

From Tradition to Activism: Touiza as a Socio-Cultural Practice for Solidarity and Mountain Tourism in Algeria

Adel CHIHEB*

University of jijel 18000 jijel, (Algeria) faculty of humanities and Social Sciences
chiheb-adel@univ-jijel.dz

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Abstract

This paper examines Touiza, an ancestral socio-cultural practice of collective work and mutual aid from Algeria, tracing its evolution from a traditional foundation of communal life to a modern form of civic activism. Often translated as solidarity or communal work, *Touiza* is a living practice that continues to shape social relations and is being actively reimagined by contemporary actors. By analyzing its foundational principles and examining its modern applications, this paper argues that *Touiza* serves not only as a potent vehicle for reinforcing social solidarity but also as a blueprint for an authentic, equitable, and sustainable model of mountain tourism. This approach stands in contrast to extractive or mass-market tourism, instead proposing a model where cultural integrity, community empowerment, and environmental stewardship are paramount. Through a deconstruction of the concept of *Touiza*, an exploration of its role in fostering modern solidarity and local governance, and an analysis of case studies, this paper illustrates its tangible potential to transform the mountain tourism landscape in Algeria.

Keywords : Touiza ; Sustainable Tourism ; Community Empowerment ; Social Solidarity ; Activism.

* The Sender Author

Introduction

The mountainous regions of Algeria, are confronted with the complex task of safeguarding their distinct socio-cultural identity while striving for sustainable economic progress. Within a national framework where centralized, state-driven development models have frequently produced limited results (Khaled & Medour, 2021), the need to explore endogenous, community-led strategies for resilience and prosperity has become increasingly urgent. This paper proposes that *Touiza*, an ancient socio-cultural tradition of collective work and mutual aid, presents a robust, culturally-grounded framework to meet these objectives. This study expands on existing research in community-based tourism and endogenous development, advocating for the unique suitability of the *Touiza* model to the Algerian context.

Commonly understood as solidarity or communal labor, *Touiza* is not a mere historical artifact but a dynamic, living practice that persistently shapes social interactions and is being creatively reinterpreted by modern communities. Through an in-depth analysis of its core tenets and an investigation of its contemporary uses, this paper contends that *Touiza* functions both as a powerful mechanism for enhancing social cohesion and as a viable blueprint for an authentic, just, and sustainable form of mountain tourism. This model diverges sharply from extractive or mass-market tourism paradigms by prioritizing cultural integrity, community empowerment, and environmental stewardship. This paper will deconstruct the *Touiza* concept, examine its function in promoting modern solidarity and local governance, and, through illustrative case studies, demonstrate its real-world capacity to revolutionize the mountain tourism sector in Algeria.

1- Deconstructing Touiza: The Foundation of Communal Life

At its essence, *Touiza*, or *Tiwizi* in the Tamazight language, is a "participatory work site" (*chantier participatif*), representing an organized social framework born of necessity to achieve a collective goal (Khaled & Medour, 2021). It embodies a practical application of a worldview founded on interdependence and mutual exchange. While frequently linked with the Kabyle people, analogous forms of communal assistance are present in other Algerian areas such as the Aurès and the M'Zab, attesting to its profound origins within the nation's intangible cultural heritage. This traditional system of mutual support has served as a pillar of community resilience for generations, facilitating collective endeavors for the greater good.

Historically, the roles of *Touiza* were deeply intertwined with the cadences of rural existence and the very survival of the community (Mimouni, 2005). These responsibilities encompassed:

1-1. Agricultural Support : Rallying the community for strenuous agricultural tasks like the olive harvest and planting (Chaib, 2021). This communal endeavor guarantees the prompt execution of farming duties, which is vital for both food security and economic steadiness.

1-2. Infrastructure and Construction : Collaboratively erecting a family's dwelling, clearing routes, or building and preserving crucial water systems (Mokdad et al., 2022). Such undertakings not only supply necessary infrastructure but also fortify social connections through shared effort.

1-3. Social Support : Aiding families in periods of distress, such as sickness or death, thus making sure that no community member is left in isolation (Hachelaf & Parks, 2018). This social safety net is a fundamental component of *Touiza*, mirroring a profound dedication to the welfare of the community.

