RESEARCH ARTICLE

Material Heritage in the Land of Ouled Nail: A Descriptive and Analytical Study of Weaving and Carpet-Making as Visual Memory and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This research study examines the components of material heritage in the Land of Ouled Nail, focusing on one of its most prominent manifestations: the art of weaving and carpet making. These practices serve as a reflection of the community's cultural identity and visual memory, encapsulating its symbols and daily life. Employing a descriptive and analytical methodology, the study observes the artistic characteristics, weaving techniques and meanings of colours and symbols evident in Naili carpets, with a particular focus on those from Jebel Amour. The research also emphasises the pivotal role of Naili women in safeguarding and perpetuating this heritage despite social and economic shifts. In this region, weaving is not just a physical product; it carries deep symbols that represent concepts such as belonging, beauty, and cultural resistance.

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1- Introduction:

Heritage is an essential component of any society's cultural identity, representing a collective memory passed down through generations. It reflects patterns of thought, lifestyle, and aesthetic and social practices. In this context, the Naili heritage, which encompasses both material and immaterial aspects, is a valuable subject of study and analysis due to its artistic and historical elements, which express the depth of civilisation in the Highlands region. The Naili carpet is one of the most prominent representations of this heritage. As a handcrafted product and a visual discourse, it documents collective memory and carries profound cultural codes.

This research therefore seeks to explore the aesthetic and cultural symbols embedded in carpet making, through a descriptive and analytical study of carpets from Jebel Amour. Furthermore, heritage reflects the mindset of a people or nation, providing insights into their collective consciousness. It embodies values and characteristics relevant to the human element through its collective significance. The heritage is characterised by several features, including:

Its vastness and the diversity of its sources and perspectives:

-Its ability to transcend the thresholds of time and space with considerable maturity, as well as its adaptability and harmony with evolving intellectual and civilisational data across generations and cultures.

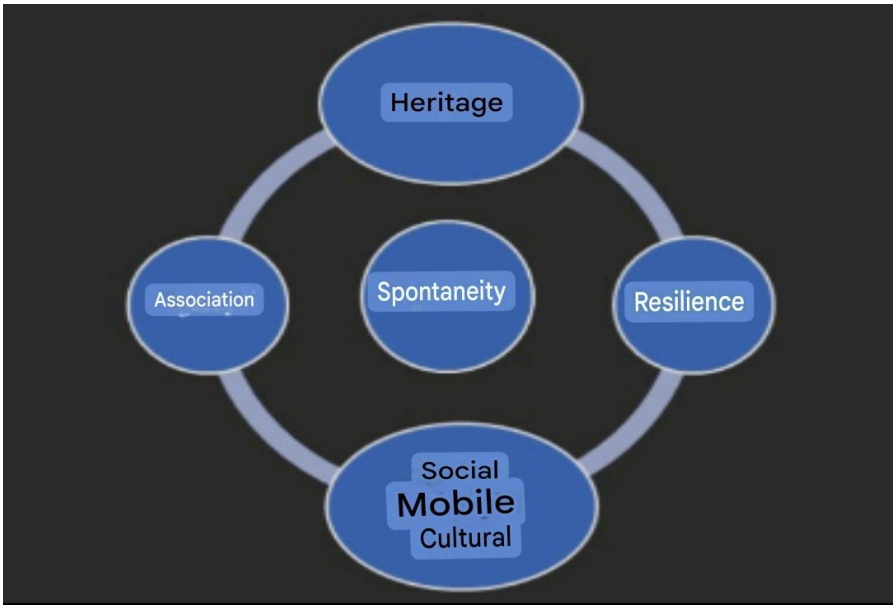
- Its capacity to exert an unconscious influence on all fields and engage with various forms of knowledge, literary genres and art.

- Its direct and profound connection to modernity and contemporaneity.

- Its effective and profound influence on the daily lives of civil societies, their behaviours (both individual and collective) and their mental representations, which extend to the present day[1].

Based on the above, we conclude that heritage carries distinctive civilisational and intellectual particularities, which we summarise based on procedural specificity:

Figure 1 illustrates the procedural specifics of heritage.



