

## **Intangible cultural heritage in the eastern countryside: a field study**

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### **Abstract:**

This field study explores the intangible cultural heritage of the eastern countryside, focusing on traditions, practices, and expressions that have been passed down through generations. Intangible cultural heritage encompasses a wide range of elements, including oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, and knowledge related to nature and the universe. Through qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations, and archival research, this study documents the unique cultural expressions found in this region, highlighting their significance and the role they play in community identity and cohesion.

The findings reveal a rich tapestry of cultural practices, from traditional music and dance to local culinary arts and agricultural techniques, which are deeply intertwined with the everyday lives of the people. These practices are not only vital for preserving historical continuity but also for fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among rural communities. The study also addresses the challenges faced in preserving intangible cultural heritage, including modernization, migration, and economic pressures, which threaten the transmission of these traditions to future generations.

By documenting and analyzing these cultural elements, the study aims to contribute to the safeguarding and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing the need for community involvement and supportive policies. The research underscores the importance of preserving these cultural treasures, which are essential for maintaining cultural diversity and enriching human creativity.

**Keywords :** Intangible Cultural Héritage- Eastern Countryside- Field Study- Traditions- Cultural Practices-Oral Traditions-Performing Arts- Social Practices- Rituals-Community Identity-Cultural Preservation-Modernization-Rural Communities-Cultural Diversity-Safeguarding Heritage.

## Introduction :

The Eastern Rif region is rich in a diverse cultural heritage and elements of civilization, where cultural heritage constitutes a historical identity that distinguishes the rural community in all its spectrums and colors. Amazigh elements are considered an integral part of this heritage, playing a significant role in enriching it. Preserving cultural heritage is a national duty due to its manifold benefits, including fostering cohesion among community members and strengthening Moroccan national unity. The cultural heritage of the Rif region is characterized by its diversity, encompassing tangible elements such as traditional attire, folk dances, and various cultural forms, as well as intangible elements like customs, traditions, folk arts, practices, celebratory rituals, beliefs, and knowledge representing the interaction of the Amazigh people with the universe and their relationship with the natural environment.

The Rif region has provided a conducive environment for the exploration of human heritage, which is a distinct aspect of the Amazigh community's identity in particular, serving as evidence of its roots and authenticity with all its cultural, scientific, and historical diversity. It encompasses values that touch upon various aspects of its cultural, social, urban, and civilizational life. Today, cultural heritage has become a focal point for many international organizations, academic institutions, and a plethora of researchers who view its preservation as an urgent research issue, especially as it intersects with issues related to reality such as tourism, development, and the economy.

In this context, amidst numerous calls for the necessity of collecting and documenting elements of intangible cultural heritage due to their importance in preserving the memory and identity of nations, and understanding human civilization through processes of excavation and exploration of living treasures and listening to them. This study, titled "Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Eastern Rif: a Field Study", aims to introduce the elements of intangible heritage abundant in the study area. It seeks to raise some of the opinions and issues raised by the residents of the region regarding measures for safeguarding and possible preservation mechanisms for this heritage, which is facing neglect and extinction.

### I. Methodological and Conceptual Context of the Topic:

#### 1. Problem Statement:

In light of the foregoing, we approach this topic from a central problematic perspective, which we attempted to formulate as follows: What is meant by intangible cultural heritage? How has the geographical location of the Eastern Rif region contributed to the creation of significant intangible heritage accumulation? In other words, what exists within this heritage? Thus, we inquire here about the distinctive elements of intangible cultural heritage in the Eastern Rif region. Furthermore, we question the entities responsible for preserving intangible cultural heritage and ensuring its continuity.

## 2. Importance of the Study :

The significance of studying intangible cultural heritage lies in its status as a field of knowledge intersecting with various intellectual disciplines such as history, geography, anthropology, literature, sociology, ethnography, and others. The elements of intangible heritage form the basis of the local identity and collective memory of the region's inhabitants, deeply rooted in history. It represents the spirit and culture of this community on one hand and serves as a primary source of cultural diversity on the other hand. Moreover, many elements of this heritage are now threatened with extinction and disappearance, while others remain vibrant and resilient in the face of the vicissitudes of time.

