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Intangible cultural heritage of the south-eastern Moroccan desert: rituals, traditions and living legacies of an invisible treasure

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Abstract

The intangible cultural heritage of the south-eastern Moroccan Sahara encompasses a whole world of practices, rituals and knowledge that shape the identity of local communities. In practical terms, desert rituals function as a genuine language, bringing the land to life: mobility, transhumance and collective memory are constantly intertwined within them. Hospitality, for its part, is not merely a tradition or a mechanism for survival and social cohesion, based on mutual aid and sharing in an often-harsh environment.

Rituals of protection and blessing, meanwhile, help to cope with uncertainty by creating a symbolic balance between humans, nature and the sacred. Seasonal festivals, oral poetry and music, such as Ahidous, convey the group's values, strengthen the sense of belonging and keep the collective memory alive. Rituals linked to rain, for example, demonstrate a genuine connection with the cosmos and a form of resilience in the face of drought.

Tiwizi and transhumance, meanwhile, reveal a robust social organisation, where solidarity, attachment to the land and intergenerational transmission are essential. In short, all these practices form a living cultural system, indispensable for preserving identity and enabling Saharan societies to adapt to today's changes.

Keywords: Heritage – Desert ritual – Sahara – identity – symbolism.

Introduction

The Sahara is a region of great cultural richness, where traditions, knowledge and symbolic expressions are deeply rooted in the history of local communities. Beyond its desert landscapes and material heritage, it is distinguished by an intangible cultural heritage of remarkable diversity, passed down from generation to generation and encompassing social practices, rituals, languages, oral arts and traditional know-how that shape collective identity. In an environment characterised by mobility, aridity and constant adaptation, ritual practices occupy a central place in social and symbolic organisation: the Ahidous rituals of movement reflect a true 'writing' of the territory, whilst rituals of hospitality reinforce social cohesion. Indeed, rituals of protection and blessing also express collective responses to uncertainty, whilst seasonal festivals constitute special occasions for cultural transmission. Added to this are musical practices, such as the ' ' performances of the Imedyazen, which embody a true geometry of solidarity. Rain rituals bear witness to a profound

cosmic connection and ecological resilience, whilst collective labour (Tiwizi) illustrates the primacy of the group and the loyalty among its members. Finally, the transhumance rituals reveal a living memory, articulating territoriality, narrative and genealogical heritage. Against a backdrop of globalisation and socio-economic change, this heritage—both valued and under threat—raises major issues of preservation and transmission, making its study essential for understanding the foundations of local cultural identity and the mechanisms of its perpetuation.

1- Desert rituals as systems of signs

A ritual is a symbolic embodiment that represents the culture and collective consciousness of a social group. It transforms abstract symbols into living, perceptible experiences. Among the nomads of south-eastern Morocco, rituals are linked to transhumance or local sanctuaries; these elements are not merely observed but shared collectively, reinforcing cohesion, solidarity and the transmission of knowledge. Ritual thus transforms the desert into a living language, articulating identity, space and social order.

1-1 Rituals of movement as a form of territorial expression

For UNESCO, knowledge and practices related to nature form an integral part of intangible cultural heritage. From this perspective, nomadism and mobility in the Sahara represent a cultural heritage of great richness.

The transhumance routes, passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition, trace a living, symbolic map of the territory. This mobility is rooted in a genuine philosophy of movement. For nomads, the territory is not a static expanse, but a series of ritualised and lived journeys. Indeed, the tracks of the Sahara are memories etched in the sand. They tell the story of the territory, written by the repeated passage of people and animals. As Hassan Rachik points out, 'the tribal territory is produced by movement rather than by settlement'. Each route carries within it a shared history, that of those who have trodden it.

