

Tents, Turbans, and Veils: Ait Khabbash Heritage Production in 1990s Morocco

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Abstract:

This essay delves into the multifaceted realm of Amazigh heritage production during the transformative era of the 1990s. It sheds light on the significance of material objects as conduits of heritage within localized realms of remembrance. It asserts that local preservation strategies can serve as alternatives to museum collections, which often fail to include material culture from marginalized communities. Its focus on one specific Amazigh community, Ait Khabbash in southeastern Morocco, reveals how endeavors to orchestrate heritage on a local scale often existed in conflict with the ideals of the burgeoning transnational Amazigh movement, particularly in the realms of tourism and commercialization. As Ait Khabbash navigated a landscape marked by climatic change and shirring cultural norms, they remained steadfast in their commitment to the preservation of material objects understood as crucial to their historical identity as nomads, namely tents, turbans, and embroidered veils. While these objects crossed over into the realm of tourism, tourism also made the preservation of identity viable for people who had suffered decades of land displacement. This essay offers a glimpse into the resilience and adaptability of an Amazigh community faced with multiple challenges, shedding light on the enduring power of local heritage dynamics and their interactions with larger, transnational narratives of identity preservation.

Keywords: Ait Khabbash, Material Culture, Heritage Production, tourism, nomadism.

The colony of bees is fine and has reached the place of grass and flowers.

Ihenna wsufegh yuley ar adghar n tuga
(Becker 2006, 91)

This line from a wedding song performed by Ait Khabbash, an Amazigh group living in southeastern Morocco, was typical in its references to the fertility of the land when I wrote about such songs in my book *Amazigh Arts in Morocco* in 2006. References to female fertility and women's agency — the bride imaged as a bee leaving her mother's hive to start her own colony — occur in the specific part of the wedding ceremony known the *ahidus*, a call and response line dance performed by men and women. During the dance, the bride moves from the tent set up outside the groom's house and into his home ("the place of grass and flowers"). Sung on the last day of the three-day-long wedding, the image of "grass and flowers" is a clear reference to future children, as an invocation and celebration of fertility.



FIG. 1: Ait Khabbash men wearing white gowns and black or indigo blue turbans assist the groom, who wears a red textile wrapped around his face. These men, known as *isnain*, were chosen to support the groom during his wedding. Credit author, 1997.

I attended dozens of Ait Khabbash weddings during the mid-1990s while conducting research for my doctoral dissertation. But now, more than twenty-five years later, I recognize the mid-to-late twentieth century as a period of great transition. Intense drought had already caused Ait Khabbash nomads to fold up their tents and settle in villages and towns. Drought continued during my time in the area; elderly people recounted how the southeast was once fertile and rivers flowed through the region. People continued to hope for rain, but the landscape was no longer filled with grass and flowers, which impacted people's ability to raise livestock and resulted in the decline of weaving. On top of these climatic changes, nationalization policies that promoted an Arab-Islamic identity for the Kingdom of Morocco, coupled with increased interactions with Arab speakers, resulted in the decline of the Tamazight language. Meanwhile, religious sanctions were putting pressure on Amazigh customs such as female tattooing. Instructed by local religious scholars that their markings were contrary to Islamic teachings, the practice of tattooing faded out. Moreover, modesty requirements compelled Ait Khabbash women to cover their faces with veils while performing *ahidus*. Despite these changes, Ait Khabbash continued to unfold nomadic tents and construct them for brides, who wore the red headdresses, amber necklaces, and silver bracelets of their ancestors, even if people were forced to borrow these items from neighbors. Men wearing pants and dress shirts at weddings rather than the *jellaba*, or hooded gown, at least made sure to wear turbans, symbols of pride in their nomadic history (Figure 1). And the wedding songs continued to reference a flowering, productive land even as that land disappeared into desert. In

short, in the face of societal and economic changes and climatic disruption, Ait Khabbash were engaged in the process of heritage production.

Through an examination of Ait Khabbash heritage production in the 1990s, this essay examines how objects function as heritage in small-scale, locally defined spaces of remembrance that are for the most part overlooked by scholars (Meier 2009,16; Probst 2011, 7). A localized approach to heritage, despite its small scale, can provide an alternative to institutional methods of collection, preservation, and display — precisely what was absent from Moroccan museums in the 1990s (Pieprzak 2010, 87). Such an approach can also illuminate how the production of Amazigh heritage works at diverse scales. As noted by Paul Silverstein in his consideration of Amazigh activists, individuals continually move between various scales of discourse (local, national, and transnational) as they operate in different political contexts (2018). This essay specifically presents local Ait Khabbash efforts to stage heritage and considers how they interact with larger transnational concerns. As we will see, how objects functioned on a local scale did not always coincide with the ideals of the blossoming transnational Amazigh movement, especially regarding tourism and commercialization.

1. Amazigh Heritage and Folklore on the National Stage

Scholarship on heritage largely focuses on how heritage functions in the space of national institutions, such as museums. National museums, for example, typically feature objects that intersect with governmental heritage concerns, establish a canon of objects deemed authentic, and aim to attract tourists in the service of economic development (Irbouh 2005; Meier 2009). But heritage is a dynamic process that involves competition over whose version of the past will find official representation. As Katarzyna Pieprzak asserted in her book *Imagined Museums*, the inadequacy of national museums in Morocco allowed for the emergence of alternative and creative spaces of art and memory (2010, 95). In the context of the conflict between competing forms of heritage, specifically between state forms and more localized concerns, it is crucial to remember that in the 1990s, Amazigh art did not feature prominently in Morocco's national museums. The post-colonial state emphasized a pan-Arab construction of Moroccan identity that historically marginalized Amazigh people and emphasized Arab-Andalusian history as Morocco's "high culture." An exception was the *Musée Tiskiwin*, a private museum that featured Amazigh art owned by the Dutch researcher and collector Bert Flint and was located in Marrakech, a city hundreds of miles from southeastern Morocco. The only national center for heritage and the preservation of patrimony in the Tafilalet oasis was *Le Centre d'Etudes de Recherches 'Alaouite* in Rissani, which concentrated on the study and preservation of the 'Alaouite Dynasty, Morocco's current ruling dynasty. The national museum thus functioned to reinforce Moroccan Arab-Islamic national identity while excluding Amazigh art and culture.

