includes written and spoken texts, as well as social, political, and religious practices associated with them.

In linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure defines discourse as chains of interrelated linguistic signs that form a complete semantic unit. He distinguishes between the signifier and the signified, and between language as a social phenomenon and a system of symbols, and the product of social faculties of speech, where speech as a phenomenon is specific to individuals who use expressive systems resulting from their personal thoughts, directing their speech to the audience.

Michel Foucault linked discourse to the concept of power, meaning the authority of discourse, making it a mode of organizing knowledge. He viewed the central theme in philosophy as the historical discourse and its treatment of linguistic, political, epistemological, philosophical, and ethical subjects. These levels reflect his concept and its extensions and relationships with fields and practices of knowledge and authority. (Bagoura, 2000)

Thus, for Foucault, discourse is a system of rules that determines what can and cannot be said in a particular historical period, and it is linked to relationships of power and knowledge.

Despite the numerous definitions of the term discourse, Ahmed Al-Mutawakkil believes that the term has not yet received a sufficient definition. This is attributed to the confusion between it and the term “text.” He states: “The concept of discourse has not yet, to our knowledge, been given a sufficient and clear definition, and this situation is reflected in the troubled usage of two terms that are almost used as synonyms, namely ‘text’ and ‘discourse’.” (Al-Mutawakkil, 2001)

This confusion in the usage of the two terms is found among many, to the extent that some use them as if they have the same meaning.

The types of discourse vary and differ according to their linguistic and terminological uses, the style in which they are presented to people’s ears, and the context in which they are found, according to the fields of daily human life, such as politics, religion, society, culture, and many others, in direct and indirect ways, explicitly or through symbolism.

Based on this, discourse is diverse and varied between political, religious, cultural, social, and historical discourse.

For discourse to be useful and impactful on people’s minds, it must be complete in its components, generally relying on three essential elements: the sender, the receiver, the message, and the medium carrying the discourse.

What concerns us in this research is the religious discourse in Algerian cinema. Therefore, we will explore its concept, nature, and characteristics.

## 2. Concept of Religious Discourse:

Religious discourse is that which is based on a religious reference derived from the fixed foundations of religion: the Quran and the Sunnah. Whether the producer of the discourse is an Islamic organization or an official religious institution, the aim is to spread the faith of God in terms of belief, law, and ethics, and to exert effort in this regard. Religious discourse is characterized by a return to the methodology of the righteous predecessors, purifying it from impurities and superstitions.

Religious discourse has two meanings: general and specific.

**The first meaning:** Religious discourse encompasses any behavior or action motivated by belonging to a specific religion, whether it is audible or written discourse, or practical practice.

**The second meaning:** It refers to what is issued by religious leaders in the form of statements, advice, or political positions on contemporary issues, grounded in the religion they adhere to.

We can distinguish between several types of religious discourse in the Islamic community, for example:

- **Quranic Discourse (Divine):** The Quran is considered one of the most important and oldest discourses. It is the speech directed by God, the Exalted, to His servants, characterized by its unique words and rhetorical phrases, containing numerous legislative and religious rules that all Muslims must adhere to. Its message is stable and unified, not translated into other languages, but its meanings are interpreted. It is unchangeable and has specific rules and principles for its recitation. (Batma, 2016)

- **Human Discourse:** This discourse comes from individuals and recognized religious entities, aimed at raising awareness and guiding people regarding the requirements of their religion and worldly matters. It often originates from religious figures such as scholars, students of knowledge, and imams, within mosques and various media outlets (radio, television, and social media). Unlike Quranic discourse, it is open to interpretation and discussion.

- **Sufi Discourse:** This refers to a discourse stemming from a set of established customs and traditions among people, most of which are attributed to religion, even though they may not be directly related to it. This discourse arises from Sufi individuals, ascetics, and hermits, and is often associated with what is called spirituality. Generally, it is a science based on metaphysical and philosophical concepts.

