

Revue internationale Animation, territoires et pratiques socioculturelles
International Journal of Sociocultural community development and practices
Revista internacional Animación, territorios y prácticas socioculturales



The Kabylia Community: Towards a People Centred Socio-cultural Development

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Number 16, 2019

Modalités et défis de l'animation en Afrique

Modes and challenges of sociocultural community development in Africa

Modalidades y desafíos de la animación en África

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099145ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55765/atps.i16.451>

[See table of contents](#)

Article abstract

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Publisher(s)

Département de communication sociale et publique, Université du Québec à Montréal

ISSN

1923-8541 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Touati, R. & Traxler, J. (2019). The Kabylia Community: Towards a People Centred Socio-cultural Development. *Revue internationale Animation, territoires et pratiques socioculturelles / International Journal of Sociocultural community development and practices / Revista internacional Animación, territorios y prácticas socioculturales*, (16), 51–61.
<https://doi.org/10.55765/atps.i16.451>

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The Kabyle Community: Towards a People Centred Socio-cultural Development

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Cet article met en évidence les moyens de parvenir au développement socioculturel de la région kabylienne en Algérie. Cette communauté amazighe (berbère) a beaucoup souffert de sa position géographique montagneuse et de sa marginalisation par les autorités pour des raisons idéologiques. Ces conditions ou circonstances ont renforcé l'idée d'autonomie entre les membres de cette communauté et ont conduit à l'émergence de l'esprit d'appartenance, de solidarité et de coopération entre eux. Les gens dépendent de leur culture et de leur territoire pour s'organiser, surmonter leurs problèmes et développer leur communauté. Dans les faits, des villageois délaissent le développement purement gouvernemental pour le développement axé sur les personnes.

Mots-clés : Communauté kabylienne, développement centré sur les personnes, capital social, citoyenneté culturelle, durabilité environnementale.

This paper highlights ways of achieving socio-cultural development in Kabyle region in Algeria. This Amazigh (Berber) community has suffered much because of its mountainous geographical position and because of its marginalization by authorities for ideological reasons. These conditions or circumstances have reinforced the idea of self-reliance among members of this community and led to the emergence of the spirit of belonging, solidarity and cooperation amongst them. People depend on their culture and territory to organise themselves, to overcome their problems, and to develop their community. In fact, villagers are moving away from purely governmental development to people-centred development.

Keywords: Kabyle Community, people centred development, social capital, cultural citizenship, environmental sustainability.

En este artículo se destacan las formas de lograr el desarrollo sociocultural en la región de Kabilia en Argelia. Esta comunidad amazigh (bereber) ha sufrido mucho debido a su posición geográfica montañosa y a su marginación por las autoridades por razones ideológicas. Estas condiciones o circunstancias han reforzado la idea de la autosuficiencia entre los miembros de esta comunidad y han llevado al surgimiento del espíritu de pertenencia, solidaridad y cooperación entre ellos. Las personas dependen de su cultura y su territorio para organizarse, superar sus problemas y desarrollar su comunidad. En la práctica, los aldeanos abandonan el desarrollo puramente gubernamental en favor del desarrollo centrado en las personas.

Palabras clave: Comunidad Kabilia, desarrollo centrado en las personas, capital social, ciudadanía cultural, sostenibilidad ambiental.

Introduction

To achieve a socio-cultural development and create a dynamism within the Kabyle traditional society requires the people of the region to unite, cooperate and rely on themselves in the framework of volunteerism and the initiative to organize various activities with social, cultural, environmental and educational dimensions. In this paper, we will present a set of examples and experiences that express the keenness of the Kabyle villagers to change their territory and to defy the social conditions, nature and the government's marginalisation.

The study is a Qualitative Descriptive Research, *"which is one of the most commonly used type of researches in social sciences. It aims to describe a phenomenon the ways it is, for example, describing social systems or relationships between events."*¹ We will rely on this Descriptive Analytical Methodology, *"which deals with describing a phenomenon that how we think something is. It attempts to examine the situations in order to describe the norm."*² As for the scientific research tools, we will depend on observation and interview. The former is, *"the most commonly used tool of evaluation research. It is used for evaluating cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of a person. It is used in evaluation performance, interests, attitudes, values towards their life problems and situations."*³ The latter *"is fundamentally a process of social interaction"*⁴; *"it may be regarded as a systematic method by which a person enters more or less imaginatively into the inner life of a comparative stranger."*⁵

The Environmental Dimension

Most of the Kabyles live in the mountains, away from the city's noise and bustle. Historically, this can be explained by the succession of invaders to Algeria and North Africa, which made the indigenous people choose the highlands to take refuge there to increase the chances of overcoming the enemy and dominating it.