Rather than display Amazigh arts in museums, the post-colonial Moroccan state created the first Festival National des Arts in 1956, which treated Amazigh dance and music as folklore, with groups performing dances and songs for European and American tourists. The festival has taken various forms and been held in various locations over the years, but Amazigh arts continue to be promoted by Morocco's national Ministries of Culture and Tourism as products available for purchase and consumption by tourists worldwide as part of the kingdom's traditional authentic history (Boum 2007, 231-233). The problem is that in a Moroccan context, the folkloric lens implies a stigmatized status largely due to French colonial attitudes that portrayed North African arts and culture as picturesque, barbaric, and inferior forms of aesthetic expressions that would

eventually fade away as the region became truly civilized (Webber 1991, 200-202). In other words, to see Amazigh culture as folklore was to consign it to a vanishing or extinct status.

Amazigh political activists thus lament the folklorization and festivalization of their culture, believing that such festivals present Amazigh culture as a fossilized part of Moroccan history and the Imazighen themselves as “uncivilized” and “backward” (Boum 2007, 215), standing apart from modernity. Inherent in the process of folklorization is the idea that the staged product loses its authenticity, becoming an adulterated form of itself. Addressing the issue of Amazigh folklorization is the *Amazigh Manifesto*, which was created and signed by 229 prominent Moroccan activists in 2001, the same year that the Moroccan monarch established the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM). The manifesto questions the Arab-Islamic foundations of Moroccan official history and calls for official state recognition of the Amazigh language and culture, going on to urge that:

[t]he original Amazigh is to be rehabilitated. This includes literature, dancing, singing, architecture, and decoration. This art is to be modernized so that it will be improved and promoted. Moreover, the practice of using the negative appellation “folklore” should be abandoned, as it was the colonizer’s appellation.¹

To elevate Amazigh culture from the realm of folklore, Amazigh activists seek to institutionalize heritage and centralize the responsibilities for its preservation. Scholar Aouar Boum recounts how Amazigh intellectuals demanded the creation of an academic center for Amazigh dance that would standardize its use by tourism developers, preventing its distortion and modification to respond to audience tastes and expectations (2007, 233). A similar strategy was developed by the Moroccan linguist and IRCAM director Ahmed Boukous, who asserts that a means to ensure the survival of the Amazigh language is to create a standardized lexicon accessible to all speakers (2013, 19-29). The paradox is that the standardization of cultural practices can result in a curtailing and stifling of creative expression, especially at the local level. Furthermore, the performance of heritage at tourist festivals does not disengage people from modernity, but is rather a consequence of modernity, providing financial incentives for arts, crafts, and other activities that may have lost their former social and economic basis (Hafstein 2018, 131 and 137). While this essay does not intend to tease out the complex relationship between folklore and heritage, it does recognize that international, national, and local actors often have diverse goals with regard to heritage production.

On the far periphery of cultural centers and institutions, including the Amazigh rights movement itself, Ait Khabbash interact with their aesthetic forms in very personal, unmediated ways while simultaneously promoting their culture for consumption by outsiders. A characteristic of this localized heritage production is the layering of multiple meanings on the same object. A tent, for example, can be transformed from a functional living space to a symbol of nomadic heritage during a wedding, and then into a romantic dwelling for tourists. The process of transformation itself hints at the complicated nature of heritage production. Such an approach can also illuminate how Amazigh heritage production works at diverse scales.

2. Southeastern Morocco in the 1990s

This essay concentrates on the period of the 1990s, an especially significant time in Morocco for groups involved in the nation’s blossoming Amazigh movement. Cultural associations emerged and played an important role in raising the level of Amazigh consciousness, largely in response to

¹ Available at: http://www.amazighworld.org/human_rights/morocco/manifesto2000.php

political protests by Amazigh groups in Algeria. For example, in 1994 seven teachers from the Goulmima-based Amazigh association Tilelli (Freedom) were arrested in the city of Errachidia for carrying pro-Amazigh banners during a May Day parade. Police held them for several weeks until international outrage pushed the government to drop all charges against them (Boum 2007, 221; Silverstein 2013, 773). A growing indigenous consciousness began to impact people's relationship to their Amazigh heritage and connection to Tamazgha as their rightful homeland.

Despite the proximity of Ait Khabbash to the cities of Errachidia and Goulmima, they did not engage in large-scale protests or attend transnational Amazigh gatherings. This difference can be attributed to the different colonial experiences in each area. In the 1930s, Ait Merghad, the Amazigh group living in Goulmima, petitioned for French support against their local political rivals. As a result, the French built a military base in the region and rewarded the loyalty of patriarchs by appointing them to positions in the government and gifting them land (Silverstein 2013, 771). The French built schools in the region where the sons of the elite studied, often enrolling in universities or military academies in Morocco's urban centers. Other men left to work abroad or joined the military. The constant stream of people in and out of the region resulted in the spread of a political consciousness, and during the post-colonial period, Ait Merghad embraced the Amazigh movement as early as the 1980s (Silverstein 2013, 773).

