

ENNAYER

*An excerpt from Encyclopédie Berbère, XVII
Translated from French by Hsen Larbi*

ENNAYER is the name of the first month of the Julian calendar and is derived from the Latin word *lanuarius* (January). It is also the name of a holiday celebrated in all of Tamazgha and closely related to the winter solstice although, generally, this one is assimilated with the feast of Mouloud Aïsa of the 24th of Djambir (Julian December), corresponding to Christmas. According to E. Destaing, Mouloud Aïsa, which was celebrated eight days before Ennayer was known in the Aurès region under the name of Bou Ini. This name, according to this author, would be derived from Latin *Bonus Annus*¹. J. Servier, however, rejects this interpretation, undoubtedly with reason, but the explanation he proposes is far from satisfactory: He suggests that Bou Ini is nothing but a contraction of "Bu-Imnian" (the day of the tent stakes), commemorating the gesture of semi nomads returning from transhumance and thus inaugurating their sedentary cycle.

Ennayer, which is also called *Haggus* by the Amazigh of Morocco, is the Door that opens the year, the *Ansara*, the summer solstice, would be the one that closes it. But the principal feast is indeed Ennayer, which lasts, depending on the area, two, three or four days. The last day of the year, the day before Ennayer, is conceived like a day of mourning and this is especially felt in the kitchen. Generally one deprives oneself of couscous, which is replaced by *berkukes*, pellets of flour cooked in a light bubble. Elsewhere one consumes only milk or dry vegetables cooked in water or in some cases arum stalks, as in Kabylia.

Except for some details, the rituals of Ennayer are the same from one end of the Tamazgha to the other and, as J. Servier notes it, there are hardly any differences between the Arabic-speaking people and the Amazigh. According to the same author, the rituals of Ennayer can be summarized to four dominant concerns: to eliminate famine, to predict what the coming year has to offer, to bless the seasonal change of cycle and to welcome the invisible Forces represented by masked characters. Therefore Ennayer is marked, initially, by the consumption of a rich meal of a good omen and all must leave the table satisfied so that the year is prosperous. It is not surprising that for this meal one prepares unusual dishes or delicacies, such as cakes made with eggs (*harira* of Tlemcen), crepes and beignets of all kinds. It is common in the majority of Moroccan and Algerian cities and countryside to eat the "seven vegetable" dish in Ennayer made only with green vegetables. Almost everywhere chickens or goat kids or sheep are sacrificed. In Kabylia where Ennayer is somewhat less celebrated than in the remainder of Algeria, people eat an ox head on that day which is held up above the boy who is born that year, so that he becomes "head" (leader) of the village. It is on that day that the first haircut is given to young boys. In many areas sometimes very distant from each other (in Blida, at the *Beni Hawa* in the west of Ténès, at the *Beni Snous* in the area of Tlemcen) the same dwarf palm tree heart and roots (see Douuté) are consumed at the time of Ennayer. One explains this custom by the hope the year will be green like the plants consumed and like the strewn palms leaves and other house plants on the roofs or tent floors.

As nicely put by E. Destaing, the way Ennayer finds you, that is how you will be during the whole year. It is necessary, that day, to be merry, pleasant, generous, rich. That day, people exchange wishes. The farmers get information about the weather during the first few months of the year by examining the pellets of *berkukes* or the blood of the sacrificed animals. Filled with the same hopes, the Kabyls conversed with their oxen and their goats.

During the festival of Ennayer, various masks come into the picture, claiming money or dishes intended for the communal celebration, they are "the ass with the figs" in Nédroma, the Bu-Bnani in Tlemcen, the Bu Reduan in Western Tunisia, and elsewhere a camel or a lion but the most significant character is the Old Lady of Ennayer.

The Old Lady is portrayed as a fairy of that is used to threaten the children who do not eat sufficiently during the feast; she would open their belly and stuff it with straw. A dinner portion is left carefully aside for the Old Lady. Finally many legends use this character known in all the Mediterranean areas, to explain how the "missing days" of February were loaned².

References:

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¹ Note from the translator: In other publications, Bou Ini is used by the Shawis in reference to the feast where the "ini", the stones used in a fire pit are renewed. The Shawis indeed change their "ini" during Yennayer.

² Yennayer and the Old Lady: At the end of Yennayer, the cold weather is over, the Old Lady defied Yennayer and told him that now that he is gone with its cold weather, she could get out and take her goat to graze. Upset, Yennayer wanted to punish her and asked February to loan him a couple of days. The Old Lady took her goat out and in the middle of the day, the weather changed drastically and she died with her goat from freezing weather. This story is told to kids to explain to them why February is two days too short.