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The experience of the socialist villages in Algeria has caught the attention of various observers and researchers. Several theses and articles have already examined the legal, social, cultural and ideological aspects of an achievement of national dimensions (see bibliography at the end of the article). However, a satisfactory evaluation of the results from the point of view of architecture, town planning and regional development, has not yet been made. One cannot say that, on the whole, the interest devoted to architectural problems in the Maghreb measures up to the concern which prompted His Highness the Aga Khan to found an *Award for Architecture in the spirit of Islam*. We shall see, for example, that the socialist villages demonstrate the fulfillment of the requirements of return on investment, standardized plans and speed in execution of collective housing. The ideological aims are, however, even more significant, and this is why we shall concentrate more on the origins and the socio-political development of this ambitious programme.

We shall begin by recalling the basic facts as we could ascertain them in May, 1981, then give some background information on life in the socialist villages, and finally examine what could be called a total social phenomenon.

#### Basic Data

The socialist villages are one of the concrete outcomes of the Agrarian Revolution launched by President Boumédiène in 1971. The idea of creating 1.000 villages with the objective of *regrouping* a rural population displaced during the Algerian war was already suggested by the French in 1959. In reviving this idea, Boumédiène wanted "to challenge the colonial past, during which the French colonial regime had planned to create 1000 villages, so-called "villages of the future", with the fixed aim of isolating a revolution of the peasant masses, after its "scorched earth" policy had failed. These villages were in fact concentration centres ...<sup>1</sup>

The first village, Aïn-Nchala (1971-1972), was built by "the peasants, youth and intellec-

tuals". By March 31st, 1977, of the 271 villages registered, 58 were completed, 88 were under construction, 125 had not been started. Only 300 have been built at present, whereas the entire programme was supposed to have been completed in 1980. There are several reasons for this delay, which we shall deal with in the third part of this paper.

The socialist villages, which were at first called Agricultural Villages of the Agrarian Revolution, were *technically speaking* conceived on urban pattern. Each village has between 100-200 or 400-700 lodgings; each lodging is able to accommodate an average nuclear family of seven persons (which excludes the traditional extended family). Thus populations vary from 700 persons to 4.900. Neither a private garden, nor a cowshed, nor a farmyard has been provided in spite of the expressed wishes of the future inhabitants. The designers have been both foreign and Algerian, but the interested parties have not been consulted at any stage, from the choice of the site to the layout of each apartment (small kitchen, small rooms, enclosed courtyard with no possibilities for extension ...) The people cannot participate in the planning of their own environment in any way. In fact, they are simply integrated into agricultural production units, which themselves are drawn into industrial circuits and an urban life-style.

"Today, hundreds of villages are being built throughout the country. The 'fellahs' will be able to live in new homes after spending their entire lives in slums and in tents, at the mercy of the winter cold and summer heat, drinking water from the swamps and exposing themselves to every possible disease. *The aim of the Revolution is to get rid of the archaic structures of society and to create a new society in our countryside where there will no longer be a place for either slums or shanty-town mentality, and where there will be no trace of unhappiness or misery*"<sup>2</sup>. This means that the infrastructure of the villages has often been out of scale: a large approach road, built at high costs, wide straight streets, geometrically laid out; standard facilities: public baths, grocer's shop, butcher's shop, mosque, bank, post and telephone; running water, gas, electricity. A youth centre, stadium, clinic, town hall, hotel with restaurant, police station market and

petrol station are to be found in the largest villages. All of this creates the sort of needs city-dwellers have such as for television, radio, telephone, household appliances, but which rural people, with modest incomes, cannot satisfy. While public benches are even provided, as in the colonial villages, the rural population never think of using them, for psychological and social reasons which I cannot analyse here.

Continuing along technical lines, the villages are very uniform: cement blocks are used indiscriminately, both in the midst of the Sahara (Tamanrasset) and in the north where the climate is milder. The same site plans, the same internal layouts, the same ideological function of integration can be found everywhere. If a mosque, bank or school is aesthetically attractive, one hardly notices. On the other hand, mistakes are easily detected from the moment you approach the village: for example, a "forest" of poles which are taller than any of the buildings, and which one notices all the more because the area around is devoid of vegetation. The choice of sites has not always been dictated by the ecological, climatic, aesthetic or even economic considerations. More thought has been given to imposing the principal ideas of the Agrarian Revolution throughout the land, and this was underlined by President Boumédiène's commitment to inaugurate personally each village and recall the political, social and cultural aims he attributed to the whole enterprise.