At the top of every mountain or hill, there is a small village with traditional houses built of stone, mud, cow dung, and roofs of logs and brown tiles. It is a unique architecture dating back hundreds of years. Perhaps this is what made the people of the region have a strong link with the mountain, nature and land. Often the Kabyle man is nicknamed

Amsedrar/ Djbayli or "The Mountaineer" by the non-Kabyle people, as an expression of lack of civilisation and contempt, but the Kabyles do not care about it, on the contrary, they cherish it and take pride in their belonging.

1. Adams, J., Khan, H. T., Raeside, R., & White, D. I. (2007), Research methods for graduate business and social science students, SAGE Publications India.
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Living in nature calls for its preservation and protection, but this is not easy in the almost total absence of support from the authorities, who do not care for nature, beauty or tourism. The state interventions remain scarce and inadequate. Therefore, the inhabitants of Kabylia depend on self-organization through what is called in the local language *Tajamaât*. This is a public space in the centre of each village, where the residents meet to discuss their concerns and their issues. In fact, it is the throbbing heart of the Kabyle social organization; it is the village council that is formed spontaneously and includes the oldest and wisest men, since all agree that they are the best in the conduct of their affairs.

Thus, in this council, all the village problems are addressed and various issues, including those related to the environment, are discussed, basing on a set of laws derived from customs, traditions and even religion. Accordingly, the villagers, based on the *Tajamaât*, often organize voluntary initiatives to protect the environment, and to clean up the village and its suburbs despite the lack of resources and equipment.

The most important examples are:

1. Clean up the Natural Water Sources (*Tiliwa*):

The natural water sources and valleys are an integral part of the villagers' lives in the recent past, especially for women. Not only because they are sources of drinking water, but because they are public spaces where women meet daily to wash clothes and wool, as well as for leisure and entertainment. They are therefore outlets for them in a male-dominated society where men possess almost everything.

Although most of the villages benefited from the potable water network supply in the past few years, a large number of villagers are still fetching drinking water from natural forest springs for two main reasons:

- Interruption and constant disturbance in the water flow, especially in the summer season and especially in the highest and the most isolated villages.
- The high quality of spring water and the desire to preserve a tradition.

Therefore, the villagers are keen to do fundraising for the purchase of cleaning supplies and restoration of different natural water sources and fountains, for the benefit of both humans and animals, and to remain as witness to the customs and traditions of the rural Kabyle woman, whose name is closely associated with these distinct public spaces.

2. Clean up the Village Alleys and Cemeteries:

By the end of spring, in the frame of volunteer work, villagers collect garbage, clean the village alleyways, and also cooperate in cleaning the cemetery, weeding, and rebuilding the fence if necessary. It is a noble habit that shows love and respect towards the dead in the almost complete absence of local authorities who do not care about such initiatives.

3. Cooperation in Extinguishing Fires:

Kabylia is characterized, as we said, by being a mountainous forest area which contains different types of flora, especially olive trees, pine, cedar, oak, carobs, etc., as well as many types of fauna

such as macaque monkeys, foxes, rabbits, partridge. In this region, we find two nature reserves. The first is the Gouraya Reserve which is located in Bejaia; it overlooks the Mediterranean Sea, full of picturesque beaches, mountains and dense vegetation and valleys emanating from the Atlas Mountains. Knowing that, UNESCO designated it as a world nature reserve in 2004. The second nature reserve is Jajra or Djurdjura, situated between the provinces of Tizi Ouzou and Bouira. It was established in 1983, and it is considered as one of the most beautiful tourist areas in Algeria.

Thus, the mountainous and forested nature of Kabylia has made it vulnerable to intense fires, especially in the summer. For example, in June, July and August 2019, the region witnessed constant fires that damaged many houses and agricultural crops and killed a lot of livestock. The majority of the population confirmed that those fires were deliberate, and their purpose was the elimination of that unique region in its architecture, culture, history and even in its geographical location. Villagers cooperate with each other to put out the fire, or at least prevent it from spreading, despite their limited equipment. The local authorities and civil protection are indifferent to this and are far behind in their interventions. That is why a village elder often uses the loudspeaker in the mosque to call the villagers to meet in *Tajamaât* and then they declare a state of emergency. It is an old means of communication, but it works well, especially in such circumstances.