This practice is regulated not by formal legislation but by a combination of *droit coutumier* (customary law) and fundamental tenets of social behavior, which ensures compliance and preserves communal harmony. Its organizational framework is notably flexible and non-hierarchical. Khaled and Medour (2021) pinpoint three key roles: the organizer (the person or family that benefits from the work), the participants (community members offering their labor freely and without being subordinate), and at times, a professional accompanier (an artisan or specialist who directs the technical facets of the work) (Khaled & Medour, 2021). The process is cyclical, focusing on the task at hand rather than a hierarchical structure, which cultivates an atmosphere where "each person knows what he has to do, why he does it, how and when he must do it" (Khaled & Medour, 2021). This intrinsic egalitarianism is vital to its effectiveness as a social cohesive.

2- Touiza in Global and Local Contexts

2-1. The Global Context: A Universal Practice of Cooperation : The principle of *Touiza*, though deeply embedded in Algerian traditions, reflects a "universal human practice of cooperation that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries" (Gourine, 2013, p. 7). This concept of collective effort for mutual benefit is a recurring theme in human societies. Similar practices of reciprocal aid are found worldwide, each with its own cultural nuances but sharing the same fundamental principles. These include "The Minga in Andean countries, Moyai-Naoshi in Japan" (Ortiz Haro et al., 2023, p. 40), and the American "barn raising," which is described as "somewhat similar to the U.S. trope of farmers getting together to help build a new barn for their neighbors" (Hachelaf & Parks, 2018, p. 4).

This perspective is greatly enhanced by linking *Touiza* to wider African philosophical traditions, especially *Ubuntu*. *Touiza* can be regarded as a localized expression of *Ubuntu's* broader principles, embodying collective labor and cooperation that align with its communitarian ethics. With its core belief that "I am because we are," *Ubuntu* highlights the importance of interconnectedness, community, and mutual assistance as the basis of personhood and moral obligation (Dolamo, 2013, p. 4). However, the act of translating such culturally embedded terms is complex. When concepts like *Touiza* "travel," they inevitably "take on different meanings, losing some conceptual frameworks while adding others," which risks oversimplifying their deep-rooted social and reciprocal obligations (Hachelaf & Parks, 2018, p. 7).

2-2. The Local Context: Variations and Expressions in Algeria : *Touiza* is a practice known throughout the Algerian and Maghrebi territory (Mimouni, 2005, p. 3). While frequently associated with the Kabyle people, analogous forms of communal assistance are present in other Algerian areas such as the Aurès and the M'Zab, attesting to its profound origins within the nation's intangible cultural heritage.

Early 20th-century ethnographer René Maunier observed three distinct but related forms of assistance : *Maouna* ; a free meal or loan of material, *Tawssa* ; a free loan of money, a "credit of honor", and *Touiza* ; free labor (Maunier, 1927 ; Bourdieu, 1958, p. 91). In its local application, *Touiza* is further distinguished by its purpose. *Touiza* of collective interest is decided by the community for public works, such as maintaining mosques or clearing pathways, and is regulated by customary law. In contrast, *Touiza* of individual interest is a voluntary act to help a person or family with a task that exceeds their capacity, such as a harvest or building a home, and relies on the spirit of cordiality and neighborhood laws (Mimouni, 2005, pp. 3-4).

3- Touiza as a Modern Vector for Solidarity and Local Governance

In the 21st century, *Touiza* is experiencing a notable resurgence, evolving from an informal tradition to a conscious model for civic engagement and local development. It stands as a powerful expression of "citizen participation", challenging the reliance cultivated by the post-colonial "welfare state" and empowering local communities to spearhead their own development initiatives (Khaled & Medour, 2021). This revitalization is not simply a nostalgic look backward; it represents a dynamic adaptation of age-old values to tackle modern issues like environmental decline, economic instability, and social disintegration (Chiheb & Northey, 2023). This evolution is a direct response to needs that "neither colonization, nor the modern Algerian State have been able to satisfy," causing the practice to reappear in new and unexpected forms (Mimouni, 2005). This contemporary form of *Touiza* can be interpreted as a type of social innovation, wherein established customs are repurposed to address new societal needs, demonstrating how a traditional practice can be "renewed and revalorized" in a modern context (Khaled & Medour, 2021).