Therefore, approaching this topic is significant from a scientific perspective, as it can serve as a fundamental building block and a modest contribution to preserving elements of this heritage at risk of extinction. It also provides valuable documentation material that can inspire anyone interested in this field of knowledge, whether individuals or institutions.

## 3. Methodological Approach of the Study :

The methodological approach to the subject required reliance on data collected through bibliographic research on one hand, and fieldwork on the other hand. In terms of desk work, we reviewed various researches and references containing references to the subject, despite their scarcity and rarity. On the field level, we based our information gathering on direct observation, conducting field visits to various locations in the Rif region. We also contacted several heritage bearers, conducting meetings and interviews with them aimed at documenting elements of intangible cultural heritage transmitted through memory.

## 4. Study Concepts :

### 1.4. Concept of the Rif :

The term "Rif" in Arabic refers to "all that is close to water from the lands of the Arabs and others, and the plural is 'Rural areas,' and the Rif in them are fertile and cultivated." (Ibn Mandur, 1794). Moulieras sees "Rif" as an Arabic term meaning fertile agricultural lands usually located on the banks of rivers and alongside deserts. This implies that the Rif is land situated on the banks of rivers or near coasts. Therefore, the Rif is associated with terrain and geography and does not have any ethnic, racial, or linguistic connotations (El Mahdi Aloush, Mohamed, 2020: 19).

As a geographical term : "It is a region in northern Morocco, located between the Malouiya River to the east and Jebel (mountains) to the west." Researchers have differed regarding the origin of the word, with some considering it Arabic in origin, while others trace it back to a Latin origin, "rive" or "rivage." In Egypt, the banks of the Nile are called "Rifa," meaning cultivated land. In the Levant, it refers to the region to distinguish it from the desert. However, in Morocco, the term refers to the mountainous area adjacent to the Mediterranean coast without necessarily implying any idea of fertility or agriculture.

The term "Rif" has been used by many researchers. Some attribute it to "the area along the Mediterranean coast since the beginning of the Marinid era" (Ettaybi, Abderrahman, 2008: 21). It has also been used to refer to a human group settled in northern Morocco (Ettaybi, Abderrahman, 2008: 21).

In the same context, Abu Ya'qub al-Basri dedicated a book specifically to the righteous people of the countryside, indicating the geographical area where the saints are spread, which he defined between Ceuta and Tlemcen (El Badisi, Abdel-Haq. 1982: 10-60).

#### 2.4. In the concept of cultural heritage :

The concept of cultural heritage, as discussed in numerous studies, is a complex one, difficult to precisely define and agree upon. It is challenging us to encompass all its various definitions as they are numerous and diverse. However, generally speaking, it is "the inheritance passed down from ancestors, which necessitates its preservation, appreciation, continuity, and transmission from one generation to another, which lies at the core of heritage's meaning." UNESCO defines heritage as "the legacy of the past that we enjoy in the present and pass on to future generations" (Shaira, Zakaria. 2022: 414). Some define it as "the collection of material, intellectual, and social cultural forms and elements that have reached us from both distant and recent past" (Riadh Ouitar, Mohamed. 2002: 21), prevalent in a society and present in various forms of daily life, in our actions, expressions, and ways of thinking (El Bounouhi, El-Bashir. 2021: 186).

Therefore, cultural heritage is the link between the past of peoples and their present, what generations have inherited from their ancestors generation after generation, whether material such as sites, artifacts, complexes, and other tangible remains, or immaterial as a reservoir in the nation's memory such as arts, various forms of expression, rituals, ceremonies, languages, customs, traditions, crafts, knowledge, and sciences (Menzri, Ibtisam & Other. 2022: 261).

The cultural heritage can be described as that living or inert matter left by ancestors for descendants, whether material or immaterial.

#### 3.4. Material Heritage:

This type of heritage encompasses all architectural forms (such as doors, towers, mosques, corners, walls, shrines, hotels, courtyards, mills, castles, and forts, among others), as well as all tools used in handicrafts, agriculture, and various leisure activities. It also includes clothing, fashion, and furnishings in all their aesthetic, decorative, and utilitarian functions (ETToubi, Mohamed. 2013 : 368). Additionally, it comprises archaeological sites of exceptional global value from historical, ethnological, or anthropological perspectives (UNESCO, 1972: 3).