During this same period, Ait Khabbash suffered due to decades of land displacement, which forced them to give up their nomadic lifestyles and settle towns dominated by Arab speakers, impacting their ability to preserve their language. Unlike Ait Merghad in Goulmima, Ait Khabbash did not have access to state-run education until the 1970s (Bouba 2020, 266). Few people migrated to Europe or urban centers in Morocco. In the 1990s, Ait Khabbash, who lived outside the regional towns of Erfoud or Rissani, had no access to electricity. Communities in rural areas pooled resources to purchase a communal generator, which allowed people to watch television for a few hours after sunset and gain limited access to the news. The internet was almost non-existent, and no one had a home telephone. Few people owned cars, and most traveled to the market town of Rissani on foot, in a mule-driven cart, or in a communal van.

In the 1990s, some recently settled Ait Khabbash continued to construct tents near their adobe houses in order to enjoy the fresh air outside the four walls of a house, which typically have small windows and poor air circulation. Those who left these rural areas due to drought often settled on Ait Khabbash communal land to be closer to water sources and paved roads, and for these people, the tent accrued additional meaning. Aware of the precariousness of living illegally on communal land, people often hastily built one-room earthen houses, keeping the tent not only as an extra sleeping area but as a means to leave if they were expelled. Over time, the nomadic tent came to represent both the pragmatics of economic struggle and increasingly, in the 1990s, a connection to what Ait Khabbash perceived to be a noble, nomadic past.

3. The Tent: Nomadic Heritage

Ait Khabbash understandings of heritage can be inferred from their idealization of the pre-colonial period, which includes memories of nomadic life under a tent. In the 1990s, it was rare to encounter a nomadic family living in a tent, despite the role nomadism played in Ait Khabbash history. Tracing their ancestry to the Ait Atta, the largest Amazigh group in southern Morocco, Ait Khabbash historically occupied the desert surrounding the Tafilalet oasis along what is today the Morocco-Algerian border, marking a territory extending for hundreds of miles from the Tafilalet oasis to Touat, a series of oases in what is now west-central Algeria.

During the pre-colonial period, families raised goats, sheep, and camels, measuring their material wealth by the livestock they owned and providing them with meat, milk, leather, and wool for textiles. Women used strong coarse goat hair mixed with sheep wool to weave the tent panels that they sewed together to make nomadic tents. The long narrow tent panels were woven on horizontal ground looms, called *azetta n iflidjen*, that ran parallel to the ground. Each panel (*aflidj*) was at least two feet wide and thirty-two feet long. A medium-sized tent consisted of approximately seven panels, each of which took about three weeks to weave. The soft wool from sheep and camels was used to make flatwoven floor coverings, blankets, and clothing on vertical looms set up inside nomadic tents. The most intricate textiles woven by Ait Khabbash women included the *taghnast*, a flatwoven woman's shawl, and the long gown for men, the *tajellabiyt*.

A series of social and political changes resulted in the decline of weaving among Ait Khabbash women over time, as their access to wool from livestock became limited. Beginning as early as the late nineteenth century, French occupation of what is now the southwestern Algerian Sahara restricted Ait Khabbash winter pastures and prevented them from engaging in caravan trade (Bouba 2020, 267; Ilahian 2004, 54). Ait Khabbash battled the French military until their final defeat in 1934, which resulted in "their tents packed and their livestock shrinking" (Bouba 2020, 266). By the early 1960s, 90% of Ait Khabbash nomads settled into houses built on their traditional grazing territory, creating the settlements of Merzouga, Haselbait, and others located near the sand dunes of Erg Chebbi (Trout 1969, 151). Water supplies found under the sand dunes provided them with potable water and an irrigation source for newly planted crops of wheat and vegetables. However, drought impacted the region in the 1970s and 80s, forcing Ait Khabbash to resettle in the larger towns of Rissani and Erfoud, with many men giving up pastoralism and farming to join the Moroccan military.

When I studied the region's weaving practices in the 1990s, few Ait Khabbash women still wove textiles from local wool. Sedentarization, increased desertification, and the disappearance of grazing lands meant that those who continued to weave were obliged to buy wool in the market. Due to its high cost, some women began to economize by unraveling sweaters, cutting worn clothing into strips, and using them to create a style of textile known as *boucherouite* (plural: *id-boucherouite*).² Furthermore, women no longer wove tent panels. As noted by scholar Mokhtar Bouba, Ait Khabbash tended to live on the peripheries of the towns of Efoud and Rissani, which provided them with "outside space" to build enclosures for small flocks of sheep and goats, to build mudbrick ovens for bread, and to gather for ceremonies (2020, 268). These outdoor spaces also served as places for the construction of tents during weddings.

The tent sets the stage for the performance of certain aspects of Ait Khabbash history deemed worthy of preservation. Historically, during Ait Khabbash weddings, three men chosen by the groom (called *isnain*) constructed a tent for the bride, such as those inhabited by nomads. Erected a short distance from the groom's tent, this ceremonial tent was intended to be the space for the bride, her family, and the numerous wedding guests. Almost all the events of the three-day wedding ceremony took place in and around the bridal tent, only taken down after the completion of the ceremony. In fact, the bride circles the tent while riding a mule three times before entering.