This diagram illustrates how the aesthetic perspectives of heritage multiply, as it serves as a unifying link for members of a society due to the spontaneity and flexibility that characterise heritage. Therefore, it is essential to define heritage and its forms, as well as the region under study.

2. Defining the study concepts (heritage, art, Land of Ouled Nail).

2.1 Heritage:

Linguistically, it is mentioned in Lisan al-Arab by Ibn Manzur: 'Inheritance, legacy and heritage are synonymous.' The origin of 'mirath' is 'mawruth', where the 'waw' changes to 'ya' due to the preceding vowel.[2]" Heritage refers to what is inherited; inheritance is said to pertain to wealth, while legacy pertains to lineage. Heritage is what a person creates for their heirs.[3]"

This term also appears in the Quran, in the following verse: 'You consume inheritance greedily and love wealth with an immense love' (Surah Al-Fajr, verses 19 and 20). This verse refers to a type of ignorant wealth consumption (the failure to provide for women and children).

Linguistically, we can conclude that 'heritage' means 'legacy'[4].

Terminologically:

Heritage is what 'predecessors have left behind in material and immaterial forms, regardless of their type'.

As a human activity that renews and continues through transmission, heritage "represents a spiritual pattern extending over long periods, encompassing a multitude of ancestors and predecessors, including a large accumulation of various human activities, whether individual or collective, along with numerous intellectual, cultural, political and economic currents, even when they contradict each other"[5].

Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri believes that 'heritage is everything that is artistically or meaningfully present from the past, whether from our own past or that of others, whether distant or near'[6].

From these concepts, we can see that heritage encompasses everything that predecessors leave for successors in terms of concepts and ideas. It is also part of both the past and the present, existing through social interaction and consisting of various material and immaterial forms that shape the heritage of any nation.

Types of heritage:

Heritage is divided into two categories:

A. Material heritage: This includes all manifestations of material popular culture, such as weaving, decorations, clothing, food and drink, dance, art, painting, engravings and folk games.

B. Immaterial heritage: This encompasses beliefs, mental concepts and oral arts, such as poetry, riddles, tales, myths and oral folklore.

2.2 Meaning of Art:

Art signifies expulsion, effort or wondrous affairs. Linguistically interpreting the term art, Mahmoud Al-Aqqad states that in its original language, it refers to line and colour. 'Art' refers to anything with various forms and descriptions that can be perceived by the naked eye or understood by thought[7].

Concept of Formation: In linguistic terms, formation refers to shape (with the open vowel) and has plural forms (ashkal). Two things can resemble each other, and each can resemble its counterpart[8].

Plastic art: Plastic art is a living museum of human civilisation, manifesting itself in works of various styles, colours and formative elements. It is a universal language of communication and connection, laden with symbols and forms that constitute part of our cultural and identity heritage[9].

History of Plastic Art: The roots of plastic art, which gained widespread recognition in the 15^(th) century, can be traced back to prehistory. Throughout history, humans have sought to capture images that captivate the senses and spark curiosity. The earliest evidence of human artistic activity includes drawings and shapes preserved in prehistoric caves due to geological conditions. The tools used for hunting revealed a potential for imitation, as seen in engravings on stone or bone. We can safely say that the talent for painting emerged the day the first human used lines to depict the shapes of the surrounding objects, giving significance to each form encountered. These symbols became part of their daily lives, enabling early humans to record a limited victory in their eternal struggle against death, a preoccupation that dominated their entire existence[10].

2.3 The original name of the land of Ouled Nail:

It is believed that the Ottomans named the geographical area 'Ouled Nail', located south of the Tell Atlas. This name is derived from the Turkish military fort 'Burg al-Suwari'. The term "Ouled Nail" likely became widespread due to the tribes' widespread practice of livestock breeding, which necessitated migration, and their alliances

against Ottoman authority, particularly in evading taxes. Supporting this claim is the fact that both Arabic and foreign writings employed this term.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the geographical term 'Land of Ouled Nail' and terms related to lineages and genealogies. Researchers delving into historical records will find numerous French references to the "Confédération des Ouled Nail", meaning "Union of Ouled Nail", which refers to the harmony among the region's tribal composition. The French geographer Louis Bias wrote in his geographical study that 'they constitute a very powerful confederation of tribes occupying a vast area extending to Bousaada and the Ziban to the east, and to the wetlands of Zaghir and Jebel Amour to the west'[11].