Since fires are recur every summer, villagers have started to buy some equipment with their own money, such as cisterns. They are also considering constructing roads and reducing the isolation of villages and mountainous areas so as to facilitate the process of extinguishing fires if they break out.

4. The Organization of Aissat Rabeh Contest for the Cleanest and Most Beautiful Kabyle Village:

The contest of the cleanest village in Kabylia, named after the President of the People's Assembly of the Wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou who launched the competition and who was murdered by a terrorist group on October 12th, 2006, highlights several aspects including the development and the rehabilitation of public squares and fountains, creation of green spaces, beautification of the streets, maintenance of cemeteries, organization of waste collection, and the setting-up of composters.

Therefore, this competition has an ecological dimension. This aims to instil and promote the values of environmental citizenship among the Kabyle citizens and raise awareness of the importance of maintaining the cleanliness of the environment. Besides, it aims to foster a spirit of solidarity among villagers. According to Sid Ali Youcef,

*"the Aissat Rabah contest has for its main mission the safeguarding of the ancestral values of Kabylia, namely the consensus in the village, the solidarity, the tolerance, the living-together ... All this in a holy and clean space. The creation and maintenance of the citizen dynamic, knowing that the village is a space freed by the citizen who constantly watches over the preservation of the values of his territory. Thanks to the competition between the winning villages, we want to maintain the active dynamics and the citizen commitment to maintain cleanliness, the preservation of nature and village solidarity."*⁶

It is true that the contest is organized under the supervision of the People's Assembly of the Wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou, through the Health, Hygiene and Environmental Protection Commission, but the preparations and the fitting-out of the villages are the responsibility of the villagers. As for the Evaluation Committee, it consists of elected representatives, representatives of several directorates, bailiff, as well as members of the environmental associations. It conducts frequent

6. H. T. SID-ALI YUCEF, président de la commission santé, hygiène et environnement de l'APW de Tizi Ouzou « Le concours dépasse désormais le volet environnemental » <https://www.depechedekabylie.com/evenement/le-concours-depasse-desormais-le-volet-environnemental/> 20 juillet 2019.

field visits to participating villages to choose the cleanest and most beautiful village taking into account the standard of respect for the sorting and composting of waste.⁷

Eventually, it is a great success and a tribute to the winner inhabitants of the Rabah Aissat prize of the cleanest village who adopted their village area in all its social, human and economic dimensions, and managed to improve their environmental framework.

The Status of Education in the Kabyle Community

It is clear that the inhabitants of the Kabyle region throughout history have through lived many difficulties, woes and sorrows, and have long suffered from poverty, marginalization and exclusion. All these accumulations increased awareness in Kabyle individuals and generated a sense and desire to succeed and change their fate, which could be achieved only by education. Thus, the Village/Education dichotomy has often been associated with the dire social conditions of the villagers, as education is the only way to improve economic conditions. That is why families in the villages have been working hard to educate their children and often send them to relatives in major cities to get them to school. They all hope and sure of their success, despite the bitterness of distance and separation, because in the end, life hardness that gives and forges a real man as the Kabyle proverb says *Lhif i d-iskaryen irgazen*.

Returning to the colonial era (1830/1962) some Kabyle villages benefited from the education offered by Catholic clergy, the *White Fathers*, whose official name was *Missionaries of Africa*. The White Fathers were not a religious order in the strict sense of the term, but a missionary institute of pontifical right, so they made oaths and not vows. It also benefited from some French schools from which many of the great Kabyle intellectuals emerged, such as Fadhma Aït Mansour Amrouche, Jean and Taos Amrouche, Mouloud Maameri, Mouloud Feraoun, Malek Ouari and others, but education was not available to everyone and the school was almost exclusively male.



In post-independence Algeria, despite the proliferation of educational institutions throughout the country, several Kabyle villages didn't benefit from them, especially with regard to middle and secondary schools. That is why many pupils, mainly girls in the more isolated areas, were unable to carry on their studies and generally stopped at primary school phase. The situation was still like that

until the beginning of the 1990s, since transportation was scarce and social traditions and customs based on honour, *Nif akked lherma* were very strict. This has left mothers and even fathers with a limited educational level, but they are very aware of the importance and the need for education.

