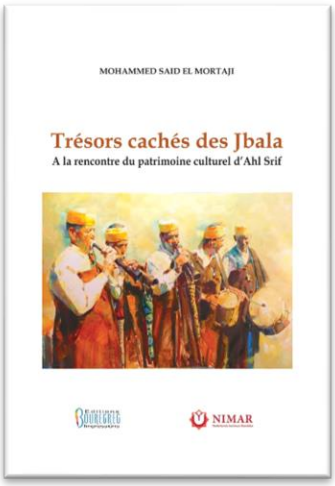


Mohammed Said El Mortaji .- *Trésors cachés des Jbala. A la rencontre du patrimoine culturel d'Ahl Srif* (Rabat: Éditions Bouregreg, 2023), 271p.

In *Trésors cachés des Jbala*, Mohammed Said El Mortaji meticulously presents a comprehensive ethnographic exploration of the cultural practices of the Jbala tribes, who reside in north-west Morocco. The text emphasizes the vibrant traditions, customs, and identity of the Ahl Srif community within the Jbala region, located in the northwestern part of Morocco, specifically on the western slopes of the Rif Mountains. This area is home to the Ahl Srif community, a tribal confederation comprising over 40 tribes and boasting a population exceeding one million individuals. The Jbala community represents a unique group of non-Hilalian Arabic speakers who have been shaped by both Amazigh and Spanish cultural influences, resulting in a distinctive cultural identity that differentiates them from other populations in the Rif and Atlantic coastal regions. This characteristic contributes to their predominantly rural demographic, with a historical lineage tracing back to medieval times when they were known as Ghomara.

Since 1997, El Mortaji has engaged in extensive fieldwork with the Jbala community, and his academic training, diverse perspective, and immersive research methodology have enabled him to develop a nuanced understanding and expertise regarding the cultural practices and social dynamics of the community in question. This prolonged engagement has been a fundamental element contributing to the ethnographic depth of his research, facilitating a comprehensive depiction and representation of the Ahl Srif people. Documenting Jbala culture is crucial, as this community has historically faced underrepresentation and misrepresentation in both colonial and academic discourses. In this context, earlier literature often oversimplified the social and cultural realities of the Jbala, reducing them to simplistic stereotypes. The author addresses these discursive inaccuracies by providing thorough and methodologically sound accounts of Jbala's cultural heritage, thereby enhancing Moroccan ethnographic scholarship while simultaneously presenting new and precise insights into a significant yet overlooked demographic group.

The author employs a comprehensive ethnographic methodology, which encompasses rigorous fieldwork, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a thorough examination of archival resources to record the

cultural heritage of the Ahl Srif community. Crucially, he adheres to ethical research standards, ensuring that community consent and privacy, along with the potential sensitivities of local respondents, are meticulously honored throughout the research process. Upholding these ethical principles not only enhances the credibility and weight of the collected data but also affirms its validity. Furthermore, the book is characterized by a thoughtful collaborative and participatory approach, as local community members were actively engaged throughout the documentation process. This is particularly evident in the author's prioritization of local dialects and oral narratives, which are instrumental in capturing the nuances of Jbala cultural expressions and safeguarding the intangible heritage.

Trésors cachés des Jbala provides its audience with an in-depth examination of the daily material culture of the Ahl Srif community, focusing significantly on commonplace tools and utilities, which encompass agricultural implements, household goods, and traditional crafts. Illustrations of these artifacts, such as painted wooden chests known as sanduq and various other practical tools utilized in agricultural and domestic tasks, serve as authentic and tangible representations of the values, social organization, and the profound relationship that connects the community to their mountainous surroundings. The book's thorough documentation of these items highlights their deep-rootedness in the daily practices and cultural identity of the Jbala people. It is crucial to safeguard this material culture, particularly in a global landscape where modernization and globalization pose a risk of erasing these traditional practices and both tangible and intangible heritage. The elaborately adorned sanduq chests, which are brought outside of homes for the purpose of being photographed and documented, represent one of the numerous examples featured in the book, ensuring that such actions do not infringe upon the privacy of the interior spaces.

The celebratory essence of Jbala culture revolves around the integral components of music and dance. This becomes apparent when considering musical traditions such as the renowned Jahjouka, a village celebrated for its distinctive Sufi trance music. The community's musical heritage includes instruments like the ghayta (a type of clarinet) and the tbul drum, with performances typically accompanied by traditional attire and ritualistic dances. These ceremonial musical expressions are sometimes showcased in various social and spiritual settings, serving both personal celebrations and tribal or regional festivities. Nevertheless, El Mortaji openly critiques the tendency to romanticize and dismiss outdated portrayals of Jbala music as primitive or static. He instead highlights the vibrant and evolving nature of these traditions, shaped by ongoing cultural dialogues both externally and internally. The text also addresses the cultural and religious tensions that have impacted musical practices. In this context, shifts in the community's

religious interpretations have sparked debates over the acceptability of certain musical forms. Such contentious discussions occur within a broader context of negotiations between tradition and modernity.