While the tent itself was constructed by the *isnain* before they left for the bride's home, a group of Ait Khabbash women would gather nearby and perform a call and response song, *izlan*, to both tease and honor the men. By the 1990s, the songs performed by women during the tent's

² The term *boucherouite* is Tamazight and derives from two words: *bou*, meaning "one of/one made of," and *achourite*, meaning "a piece of cloth [*icharouitn*: plural]. While the name literally translates to "the one made of a piece of cloth," people understand that it is made from hundreds of cloth scraps.

construction had largely faded from memory.³ As an earnest young graduate student, I was intent on collecting all wedding songs, even those in decline. I was directed to an elderly woman in Qsar Mezguida, Ftouh Husain, who allowed me to record her while she recited the song associated with the tent's construction, some of whose words were no longer understood by any Tamazight speakers in the region. I spent many hours with her and others attempting to translate this song on the edge of extinction. When I included the song in my book *Amazigh Arts in Morocco*, I did not appreciate how its imagery was related to the environment, especially the following phrases:

Annaygh amedlu yagh s-ighir.

Annaygh-k a lea 'lam ik-d asif.

Ad wtegh aghejdim ad-d gulun.

I see clouds moving toward the mountain.

I see the sign coming by the river.

I sit down to wait for them to arrive.

The “clouds moving” refers simultaneously to the arrival of the *isnain* along with the white-clothed bride and to the anticipated arrival of rain, and thus fertility. The “sign coming by the river” refers to this desert region's dried riverbeds being filled by runoff from the mountains. The women singing the *izlan* sit to wait for “them” to arrive, a word with multiplicitous meanings in the context of a wedding: the rains, the bride and the women who traveled with the bride to the wedding, and the children that everyone expects to be forthcoming from the marriage.

The imagery of this *izlan* had already become abstracted from the lived life of Ait Khabbash in the 1970s when the Moroccan national government built the Hassan Addakhil dam at the River Ziz in Errachidia. The dam was intended to control the danger of extreme floods that impacted the region in 1965 (Mahdane and Ruf 2017, 223). Before the dam, seasonal floods resulted in grazing land for animals. Afterwards, the dam controlled the floods and released water in small doses through a network of concrete-lined canals to agricultural fields. However, the amount of water released from the dam was not enough to adequately irrigate fields and caused the level of groundwater to decrease, impacting the land's ability to support the date palms, fruit trees, vegetable gardens, and alfalfa that previously grew in the area (Toutain 1982, 80). Drought accompanied the effects of the dam, causing both the landscape to dry up and a decline in the health and productivity of date palm trees. Lack of grazing land meant most of the remaining nomads sold their sheep and goats, left their tents, and built cement houses in the town of Rissani and the nearby city of Erfoud. Many Ait Khabbash men joined the Moroccan military, and young children were sent to school for the first time. The process of living with Arabic speakers and increased exposure to an educational system that emphasized French and Arabic resulted in the decline of the Tamazight language.

³ By the mid-1990s, very few Ait Khabbash families living in Qsar Mezguida continued to speak Tamazight on a daily basis, and only a handful of elderly people remembered enough Tamazight to perform wedding songs. Ait Khabbash distinguished between those who lived in the Tafilalet oasis and those who continued to live around Erg Chebbi, viewing the latter as more authentic because they had less contact with Arabs, who lived along Ait Khabbash in the *qsar*. However, families constantly moved throughout the region. A woman who grew up in a *qsar* might be married to a man living in the desert outside the oasis. As a result, the Arabization of Ait Khabbash culture was rampant, regardless of where the family lived. Furthermore, national policies contributed to contemptuous attitudes towards Amazigh-speakers as backward and ignorant, resulting in the stigmatization of the language.

By the 1990s, *izlan* performed by women for the *isnain* had practically disappeared along with the sound of water that once flowed freely through the region's rivers. The resulting desertification also meant that wool was rare and weaving was in rapid decline; almost no one lived in tents. Furthermore, the songs retained imagery of a lifestyle that no longer existed, which contributed to the disappearance of this song from weddings in the 1990s. It existed only in the memory of the elderly.



FIG. 2: An Ait Khabbash family constructs a tent near Tanamoust in southeastern Morocco. This nomadic family constructs a tent each summer near the dunes of Erg Chebbi to welcome Moroccan tourists who visit the area to bury themselves in the hot sand and drink camel's milk for health reasons. Credit author, 2023.

While the song itself was not preserved as heritage, the tent morphed into a visual symbol of nomadic history and heritage, even though its overall form and method of construction changed. Historically, an Ait Khabbash nomadic tent was supported by a slightly curved wooden beam held up by two vertical wooden poles. A woven panel, around 20 to 26 feet long and 8 to 16 inches wide was sewn to the inside center of the tent fabric, parallel to the short sides of the tent. Laid over the curved beam, it was stretched and anchored to the ground with ropes, wooden hooks, and pegs (Figure 2). The four corners of the tent were also held in place with wooden stakes, while its edges were raised with small poles. The open areas could be covered with long narrow panels, which could be thrown back over the tent to allow air and light to circulate (Grammet 2002, 158-159).

As the tents of the nomadic past gave way to the ceremonial tents constructed by the *isnain* for brides in the 1990s, the tent became symbolic of the identity attachment of sedentary Ait

Khabbash to their previously nomadic way of life.⁴ However, these ceremonial tents did not attempt to replicate the nomadic tents but rather were square with a flat roof, reflecting the influence of the four-walled flat-roofed earthen houses that Ait Khabbash constructed for themselves after sedentarization (Figure 3). Men simply unfolded a nomadic tent, which families often borrowed from friends and relatives, and draped it over a square wooden frame. One side could be attached to the house, which required less effort to construct. This provided the interior space with greater height and one open side, providing everyone with a view of the bride, who perched on pillows or a chair in the center.



