

Algerian Female Captives in Early Modern Europe: Between Forced Baptism and Voluntary Conversion

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Abstract:

This study examines the factors surrounding the displacement and conversion of Algerian women in Europe during the Ottoman era (16th–19th centuries). It aims to analyze how corsair activity, European coastal incursions, and Spanish occupations facilitated the capture of these women. Furthermore, it investigates the mechanisms governing their transition to Christianity, differentiating between forced baptism and voluntary apostasy.

The findings indicate that maritime captivity was the primary driver of forced displacement, leading to slave markets and mandatory baptism in European convents. However, conversion was not entirely coercive; cases like Thurayyā demonstrate that domestic interaction with Christian bondwomen and enticing promises of freedom also fostered voluntary conversion. Ultimately, female conversion reflected a complex interplay between imperial rivalry, religious coercion, and individual agency.

Keywords: Regency of Algiers, Captivity, Forced Baptism, Voluntary Conversion

INTRODUCTION

In the early modern Mediterranean world, social institutions and cultural norms within the Regency of Algiers imposed strict patriarchal frameworks governing female life. Designed primarily to safeguard family honor and ensure domestic protection, these norms restricted women's independent mobility within the public sphere, rarely permitting them to navigate urban spaces or public facilities unescorted.

However, the Mediterranean was far from a closed space; it was a volatile arena of geopolitical rivalry, maritime conflict, and constant cross-cultural friction. Within this turbulent setting, historical records reveal an intriguing phenomenon: the presence of numerous North African women from the Regency of Algiers across various European states, many of whom underwent formal religious conversions to Christianity.

This historical reality poses a complex set of questions regarding captivity, gender, and religious identity in the early modern basin. This study addresses a central historical problem: What primary geopolitical and maritime factors facilitated the transfer of Algerian women to European lands between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Furthermore, what mechanisms governed their conversion to Christianity were these conversions predominantly the result of physical coercion, captivity, and forced baptism, or did they, in certain instances, stem from voluntary assimilation driven by prolonged exposure to European captives and cultural allure?

To address these questions effectively, this study employs a synthetic and analytical historical approach. Given the extensive chronological framework—spanning from the establishment of the Ottoman Regency in the early sixteenth century to the threshold of the nineteenth century—this methodology allows for a comprehensive synthesis of interconnected maritime dynamics, including corsair privateering, European naval incursions, and Spanish military occupations of coastal enclaves. Simultaneously, it provides an analytical lens to examine the social, legal, and psychological conditions of Algerian women in European captivity, evaluating the fine line between forced servitude and voluntary religious transition.

Ultimately, this paper aims to illuminate a critical yet often overlooked dimension of Mediterranean history, shedding light on how female captives navigated survival, faith, and identity at the crossroads of Islamic and Christian empires.

FIRST: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN FROM THE REGENCY OF ALGIERS IN EUROPE

A combination of factors contributed to the presence of captives within the Regency of Algiers, chief among them corsair activity (privateering) and military campaigns. These very same factors led to the captivity of Algerian men and women across European states¹:

A. Corsair Activity (Privateering)

During the sixteenth century CE (tenth century AH) and subsequent centuries, the Mediterranean Sea witnessed intense corsair activity, which became virtually synonymous with maritime piracy. This activity was carried out either by Maghrebi corsairs—such as those of Algiers, who viewed their naval engagements as a form of *Jihād*—or by various European powers, including the Spanish, Dutch, English, Venetians, Knights of Malta, Genoese, Neapolitans, and other Italian states. These European corsairs received backing from merchants in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Genoa, and Livorno, who acted as their commercial partners. At times, these corsairs contented themselves with trading the plunder seized at sea “...with greater greed and brutality, until the Mediterranean Sea turned into a veritable den of thieves...”

European privateers frequently attempted to raid Algerian vessels; however, the Algerian fleet resisted them vigorously, rendering Algerian ships less vulnerable to attacks owing to its naval prowess and repeated victories. Consequently, nearly anyone navigating the Mediterranean for commerce or travel risked falling victim to corsair attacks. Certain Algerian ships were thoroughly plundered, and their passengers—including women and children—were taken captive.

Furthermore, the operations of these corsairs were not restricted to the open sea; some launched surprise raids on North African coastal settlements, abducting individuals along the shores. These captives were subsequently trafficked and sold in European slave markets, such as those in Livorno, Sicily, Rome, Venice, and Genoa, among others².

¹ Šālih ‘Abbād, *Al-Jazā’ir khilāl al-ḥukm al-Turkī 1514M–1830M*, Algiers: Dār Hūmah li-al-Ṭibā‘ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī‘, 2014, p. 360.