This contemporary understanding of *Touiza* bolsters solidarity by forging a common sense of purpose and achieving concrete results. The collective effort involved in a project—whether it's cleaning up a village, restoring a historical landmark, or forming a local cooperative—cultivates social capital, trust, and a unified sense of identity. This process transforms neighbors into a "real big family" bound together within a shared locality (Khaled & Medour, 2021). The process of collective action and community building is fundamental to cultivating local resilience and achieving sustainable development. The practice reinforces the "spirit of solidarity and organization" that characterizes Kabyle communities, translating it into collective action with highly visible results. This aligns with the broader understanding of social capital, where networks, norms, and trust facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Gagnon et al., 2008).

Moreover, this practice can be viewed as a type of grassroots governance, offering a framework for collective decision-making and resource management that is inherently democratic and participatory. This is evident in modern initiatives where *Touiza* is used as a term to "indicate what community leadership could look like in our civil society" (Hachelaf & Parks, 2018). This practice is a powerful manifestation of what sociologists term "social capital"—the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Gagnon et al., 2008). Furthermore, *Touiza* can be understood as a practical embodiment of the principles of the "solidarity economy" or "social economy," an economic paradigm that prioritizes social

objectives, cooperation, and democratic governance over profit maximization (Chaib, 2021; Malek et al., 2020).

This viewpoint is greatly enhanced by linking *Touiza* to wider African philosophical traditions, especially Ubuntu. *Touiza* can be regarded as a localized expression of *Ubuntu's* broader philosophical principles, insofar as *Touiza* embodies collective labor, social participation, and citizen cooperation that align with *Ubuntu's* communitarian ethics (Khaled & Medour, 2021).

With its core belief that “I am because we are,” Ubuntu highlights the importance of interconnectedness, community, and mutual assistance as the basis of personhood and moral obligation (Dolamo, 2014). Situating *Touiza* in this context raises it from a mere local tradition to a practice that represents a refined ethical system grounded in shared dignity, relational accountability, and cooperative action (Ndasauka, 2024). This connection underscores that the well-being of the environment and society are inextricably linked, and that genuine development must be comprehensive, participatory, and oriented toward collective flourishing—principles emphasized within Ubuntu’s relational ethics and echoed in contemporary reinterpretations of *Touiza* within local governance and rural contexts (Ndasauka, 2024).

4- Case Studies : The Spirit of Touiza in Action

The practical application of *Touiza* as a modern tool for activism and development is substantiated by numerous successful projects, particularly in the Kabylie region of Tizi Ouzou. These case studies offer empirical proof of how *Touiza* can be effectively utilized in contemporary settings to produce tangible developmental results.

4.1. The « Projet Taksebt » : Institutionalizing Solidarity for Economic Development : Between 2009 and 2012, the Taksebt Project was implemented as a pilot initiative for sustainable local economic development by the association *Touiza Solidarité*, in collaboration with local community groups (*Touiza Solidarité*, 2016). The project’s ethos was a direct application of the *Touiza* principle, adapting this ancestral solidarity practice to address modern socio-economic challenges (Khaled & Medour, 2021). Its objectives included enhancing natural and cultural assets, supporting the creation of micro-enterprises, and empowering marginalized groups, particularly young people and women (*Touiza Solidarité*, 2016).

This initiative illustrates how traditional solidarity customs can be formalized and expanded to tackle contemporary economic difficulties (Khaled & Medour, 2021). The outcomes were remarkable: the project provided funding for 182 local entrepreneurs, of whom 59% were women, working in sectors such as animal husbandry, cheese production, pottery, and jewelry (*Touiza Solidarité*, 2016). A loan repayment rate of 80% was achieved, demonstrating not only the project’s financial viability but also the profound sense of accountability among participants (*Touiza Solidarité*, 2016). This case shows how the core values of mutual trust and collective responsibility embedded in *Touiza* can be successfully integrated into scalable development initiatives (Malek et al, 2020).

4.2. The « Cleanest Village Contest » (Meilleur Village Plus Propre) : Launched in 2006 by the People's Assembly of Tizi Ouzou, the annual "Cleanest Village Contest" has ignited a remarkable "citizen dynamic" throughout the area (Khaled & Medour, 2021). More than just a contest for beautification, it rallies entire villages for a massive, year-long *Touiza* centered on environmental safeguarding, waste management, and the conservation of cultural and architectural heritage. This competition has strengthened the "spirit of solidarity and organization" distinctive of Kabyle communities, translating it into collective efforts with clearly visible outcomes. The initiative underscores the power of community engagement and collective action in realizing substantial environmental and social progress.

