

Book Crafts in *Tarâb al-Baydân*

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Introduction

For centuries, books (both handwritten manuscripts and printed volumes) have been among 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 Madînah often brought back books purchased in Cairo, Damascus, Tunis, or Fez¹. With the rise of Islamic scholarship in many Saharan towns local versions of Islamic classics as well as new books written by local authors were produced and copied. Scholarly families established schools or *mahdarab* to teach Islamic law and sciences, building large personal/family libraries many of which still exist². 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 *ma'allimât* to store and keep the valuable works from harm. *Ma'alimîn* or master craftsmen, who were often as not the husbands of the *ma'allimât*, produced wooden chests to store the books when not in use or when they were being

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¹ There is a number of local tales about buying books. It is reported that Sîdî 'Abd Allah wuld al-Hâj Ibrâhîm from Tajikjah traded his valuable pure blood Arabian stallion for a book in Cairo while on pilgrimage to Makkah and in 1839 the scholar Ahmad wuld Twayr al-Jannah needed 30 camels to bring back to Wadân the books and manuscripts he had purchased during his pilgrimage to Makkah (Werner 2002: 14).

² Today most of these family libraries hold around 800 titles while the al-Habbut family library in Shinqît has between 1,200 and 2,000 manuscripts dating from 11th to the 20th centuries (Le Quellec 2004: 142; Werner 2002: 9).

transported³. While much has been said about the contents of the books and their authors, the development of the Saharan styles of calligraphy⁴, and even on the decorative arts associated with writing and illuminating manuscripts, little has been done on the leather containers made by the local women⁵.

The Study Area : Tarâb al-Baydân

The western part of the Sahara stretches from Wâdî Nûn in today's Morocco east skirting the Jabal Banî or Anti Atlas mountains as far as M'hamîd Ghazlân and Hamâdat al-Dar'â, southeast to the oasis of Tuwât in central Algeria, south to the Niger Bend and Tîmbuktû, and from Tîmbuktû it extends west to the Atlantic coast following the course of the Senegal River. The area is vast and includes some of the least inhabited regions on earth; extensive areas such as the Majâbat al-Kubrâ (meaning the Great Empty Land) are seas of sand dunes having no permanent

³ Odette du Puigaudeau notes that the *ma'allimât* also made large leather bags called *tasûfrah* that were also used to store and transport books especially among the nomadic tribes (2004: 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 *Maghribi* 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-Mashraq al-'Arabî*), and *Mushafi* "or text like" an ornamental style used mainly for illuminated pages (Werner 2002: 13 and Maghrâwî 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 *thwijaht*. She writes, « Certains de ces *mudâres* 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. LII, LIII, LIV) orné de découpes finement dessinées et colorées, doublé de fourrure d'agneau noir, afin que les reliures ne soient point élimées par le 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. » (2002: 224)

settlements. The region is primarily desert receiving less than 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-Mukhtâr wuld Hâmidun notes that the region never had a single name to describe it (1994:8-10). He states the region extends beyond the borders of the current state of Mauritania to include al-Sâqîyah al-Hamrâ' in the Western or Moroccan Sahara and western Algeria as well as the Azawâd in Mali. He argues what ties the region together is "the same dialect of melodious Arabic called al-Hassânîyah which is the closest Arabic dialect to the Classical language⁶." (1994:8). He further argues the people share not only the same language, Arabic, but also the same "customs, traditions, family ties, and history" (1994:8). A number of terms were used in classical Arabic geographies for the region such as Bilâd al-Takrûr and Bilâd al-Shinqîti, but the name most often used by the local people is Tarâb al-Baydân or the Land of the Whites to distinguish it from Bilâd al-Sudân or Land of the Blacks to the south (1994:9-10). 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

⁶ The passage reads, "Sukânuhâ yatakalamûna lahjah wâhidah hiyya lughah 'Arabîyah malhûnah tusamma al-Hassânîyah wa hiyya aqrab al_lahajât al-'Arabîyah ila al-Fushâ". Many Hassânî 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 Hassânîyah is spoken is also referred to as Bilâd Millyûn Shâ'ir or the Land of a Million Poets.

