Protective Manuscript Covers in \textit{Balad Tarāb}

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\textbf{Abstract}: The Ḥassānī Arabs occupy the western part of the Sahara stretching from the Senegal River north to the Anti Atlas in Morocco and from the Atlantic to Tuwāt Oasis in central Algeria and south to Timbuktu on the Niger River. The Ḥassānī Arabs arrived in the region between the 13\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries slowly incorporating the peoples already inhabiting the area. Ḥassānī society adopted many of the pre-existing social class distinctions based on Sudanic concepts of purity. Important to the discussion of leather crafts and books is the social class called \textit{ma'alimān} or master craftsmen, and more particularly the \textit{ma'allimāt} or master craftswomen as fine leather working is a female task. The \textit{ma'alimān} and \textit{ma'allimāt} produce much of the Ḥassānī material culture from musical performance to everyday objects. There is a gender division in the materials they work in; men work in wood and metals while women work in cloth and leather. Often they are husband and wife and there is a definite cross fertilization of concepts and designs across the media used. Using the most basic and simple tools these craftsmen and women are able to produce exquisite objects for everyday use. Intricate designs are created without benefit of patterns and are said to be the result of the artisan’s “mood” or \textit{mizāj}. Most of the designs are geometric, but some are representational such as hands, sandals, teapots, camels, and the star and crescent (symbols both of Islam and Ḥassānī identity as they are symbols on the flag of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania). Women use a range of colors; mainly bright and vibrant reds, yellows, and greens. Other colors such as black, blue, and purple are more frequently used to help outline the designs. Techniques employed include painting colors onto leather, cut outs, overlay of leather on mirrors, and stamping.

\textbf{Keywords}: Ma'alimān, Ma'allimāt, Ghilāf, Tlwijhat, Leather Folders, Manuscripts, Ḥassānī, Material Culture.

\section*{Introduction}

For centuries, books (both handwritten manuscripts and printed volumes) have been among of the important items traded along the routes that linked the oases and towns of the Sahara with North Africa and the eastern Arab lands as well as to the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa. People from the Sahara who went on pilgrimage to Makkah and Madīnah often brought back books purchased in Cairo, Damascus, Tunis, or Fez.\textsuperscript{1} With the rise of Islamic scholarship in many Saharan towns, local versions of Islamic classics as well as new

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\textsuperscript{1} There are a number of local tales about buying books. It is reported that Sīdī ʿAbd Allah ould al-Ḥāj Ibrāhīm from Tajākjah traded his valuable pure blood Arabian stallion for a book in Cairo while on pilgrimage to Makkah and in 1839 the scholar Ahmad ould Twayr al-Jannah needed 30 camels to bring back to Wadān the books and manuscripts he had purchased during his pilgrimage to Makkah, Louis Werner, “Mauritania’s Manuscripts,” \textit{Saudi Aramco World} 54, 6 (2003): 14.
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books written by local authors were produced and copied. Scholarly families established schools or maḥdarah to teach Islamic law and sciences, building large personal/family libraries many of which still exist. Books whether in manuscript or in print form, were valuable; and, as valuable items, needed to be protected. Finely worked leather folders, pouches, and folios were and are still made by local artisans, master craftswomen or maʿallimāt to store and keep the valuable works from harm. Maʿalimāt or master craftsmen, who were often as not the husbands of the maʿallimāt, produced wooden chests to store the books when not in use or when they were being transported. While much has been said about the contents of the books and their authors, the development of the Saharan styles of calligraphy, and even on the decorative arts associated with writing and illuminating manuscripts, little has been done on the leather containers made by the local women.

The Study Area: Tarāb al-Baydān

The western part of the Sahara stretches from Wādi Nūn in today’s Morocco east skirting the Jabal Banī or Anti Atlas mountains as far as Mḥamīd Ghazlān and Ḥamādat Dar’a, southeast to the oasis of Tuwāt in central Algeria, south to the Niger Bend and Timbuktu, and from Timbuktu it extends west to the Atlantic coast following the course of the Senegal River.

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2. Today most of these family libraries hold around 800 titles while the al-Habbut family library in Shinqīt has between 1,200 and 2,000 manuscripts dating from 11th to the 20th centuries, Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, Impressions of the Sahara (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 142; Werner, “Mauritania’s Manuscripts,” 9.

3. Odette du Puigaudeau notes that the maʿallimāt also made large leather bags called tasīfrah that were also used to store and transport books especially among the nomadic tribes, Le Quelle, Impressions of the Sahara, 224.

4. There are several types of calligraphic styles still used in the Western Sahara and Sahel based primarily on Kufic as developed in al-Andalus and the Maghrib usually referred to as Maghribī script. The most commonly used in Saharan manuscripts is called al-Graydah or lobed because of its overall rounded look. Others are Sudani or “Sudanese” with bold, wide, angular pen strokes, mashriqi or “Eastern” modeled after the less angular scripts more common in the Arab East (al-mashrīq al-ʿarabī), and mushafī “or text like” an ornamental style used mainly for illuminated pages (Werner, “Mauritania’s Manuscripts,” 13 and Muhammad Maghrīwj, “Timbuktu: Qarābat alf sannah min al-maktabāt,” in musālik al-maʿarifah: al-makṭūṭāt al-ʿarabiyah wa al-ʿajamiyah fi bilād al-sahra’ wa al-sahil (Rībāt: mʿāhād al-dirāsāt al-ifriqiyyah, 2006), 13-14.

5. The French ethnographer Odette du Puigaudeau offers only one paragraph about them in Arts et coutumes des Maures though she provides six detailed illustrations of which three are of book pouches or tlwijaht. She writes, “Certains de ces mudāres possèdent huit ou dix charges de chameaux, des livres scolaires, soit 1200 à 1500 kg. Chaque livre est enfermé dans un étui de peau souple, le tilwichet (pl. LI, LIII, LIV) orné de découpages finement dessinées et coloriées, doublé de fourrure d’agneau noir, afin que les reliures ne soient point élimées par la sable. Pendant les longs transports sur les animaux de bât, les livres sont rangés dans des coffres de fer ou de bois renforcés par de des traverses, des appliques et des clous de fer et de cuivre ciselés. On emploie aussi de grands sacs-bibliothèques en cuir, richement décorés, garnis intérieurement de fourrure noire; le dos du sac se prolonge en large rabat tenu fermé par un cadenas.” Odette du Puigaudeau, Arts et coutumes des Maures (Paris: Ibis Press, 2002), 224.
The area is vast and includes some of the least inhabited regions on earth; extensive areas such as the Majābat al-Kubrā (meaning the Great Empty Land) are seas of sand dunes having no permanent settlements. The region is primarily desert receiving less that 150 mm of rain fall a year, in many parts less than 100 mm a year. The southern part close to both the Senegal and Niger Rivers receives higher average rainfall and rather than true desert is Sahel grasslands able to support herds of cattle.

