

Narrating Place Identity: Literary Heritage, Cultural Memory, and Storytelling in M'Sila, Algeria

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Abstract

Place is not merely a geographical setting in narrative discourse but a dynamic repository of identity, memory, and collective experience. This study examines how the narrative heritage of M'Sila, Algeria, constructs and preserves the region's place identity through formal literary production and popular storytelling. Using a qualitative, interpretive approach, it analyses the interaction between narrative form, spatial representation, and cultural memory. Particular attention is given to the Hamel Zawiya as a centre of literary and intellectual production and to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Dissi's maqāmah, *The Debate Between Knowledge and Ignorance*, as a significant example of M'Sila's formal narrative heritage. The study also explores local folktales as repositories of historical consciousness, social values, religious references, customs, and collective representations transmitted across generations. The findings indicate that M'Sila's narrative traditions transform place from a passive setting into an active cultural agent that shapes characters, structures meaning, and reinforces communal belonging. Formal and popular narratives perform complementary functions: the former records the region's scholarly and intellectual legacy, while the latter sustains its collective memory through oral transmission. The study concludes that safeguarding this narrative heritage is essential to preserving M'Sila's cultural identity and strengthening the relationship between literature, memory, and place.

Keywords: place identity; narrative heritage; cultural memory; M'Sila; Hamel Zawiya; maqāmah; Algerian folktales.

Introduction

The region of M'Sila possesses a rich and significant material and intangible heritage that has, throughout history, shaped a distinctive spatial identity, differentiating it from other regions of the

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nation. This heritage constitutes a cultural reservoir resulting from successive civilizations that flourished in M'Sila during both its prosperous and turbulent periods. Consequently, it has produced an ideal image of the harmony between spirit and matter in the formation of collective memory and its subsequent investment in social production across diverse fields of knowledge.

Intangible heritage arguably constitutes the largest and most diverse component of M'Sila's cultural legacy due to its multiple artistic and intellectual forms. This study focuses specifically on literary intangible heritage, which occupies a prominent place in the memory of M'Sila and manifests itself in various prose and poetic texts, both vernacular and classical. These narratives are preserved through narrative memory, which has accompanied the achievements of the earliest human communities that passed through this region.

Place constitutes one of the fundamental elements of any literary work, alongside character, time, and event. Creative imagination continuously seeks to transfer these elements from the realm of reality into the world of the literary text, reflecting both personal and collective perceptions. Place emerges as a particularly powerful component because it embodies essential elements of identity, including language, religion, and history, all of which reflect the coexistence, solidarity, and cohesion of a community across time.

In light of the foregoing, this paper seeks to uncover the narrative heritage associated with place and to highlight its role in breathing life into landmarks that continue to testify to the M'Silian community's vision of life and its methods of shaping reality according to its beliefs, ideas, customs, and traditions.

The study therefore raises the following questions:

1. What are the most significant forms of modern M'Silian narrative production?
2. What are their artistic and cultural values?

To address these questions, the paper is organized into two principal sections. The first examines the Hamel Zawiya and its contribution to literary and intellectual production, considering it a major literary source in the region. In this regard, Abd al-Rahman al-Dissi's *maqāmah* (The Debate Between Knowledge and Ignorance) serves as a representative model. This section is entitled **"The Hamel Zawiya and the Story of Narrative."**

The second section explores M'Sila's popular narrative heritage and its role in preserving cultural identity.

First: The Hamel Zawiya and the Story of Narrative

1. Introducing the Zawiya

The Hamel Zawiya is a scholarly institution and a prominent cultural and tourist landmark. It was established in 1280 AH (July 1863 CE) and remains the only zawiya in the region. It was founded by Muhammad ibn Abi al-Qasim ibn Rabih ibn Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahim ibn Sa'ib ibn Mansur, the Algerian Hasani Sharif. The Hamel Zawiya houses a library containing more than 1,300 manuscripts, making it one of the most important repositories of Algeria's intellectual and cultural heritage (Ben Bouzid, 2017).

2. Introducing the Author

The author is the scholar and man of letters Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Tayyib ibn Abd al-Qadir ibn Abi al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghul al-Siba'i al-Idrisi, commonly known as **al-Dissi**, after the village of al-Diss where he was born. He passed away on Friday, 22 Dhu al-Hijjah 1339 AH, corresponding to 26 August 1921 CE, at the age of sixty-nine.