The commonality among all these definitions is that Sufism or the Sufi is one who directs themselves towards God deeply, severing ties with all creatures, renouncing pleasures, and dedicating themselves to the Creator. This is a desire to attain true love and realize it—a love without expectation, which is the love of God and annihilation in Him, where all things exist for and through God. (Suhaila, 2020)

### **Cinema and Religion: Interaction Between Art and Sanctity**

The relationship between cinema and religion is one of the most controversial topics in the history of the arts, as it intertwines the sanctity of religious beliefs among peoples with the freedom of artistic expression among creators. Since its emergence in the late 19th century, specifically in 1895, cinema has aimed to depict the reality of human society through documentary film. The themes have varied from one film to another, with religion receiving a significant share through the portrayal of churches, mosques, and temples around the world. Additionally, many films have been produced specifically for religious purposes, such as the missionary endeavors of Christianity, the promotion of Islam, and the introduction of ancient Indian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism.

This leads to the concept of conflict between the sanctity of religion and cinematic art and its critique. This point has created a broad field for opposing ideas between religion and cinema, as cinema has harnessed all its artistic, technical, and aesthetic mechanisms to depict religion with both its negatives and positives, making it a prominent icon in its themes that often challenge anyone opposing its policies. For instance, American and French cinema have made Islam and Muslims significant subjects for their films, aiming to distort and obscure Islamic religion and beliefs. The French archives are filled with thousands of films shot during the colonial era in Algeria, which, in general, depicted the brutality and harshness of colonial treatment towards Algerian Muslims, producing numerous films that reflect the malice and deceit of the French.

“With the growth of cinematography, of entertainment-oriented viewing, the strangeness of North Africa naturally became a source of humor. Thus we find in Méliès: *Le Musulman rigolo* (The Funny Muslim, 1897), *Ali Barbouyou et Ali Bouf à l’huile* (Ali Barbouyou and Ali with Oil, 1907). This natural relationship is merely a product of the given state of social relations: if the other man is ready to laugh, it means, at that very moment in history, that he is in a subordinate position” (Dalila, 1995). (Dalila, 1995) On the other hand, American cinema has produced numerous films that express the contempt of the Western man for everything Eastern in terms of customs, traditions, and religious beliefs, portraying the conflicts present in Arab and Islamic societies, such as the Sunni-Shiite conflict and the ongoing disputes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other Muslim countries. This has led to the establishment of stereotypes in American cinema.

Examples of films produced for this purpose include:

- *The Siege* (1998) - *The Kingdom* (2007) - *American Sniper* (2014)

### **Algerian Cinema and Religious Discourse:**

Algerian cinema is considered one of the most important cinemas in the world since its beginnings in 1957, representing an artistic journey rich in significant achievements that reflect its ability to adapt and stand out in the global cinematic landscape.

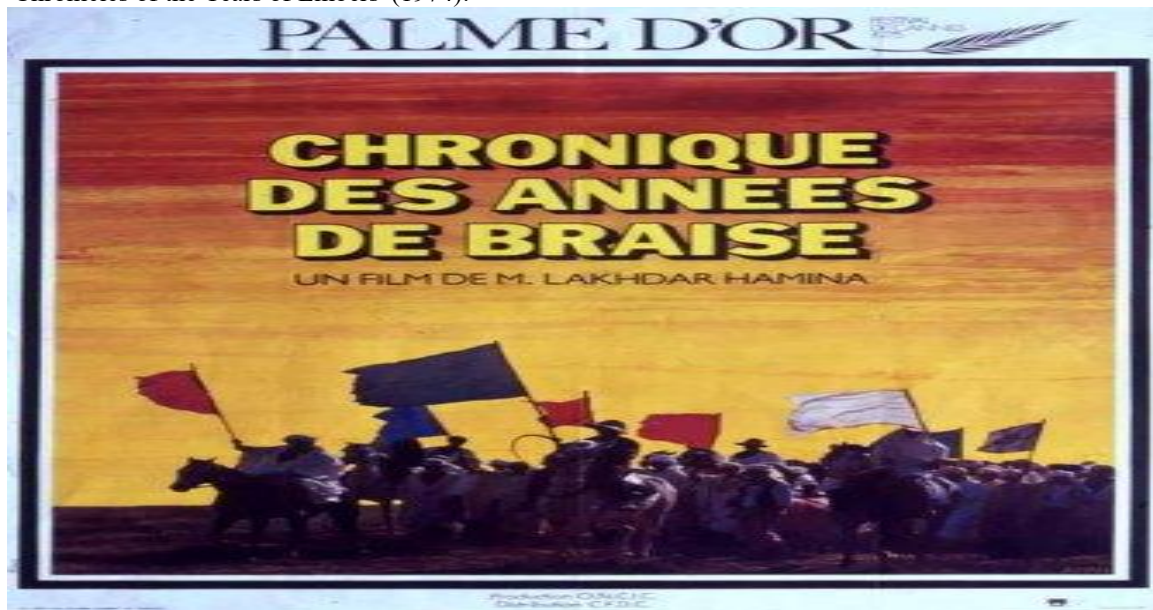
In a short period after independence, it managed to secure a prestigious position in both Arab and global cinema through its substantial and distinctive productions in the early 1960s and 1970s, resulting in numerous international awards such as the Oscar, the Palme d'Or, the Golden Lion, and other regional and Arab awards.