Among the nomads of south-eastern Morocco, transhumance goes beyond a mere economic dimension. It constitutes a veritable ritual text, in which every movement and every halt codify tribal identity. The routes—the round trips between Adrar, Mssemrir, Saghro and Gnat in winter, and the reverse in summer—are not mere journeys, but ritualised sequences that anchor the group in space and time. The breaks, marching orders and formations of the walkers form a codified language, expressing both solidarity and social organisation. In desert culture, certain passages, notably mountain passes such as Tizi n Talghmt, Tizi n Tifrkhin and Tizi n Drâa, carry a historical and initiatory memory. Indeed, they recall the ancient conquests, alliances and trials endured by the ancestral Aït Atta, lending mobility a symbolic and sacred character. Indeed, "The Aït Atta desert is a hierarchical social space where mobility never signifies an absence of territorial roots. ' From this, Hart observes that mobility is not a sign of a lack of territory. On the contrary, their movements form part of a precise, hierarchical and collectively recognised territorial system, rather than an empty space. Each group possesses rights and ties in the desert. Consequently, mobility is a strategy for adapting to the desert environment.

Often, movements take place within a tribalised, recognised and organised space, where each group has its own grazing areas, routes, water points and symbolic sites. From Jbel Saghro, which forms the historical centre of the Aït Atta territory, they would descend in winter in groups towards the warmer valleys of Tafilalet or Drâa. In summer, they would return to the heights of the Saghro to take advantage of cooler pastures. Even though they moved, these movements remained circular and regular, always linked to the Saghro, which represented the territorial and symbolic heart of the tribe. Although the groups moved with their herds, these fixed locations served as a reminder of their roots in a specific area.

Nomadic movement is thus a structured ritual, comprising: a precise order of march, distinct roles within the group, codified stops at significant locations, and navigation guided by the stars, ensuring safety and the continuity of knowledge. This ritual transform movement into a writing of the territory: it proclaims that the group is on the move, yet at the same time that it belongs to the land it traverses. The journey thus becomes a living text, legible to participants and future generations alike, expressing at once tribal identity, collective memory and the sacred relationship with the desert. 'Mobility is the principal marker of identity for the members of the confederation. A founding legend emphasises this initial mobility'. Consequently, this journey is a text, a writing of the territory that says:

- "We are a group on the move",

- "We belong to this land we are crossing".

1-2 Rituals of hospitality: a vital sign of social cohesion

In the desert, hospitality is not merely a moral virtue or a simple custom: it constitutes a vital semiotic structure—that is, a system of signs, codified gestures and shared values—which shapes social interactions and collective survival. In the desert societies of the South-East, hospitality arises directly

from the extreme environmental conditions: isolation and the scarcity of water and resources drive groups to create powerful symbolic rituals to ensure social cohesion and mutual protection. Traditional rites are often associated with symbolic forms of structuring human and social relationships, where each ritual gesture gives meaning to the exchange between people. This clearly demonstrates that the sacralisation of human interactions provides a useful framework for understanding these rituals as manifestations of the social sacred. Desert hospitality is expressed first and foremost through concrete practices that have become ritualised, each carrying strong meanings such as:

- **The sharing of water**

Offering water to a stranger is not merely a gesture of charity or a simple act of generosity, but also a promise of survival. The logic is such that, as nomadic tradition reminds us, 'hospitality can be a vital necessity where an encounter with a stranger can mean the difference between life and death'. It is therefore a deeply rooted social norm, based on the collective awareness that anyone crossing the desert may, at some point, depend on the help of others to survive.

Thus, hospitality becomes a rule of mutual security. The traveller who receives water and shelter today may, in other circumstances, offer the same assistance to someone else. This logic of reciprocity strengthens solidarity between groups and reduces the risks associated with the harshness of the desert environment. In this context, refusing water to a stranger could mean condemning them to death.

Consequently, in the nomadic tradition, hospitality is not merely a moral or cultural value: it constitutes a genuine mechanism for collective survival. Offering water thus becomes an act that protects human life and maintains social balance in an environment where solidarity is indispensable.