² Édouard Cat, *Petite histoire de l’Algérie*, Vol. 1, Algiers: Adolphe Jourdan, 1888, pp. 291–292; Arzki Shuwī tām [Arzki Chouïtem], *Dirāsāt wa-wathā’iq fī tārikh al-Jazā’ir al-‘askarī wa-al-siyāsī: al-fatrah al-‘Uthmāniyyah 1519M–1830M*, Algiers: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2010, p. 55; Jamāl Qannān, *Mu‘āhadāt al-Jazā’ir ma’a Faransā 1619M–1830M*, Special Edition, Algiers: Wizārat al-Mujāhidīn, 2007, pp. 249–251; ‘Abd al-Qādir Fukkāyir, *Al-Ghazw al-Isbānī li-al-sawāḥil al-*

This was precisely what transpired in 1612 CE with Fāṭimah, the daughter of the Janissary *Agha*. She was abducted by European corsairs while on a maritime excursion with her fiancé and his parents to finalize their marriage arrangements. Transported to the island of Corsica, she was sold at a local slave market and purchased by a Christian family. Under their roof, she received instruction in Christian doctrine, which deeply influenced her. As the chronicler noted: "...she was moved by the greatness of our mysteries and the purity of our morals..." Consequently, she resolved to convert to Christianity and requested to be baptized.

The host family hailed Fāṭimah's decision as magnificent and renamed her *Maria Eugenia* to align with her new faith. When news of the abduction reached her father, he promptly dispatched two envoys to pay her ransom and secure her release from captivity. However, Fāṭimah steadfastly refused to return and rejected the financial ransom offered for her freedom; she had become captivated by the Christian faith and the European lifestyle, ultimately marrying a Corsican Christian.

Unable to persuade her to return and terrified of her father's retribution, the two envoys falsely reported that the Christian family who had purchased Fāṭimah refused to accept the ransom—despite the lucrative sums offered—and were forcefully holding his daughter, compelling her to renounce her faith and convert to Christianity. This report incensed the father. In retaliation, he ordered all Christian captives to be put in chains and imprisoned several redemption fathers (*Pères Rédempteurs*). After some time, the father regained his composure, released the priests, and permitted them to leave the country for Spain³.

B. European Expeditions Against the Algerian Coasts

The Algerian coastline was subjected to repeated assaults by Christian European powers seeking to liberate their captives and secure their maritime passages through the suppression of corsair activity. During these incursions, European forces seized whatever lay in their path, including women, who were subsequently taken into captivity.

Among the coastal cities targeted was Annaba, which faced recurrent attacks by European forces, such as those from Tuscany and Malta—the latter of which commanded a fleet comprising 15 vessels, 200 knights, and 2,000 soldiers, capturing numerous men, women, and children. Similarly, during a Spanish expedition in 1697 CE, 17 Algerians and three women were taken captive. Algerian captives were also documented in England; for instance, a 1625 CE roster of captives includes the name of a captive woman named *Mas 'ūdah*⁴.

Jazā'irīyyah wa-āthāruh 910H–1206H / 1505M–1792M: *Dirāsah tatanāwal al-āthār al-siyāsiyyah wa-al-iqtisādiyyah wa-al-ijtimā'iyyah wa-al-thaqāfiyyah 'alā al-Jazā'ir*, Algiers: Dār Hūmah li-al-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2012, p. 317; Ibrāhīm Sa'yūd, *Al-Asrā al-Maghāribah fī Ḩālīyah khilāl al-fatrah al-ḥadīthah min al-qarn 16M ilā al-qarn 18M wa-min al-qarn 10H ilā al-qarn 12H: Dirāsah fī awḍā'ihim al-ijtimā'iyyah fī ḍaw' al-wathā'iq al-Ḩālīyyah*, Algiers: Sharikat Aṣḥāh li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2020, pp. 204–208, 235–236.

³ Ḥafīzah Khashmūn, *Mahāmm muftadī al-asrā wa-iltizāmātuhum al-ijtimā'iyyah fī madīnat al-Jazā'ir khilāl al-fatrah al-'Uthmāniyyah*, Master's thesis, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of History, Mentouri University, Constantine, 2006–2007, pp. 79–80; Khalid Bekkaoui, *White Women Captives in North Africa: Narratives of Enslavement 1735–1830*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 10.

⁴ Ibrāhīm Sa'yūd, *Al-Asrā al-Maghāribah fī Ḩālīyah khilāl al-fatrah al-ḥadīthah min al-qarn 16M ilā al-qarn 18M wa-min al-qarn 10H ilā al-qarn 12H: Dirāsah fī awḍā'ihim al-ijtimā'iyyah fī ḍaw' al-wathā'iq al-Ḩālīyyah*, Algiers: Sharikat

C. The Spanish Occupation of Algerian Coastal Cities

The Spanish occupation of several Algerian coastal cities between 1505 and 1535 CE—such as Mers el-Kébir, Oran, and Bejaia—led to military expansions into neighboring areas to plunder resources and capture their inhabitants. For instance, in 1507 CE, two years after Spain's occupation of Mers el-Kébir, Martín de Argote led an expedition against Misserghin, capturing numerous men and women from these rural encampments (*duwār*).