#### Life in the Villages

It is very difficult to do research in the villages with all the freedom one desires. A correct sociological inquiry must be directed towards the workers, the women, the children, the old persons, the youngsters ... This has been attempted by F. Burgat (see bibliography). Daily life is obviously filled with cultivating the land allotted to the peasants after the nationalization of all property containing over 25 hectares. The political involvement regarding socialist villages renders problematic, if not impossible, a serious study of the adaptation

of these people to their new surroundings, and the actual feelings they have towards the land. In many cases it is still too early to attempt a significant objective evaluation of the program. One cannot help noticing the unwillingness, even the refusal from some of the 'beneficiaries'. Of those who have accepted, not all work the land which does not fully belong to them with the same enthusiasm. There are no peasants in Aurès el-Mayda; on the contrary, there are too many in El-Ouldja. This means that the daily life in the villages differs with the cultural and social origins of the inhabitants. Agricultural production has therefore gone through certain difficulties which have not yet been fully overcome. In addition to cultivation of the land, we would like to determine how the experiment is evolving, and especially to see whether integration is being achieved in the towns, or rather in the traditional villages and the countryside, and even, whether a new way of life connected with the specific environment is beginning to develop.

Contact between the departmental administration and the traditional rural dwelling environment has in any case become much easier, more regular than it has ever been. Even though the "beneficiaries" of these new surroundings tend to continue their usual autonomous way of life, the administration is approaching them with remarkable concern. This is evidenced by the social facilities already mentioned and the different kinds of aid proposed so that the neighbouring lands are well-cultivated. They have gone to the extent of refusing to provide private gardens, so as not to distract the workers from the common land. As long as no surveys are made on the daily life of women and children, on men-women relationships in each home, on the distribution of work inside and outside, nothing can be stated about the cultural, moral and sociological impact of the socialist villages. How have changes occurred from the large patriarchal family to the nuclear family, from tribal or regional autonomy to a civic spirit within the national framework, from old kinship patterns to modern matrimonial tactics? These are crucial questions which, when carefully examined, should reveal to what extent the socialist village has become a

transforming ground for Algerian society, or merely constitutes a change without a future, of a more decisive page of history taking place elsewhere.

### A Total Social Phenomenon

The war of liberation waged by the Algerians for seven years (1954-62) gave rise to a political voluntarism in the hearts of the leaders and the entire population, thereby explaining the particular style of the whole history of the country since independence. The word revolution takes on concrete meaning in everyday life since all the traditional means of obtaining and exercising power, all the social and economic structures, all the regional bases, all the symbolic contents of the collective subconscious are progressively affected by two arbitrary decisions: the priority given to industrializing industry between 1967-1979; the launching of the Agrarian Revolution in 1971 after having initiated in 1962, a self-managed agricultural sector (taken over by management committees of all the wealthy farms left vacant by the departure of the colonials).

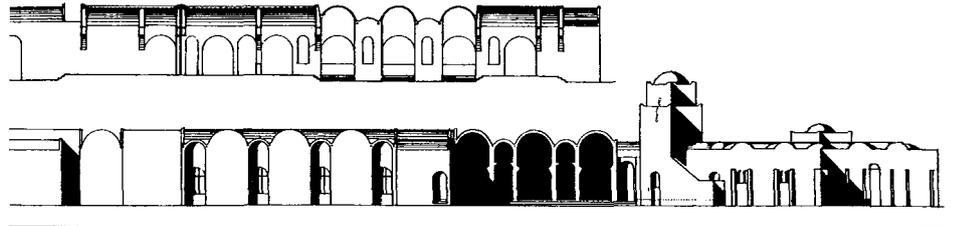
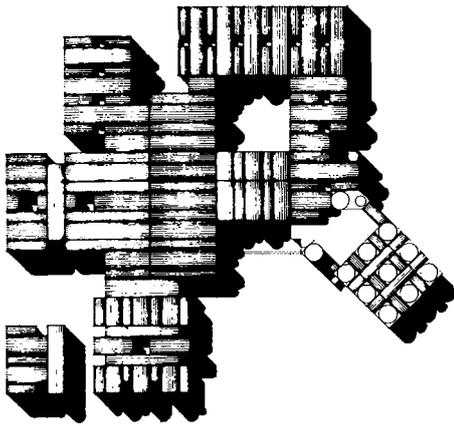
It is within this context of voluntaristic politics and the upheavals brought about by the war that the campaign of the 1,000 socialist villages must be situated, in order to judge both the *desired* effects and the *actual* results. One of the constant themes in President Boumédiène's political thought was the destruction of the archaic society, the elimination of the "shanty-town mentality", and the struggle against "unhappiness" and "misery". To combat those who were nostalgic for "fundamental Islam", he used a bold metaphor which struck everyone in Algeria: *God did not ask His believers to enter Paradise with an empty stomach!*