Due to the scarcity of water and its importance in arid regions, it has taken on a central role in both religious and social life. Scholars and jurists thus advised those who had committed grave sins to dig wells along the routes taken by caravans and nomads, in order to atone for their sins. These wells provide water to travellers and allow herders to water their livestock in an environment where resources are scarce, thus becoming a continuous act of charity from which every passer-by can benefit. This act therefore combines a religious and social dimension, whilst supporting life in the desert. The routes between Tafilalet and Drâa thus feature wells that have become meeting places for nomads, bringing vitality and dynamism to these regions.

- **The placement of the guest**

In many nomadic traditions, the guest is seated in a way that signifies not only respect but also protection – often in the most sheltered part of the tent – embodying the idea that the visitor becomes family for the duration of their stay. This unspoken rule regarding the allocation of space reflects the symbolic integration of the 'unknown' into the protected social space.

- **Blessing formulas**

The recipients of acts of hospitality are often accompanied by specific blessings, showing that hospitality is viewed as a sacred and socially structuring act rather than a mere exchange of goods. Refusing hospitality in these contexts is not simply an act of rudeness: it is a rupture of the social bond itself, as hospitality acts as an embodied social memory and a contract of reciprocity between members or visitors. Hospitality is a ritual of survival and communication: it transforms the stranger into a guest and makes the exchange a link in social cohesion.

An anthropological study highlights that, among the Bedouins, hospitality is a social mechanism that transcends individual ethics to become a marker of solidarity and social peace – the act of welcoming not only protects the visitor but also reinforces the social order and the group's identity. From a semiotic perspective, hospitality fulfils several essential functions within the social ecosystem of the desert:

- Creation of a liminal space between self and other: the guest is welcomed into a symbolically neutral zone where social boundaries are temporarily suspended, enabling communication.

- Transforming the stranger into a guest: through the ritualised exchange of tea, water and conversation, the visitor ceases to be a stranger and becomes a temporary member of the local social network.

- Strengthening the group's social prestige: the more generous a group is and the more it adheres to the rules of hospitality, the more its reputation and prestige are enhanced, which can increase solidarity between clans and inter-tribal cooperation.

- Reviving the memory of protective ancestors: welcoming rituals often include stories and blessings inherited from ancestors, reminding us that these gestures connect the living to the group's traditional values. Thus, hospitality in the desert can be analysed not only as a moral duty but as a codified semiotic system that provides a lasting structure for human relations, confers meaning and security in a hostile

environment, and enables the symbolic and material construction of networks of solidarity.

1-3 Rituals of protection and blessing: signs against uncertainty

In the tribal societies of south-eastern Morocco, particularly among the Aït Atta, rituals of protection and blessing form part of an anthropological framework in which climatic, social or political uncertainty is conceptualised, contextualised and symbolically managed. These practices are not merely a matter of folklore; they constitute a framework of meaning that helps to order the world: 'sacred symbols serve to synthesise a people's ethos – the tone, character and quality of their life – and their worldview'. This link between worldview and ritual practices highlights the centrality of baraka, visits and collective sacrifices in the communities of the South-East: the rite gives visible form to an implicit cosmology and renders the uncertain intelligible.

In the context of the High Atlas and the pre-Saharan regions, symbolic protection is inseparable from social organisation. Jacques Berque emphasises that "local sanctity is less an isolated belief than a principle of group organisation". Visits to shrines, the upkeep of saints' tombs and participation in moussems are part of a dynamic of collective integration. The blessing sought does not merely protect the individual; it consolidates kinship alliances and regulates internal tensions. The ritual thus functions as a space for mediation where hierarchy, solidarity and tribal memory are articulated.

The ecological insecurity characteristic of desert fringe areas reinforces this quest for protection. In his analyses of rural Moroccan societies, Paul Pascon observes that 'ecological insecurity leads to an overvaluation of symbolic protections'. In the face of drought, livestock epidemics or fluctuations in pastoral resources, the recourse to collective sacrifice, the invocation of protective saints or the recitation of the Quran constitutes a cultural strategy for risk management. The rite does not abolish natural hazards, but reconfigures them within a shared framework of meaning.