The Mauritanian scholar al-Mukhtar Ould Ḥāmidun notes that the region never had a single name to describe it.⁶ He states the region extends beyond the borders of the current state of Mauritania to include al-Sāqiyyah al-Ḥamrā’ in the Western or Moroccan Sahara and western Algeria as well as the Azawād in Mali. He argues what ties the region together is “the same dialect of melodious Arabic called al-Ḥassāniyyah which is the closest Arabic dialect to the Classical language.”⁷ He further argues the people share not only the same language, Arabic, but also the same “customs, traditions, family ties, and history.”⁸ A number of terms were used in classical Arabic geographies for the region such as Bilād al-Takrūr and Bilād al-Shiqṣīt, but the name most often used by the local people is Tarāb al-Baydān or the Land of the Whites to distinguish it from Bilād al-Sudān or Land of the Blacks to the south.⁹ Mauritania is the name the French gave to the largest part of the region in 1903 but it does not cover the whole area under discussion.

Social Organization and Craft Workers Class

The social organization in the region differs in a number of important ways from much of the rest of the Arab world and resembles the highly stratified societies of Mali or Senegal. The influence of such highly stratified societies with concepts of purity and impurity of professions extends to even the oases that dot the northern shore of the Sahara Desert. The legal implications for marriage, inheritance, and ownership of property are different for the distinct social classes to such an extent that the term “caste” is often used to describe the different classes in oases such as the Tāffīlāl in Morocco and Tuwāt in

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⁷ The passage reads, “Sukānuḥā yatakalāmuḥā lahjah wāḥidah hiyya al-lughah al-‘arabiyyah malḥūnah tusammā al-Ḥassāniyyah wa hiyya aqrabu al-lahajāt al-‘arabiyyah ʿila al-fusḥā.” Many Ḥassāni speakers maintain that their dialect is the closest of all modern forms of the language to Classical Arabic emphasizing their ability in poetry which is linked to both their Bedouin past and the close link between poetry and the Classical language. The region where Ḥassāniyyah is spoken is also referred to as “bilād mallyūn shā’ir” or “the land of a million poets,” Ould Ḥāmidun, Ḥayāt Mūrūtāniyya, 8.
⁸ Ould Ḥāmidun, Ḥayāt Mūrūtāniyya, 8.
⁹ Ibid. 10.
Highly stratified social divisions are more often associated with settled populations and states than the nomadic tribally organized peoples such as the Berbers and Arabs of the Tarāb al-Baydān and their adoption of the system is an indication of the strong cultural and political influence exerted by states such as the Empire of Ghana and the Empire of Mali over the area. Arab geographers such as al-Bakrī (died 1094) noted that the Berber princes of Awdāghust took on the court ceremonies of their Ghanaian overlords. By the time the Awlād Ḫassān tribes arrived in the region the highly stratified social organization was already well established. The Awlād Ḫassān formed a new elite and their language quickly spread among the non-Arab peoples of the region.

At the top of the social hierarchy are the Awlād Ḫassān tribes. As noted by wuld Ḫāmidun, Ḫassānīyah dialect of Arabic is spoken throughout this vast area and serves as the major unifying cultural force for even those who do not have Ḫassānī lineages. Ḫassānīyah belongs to the group of dialects brought to North Africa by the Banī Maʿqil Bedouin tribes who arrived in the Maghrib during the latter part of the 12th century. Like the other major wave of Bedouin Arabs, the Banī Hilāl and Banī Sulaym, the Banī Maʿqil originally came from Yemen in the Arabian Peninsula and migrated first to Egypt. The Fatimid rulers of Egypt encouraged these three Bedouin confederacies to move on into North Africa with the Banī Hilāl and Banī Sulaym taking a more northerly route along the Mediterranean and the Banī Maʿqil taking a more southerly route skirting the Sahara. The Banī Maʿqil arrived in what is today Morocco about 100 years after the Banī Hilāl and Banī Sulaym and by the 12th century established themselves near the major caravan city of Sijilmāsah in the important Tāfilālī Oasis. The Awlād Ḫassān or Dhwi Ḫassān emerged as

10. The northern oases have four distinct social classes, two considered “free” and two “non-free.” At the top are the shurafla’ or descendants to the Prophet Muhammad, second are the ahrār or free people who are most tribally organized Arabs or Berbers though non-tribal craftsmen are included including the Jews but with restrictions on agricultural property, third are the harātīn similar to serfs in that they are technically free but unable to own or inherit property including water rights, and finally there are the ‘abīd or slaves. These social divisions still exist despite various governments’ attempts to end them. See, Larbi Mezzine, Le Tāfilālī: Contribution à l’histoire du Maroc aux XVII et XVIII siècles (Rabat: Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, 1987), for a detailed discussion of the legal aspects of the class divisions in Morocco’s oases. For a better discussion of the contemporary situation in the same oasis see Hsain Ilahiane, “Small-scale Irrigation in a Multietnic Oasis Environment: The Case of Zaouit Amelkis Village,” Journal of Political Ecology 3 (1996): 89-104.