7. Tassadit Chibani, 6e édition du concours Aissat Rabah: Azemmour Oumeriem élu village le plus propre de Tizi Ouzou, https://www.vitamedz.com/6e-edition-du-concours-aissat-rabah/Articles_14640_6537117_15_1.html.

Because of the feelings of frustration in not continuing to study, parents are eager to provide their children with education at any cost; the success of the child at school means securing his/her future, and for parents, it is a kind of self-realization, and a way to fulfil a desire of which they were deprived.

This special socialization, which was associated with the cruelty of living in the mountains and the thirst of education for a better future, has greatly contributed to the formation of the personality of the Kabyle individual, who has long been convinced of its importance. For him/her education is sacred and the only way to overcome all the surrounding problems, whether social or related to the issue of identity. Thus, these conditions and socialization contributed directly or indirectly to the remarkable results that are now being achieved by the province of Tizi-Ouzou, which belongs to Kabyle, in various national examinations, where it has been ranked first nationally for 12 consecutive years, i.e. since 2007.

Moreover, the majority of teachers are doing their best to improve students' attainment, despite the low salary of teachers in Algeria. The spirit of belonging, their professional conscience, and the desire to foster the superiority of Kabyle children overcomes narrow personal interests. This feeling led them to make an extra effort in the teaching process as well as in the initiative to create many cultural activities. The most notable example is the inter-school cultural competition that contributes to creating a competitive atmosphere among pupils and motivates them to work more⁸. It is a way to prepare the pupils of the final classes, who will take the national exams (Primary Education Certificate Exam, Middle Education Certificate Exam, and the Baccalaureate Exam) and an opportunity to change the atmosphere and instil the spirit of brotherhood among them. It is true that the present may not exceed some copybooks and a dictionary, but the act of honouring itself and in front of the whole villagers let them feel a sense of pride and motivated them to continue in the same vein. Note that this concert interspersed with cultural activities prepared by the students such as theatre, singing and playing music instruments which are prepared during the school year under the supervision of teachers.

Parents are also keen to accompany their children and provide them with so-called private lessons. These are enhancing courses to pupils offered by private teachers in various subjects; especially in basic ones such as mathematics and foreign languages, so that they can understand what they have already studied at school better. The cost may be high for some parents, but the child's success is priceless. As for the remote villages, the villagers are cooperating with each other, especially the university students, to provide the pupils of the village who are preparing for the national exams with reinforcing lessons in the framework of voluntarism.

Thus, the socialization of the Kabyle individual, the parent's awareness, the sanctification of education, the school cultural activities, the love of notability, and voluntarism are the most important keys that contributed to the Kabyle pupils' success in various national exams. Unfortunately, at a time when those concerned and those interested in educational affairs in Algeria should be conducting objective scientific studies to find out the real reasons for success and thus disseminate the experience to all parts of the country, sceptics, complicit in "distorting the Kabyle area", continue to insult the people and accuse pupils of cheating and teachers of complicity.

8. Personally, I remember when I was in the final class of primary school in 2000 at Abane Ramdane School in the village of Wizran, and my classmates and I felt the magnitude of our responsibility because we would represent the name of our school and village in an external competition. Once you remember that, you redouble your efforts in preparation for the competition, which externally seems to be simple but internally carries educational, recreational and human dimensions.

Civil Society and the Socio-cultural Voluntary Work



The stagnation of the Kabylia area due to lack of projects, investments and state support, in addition to its difficult topography and distance from cities and all facilities, made life very complex. These conditions forced the people of the region to be self-reliant and find and adapt solutions and mechanisms appropriate to their situations. Some private investments have emerged for some

businessmen, and voluntarism and socio-cultural activation initiatives have been particularly prominent, in which civil society, represented by cultural associations and village committees throughout Kabylia, have contributed. The main objectives of the majority of these cultural associations are to defend the Amazigh identity and culture after the Algerian government's exclusion and marginalization of the Amazighs in general and the Kabylis in particular.

These associations have also contributed to defending the villagers' rights, as well as organizing cultural and social activities, like the cultural festivals that aim to get the inhabitants out of the countryside life routine and break the isolation, to serve as an outlet for them. Recreation facilities such as theatre, cinema, swimming pools, sport and cultural clubs are almost non-existent. One of the most successful art festivals in recent years is the international *Raconte-Arts* festival, which has been held annually in the Kabylia villages since 2004.

