

Reviews

Nomads of Mauritania. By Brigitte Himpan & Diane Himpan-Sabatier. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018. Pp. 460, foreword, introduction, notes, lexicology, bibliography, index

Brigitte Himpan and Diane Himpan Sabatier's *Nomads of Marutania* uncovers the cultural wealth of the "Nomades de Mauritanie." This work is essential for those who wish to understand the cultural history, the nomadic lifestyle, and the social organization of one of the last nomadic peoples—the titular nomads of Marutania—with insight. The text raises the question of whether urbanization threatens the survival of their values: their ways of living and artistic expressions, built through adaptation to survival and travelling in the notoriously harsh environment of the Sahara Desert. A 40-page lexicon completes the work and offers the definitions for Ḥassāniyyah (the dialect of Maghrebi Arabic spoken by the nomads) terms and technical phrasing used in the text. Included as well is an iconography, a cartography, as well as drawings made by the authors themselves usefully illustrate the subjects in their respective chapters.

The first two chapters focus on geography and history of Marutania. The desertification of the Sahara, which went through an equatorial period, is the result of a long process with several climatic and human causes which are well explained in this book. The settlement of Mauritania results from an incredible diversity of migratory flows, producing a history rich in twists and turns. The book

charts the history of the region's inhabitants: first the Black ethnic groups, then white Canarians, Persians, joined by Berbers and Arabs who are politically dominant today. This offers a sense of how the modern groups came to comprise so many unique traditions. The authors go deeper still, exploring the influence of the Almoravid Empire from 1054 to 1147, from Africa to Andalusia, then the strong resistance to French colonization, constitute different stages of their history, and their presentation is the result of a serious reconstruction work from the different existing sources, creating a tapestry of influences that results in a unique bounded culture.

Chapters 3 to 8 cover different socio-anthropological topics of Mauritanian cultures organized by through the characterization of this group of people with great freedom, moving at will on the vast expanses of the Sahara, their rigid and hierarchical caste system (including slavery), eating habits, and forms of crafts. The authors also engage with the nomads' majority language, Ḥassāniyyah, which is very close to classical Arabic, in a multilingual context. They further examine the beliefs and values deriving from this community's religious practice, a vein of Islam of multiple currents including Sufism. The authors further explore artistic forms that may be classified into two categories: "ephemeral daily art" and "ephemeral body art." The eighth chapter seeks to describe the survival and transformation of nomadic forms in the contemporary, young Mauritanian state. Less than two percent of the Mauritanian population still practice the nomadic way of life permanently. This final

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chapter, based on census data, explains the family and matrimonial practices of this population, their level of literacy and schooling, and ends with a focus on their presence, in the political system of the contemporary fledgling democratic state, at least that of the former chiefs of tribes and their allies who possess authority. In other words, the transition from an entirely nomadic society, without a state and without borders, to a sedentary state society, in the age of globalization, is implicitly described.

The two authors develop a theory on the forms of traditional Mauritanian arts in the chapter dealing with the cultural identity. At the origin of Mauritanian art, there are two sources of inspiration: life in the desert and the disposition to meditation and the spirituality that it engenders, and the framework of Muslim beliefs, especially Sufism. These arts have not yet given rise to serious analyses, apart from those of Jean Gabus, with his *Connaissance de l'art et de la culture matérielle, Sahara, 1960–1961* (1961), who the authors widely quote. The authors specify the hierarchy of values of noble warriors and nomadic marabouts for whom music, poetry, and literature are of utmost importance because they are works of the mind. Anything related to matter is considered inferior, which is why their scientific research is also more often concerned with music and letters. The visual arts of Mauritania are of infinite richness and one of the focal points of this work is to reveal that wealth, to propose a first grammar of the forms of this traditional art and to allow it to establish its pedigree.

For the authors, ephemerality, geometrization, abstraction, play with two-dimensionality or three-dimensionality,

spirituality, “view from above” (in other words, “the divine gaze”), are the main characteristics of Mauritanian arts. The “ephemeral daily arts” appear in such objects as the tent: its ridge, mats, cushions, bags, camel saddles, calabashes, milking pots serve as art materials. These objects are ephemeral insofar as they are made of degradable materials. Hence the name “ephemeral daily art.” Further significance is found in the philosophy of the Mauritanian nomads, inspired by Sufism, in which material life is ephemeral and must be despised. The “ephemeral body art” is painted on the body of the bride and created with her hair. Henna designs, hairstyles inlaid with gold beads, glass paste, and semi-precious stones will not last. The body of the woman at the wedding is an exceptional material for art, for a privileged moment. With these categories, the authors build the premises of an original theory of Moorish visual arts, presenting their present shape as the result of historical and geographic influences, filtered through multitudinous cultural interactions.

Overall, there is space a more critical approach to a patriarchal society in which the condition of women seems so inferior, as evidenced by the very early marriage, low schooling, and illiteracy among women in the contemporary nomadic society, and a more critical examination of the caste system, including slavery. The authors, who are living in India, consider more or less as a bulwark against the standardization of societies on the Western model, which further raises the question of the limits of cultural relativism. We can also think of the pioneer Odette de Puigodeau, who published the ethnography *Pieds nus à tra-*

vers la Mauritanie (1936), with whom they share an inside knowledge of nomadic societies in Mauritania. Still, the empathy cast on nomadic society by the authors invites understanding and makes for pleasant reading. The two authors obviously share a great passion for such a relatively unknown culture.

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