This dimension is even more evident in Saharan regions characterised by mobility. Hélène Claudot-Hawad emphasises that 'the ritual places the nomad within a network of invisible protections that safeguards their movements and exchanges'. Practices preceding transhumance or trade caravans reflect this need to sanctify the movement itself. In a world where mobility is a condition of survival, ritual protection becomes a form of symbolic insurance.

Finally, Durkheim's analysis of the religious fact helps us understand the collective significance of these practices. He states that "Rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must behave towards sacred things' in the tribal societies of south-eastern Morocco, these 'rules of conduct' frame moments of transition – birth, marriage, the start of transhumance – and embed the individual within a collective order that transcends their own existence. The rite protects because it connects.

Thus, rituals of protection and blessing appear as elaborate cultural responses to uncertainty. They articulate cosmology, social organisation and the management of ecological risk. Among the Aït Atta, as in other tribes of south-eastern Morocco, these practices constitute both a symbolic language of security and a mechanism for collective cohesion, where the blessing becomes a vehicle for balance between the individual, the community and the environment.

These signs directly evoke a protective and blessing effect: invisible barriers, placing objects, drawing circles around the camp or burning fragrant herbs establish a spiritual boundary. Some signs are used to manage collective fears. The desert is also a place of uncertainty; these rituals provide psychological security. Others serve to uphold moral order, as protective measures serve as a reminder that internal harmony depends on the purity of the group. They mark the distinction between 'inside' (safety) and 'outside' (the dangers of the dunes).

1–4 Seasonal festivals, and moussem: social practices that shape living heritage

Amulets (tasfift), protective henna, rain sacrifices (tighmi) and the marking of livestock are symbolic acts designed to channel the uncertainty of the environment. These gestures act as indexical signs: they indicate a protective presence. In Saharan societies, the threat of climate change gives rise to a set of apotropaic rituals against evil, such as: the marking of animals, rain sacrifices (taghmat), protective henna, and Amazigh amulets (tazla, tasfift). These objects function as indexical signs according to Peirce's classification. These ritualised practices form a coherent whole and a genuine intangible heritage that corresponds perfectly to what UNESCO refers to as 'social practices, rituals and festive events'.

Agropastoral festivals express the continuity of the group. Example: Achoura in the South-East (in the town of Goulmima, where a carnival is organised for the occasion). Festivals such as Achoura, the use of water and fire. In the collective consciousness, water purifies, fire renews, and wood symbolises tribal roots): Example: the legend of Imilchil

(Aït Hdiddou tribes). The marriage rituals of Imilchil strengthen group cohesion. These celebrations revive founding myths, tribal alliances and the continuity of communities in south-eastern Morocco. Indeed, they regulate all alliances and foster unity in the face of a harsh natural environment. In this context, the ritual of collective weddings signifies community cohesion. To preserve this ritual, a collective wedding festival is held every summer in Alnif. These festivals are cultural expressions, where the desert serves as the stage for the expression of identity, blending to create a seasonal necessity and a perpetual need.

The seasonal festivals and moussems of south-eastern Morocco play a far broader role than a simple celebration. "They are living spaces where memory is passed down between generations, where social cohesion is strengthened, and where identity is expressed and negotiated in the face of the changes in the contemporary world".

2- Poetry, proverbs and oral performance: symbolic codes of the desert

Amazigh poetry (timawayin-izlan) and proverbs occupy a central place in the semiotics of the desert, as major forms of expression and symbolic transmission. In societies where orality remains a fundamental vehicle for knowledge, these verbal expressions ensure the preservation of collective memory, the transmission of social values and the interpretation of the surrounding world. Indeed, poetic speech thus becomes a veritable reservoir of meaning, enabling individuals to interpret and understand the desert as a space that is simultaneously lived, imagined and sanctified. From this perspective, desert poetry functions as an oral semiotics based on a system of widely shared metaphorical signs.

