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From the Collectivity to the Individual: A Sociology of Transformations in the Algerian Family

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Abstract

The Algerian family has faced internal and external cultural, social, economic, and ideological challenges, foremost among them French colonialism, that have sought, and continue to seek, to dismantle and fragment it. Most sociological studies, including those by Pierre Bourdieu, Addi Lahouari, Mustapha Boutefnouchet, and Mohamed Souidi, that examined the Algerian family during and after colonialism and up to the end of the nineteenth century indicate that the Algerian family underwent several changes in its structural configuration, internal relations, and social and religious values as a result of the aforementioned factors. This study examines the most significant changes affecting family structures, the factors that have contributed to these changes, and the social forms, or family patterns, resulting from them. It begins with the tribe as a social structure and the position of the traditional family within it, proceeds through transitional and modern forms of the family, and concludes with the individual as the focal point of social processes and as a historical actor, in Alain Touraine's formulation.

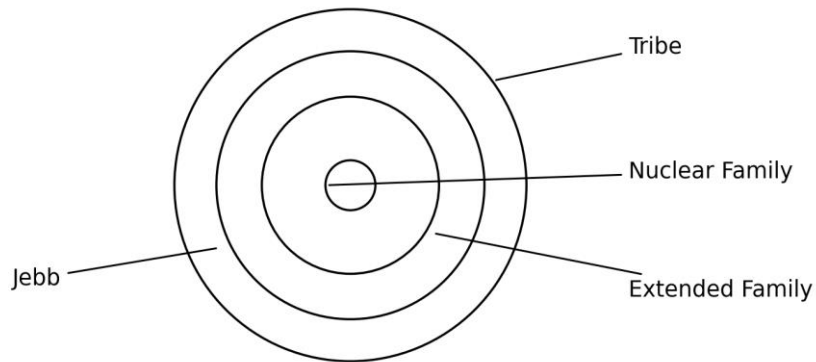
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Introduction

A researcher in the sociology of the family cannot examine the disintegration of family structure and the emergence of the individual as the focal point of social processes without addressing the transformations undergone by social structure in general and by family structure in particular.

In this respect, numerous studies by Western and Algerian sociologists have examined developments in both social and family structures. These studies analysed and interpreted the Algerian family, elucidating its social structure, characteristics, functions, and position within the broader social structure. Some also addressed the factors underlying changes in and the development of family structure, as well as the family patterns resulting from this development.

In his study of the colonial policy of dismantling, Addi Lahouari argues that, in the social organisation preceding French colonialism, the family constituted the third level after the tribe and the jebb, as shown in the following figure:



Addi Lahouari also maintains that the nuclear family, which is a reproductive and moral unit, has no social status within the group and is manifest only through the extended family to which it belongs. He adds that the extended family consists of a group of multifunctional nuclear families. It is also a political unit represented externally by its head, as well as an economic unit of production and consumption.

Of all the functions performed by the extended family, including its economic, political, religious, and moral functions, the most important is the determination of the individual's social identity. The unity of the extended family is embodied in shared residence.

Addi Lahouari emphasised that colonial policy did not target the extended family directly in the same way that it targeted the tribe. With the decline of the tribe and the branches through which individuals had defined their social identity, this function passed to the family and became firmly rooted within it. Addi Lahouari therefore asked how the family would develop after the disappearance of the *jebb* and whether new social conditions would alter its functions and structure.

From Addi Lahouari's account of social formation during the Ottoman period, we conclude that he focuses on two factors through which social formation changes. First, he emphasises the economic bond, arguing that a fundamental condition for the unity of the extended family is the unity of the land. Families that own land capable of meeting their members' food needs possess all the conditions necessary for continuity. In this respect, his argument accords with the Marxist approach. Second, he emphasises ties of blood, in agreement with Lucette Valensi, maintaining that the unity of the land remains intact as long as the father, as head of the family, remains alive. After his death, the inheritance is often divided, leading to economic disruption.

Whereas Addi Lahouari asked how the extended family would develop after the disappearance of the *jebb* and whether new social conditions would alter its functions and structure, Mustapha Boutefnouchet began with the question of how the family structure derived from the extended family would develop. Boutefnouchet's question thus takes us to the point at which Addi Lahouari concluded.