#### 4.4. Concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage :

The concept of intangible cultural heritage, according to the definition provided by UNESCO, encompasses "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills - along with the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural

spaces associated with them - that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history. It provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity" (UNESCO Convention, 2003). This definition reveals the extensive nature of intangible heritage specifically, placing it within the classic definition context of culture (Giguère. H : 2006 : 107.), especially considering that the defining elements entail considerable generalization (Fayez Abdelhamid, 2019: 73). In line with this definition, intangible heritage can be categorized into several types :

\*Linguistic heritage : Encompasses language, local dialects, and folk literature. It also includes all literary forms such as poetry, tales, and riddles.

\*Beliefs and popular knowledge : Social actions and practices towards elements of cultural heritage, whether material or immaterial. Beliefs encompass people's perceptions of things, the secrets of certain phenomena, and their interpretation, such as optimism, pessimism, dreams, visions, spirits, envy, and magic.

\*Knowledges: Encompasses the understanding of information acquired by individuals about various aspects of life, including Arab and folk medicine, plant types, herbs, star observation, and the calculation of seasons and times.

\*Customs and traditions : Social actions and practices, such as weddings, receiving and bidding farewell to guests, and ceremonies related to eating and drinking.

Folk arts, which are divided into two types :

- Kinetic and expressive arts : Such as folk games and dances. Expressive arts encompass all forms of applied, visual, and traditional industries.

- Music and musical performance, which are diverse and vary from one people, country, or region to another.

Therefore, it can be said that intangible cultural heritage manifests in "all non-material and intangible aspects of the various formations and variations of human heritage as a living and transferable cultural practitioner through generations, carried and practiced by its core elements" (Maala, Talal. 2017 : 2).

## II. Geographic Framework of the Eastern Countryside (Study Area) :

The Eastern countryside is considered one of the strategic geographic locations in Morocco, with an area of approximately 6130 square kilometers, comprising 46 territorial communities, including 10 urban and 36 rural communities. Its population is estimated at around 776,446 inhabitants, with 448,201 residing in urban areas and 327,762 in rural areas (Chawch, Ayoub. 2022 : 24).

The Eastern countryside extends from the outskirts of the Nekor Valley in the west to the borders of Malouiya in the east, encompassing the provinces of Nador and Driouch, as well as parts of the Guercif province to the south, according to the administrative division of the kingdom. Some opinions suggest that the Eastern countryside extends to the borders of Algeria to the east.

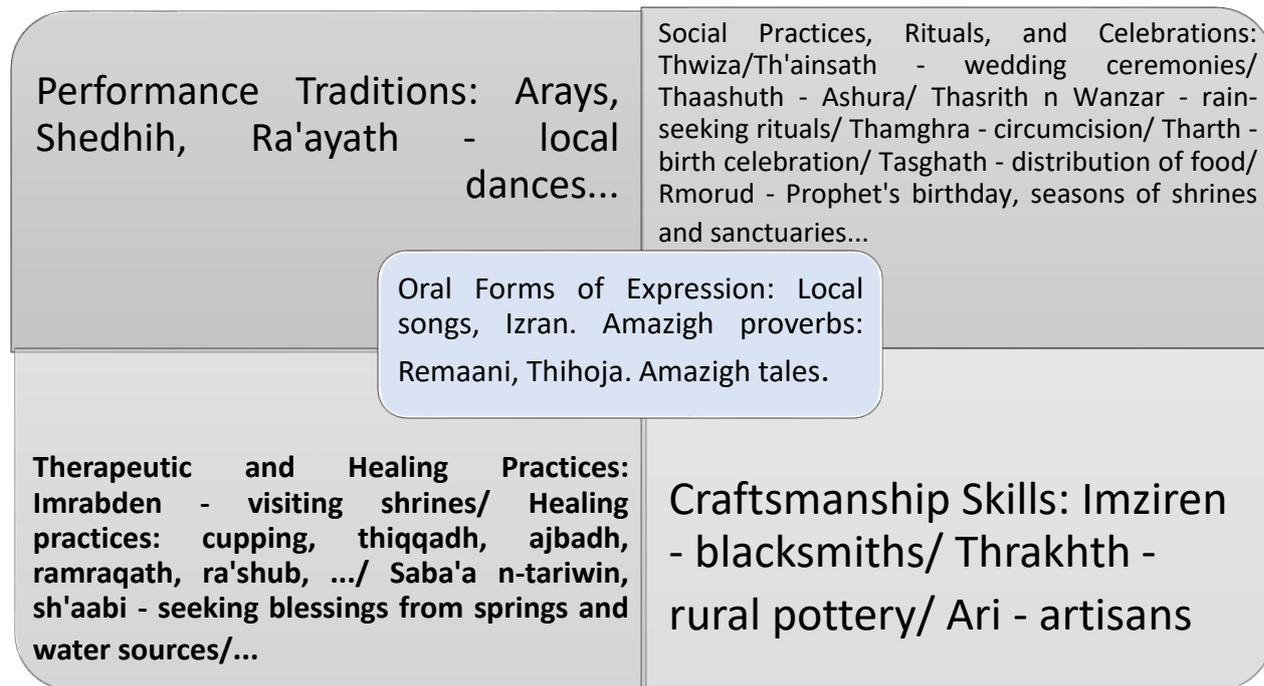
### III. Presenting the results of the field study and Analysis:



Source : Wikipedia (adapted)

To assess the extent of awareness among the population regarding the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage in the Moroccan countryside and identifying the authorities responsible for its protection, we conducted a survey comprising diverse questions on the subject. Additionally, we conducted focused interviews to investigate the distinctive intangible heritage elements in the countryside, their practitioners, understand their characteristics and benefits, and then identify the measures taken to protect this heritage and the responsible authorities.

(Calligraphy): reveals the key elements of intangible cultural heritage in the

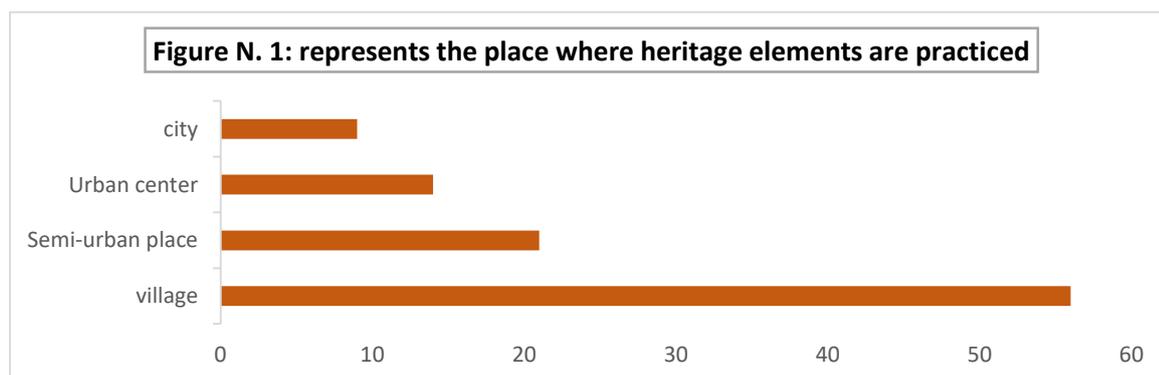


Eastern Rif region.