These oral traditions carry within them the history of the tribes, passing on essential values such as solidarity, courage and a deep respect for nature from one generation to the next. Amazigh poetry from the South-East is a true living memory, which reinvents and renews itself with every new performance.

Through the images embodied by various elements, the desert becomes a language, and poetry a means of deciphering it. Amazigh poetry highlights fundamental principles such as courage (tawargit), conceived as a virtue essential to the survival and cohesion of the group. This courage is not merely individual: it refers to the collective capacity to face adversity, preserve honour and maintain social balance. Furthermore, references to ancestors occupy an important place in the timawayin, situating the poetic word within a historical and symbolic continuity. The evocation of sacred places such as mountains, springs, transhumance routes and others reinforces this link between memory, territory and identity.

Finally, oral performance gives poetry and proverbs their full semiotic effectiveness. The tone, rhythm, gestures and context of the utterance contribute to the construction of meaning and transform speech into a social act. In this way, Amazigh poetry is not limited to an aesthetic function, but establishes itself as a symbolic code of the desert, through which knowledge is transmitted, collective identity is strengthened, and the relationship between man, memory and the desert landscape is perpetuated.

3- Musical rituals (Ahidous, Imedyazen): A Geometry of Solidarity

The circle of the Ahidous is not merely a spatial formation; it reflects an egalitarian organisation. Indeed, Ahidous requires the ego to be set aside for the sake of the community. As Abdellah Hammoudi notes, this circularity is a manifestation of cohesion: the space is enclosed to protect the group's privacy and open to the sky to invoke nature.

The practice of Ahidous involves a unity as one body, where the dancers are arranged shoulder to shoulder, forming a human wall. This physical contact symbolises the 'Tawiza', which signifies community solidarity. If a single dancer loses the rhythm, the entire chain wavers, demonstrating the mutual impact of the members of a group where individualities are fused. The circle functions as a language where the boundary between 'I' and 'the Other' blurs. It is like an echo of Roland Barthes's thoughts on the sign; this fusion is punctuated by the beat of the bendir, which acts as the tribe's single heart. Hence the place of art and local symbols in tribal culture. Consequently, Ahidous, like all artistic expression, constitutes a living and poetic archive. Ahidous is thus the guardian of the region's collective memory. The music and songs are not mere embellishments, but oral historical records.

As for the themes addressed by Ahidous, the songs (Izlan) serve to fix major events in the minds of younger generations: emotional aspects, social relations, daily life and/or protests and criticism, etc. They also commemorate local events and ceremonies, or battles fought by ancestors, accurately describing the warriors' courage and the topography of the sites.

It should be noted that poetic improvisation is the driving force behind the ritual's relevance today. The poet is not merely an artist; he is the social mediator tasked with commenting on current events: at weddings or seasonal festivals, for example, the poet may criticise a village chief's

leadership or congratulate him on a significant achievement, or celebrate a bountiful harvest. He may also seize the opportunity to convey values by reaffirming the moral order through metaphors linked to nature (for example, the lion for courage, the spring for generosity).

4- Rain rituals

In the desert societies of south-eastern Morocco, rain rituals occupy a central place in the symbolic, social and ecological organisation of community life. They appear as liminal practices situated at the intersection of the cosmic, the identity-related and the environmental. Far from being mere folkloric relics, these rituals constitute genuine cultural mechanisms for managing climatic uncertainty and generating meaning in the face of scarcity.

a. Cosmic reconnection

The desert is characterised by a lack of surplus and by extreme dependence on natural cycles. In this context, water is not viewed as an ordinary resource, but as a sacred entity, endowed with a vital force (baraka). Indeed, 'water symbolises the totality of potentialities; it is gons and origo, the source of all existence'. This sacralisation is particularly evident in rain rituals, where communities organise collective processions to springs, mountain peaks or places reputed to be holy.