12. Ḫassānīyah is the feminine nisbah adjective derived from the name Ḫassān, the apical ancestor of those who claim to be Awlād Ḫassān while Ḫassānī is the masculine version of the adjective. The dialect is referred to as Ḫassānīyah because the word for dialect in Arabic, ḫājah, is feminine but in speech Ḫassānī can be used, for example the language can be called ‘Arabī Ḫassānī or even simply Ḫassānī just as Moroccan Arabic can be called Maghribī or Egyptian Arabic Masrī.
a distinct tribal entity during the 13th century while still living in the vicinity the Tāfilālt. The Awlād Ḥassān began absorbing elements of the Sanhājah Massūfāh Berbers who from the time the Murābitūn state collapsed in the 12th century controlled much of the trans-Saharan trade. Eventually the Massūfāh and elements of the Awlād Ḥassān merged together into the different Ḥassānī tribes one finds today in the Ḥawd of Mauritania and Azawād in Mali. The Ḥassānīyah dialect reflects the history of the Awlād Ḥassān carrying with it features common to all Bedouin dialects, influences from Egypt, and numerous words and phrases from Sanhājah Berber. In addition, there are a few borrowings from other languages such as Pulaar and Soninke. All of this makes Ḥassānīyah distinct from other dialects of the language spoken in the Maghrib.

The penetration by the Ḥassānī Arabs into the region now fully part of what can be called their “cultural area” took a long time and was not completed until the defeat of the Sanhājah Berbers in War of Shurbubba in 1674. With the defeat of the Sanhājah, there was a rapid Arabization process with many of the Berbers adopting Ḥassānī Arabic and some even claiming Arab origins – often associating themselves with the heroes of the Arab/Muslim conquest

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13. The Awlād Ḥassān or Dhwi Ḥassān was well established as a separate tribal entity before Hasan al-Wazzān or Leo Africanus traveled across the Sahara between 1509 and 1513. He is among the first to mention them as well as some of their distinct sub-tribes. See the maps of tribal locations based on the information provided by Ḥasan al-Wazzān or Leo Africanus by Louis Massignon in Le Maroc dans les premières années du XVI siècle (reprint of 1906 edition) (Rabat: Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc, 2006).

14. The Ḥassānī Arabs married into and absorbed the Sanhājah Massūfāh lineages which controlled the trans-Saharan trade between the Tāfilālt and Timbuktu. The Barābīsh tribe seems to have a large Berber element with perhaps a small core of Ḥassānī lineages. The Awlād Mbrak and Awlād Dāwūd along with the Barābīsh gained control over much of the eastern part of today’s Ḥassānī cultural area replacing the Massūfāh as far south as the Azawād in western Mali by the 16th century. The eastern part of today’s Ḥassānī area was the first region to come under their cultural domination. See the discussion in H.T. Norris, The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara (Beirut, Lebanon: Longman Librairie du Liban, 1986) and in Aziz Batran, The Qadiryya Brotherhood in West African and the Western Sahara (Rabat: Institute of African Studies, 2001).


16. The Shamāmah and Guidimaka regions of modern Mauritania are not fully Arabic-speaking today and both Pulaar (Fulani) and Soninke are the dominant languages. Caravan cities such as Walātah and Tishīt had significant Soninke-speaking populations well into the 20th century where Azayr, a form of Mandé, was still spoken by a few people until the end of the 20th century (see the discussion on the slow change of ethnic identity and language in Timothy Cleveland, Becoming Walata: A History of Saharan Social Formation (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2002).

17. The Sanhājah were led by a religious reformer, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Daymānī. Nāṣir al-Dīn tried to reform society and launched expeditions against those he considered to be lax or poor Muslims, including the Ḥassānī Arabs. The defeat of his forces in central Mauritania brought about the quick Arabization of western and central Mauritania, Norris, The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara, 35-43; Norris, “Mūrūtāniyyā.”
of North Africa such as ‘Uqbah ibn Nāfi‘ or with the family of the Prophet Muḥammad such as the Idrīsī sharīfs. Others claim descent from the Arab jurist, al-Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Murādī al-Ḥadrāmī (died 1095-6), who helped the Murābfīn set the seal of Mālikī Sunnī orthodoxy on the Maghrib. Those who could claim to be Ḣassānī in origin (whose direct ancestor is Ḥassān ibn ‘Āqil founder of the Axlād Ḥassān) are referred to as “warriors” or muḥāribīn and hold the top rank in the social hierarchy.

Second to the muḥāribīn are the “scholars” or zawāyā tribes who are mainly descendants of the Lamtah, Jazūlah, Lamṭūnah, and other Sanhājah Berber tribes who had formed the military base for the Murābatfīn in the 11th century and who had dominated the region until the arrival of the Ḥassānī Arabs.19 As noted above, many of them adopted the Arabic language as well as Arab ancestors.20 Along with the Berber tribes a number of “noble” Arabs are also considered to be among the zawāyā tribes, primarily those who are Shuṛfīn1 or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad or from other Quraysh ancestors who had established themselves in the region long before the arrival of the Axlād Ḥassān.21 The next social class is that of the Znāgh or Sanhājah herders who work for the muḥāribīn and zawāyā tribes but their numbers are rather small as they merge into other classes such as the zawāyā. Znāgh tribes such as the Idayshillī have fairly high status once being warriors and paid no tribute to the elite and today are not that distinguishable from other Baydān

18. The Arabic term zawāyā is the plural of zawāyā and has come to mean a Sufi lodge. The spread of the Qadirī Sufi Brotherhood in the region began around the same time as the arrival of the Axlād Ḥassān tribes and once defeated, the Sanhājah were to give up the way of the sword and take up the way of the scholar’s pen. The Qadirī order was greatly spread by the work of the Kuntah tribe who trace their origins to ‘Uqbah bin Nāfi‘, see Hammahallah Ould al-Salim’s edited and annotated edition of Al-risālah al-ghālawiyah wa risālah fi nasib idw al-ḥāj al-sharīf fīn (Ribat: Ma‘had al-dirāsāt al-ifrāqiyah, 2003) and Aziz Batran’s work on the role of the Kuntah in spreading the Qadirī Order in The Qadiryya Brotherhood in West Africa and the Western Sahara: The Life and Times of Shaykh al-Mukhtar al-Kunti (1729-1811) (Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 2001).

19. The division between warrior and scholar tribes is not so neatly divided into Arab and Berber, as some Ḥassānī tribes left the way of the warrior to led more sedentary and scholarly pursuits and some of the warrior tribes, such as the Idaw ‘Ish who ruled the Emirate of the Tagant, are Sanhājah, see Norris, “Mūrāfanīyā,” Encyclopaedia of Islam. The “scholarly” Kuntah were both warriors and scholars, see John Hunwick, “Kunta,” Encyclopedia of Islam (2 edition) CD ROM, 2001.