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 Tâfilâlt in Morocco and Tuwât in Algeria⁷. 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 Tarâb al-Baydân 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 Kingdom of Mali over the area. Arab geographers such as al-Bakrî (died 1094) noted that the Berber princes of Awdâghust took on the court ceremonies of their Ghanaian overlord (Norris EI² “Mûritâniyâ”). By the time the Awlâd Hassân tribes arrived in the region the highly stratified social organization was already well established. The Awlâd Hassân formed a new elite and their language quickly spread among the non-Arab peoples of the region.

⁷ The northern oases have four distinct social classes, two considered “free” and two “non-free”. At the top are the *Shurufâ*’ or descendants to the Prophet Muhammad, second are the *Ahrâr* 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 *Harâtîn* similar to serfs in that they are technically free but unable to own or inherit property including water rights, and finally there are the *’Abîd* or slaves. These social divisions still exist despite various governments’ attempts to end them. (See Larabi Mezzine Le Tafilalt: Contribution à l’Histoire du Maroc aux XVII et XVIII siècles 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 Ilahaine “Small-scale Irrigation in a Multiethnic Oasis Environment”)

At the top of the social hierarchy are the Awlâd Hassân tribes. As noted by wuld Hâmidun, Hassânîyah⁸ dialect of Arabic is spoken throughout this vast area and serves as the major unifying cultural force for even those who do not have Hassânî lineages. Hassânîyah belongs to the group of dialects brought to North Africa by the Banî Ma‘qil Bedouin tribes who arrived in the Maghrib during the later part of the 12th century. Like the other major wave of Bedouin Arabs, the Banî Hilâl and Banî Sulaym, the Banî Ma‘qil originally came from the Najd in the Arabian Peninsula and migrated first to Egypt. The Fatamid rulers of Egypt encouraged these three Bedouin confederacies to move on into North Africa with the Banî Hilâl and Banî Sulaym taking a more northerly route along the Mediterranean and the Banî Ma‘qil taking a more southerly route skirting the Sahara. The Banî Ma‘qil arrived in what is today Morocco about 100 years after the Banî Hilâl and Banî Sulaym and by the 12th century established themselves near the major caravan city of Sijilmâssah in the important Tâfilâlt Oasis. The Awlâd Hassân or Dhwi Hassân emerged as a distinct tribal entity during the 13th century while still living in the vicinity the Tâfilâlt.⁹ The Awlâd Hassân began absorbing elements of the Sanhâjah Massûfah Berbers who from the time the Murâbitîn state collapsed in the 12th century controlled much of the trans-Saharan trade. Eventually the Massûfah and elements of the Awlâd Hassân merged together into the different Hassânî tribes one finds today in the Hawdh of

⁸ Hassânîyah is the feminine *nisbah* adjective derived from the name Hassân, the apical ancestor of those who claim to be Awlâd Hassân while Hassânî is the masculine version of the adjective. The dialect is referred to as Hassânîyah because the word for dialect in Arabic, *lahjah*, is feminine but in speech Hassânî can be used, for example the language can be called ‘Arabî Hassânî or even simply Hassânî just as Moroccan Arabic can be called Maghribî or Egyptian Masrî.

⁹ The Awlâd Hassân or Dhwi Hassân was well established as a separate tribal entity before Hasan al-Wazzân 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 Hasan al-Wazzân or Leo Africanus by Louis Massignon in [Le Maroc dans les premiers annes du XVI siècle](#) 2006.

Mauritania and Azawâd in Mali.¹⁰ The Hassânîyah dialect reflects the history of the Awlâd Hassân carrying with it features common to all Bedouin dialects, influences from Egypt, and numerous words and phrases from Sanhâjah Berber (Bonte 2006: 98). In addition, there are a few borrowings from other languages such as Pulaar and Soninke.¹¹ All of this makes Hassânîyah distinct from other dialects of the language spoken in the Maghrib.

