

An aerial photograph of a Moroccan oasis village. The village is nestled in a lush green valley filled with dense palm trees. In the background, there are high, flat-topped desert cliffs under a clear blue sky. The text 'When Nomadism Dies Out: Climate Change and the Loss of the Cultural Heritage' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

When Nomadism Dies Out: Climate Change and the Loss of the Cultural Heritage

The echo of the vanishing tent: A story from Morocco

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In the high, rugged reaches of the High Atlas Mountains, where the Ait Aissa Izm tribe has practiced nomadism for many centuries, a profound transformation has taken place as these communities are now forced to settle, given the worsening of climate conditions. For centuries, the mountain peaks were more than just a landscape; they were a home that moved with the seasons, a sanctuary of wool tents and migratory paths. But today, nomads look out at a horizon that has grown increasingly dusty and dry. The elders remember when nearly hundreds, if not thousands, of tents dotted the valleys of their ancestors; now, only a few dozen remain, scattered like remnants of a fading dream.



The age of relentless drought

The change did not happen overnight, yet its impact has been as swift as a summer storm that never brings rain.

Over the last two decades, the frequency of droughts in Morocco has increased fivefold, shifting from a rare occurrence to a relentless reality that arrives every three years. The last time I went back to my home village, no water on the horizon, all along the way.

A 91-year-old nomad told me: "We are now in the eighth consecutive year of drought". For nomads, climate change is an existential threat.

Their migratory routes, once well-defined paths between the summer pastures of Imilchil and the winter shelters of Errachidia, are dying out.



The natural resources, the water points and the green pastures have vanished, leaving the livestock to perish and the families with a heartbreaking choice.

To stay in the mountains is to face a desiccation of self and place, where the soul no longer sings because the environment that nurtured it is withering. Driven by the need for survival, many families have folded their tents for the last time and moved toward the sedentary life of urban centers like Er-Rich and Errachidia.

Language loss

In the small town of Er-Rich, sedentarization has brought a different kind of drought, a cultural one. Tamazight, the ancient language of the Indigenous people of North Africa and the mother tongue of the Ait Aissa Izm tribe, is beginning to recede. While the elders still speak the language, the younger generation, born or raised in the shadow of permanent walls, increasingly favors Darija. The loss of language is not merely a change in vocabulary; it is a breakdown of communication and identity. One nomadic woman recounted a painful journey to a local hospital in Assoul, where the nurse did not speak Tamazight.



"We couldn't understand each other at all," she shared, highlighting a linguistic marginalization that creates a sense of existential outsidership and inferiority. These forms of loss are often overlooked in international debates on climate change loss and damage.

As the children grow up using Darija to fit into the public sphere and social media, the unique know-how and storytelling embedded in Tamazight face the risk of extinction. It isn't merely the loss of words; it marks the fading of a deeper cultural world.

Tamazight holds the stories, songs, rituals, and ecological knowledge that guided generations of nomads how to endure drought, and move in harmony with a fragile environment.

As sedentarization accelerates, this chain of transmission weakens, threatening an entire system of cultural expression that includes oral traditions, social practices, craftsmanship, and environmental knowledge. When the language fades, the cultural fabric it holds together begins to unravel, and with it disappears a collective identity and memory that cannot easily be replaced.



The fading dance and the woolen garment

The loss of their lifestyle has also reached the most joyous moments of nomadic life: the wedding. In the past, a union was a multi-day festival, a four-day celebration defined by the Ahidous dance and traditional Amazigh chants that echoed through the camps. Today, in the sedentary villages, these celebrations are often reduced to a single day. "Everything has changed," one nomad lamented, noting that the traditional music has been replaced by modern instruments and materials that "no longer sound like us". A nomad explained with deep sadness that "in the past, we celebrated weddings for four days, with Ahidous every day.



The Ahidous resounded every night, bringing everyone together in the ritual dance under the stars. Today, modern musical instruments have taken over, and their music no longer resembles us".

Even the very clothes the people wear have become symbols of this cultural erosion. Nomadic women were once masters of their craft, weaving vibrant garments from the wool of their own sheep, skills that served as markers of their identity. Now, in the urban setting, these traditional clothes are sometimes met with ridicule.

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The jellaba, once an unimaginable garment for a nomadic woman in the mountains, has become the standard for those who fear being seen as "eccentric" or "missing out" on a new sedentarized life.

A living Heritage at the Crossroads

As the Ait Aissa Izm adapt to their new reality, some seek a middle ground through semi-sedentarization. Mothers and children settle in villages so the youth can attend school, while the fathers remain in the mountains, tending to what is left of the livestock. This strategy is a desperate attempt to bridge two worlds—one that is vanishing and one that is still unfamiliar. Parents are torn between the desire for education for their children and the need to survive. They face a poignant dilemma. "The child's education and the nomadic lifestyle do not go well together, because it is not possible to take the school or the teacher with us," a mother tells me near her tent.



Experts and Amazigh activists warn that without education and intentional preservation, Tamazight and the traditions of the nomads will become nothing more than a memory.

The silent and profound loss of heritage in Morocco's urban centers is a warning that climate change does more than destroy physical sites; it unravels the interconnected cultural fabric of a people.

The story of the Moroccan nomads is a testament to human resilience in the face of a changing planet, but it is also a poignant reminder that when the environment changes, the culture it supports, the language, the

songs, the dances, and the very words used to describe the world, can disappear just as quickly as the water in a drying well.

When nomadism disappears, more than a livelihood is lost. The tents that once dotted the mountains carried not only families, but centuries of memory and identity.

If these traditions vanish under the pressure of climate change, Morocco will lose more than a pastoral way of life; it will lose a living part of its cultural heritage.

Protecting nomadic communities today, therefore, means protecting a history, a language, and a way of understanding the land that cannot easily be rebuilt once it is gone.

A story collected by Said

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