The themes of Algerian films are varied and diverse, despite the state's focus after independence on glorifying the revolution and the struggle of the Algerian people against the oppression and tyranny imposed by French colonialism, depicting the heroism and popular resistance fought by our people. However, this did not prevent the inclusion of religious themes in all these cinematic works due to the close relationship between religion and Algerian society. This theme has often been employed in Algerian cinema, both directly and indirectly.

What is striking about the concept of religion among some Algerians is their belief that all customs, traditions, rituals, and inherited beliefs from their ancestors constitute religion. This applies to many scenes included in numerous films that express terms like "zarda," "waada," "visiting the graves of the righteous," and seeking blessings from them, as well as venerating certain figures that exist only in popular imagination (such as the \*marabouts\*). Celebrations of seasons unrelated to Islamic religion are also common, and these individuals are divided into many diverse Sufi groups, most of which rely on dancing, fire play, and the use of sorcery, claiming perfection and communication with spiritual realms, and sometimes even with God.

The "high rate of illiteracy after half a century of occupation" led a French researcher to state: "The Arab in Algeria in 1830 could read and write, but after half a century of occupation, he was engulfed in ignorance." (Bouraoui, 1998) Immediately after independence, Algerian cinema experienced a qualitative leap in quantity and quality, especially for a nascent cinema at the time, compared to Arab and world cinema. The 1960s and 1970s are considered a golden era for Algerian cinema, according to critics and cinema professionals, as it quickly managed to win numerous international awards and gained global recognition through a series of cinematic works whose reputation spread worldwide, such as "The Battle of Algiers", "The Winds of Aurès", "Z", "Chronicles of the Years of Embers", "Opium and the Stick", "Patrol Towards the East", "Lotus Flower", and others. These films became icons for many Arab and world cinemas and are now studied in major film institutes.

Film "Chronicles of the Years of Embers"(1974):



Chronicles of the Years of Embers has been and remains an icon of global cinema. Its director, Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, succeeded in conveying the suffering of the Algerian people during the colonial period through scenes of hardship, poverty, deprivation, the harshness of nature, and the injustices of the French colonizer. The film won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1975.

The film begins with an extremely tragic cinematic scene that depicts the struggle of Algerians for water in a barren desert, reflecting a drought phenomenon that has afflicted the region for years. This struggle is illustrated through the violent fighting of dogs, symbolizing the deep divisions among the locals. "The focus on this was peculiar; it showed them fighting fiercely over water sources, symbolized by the dogs' brawls. The viewer witnesses images of dogs fighting interspersed with images of Algerians battling against poverty and epidemics." (Charef, 1995).