Between 1568 and 1571 CE, Spanish troops stationed in Oran and Mers el-Kébir launched eleven raids against adjacent settlements, during which they captured 2,160 inhabitants, including men, women, and children. Notably, some of these local residents preferred death over falling into captivity; as Montañés observed: "...at times, we witnessed men and women surrendering..." In 1549 CE, Count Alcaudete launched an assault on the towns surrounding Oran, capturing 75 individuals; he subsequently auctioned 12 captives—including ten women aged between 25 and 40—in the town square. These women were named Tāliyah, Tūnis, 'Arabiyyah, Malūzah, 'Ā'ishah, Maryam, Malshah, Fāṭimah, Yaṭṭū, and 'Ā'ishah, and were sold for prices ranging from 8 to 48 *doblas*.

Similarly, Don Martín de Córdoba launched a raid against the Madiyūnah tribe in the Tessala region, capturing 241 inhabitants, both men and women. Approximately 138 of them were sold at auction for 144,137 *maravedis*⁵.

Among the Algerian women captured in Oran by the Spanish were:

- 'Ā'ishah (aged 60) and her daughter **Mahāsa al-'Āliyah**, held captive by the Barón de Escobar.
- **Fāṭimah** (aged 70), held captive by Gisberto de Santa.
- 'Azīzah (aged 20), held captive by the Conde de Oliva.
- 'Ā'ishah (aged 18), purchased by Ruy Díaz de Rojas.
- **Basta** (aged 60), held captive by Pedro de Vargas.
- **Amesta Gani**, held captive by Juan Collado⁶.

Slave traders routinely arrived in Oran to acquire captives in exchange for fabrics, garments, foodstuffs, or monetary sums. These captives were subsequently transported to Spain and settled in major cities, particularly coastal hubs such as Málaga, Cádiz, and Valencia, among others. According to statistics cited by 'Abd al-Qādir Fukkāyir, the number of captives in Spain taken from Oran included 25 captives between 1569 and 1570 CE, followed by cohorts of 62 and 88 captives, as well

Aṣālah li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2020, pp. 171–235; Khalid Bekkaoui, *White Women Captives in North Africa: Narratives of Enslavement 1735–1830*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 7.

⁵ 'Abd al-Qādir Fukkāyir, *Al-Ghazw al-Isbānī li-al-sawāḥil al-Jazā'iriyyah wa-āthāruh 910H–1206H / 1505M–1792M: Dirāsah tatanāwal al-āthār al-siyāsiyyah wa-al-iqtisādiyyah wa-al-ijtimā'iyyah wa-al-thaqāfiyyah 'alā al-Jazā'ir*, Algiers: Dār Hūmah li-al-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2012, pp. 312–315, 320; 'Ammār Bin Kharūf, *Al-'Alāqāt al-siyāsiyyah bayna al-Jazā'ir wa-al-Maghrib fī al-qarn al-'āshir al-hijrī / al-sādis 'ashar mīlādī*, Vol. 1, Algiers: Dār al-Amal, 2006, p. 17.

⁶ Chantal de La Véronne, *Relations entre Oran et Tlemcen dans la première partie du XVI^e siècle*, Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1983, p. 15.

as 62 captives recorded between 1607 and 1620 CE. They were sold in slave markets; a study by Qurbāsh indicates that Algerian women accounted for 21% of the captives in Spanish slave markets⁷.

SECOND: THE STATUS OF CAPTIVE ALGERIAN WOMEN IN EUROPEAN LANDS

A. Sale in Slave Markets

Unlike European states, the Regency of Algiers—much like other Maghrebi regencies—lacked dedicated redemption institutions or official agents tasked with ransoming captives. Consequently, individuals captured in European countries were often deemed lost due to the complete severance of news regarding their whereabouts and conditions. Nevertheless, some captives managed to correspond with their families; in a letter penned by an Algerian captive describing the plight of prisoners—particularly women—in the hope of securing support for their liberation, he wrote:

"...Nature and custom enable man to endure servitude with a degree of steadfastness, but women and children demand your care; their frailty necessitates immediate liberation, lest you bear responsibility for the sins they may commit..."

However, this did not preclude active attempts at liberation. The authorities in Algiers systematically sought the release of their captives through official correspondence. Notable examples include the letter of Murād Qubṭān (Captain Morat) to the officials of Marseille in 1597 CE, Yūsuf Pāshā's letter to King Louis XIV in 1648 CE, and Dey Muṣṭafā's letter to the French Minister of the Navy in 1700 CE, in addition to dispatching envoys directly to regions where captives were held.