Source : Field Research

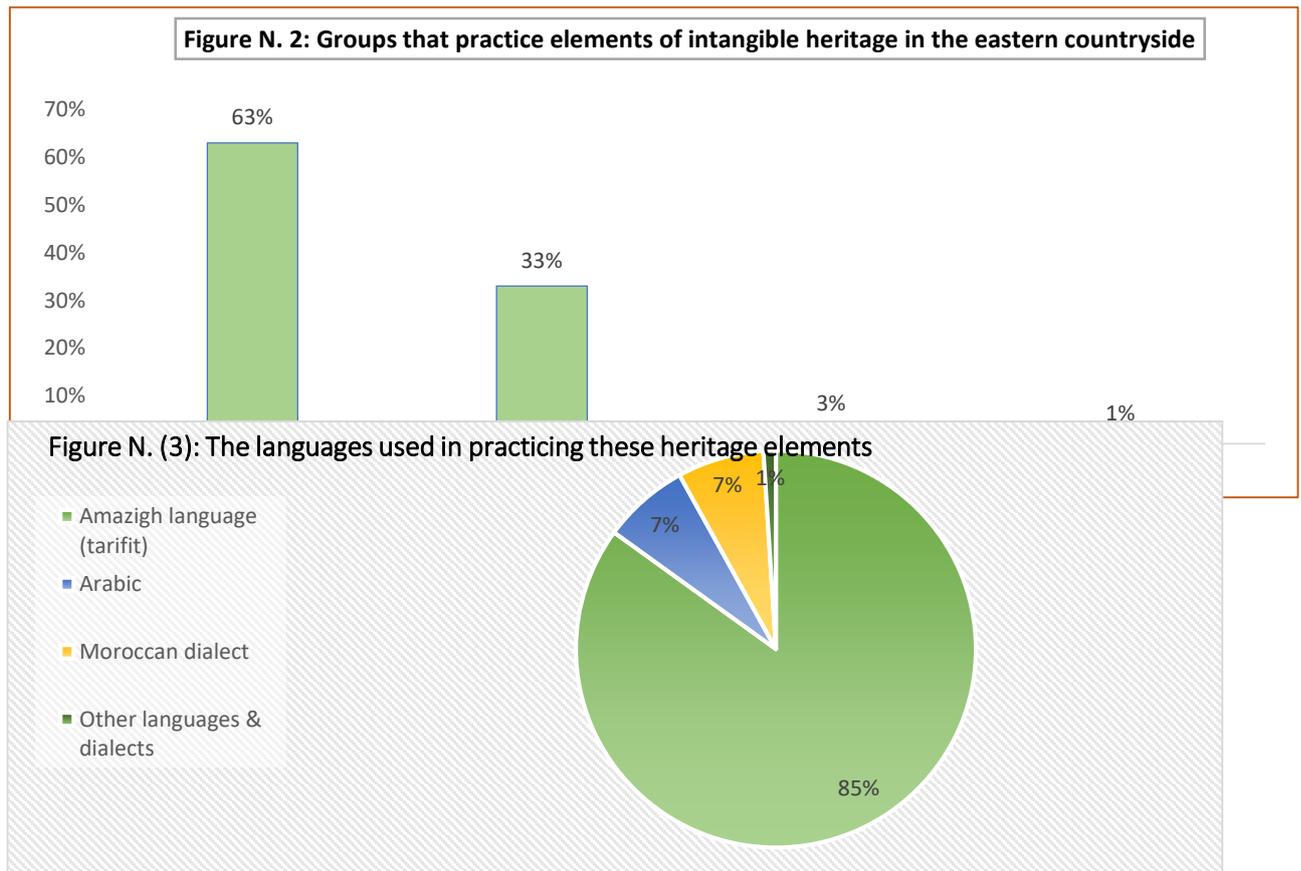
Through the aforementioned calligraphy, we notice that the Eastern Rif region serves as a cultural treasure characterized by a rich intangible heritage, manifested in a diverse array of oral expressions such as local poetry (izran) and Amazigh proverbs and tales (Rama'ani, Thihwaja), distinctive social practices, and vibrant celebratory rituals (Thwiza, Ashura, Thasrih n Wanzar...). This richness lies in the oral traditions passed down through generations, traditional artistic performances (local dances : Arrayess, Shdhih) that express the cultural identity of the region, enriching its cultural and artistic landscape and distinguishing it from others. Additionally, there are therapeutic and healing practices (such as seeking blessings from water sources and visiting shrines) as well as numerous inherited craftsmanship skills.

Source : Field research



The results from this analysis show that the villages of the Rif region contain the largest concentration of elements of an intangible cultural character compared to urban centres. This indicates the continuity of the population of the Bawadi in adhering to the origins of their heritage and their close connection to their local environment, which reflects their preservation of their cultural identity and its characteristics.