The penetration by the Hassânî 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 Sanhâjah Berbers in War of Shurbubba in 1674¹². With the defeat of the Sanhâjah, there was a rapid Arabization process with many of the Berbers adopting Hassânî Arabic and some even claiming Arab origins – often associating themselves with the heroes of the Arab/Muslim conquest of North Africa such as ‘Uqbah ibn Nâfi‘ or with the family of the Prophet Muhammad such as the Idrîsî *sharîfs*. Others claim descent from the Arab jurist, al-Imâm Muhammad ibn al-

¹⁰ The Hassânî Arabs married into and absorbed the Sanhâjah Massûfah lineages which controlled the trans-Saharan trade between the Tâfilâlt and Timbuktû.. The Barâbîsh tribe seems to have a large Berber element with perhaps a small core of Hassânî lineages. The Awlâd Mbârak and Awlâd Dâwûd along with the Barâbîsh gained control over much of the eastern part of today’s Hassânî cultural area replacing the Massûfah as far south as the Azawâd in western Mali by the 16th century. The eastern part of today’s Hassânî area was the first region to come under their cultural domination. (See the discussion in Norris The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara 1986 and in Batran The Qadiryya Brotherhood in West African and the Western Sahara 2001)

¹¹ The Shamâmah 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 Walâtah and Tishît 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 Walâta: A History of Saharan Social Formation, 2002).

¹² The Sanhâjah were led by a religious reformer, Nâsir al-Dîn al-Daymânî. Nâsir al-Dîn tried to reform society and launched expeditions against those he considered to be lax or poor Muslims, including the Hassânî Arabs. The defeat of his forces in central Mauritania brought about the quick Arabization of western and central Mauritania (Norris 1986:35-43; Norris, EI²).

Hasan al-Murâdî al-Hadramî (died 1095-6), who helped the Murâbtîn set the seal of Mâlikî Sunnî orthodoxy on the Maghrib. Those who could claim to be Hassânî in origin (whose direct ancestor is Hassân ibn ‘Âqil founder of the Awlâd Hassân) are referred to as “warriors” or *muhâribîn* and hold the top rank in the social hierarchy.

Second to the *muhâribîn* are the “scholars” or *zawâyâ*¹³ tribes who are mainly descendants of the Lamtah, Jazûlah, Lamtûnah, and other Sanhâjah Berber tribes who had formed the military base for the Murâbatîn in the 11th century and who had dominated the region until the arrival of the Hassânî Arabs¹⁴. As noted above, many of them adopted the Arabic language as well as Arab ancestors¹⁵. Along with the Berber tribes a number of “noble” Arabs are also considered to be among the *zawâyâ* tribes, primarily those who are *Shurufâ’* or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad or from other Quraysh ancestors who had established themselves in the region long before the arrival of the Awlâd Hassân.¹⁶ The

¹³ The Arabic term *zawâyâ* is the plural of *zâwîyah* and has come to mean a Sufi lodge. The spread of the Qâdirî Sufi Brotherhood in the region began around the same time as the arrival of the Awlâd Hassân tribes and once defeated, the Sanhâjah were to give up the way of the sword and take up the way of the scholar’s pen. The Qâdirî order was greatly spread by the work of the Kuntah tribe who trace their origins to ‘Uqbah bin Nâfi’. See Ould al-Salim’s edited and annotated edition of Risâlah al-Ghâlâwîyah 2003 and Batran’s work on the role of the Kuntah in spreading the Qadiri Order in The Qadiriyya Brotherhood in West Africa and the Western Sahara: The Life and Times of Shaykh al-Mukhtar al-Kuntî (1729-1811) 2001.

¹⁴ The division between warrior and scholar tribes is not so neatly divided into Arab and Berber, as some Hassânî tribes left the way of the warrior to lead more sedentary and scholarly pursuits and some of the warrior tribes, such as the Idaw ‘Ish who ruled the Emirate of the Tagant, are Sanhâjah (Norris, EI²). The “scholarly” Kuntah were both warriors and scholars (Hunwick EI²).

¹⁵ The famous *Risâlah al-Ghâlâwîyah* by Shaykh Sîdî Muhammad al-Kuntî was written to prove the validity of the Kuntah’s claim to noble Arab ancestry through the Qurayshî commander ‘Uqbah bin Nâfi’ see Ould al-Salim 2003.

¹⁶ The *zawâyâ* are further divided into those called *shamsî* or *shiyam* meaning those who stand in the sun and do not need the protection of a warrior tribe and those called *zulmî* meaning those who stand in the shade and need the protection of a warrior tribe. Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh presents a comprehensive list of the different tribes of Mauritania in Eléments d’histoire de la Mautanie, 1991. Ould Chiekh notes that he

next social class is that of the *Znâgah* or Sanhâjah herders who work for the *muhâribîn* and *zawâyâ* tribes but their numbers are rather small as they merge into other classes such as the *zawâyâ*. *Znâgah* tribes such as the Idayshillî have fairly high status once being warriors and paid no tribute to the elite and today are not that distinguishable from other *Baydân* tribes in the Adrâr of central Mauritania having lost the Berber language in favor of Hassânî Arabic.