They descend from Sidi Nail and are considered the most significant tribe in the Djelfa region. Their territory extends from Bousaada to Biskra, covering Jebel Amour, Laghouat, Wadi Jdi, Tamanrasset and Djelfa, with M'sila at its centre[12].

3. Textile industries:

3.1 Definition of weaving:

Woven fabric is created by interlacing two sets of threads at right angles. The first group of threads is known as the warp, which is set primarily in a longitudinal position on the loom, while the second group of threads is known as the weft and is found in the shuttle or its equivalent[13].

The process of weaving involves making the spun threads intersect with the horizontal threads and compacting them together using a tool called a 'weaving beater'. Each woven section is rubbed and moistened using a device known as a 'karnafa' until completion[14].

Thus, weaving consists of the intersection of adjacent longitudinal threads (warp) with horizontal threads (weft). The intersection of the warp and weft threads requires preliminary preparation and a special tool known as a loom, of which there are two types: horizontal and vertical. The raw materials used in fabric production are known as textile fibres[15].

Textile industries in the Land of Ouled Nail can be divided into three categories:

A. Tent equipment:

The 'tent', 'ghrara' and 'haml' are the most significant items crafted by women in the Land of Ouled Nail. The tent is known as the 'house', while the 'ghrara' is used for storing items. They are made using a loom called the 'al-falij', where the wool is prepared and mixed with goat's hair to increase its durability. The weaving process involves carding sheep's wool, shearing goat's hair, washing the wool, spinning it and mixing it with hair. The al-falij is also used to weave specific pieces for tent preparation, such as al-tariqa, al-shabha and haml (also referred to as ropes), as well as al-telis, a large cover placed on the sides of a camel for carrying items.

B. Woven clothing:

The burnous, made from the hair of young camels, is at the forefront. It is a symbol of male adornment and is the most expensive garment to this day, depending on the finesse and lightness of the weaving. The qachabiya has also become a distinctive garment over time thanks to the skill of Naili weavers. Women's garments include the finely crafted, lightweight "al-khamri", typically black with two red stripes, made from wool.

C. Woven Covers:

These include various bedding and covers, such as carpets, cushions, al-houli, al-hanbal, al-kassa and al-qatifa, which differ in weight and dimensions. Some textiles are characterised by the density of their fibres, specifically the woven wool threads[16].