The model for development implied by this political philosophy unites the productivity of industrial societies, the nationalization of the means of production, the mobilization of all the social forces, the outstanding attention given to workers and the under privileged classes of the population.

The effort undertaken to industrialize production, and to mobilize agricultural workers, accelerated the movement of rural workers towards towns, a tendency which had already begun during the war. The problems created by these movements of population have become all the more serious since demographic pressure has been constantly increasing since the 1950's: 8 million inhabitants in 1950, almost 20 million today. Far from attempting to curb this growth, the Boumédiène's policies have, on the contrary, encouraged it.

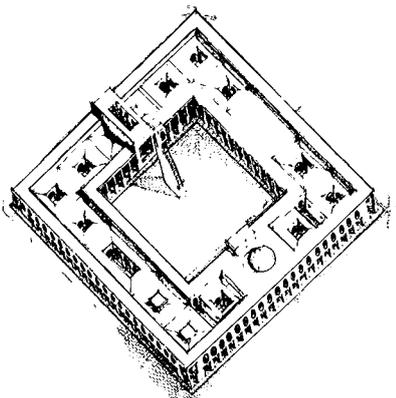
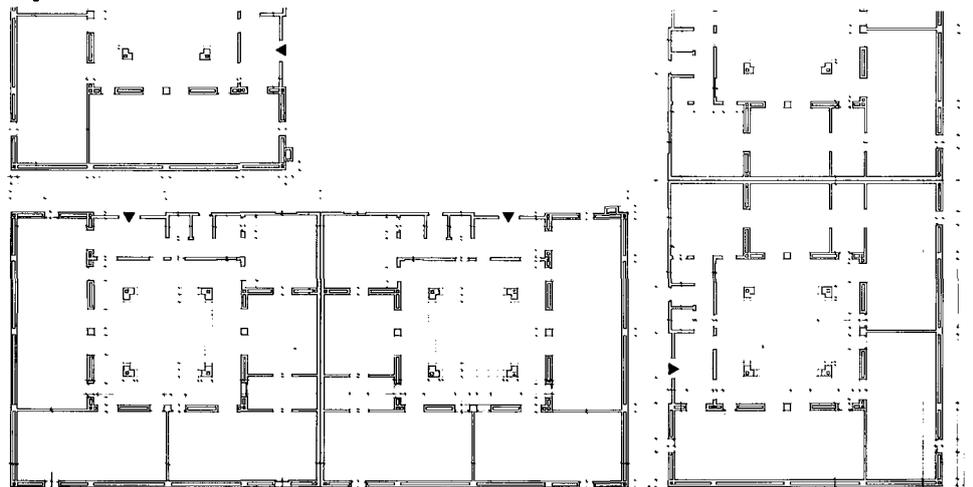
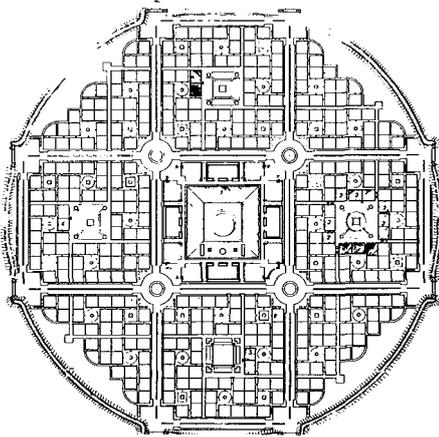
From here on we see the problems the socialist villages tried to solve: to contain the influx of rural immigrants to large city centres like Algiers, Oran, Annaba, Constantine ...; to deal with the socio-cultural transition between life in the shanty towns and that of large towns, or even that in traditional villages; to anticipate the social and political threats that slums represent on the edges of vast agglomerations; and hence to counter the notion that independence has aggravated the very social ills vehemently denounced during colonization; to break down tribal solidarity and the mechanisms of alliance and protection in the traditional society (archaisms) to eventually make it possible to build a *unified nation* under the aegis of one state, one culture, with one ideology *common* to all the citizens. In this way the socialist villages were to become the creation of political awareness in the masses, and for the diffusion of new cultural models (the Arabic language and Islamic ideals).