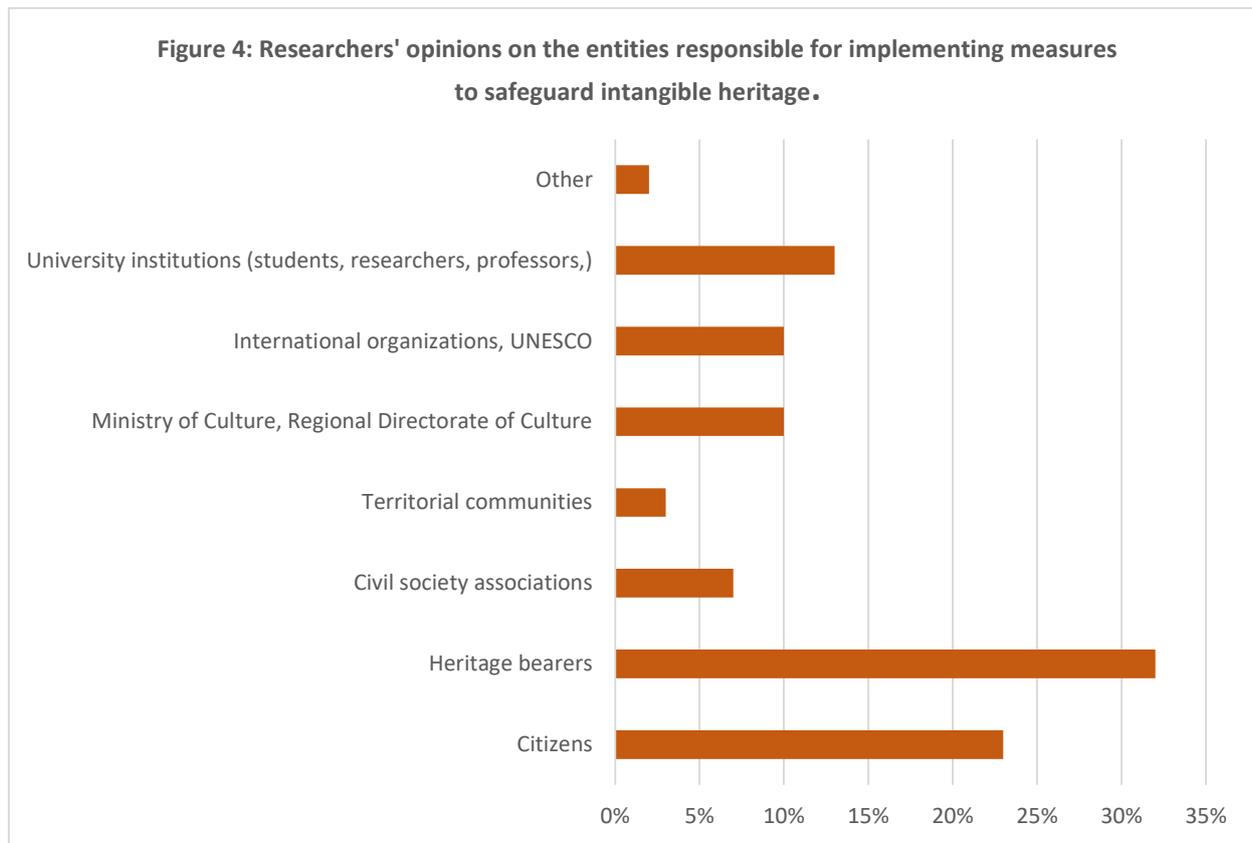
Source : Field research



Based on the previous data, it is clear that heritage activities in the Eastern Rif region are carried out individually at a rate of 63%, while group activities come in second place at a rate of 37%. However, intangible heritage activities seem to be rare in collective activities, reflecting the personal understanding and individual experience of heritage by individual practitioners, with each person reflecting his or her individual taste and vision of heritage. On the other hand, communities can preserve this heritage through social events and shared traditions.

Source : Field research

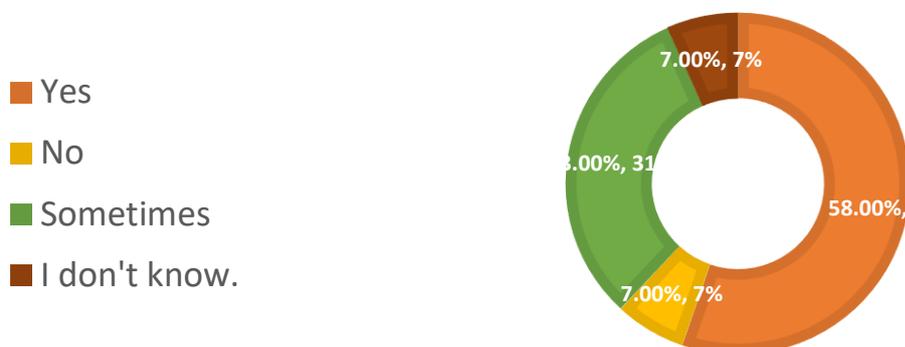
The results of this analysis show that villages in the rural area contain the largest concentration of intangible cultural elements compared to urban centers. This indicates the continuity of the population in rural areas in adhering to their heritage roots and their close connection to their local environment, reflecting their preservation of their cultural identity and its characteristics.