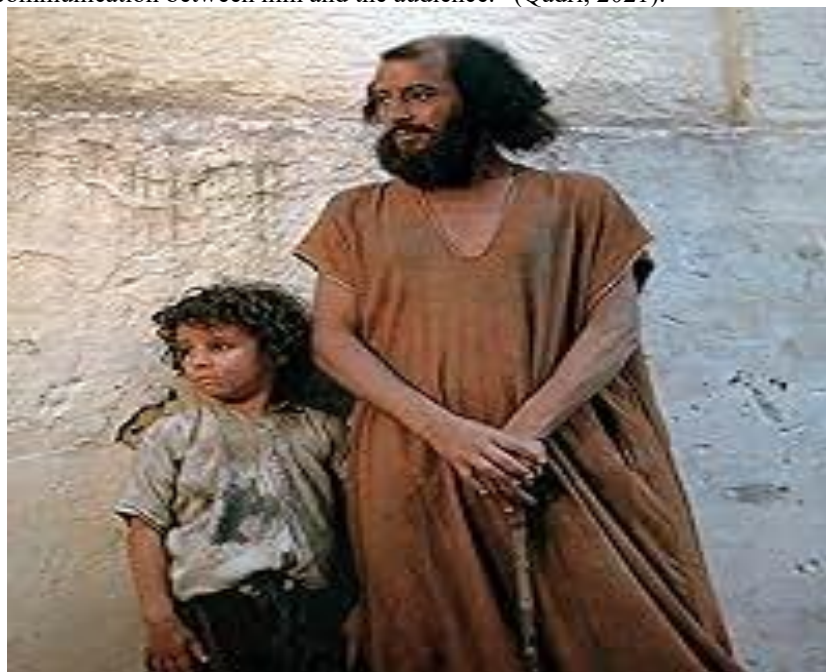
The Struggle for Water: 0:11 (Chronicles of the Years of Embers)

In another scene, large crowds representing various segments of society—children, men, women, and elders—are seen walking towards the saint (Sidi Sahraoui), believing that the solution lies in his hands. They celebrate at his grave, sacrificing a calf for him, and earnestly pray for his intercession. At 7:52, the film's protagonist, Ahmed, played by the Greek actor Yorgo Voyagis, says to Sidi Ali Kuirat in Algerian dialect: “Zadu matouli thlath shiyah thani” (Three more of my sheep have died). Sidi Ali Kuirat responds at 7:55: “If the drought continues, all the flocks will perish.” Ahmed continues, “We’re going to pray to our Saint for help.”

The scene expresses the ignorance of many regarding religion, as they believe that celebrating at the shrine of the righteous saint is their only refuge from the crisis of drought. This grand celebratory scene reflects a practice still carried out by some people today in various regions of Algeria. It encapsulates religious practice in a set of traditions and Sufi rituals, which director Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina emphasized in its realism.

On the other hand, we encounter the character of the dervish Miloud, portrayed by Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina himself, who excelled in this role. This symbolic character carries multiple meanings, representing various figures such as the narrator, the madman, the wise man, and the “murabit” (a spiritual Sufi figure).

“The definitions of ‘dervish’ vary from one region to another, but they share common attributes indicating that he is a person of vision and wisdom; a Sufi who has dedicated himself to a life of piety, renouncing worldly pleasures, taking only what sustains him to think and walk. Usually, in every city or neighborhood, there is a person who fits this description, treated with a degree of respect and sanctity, especially as he carries wisdom and prophecy. His speech is often poetic and carries visionary meanings, making what he says noteworthy among both the public and the elite, thus creating a bridge of communication between him and the audience.” (Qadri, 2021).



The Dervish Miloud in “Chronicles of the Years of Fire” In Algerian cinema, the dervish is seen by many as a link between man and God. He is considered wise and cunning, although he is also perceived as a fool or a madman. People seek his blessings and ask for his prayers for healing, livelihood, offspring, and other mundane matters. He lends a sense of spirituality and holiness to the scenes and adds symbolism to the cinematic image.