Mustapha Boutefnouchet's study focused on the structural dimension of the Algerian family and on the form of social relations. He concluded that the most widespread family form is the patriarchal family, which derives from the extended family and still retains its structure and activities. This family structure is moving towards dissolution into a simpler structure. Boutefnouchet explained this by arguing that an economic system based on wages rather than indivision in the urban milieu no longer permits the patriarchal system to exist in its conventional classical form.

Boutefnouchet also maintains that as the traditional economic system moves towards fragmentation, the value system and forms of kinship relations change under the influence of this transformation and the conditions it produces.

He points to the emergence of civil law that competes with the customary law of "honour". He adds that the father's status remains distinctive, although his economic role is less important than it was within the undivided economic structure. His sons, as wage earners, also compete with him in managing the family economy, without conflict. The mother likewise benefits from her status as a wage earner and manager of the family budget, and her position becomes more valued than it was in the past. Children, meanwhile, receive a more democratic upbringing, creating new situations within the family structure.

Mustapha Boutefnouchet began where Addi Lahouari left off, and his view of the process of change and its mechanisms does not differ from Addi Lahouari's explanation. He examined the family structure derived from the extended family and the transformations it undergoes, while also identifying their causes and consequences. Boutefnouchet focused on the economic factor as fundamental to changes in the structure of the family derived from the extended family, linking changes in the value system and forms of kinship relations to the inevitable fragmentation of the traditional economic system. Whereas

Addi Lahouari attached importance to ties of blood, represented by the death of the father, which may lead to a change in family structure, Boutefnouchet pointed to external circumstances that alter the form and structure of the family, descending from the extended family. These circumstances include children's entry into wage employment, which may enable them to compete with the father in meeting family expenses; the emergence of civil law as a competitor to the customary law of "honour"; the disappearance of the jama'a, leaving the municipal council to manage individuals' lives; and the change in women's status following their education and entry into wage employment.

El Ayachi Ansar maintains that the family lies at the heart of major transformations affecting various aspects of social life. Perhaps the most important feature of these transformations is the transition from locally rooted manifestations, patterns of behaviour, practices, and ways of life, whose operation is governed by local mechanisms determined by the nature of social systems and forces and by their objectives and choices associated with elements of their culture and ethnic and religious identity, to processes governed by a universal rationality shaped by new factors and variables that transcend those traditional determinants.

El Ayachi Ansar also maintains that the distinguishing feature of Arab social formations is that they are incomplete and immature, characterised by the articulation, intersection, or coexistence of several patterns and models of relations and forms of organisation belonging to different historical formations: pre-capitalist formations based on social collectivities, namely the tribe, the clan, and the extended family; and peripheral, dependent, and distorted capitalist formations based on hybrid and incompletely formed social classes, occupational hierarchies, civil society organisations, and the elementary family.

What may be observed and inferred from the preceding studies is that they regard changes in social structure as primarily the outcome of economic change. In our view, when economic ties change, solidarity does not disappear; rather, its form changes, as Émile Durkheim affirmed. Changes in both social and family structures result from cultural and economic transformations that alter the content of social domains and the cultural models that govern them. In other words, family structure changes as the cultural model that governs it evolves, leading to new patterns that keep pace with social, cultural, and economic transformations.

1.1. Patterns of the Contemporary Algerian Family: Structural Transformations and Continuity of Values

Given the social, economic, and cultural transformations Algeria has undergone, particularly after the country changed its economic orientation and entered a market economy in 1990, the Algerian family has interacted with the various processes of transformation shaping Algerian society. Perhaps the most significant effect of these transformations on the family has been the transition from an extended structure based on functional solidarity to a new structure compatible with the changes experienced by Algerian society...