Underneath the *Znâgah* are the craftsmen and women (*ma'allimîn* and *iggâwin*) who have a number of different origins. They have always been a both needed and somewhat despised population¹⁷. Some have Hassânî tribal origins, some descend from Sanhâjah tribes, and others have Hartânî ancestors (Cleaveland 2002:46). Du Puigauveau states that some of the *ma'allimîn* 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 smiths¹⁸. 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 (Novaresio and Guadalupi 2003: 29). Du Puigauveau states that members of the Ahl Barakâllah tribe told her that the “*ma'allimîn* have no country or tribe and are

depended on the work of Wuld Hâmidun who provides an extensive presentation of Hassânî and Zawâyâ tribes of the entire Hassânî speaking region in Hayat Mûrîtânîyâ: al-Jughrâfiyâ, 1994.

¹⁷ See Dilley Islamic and Caste Knowledge Practices Among the Haalpulaar'en in Senegal: Between Mosque and Termite Mound 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 is 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.

¹⁸ Labelle Prussin has pursued the possible Jewish origins of some of the *ma'allimîn* exploring the Jewish connection with craftsmen in not only the Sahara but also in West African societies (see Prussin “Judaic Threads in the West African Tapestry: No More Forever?” in The Art Bulletin June 2006).

called *Yuhûd* because according to a legend only Jews are artisans” (du Puigauudeau 2002: 23)¹⁹. 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 *inâdan* or craftsmen among the Tuareg who claim their craft was originally taught to them by Saydnâ Dâwûd, King David (Bernus 2006: 76)²⁰. Today, few if any of the *ma'allimîn* claim a Jewish background and many instead claim connections to Hassânî or Zawâyâ tribes including the Kuntah, Awlâd Qaylân (or Ghaylân), Awlâd Dâwûd, Taknah, and Awlâd Abyîrî²¹.

The *ma'allimîn* are followed in the social hierarchy by the non-tribal *harâtîn* who are similar to serfs. They are composed of various different origins including freed slaves and who work the soil for the Hassânî and *Zawâyâ* overlords. The *harâtîn* are technically free, but have no rights of inheritance or rights to own land and water. Below them are the *'abid* or slaves, who no longer are owned (and therefore not an economic class) but still exist as a distinct social class²². At the bottom of the social scale are the non-tribal *bafur*, *nemadi* (hunters in the deep desert), and *immwagin* (fishermen along the Atlantic coast) who may be direct living connections to Saharan Neolithic populations. The highly stratified

¹⁹ The actual text is, “Les *ma'allemin* n'ont ni patrie ni tribu. On les appelle Yohûd 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'allimîn* she encountered were Muslims and never heard anyone refer to the *ma'allimîn* as *Yuhûd*.

²⁰ See also ag Ewangaye “The Inadan, Markers of Amazigh Identity” in *Art of Being Tuareg* 2006.

²¹ Du Puigauudeau notes several of the very fine leather pieces she uses to illustrate *Art et coutumes des Maures* were made by *ma'allimât* of the Awlâd Abyîrî.

²² 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 Tâfilâlt Oasis has revealed that both the *Harâtîn* and *'Abid* are frozen out of a number of rights since by social convention they can not own or inherit property.

social system based on occupation seems to have been in place before the arrival of the Hassânî Arabs; a borrowing from a much earlier time by local Berber princes in service to the Kings of Ghana and later Mali. The Hassânî Arabs complicated the situation by adding an overlay of tribally organized elite replacing the tribally organized Sanhâjah Berbers as the top rung of the social scale.