**“Film “Cut Off” by Mohammed Chouikh (1982):**

“It is a movie about the events that took place in Algeria on the eve of the Second World War, through the tragic fate of a young man who rebelled against the forces of colonial oppression.” (Cinématographique, 1984) Similar scenes recur in “Cut Off,” where two men fleeing the French military (the film’s protagonist and his friend, the poet) seek refuge at the shrine of a righteous saint known as Sidi Jahid, believing they will find safety there. An engaging dialogue unfolds between them about the nature of the shrine, emphasizing that one cannot sleep, smoke, or engage in sinful acts there, as these actions fall under the category of prohibitions. The director clearly illustrates the prevailing beliefs of the time regarding visits to shrines by the inappropriate behavior at the grave, asking for prayers, as demonstrated by a woman visiting the shrine from 19:36 to 34:22: “Goodness, O Sidi Jahid, I come to you before my Lord. O Sidi Jahid, may you free me from this old woman, the burden of the fire... O Sidi Jahid, I come to you so that my Lord gives them a mouth to speak... I come to you every year and perform the ‘Waada’ for you”.

In contrast, Omar and his friend burst out laughing at her words as they hide inside the shrine. They then proceeded to take the coins she left in the shrine, a common belief among Algerians called “visiting,” which symbolizes loyalty and submission to the spirit of the saint and those who serve him (the muqaddam).



The Woman’s Visit to the Shrine (D: 21:26 in “Cut Off)

Sufi rituals have been extensively utilized in Algerian cinema, primarily due to the social structure that prevailed during that era, from the time of independence until the late 1980s. With the advent of what is known as the religious revival and Algeria’s opening to the outside world, many of the customs and traditions of Algerians changed, influenced by the emergence of satellite television, the internet, and mobile phones. Algerians were significantly affected by globalization in all aspects of their lives—social, political, cultural, and even economic.

“Thus, cinema became a powerful tool for social change and cultural development. Cinema is... a means of culture and knowledge, an effective educational tool aimed at uplifting society. It plays a prominent role in shaping the values, customs, and arts of the community, in addition to being used as a means for guidance, cultural enlightenment, and inspiring a desire to improve social standing, material growth, and advancement among viewers, and to stimulate the latent capabilities of citizens. It serves as a tool for communication with others and transmits the peculiarities of the nation, its history, and its values. Moreover, it is an effective and potent tool for cultural exchange.” (Khalaf, 2009)

Many customs, traditions, and Sufi rituals in Algerian society, despite having disappeared for a long time, are still well-preserved in Algerian cinema, which has professionally and aesthetically depicted many of these practices in scenes that remain etched in the minds of many Algerians.

For example, in the film “Sheikh Bouamama” (1985), directed by the late Ben Omar Bakhti, there is a clear symbolism in the use of religious visual icons to signify the deep and spiritual connection between humans and their Creator. The film employs various characters that express the authenticity and heritage of Algerian society, foremost among them being the character of Sheikh Bouamama, a prominent figure in Sufism who was the leader of the Sheikhiyya order. He had a thriving zawiya (Sufi lodge) filled with disciples who fought alongside him, as he was among the finest freedom fighters and resisters of French colonialism, defending religion, land, and honor.



Othman Ariwat (Sheikh Bouamama)

Everyone called him by the title “Sidi Sheikh” due to his role as an imam, religious scholar, military leader, and historical figure. The director expressed the sanctity of the Sheikh’s character, emphasizing that it is beyond reproach. He is the imam in prayer, the commander in battle, and the reformer in society, with authority and obedience. This conveys a clear message to the audience: Sufism is deeply rooted in Algerian society, and its figure holds great significance.

This is evident through the epic scenes that illustrate the unity of the Algerian people across various segments, showcasing how the disciples of Sheikh Bouamama fought with great faith and unwavering conviction. In their mobile zawiya, represented by the Sheikh’s tent, they would recite their deep Sufi \*awrad\* (liturgical prayers) and supplications. For them, he was a shining symbol and a blazing flame in the sky of Sufism, embodying both spiritual faith and resistance, a saint endowed with miracles and a leader of great resolve and dignity.