20. The famous Risālah al-ghālawiyah by Shaykh Sūfī Muḥammad al-Kuntī was written to prove the validity of the Kuntah’s claim to noble Arab ancestry though through the Qurayshī commander ‘Uqbah bin Nāfi‘, see Ould al-Salim, Al-risālah al-ghālawiyah.

21. The zawāyā are further divided into those called shamsī or shiyām meaning those who stand in the sun and do not need the protection of a warrior tribe and those called zulmī meaning those who stand in the shade and need the protection of a warrior tribe. Ould Cheikh presents a comprehensive list of the different tribes of Mauritania in, Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, Eléments d’histoire de la Mauritanie (Nouakchott: Centre Culturel Français Antoine de St-Exupéry, 1991). Ould Cheikh notes that he depended on the work of Ould Ḥamidun who provides an extensive presentation of Ḥassānī and Zawāyā tribes of the entire Ḥassānī speaking region in Hayāt Mārūtāniyā, 1994.
tribes in the Adrār of central Mauritania having lost the Berber language in favor of Ḥassānī Arabic.

Underneath the Znāgah are the craftsmen and women (ma'allimīn and iggāwīn) who have a number of different origins. They have always been a both needed and somewhat despised population. Some have Ḥassānī tribal origins, some descend from Sanhājah tribes, and others have Hartāṇī ancestors. Du Puigaudeau states that some of the ma'allimīn could have Jewish origins given the strong Jewish involvement in the trans-Saharan trade during its height as well as the fact that Jews were often gold and silver smiths. The 13th to 15th centuries have been called the “Jewish era of the Sahara” due to their heavy involvement in trade and there were large Jewish populations in a number of main Saharan cities. Du Puigaudeau states that members of the Ahl Barakāllah tribe told her that the “ma'allimīn have no country or tribe and are called Yuhūd because according to a legend only Jews are artisans.” Norris in his article on Mauritania in the Encyclopaedia of Islam states, “The smiths were held to descend from Jews (especially from King David) or Negroes.” Jewish ancestry is also claimed by the inādan or craftsmen among the Tuareg who claim their craft was originally taught to them by Saydnā Dāwūd, King David. Today, few if any of the ma'allimīn claim a Jewish background and many instead claim connections to Ḥassānī or Zawāyā tribes including the Kuntah, Awlād Qaylān (or Ghaylān), Awlād Dāwūd, Taknah, and Awlād Abyūrī.

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22. See Roy M. Dilley, Islamic and Caste Knowledge Practices Among the Haalpulaar'en in Senegal: Between Mosque and Termite Mound (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) for a discussion on the social status of craftsmen and women in West African society. As people who change substances from one form into another, there are a number of pre-Islamic concepts of purity and power, suspicion and fear about the craftsmen that have continued to the present. The Haalpulaar'en or Fulbe occupy the Futa Toro which is on both sides of the Senegal River, in both Mauritania and Senegal. Craftsmen and women have the same social status among other West African peoples such as the Wolof and Mandinka.


24. Labelle Prussin has pursued the possible Jewish origins of some of the ma'allimīn exploring the Jewish connections with craftsmen in not only the Sahara but also in West African societies (see Prussin Labelle, “Judaic Threads in the West African Tapestry: No More Forever?” in The Art Bulletin June (2006).


26. The actual text is, “Les ma'allemin n'ont ni patrie ni tribu. On les appelle Yahūd parce que d'après la légende, seuls les Juifs étaient artisans.” She goes on to say that in her long time in the region all of the ma'allimīn she encountered were Muslims and never heard anyone refer to the ma'allimīn as Yuhūd, see du Puigaudeau, Arts et coutumes des Maures, 23.


28. Du Puigaudeau notes several of the very fine leather pieces she uses to illustrate Arts et coutumes des Maures were made by ma'allimāt of the Awlād Abyūrī.
The maʿallimīn are followed in the social hierarchy by the non-tribal harāṭīn who are similar to serfs. They are composed of various different origins including freed slaves and who work the soil for the Ḥassānī and Zawāyā overlords. The harāṭīn are technically free, but have no rights of inheritance or rights to own land and water. Below them are the ʿabīd or slaves, who no longer are owned (and therefore not an economic class) but still exist as a distinct social class.29 At the bottom of the social scale are the non-tribal bafur, nemadi (hunters in the deep desert), and imwragin (fishermen along the Atlantic coast) who may be direct living connections to Saharan Neolithic populations. The highly stratified social system based on occupation seems to have been in place before the arrival of the Ḥassānī Arabs; a borrowing from a much earlier time by local Berber princes in service to the Kings of Ghana and later Mali. The Ḥassānī Arabs complicated the situation by adding an overlay of tribally organized elite replacing the tribally organized Sanhājah Berbers as the top rung of the social scale.

Of interest here are the maʿallimīn and maʿallimāt who provide most of the items of Baydānī material culture.30 They are a professional class, and some have called them a “caste,” of highly skilled artisans with definite gender divided tasks.31 Men work in metals (gold, silver, brass, copper, and iron), wood, and as tailors while their women work in leather, making tents and mats, painting teapots and other household utensils, and dyeing cloth.32 Frequently husbands and wives are both skilled craftspeople and it is easy to see how designs in

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29. Slavery has long been an issue for Mauritania and despite numerous attempts by the National Assembly to pass laws emancipating slave, the institution seems to persist. In May, 2007 the newly elected government of Mauritania passed a new law which criminalizes slavery. Even where the institution no longer exists as an economic category, it nonetheless persists as a social category. Fieldwork in the Tāfflālt Oasis has revealed that both the harāṭīn and ʿabīd are frozen out of a number of rights becaushe, by social convention, they cannot own or inherit property.

30. The iggāwin or bards also belong to the same social class or “caste” as the maʿallimīn and are seen to be “craftsmen and women” who are skilled in the use of words (poetry) and in composing/playing music. Just as the muhāribīn tribal elite had their artisans, they also had their bards. The iggāwin are still feared for the power of their words as well as admired for their abilities in music and poetry. They played major roles in the court life of the Ḥassānī leadership and even provided inspiration for sustained valor in battle accompanying their patrons to war, Norris, The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara, 60-66.