This helps us understand why the socialist villages are scattered across the entire national territory, why the sites are chosen according to the ideological requirements of the hoped-for integration more than the ecological ones, why the roads, the electricity and water supply are guaranteed almost everywhere regardless of the costs, and why the users have no say in the layout of their environment and cannot influence urban projects and architectural structures by means of inherited, often unique, aesthetic values in local or regional cultures. (Touaregs, Mozabites, Chàwiya, Kabyles, high plateaux, littoral, oasis, Ksour). The entire operation thus rests on one basic assumption which we find in "popular demo-



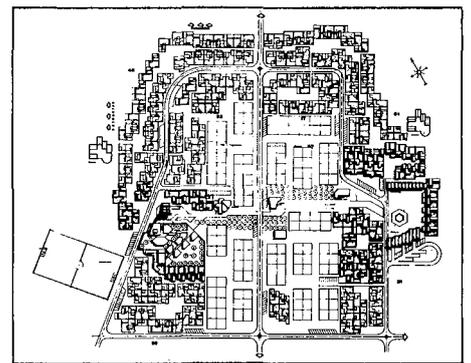
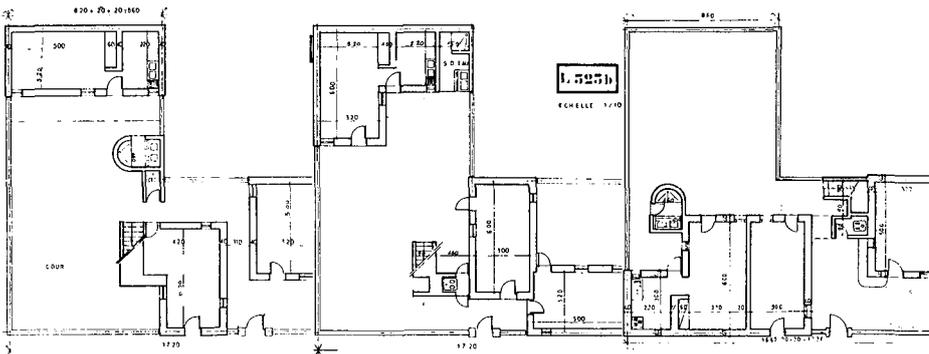
Pastoral village of El Mahder (wilaya of M'Sila) Algeria 100 dwellings and communal facilities (including mosque, health center, town hall, post office and craft center) H and A El Miniawy, architects Site plan, section and elevation of the communal center, illustrating the use of local materials (stabilised earth) to construct vaulted spaces for living and public activities. This project has been built and is presently inhabited.

Source Techniques et Architecture, no 329, 3/80



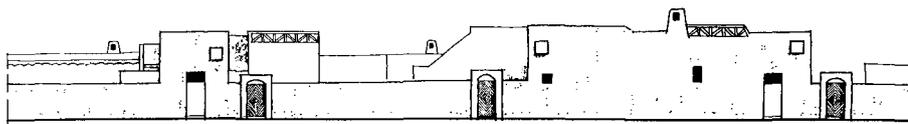
Socialist village Houari Boumedienne near Abdala (Bechar), Algerian A A U. (Atelier d'architecture et d'urbanisme) with Ricardo Bofill, architects Site plan of the village, axonometric drawing of the main plaza with social services grouped around it, and typical plans of houses assembled in groups of eight around smaller plazas Particular emphasis was placed upon creating densities of an urban nature in this project, now completed