Despite these efforts, individuals and local authorities in European states frequently concealed captives—a practice notably employed in France. A similar precedent occurred in 1530 CE when the King of Tlemcen, Mawlāy 'Abd Allāh, addressed the Spanish Governor of Oran regarding captives:

*"...Concerning the Arabs who were taken captive... his Majesty is requested to return them in exchange for 500 doblas... and His Majesty must issue an order for the release of the captives..."*⁸.

B. Forced Baptism into Christian Servitude

Women who fell into captivity across European states and were not ransomed were frequently coerced into embracing Christianity through forced baptism, thereby transitioning into Christian bondwomen.

1. Concept of Baptism

In Catholic studies, baptism is defined as the purification of a human being from sin, achieved when the baptized individual enters into a covenant of faith before Christ. This represents a spiritual union—both intellectual and emotional—between the initiate and Christ, formalized through an oral declaration of consent to the baptismal rite.

⁷ 'Abd al-Qādir Fukkāyir, *Al-Ghazw al-Isbānī li-al-sawāḥil al-Jazā'iriyyah wa-āthāruh 910H–1206H / 1505M–1792M*, pp. 312–315, 320–324; Qurbāsh, p. 177.

⁸ Jamāl Qannān, *Mu'āhadāt al-Jazā'ir ma'a Faransā 1619M–1830M*, Special Edition, Algiers: Wizārat al-Mujāhidīn, 2007, p. 255; 'Abd al-Qādir Fukkāyir, *Al-Ghazw al-Isbānī li-al-sawāḥil al-Jazā'iriyyah wa-āthāruh 910H–1206H / 1505M–1792M: Dirāsah tatanāwal al-āthār al-siyāsiyyah wa-al-iqtiṣādiyyah wa-al-ijtimā'iyyah wa-al-thaqāfiyyah 'alā al-Jazā'ir*, Algiers: Dār Hūmah li-al-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2012, p. 313; Khalīfah Hammāsh, "Al-Maṣādir al-waṭaniyyah 'an al-asrā al-Jazā'iriyyīn fī Ūrubbā khilāl al-'ahd al-'Uthmānī," *Al-Majallah al-Tārīkhiyyah al-'Arabiyyah li-al-Dirāsāt al-'Uthmāniyyah*, Nos. 45–46, 2012, p. 105; Khalid Bekkaoui, *White Women Captives in North Africa: Narratives of Enslavement 1735–1830*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 8.

This declaration is recited by the officiant—typically a priest—during the immersion process. The priest instructs the initiate to profess:

"...to believe that God is the third of three; to believe that entering Paradise is impossible except through immersion; that our Lord Jesus is the Son of God... who ascended into Heaven... and who shall judge creation on the Day of Resurrection; and that you believe in all that the adherents of the Church believe in. Do you believe in all of this?"

Upon the convert's affirmative response ("Yes"), the priest takes a vessel of water from the font, pours it over the initiate, and declares: *"...And I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."* The water is then wiped away with a towel, and the individual departs, having formally entered the Christian faith.

Thus, from the Christian perspective, the baptized believer benefits from a prior absolution of sins. For non-Christians—such as Muslims—baptism signifies a transition from disbelief (*kufṛ*) to faith, and the individual is henceforth designated as a "neophyte" or new convert (*Al-Mu'ammad al-Jadīd*)⁹.

C. Fate Following Forced Baptism

Numerous Maghrebi captives—both men and women—were coerced into adopting Christianity and undergoing baptism. This was the fate of several Algerian women, numbering seven females according to the researcher Ibrāhīm Sa'yūd. Following baptism, these women were transferred to reside in a convent or house of catechumens located near the baptismal chapel, administered by a director holding the rank of Cardinal and managed by nuns¹⁰.

D. Cases of Baptized Algerian Female Captives

Among the Algerian women documented to have been taken captive and baptized were:

- ❖ **Faṭūmah from Annaba:** Converted to Christianity on July 24, 1622 CE, her name was changed to *Margherita* to conform with her new faith. Her designated godfather was Teodoro Barbiton Alexander Roberti.
- ❖ **Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad (aged 25) from Algiers:** Baptized on December 7, 1726 CE, she was given the name *Costantina Maria Denschein* and placed under the sponsorship of her godfather, Cardinal Melchior de Polignac.
- ❖ **Amah Allah (aged 18) from Algiers:** Baptized on August 12, 1732 CE, she was given the name *Ignazia* and placed under the sponsorship of her godfather, Agostino Montalto¹¹.
- ❖ Young girls were similarly subjected to baptism, including:
- ❖ **Maryam bint 'Abd al-Raḥmān wa-Fāṭimah (aged 6) from Algiers:** Baptized on September 20, 1726 CE, she was given the name *Marie de Sanctis*.