31. Gisèle Simard notes that scholars such as ould Cheikh do not like the term “caste” as social stratification in the Sahara because it does not have same basis as caste in India; purity, profession, in addition there are no untouchables in Baydānī society. Ould Cheikh sees the basis of social organization of the society as tribal, which he states is the fundamental social structure (46). However, not all people are tribally organized and there are concepts of purity and profession that influence the division within the society. Gisèle Simard does note that there are both horizontal and vertical stratification even within those who are tribal (45). There are also differences in rights of ownership and inheritance as well as restrictions on marriage that prevent horizontal and vertical social and spatial mobility (47).

one medium influence those in another. Similar designs can be found on leather items made by the women and in silver or wood items made by the men. It is generally recognized that the workmanship in leather has always been better from the regions around ‘ayûn al-‘atrûs, Būtilimit, and Madhadharah though following the devastating droughts of the 1970s many of the ma’allimûn and ma’alîmät moved to Nouakchott (Anwâkshut), Nouadhibû (Anwâdhibû), and Zouèrate (Zawirat) a where most craft work is now being done.

Book Crafts of the Ma’tallîmät

The ma’allîmät make a wide variety of leather items from mirror cases, bags and containers of different sizes, men’s belts, and floor mats to parts for camel saddles. Generally speaking women work at home when other household tasks have been finished leaving her brief times during the day to work on an item. Today some of the ma’allîmät work on site at women’s cooperatives or special workshops but even then much of the work offered for sale at women’s cooperatives have been done at home. Frequently leather items made by the women are offered for sale through their husband’s workshops.

Using the most basic tool kit consisting of a set of paints, small sticks used to apply the paints (qalam), a knife or razor blade (mûs or muqallam, which refers specifically to the act of trimming), a tool for making incised designs (sakîn lil-zakhrafah), an awl (mikhraz), a large needle (’ibrah), a piece of wood or stiff hide as a work surface (khashbat al-’aml or simply called a lawḥ), and sometimes a compass (bikkâr) to help make circles, ma’allîmät make the a wide range of useful and decorative items for daily use. Camel, cow, goat, and sheep hides are used for the leather, though most

33. The two settlements of Bûtilimit and ‘Ayûn al-’Atrûs are still well known for the high quality of the items made for pastoral nomads and the ma’allîmät from Madhadharrah are famous for their skills both in leather work and in making tents.

34. Husbands have workshops where they make items such as jewelry, wooden chests or boxes, wooden milk bowls or repair items like tea trays and display the leather items made by the women of the family. Simard’s study of women merchants in Mauritania notes that in the 1980s some 80% of those working in artisan production and were women were organized into cooperatives or sold their products in individual shops (Ibid., 97).

35. Today nearly all the paints used throughout the region are synthetic rather than made of natural dyes.

36. M. F. Delarozière, Formes et couleurs en Mauritania (Nouakchott: Société Nationale de Press d’édition, 1976), 22. It is interesting to note that the detailed work by du Puigaudeau includes descriptions and illustrations of the tools used by the ma’llimûn but not of the ma’allîmät other than one plate showing knives used to cut leather (Delarozière, Formes et couleurs en Mauritania, 29). The publication by the National Museum in Nouakchott Ethnographie gives a slightly different list of names for the ma’allîmät’s work tools. They include marçhem or tool used to stamp designs into the leather and a marârâl or stone used to polish the leather (no author, Ethnography. Nouakchott: National Muieum, n.d., 17). They note the stone is often a Neolithic grinder.
items made for books are of goat or sheep leather because they are softer and supple. In the past, some items, including book covers, were made of addax hide though the number of such covers seems to have been small. Called *muhar* or *mahāh* \(^{37}\) or *lami* \(^{38}\) in Ḥassānīyah and Znāgah dialects, addax hide is still highly prized for its strength and durability. The region of the Western Sahara was well known for the items made from addax hide, such as shields (called *Lamtī*) that were in high demand in North Africa, Spain, and the Arab East. \(^{39}\) Book covers made from addax are said to outlast any other leather and the few examples seen by the author are in excellent condition despite age. \(^{40}\) In addition to addax, gazelle hides are also used for books, though mainly for parchment pages. \(^{41}\)

The leather is available from slaughtered animals and needs to be tanned and prepared to be used to make items such as pouches or folders. In the past the skins were either tanned at home by the *maʿallimāt* or were purchased in the market already tanned and ready for preparation. \(^{42}\) Home tanning required the skin to be stretched, dried, and fletched to remove all of the fat and other tissues. \(^{43}\) The hide then would need to have the hair or wool removed, though for certain items such as the pouch for valuable manuscripts or Qurʾans called *tlwjhat* requires the wool to remain. This tanning process requires the use of animal urine or bird droppings to provide the needed acids to both remove the hair or wool as well as to soften the hide. \(^{44}\) Once the hide had been tanned it is ready to be prepared for use. The leather is laid out on the work board, the *khashbat al-ʿaml* or *lawḥ*, and first trimmed with a knife to the size and shape for the item to be made. The leather is then rubbed with a rounded stone to make the surface smooth. Once the surface has been sufficiently smoothed

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\(^{37}\) *Mahāh* or *baqar wahshi*, means wild cow, are the usual Arabic terms for oryx, another large desert antelope indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula.

\(^{38}\) *Lami* or *amelul* are the Berber terms for addax. The addax was hunted to near extinction and today only a few small herds still exist in Mauritania and Mali (Novaresio and Guadalupi, 127).

\(^{39}\) The addax was hunted to near extinction in order to supply North African and even Spanish military demands for shields. A special means of tanning the hide was used that made them strong enough to repel lance thrusts and arrows, Norris, *the Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara*, 136; 147-50.

\(^{40}\) One entire manuscript in the Habbut library in Shinqīṭ is made of addax, the pages as well as the cover. One of the few surviving copies of the Qurʾān in the hand of Shaykh Māʿ al-ʿAynayn kept at his *zāviyā* in al-Asmārah is in an addax hide folder.

\(^{41}\) Several of the libraries in Shinqīṭ include rare samples of manuscripts written fully on gazelle parchment or *al-riqq*.