Raconte-Arts festival is truly a unique human experience that was created by three artists, Hacène Metref, Denis Martinez and Salah Salem, in collaboration with an association, The League of Cinematographic and Dramatic Arts of Tizi-Ouzou. It appeared just after the Amazigh Black Spring⁹ and after a decade of blood and terrorism in Algeria.¹⁰ This festival serves as an attempt to restore a smile, spirit and dynamism to the region.

Raconte-Arts is above all a rich and diversified program, something to occupy young and old throughout the day. It is a mosaic of different artistic genres combining theatre, singing, painting, plastic arts, dance, storytelling, poetry, artistic performances, magic, as well as various exhibitions of books, traditional clothing, and crafts such as pottery and jewellery, etc. An important space is also devoted to workshops and conferences on Amazigh culture and identity organized by the academics and researchers.

9. Kabylia region was marked by several marches in 2001 which aimed at demanding the government recognize the Amazigh culture and identity and condemn the killing of the secondary school pupil Guermah Massinissa, who was murdered by an officer. Those demonstrations were suppressed by the Algerian Security Services and left 127 dead.

10. Leila A, *Raconte -arts* 2015, <https://www.babzman.com/raconte-arts-2015>.

To participate in this festival, interested villages must submit their applications to the organizing committee, which selects the ideal village to host the event based on logical criteria such as:¹¹

- Previous projects implemented in the village by the village committee and cultural associations.
- The extent of the contribution of the village committee and cultural associations in preserving the Kabyle cultural heritage.
- The extent of the use of the Amazigh language.

The particularity of the festival lies in involving the villagers in the organization of the activities, and in the logistics; this promotes self-management, and allows residents to become actors in the development of the socio-cultural scene. Men, women, children and elders, without exception, clean and decorate the village, as well as paint murals expressing the regional culture and identity, and its heroes who have fought for democracy and cultural diversity in Algeria. But, before that, the Steering and Organization Unit in the village, consisting of village elders, the head of the village committee and the heads of cultural associations, meets to alert and mobilize the population, and to identify and distribute tasks between themselves, because preparing the village to host an international festival is not easy at all. After discussions and exchange of views between people and the Steering and Organization Unit's members, the roles are divided as follows:

- Fundraising: where a group of young people collect money and various equipment and logistical tools from the villagers as well as from neighbouring villages.
- Preparing, widening and decorating the roads and village alleys. After collecting money, villagers buy the building materials and the necessary equipment for roads and fitting out alleys. In order for justice and equality to prevail among all people, each family presents one of its members to represent it in this hard, multi-month volunteer work. If this not possible, the family should pay someone else to accomplish its task. In addition, some craftsmen and painters decorate the main streets, paint murals, as well as sculpting forms and statues of the famous figures of the region. This adds an artistic touch to the place and a lot of beauty and life. Remember that women usually organise the beautification, clean up and plantation campaign. The festival has an ecological dimension as well. Restoration and roughcasting old houses to use them during the festival as places to sleep guests and participants, especially since the small villages do not have hotels or hostels. Moreover, the initiative aims to let the foreign guests live and taste the atmosphere of the Kabyle traditional society and immerse them into the depth of history and originality. This is why the village builders restore and rebuild the abandoned and damaged houses, while housewives roughcast, paint and decorate them later. It is therefore an opportunity for those women to get out of the housework routine. The choice of women instead of men is not arbitrary or coincidental, but has to do with the culture, values and social structure within the Kabyle traditional society. "If a man represents the light of the outside, a woman is the light of the inside (house)."

It is a Kabyle proverb that signifies the woman's status and authority, and the extent of her association with the house. It represents her own space or rather her kingdom that must be protected. So, a woman is considered as the home's honour and its main pillar¹²(*Asseles*), to the extent that the Kabyle husband does not call his wife in her real name, but he nicknames her,

11. Hocine Aït Iddir, village le plus propre : Lancement de la 7e édition, <https://www.elwatan.com/regions/kabylie/tizi-ouzou/village-le-plus-propre-lancement-de-la-7e-edition-07-03-2019>.

12. Bourdieu, P. (1972), Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique « Précédé de Trois études d'ethnologie kabyle », Travaux de Sciences Sociales, Librairie Droz.