As for the heritage symbolizing the Oulad Nail region, it is manifested in the mention of the red tent. The storyteller and popular poet Mohammad Bahanas spoke to us about the origin of the name "the red tent," which symbolizes nobility and generosity for the Oulad Nail[17]. He discussed the history of the Oulad Nail tent, stating: "The symbolism of the red color in the tent of Sidi Nail can be summarized in a number of interpretations, between a realistic interpretation and another fantastical one. One interpretation relates to the story of the Seven Martyrs, a famous tale passed down through generations and recorded in several books. I, the humble servant, obtained a book containing this story directly from the hands of Sheikh Alim Amir Mahfoudhi in his home. The story recounts the lives of those known as the Seven Martyrs who studied under Sheikh Ahmad bin Youcef Al-Rashidi, including our ancestor Mohammad bin Abdullah, nicknamed Nail.... After they had passed the Sheikh's test of their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the Lord of the Worlds, he gave them seven spindles and a sticky substance made from a mixture of different colours. He then asked them to dip their spindles into the substance to see what would happen. They did so and the colours appeared different, including white and black. Sheikh Sidi Nail's spindle appeared in two colours: red and black. Later, when he arrived in the suburbs of Djelfa in Algeria, the tent took on a red colour in reference to the aforementioned incident. However, this is closer to a mythical interpretation. Another interpretation is that we, the Oulad Nail tribe, descend from the Red Canal in Morocco, and thus the red colour became a symbol for us. Sidi Nail was born and raised in Figuig, Morocco, so the red colour also signifies our homeland. Meanwhile, the most logical interpretation suggests that the black colour, which is a dominant colour, symbolises blood. How so? When Sidi Nail settled where his descendants are now, he found that the tents of the Hilalian Saharan tribes in the region were all black. He therefore combined the two colours: red, the original colour, serves as a warning to invaders. Anyone who attacks us intends to spill blood. Even our knight, when he goes out to face invaders, wears black attire seeking the blood of the attackers; thus, the red colour is significant. It is also said that Sidi Nail chose red for his tent to honour and bless the Prophet (peace be upon him), based on his saying to Ali: 'By Allah, guiding one man through you is better for you than red camels,' which is agreed upon. The region is also rich in heritage, including various forms: Popular poetry, which comes in various types and forms and is characterised by colloquial Arabic. Popular, Bedouin and colloquial poetry are especially prevalent in the Masad area. - Riddles and proverbs: due to the richness of the language, there are many riddles and proverbs. Handicrafts and industrial tools reflect the region's economic and social features. - Traditional medicine, beliefs, customs, traditions and children's games. All of these elements represent the region's tangible and intangible heritage, and the most important activities and religious beliefs are manifested here, establishing the Oulad Nail region as a cultural and tourist hub for the highlands and the south.

3.2 A Study of the Weaving of Carpets in the Land of Ouled Nail: A Descriptive and Analytical Study:

The Naili heritage is a deeply rooted beacon that casts its shadow over the essence and depth of human civilisation. Local culture has emerged from the hands of the Naili people, drawing inspiration from traditions and customs passed down through generations. This heritage provides an aesthetic representation of contemporary life rather than that of the past. The legacy of weaving belongs to the material heritage of the Land of Ouled Nail and represents the region's archaeological heritage, forming the collective memory of the area and contributing to cultural continuity among community members.

To understand the foundational thoughts of the Naili community, a researcher need only grasp the weaving tools that connect them to the region's material and geographical culture, located in the heart of Algeria. This region is a link between north and south, having experienced various civilisations and shaping the concept of intellectual heritage. This significance has led UNESCO to recognise this heritage as part of human communities' achievements.

It is interesting to note that the term 'weaving' is frequently used, yet it is somewhat ambiguous and difficult to define. Weaving involves creating fabric by interlacing two groups of threads at right angles. The first group, known as the warp threads, is set primarily in a longitudinal position on the loom, while the second group, the weft threads, is found in the shuttle or equivalent. Weaving involves interlacing the weft threads, which run horizontally, with the warp threads, which run vertically at right angles. This interlacing involves passing the weft under and over the warp threads in an alternating pattern, with variations depending on the type of weaving used.

4. Nature of the Carpet:

A. Linguistically: The term "carpet" refers to anything that is trodden upon, whether it has short fibers or knots. This term can vary across the Arab world. The origin of the word is Persian, meaning the underside of the foot. The term "carpet" is commonly used among the inhabitants of the Islamic Maghreb, and it appears in the Quran: "And cushions lined up, and carpets spread out" (Surah Al-Ghashiya, verses 15-16).

B. Terminologically: A carpet (zarbi) refers to mats and anything laid on the ground, with its singular form being "basaṭ." The term "basaṭ" is also mentioned in the Quran: "And Allah has made for you the earth a vast expanse" (Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 19).

In the Arab East, carpets are known as "ṭunfusa," except in Baghdad, where they are referred to as "zawliya," a Persian-origin word meaning "to wrap," as they are typically rolled or wrapped when used in summer or carried from one place to another.

In southern Tunisia, carpets are known as 'qatifa' (pronounced 'katifa'), while in the Al-Harakta, Al-Namsha and Zalas regions, they are recognised as small 'matrah' carpets. In the Amour region, they are known as 'farsh' or 'farshiya'[18].