Among his notable works are a commentary on *al-Ustadh al-Isma'iyyah* entitled *Fawz al-Ghanim*; a grammatical poem entitled *al-Zabrah al-Muqtatafah*, which he explained in a commentary called *al-Qabwah al-Murtashafah*, supplemented by a marginal gloss entitled *al-Hadiqah al-Muzakhrifah*; a didactic

poem on Islamic monotheism accompanied by a commentary entitled *al-Mujaz al-Mufid*; a commentary on al-Shabrawi's poem entitled *al-Mashrab al-Farawi*; a *Badi'iyah* dedicated to al-Ustadh together with its commentary *Tuhfat al-Ikhwān*; and a commentary on Shaykh Shu'ayb's theological poem (Al-Hafnawi, n.d., p. 400).

3. The Story of the Text

A researcher investigating M'Sila's early narrative literary heritage soon discovers the scarcity of formal narrative production in the city. The only surviving example appears to be al-Dissi's *maqāmah*, *A Debate Between Knowledge and Ignorance*. Although it stands as the sole representative of formal narrative literature from that period, it remains a bold and distinctive literary achievement.

This situation may be explained by the fact that most writers of the period were primarily engaged in composing works on language, religion, and related scholarly disciplines. Al-Dissi himself produced numerous works in these fields, as did many of his contemporaries. However, this perception changes when the text is examined alongside other creative narrative works that appeared during and after the same period, including Muhammad ibn Brahim's *The Tale of Lovers in Love and Longing* (1845), *The Sheikh's Revenge* by Muhammad ibn Rahhal, and *François and al-Rashid* by Muhammad Sa'id al-Zahiri (1925) (Ben Yahia, 2021–2022).

Al-Dissi's *maqāmah* represents a turning point in the field of narrative creativity. It served as an invitation to his contemporaries and to future generations to engage with reality and represent it artistically in order to foster cultural, political, and identity awareness—an urgent need for the region at the time.

One possible explanation for the existence of only a single formal narrative text lies in the difficult conditions surrounding both the production and reception of narrative literature during that period. Furthermore, al-Dissi belonged to the era of the Arab literary revival (*al-Nahdah*), which was characterized by a return to classical literary achievements and an effort to emulate earlier masters. Within this traditional literary genre, writers such as al-Suyuti (d. 911 AH) and Shaykh Muhammad al-Hanafī al-Mahdi had already established important precedents.

This first generation sought to cultivate modern *maqāmāt* within an Arabic literary framework. Subsequently, a second generation emerged, represented by authors such as al-ʿAttar, Nasif al-Yaziji in *Majmaʿ al-Bahrāyn*, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq in *al-Saq ʿala al-Saq*, Abdullah Fikri in *al-Maqamah al-Fikriyyah al-Sunniyyah fi al-Mamlakah al-Batinīyyah*, and Muhammad al-Muwaylihi in *Hadith Isa ibn Hisham* (Hassan, 1974, p. 33).

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Dissi may therefore be regarded as one of the pioneers of this first generation due to his interest in this literary genre and his awareness of its potential benefits. It appears that two principal objectives motivated his revival of the *maqāmah*. The first was educational, corresponding to the original pedagogical function of the classical *maqāmah*. The second was artistic, involving the renewal and adaptation of the genre in accordance with the demands of the modern age.

What concerns us most in the present study is the text's spatial significance as one of the most prominent manifestations of the region's intangible cultural heritage. Although the events of the debate unfold within the author's imagination, it is difficult to envision them taking place anywhere other than within the scholarly assemblies of the Hamel Zawiya.

As Barthes noted, narrative may be supported through spoken or written language, still or moving images, movement itself, or an organized combination of these media. Narrative is present in myths, folktales, stories, epics, histories, tragedies, dramas, comedies, pantomimes, paintings, stained-glass art, cinema, popular gatherings, various events, and everyday conversations. In short, narrative exists across all times and places (Barthes, trans. al-Sayyid, n.d.).

The *maqāmah* opens with the following passage:

After praising the Inspirer of right judgment and the Revealer of truths, and after offering complete prayers and continuous salutations upon our master Muhammad, his family, companions, and the learned and righteous community, circumstances required that a debate and dispute arise between Knowledge and Ignorance. Thus, a group assembled and appointed a day for the encounter.