⁹ Ibrāhīm Sa'yūd, *Al-Asrā al-Maghāribah fī Īṭāliyā khilāl al-fatrah al-ḥadīthah min al-qarn 16M ilā al-qarn 18M wa-min al-qarn 10H ilā al-qarn 12H: Dirāsah fī awḍā'ihim al-ijtimā'iyah fī ḍaw' al-wathā'iq al-Īṭāliyyah*, Algiers: Sharikat Aṣālah li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2020, pp. 255–256; Al-Qiss Islīm Turmeda [Anselm Turmeda / 'Abd Allāh al-Taṣṭumān al-Andalusī], *Tuḥfat al-arīb fī al-radd 'alā ahl al-ṣalīb*, ed. Maḥmūd 'Alī Ḥamāyah, 3rd ed., Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d., pp. 81–82.

¹⁰ Ibrāhīm Sa'yūd, *Al-Asrā al-Maghāribah fī Īṭāliyā khilāl al-fatrah al-ḥadīthah min al-qarn 16M ilā al-qarn 18M wa-min al-qarn 10H ilā al-qarn 12H: Dirāsah fī awḍā'ihim al-ijtimā'iyah fī ḍaw' al-wathā'iq al-Īṭāliyyah*, Algiers: Sharikat Aṣālah li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2020, pp. 235, 257–258, 336.

¹¹ Ibrāhīm Sa'yūd, *Al-Asrā al-Maghāribah fī Īṭāliyā khilāl al-fatrah al-ḥadīthah*, pp. 264, 294–295.

- ❖ **Radāshiya (Rashidah, aged 7) from Algiers:** Baptized on December 7, 1726 CE, she was given the name *Maria Teresa Denschein* and placed under the sponsorship of her godfather, Cardinal Melchior de Polignac¹².

THIRD: EUROPEAN CAPTIVES ENTICING WOMEN OF THE REGENCY OF ALGIERS WITH EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION AND CHRISTIANITY

The city of Algiers contained a large population of Christian captives. According to Haëdo, their numbers reached approximately 25,000 in Algiers during the sixteenth century CE (tenth century AH), and ranged between 20,000 and 60,000 during the seventeenth century CE (eleventh century AH), including women¹³.

Despite the intense conflict and hostility between certain European powers and the Regency of Algiers during this period owing to privateering and captivity, Algerian captive women were treated with respect by Algerian families. As William Shaler, the American Consul, noted: "...female captives were always treated with the respect commanded by their sex..." They enjoyed significant trust, protection, and were even treated as members of the household¹⁴.

Indeed, several Algerian families placed immense trust in Christian bondwomen, entrusting them with the upbringing of their children. Certain captive women exploited this role to propagate their Christian faith and allure young girls with the prospects of European life, as occurred between a Christian bondwoman and Thurayyā.

Furthermore, this influence was not restricted to female captives alone; male European captives residing in Maghrebi cities in general, and Algiers in particular, actively sought to entice young Algerian women with life in Europe. They depicted European society as offering every form of comfort, most notably liberation from societal constraints and the servitude imposed upon women in North Africa. In Europe, women were purportedly allowed to attend various venues of entertainment and recreation without restriction. As an American captive declared to an Algerian woman whom he attempted to persuade to move to Europe:

"...there are no locks, nor bars... nor guards... women do as they please..."¹⁵

A similar endeavor was undertaken by the captive Cotillon, who attempted to convince the Moroccan woman Zalimah to escape with him to Europe, where she could enjoy freedom rather than remaining like a prisoner bound by societal constraints in her homeland:

"...there you will attend horse races... and dances... you will see everything and hear everything... you will learn singing... French music, and dancing..."¹⁶

¹² Ibrāhīm Sa'yūd, *Al-Asrā al-Maghāribah fī Itāliyā khilāl al-fatrah al-ḥadīthah*, pp. 293–294; Khalid Bekkaoui, *White Women Captives in North Africa: Narratives of Enslavement 1735–1830*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 10.

¹³ Amīn Maḥraz, *Al-Jazā'ir fī 'ahd al-Aghāwāt (1659M–1671M)*, Algiers: Dār al-Baṣā'ir li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2011, p. 161; 'Abd al-Laṭīf Baṭṭayyib, *Amīr al-baḥr Murād Rā'is al-Aṣghar al-Jazā'irī: Min al-Jazā'ir ilā Īrlandā*, Algiers: Dār al-Nu'mān li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2014, pp. 155, 158, 160; Ṣāliḥ 'Abbād, *Al-Jazā'ir khilāl al-ḥukm al-Turkī 1514M–1830M*, Algiers: Dār Hūmah li-al-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2014, p. 361.