FIG. 3: A group of Ait Khabbash men and women in Hafira gather to perform *ahidus* outside of a bride's tent, which was constructed near the groom's adobe home. Credit author, 2000.

What does it mean that the form of the ceremonial tent constructed in the 1990s differed from the nomadic tent? Myriem Naji, who studied textiles in the Siroua region of Morocco, notes that textile designs and techniques travel widely. European textile dealers typically imagine weavers living in unspoiled natural settings, unimpacted by modern life. But this static view of heritage ignores how weavers constantly engage with their surroundings and “redefine their textile heritage in phase with their time” (2019, 143). The form of the Ait Khabbash bridal tent changed to fit people's needs and opportunities in a sedentary context, demonstrating how heritage is a dynamic, living process. While the nomadic tent did not figure into Moroccan national museums, it was featured in European and American exhibition catalogs, such as *Splendeurs du Maroc* (1999) and *The Fabric of Moroccan Life* (2002). These catalogs featured descriptions of the “ideal”

⁴ Gélard (2008) also wrote about the significance of the tent and what it symbolizes for Ait Khabbash.

nomadic tent, presenting it as a static and unchanging structure, while in reality, the tent in local heritage production exists in dialogue with (but also counters) the presentation of collectors and museum curators.

The morphic alteration of the tent over time demonstrates that the construction of an “authentic” nomadic tent was less important than the presence of a structure reminiscent of a tent—an allusion to rather than a reification of the past. In the 1990s, the ceremonial tent could occupy an outdoor space surrounded by concrete walls near a busy street in a bustling city. Some families even used plastic or another material to construct a bridal tent. Rather than placing carpets inside the tent on rocky or sandy desert ground, carpets covered hard pavement. And yet, the tent was endowed with the aura of authentic nomadic life, becoming a space where the past was staged and redefined for the present.

4. The Turban: Male Status in a Multicultural Oasis

In the multicultural urban spaces of Rissani and Erfoud, the tent also became a stage for the display of perceived distinctions of status associated with nomadism. When attending weddings in the 1990s, *isnain* wore white turbans (singular: *tarzziyt*), a headdress that reflected their nomadic roots. The Tamazight expression *tbedda tarezziytnek* (which can be translated as “your turban is standing up”) signified an honorable man, with the opposite expression “your turban has fallen” signifying dishonor. People told me that in the pre-colonial period, young boys would be given a turban at puberty, which was once woven by women from wool. As fabrics entered the market economy in the 1930s, a period that coincided with sedentarization and colonization, people began to purchase imported white, blue, and black cotton for turbans.

The turban had a practical function for people living in the desert, as it protected one’s face from blowing sand and the blazing sun. Ait Khabbash men tied their turbans so that some of the fabric draped under their necks, which could be lifted to cover the lower part of their faces. This protected them from the elements and provided anonymity during raids. In fact, the turban was a marker of status and distinction across the region of southeastern Morocco. Within the complex socially stratified context of the Arab oasis, only men of particular social groups wore turbans, such as *Shurfa*, who claimed to be descended from the Prophet Muhammed, and *Murabitin* Arabs, associated with holy men revered as saints. Arab *Ahrar*, meaning “freeborn,” owned and cultivated land in the oasis, they also wore turbans. Their method of wearing their turbans was distinct from Ait Khabbash, as they wrapped the crown of their heads and did not extend the turban to cover the neck or lower part of their faces. The lowest group on the social scale, *Haratine*, did not wear any type of turban. *Haratine* were dark-skinned, landless laborers who worked as sharecroppers and did other forms of manual labor in the *qsar*. They were not allowed to own land, participate in village councils, and were denied arms, reinforcing their low social status (Ilahiane 2001, 382; Ilahiane 2004, 59).

Since as nomads, Ait Khabbash did not practice agriculture, they were compelled to supplement their daily needs by entering into reciprocal, transactional relationships with the Arab speakers who lived in the Tafilalet oasis in walled adobe villages (*qsour*; singular: *qsar*). While at times Ait Khabbash would trade livestock and wool for grain and dates,⁵ in the pre-colonial period, the Ait Khabbash also frequently raided *qsour*, demanding a percentage of the harvest (Dunn 1972,

⁵ A strict social hierarchy characterized oasis dwellers. As the homeland of the ruling `Alawi Dynasty, a great number of *shurfa* lived in the oasis and had a great deal of political and economic power due to their ancestral connection to the Prophet Muhammed.

9; Ilahiane 2004, 75). During the time of my research, I met elderly people who could still recall this period, such as an elder named Abdelrahman who emphasized the fierceness of Ait Khabbash men:

If you hide in a tree with thorns, you will gain nothing. A Khabbashi [Ait Khabbash man] will go into the tree and kill you. Ait Khabbash did not mix with *qsouri* [*qsar* dwellers]. If a *qsouri* wanted to travel outside of the oasis, he had to search for a Khabbashi to take him or he did not go.⁶

While other groups might have associated Ait Khabbash men with thievery, they also commanded fear and respect due to their military strength. By the early twentieth century, in return for protection, Ait Khabbash were offered homes and land to farm, and some moved into *qsour* located on the fringes of the Tafilalet oasis where they had to vie for status within the existing social strata.