Source. Techniques et Architecture, no 329, 3/80



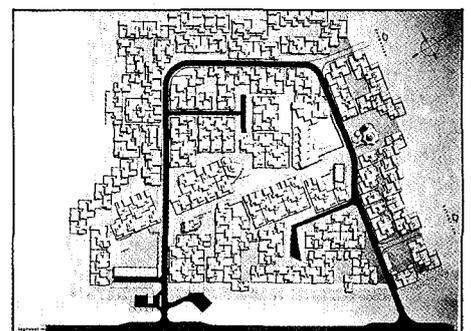
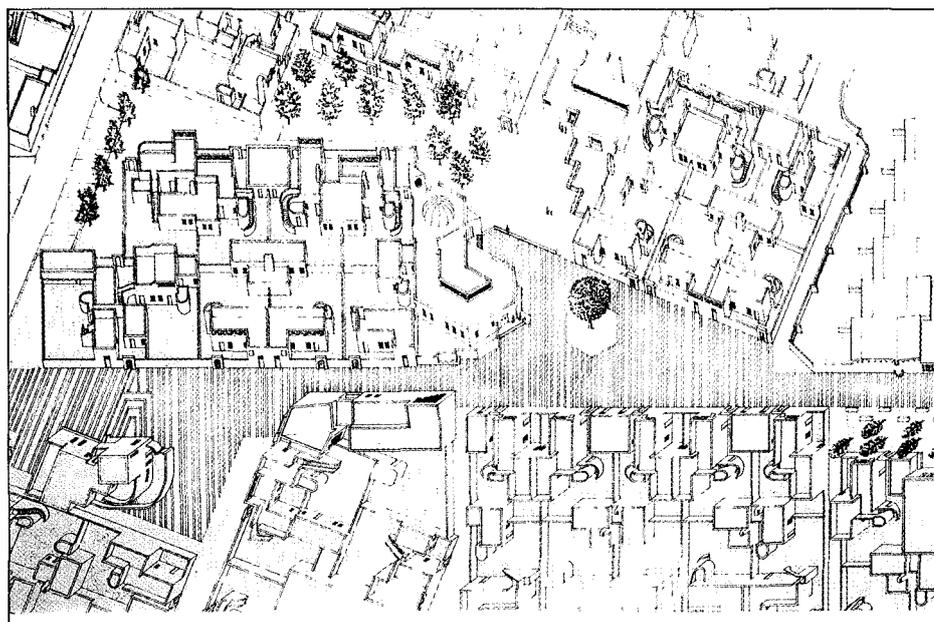
Village of Zelfana (M'zab), Algeria Housing and communal facilities as the extension of a peripheral neighbourhood in an existing village. D. and R. Poux and J-C Petitdemange, architects Site plan of an unusual attempt to give meaningful structure to an already constructed modern complex (center) by filling the vacant open spaces and introducing a variety in house-types and urban spaces The project is 80% completed

Source Poux and Petitdemange.



Studies of various plan-types and elevations for dwellings in the Algerian socialist villages of Zelfana, Guerrara and Dahia Benana. There are separate rooms intended for women, for guests and for the family as a whole, arranged around an open courtyard.

Source Poux and Petitdemange



Village of Dahia Benana (wilaya of Laghout), Algeria D and R Poux and J-C Petitdemange, architects Third of a series of villages conceived by the architects, Dahia Benana develops ideas already present at Zelfana and Guerrara: use of house-types composed of independent rooms around a court, grouping of units, and urban structure organised along a main axis or "dorsal column" Marketplace at one pole and mosque at the opposite one, other communal facilities such as a hammam are located along this axis (Automobiles are permitted only dark-shaded roads on plan)

Source Poux and Petitdemange

Village of Dahia Benana. Detail of axonometric drawing which shows grouping of dwellings, open spaces and communal facilities This village was not built according to these plans.

Source Poux and Petitdemange

cracies": it is possible to create a culturally and ideologically homogenous society, an ideal alliance between State and Nation under a varying number of leaders assembled in a Revolutionary Council and all sufficiently enlightened to grasp and satisfy *fully* and *adequately* the expectations, hopes and the needs of the "healthy" sectors of the population (as against the deviating or opposing forces: "bourgeois", mercenary persons, reactionaries ...) I am referring here to the citizens' perception of the authorities. The leaders might make successful decisions or fail in their endeavors according to the degree of communication occurring between them and the majority of the population. In order to appreciate the mythological or realistic aspects of this assumption as it relates to the example of the socialist villages, one needs to look at the cultural, historical, sociological, economic facts in the Algerian, and more generally, the Maghrebian society. We have no time to discuss these facts; I would like to emphasize only that they are implied by the setting up of socialist villages, and nevertheless, they are not *taken into consideration* at the initial and decision-making stage of each village. They cannot be taken into consideration even if those in charge wanted to, for these facts are, to this day, inaccessible to the various experts. The tragedy of so-called underdeveloped societies is that they are condemned to a political voluntarism whilst being unaware of the basic facts of their history, the lasting mechanisms which, unknown to them, order their lives. This means, for example, that each region must be considered in its own historical context with its own cultural characteristics as this has been revealed in the recent cultural debate on a national level, in Algeria. Undoubtedly, there is a risk in any political action, which is all the greater when the individual within the group concerned is overlooked. However, in the case of societies like the Algerian one, the need to deal promptly with serious political, economic and cultural gaps forces one to accept in a short space of time, changes made over many centuries particularly in Europe. (I am referring to the processes of secularization, urbanization, democratization, education and social stratification ... in France or in England, for example)<sup>3</sup>.