Sociologists concerned with the study of the family agree in identifying patterns of change in the modern family. Their only point of disagreement concerns how these changes should be assessed: whether they constitute signs of family dissolution or are limited to changes in its components and functions. There is, however, agreement that the family has shifted from a three-generation form to a simple form comprising parents and children.¹

Mustapha Boutefnouchet and Rabah Derouache,² together with Nadia Aichour,³ considered the Algerian family to be transitional. Boutefnouchet also observed the emergence of a new family pattern that no longer represents the extended family. This structure is associated with the country's economic, social, and cultural transformations, and he termed it the "transformed extended family".⁴ Mohamed Souidi maintains that the Algerian family began to lose its form as an extended family, whose membership may exceed forty individuals, and to move towards the conjugal or nuclear family. This new form, which has begun to characterise urban centres in particular, is also marked by high fertility, with the average conjugal family comprising between five and seven members, while often retaining the functions of the extended family. Souidi further argues that this family combines the characteristics of the urban family with the functions of the rural family.⁵ Farida Saidi Bechiche, by contrast, maintains that family patterns are diverse and vary by geographical region, class and social structure, and the

¹ Ismail Mihoubi, *Introduction to the Study of the Rural Local Community: A Sociological Analysis of the Socialisation of the Adolescent Pupil in the Rural Environment*, 1st ed. (Algeria: Jitali Publishing House, 2014), 105.

² Rabah Derouache, *Sociology of the Family* (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Hadith, 2012), 146.

³ Nadia Aichour, "The Structure of Social Ties in the Modern Family: A Western/Islamic Approach," University of Setif, research paper presented at the Fourth National Symposium of the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers, 6–7 November 2006, 123.

⁴ Derouache, *Sociology of the Family*, 147.

⁵ Mohamed Souidi, *Introduction to the Study of Algerian Society: A Sociological Analysis of the Most Important Manifestations of Change in Algerian Society* (Algeria: University Publications Office, 1984), 89.

economic circumstances of the head of household. Accordingly, she considers that the contemporary Algerian family may be divided into three patterns, each associated with the social, economic, and cultural conditions in which families live: the renewed traditional family pattern, the transitional pattern, and the modern pattern.⁶

Researchers differ in their classification of the prevailing family pattern within which the Algerian family may be placed, and they have provided characteristics only for the urban family. It may also be observed that most classifications focus solely on the family's social domain without taking the spatial and urban dimensions into account as a fundamental variable in the study of family development, except Farida Saidi Bechiche, who indicated that classifying the family within a particular pattern should depend on economic, cultural, and social conditions. Such classification also varies according to geographical region, social structure, and the family's economic framework. Nevertheless, most researchers agree that the Algerian family is transitional, though they differ over its characteristics. Its classification as transitional derives from its state of transformation: it has neither retained the structure of the traditional family nor settled into the modern pattern. Hisham Sharabi, El Ayachi Ansar, Mustapha Boutefnouchet, and Nasser Qasmi advanced this position.

If most researchers agree on classifying the Algerian family within the transformed family pattern, what factors account for the emergence of this pattern? Will the Algerian family stabilise within it, or will it continue to accompany the process of transformation in a manner that contributes to the growth of individualisation?

1.2. Determinants of the Transition towards Transitional Structures in Family Organisation⁷

Some researchers group the factors contributing to the emergence of transitional forms of family organisation into two categories:

- a. Traditional factors: the decline of the traditional agricultural production system; the growing importance and role of modern employment sectors, such as industry and services; and the considerable social and geographical mobility generated in rural and semi-rural settings by the expansion of the educational system.
- b. Non-traditional factors: what may be termed the conditions accompanying the process of social transformation, such as the housing crisis; the economic crisis and its consequences, including unemployment, worker redundancies, and their negative effects on systems of social and family solidarity; circumstances arising from the upbringing and socialisation of children, such as working mothers frequently turning to relatives for assistance; and social obligations associated with religious and cultural heritage, such as caring for elderly or incapacitated parents.

1.3. The Algerian Family in the Context of Social Transformation: From Transitional Structures to Individualisation

Given that the Algerian family has been classified in the sociological literature as a transitional or transformed family, Nasser Qasmi maintains that the transformed family is a stage that paves the way for individualistic tendencies because it is characterised by an unstable structure and by a greater exchange of services and interaction than in the extended family. This is attributable to the smaller size of the transformed family, its sharing of various functions with different social institutions, and the disappearance of occupational cooperation, with each individual becoming a productive unit separate from the other family members. This signifies a gradual shift towards individualism and a movement away from the family's previous kinship structure.⁸