\(^{42}\) The *maʿallimāh* who manages the women’s leather cooperative in Laayoune (al-ʿAyūn in the Sāqīyah al-Ḥamrāʾ) that most of the women are now using lower quality leathers in their work because they can no longer afford the higher quality hides (personal communication, December 2006).

\(^{43}\) The *maʿallimāt* make a few items from raw hide such as small boxes used to keep jewelry. These are shaped while wet and then as they dry they harden and take on the shape. They are then decorated in geometric designs using *henna*.

\(^{44}\) Repeated soakings in a vat of urine causes the hide to turn a brilliant white.
so that it is possible to apply the paints, the *ma‘llumah* begins to lay out the designs sometimes using a small compass for circles and a tool with a pointed end such as a knife or an awl to make straight lines. These are lightly incised into the leather to serve as a guide for the elaborate patterns she will then fill in using the sticks dipped in the paints.

Designs used by the *ma‘llumât* are mainly geometric; straight lines, squares, circles, crosses, triangles, and diamonds. The Arabic letter “*waw*” and the stylized side view of a *znâd* (the metal/steel part of the flint and steel used to create sparks for a fire)\(^{45}\) are used to help create a wide variety of other designs including arabesques, swastikas, and what are called ‘*‘aqrab* or scorpions. Tri-lobed or four-lobed designs are common in a wide range of items made in metal, wood, and leather where they are used as a center.\(^{46}\) Other designs include some recent adoptions such as hearts and clubs taken from playing cards and rosettes associated with Moroccan carpets and Moroccan *henna* designs. Most of the designs are seen as “female” while only the Arabic letter “*waw*” is thought of as a “male” design.\(^{47}\) For example, it is argued that the letter “*waw*” in combination with geometrics serves as the base for designs called *ra‘ s maftūḥ* or open head and *widhān* or ears; patterns used in wall decorations in Walâtah as well as on leather and calabash. As noted above, many of the patterns are shared between the various media; leather, calabash, wood, silver, straw mats, and even wall decorations with the same motifs, though sometimes with different names.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{45}\) *Zandawāt* (plural of *znād*) are still made by the *ma‘llumín* for use by pastoral nomads. In the hands of a skilled person, it is as easy or even easier to start a fire with a flint and steel as it is with a match.

\(^{46}\) In Walâtah four-lobed designs flank both sides of the main doorway. They are called *musham‘ah* or candelabra and they have a *ḥajar al-taymūm* or ablation stone in the middle. Some speculate that the design may be influenced by manuscript decorations.

\(^{47}\) There is a good deal of debate about the “*waw*”; its use and meaning as a design in Hāssanī material culture. See the discussion in National Museum, Nouakchott publication *Ethnographie* n.d.

\(^{48}\) During field work in Walâtah in December 2005 – January 2006, designs used as house decorations were photographed and cataloged by the author and three student assistants. Names for the designs were collected and compared with those collected by Odette du Puigaudeau in 1937 (Du Puigaudeau, *Arts et coutumes des Maures*; Le Quellec, *Impressions of the Sahara*). Le Quellec notes that in addition to the work done by du Puigaudeau, those by G. J. Duchemin in 1948 and 1949 provided local meanings rather than the Diffusionist orientation of du Puigaudeau (see Le Quellec, *Impressions of the Sahara*, 100-8). A number of the designs on houses are similar to those found on other items such as calabash, but did not share the same name. House decorations in Walâtah are unique to the city and, like leather work, are the domain of women. Today there is one recognized *ma‘llumah* in Walâtah from whom all others learn.
designs depict the shape of traditional sandals, hands, star and crescent, or a barrād or tea pot.

The main colors used on leather are red, yellow, green, blue, purple, and black, but the dominant colors are red and yellow with the others used often for outlining or emphasizing the designs; black being the most common color for outlining. Yellow is often used as an overall background color rather than leave the natural color of the hide because the yellow background helps bring out the designs. When made from natural dyes, the once vivid colors fade into a soft, mellow reddish brown making the individual designs difficult to discern. More recently minimalist black and white color schemes have become more popular with the women perhaps as a response to tourist tastes.

Book covers come in three main types: a pouch or box that the book is placed in, a folder or folio that again the book is placed in, and a cover bound directly onto the book. Today few ma’allimāt take the time to make the pouch or box, but the folder/folio is still made in fairly large numbers throughout the region. The most beautiful of the book arts made by the ma’allimat is the pouch called tlwijhat and is frequently used to protect the most valuable book, the Qur’an. The word tlwijhat is originally a Berber term and closely related to the Ḥassāniyah term lwijh used for the prayer rug as well as for the sheepskin pad placed under the camel saddle. Both take their

49. The sandal design is often associated with the Prophet Muhammad the representations of them often found in manuscripts such as the Dalā’īl al-Khayrāt of Sufi shaykh Abū ‘Abdallah Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān ibn Abī Bakr al-Jazārī (died 1465) or those which trace the Prophet’s genealogy. Similar representations of the Prophet’s sandals are found in mihrabs of some mosques such as in the Ottoman period tile work in the Darwish Pasha Mosque in Damascus built between 1572 and 1575. The Ḥassāni prayer “rug” called lwijh made of leather often has the two sandals to mark the place where the person should stand and has two hands for where the person should put them while prostrating during prayer.

50. Hands are found on a number of craft items made by the ma’allimāt and have a number of meanings from the khamsah or khamsah or the five used to protect against the ‘ayn al-ḥassād or eye of envy to representation of a woman’s hands with henna designs on items such as woman’s musical instrument the ardīn or small harp.

51. The star and crescent are symbols of Islam, but in the Hassāni area, they have also come to represent the Hassāni community at large and they are the symbols used on both the Mauritanian and Polisario flags. The star and crescent are found on a number of items in cloth, leather, metal, and wood made throughout the entire Hassāni cultural area.

52. The barrād is a symbol of hospitality and generosity. Tea is an important part of Hassāni social customs and their tea is both strong and sweet. In a community that historically was often very poor, tea and sugar represent the best that can be offered to a guest.