Ait Khabbash inserted themselves into the Arab oasis hierarchy and saw themselves as equal to Shurfa and Murabitin, who had high status due to their connection to Islam and the Prophet Muhammed. However, they saw themselves as courageous and noble warriors and superior to other Arab oasis dwellers, especially Haratine (Ilahiane 2001, 382). The importance of the turban as a symbol of status is exemplified by Haratine, who were historically precluded from wearing a turban but adopted it in the post-colonial period when social boundaries were relaxed—in essence, appropriating a symbol of honor (Ilahiane 2001, 382, 392). Thus, Haratine used the turban to express how they had managed to cross boundaries that had previously relegated them to a low social status. However, Haratine wear their turbans according to the Arab style—covering the crown with fabric—while Ait Khabbash men emphasized their unique veiling style, covering the bottom of their faces, especially during weddings.

Given that heritage production can layer multiple meanings on the same object, the turban also became an important feature of Ait Khabbash men working in the growing tourist market of the 1990s. With agriculture increasingly in decline in the region, Ait Khabbash men gravitated to the tourist industry that had flourished in Morocco as early as the colonial period. When tourism began in the region, the tent assumed an additional performative aspect as Ait Khabbash, proud of their nomadic history, set up the tents of their ancestors to welcome tourists, wearing the turban as an homage to their history. By the 1990s, most families had taken down their tents and built small guest houses, offering camel excursions into the dunes and selling fossils mined from the rocky desert terrain. In the 1990s, there were no paved roads to tourist hotels, which meant that only those working in hotels interacted with tourists; hotels were constructed far from the villages near Erg Chebbi.⁷ Only a few dozen small hotels existed and Ait Khabbash managed to keep large international or national hotel chains out of the area, since most of the small hotels were built on collective grazing land, thereby preventing external land grabs (Gagnol 2018).

Tourism and heritage are, of course, intimately related. As noted by Rodney Harrison, “tourism is required to pay for the promotion and maintenance of heritage, while heritage is required to bring in tourism that buys services and promotes a state’s, region’s, or locality’s ‘brand’ (2010, 21).” Ait Khabbash men who worked with tourists extolled the virtues of the desert and its unique wildlife and vegetation. Men working in tourism typically wore blue turbans, evoking the indigo-dyed turbans worn by Tuareg men in the Sahara and Sahel. Indeed, many hotels included the word Tuareg in their name, such as “Kasbah Le Touareg” and “Les Hommes Bleus” to appeal

⁶ Interview with Si Abdelrahman by the author, 1995.

⁷ Today, around sixty hotels of varying sizes are scattered around the dunes of Erg Chebbi and most are controlled by Ait Khabbash families.

to tourists' preexisting ideas about desert nomads.⁸ In the 1990s, when Ait Khabbash hotel owners realized that European tourists carried a romantic association between the desert and nomadism, they started to construct nomadic tents in the sand dunes near their more permanent structures. This provided tourists with an "authentic" taste of nomadic life, with the nomadic accruing a new function.

Ait Khabbash men were undeniably performing for the tourist gaze, dressing and acting in a way tourists expected of nomads. As much as this constituted an astute economic strategy, it can also be understood as an act of agency that connected Ait Khabbash to a transnational Amazigh movement that understands Tuareg as more authentic Imazighen uncorrupted by Islam and Arabization, freely crossing borders and living in harmony with nature. Furthermore, the Tuareg embody an ideal of what might have been if Ait Khabbash had continued to live nomadic lives.

5. Veiling, Tattooing, and the Female Body: Heritage in Transition

Tourism in the region was increasingly critical, given the drought and lack of economic development. In the 2000s, those not working in tourism or selling fossils began to leave the region to find work in the urban centers of Morocco, often leaving their families behind and returning for visits. People relied less on small-scale farming and herding for survival, thus resulting in a shortage of wool. As previously mentioned, Ait Khabbash women began to produce brightly colored woven rugs primarily made from clothing purchased at the market (*boucherouite*), engaging with the global commodity market. Since Ait Khabbash were the only group in the region to make woven carpets, this new textile style became an important symbol of Ait Khabbash Amazigh identity.⁹ However, it was an identification that Ait Khabbash women themselves largely rejected, believing the *boucherouite* signified marginality and low status. Since they were made from discarded and recycled fabrics, many Ait Khabbash women refused to make or use these rugs, suspecting that their association with poverty would bring bad luck and misfortune to a household. In the 1990s, I saw that few young women wanted to weave carpets. The weavers themselves encouraged their daughters to spend their time studying so that they could attend middle school and maybe go to high school.

During the 1990s, the options available for young Ait Khabbash women were still rather limited. One of the central observations in my book *Amazigh Arts in Morocco* was that Ait Khabbash women were responsible for the creation of public symbols of identity. The clothing they wore, the textiles they wove, and their oral poetry served as crucial expressions of Ait Khabbash identity. The central paradox is that the very association of women, art, and identity that gives women social power also limits their life choices and exerts control over their mobility, sexuality, and fertility (2006, 45). This was a burden that limited the life choices for young women.

⁸ "*Les Hommes Bleus*" or "The Blue Men" is an appellation commonly given to Tuareg men, as it refers to the fact that the indigo from their turbans dyes their faces a blue color.

⁹ In one *qsar* in the Tafilalet, Charfat Bahaj, women wove flat woven wool blankets from undyed wool. Their husbands who work in a wool processing *fondouk* in the city of Fes, regularly brought wool to their wives, which led to the creation of a cottage industry. This was unusual and other Arab women did not weave textiles and few engaged in artistic production. An exception included the mats, donkey saddle bags, and bread platters from palm fronds made by Haratin women, which they sold for local use in the market of Rissani.