These ritual journeys are not insignificant: they constitute a symbolic dialogue with cosmic forces. The collective march, the invocations and the codified gestures reflect a desire to restore harmony between the human world and the natural order. Consequently, "societies develop specific modes of relationship with nature, based on cultural ontologies". In the desert, this relationship is based on the recognition of humanity's absolute dependence on the climate and the elements surrounding it. Thus, the rain ritual acts as a cosmic reconnection, reminding us that collective survival depends on a fragile balance between humanity, the sacred and the environment.

b. Affirmation of identity

Beyond its cosmic dimension, the rain ritual is a powerful moment of identity affirmation and social cohesion. The active participation of children, carrying figurines or symbolic vessels such as Tislit n waman (the 'bride of water'), carries profound significance. These objects embody the collective plea for rain, but also the intergenerational transmission of values and beliefs. This reinforces the idea that 'collective memory is maintained by being passed on through shared practices', as they form an integral part of the society's existence, history and culture.

By involving children in the ritual, the community affirms the group's continuity and projects its identity into the future. The children become symbolic actors, bearers of the hope for renewal, much like the rain they await.

This performative dimension aligns with the analysis that rituals reinforce a sense of community, that is, a collectively experienced sense of equality and unity. The rain ritual thus functions as a marker of identity, reaffirming group membership and solidarity in the face of climatic adversity.

c. Ecological resilience

Finally, rain rituals can be interpreted as a form of ecological resilience. They explicitly express the struggle against drought, but also the recognition of collective vulnerability in the face of climatic hazards. As Gilbert Durand points out, 'the symbol does not eliminate anxiety, but it organises it and makes it bearable'. This idea implies that symbols do not eliminate human anxieties about the unknown, suffering or uncertainty, but rather give them an intelligible and socially shareable form. Thus, through rites, images or beliefs, anxiety is integrated into a cultural framework that allows it to be understood and endured

By ritualising the plea for rain, the community transforms climate-related anxiety into a structured collective action. The ritual psychologically prepares individuals for scarcity, whilst strengthening their capacity for social resilience. From this perspective, it is not merely a call for divine intervention, but a cultural mechanism for adapting to a hostile environment.

Rain rituals thus contribute to the construction of a cultural ecology, where symbolic knowledge, social practices and environmental awareness are intertwined. As Berque states, 'human ecology is not reducible to natural data; it is also made up of cultural representations and practices'. He also asserts that "the land is not merely a natural given; it is a human creation.". Consequently, the territory transcends the natural framework, constituting a reality shaped by human action and social practices. Cultural practices, collective representations and historical memory give meaning to lived space. Thus, the environment becomes an integral part of the social and symbolic organisation of societies.

5- The ritual of collective work (Tiwizi)

Tiwizi is one of the most emblematic expressions of the social organisation of rural and tribal societies in south-eastern Morocco. Far more than a simple mechanism for economic

mutual aid, it is a structuring social ritual, based on a collective ethic that places group cohesion above individual interests. This is the case in segmentary societies, where solidarity does not stem from a central authority, but from the dynamic balance between equivalent segments. In south-eastern Morocco, society structures its social, political and economic relations around pastoralism and kinship ties. These cultural practices shape their relationship with the natural environment, demonstrating that social organisation and the environment are intimately linked. Indeed, the Tiwizi embodies precisely this logic of interdependence and presents it as a cultural attitude that characterises them.

a. Foundations of segmentary society

Tiwizi is the practical application of the fundamental principle that the group takes precedence over the individual. In segmentary societies, social organisation is based on lineages (ikhss), sub-groups and confederations, linked by reversible and contextual alliances. As Jamous has shown, 'segmentary society functions through the ad hoc mobilisation of interlocking solidarities'. Collective work serves precisely to activate these forms of solidarity at different levels depending on the nature of the task: the construction of an irrigation canal, harvesting, transhumance or the building of a house. From this perspective, the Tiwizi does not merely respond to a material necessity; it constitutes a ritual enactment of the social order. Claudot-Hawad emphasises that 'collective work is a social language that expresses belonging and mutual recognition'. Through shared effort, the members of the group reaffirm their place within a social structure based on reciprocity and balance.