¹⁴ Sir Godfrey Fisher, *Barbary Legend: War, Trade and Piracy in North Africa (1415–1830)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. 102–103; William Shaler, *Mudhakkirāt Wilyām Shāler Qunṣul Amrīkā fī al-Jazā'ir (1816M–1824M)*, trans. Ismā'īl al-'Arabī, Algiers: Al-Sharikah al-Wataniyyah li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1982, p. 99.

¹⁵ Khalid Bekkaoui, *White Women Captives in North Africa: Narratives of Enslavement 1735–1830*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 35.

This dynamics is vividly illustrated in the case of Thurayyā, the daughter of Ḥājj Murād—a wealthy city figure who served as the governor (*wālī*) of *Apata* (a fort in Oran). Thurayyā was his only daughter, and he assigned a Christian bondwoman to care for her. Thurayyā's mother appears to have passed away when she was young, leaving her solitary; consequently, the girl developed a deep emotional attachment to the Christian bondwoman, viewing her as a second mother who provided affection and care.

The bondwoman exploited the girl's youth, lack of awareness, and the absence of parental oversight—compounded by her father's frequent absence due to his duties in Oran—to induce her conversion to Christianity. When the bondwoman died, she left the young girl adhering to Christianity within a Muslim family and an Islamic state.

Had her apostasy been discovered, she would have faced execution. During this period, the Algerian authorities imposed the death penalty by burning or by execution via throwing from high ramparts onto iron hooks—where the condemned remained suspended until death—for any Christian or Jew who converted to Islam and subsequently relapsed into their former faith. Execution by being thrown from the city walls was also decreed for anyone who dared insult Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. If such was the fate of a non-Muslim, the punishment for an apostate Muslim woman would have been equally severe, if not more stringent¹⁷.

Thus, Thurayyā bint Murād stands out as a prime example of a young Algerian girl who fell victim to a captive Christian woman entrusted with her upbringing from early childhood. Taking advantage of the girl's orphaned status, the bondwoman led her to adopt Christianity and choose to depart for a new life in Europe. Below, we examine the principal events surrounding her story.

A. The Course of Thurayyā's Departure from Algiers to Spain

1. Acquaintance with the Captive Cervantes

Driven by the constant fear of her apostasy being uncovered and seeking relief from her psychological distress, Thurayyā seized upon the proximity of a Christian captive prison (*bāniyō* / *bagnio*) to her family home. She sought to enlist the aid of one of its inmates to arrange her emigration to a Christian European city, offering to provide him with the funds necessary to ransom himself in exchange for his commitment to transport her to Christian lands.

Fortune favored Miguel de Cervantes and his companions, who documented these events in his novel *Don Quixote*. Cervantes recounted that while held in prison, his room window overlooked the residence of a wealthy Moorish family—the home of Thurayyā. One day, while he and his companions were on the prison roof practicing leaping, he glimpsed a reed pole with a cloth tied to it, waving as a signal for them to grasp it. Following several attempts, the pole dropped near Cervantes. Upon untying the cloth, he discovered a sum of money amounting to ten gold coins (*ciani*—small gold coins minted in Algiers, equivalent to ten reals).

Cervantes rejoiced immensely, particularly as the money was specifically intended for him, Thurayyā having selected him among his peers to receive the funds required for his redemption from

¹⁶ Khalid Bekkaoui, *White Women Captives in North Africa*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, Vol. 2, Syria: Dār al-Madā li-al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Nashr / Abu Dhabi: Cultural Foundation, 1998, pp. 71–72; Būshnāfī Muḥammad, *Al-Qaḍā' wa-al-quḍāh fī al-Jazā'ir khilāl al-'ahd al-'Uthmānī*, Vol. 1, Algiers: Dār Kawkab al-'Ulūm li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī' wa-al-Ṭibā'ah, 2017, p. 116.

servitude. Taking the money, Cervantes sought to identify his benefactor; as he looked up once more, Thurayyā briefly extended her hand—revealing it to be that of a fair-skinned woman attempting to assist them—before quickly closing the window to avoid detection. He gestured a greeting in the manner customary toward Muslim Algerian women. Upon observing his greeting, she displayed a small cross to signal her Christian faith. Cervantes initially assumed she was a Christian bondwoman attempting to secure his release, rather than a native Algerian woman¹⁸.

2. Correspondence Between Thurayyā and the Captive Cervantes to Plan Her Flight from Algiers to Spain

After a period, Thurayyā repeated the act, lowering a bag filled with money—even more swollen than the first—via her usual reed pole. Upon opening it, Cervantes found 40 Spanish gold coins. This time, she attached a letter written in Arabic, concluding with a drawing of a large cross. The letter, which was translated for Cervantes by a renegade (‘ilj)¹⁹—reads as follows:

"...When I was a young girl, my father had a bondwoman who taught me Christian prayers in my own language and spoke to me often of Lalla Maryam [the Virgin Mary]. This bondwoman died, and I know beyond all doubt that she did not go to Hell, but is with God, for I have seen her twice since then. She told me to go to the land of the Christians to see Lalla Maryam, who loves me dearly. But I do not know how this can be accomplished. From this window, I have seen many Christians, but none seemed to me a true knight except you..."