During the 1990s, Ait Khabbash women's bodies were highly politicized by those engaged in both heritage production and its suppression. Islamic modesty concerns impacted women's self-conceptions as they engaged in the preservation and creation of visual culture identified as heritage. Ait Khabbash women commonly covered themselves with large black scarves (called *tahruyt*) covered with bright embroidered patterns and small metallic sequins (Figure 4). One woman described the *tahruyt* to me as her "passport," meaning that it allowed her to be recognized immediately as Ait Khabbash. The *tahruyt* was made from two lengths of cloth purchased at the market and sewn together with a joining stitch to create a multicolored band of wool yarn about an inch wide called the *tanammast*. The *tanammast* ran down the middle of the veil and served as a groundline for the textile. Women embroidered vegetal and geometric motifs on either side to resemble growing plants and flowers. There were different methods of wrapping the *tahruyt* around the body so that a woman's face might or might not be covered, depending on her marital status (unmarried women typically did not cover their faces and might wear veils with less embroidery).

Since most Amazigh groups in Morocco do not wear veils, I tried to identify the origin of this unique garment. Oral interviews, photographs, and written sources suggest that Ait Khabbash women wore unadorned indigo coverings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as indigo was a common material worn by people across the Sahara for protection from the intense sun and sandstorms. However, imported cloth became more common in the local market at the end of the nineteenth century, and indigo was gradually replaced by inexpensive, mass-produced black cotton or synthetic cloth, as brightly colored cotton thread also became readily available for purchase. In my book *Amazigh Arts in Morocco*, I proposed that the use of embroidery on the *tahruyt* in the 1970s, a time when the practice of tattooing by Ait Khabbash women rapidly declined, was a means of asserting identity through a style of dress deemed acceptable in this religiously-conservative region of southeastern Morocco. While the motifs used for tattoos and embroidery were different, both referred to female fertility, as young girls were tattooed after their first menstruation to mark their status as marriageable women. By the time of my arrival in the Tafilalet oasis in the 1990s, the practice of tattooing had completely faded out under pressure from religious scholars who condemned it as counter to the teachings of Islam. Only elderly women still had tattoos, and when I inquired, one woman recalled the process to me as follows:

I was around twelve years old, and a neighbor did the tattoo for me after I asked her. When she pricked my lip, it was like someone poked the white of my eyes with a needle, it was so painful. She went over it three times and put alfalfa on my lip. I also had her make a line on my chin but would not let her tattoo my forehead because I was in so much pain.

We may infer that tattoos gave visual expression to the desired physical qualities of strength, endurance, and patience that were once important to defining Amazigh womanhood, especially in rural Morocco. However, as Islamic influence permeated Ait Khabbash culture, women expressed shame about their tattoos, and some women even told me that they had been held down against their will and forcibly tattooed. One woman recounted a song chanted in Arabic to condemn tattooed women:

God insults the women who do tattoos and the women with tattoos,
and the women who rest near them.
He also insults the wall that they lean against.

Why doesn't it fall on these tattooed women?¹⁰



FIG. 4: A group of Ait Khabbash women gathered during a wedding. Credit author, 2000.

¹⁰ Interview with Fatima Ouadderrou, southern Morocco, 1997.

Clearly, social pressure has impacted how women viewed their tattoos. Many of the elderly and middle-aged women who discussed tattooing with me declared that they had committed such a grave affront against Islam that their tattoos would be burned off their skin in the afterlife. Women told me that instead of tattoos, they expressed their Amazigh heritage through the embroidered head coverings that they wore. In this way, women could continue to demonstrate their artistic creativity in a covert challenge to Arabization (2006, 63). Thus, an embroidered modesty garment could be simultaneously a concession to the dominant Arab culture and a means of resisting it by asserting Ait Khabbash identity in its midst.¹¹

In contrast to the colorful *tahruxt*, Arab women in the Tafilalet oasis draped themselves in long, unadorned pieces of black cotton fabric called *lizour* (singular: *lizar*), with only a small crack left open to see through. In fact, people often referred to Arab women wearing this dress as *awina*, meaning “one small eye” in Arabic. This conservative style of covering was influenced by the large numbers of Shurfa who traced their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, priding themselves on their conservative behavior and strict style of body covering, which they believe reflects the practices of the Prophet. In the Tafilalet, as in the rest of the Muslim world, descent from the Prophet carries prestige and commands a high level of respect.

During my time in the southeast, I sometimes heard the critique, voiced by both Arab and Ait Khabbash and by both men and women, that the *tahruxt*'s brightly colored embroidery and shiny sequins draw attention to women's bodies, and hence that the colorful Ait Khabbash veil was immodest. Others associated the *tahruxt* with being unsophisticated, rustic, and provincial, common stereotypes about Amazigh people across Morocco. In response to such social sanctions, I noticed that regional styles of *tahruxt* developed: women living among Arabs in cities and qsour in the oasis wore veils with less embroidery than those living in more remote areas with fewer Arabs living among them. Clearly, whether Arab or non-Arab, female dress was freighted with both religious and political significance.

In fact, the *tahruxt* became an important component of *ahidus* performances in the 1990s. During *ahidus*, men and women stand in parallel lines facing each other and sing call and response songs. Men sing a single phrase in Tamazight and women repeat it as men play frame drums and women sway back and forth. Religiously conservative people, both Arab and Ait Khabbash, frowned upon *ahidus* performances, claiming that they brought unrelated men and women too close and encouraged promiscuity. The *tahruxt* became an important component of the *ahidous* wedding dance since it permitted women to participate in this male-female performance while maintaining a degree of modesty or physical separation from unrelated males (Figure 3).