b. Social regulation

The Tiwizi also plays a fundamental role in social regulation. By collectively mobilising the workforce, it helps prevent tensions linked to access to scarce resources, particularly water and pastureland. As Pierre Clastres observes, 'stateless societies develop internal mechanisms aimed at neutralising the emergence of conflict'. The Tiwizi fits into this logic by transforming potentially conflictual issues into cooperative actions.

Furthermore, collective work symbolically redistributes the group's strength. Everyone contributes according to their abilities, and the effort becomes shared moral capital. This dynamic aligns with Marcel Mauss's analysis of gift-giving and counter-gift: "to give is to demonstrate one's social value and to recognise that of others". The Tiwizi thus functions as a gift of labour, creating a positive moral debt that strengthens cohesion and limits rivalries.

c. Proof of loyalty

Finally, the Tiwizi constitutes public proof of loyalty and commitment to the group. Each lineage (ighss) is required to participate in order to demonstrate its fidelity to tribal alliances and its respect for collective norms. Absence or defection during a Tiwizi may be interpreted as a sign of rupture or disengagement, likely to weaken the social standing of the lineage concerned. As Victor Turner notes, 'rituals are moments when the social order becomes visible and verifiable'. The Tiwizi makes everyone's commitment visible, transforming work into a rite of confirmation of belonging. Through this active participation, lineages publicly renew the social pact that unites them, thereby ensuring the continuity and stability of the community. Thus, the Tiwizi emerges as a pillar of social resilience in the societies of south-eastern Morocco. It brings together solidarity, regulation and loyalty in a practice where the economic, the symbolic and the political merge. Through collective labour, society reproduces itself, not through coercion, but through ritual adherence to shared values.

6- The rituals of transhumance

Transhumance is a total social phenomenon in the pastoral societies of south-eastern Morocco, where economic mobility, collective memory and the symbolic production of territory are intertwined. It is not merely a seasonal movement, but constitutes a spatial ritual in which the group asserts its historical and identity-defining place in the desert.

a. Naming, narration and relational territoriality

Transhumance brings about a symbolic territorialisation based on naming, storytelling and the way in which places are embedded in our relationship with the land. Rocks, hills, mountain passes, waterholes and pastoral trails form a network of memory—shared, lived, commemorative and socially constructed. "Space becomes a place when it is imbued with meaning", says Yi-Fu Tuan. This phenomenon of narrative toponymy, and more specifically of the Amazigh oral tradition, highlights that the desert is seen as a place inhabited by memory :

"Ur illi amadal war isem". (There is no land without a name)

Walking thus becomes an act of reading the territory, activated each time transhumance resumes. Claudot-Hawad interprets this as a relational territoriality, based on use and memory rather than fixed boundaries.

b. Genealogical memory in motion

Among the Aït Atta, the routes linking the Saghro massif and the Tafrawt pastures constitute a genealogical memory in motion. The pastoral routes embody family lineages and tribal alliances. A recurring oral expression: "Akal d amuddu n yidammen ' (The earth is the trace of the ancestors). Every pass, every stop refers to an ancestor or a founding event, paving the way for Halbwachs's interpretation that 'collective memory is anchored in concrete spatial contexts'. Transhumance is thus a living archive, in which transmission takes place through movement rather than through the written word.

c. Rite of passage

Transhumance is also a rite of passage for young men. The long march tests endurance, knowledge of the territory and responsibility for the herd. This clearly follows Van Gennep's classic model of the rite of passage: separation from the community, a liminal phase of wandering, and reintegration with a new symbolic status.