The connection to tourism is both immediate and significant. The competition has markedly increased the region's "territorial attractiveness." Villages have been revitalized, featuring clean, flower-adorned streets, renovated traditional fountains, and meticulously kept public areas. For instance, the winning village of Sahel became a prime tourist spot, drawing over 30,000 visitors on the Amazigh New Year (Yennayer) in 2020. These villages have transformed into "open-air museums of citizenship and local governance," providing tourists with a genuine look into a dynamic, living culture (Khaled & Medour, 2021). This project proves that community-led initiatives, grounded in the *Touiza* philosophy, are a more potent catalyst for tourism than any centrally planned marketing effort.

5- A Touiza-Based Framework for Sustainable Mountain Tourism

The insights gained from these examples lay the groundwork for a thorough framework for sustainable mountain tourism in Algeria, founded on the tenets of Touiza, understood as cooperative, community-led labor and governance embedded in local ethics and collective responsibility (Touiza Solidarité, 2016). This model presents an alternative to “enclave” tourism that frequently characterizes developing nations—where capital leakages are high, profits are expatriated, and local culture is commodified—by centering endogenous development and local value retention (Britton, 1982). The framework aligns with sustainable and community-centric tourism principles that prioritize local empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental protection, consistent with global guidance and empirical evidence from mountain destinations (Butler, 1999).

5.1. Pillars of the framework

5-1-1. Community ownership and governance: Touiza's collective nature provides an institutional and normative basis for community-led planning, management, and reinvestment through cooperative structures (e.g., community guesthouses, ecological trails, cultural centers). This ensures that economic gains are retained locally, reinforcing endogenous development and empowering communities to have a direct stake in the tourism that affects their lives (Scheyvens, 1999, p. 245). This model fosters a form of grassroots governance, offering a framework for collective decision-making and resource management that is inherently democratic and participatory (Hachelaf & Parks, 2018, p. 6).

5-1-2. Authenticity and experiential immersion : Contemporary tourism exhibits a strong preference for authentic, participatory experiences beyond conventional sightseeing (MacCannell, 1973). A *Touiza*-centric model naturally offers respectful community interactions—such as artisan workshops, traditional agro-pastoral methods, and family-hosted meals—grounded in lived culture rather than staged replicas. This approach allows tourists a genuine look into a dynamic, living culture, as demonstrated by the success of the "Cleanest Village Contest" (Khaled & Medour, 2021).

5-1-3. Integrated cultural and environmental stewardship : Community initiatives such as village cleanliness and heritage conservation in Kabylie demonstrate that *Touiza* embeds duties to both natural and built environments; in mountain regions, where landscape and cultural legacy are primary assets, tourism premised on *Touiza* is intrinsically tied to safeguarding these resources, resonating with youth-led environmental activism and intergenerational stewardship (UNWTO & UNEP, 2005).

5-1-4. Economic empowerment and diversification : As evidenced by the Taksebt project, solidarity-based approaches catalyze diversified local economies. Tourism can anchor interconnected micro-enterprises in food production, crafts, guiding, and transport. This reduces sectoral dependence and expands youth employment while reinforcing community resilience (Khaled & Medour, 2021). This economic model prioritizes social objectives and cooperation over pure profit maximization, reflecting the core principles of the solidarity economy (Chaib, 2021, p. 149).

6- Challenges and Considerations

The implementation of a *Touiza*-based tourism framework in Algeria faces several practical and ethical challenges that must be addressed to ensure long-term viability and community benefit, including sector-wide regulatory constraints, infrastructure gaps, and the risk of cultural distortion under market pressures (Ghezal & Benchouat, 2025).

6-1. Folklorization and Commodification : The main danger is the trivialization of a living tradition—transforming *Touiza* into a commercialized attraction for tourists. Preserving authenticity demands community oversight and co-governance of tourist interactions to keep practices embedded in everyday social life (ISTO, 2025).

6-2. Scalability and Bureaucratization : *Touiza*'s effectiveness rests on voluntary, relational, and informal organization at the local scale; scaling to regional or national programs risks bureaucratization and dilution of core values if institutional frameworks prioritize standardization over community autonomy. Algeria's tourism policy discourse already notes systemic constraints (regulation, visibility, infrastructure) that, without careful design, could over-formalize grassroots initiatives and weaken endogenous dynamics (Ghezal & Benchouat, 2025).