Women play a vital role in the cultural landscape of the Jbala community, significantly enriching the overall Jabli culture through their contributions to culinary arts, textile production, singing, and poetry. In particular, they are recognized for their involvement in creating traditional crafts, such as the weaving of the distinctive *Mendil* – a remarkable example of rural textile artistry worn by women throughout the region. Moreover, women's participation in oral traditions, including singing and poetry, enhances the expressive heritage of the community, positioning women and their voices at the forefront of cultural industries. In this context, the cultural activities of women in the Jbala region continually shape and uphold the community's sociocultural identity, as these artistic and domestic endeavors help preserve collective memory and strengthen social cohesion.

These matrimonial roles, as emphasized by the author, challenge the male-centric narratives that dominate Moroccan ethnography by highlighting the significant roles that Jabli women play in the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge. Having been a city dweller, the author still remains very much in touch with the local people and tries to show an insider perspective which is not only intellectually informed but also fervently and candidly articulated. As a case in point, he acknowledges ethical and cultural sensitivities when instead of entering the inner domestic spaces of households, he invited the residents to bring objects outside for documentation. This non-intrusive and sensitive stance is a testament to the researcher's academic rigour and thoughtful approach to the community under study. Eventually, and through a careful documentation and a valorisation of both the tangible and intangible heritage of the Ahl Srif tribal community, El Mortaji ensures that the rich traditions of the Ahl Srif are recognized and transferred to future generations hence guaranteeing heritage continuity in time and reinforcing a sense of belonging within the Jbala region.

Trésors cachés des Jbala is a good example that can be used by heritage professionals and students alike as it has managed to bridge the gap between strict academic research and ethical fieldwork within the context of heritage preservation. Following years of fieldwork and critical reflection/reflexion, the work of Mohammed Said El Mortaji is an example of applied museology, showcasing the way(s) ethnographic documentation can be used to inform the preservation and presentation of local (marginalized) cultural heritage. In addition to this, the fact that the book is

able to capture both the material and intangible aspects of culture in such great details provides an immediate window for stakeholders working on heritage into how to efficiently conserve and preserve untapped cultural sites. One of the most important contributions of the book is that it accords a special attention to archiving intangible cultural heritage, more specifically: oral traditions, music, and local dialects, as well as material culture, including artisanal crafts and simple useful objects of everyday life. This two-fold focus aligns with modern paradigm of heritage preservation, which acknowledges that tangible and intangible heritage are overlapping and would remain inseparable features of cultural identity.

The book, however, has its limitations. Although it is highly detailed in its focus on the Jbala region, it does not draw any comparisons with other regions of Morocco, which would have contributed to the comprehension of the larger cultural dynamics in the country. Also, it is not always easy to capture the entire picture of the evolving nature of traditions in the region because social and religious changes keep on morphing and transforming the cultural practices and manifestations of the community. Further studies may expand on the work of El Mortaji by conducting comparative ethnographic research in other regions of Morocco to place the Jbala experience in the national and transnational context(s). In this respect, themes like migration, gender relations, and globalization effects on the rural heritage could also be subjected to interdisciplinary research involving and drawing on fields of anthropology, history, and cultural studies. Optimally, these potential research projects could supplement and inform our understanding of the fluid and evolving nature of the diverse (in)tangible cultural heritage of other rural regions in Morocco.

Trésors cachés des Jbala is an essential read for scholars in anthropology, heritage studies, ethnography, heritage professionals, and anyone with an interest in Moroccan culture(s) broadly. Its community-oriented methodology, comprehensive perspective, and the integration of a wealth of visual-oral materials lay the foundation for forthcoming ethnographic inquiries into the area or any prospective heritage conservation efforts. The book merges thoughtful and meticulous ethnographic investigation while redirecting academic attention towards lesser-known regions at a time when "subaltern" cultures are fading. El Mortaji's work exemplifies how conscientious and insightful scholarship can not only enhance the academic corpus but also act as a medium for encapsulating, safeguarding, and conveying cultural identity to future generations in an era where local heritage(s) are increasingly overwhelmed by the forces of relentless and merciless globalization.

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