Some go further, emphasising the importance of the shift from the family as a unit of social interaction to individualisation, which entails the emergence of the individual as the focal point of social processes or as a historical actor, in Alain Touraine's formulation. According to proponents of this view, numerous factors facilitate this process, including modern laws and legislation in the fields of personal status, economic activity and employment, and political activity. Such legislation addresses the individual directly and treats the individual as an independent legal entity. Others, however, question the validity of these conclusions and ask whether individualisation is truly an "available choice", regarding these transformations as merely superficial cosmetic changes of limited effect in time and space and linked to certain legislative amendments concerning civil and occupational status. Consequently, they do not constitute a general tendency or current comparable to that experienced by European countries during the era of modernity.⁹

Some researchers attribute these transformations primarily to rapid technological developments.

Globalisation contributes to the dissemination and entrenchment of several illusions, including the illusion of individualism: the belief that one's existence is confined to one's individuality and that everything else is foreign and of no concern. This belief has contributed to undermining and tearing apart the social bond that enables the individual to recognise that existence is grounded in membership of a group, a class, and a nation. Mahmoud Orabi maintains that this illusion of

⁶ Farida Saidi Bechiche, same reference, 150–51.

⁷ El Ayachi Ansar, "The Family in the Arab World: Prospects for Transition from Patriarchy . . . to Partnership," *Alam al-Fikr* 36, no. 3 (January–March 2008): 295.

⁸ Nasser Qasmi, *Sociology of the Family and Social Change*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Hadith, 2013), 169–70.

⁹ Ansar, "The Family in the Arab World," 295.

individualism aims to abolish collective, class, national, and nationalist identities, as well as every other collective framework, leaving only the global, indeed globalised, framework in existence.¹⁰

Darin Barney points out that electronic culture is sympathetic to the values of openness, freedom, and tolerance at both the social and economic levels, reflecting the broader ethos of "individualism" and the alternative lifestyles that appear to flourish on the Internet... It is a culture that favours secular values over traditional moral issues, such as marriage and the family, sexual choices, and fundamentalist Christian beliefs, while also entrenching the principle of "laissez-faire, laissez-passer" and limiting the role of the state in the economy and business.¹¹

These changes led Edward Cornish to infer several scenarios regarding the family's future. One scenario points to the decline of the traditional family pattern, with women and men assuming divergent roles, a reluctance to have children and form a family, and the emergence of isolation, alienation, selfishness, and a reluctance to participate actively in and engage with family life. Other values and patterns, based on private interests and utilitarian material ties, would take their place, alongside the prevalence of socially unacceptable forms of relationship.¹²

Conclusion

This study indicates that the extended family was the prevailing family pattern in Algerian society and was characterised by sociological features that reflected the traditional cultural model par excellence. It also constituted an extension of earlier social structures, represented by the tribe, which were subjected to several internal and external economic, cultural, social, and ideological factors that worked to dismantle and fragment them. The totality of the aforementioned internal and external factors to which the family's social structure was subjected also contributed to the emergence of new family patterns, governed by cultural models that differ from those governing the traditional family and keep pace with developments in society.

We may also conclude that changes in family structure depend on changes in the cultural model governing it and are not linked to changes in the form and structural composition of the family. This may be demonstrated by the family patterns that researchers have termed the "transitional family pattern", which resulted from the disintegration of the family but combines the characteristics of the urban family in terms of form and composition with the functions of the rural family. Its independence from the extended family is merely spatial, that is, urban; the change undergone by family structure occurred only at the level of form.

Based on the foregoing, the discussion of the family pattern resulting from changes in social structure, as presented in the various sociological studies of the Algerian family, consists of conclusions drawn from studies and field research that focused on the structural dimensions of the family, as well as the developments and divisions affecting it from independence to the beginning of the twentieth century. We shall take these studies as our point of departure in this research to determine the prevailing family pattern and compare it in light of the spatial, urban, economic, and cultural variables about its members.

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¹⁰ Mahmoud Orabi, *The Impact of Globalisation on Youth Culture: A Field Study*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Cultural Publishing House, 2006), 142.

¹¹ Darin Barney, *The Network Society*, trans. Anwar al-Jamawi, 1st ed. (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015), 211.

¹² Orabi, *The Impact of Globalisation on Youth Culture*, 143.