6-3. Youth Engagement and Institutional Support : Sustaining *Touiza*-centric tourism requires ongoing youth participation and enabling—not absorbing—institutions. Policy recommendations stress the need for supportive ecosystems (capacity-building, facilitation, and infrastructure) that empower local actors rather than supplant them, aligning institutional support with community-led governance and intergenerational stewardship (Ghezal & Benchouat, 2025).

7- The Broader Context: Touiza and Transnational Practices

The principle of *Touiza*, though deeply embedded in Algerian traditions, reflects a universal human practice of cooperation that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. The concept of collective effort for mutual benefit is not unique to Algeria; rather, it is a recurring theme in the history of human societies. This transnational perspective enriches our understanding of *Touiza*, positioning it not as an isolated tradition but as a local variant of a global phenomenon of social resilience.

Similar practices of reciprocal aid are found worldwide, each with its own cultural nuances but sharing the same fundamental principles. In the Andean regions of South America, the *Minga* represents a form of collective work for purposes of public utility. In Japan, the traditional system of *Moyai-Naoshi* involves mutual financial and social support within communities. The American "barn raising," where neighbors come together to help build a barn for one of their own, is another well-known example that, while informal, is deeply rooted in the same ethos of community solidarity. As Ahmed Abdelhakim Hachelaf notes, *Touiza* is "somewhat similar to the U.S. trope of farmers getting together to help build a new barn for their neighbors" (Hachelaf & Parks, 2018). These examples demonstrate that communal work systems are not relics of the past but are adaptable and enduring social technologies.

However, *Touiza* as Transnational Practice, the act of translating such culturally embedded terms is fraught with complexity. When concepts like *Touiza* "travel," they inevitably "take on different meanings, losing some conceptual frameworks while adding others" (Hachelaf & Parks, 2018). Applying Western terminologies such as "civic engagement" or "community partnership" to *Touiza* risks oversimplifying its deep-rooted social and reciprocal obligations. Unlike some forms of Western volunteerism, which may focus on individual altruism, *Touiza* is embedded in a system of mutual responsibility and is often perceived as an ethical and social duty (Mimouni, 2005). The challenge, therefore, lies in appreciating *Touiza* on its own terms while recognizing its relevance to the global discourse on civil society and development.

This practice is a powerful manifestation of what sociologists and economists term "social capital"—the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Gagnon et al., 2008). *Touiza* is a mechanism through which social capital is both built and utilized. The shared work, the collective problem-solving, and the reinforcement of mutual obligations strengthen the trust and bonds within a community, creating a resilient social fabric that can be mobilized in times of need.

Furthermore, *Touiza* can be understood as a practical embodiment of the principles of the "solidarity economy" or "social economy." This economic paradigm prioritizes social objectives, cooperation, and democratic governance over profit maximization (Chaib, 2021). The *Touiza*-inspired projects, such as the Taksebt micro-enterprise program, which reinvests loan repayments into a community fund, are clear examples of a solidarity-based economic model in action. They demonstrate an alternative to purely market-driven development, one that is rooted in community needs and collective well-being. By situating *Touiza* within these

broader academic and global frameworks, we can better appreciate its potential as a sophisticated and relevant model for contemporary development challenges, offering a compelling counter-narrative to top-down, globalized development models.

Conclusion

Touiza is a profound socio-cultural asset for Algeria, a testament to the enduring power of community, solidarity, and collective action. As this paper has argued, its principles offer more than just a window into the past; they provide a clear and actionable blueprint for a more sustainable and equitable future for the country's mountain regions. By grounding local governance in participatory practices and building a tourism model based on community ownership and cultural authenticity, the ethos of *Touiza* can unlock immense potential.

This model, evolving from a tradition of solidarity to a practice of modern activism, provides valuable lessons that extend far beyond Algeria, offering a compelling counter-narrative to globalized, corporate-driven development. It champions a vision where economic prosperity is not divorced from social well-being and environmental health. The revival of *Touiza* in various modern forms demonstrates its adaptability and continued relevance in addressing contemporary issues, from economic precarity to environmental degradation. It represents a form of endogenous development that leverages local cultural assets to create sustainable and meaningful change.

Future research should focus on quantifying the socio-economic impacts of these *Touiza*-inspired initiatives, further exploring the motivations of a new generation of participants, and developing concrete policy recommendations that can create a supportive ecosystem for these grassroots movements to flourish. By studying, renewing, and revalorizing this ancestral practice, Algeria can showcase to the world a unique and powerful model of development rooted in its own rich heritage.

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