Of interest here are the *ma'allimîn* and *ma'allimât* who provide most of the items of *Baydâni* material culture²³. They are a professional class, and some have called them a “caste”, of highly skilled artisans with definite gender divided tasks²⁴. 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 (Simard 1996 : 97). Frequently husbands and wives are both skilled craftspeople and it is easy to see how designs in 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-

²³ The *iggâwin* or bards also belong to the same social class or “caste” as the *ma'allimîn* 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 *muhâribîn* tribal elite had their artisans, they also had their bards. The *iggâwin* 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 Hassânî leadership and even provided inspiration for sustained valor in battle accompanying their patrons to war (Norris 1986: 60-66)

²⁴ Gisèle Simard notes that scholars such as Ould Cheikh do not like the term “caste” as social stratification in the Sahara does not have same basis; purity, profession, in addition to those who are untouchable. Ould Cheikh sees the basis of social organization of the society is tribe, which he states is the fundamental social structure (1996: 46). However, not all people are tribally organized and there are concepts of purity and profession that influence the division within the society. Simard does note that there are both horizontal and vertical stratification even within those who are tribal (1996: 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 (1996: 47).

‘Atrûs, Bûtilimât, and Madhadharah²⁵ though following the devastating droughts of the 1970s many of the *ma‘allimîn* and *ma‘allimât* moved to Nouakchott (Anwâkshut), Nouadhibou (Anwâdhibû), and Zouérate (Zawîrât) a where most craft work is now being done.

Book Crafts of the *Ma‘allimât*

The *ma‘allimât* 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‘allimât* 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 workshops²⁶.

Using the most basic tool kit consisting of a set of paints²⁷, 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-ṣakbrafah*), an awl (*mikbraṣ*), a large needle (*ibrab*), a piece of wood or stiff hide as a work surface (*khabbat al-‘aml* or simply called a *lawb*), and sometimes a compass (*bakkâr*) to help make circles, *ma‘allimât*

²⁵ The two settlements of Bûtilimât and ‘Ayûn al-‘Atrûs are still well known for the high quality of the items made for pastoral nomads and the *ma‘allimât* from Madhadharah are famous for their skills both in leather work and in making tents.

²⁶ 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 were women with their sales being organized by cooperatives or individual shops (1996: 97).

²⁷ Today nearly all the paints used throughout the region are synthetic rather than made of natural dyes.

make the a wide range of useful and decorative items for daily use²⁸ (Delarozière 1976: 22). Camel, cow, goat, and sheep hides are used for the leather, though most items made for books are of goat or sheep leather because they are softer and more 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 *mubar* or *mahâb*²⁹ or *lamt*³⁰ in Hassâniyah and Znâgah 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 *Lamtî*) that were in high demand in North Africa, Spain, and the Arab East³¹. 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 age³². In addition to addax, gazelle hides are also used for books, though mainly for parchment pages³³.

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

²⁸ It is interesting to note that the detailed work by du Puigaudeau includes descriptions and illustrations of the tools used by the *ma'allimîn* but not of the *ma'allimât* other than one plate showing knives used to cut leather (2002: 29 Outils). The publication by the National Museum in Nouakchott Ethnographie gives a slightly different list of names for the *ma'allimât*'s work tools. They include *marchem* or tool used to stamp designs into the leather and a *marâral* or stone used to polish the leather (n.d.: 17). They note the stone is often a Neolithic grinder.

²⁹ *Mahâh* or *baqar wahshi*, meaning wild cow, are the usual Arabic terms for oryx, another large desert antelope indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula.

³⁰ *Lamt* 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 2003: 127).

³¹ 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 1986: 136, 147-150).

³² One entire manuscript in the Habbut library in Shinqît is made of addax, the pages as well as the cover. One of the few surviving copies of the Qur'ân in the hand of Shaykh Mâ' al-'Aynayn kept at his *zâwîyah* in al-Asmârah is in an addax hide folder.

³³ Several of the libraries in Shinqît include rare samples of manuscripts written fully on gazelle parchment or *al-riqq*.

ma'allimât or were purchased in the market already tanned and ready for preparation³⁴. Home tanning required the skin to be stretched, dried, and fletched to remove all of the fat and other tissues³⁵. The hide then would need to have the hair or wool removed, though for certain items such as the pouch for valuable manuscripts or Qur'ans called *thjbat* 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 hide³⁶. 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-'aml* or *lawh*, 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 so that it is possible to apply the paints, the *ma'allimah* 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'allimât* 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 fire³⁷) are used to help create a wide variety of other designs including arabesques, swastikas, and what are called *'aqrab* or scorpions. Tri-lobed or

³⁴ The *ma'allimah* who manages the women's leather cooperative in Laayoune (al-'Ayûn in the Sâqiyah al-Hamrâ') 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).

³⁵ The *ma'allimât* 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*.