She further added details regarding herself and her beauty to induce him into marriage and to facilitate her transport to Europe:

"...I am a young woman of exquisite beauty, and I can take much wealth with me. Consider, then, if you can take me there and become my husband if you wish; if not, it shall not weigh heavily upon me, for Lalla Maryam can grant me a husband. I write to you: do not trust any Moor, for they will all deceive you, and this troubles my heart. I ask that you reveal this secret to no one, for if my father knew of this, he would throw me into a well and fill it with stones. I shall attach a thread to the reed so that you may tie your reply to it. If you cannot write in Arabic, speak to me by signs, and Lalla Maryam will make me understand you. May God protect you, along with this cross which I kiss repeatedly as the captive woman instructed me..."²⁰

This correspondence illustrates the profound influence of the Christian bondwoman who raised the young girl from childhood. She alienated her from her Islamic faith, inculcating a deep adherence to Christian doctrine at the expense of her ancestral religion. Furthermore, the bondwoman's influence extended to instilling a distrust and dislike of the local Maghrebi population—the Algerians—preventing them from persuading her to renounce Christianity and return to Islam should her secret be uncovered. Following the bondwoman's death, the girl was left navigating an uncertain

¹⁸ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Badawī, Vol. 2, Syria: Dār al-Madā li-al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Nashr / Abu Dhabi: Cultural Foundation, 1998, pp. 70–71.

¹⁹ The term ‘ilj (pl. ‘ulūj) or renegade refers to European Christians who converted to Islam within the Ottoman regencies; European sources often designated them as apostates. See: Amīn Maḥraz, *Al-Jazā’ir fī ‘ahd al-Aghāwāt (1659M–1671M)*, Algiers: Dār al-Baṣā’ir li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī’, 2011, p. 147.

²⁰ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Badawī, Vol. 2, Syria: Dār al-Madā li-al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Nashr / Abu Dhabi: Cultural Foundation, 1998, pp. 71–73.

fate as an apostate. Fully aware that the consequence of her apostasy was execution, she sought salvation by appealing to a captive in the adjacent prison, offering to secure his freedom with her wealth on the condition that he save her life by marrying her and smuggling her out of the Regency.

Cervantes seized this opportunity—the plea of a wealthy woman needing salvation and willing to rescue him from captivity and facilitate his return home. He promptly affirmed her conversion to Christianity, encouraging her to remain steadfast in what he described as the true faith. Dictating his response in Arabic to the renegade, Cervantes wrote:

"...May the true God protect you, my lady, and may the Blessed Mary, true Mother of the Lord, preserve you. It is she who inspires your noble plan to go to the land of the Christians, for she loves you dearly. Pray to her to reveal the means to accomplish this; she is benevolent and will do so. As for myself, and on behalf of all the Christians with me, I offer to do everything within our power for your sake, even at the risk of our lives. Do not cease writing to me, and keep me informed of your plans. I shall always reply, for Almighty God has provided us with the assistance of a Christian slave who can read and write in your language, as you see from this letter. Thus, fear nothing, and inform me of all you desire. As for your proposal of marriage once we reach a safe haven, I accept it as a true Christian believer, and you shall see that Christians are faithful to their word. May God and Lalla Maryam hold you in their care...²¹"

Two days after sending the letter, Thurayyā reestablished contact with Cervantes by sending another sum of money comprising gold and silver exceeding 50 *escudos*. During this interval, Cervantes tasked his renegade friend with gathering intelligence about the woman living in the house and the extent of her family's wealth. The renegade returned with information confirming that she was the sole daughter of Hājj Murād, one of the wealthiest men in the city. Though renowned as one of the most beautiful maidens in Algiers and sought in marriage by numerous governors, she had rejected all proposals. The report also confirmed that she had been raised by a Christian bondwoman who was now deceased²².

Thurayyā contacted Cervantes once again, sending approximately one hundred gold *escudos* along with a letter stating:

"...I know not, sir, what we ought to do to escape to Spain, for Lalla Maryam has not informed me, though I have asked her many times. All I can devise is to throw to you from this window sufficient gold for you to ransom yourself and your companions. Let one of them proceed to the land of the Christians, purchase a vessel, and return to collect the rest. As for me, you shall find me at my father's garden near the Sheep Gate [Bāb al-Ḍa'n] at Bāb Azoun by the seashore, where I spend the summer with my father and his slaves. You may then take me by night and convey me to the ship. But remember that you have promised to marry me, for if you break your vow, I shall entreat Lalla Maryam to punish you. If you trust no one else to buy the vessel, ransom yourself and go in person; I am certain you will return, for you are a knight and a devout Christian. Inquire about the location of the garden, and when you walk there, know that no one remains in the prison. I shall grant you abundant wealth. May you remain in God's keeping, sir...²³"

²¹ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Vol. 2, p. 74.

²² Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Vol. 2, p. 74.

²³ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Vol. 2, p. 75.

Cervantes replied, confirming his agreement to marry her and accepting her proposal. Encouraged by his commitment, Thurayyā doubled the funds transmitted, sending installment payments totaling two thousand gold *escudos*. Along with the money, she sent a letter informing him that she would depart on Friday for her father's garden, promising to send additional funds prior to her departure since her father possessed vast wealth. She enclosed five hundred *escudos* and instructed him, once ransomed, to inquire about her father's residence and come to see her.

Utilizing her funds, Cervantes successfully secured his freedom and visited her at her father's garden without the father suspecting the nature of their interaction. The father permitted the meeting, viewing Cervantes merely as an acquitted captive—unlike free Algerian men, who were strictly barred from seeing young women. During this encounter, Cervantes advised her to continue invoking Lalla Maryam and reciting the prayers taught to her by her former bondwoman²⁴.

3. Thurayyā's Departure with Cervantes to Christian Europe

When the appointed time for departure arrived, Cervantes proceeded to Thurayyā's residence at two o'clock in the morning. He found Thurayyā eagerly awaiting their arrival from the window. Upon spotting them, Cervantes notes that she was startled; in her fear, she sought to verify their identity, asking: "*...Are you the Christians?*" to which Cervantes replied: "Yes."²⁵

As she attempted to leave the house, her father woke to the noise of the Christians and shouted, "*Christians!*" The men promptly seized him and conveyed him, along with his daughter, to their vessel. Thurayyā seized the opportunity to reveal her conversion to Christianity to her father, explaining that through this faith she sought her own salvation and well-being, and urged him to ask Lalla Maryam to confirm the truth of her words.

Her father was overcome with rage. Shocked by the revelation, he shouted at them, asserting that his daughter's conversion to Christianity was not driven by genuine religious conviction, but rather by a desire for the freedom enjoyed by Christian women in Europe. As Thurayyā's father declared:

"...Do not believe that she changed her religion because she found yours superior, but because she knows that women in your land enjoy greater freedom than in ours..."²⁶

He then turned to her in fury over her apostasy, exclaiming:

"...O corrupt, deluded girl! Where are you going, blind as you are, among these dogs who are our natural enemies? Accursed be the hour in which you were born!..."

Despite his attempts to persuade her to renounce the new faith and return to Islam, her firm determination and devotion to Christianity led her to reply to her father once more:

"...O father! May Lalla Maryam—who inspired my conversion to Christianity—console you in your grief. God knows full well that I could not refrain from doing what I did, and that the Christians did not compel me. Yet I could not resist the desire to go to those lands with them, for I was eager to accomplish what I believe to be good, though you perceive it as sheer evil..."²⁷

²⁴ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Vol. 2, pp. 76–79.

²⁵ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawī, Vol. 2, Syria: Dār al-Madā li-al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Nashr / Abu Dhabi: Cultural Foundation, 1998, pp. 83–84.

²⁶ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Vol. 2, pp. 83–86.

²⁷ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Vol. 2, p. 87.

They subsequently left the father behind, and the vessel set sail toward Málaga. While at sea, they were attacked by French corsairs. Cervantes was struck with terror, recalling that her father's curse seemed to have been answered. However, the corsairs contented themselves with plundering the wealth aboard the vessel before allowing them to resume their voyage. Upon arriving in Málaga, Cervantes escorted her directly to the church, fully aware of her profound eagerness to see a church and the image of the Virgin Mary, and her fervent desire to become a Christian. Thus, Thurayyā formally embraced Christianity²⁸.

CONCLUSION

Based on the preceding analysis, it can be concluded that during the Ottoman period, a combination of factors led to the presence of Algerian women in Europe.

The developments witnessed across the Mediterranean during this era—along with their repercussions on the Regency of Algiers, including corsair activity, European naval expeditions, and the Spanish occupation of Algerian coastal regions—resulted in the capture of numerous Algerian women, who were subsequently transported to Europe and sold in slave markets.

While certain captive Algerian women in Europe were subjected to forced conversion and involuntary baptism, others departed for Europe voluntarily. Influenced by European civilization through close interaction with captives—as exemplified by the case of Thurayyā and the Christian bondwoman entrusted with her upbringing—these women willingly embraced Christianity and chose to resettle across the Mediterranean.

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²⁸ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Vol. 2, pp. 87–91.

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