An Amazigh proverb sums up this formative role of the walk:

"Amuddu issn yan, ur issnsin". (The journey teaches one what two speeches cannot)

The collective ordeal forges major markers of identity, combining virility, pastoral knowledge and tribal belonging. As Turner points out, "the liminal experience produces a communitas based on shared ordeal".

7- Funeral rituals

In south-eastern Morocco, tribal societies practise funeral rituals that constitute a central symbolic framework linking the relationship with the desert, social cohesion and the preservation of memory. Their extreme simplicity reflects a cosmology of life in which humans perceive themselves only as transient beings in relation to the ever-present elements.

a. Humility before the desert

The Saharan tomb is based on formal economy at the expense of monumentality (rough stones, sand, etc.). It illustrates an ethic of humility in which the dead are not glorified; they return to the cosmic order. As Eliade points out, "to die, in traditional societies, is to rejoin the fundamental rhythm of the world". This vision is clearly expressed in Amazigh oral tradition: "Amdan ur iɛeddan akal" (Man never rises above the earth). Stone and sand serve as a reminder of man's fragility in the face of the desert's immensity; they confirm Louis-Vincent Thomas's thesis "that death is conceived as a passage, not as a heroic rupture".

This representation is explicitly expressed in Amazigh oral tradition:

"Amdan ur iɛeddan akal". (Man never transcends the earth)

Stone and sand thus demonstrate the fragility of humanity in the vast desert, as attested by Louis-Vincent Thomas's analysis: "death is conceived as a passage, not as a heroic rupture".

b. A community united in mourning

The funeral ritual is a mandatory gathering. Even distant relatives must take part, thereby fulfilling kinship and tribal obligations. This obligation contributes to segmentary cohesion, temporarily suspending internal tensions. Evans-Pritchard observes that "death is one of the few events that brings scattered segments together".

The Amazigh proverb sums up this collective logic of mourning:

"Lmut tserrḥ idammen". (Death brings lineages together)

Mourning functions as a rite of social pacification, confirming that funeral rites are above all rites of the living and that they unite them around shared values.

c. The landscape as an archive

The graves scattered throughout the wadis, on the heights or at the foot of mountains, are imbued with a tribal cartography of memory. In the absence of written archives, the landscape is a living archive, readable by those in the know. Moreover, "memory is anchored in places when the written word fails" as Pierre Nora points out.

An oral expression confirmed this unequivocally:

"Akal iḥda amezruy". (The earth is the witness to history)

The desert therefore does not erase memory, but subtly layers it: funeral rituals form the foundation of territorial and identity continuity.

Conclusion

The desert is much more than a landscape: it is the living cradle of profound rituals, shaped by centuries of life and bonds. In the Moroccan desert, these rituals are not mere folk customs. They form a genuine language, a complex symbolic system that has enabled communities to survive in a harsh environment, maintain their cohesion and organise their territory. They are the vehicle for a transmitted memory and the expression of a powerful collective identity.

In practice, these rites codify the intimate relationship with the environment, provide the social glue, forge tribal identity and preserve the group's memory. They act as living structures, weaving an unbreakable bond between the individual, the land they tread, the ancestors they honour and the community to which they belong.

The work of Hart and George Spilmann invites us to see the desert as far more than a mere landscape. For them, it is a genuine social system, a cultural matrix, a way of life in its own right, and even an agent that shapes identities. The identity of the desert is never static: it is shaped by the climate, forged through mobility, enriched by exchange, spiritualised in silence and consolidated within the tribe. It is an identity woven from resilience, hospitality, dignity, wisdom and openness.

As George Spilmann points out, "nomadic pastoralism is not merely an economic choice, but a rational adaptation to the constraints of the arid environment". For his part, Hart observes that "the desert environment reinforces segmentary structures and values of honour, as it demands internal cohesion and constant vigilance". Their analyses complement one another and together paint a vivid picture of these societies, where man and the desert are in constant dialogue.

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