³⁶ Repeated soakings in a vat of urine causes the hide to turn a brilliant white.

³⁷ *Zandawât* (plural of *znâd*) are still made by the *ma'allimîn* 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.

four-lobed designs are common in a wide range of items made in metal, wood, and leather where they are used as a center.³⁸ Other designs include some recent adoptions such as hearts and clubs taken from playing cards and rosettes associated with Moroccan carpets and Moroccan *benna* designs. Most of the designs are seen as “female” while only the Arabic letter “*waw*” is thought of as a “male” design³⁹. For example, it is argued that the letter “*waw*” in combination with geometrics serves as the base for designs called *ra’s maftûh* or open head and *widhân* 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.⁴⁰ Some of these shared designs depict the shape of traditional sandals⁴¹, hands⁴², star and crescent⁴³, or a *barrâd* or tea pot⁴⁴.

³⁸ In Walâtah four-lobed designs flank both sides of the main doorway. They are called *musham’ah* or candelabra and they have a *hajar al-taymûm* or ablution stone in the middle. Some speculate that the design may be influenced by manuscript decorations.

³⁹ There is a good deal of debate about the “*waw*”; its use and meaning as a design in Hâssanî material culture. See the discussion in National Museum, Nouakchott publication *Ethnographie* n.d.

⁴⁰ 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, 2002; le Quellec, 2004). 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 (2004: 100-108). 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’allimah* in Walâtah from whom all others learn.

⁴¹ The sandal design is often associated with the Prophet Muhammad the representations of them often found in manuscripts such as the *Dalâ’il al-Khayrat* of Sufi *shaykh* Abû ‘Abdallah Muhammad ibn Sulaymân ibn Abî Bakr al-Jazûlî (died 1465) or those which trace the Prophet’s genealogy. Similar representations of the Prophet’s sandals are found in *mihrrabs* of some mosques such as in the Ottoman period tile work in the Darwish Pasha Mosque in Damascus built between 1572 and

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'allimât* 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 *thwijbat* and is frequently used to protect the most valuable book, the Qur'an⁴⁵. The word *thwijbat* is originally Berber

1575. The Hassânî prayer "rug" called *twijh* 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.

⁴² Hands are found on a number of craft items made by the *ma'allimât* and have a number of meanings from the *khamîsah* or *khamsah* or the five used to protect against the '*ayn al-hasûd* or eye of envy to representation of a woman's hands with *henna* designs on items such as woman's musical instrument the *ardîn* or small harp.

⁴³ The star and crescent are symbols of Islam, but in the Hassânî area, they have also come to represent the Hassânî 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 Hassânî cultural area.

⁴⁴ The *barrâd* is a symbol of hospitality and generosity. Tea is an important part of Hassânî 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.

⁴⁵ These differ greatly from the leather covered boxes called *makhtûm* in Senegal used primarily for Qur'ans. The *makhtûm*, from the Arabic word meaning stamped, is composed of a stiff material (often card board today) that is then covered in an outer

and closely related to the Hassânîyah term *hwijh* used for the prayer rug as well as for the sheepskin pad placed under the camel saddle. Both take their names from the Berber word *hwijh* which means sheepskin⁴⁶; *thwibat* being the feminine diminutive form. In Arts et coutumes des Maures du Puigaudeau supplies three detailed line drawings of *thwibat* from Bûtilimât of which two are identified as having been made by *ma'allimât* of the Awlâd Abyîri tribe⁴⁷. The *thwibat* 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 *hwijh* or other leather items such as the large leather travel bag called a *tasûfrah*. 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.

The second format is the folio or folder called *ghalaf* which is still widely made by the *ma'allimât*⁴⁸. 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

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 Awlâd Abyîri in Bûtilimât in 1951 (2002: 236-237).

⁴⁶ The term comes from the word Berber terms *uli* or sheep and *wich* or hide (du Puigaudeau 2002: 252).

⁴⁷ The drawings are plates LII, LIII, and LIV with written descriptions on the facing pages (du Puigaudeau 2002: 226-231). Most of the line drawings in du Puigaudeau's works were done by her friend and traveling companion, Marion Sénones.