The Zawiya’s Role in War



The Zawiya’s Role in Peace



Actor: Othman Ariwat in the Film “Sheikh Bouamama”

#### Cinema as a Means of Reviving Material and Immaterial Heritage

Cinema is, therefore, a means of reviving both material and immaterial heritage, capturing its details and dimensions through advanced techniques and artistic elements that captivate audiences, such as soundtracks, costumes, set designs, and the logical progression of events. It also relies on the realism of scenes and draws from popular stories and both individual and collective historical memory. The state works to preserve this heritage and recover what was taken from it by French colonialism and other European invaders who swept through our country at various times.

#### Cinema of the Black Decade (The Image of Terrorism and the Renewal of Religious Discourse)

The period between 1992 and 2002 witnessed a bloody conflict that devastated Algeria, known as the Black Decade, resulting in the deaths of thousands from various segments of society, not to mention the countless orphans and displaced individuals in an internal strife unprecedented in Algeria’s history.

Although the security crisis in Algeria was fundamentally political, it was outwardly dominated by a religious aspect, with intense conflict between supporters of the modern (extremist) religious discourse and traditional religious discourse represented by Sufi teachings.

“The 1990s witnessed the Algerian Civil War (or the so-called Black Decade), and what was considered a decline in cinematic production in the 1980s became almost non-existent in the 1990s. Many intellectuals and artists fell victim to this war, and in addition to the scarcity of cinematic production, the practice of cinema became a dangerous endeavor during this period in Algerian history”. (Youssef, 2021) Following the rise of religious extremism in Algeria during this period, it became impossible to pursue any scientific activity in the country, as schools and secondary institutions in rural and urban areas were closed, and all cultural activities (theater, cinema, visual arts, folkloric performances, festivals of all kinds, tourism, and anything related to culture) were suspended.

“These factors led Algerian filmmakers, like other intellectuals, to go into voluntary exile or to remain silent, freezing their activities until the storm passed. Perhaps Algerian television was the only institution that weathered this storm, given its vast material and human resources producing in the cinematic field.” (Khalaf, 2009) Cinema expressed this period through various cinematographic works, although they were not numerous, one could almost count them on one’s fingers. Most of these films encapsulated the contradictions that existed in Algerian society at the time and showed considerable boldness in their themes, as many subjects were considered taboo and could not even be discussed.

Here is a table of some of the films that depict this period:

Number	List of Films	List of Directors	Year of production
01	Bab El Oued City	Merzak Allouache	1994
02	Rachida	Yamina Chouikh	2002
03	Mouritouri	Akacha Touita	2007
04	Scents of Algeria	Rachid Benhadj	2012
05	The Repentant	Merzak Allouache	2012
06	Before Days	Karim Moussaoui	2013
07	The Heroine	Chrif Aggoun	2013
08	Abou leila	Amin Sidi Boumediene	2019
09	Papicha	Mounia meddour	2019

#### Conclusion

Algerian cinema is a dynamic space that combines memory and modernization in its treatment of religious discourse, particularly in the representation of Sufism and popular rituals. By drawing inspiration from spiritual and Sufi traditions,



cinema has preserved an important part of Algeria's cultural heritage, transforming the screen into a means of reviving popular religious practices such as \*hadrats\*, group dhikr, visits to the righteous saints, and the celebration of seasonal festivals (such as waada or zarda), all within a visual context that reflects the relationship between the Algerian individual and faith.

At the same time, Algerian cinema, especially the new generation of filmmakers, seeks to deconstruct and critique certain religious traditions by questioning their relationship to modernity and social change. In this way, cinema is not limited to documentation, but is becoming a space for discussion and for reshaping the collective awareness of spiritual heritage in the midst of contemporary intellectual and cultural transformations.

Between memory and modernization, religious discourse in Algerian cinema remains a vital field that reflects the spiritual diversity within society. It presents a renewed vision of Sufism and popular rituals, whether through glorification or critical reflection. In this way, cinema is not only a mirror of religious history, but also a tool for reshaping it according to evolving perspectives over time.

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