53. These differ greatly from the leather covered boxes called makhtūm in Senegal used primarily for Qur’ans. The term makhtūm, is from the Arabic word meaning stamped, is composed of a stiff material (often card board) that is then covered in an outer layer of thick, embossed red leather with geometric designs. Du Puigaudeau includes one line drawing, plate LVII, of a similar sort of cover which she notes was made by a ma’allimah of the Awd Abyrī in Büülimīn in 1951 (236-7).
names from the Berber word lwijh which means sheepskin;\textsuperscript{54} tlwijhat being the feminine diminutive form. In Arts et coutumes des Maures du Puigaudeau supplies three detailed line drawings of tlwijhat from Būtilimĭl of which two are identified as having been made by ma'allimāt of the Awlād Abyīrī tribe.\textsuperscript{55} The tlwijhat is made of a folded piece of sheepskin with the fleece still intact. The fleece side faces the inside of the pouch because it helps protect the book from sand and dust. The Qur’an, being a holy book, should not touch any type of dirt. The outside of the pouch is decorated similar to what is done for larger lwijh or other leather items such as the large leather travel bag called a tasūfrah. Decorations can be directly painted on to the leather or be separate pieces of leather appliqué sewn onto the pouch. The pouch is made so that it has a top flap that can be folded over and secured with a long leather strap. The strap ties to a small braided leather loop at the bottom of the piece.

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\textsuperscript{54} The term comes from the word Berber terms ulī or sheep and wich or hide (Du Puigaudeau, Arts et coutumes des Maures, 252).

\textsuperscript{55} The drawings are plates LII, LIII, and LIV with written descriptions on the facing pages (Du Puigaudeau, Arts et coutumes des Maures, 226-31). Most of the line drawings in du Puigaudeau’s works were done by her friend and traveling companion, Marion Sénones.
Fig. 2: Wooden chests like this one are used to protect the manuscripts and during the AQIM takeover of Timbuktu, they were used to house the manuscripts and were taken out into the desert and buried in the sand, (Mauritania 2007).

Fig. 3: The mosque founded by Muhammad Fadil bin Mamin (1797-1869) of the Fadiliyyah Sufi order near the town of Atar, Mauritania. It houses a number of manuscripts, (Mauritania 2007).
Fig. 4: One of the books in the collection owned by the mosque founded by Muhammad Fadil bin Mamin, (Mauritania 2007).

Fig. 5: Freshly completed covers for manuscripts made by a women’s cooperative in the town of Shingit. They are made for tourists to buy to help support the women who have traditionally made the covers for manuscripts. The women also make the covers for the various libraries in the town which has a rich tradition of making such items for the books in the local libraries, (Mauritania 2007).
The second format is the folio or folder called ghilāf which is still widely made by the ma‘allimāt.56 These used to be made of a stiff piece of raw hide or other such material (even pieces of commercial book bindings) with an outer cover of well-tanned, supple goat or sheep leather glued to it. The outer cover is heavily decorated with painted designs in bright colors, and in the past is seems that red was the main color used. Today most of the folios are made of cardboard or some other cheap but stiff material for the base form and then a piece of goat or sheep leather glued to it. Book folders offered for sale at women’s cooperatives in places such as Shinqīt or Rashīd are often made for the growing tourist market and are less carefully made and most likely would not be used to actually protect a manuscript.57 These folders/folios are the most commonly made book item throughout the area today, being the easiest and quickest to make though ma‘allimāt will make other, more time consuming items on request.58 Folios, similar to the tlwijhat, are used to protect manuscripts and preserve original leather bindings on rare printed books that have been imported from other Arab countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria by those returning from pilgrimage to Makkah and/or periods of study in Damascus, Cairo, Tunis, or Fez.59

The third format is leather covers directly bound to the book itself which are also called ghilāf; ghillafa meaning cover in Arabic.60 While there are a few examples of locally bound volumes, these seem to not have been very common requiring tools and skills beyond those usually found among the ma‘allimāt.61 More frequently these are pieces of decorated leather sewn or glued over the original bindings like an appliqué rather than to completely

56. The Mauritanian authorities are encouraging women to maintain this art form. Women’s craft cooperatives in places such as Shinqīt and Tīshīt make the folders not only for sale to the growing tourist industry but also to help in the efforts to preserve/conserve the numerous collections of manuscripts in the country. Women are asked to make folios that are used to replace older ones that no longer are able to adequately protect manuscripts.

57. This was in contrast to a visit in December 2003 where a number of folios were, though made with inferior materials, well made with care taken in all stages of construction.

58. The author commissioned one of the ma‘allimāt in Laayoune (al-‘Ayūn) to make a tlwijhat based on a line drawing of plate LII made by Marion Sénones (Du Puigaudeau, *Arts et coutumes des Maures*, 227). It took the ma‘allimah three days to make the item. The ma‘allimah took the black and white line drawing literally as a model and made a black and white replica.

59. It should be noted that much of the damage suffered by the books and manuscripts is the result of continued use by students studying the texts and less by the actual conditions of storage. Many of the libraries are still actively used by students and scholars and very few have alternative versions (digital or microfilm) available for people to use.

60. The term ghilāf is also used for leather rugs. Small rugs are often part of the tea service while the large rugs are made to lie on the floor or even serve as a blanket. Most often these are made as a patchwork of leather pieces carefully sewn together and each piece painted in bright colors.

61. Skills in actual book binding, affixing the pages to the spine of a book, require equipment rarely found among the ma‘allimāt’s tool kit.
replace worn out bindings with a new binding. The covers may be made of finely tanned leather with painted decoration similar to the folders or with a simple embossed design similar to those of their original leather bindings.62

**Conclusion**

The future of traditional book covers is tied to the future of the women who make them, the ma'āllimāt.63 The government of Mauritania is trying to encourage the ma'āllimāt to continue to make at least book folders (ghilāf) as part of a large national effort to preserve the scholarly heritage of the country. Mauritania’s manuscripts were declared a UNESCO World Heritage in 1979 and the towns of Shinqīt, Tīshīt, Wādān, and Walāṭah were placed on the list of World Heritage sites.64 In 1993 the Mauritanian government established the National Foundation for the Preservation of the Ancient Towns of Mauritania and has launched several programs and initiatives to help preserve the manuscripts. The town of Shinqīt has its own local association, Association for the Protection of Shinqītī’s Historical Monuments, to deal with its heritage.65 The old caravan cities of Shinqīt and Wādān have received financial support from the European Union and the Government of Spain while Walāṭah has received assistance from Spain to help preserve local heritage including the libraries.66 Many of the books and manuscripts need to have new folders and a number of the ma’āllimāt in places like Shinqīt and Tīshīt have been asked to make them as part of the effort. Given the large number of libraries and the number of manuscripts, the ma’āllimāt have work for the next several decades.