⁴⁸ The Mauritanian authorities are encouraging women to maintain this art form. Women's craft cooperatives in places such as Shinqît and Tîshît make the folders not only for sale to the growing tourist industry but also to help in the efforts to preserve/conservate 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.

decorated with painted designs in bright colors, and in the past it 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 Shinqîr or Rashîd are often made for the growing tourist market and are less carefully made and most likely would not be used to actually protect a manuscript⁴⁹. These folders / folios are the most commonly made book item throughout the area today, being the easiest and quickest to make though *ma'allimât* will make other, more time consuming items on request.⁵⁰ Folios, similar to the *thwijhat*, 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 Fez⁵¹.

The third format is leather covers directly bound to the book itself which are also called *ghalaf*, *ghalaf* meaning cover in Arabic⁵². While there are a few examples of locally bound volumes, these seem to not have been very common requiring tools and skills

⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ The author commissioned one of the *ma'allimât* in Laayoune (al-'Ayun) to make a *thwijhat* based on a line drawing of plate LII made by Marion Sénones (du Puigaudeau 2002: 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.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² The term *ghalaf* 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.

beyond those usually found among the *ma'allimât*⁵³. More frequently these are pieces of decorated leather sewn or glued over the original bindings like an appliqué rather than to completely 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 bindings⁵⁴.

Conclusion

The future of traditional book covers is tied to the future of the women who make them, the *ma'allimât*.⁵⁵ The government of Mauritania is trying to encourage the *ma'allimât* to continue to make at least book folders (*ghalaf*) 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 Shinqît, Tîshît, Wâdân, and Walâtah were placed on the list of World Heritage sites (Le Quellec 2004: 144)⁵⁶. 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 Shinqît has its own local association, Association for the Protection of Shinqît's Historical Monuments, to deal with its heritage (Le Quellec 2004:

⁵³ Skills in actual book binding, affixing the pages to the spine of a book, require equipment rarely found among the *ma'allimât*'s tool kit.

⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ Already the *tlwijhat* is a rare item in the market and are too costly for most locals to order. Most of what is made today are *ghalaf* or book folders.

⁵⁶ The largest library in Tîshît, the wuld Ydda, was badly damaged in a flood in 1999 and a number of the manuscripts was damaged beyond repair (Le Quellec 2004: 149 and Fall et al 2000: 43).

144)⁵⁷. The old caravan cities of Shinqât and Wâdân have received financial support from the European Union and the Government of Spain while Walâtah has received assistance from Spain to help preserve local heritage including the libraries⁵⁸. Many of the books and manuscripts need to have new folders and a number of the *ma'allimât* in places like Shinqât and Tîshât have been asked to make them as part of the effort. Given the large number of libraries and the number of manuscripts, the *ma'allimât* have work for the next several decades.

Tourism is another important influence on the craft work done in the region, not only that of the *ma'allimât* but of the *ma'allimîn* 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'allimât* 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

⁵⁷ There are similar efforts in Mali but both Mauritania and Mali are poor countries with little resources to deal with the preserving of their cultural heritage. The Ahmad Bâbâ Library in Timbuktû 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 Azawâd are stepping forward with their own private libraries asking for similar assistance.

⁵⁸ The Spanish government gave financial and technical assistance for the building of a new library as well as a museum in Walâtah (Fall et al in Sur la Route des Caravanes 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 Walâtan scholar al-Tâlib Abû Bakr. Manuscripts have been cataloged and are now housed in metal cases with large sliding drawers. In Shinqât the European Union and the Spanish government provided aid to rebuild or renovate houses including the old private libraries. Wâdân has only recently received the same sort of aid and is currently (2007) in the process of doing some of the restoration of the old part of the city.

of the item⁵⁹. *Ma'allimât* from Laayoune (al-'Ayûn) and Boujdour (Bûjdûr) 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 (Marrâkush) 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 as well as 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'allimât*, and *ma'allimîn*, has not been well recognized. Their skills, passed on from one generation to another, are also worthy of being declared a living world heritage.⁶⁰ 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 *Baydân* identity.

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⁵⁹ *Ma'allimât* 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.

⁶⁰ Many of the *ma'allimîn* and *ma'allimât* found it strange some one 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'allimât* were extremely interested in the detailed line drawings done by Marion Sénonés especially of the leather pieces such as *tasûfrah* (large travel bags) or *wisâdah* (cushions). The best received gifts presented by the author to both *ma'allimîn* and *ma'allimât* were copies of these drawings.

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