5. Analysis of Weaving and Model Construction:

This study aims to analyse the Ouled Nail carpet model through its elements, weaving and aesthetic dimensions, providing a cultural analysis of the carpet's artistic value shaped by the quality of the wool and weaving method. The finer the weave, the more valuable the carpet. Additionally, the arrangement of designs and the harmony of elements are vital.

The coordination of colours conveys meaning, making the weaving of the carpet a key evaluation criterion. The model requires more time, greater skill and patience, and necessarily a higher financial value. Therefore, the proposed analysis highlights the elements that distinguish the Naili carpet, which we are using as a model for the Jebel Amour carpet, in terms of:

- A frame surrounding the carpet's ground that organises shapes and colour distribution (the border).

- The ground, which is affected by room size and the techniques used, features harmonious designs and lines.

- Coloured strips (coloured threads) that define shapes and close the ground of the carpet on both sides. There are two types: triangular or inverted dome and split triangle or dome.

- The 'raqm', which fills the void at the edge of the carpet.

The corners, 'daraj' and 'marṣa', are a collection of elements that fill the ground with domes and shapes (natural and schematic), balancing colours and lines.

The main colour of the Naili carpet is dark red, which dominates the design.

6. A descriptive and analytical reading of the Jebel Amour carpet in the land of the Ouled Nail.



Figure 2: Jebel Amour Carpet



Figure 3: Jebel Amour Carpet

The Jebel Amour carpet is one of the most popular textiles in the Aflo region, both nationally and internationally. It boasts unique features in terms of the materials used in its production, colours, and intricate designs crafted by artisans. Regarding materials, the carpet relies heavily on natural resources. Women utilise their knowledge and special connection to nature to prepare the sheep's wool by washing it and removing impurities before spinning it into fine threads. The wool is then dyed using natural colouring agents such as pomegranate peels, sugar beets, saffron grains, anemone herbs and indigo stones.

The colours are dyed using natural substances, with white, red and black being the most important, while green and yellow were added later.

In terms of symbolism and meaning, white represents purity and clarity. It is a spiritual colour that evokes harmony, peace and tranquillity in observers. In Islam, God and His Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him) are said to love this colour.

The red hue in the carpet comes from anemone flowers and sugar beets. This distinct shade of red symbolises purity, joy and happiness, and is associated with luck and prosperity. It plays a significant role in wedding traditions and is also a symbol of mourning, expressing feelings of sadness and death. Furthermore, when paired with white, red conveys pride and national identity as it represents the blood of martyrs.

Black is held in high regard by many peoples; some view it as a gloomy colour, while others see it as a symbol of dignity. Historically, black was considered the king of colours and is ultimately regarded as one of the most refined and luxurious colours, commonly used in modern décor.

Green is used as a national colour in Islam and appears in the Qur'an: 'They will be adorned with green garments of fine silk and brocade' (Surah Al-Insan, verse 21). It symbolises new beginnings, abundance, good health, the earth, purity, nature, growth, optimism, strength, goodness, peace and love. The colour green reflects a person's heart and soul.

Historically, women wore yellow scarves to signify hope for the safe return of their loved ones from war. Yellow is also used to welcome loved ones back home, representing joy, happiness and vitality.

Carpets are renowned for their patterns, which express themes such as the relationship between men and women, the sun and the moon, and other topics derived from the unique characteristics of these carpets. While men traditionally handled the arithmetic involved in creating geometric shapes and designs on the carpet, women were responsible for executing these designs with precision to ensure they appeared on the carpet's surface as originally intended.

4. Conclusion:

Discussing the heritage of Naili inspires an appreciation of the region's historical creativity and aesthetic authenticity. Naili women have preserved customs and traditions through weaving, particularly carpet making, which is a cornerstone of traditional industries. Carpets have maintained their meanings and symbols, reflecting modernity through their colours, wools and decorations. Despite external social influences and changes in lifestyle, the vast geographical and demographic extent of Ouled Nail has remained unchanged, as has the determination of successive generations to uphold the torch of resilience and exchange cultural and civilisational heritage. This has enabled local women to express their creativity by connecting the past and present in a beautiful way.

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