I should like to point out that, in implementing Western knowledge today, even in its original milieu, the social sciences — especially history, sociology, cultural anthropology, social psychology (the study of the collective subconscious) — remain marginal and barely credible, compared with the so-called exact sciences. The mathematics of decision-making, economic science, technological sciences are given priority, and even primacy, in any large-scale project intended to uproot the vital structures of society. Only the weight of ideological "values" compels one to ignore the natural and technical restraints, e.g. to construct a paper factory on a site lacking an adequate water supply. This is true a fortiori if we consider the aesthetic values, the symbolic capital, the rural techniques which only the disinherited populations can vouch for, plunged as they are in material "misery", labelled "ignorant" and "illiterate" by the "educated" decision-makers, the technocratic planners in ministries and more generally by the "advanced" citizen.

Through the example of socialist villages a socio-cultural dialectics of anthropological significance emerges: I am referring to the structural opposition present at all levels of society, between segregated societies and integrated societies, local charismatic leaders and concentrated secular power, oral tradition and written tradition, popular culture and intellectual culture. For the first time in history, social groups are torn from their autonomous institutions, from their autarchic mode of existence, from their symbolic universe (sacred environment full of ritual objects), from places of pilgrimage and sacrifice, from a projection of the contents of the collective subconscious within inhabited space and in the surrounding area<sup>4</sup>. They enter *without any transition*, a social, economic and politically rationalized and technicized environment with great unifying, simplifying and centralizing power for the first time. The systems of signs with rich symbolic evocations are replaced by the *signals* directly referring to concrete objects, quantified values, material relations lacking any mediation by means of symbolic behaviour or sacred rites, as was the case in the traditional world. Anthropologists are again paying attention to the symbolic

nature of all relationships of exchange, talents, mutual aid, or conversely the positive realities covered by the codes of honour in traditional Maghreb society.

The opposing elements that I have just outlined between symbols and signs, values mediated by the codes of honour or of sanctity, and material values directly named and quantified, must not lead to the belief that modern societies are necessarily a degradation of traditional or old-fashioned societies. Nor can it be said that the change from the old-fashioned way of life to that of the socialist villages unquestionably and inevitably spells progress, as President Boumédiène's statement suggests. The entire problem lies precisely in our ability to *properly* decipher the historic significance and the philosophical factors at stake during the *change* which all contemporary societies go through, in varying degrees: a change from "the archaic" to the modern, from the sacred to the profane, from the symbolic to the geometric and the arithmetic, from the personal to the computerized anonymity. Or, conversely the return to the so-called sacred, symbolic, personal, qualitative. This does not mean that I am either calling nostalgically to restore the past, nor for the submission to the constraints of so-called modernity<sup>5</sup>.

Societies which know hunger, which are deprived of modern security obtained through technology, medicine, scientific culture, speaking through their leaders, say, that they have no time to ponder over philosophical, anthropological and historical questions. They must rapidly house as many families as possible, procure bread, work, education and medical care for everyone. These are gigantic tasks. So, we are brought back to the socialist villages which at least have the advantage, when compared with low-rent housing in cities, of providing homes of reasonable dimensions. As for the established objectives from the beginning by official ideology and the planners themselves, it can already be stated that they will not be attained, because the development strategies in Algeria have been or are being greatly revised.

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## Reference Notes

<sup>1</sup> P Balta, *La Stratégie de Boumédienne*, p 193

<sup>2</sup> *Boume'dienne*, in P Balta, p 194

<sup>3</sup> It would be out of place here to recall in the midst of a rapid presentation of the socialist villages, all the social sciences which can offer information and indicate requirements that any project involving the organization of a national entity, ought to keep in mind

<sup>4</sup> (= The home, the field, the valley, the mountain, the river, the springs: everything is imbued with religious significance and calls for propitiating behaviour).

<sup>5</sup> I have proposed a critical analysis of this concept in *L'Islam, hier, demain*, Ed Buchet-Chastel, 1978, pp 120-138