Source : Field Research

From the previous data, it is clear that researchers' opinions regarding the entities responsible for preserving intangible cultural heritage in the Eastern countryside are varied. They indicated that heritage campaigns themselves receive 32% of attention, followed by citizens in general at 23%, while state institutions, international organizations, and civil society associations rank lower in terms of heritage preservation. This variation is attributed to several factors, including the dominance of technology over traditions and the lack of awareness of the importance of heritage elements by those institutions in the region.

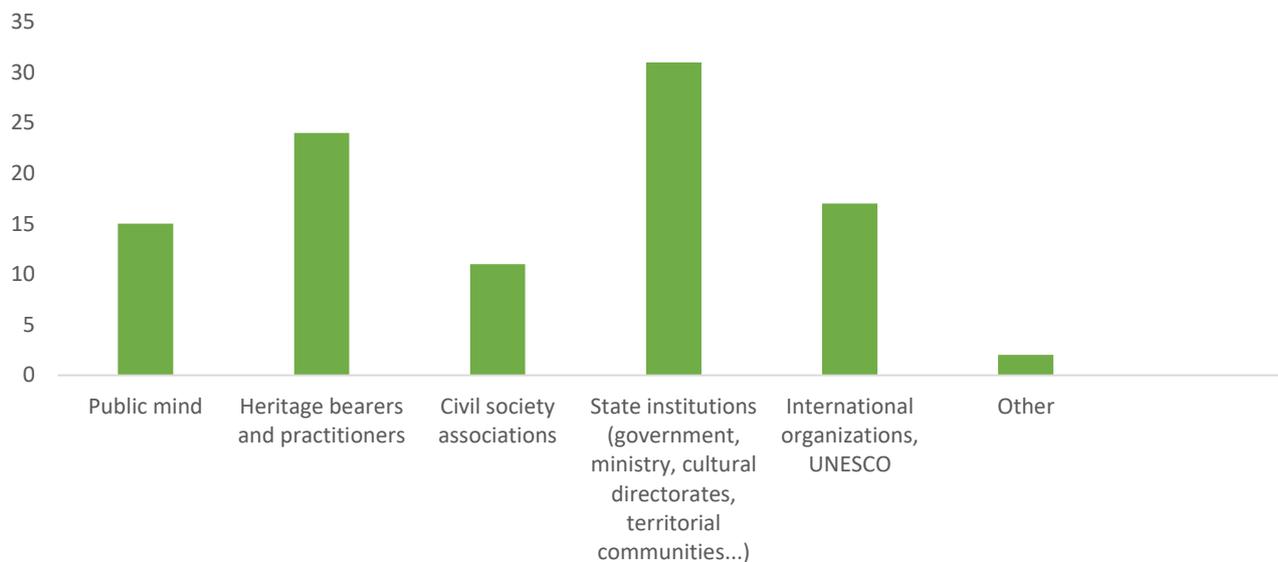
Figure 5: represents the presence and continuity of practicing intangible heritage in the eastern countryside region.



Source : Field Research

The data shows a continued high percentage of residents in the Eastern countryside region retaining intangible heritage, reaching 58%. This figure reflects a strong preservation of traditions and cultural customs spanning multiple generations. It's worth noting that 33% of the population intermittently practice this heritage in their daily lives, indicating a persistent presence of this type of heritage in their lives.

Figure 6: Entities responsible for preserving intangible heritage in the rural area.