Although this opening does not explicitly identify the location of the debate, readers implicitly share an understanding with the author regarding its setting. The deliberate omission of the place name may have been intended to avoid disrupting the narrative flow. Instead, the author relies on linguistic indicators such as “arise,” “assembled,” and “appointed,” which conceal what may be described as the narrative background space.

This hidden spatial dimension acquires an aesthetic function, as place remains concealed behind linguistic signs that operate as symbolic codes. Through these codes, readers uncover possible and desired worlds, thereby participating in the creation of literary meaning. Such a narrative technique stimulates the imagination and invites readers to enter unfamiliar worlds or revisit familiar ones from a new perspective. It also allows the author to avoid repetitive references to place while preserving its narrative presence.

The *maqāmah* therefore encourages readers to discover the setting in which the debate unfolds. At this narrative moment, one may imagine numerous debates having taken place within this scholarly environment: between diligence and laziness, between truth and falsehood, and many other oppositions generated by the imagination. These possibilities constitute interpretive tools through which readers establish relationships with the text and its components—character, time, and place.

The *maqāmah* narrates a debate between Knowledge and Ignorance, two symbolic and unconventional characters. Their presence reflects a modern conception of characterization that differs from the traditional representation of humans or animals occupying physical space.

The debate is characterized by an argumentative style through which each party seeks to persuade the other of its merits and virtues. Eventually, the dispute is resolved through the intervention of a mysterious figure whom the narrator does not explicitly identify, describing him only as follows:

“When their exchange of insults became prolonged and matters nearly escalated into physical confrontation and fighting, there arose one of noble qualities and beautiful attributes, adorned with the virtues of the righteous and the honorable, known as Equity, who said...”

The narrator may have intended this figure to symbolize another abstract value, such as reason or wisdom.

This, then, is the story of formal narrative production in the city of M'Sila. Although it constitutes a solitary example from its period, it remains an important literary work and a unique element of the region's intangible cultural heritage. Its significance has attracted the attention of contemporary scholars, who have devoted theses, articles, and books to its study.

Second: M'Sila's Popular Narrative Heritage

The region of M'Sila possesses an immense body of literary heritage at the popular and unofficial level. This heritage has been transmitted from one generation to another through oral narration and constitutes an integral part of the city's cultural and historical identity.

Foremost among these popular narrative forms is the folktale, which has maintained its position within everyday storytelling and in recounting the various events experienced by the region. This genre served as a protective shield for family identity and represented one of the last bastions defending Arab-Islamic authenticity during a period marked by cultural challenges. It also preserved the region's glorious history from the processes of identity erasure practiced by colonial powers.

Since the folktale is “a narrative account connected with an ancient event transmitted orally from one generation to another, or a free creation of the popular imagination concerning important events,

historical figures, and places” (Ibrahim, 1991, p. 19), the popular imagination in M’Sila has produced a rich collection of stories expressing the concerns, struggles, cultures, and traditions of the local population as they evolved through time.

Among the most famous of these tales are *Shamsah and Ghulam al-Layl*, *Wad’at Jinayat Sab’ah*, *The Wolf and the Hedgehog*, *Juba and His Companion*, *Jaziyah and the Sheep*, *The Orphans’ Cow*, *Hadid Madid*, *The Bride Abductor*, *Truth Has Disappeared*, *The Distributor of Livelihoods*, *The Stepdaughter*, *The Tale of Generosity*, *The Wolf and the Hyena*, and *The Guest’s Tale* (Barbash, 2011–2012).

For the purposes of this study, a summary of the folktale *Shamsah and Ghulam al-Layl* will be presented in order to highlight its relevance to the present discussion.