“The home”, first as a kind of shyness and decency that show respect for the large family and secondly because it has implied meaning that reflects the crucial role of woman and her position within the family. For a man, a woman is the home, if she is good then the house will know stability and prosperity (*Ad yali*) but if she is bad, the family is threatened with demise and disintegration.

Consequently, all the households such as raising children, cooking and washing, as well as DIY, are all the woman’s tasks. Even roughcasting is within its responsibility despite its difficulty and lack of materials as a kind of help and support for the husband who works far away. The woman brings clay from the forest on her back or on the donkey’s back in the best cases, and then prepares mortar by mixing this kind of soil with water and donkey dung to be very solid to protect them from the winter cold and summer heat. The same is for the ground mortar, but with using of cow dung and yellow soil, *Ekenken* in the local language.¹³

The Kabyle traditional house which Pierre Bourdieu (1972) talked about is distinguished not only by its unique architecture, but also by its symbolic significance and values. Unfortunately, the Algerian authorities pay no attention to this tangible cultural heritage and do not protect it from disappearing. During the rule of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, 1999 to 2019, the Rural Housing Program was launched under the Rural Development Policy. On the face of it, the initiative seems to be good, especially since the majority of villagers cannot build new houses on their own because of their low purchasing power. The state’s support was a catalyst for them to take off in construction. But, in fact, what matters to the authorities is the purchase of social peace, the hypnosis and sedation of the population and fixing them in the countryside, eliminating the remaining features of the Amazigh civilization. Such projects are supposed to be subject to forward-looking studies and the process must be constantly accompanied, so as not to have serious consequences. The beneficiary of this support, the first thing he does if he does not have a plot of land for construction is the demolition of his old house inherited from forefathers to build a new house completely different from the traditional one. It is indeed a crime against humanity, culture and Amazigh identity that has its roots in a distant history.

In all cases, we cannot blame someone who lives in an old and narrow house with his little children, and maybe in difficult social circumstances, has demolished his old house to build a new and decent one where his family can live at ease. Anyone under pressure can do it, no matter how aware and educated. Thus, for example, local authorities should also provide building plots for the villagers to keep their traditional houses and villages as an open-air museum and witness of the indigenous people civilisation of North Africa. Based on this strategy, the restored villages can be used to revive the rural cultural tourism by organizing events and art festivals, so that providing an important income for the local authorities who will inevitably recover all their money and more.

- Organizing a series of forums, lectures and brainstorming sessions: organized by the intellectuals and elders of the village in order to mobilize, motivate, encourage and sensitize the population to assume their responsibility and to meet the challenge of the festival success and give a beautiful image of the village and its inhabitants.
- Creating a Communication Unit whose mission is:
 - The definition of the festival through the Social Networking Sites.
 - Contact local, national and international media in order to cover the event.
 - Contact the participating artists and guests of the festival.

13. Interview with Khokha Messaoudi, a villager Kabyle woman who aged 72 years old, 01/09/2019 at 10 am in the village called Wizran.

- Coordination with different members and actors.

During the week-long festival, villagers watch over the event, dividing roles and responsibilities. There are those who invigilate a group for clean the alleys and others to welcome and guide the participants and visitors from home and abroad who want to explore, taste art, authenticity and simplicity. Therefore, only through cooperation, sincerity, responsibility, a collective spirit, a sense of belonging and good organization, the *Raconte-Arts* festival will ensure success and the village, and its people will get recognition and respect.

Conclusion

We conclude that the Kabyle villagers have been able to some extent to adapt to their circumstances and tried with their own simple possibilities to revitalize their cultural and social life despite the isolation and rural character of their social environment.

The historical conditions and accumulations that they have lived through all these years have contributed greatly to the structure of the Kabyle traditional tribal society, which depends very much in its management on the so-called Social Capital, which is the set of values and social standards inherited from forefathers. The cooperation value, for example, which appears in many forms within the Kabyle community contributed to the emergence of voluntary work, through which the villagers exhibited experiences worthy of recognition and encouragement in the field of socio-cultural cultural activation, through their human, environmental and educational dimensions.

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Interviews :

Interview with Khokha Messaoudi, a villager Kabyle woman who aged 72 years old, 01/09/2019 at 10 am in the village called Wizran.

Photos: Redouane TOUATI.