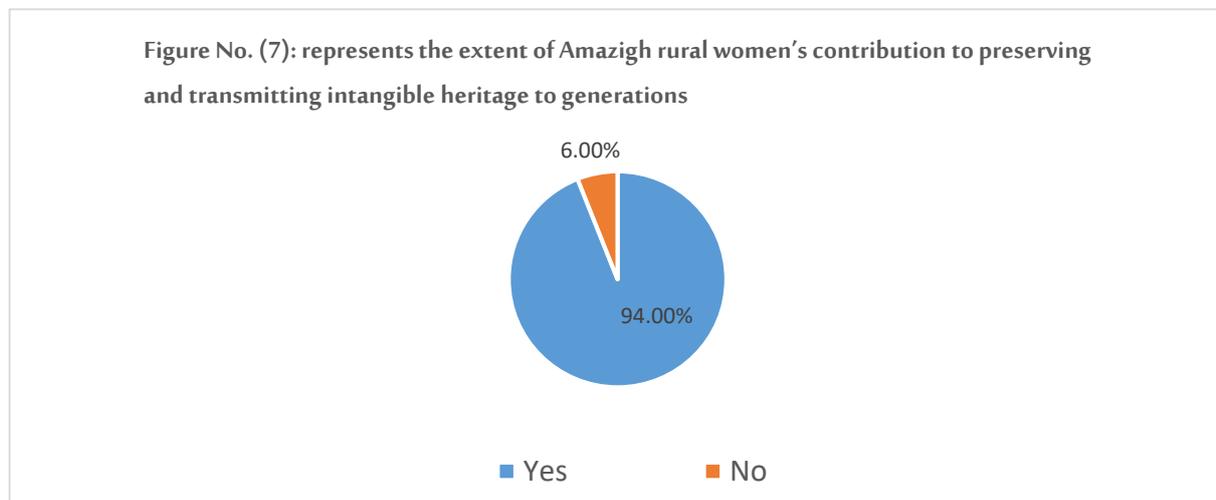


Source : Field Research

Based on the data provided in the above statistics, it appears that the majority of researchers consider state institutions such as government bodies, ministries, cultural directorates, and territorial communities primarily responsible, at 31%, for managing and safeguarding intangible heritage in the Eastern countryside. Following closely are local authorities at 24% in terms of their responsibility towards heritage elements. UNESCO takes the third position at 18%, committing to preserve heritage and prevent its loss and disappearance, along with the role of civil society associations and citizens in general in this responsibility.

Source : Field Research

It appears from the above indicator that 94% of the researchers in the Eastern countryside region believe that the Amazigh woman has a strong presence and



effective contribution in transmitting intangible heritage elements in the Eastern countryside of Morocco. If anything, this indicates that women are the primary agents of social upbringing before anything else.

#### IV. Conclusions and Recommendations:

##### 1. Conclusions:

\* Through our study, it becomes evident that the Eastern countryside region harbors a rich and diverse array of intangible elements of its cultural heritage. This includes numerous oral traditions, traditional arts, and social practices reflecting a heritage spanning several generations.

\* This study highlights a lack of attention from state institutions (government, ministries, territorial communities, etc.) in preserving intangible cultural heritage in the Eastern countryside region, leading to the loss of many elements of the local heritage of this community.

\* The study noted a lack or inadequacy of skills and expertise among the majority of the population regarding the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the area.

\* Rural women play a prominent and vital role in preserving intangible cultural heritage during social celebrations (weddings, childbirth celebrations, circumcision ceremonies), reflecting their active participation in these celebratory activities by passing down cultural heritage from generation to generation. They contribute to the preservation of cultural identity and the promotion of social cohesion, making them an indispensable part of enhancing intangible heritage in rural society.

\* There are some efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage in the Eastern countryside region by heritage bearers and civil society associations, but these efforts remain limited, and these campaigners need support from relevant authorities to enhance their efforts for sustainability.

## 2. Recommendations :

\* Raising awareness among the rural community, across all segments, about the importance of collecting, documenting, and categorizing elements of the intangible cultural heritage of the region, while providing specialized centers for this process.

\* Involvement of the community in the preservation and safeguarding of these heritage elements.

\* Organizing meetings, exhibitions, and cultural events in various rural areas to allow individuals and groups to showcase and share their heritage elements and promote them.

\* The necessity of incorporating elements of local Amazigh intangible culture into educational curricula to pass them on to future generations.

## Conclusion:

Overall, the reality indicates that efforts made in the rural areas to preserve intangible cultural heritage are still limited and insufficient compared to the richness of heritage elements in those regions. Therefore, this calls for intensifying further efforts and directing additional attention towards documenting and transmitting these customs, traditions, and traditional arts. It is imperative that these efforts be carried out through a collaborative approach involving all stakeholders and actors in their various forms, whether these parties are governmental institutions, civil society associations, or local communities.

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