Summary of the Tale: *Shamsah and Ghulam al-Layl*

1. A king marries seven women on the condition that each perform an extraordinary feat.
2. Six of the wives fail to accomplish such a feat, whereas the seventh promises to give birth to two children.
3. The six wives, aided by a woman named Stut, conspire against the seventh wife and seek to prevent the fulfillment of her promise.
4. After the children are born, Stut secretly removes them, places them in a bag, and substitutes them with two animals.
5. The bag containing the children is thrown into the sea, while the mother is subjected to humiliation and punishment.
6. A fisherman discovers the bag, takes it home, and raises the two children as his own.
7. As they grow older, the children discover that they are not the biological offspring of the fisherman.
8. The boy seeks first to repay the fisherman’s kindness before beginning a search for his true parents.
9. The brother and sister travel without knowing their destination. During their journey, they meet an old man who gives them a magical staff, enabling them to settle unknowingly in their father's land.
10. Stut learns of their whereabouts and becomes envious of the palace in which they live. She begins plotting to eliminate them and seize the palace.
11. She devises numerous schemes to destroy the young man, all of which fail. She then persuades him to seek a woman named Jaziyah and marry her, believing that reaching her is nearly impossible.
12. Through intelligence and perseverance, the young man succeeds in bringing Jaziyah back and marries her.
13. Stut continues her intrigues by inviting the family to a banquet and attempting to poison them.
14. Jaziyah’s wisdom enables the family to survive the poisoning attempt. She later invites the mother to another gathering, on the condition that every member of the household attend.
15. During the meal, Jaziyah begins narrating stories with the intention of gradually revealing the truth she already knows.
16. The Sultan realizes that the story being narrated concerns his own life.

17. The truth is ultimately revealed through Jaziyah, who discloses the reality concerning Shamsah and Ghulam al-Layl. As a result, Stut and the conspiratorial wives are subjected to severe punishment by the Sultan (Barbash, 2011–2012, p. 121).

The subject matter of these folktales is characterized by a common thematic pattern in which the struggle between good and evil occupies a central position. This theme reflects the inner world of the popular storyteller, whose memory preserves the historical experiences of the region and the succession of civilizations that shaped it, culminating in the Islamic conquests.

These narratives embody a firmly established identity framework, expressed through storytelling and reinforced by religious meanings that emphasize divine providence and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. The influence of religious culture on the popular imagination is therefore unmistakable.

From the very beginning of these narratives, readers encounter a religious invocation that characterizes many popular narrative texts:

“In the name of God I begin, and upon the Prophet I send blessings; speech finds no beauty except through prayers upon the Prophet, the best of humankind” (Barbash, 2011–2012, p. 118).

This opening establishes an implicit reading contract between narrator and audience concerning the intellectual and ideological foundations of the narrative. It also reflects the narrator’s cultural identity and worldview.

In the tale of *Shamsah and Ghulam al-Layl*, intertextual echoes may be observed with the stories of the Prophets Moses and Solomon (peace be upon them), particularly in relation to narrative components such as character, time, events, and setting.

Characters

- Ghulam al-Layl parallels the prophetic hero figure.
- The character of Billi al-Yahudi resembles the figure of the Samaritan.

Time and Events

The temporal setting resembles the eras associated with the prophets, periods often linked in popular imagination with magic and supernatural beings. One narrative passage illustrates this clearly:

“When darkness fell, Ghulam al-Layl planted the magical staff into the ground, whereupon it transformed into a glass palace radiating light. They spent the night in their kingdom without realizing its true significance” (Barbash, 2011–2012, p. 157).

Places

- Ghulam al-Layl’s palace evokes associations with the throne of Bilqis (the Queen of Sheba).

Through this tale and other forms of popular expression, the folk creator sought to establish a profound bond with the land upon which civilization was built and within which the seeds of identity were planted. This connection is evidenced by the region’s cultural landmarks, religious institutions, and architectural heritage, all of which narrate their own stories through literary production and through related disciplines such as history, sociology, and other forms of writing that document the Arab-Islamic identity of the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following points may be regarded as some of the principal findings of this research paper:

- The city of M’Sila possesses a rich and highly diverse literary heritage that encompasses both formal and popular narrative traditions.

- There exists a close relationship between narrative texts and the places in which they are produced, a relationship that is clearly reflected in the themes, events, and symbolic structures of these narratives.
- Narrative texts contribute significantly to the construction of individual and collective identity through their representation of language, religion, history, and the Arab-Islamic civilizational depth of the region.
- These texts interact dynamically with the region's cultural and historical landmarks, including sites such as the Beni Hammad Fortress and the Hamel Zawiya, thereby reinforcing the connection between narrative production and cultural memory.
- The spatial environment of M'Sila demonstrates a remarkable capacity to generate narrative functions and to inspire their artistic transformation into enduring literary forms.

Declarations

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