62. Some of the locally bound volumes seen by the author have been placed in the better quality addax leather because it is sturdier, thicker leather than goat or sheep. Books bound in the major centers of Arab learning have long traditions of fine leather covers with stamped or embossed decorations. These are often a diamond with Arabesques inside them. For the expert, it is said it is possible to tell where a book was bound by the quality of the leather and the stamped design on the cover.

63. Already the twijihat is a rare item in the market and are too costly for most locals to order. Most of what is made today are ghilāf or book folders.

64. Le Quellec, Impressions of the Sahara. 144.

65. Ibid., 144. There are similar efforts in Mali but both Mauritania and Mali are poor countries with little resources to deal with the preserving their cultural heritage. The Ahmad Bābā Library in Timbūktū is in the process of digitizing its whole collection as well as has the most up to date methods of preserving the actual manuscripts. Since the effort began, local people from around the Azawād are stepping forward with their own private libraries asking for similar assistance.

66. The Spanish government gave financial and technical assistance for the building of a new library as well as a museum in Walāṭah (Fall) notes the Spanish also provided an improved water system, an agricultural project, and solar energy). People were asked to contribute their private libraries to the new one named after the famous Walāṭan scholar al-Tālib Abū Bakr. Manuscripts have been cataloged and are now housed in metal cases with large sliding drawers. In Shinqīt the European Union and the Spanish government provided aid to rebuild or renovate houses including the old private libraries. Wādān has only recently received the same sort of aid and in 2007 the process of restoration of the old part of the city began.
Tourism is another important influence on the craft work done in the region, not only that of the ma’allimāt but of the ma’allimīn as well. Many of them complain that customers, local and foreign, are not interested in the finer items the craftspeople can make. Locals are too poor for the most part and can afford only the cheaper things while tourists want souvenirs; small, light items easily packed. Ma’allimāt interviewed by the author state that few tourists are interested in the more traditional items, many of which are both expensive and large. Book folders are also made for the tourist market and generally are not difficult to sell, but quality is too often sacrificed for quick production and the souvenir nature of the item.67 Ma’allimāt from Laayoune (al-‘Ayūn) and Boujdour (Būjdūr) in Morocco complain about the poor quality of the materials they can afford, especially of the leather. Better quality leather is available locally or from places like Marrakech (Marrākush) but it is generally beyond their means to buy and they use it only when a customer orders an item and is willing to pay both the extra cost and wait the extra time it will take.

Recognition by UNESCO and the world’s scholarly community of the value of the Sahara’s libraries has brought needed attention and will help preserve many of the books and manuscripts. Who also needs to be recognized for their value are the men and women who make the material culture that surrounds these books. The artistry of the ma’allimāt, and ma’allimīn, has not been well recognized. Their skills, passed on from one generation to another, are also worthy of being declared a living world heritage.68 This does not mean that they should be preserved as a living museum like a relic of the past. They are a vibrant part of the culture and should be recognized for both the art they produce and their importance in making the items that set the seal of Baydān identity.

Bibliography


67. ma’allimāt assume the folders sold to tourists will not actually be used to hold or protect books. The ones they make to be used in the libraries are of much higher quality including greater care taken in the execution of the designs.

68. Many of the ma’allimīn and ma’allimāt found it strange someone would want to detail their work in photos and consider their work of value for academic study. Most had never seen a photo of their work or knew that items they make are found in books. The ma’allimāt were extremely interested in the detailed line drawings done by Marion Sénones especially of the leather pieces such as tasīfrāh (large travel bags) or wisādah (cushions). The best received gifts presented by the author to both ma’allimīn and ma’allimāt were copies of these drawings.


Résumé: Les Arabes ḥassānī occupent la partie occidentale du Sahara qui s’étend du fleuve Sénégal au nord jusqu’à l’Anti-Atlas au Maroc et de l’Atlantique à l’oasis des Tuwāt dans le centre de l’Algérie et au sud jusqu’à Tombouctou sur le fleuve Niger. Les Arabes ḥassānī sont arrivés dans la région entre les XIIIᵉ et XVIIᵉ siècles, incorporant lentement les peuples habitant déjà la région. La société ḥassānī a adopté bon nombre des distinctions de classes sociales préexistantes basées sur les concepts soudanais de pureté. La classe sociale appelée maʿalimìn ou maîtres artisans, et plus particulièrement les maʿalimât ou maîtres artisans, est importante dans la discussion sur l’artisanat du cuir et des livres, car le travail du cuir fin est une tâche féminine. Les maʿalimên et les maʿalimât produisent une grande partie de la culture matérielle ḥassānî, des performances musicales aux objets du quotidien. Il y a une division entre les sexes dans les matériaux dans lesquels ils travaillent; les hommes travaillent le bois et les métaux tandis que les femmes travaillent le tissu et le cuir. Souvent, ils sont mari et femme et il y a une fertilisation croisée définitive des concepts et des conceptions à travers les médias utilisés. En utilisant les outils les plus basiques et les plus simples, ces artisans sont capables de produire des objets exquis pour un usage quotidien. Les dessins complexes sont créés sans bénéficer de motifs et sont censés être le résultat de “l’humeur” de l’artisan ou mızājī. La plupart des dessins sont géométriques, mais certains sont représentatifs tels que les mains, les sandales, les thières, les chameaux et l’étoile et le croissant (symboles à la fois de l’Islam et de l’identité ḥassānî car ils sont des symboles sur
le drapeau de la République islamique de Mauritanie). Les femmes utilisent une gamme de couleurs; principalement des rouges, des jaunes et des verts brillants et vibrants. D’autres couleurs telles que le noir, le bleu et le violet sont plus fréquemment utilisées pour aider à définir les motifs. Les techniques employées comprennent la peinture de couleurs sur le cuir, les découpes, la superposition de cuir sur les miroirs et l’estampage.

**Mots-clés:** Ma’alimīn, ma’allimāt, ghilāf, tlwijhat, chemises en cuir, manuscrits, ṣassāni, culture matérielle.