Conclusion

As the viability of the nomadic Ait Khabbash lifestyle disappeared, objects associated with nomadism assumed the aura of an idealized past. However, objects that crossed over into the realm of tourism had particular relevance. Tourism and heritage were interwoven in the region, with

¹¹ When I published my book *Amazigh Arts in Morocco*, I was unaware that that publisher intended to put a color photograph of a woman wearing an Ait Khabbash embroidered veil on the cover. When one of my Amazigh activist friends put a copy of the book's cover on an Amazigh list-serve, it generated a great deal of discussion. People lamented the fact that a “veil,” an object understood as a symbol of Arabization, Islamization, and the decline of Amazigh culture, would be used to represent Amazigh identity. I immediately contacted the press to change the cover, but it had already been printed.

tourism making heritage economically viable for people who had suffered decades of land displacement and forced sedentarization. While Amazigh political activists characterize the commodification of Amazigh culture by the Moroccan state as broadly detrimental, that same commodification process can contribute to a sense of pride as members of a minority group see their own traditions through the eyes of outsiders. Through that process, they can learn to value practices they may have internalized as inferior or stigmatized. Moroccan scholar Mokhtar Bouba calls the self-reflexive process of educating outsiders about one's history and heritage "image negotiation." Writing about Ait Khabbash tourism, Bouba recognizes the power relations that exist between tourists and host communities. He asserts that image negotiation is a dynamic process that allows local people to manage existing stereotypes by learning about their ancestral heritage from elders and bringing it back to the tourism realm, educating both themselves and outsiders (2015, 136).



FIG. 5: Ait Khabbash brides marrying two brothers in Erfoud, Morocco. Credit Hassan Ouadderrou, 2023.

This self-reflective localized process of heritage production contrasts with the top-down ideals of heritage production advocated by Amazigh activists who desire a unified, standardized Amazigh culture and language that extends across national borders. Large-scale heritage concerns often exist in conflict with local strategies, especially in regard to women. For example, Fatima Sadiqi acknowledges that Amazigh women have been preservers of their cultural heritage through oral literature, artistic production, and the transmission of knowledge over the centuries (2007), passing along a collective memory that is deeply feminine. However, their responsibility as cultural conservators can be confining and limiting, especially for women living in rural areas. In

her book *We Share Walls*, Katherine Hoffman writes that implementation of the demands by Amazigh activists, typically urban males, for the preservation of the Amazigh language often falls upon women, who are expected to maintain their rural and somewhat marginalized lives to preserve Tamazight for the collective (2007, 231). Hoffman queries the political and economic forces that have assigned women the sole responsibility for the social and linguistic reproduction of their community and asks what the implications are for women (2007, 232).

At the same time, local heritage concerns also impact women's lives. One of the central observations in my book, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco*, was that the clothing worn by the bride served as a crucial public symbol of Ait Khabbash identity, contributing to a woman's status and prestige. However, the act of binding the female body with sashes and ties symbolized the control of women's sexuality; women's life choices were still limited at the time and largely restricted to the roles of wives and mothers (2006, 133). Today, Ait Khabbash women have many more opportunities, and many go to study at Morocco's universities. Their daily dress has changed and Ait Khabbash women attending high school typically wear *hijab*, which includes a long skirt or pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a headscarf, no longer wearing veils. If they return to the region to be married, they continue to dress in the red headscarves amber necklaces, and silver jewelry of their ancestors, even if they must borrow them from their neighbors (Figure 5).

Upon reflection, of great significance in the 1990s was the way women used visual arts to maneuver their status within a society that had become increasingly Arabized and Islamized. Although tattooing was disowned as part of their heritage, women created a new heritage symbol by reinventing the veil worn by Arab women through the addition of bright colors, flower designs, and sequins which became the Ait Khabbash "passport." Ait Khabbash women used the embroidered veil to maneuver within and around the value-system prevalent in the religiously conservative area of the Tafilalet oasis. Wearing the *tahruyt* also allowed women to continue to perform *ahidus* without being seen as immodest as it created a physical boundary between them and unrelated men. Women also embroidered them for the tourist market, selling them in small boutiques in the towns of Erfoud and Rissani, even embroidering small bags, pillows, and thin scarves with *tahruyt* motifs.

The image of veiled Amazigh women dressing to accommodate perceived Islamic modesty requirements exists in contrast to images of empowered women propagated by Amazigh activists who often insist on the matriarchal base of Berber societies, claiming that Arab-Islamic patriarchy resulted in the oppression of North African women. They stress the relative freedom of Amazigh women in ceremonial life, since Imazighen, unlike most Arabs in rural North Africa, perform mixed-gender dancing (*ahidus*). The Ait Khabbash woman wearing an embroidered veil does not fit into the discourse of Amazigh activists. Clearly, tension exists between these national and transnational images of women and the reality of their lived, local experiences.

While the place of grass and flowers mentioned at the beginning of this essay was already a very distant memory in the 1990s, we can interpret one wedding song as providing hope for the future:

Ger ikhalifn a yalmu n ssa`aidin

Oh, grass of happy people, give new shoots.

While the phrase refers metaphorically to the bride and her potential offspring, "new shoots" can be understood as a self-reflexive awareness of heritage production. While Ait Khabbash did not engage in large-scale protests in the 1990s, they gave new meaning to three key symbols of identity: the tent, the turban, and the veil. Safeguarding these three objects as expressions of cultural heritage attracted tourists to the region, and since the 1990s tourism has contributed greatly

to the region's economic development. The process of Ait Khabbash heritage production did not engage with national or transnational concerns. Rather, it responded to local needs, looking to the future by engaging with the past.

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