

RHOUIFI - A HISTORIC VILLAGE IN THE AURES TO BE PROTECTED BY TOURISM

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Abstract

Today, cultural heritage has become one of the foundations of tourism activity. Wherever it is well managed, tourism investment has a real chance to develop and flourish. A rigorous cultural heritage management strategy can reduce the economic backwardness and marginalisation of historic and traditional villages, particularly those in the Oued Labiod valley in the Aurès, which are the subject of this article, through the promotion of tourism. This article aims to clarify the close link between cultural tourism and heritage enhancement and how this sector can be a resource for regional development.

Key words: cultural tourism, cultural heritage, sustainable development, Rhoufi, Aures.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the diversity of its cultural and natural resources, its geographical position and its openness to the Mediterranean, Algeria offers extraordinary opportunities to develop different types of tourism, far from the classic services offered by seaside or spa towns.

In sites under-exploited by tourists or still little known by tourists and tour operators, the promotion of cultural tourism could be a lever for the revaluation and conservation of their cultural and natural heritage, their opening up and their development. The Aurès region is the best example of this reality. Despite its potential, it appears as an endangered area, poorly integrated into the national economy and subject to various forms of aggression. Although symbolised by its traditional villages with their authentic architecture and particular way of life, it is undergoing a very advanced process of socio-economic and cultural degradation due to both natural and human factors. The traditional habitat is gradually being abandoned and the villages have become soulless and completely ignore the original physical and cultural characteristics of the thousand-year-old villages, and this is the case of the village Rhoufi.

A village considered as a real vector of a rich and diversified culture, which constitutes an important economic potential for the region, but which remains little and badly valorised and totally abandoned by its inhabitants.

It is clear that, despite all efforts, the Aurès remains one of the most isolated, disadvantaged and

underdeveloped regions in terms of tourism. However, *isn't it time to think about enhancing our thousand-year-old history and reconnecting with our cultural roots, long forgotten or often neglected due to a lack of research in this field?* It is with this in mind that the **historical village Rhoufi** in the Aurès was chosen as a field of study on the theme of the enhancement of cultural heritage and tourism development.

However, the question that concerns us is: *is tourism a solution for the protection of Rhoufi, a historic village in the Aurès?*

Tourism is one of the most important sectors, given the role it plays in development and job creation, but it is also a catalyst for social and spatial transformations in the various regions benefiting from the tourist boom.

But tourism activity will not be an effective instrument in the fight against poverty in mountain areas, will not allow cultural exchanges and will not generate economic and social development if it is not designed for and by the local population, and if the cultural heritage of the region is not promoted.

Indeed, it is with the aim of bringing elements of answer to the problem of the valorisation of this cultural heritage that the historical village Rhoufi was chosen. It is a potentially favourable field of investigation for an empirical study of qualitative type. This method offers us the possibility to observe and understand more closely the problems that this part of the country really suffers from, while involving direct contact with the research subjects through interviews and direct observations in the environment of the actors. We believe that such a study will make an important

contribution to the promotion of cultural tourism in the historic villages of the region, especially in **Rhoufi**.

In this context, it is important to use the cultural heritage of the village to meet the needs of tourism, especially cultural tourism. Nevertheless, as cultural heritage has become one of the most important tourism activities today, wherever it is well managed, tourism investments have a real chance to develop and flourish.

But this tourist activity can only flourish by combining the efforts of all the local initiatives, associations and especially the State, which deserve more interest from the public authorities and encouragement on the socio-economic level, by giving particular interest to this village from the point of view of basic infrastructures, tourist facilities and by integrating it into projects with tourist potential. However, this activity must be well managed, and particularly in these fragile areas, tourism exploitation must be compatible with the protection of the cultural and natural environment.

From this point of view, it seems that cultural tourism is today the best way to contribute to the sustainable development of the cultural heritage of our historic village and of the whole region.

II. METHODOLOGY

Tourism: a factor in the protection of historic villages

The role of tourism as a vector of development is no longer in question today, although it has long been "locked" in an economic apprehension which analysed it solely in terms of financial flows without taking account of its cultural dimensions. This is despite the fact that today's tourists are more demanding than those of a few years ago, have a wide range of interests and wish to travel the world in search of cultural and heritage sites in order to enrich their knowledge and participate in local creative activities while being in direct contact with the local population.

In this case, the host society has a very important role to play, in order to be able to satisfy the needs and objectives of tourists and to diversify its economy, it must be aware that the only means by which it can guarantee its economic development and promote its heritage wealth is undoubtedly the quality of its tourist offer, nevertheless, poor management of this offer can lead to unsatisfactory results, which the guide for community project managers explains as follows "[...] *we have our own ideas about what visitors should experience. But if we don't present these experiences as enjoyable, relaxing and fun, our message may go unnoticed, or worse, misunderstood*" (Guide, cultural and heritage tourism, 2012,p.18).

The aim is not only to preserve the cultural potential, but also to allow as many tourists as possible to enjoy the thousand-year-old history of the historical villages visited. **It should be noted that the tourism offers and the improvement of the quality of the services provided are essential elements for the competitiveness of a destination.** Thus, this sector can

generate tangible and intangible social benefits, in addition to the economic benefits of a destination. It offers visitors the opportunity to experience the living heritage of the historic villages visited and has the power to bring local people together around a common project. Thus, community developments carried out in the name of tourism contribute to improving their quality of life, conserving their heritage and giving them a sense of pride. Indeed, tourism has the power to create jobs at all levels in the various sectors of the economy, including transport, hotels, restaurants, communications, IT, and so on. In addition, many other sectors such as agriculture, architecture, handicrafts and cultural activities can benefit, to varying degrees, from the tourism industry. In addition to these benefits, tourism, and in particular cultural tourism, promotes the preservation and protection of important local resources, especially in historic villages: it preserves the traditions, customs and culture of the communities, offers experiences to visitors attracted by history, allows the preservation and enjoyment of the arts which also benefit the local population... Knowledge, encounters, exchanges and the lowering of prejudices are also benefits of tourism. Indeed, tourism is an important activity because of the migration of populations it generates and the transformation of places.

Today it is becoming one of the most characteristic elements of modern times, but only if it is well managed, as we have already explained and as Saskia Cousin also emphasised in her article when she stated that "*Tourism, to be positive, must therefore be cultural and controlled*" (Cousin S. , 2006, p.20). as excessive or inappropriate use leads to the alteration or destruction of cultural and natural historical sites and monuments.

With the promotion of tourism, historic villages have discovered their heritage and its enhancement and many of them have made this sector a main axis of their economic development strategy. Thus, heritage has been given a market value. It has also become the brand image of many destinations.

Tourism also allows to collect funds thanks to the different tourist taxes (guided tours, access to monuments, consumption on the spot...) which are used for the enhancement and conservation of heritage.

In this context, tourism must be considered as the most important means of promoting and preserving heritage, as it is the saviour of heritage and contributes to its transmission from generation to generation and "[...] *without tourism it is not possible to live, experience or feel cultural diversity through the aesthetic emotions it arouses and the understanding of the values it expresses*" (UNESCO, 2004, Forum of Cultures).

It is this strong link that leads us to be more and more interested in our heritage. The interest that we can attribute to it is its valorisation in the eyes of its visitors, that is to say giving it back its noble place in the cultural and natural environment where it is located.

From what has been said, we can see that tourism is necessary for the cultural heritage of historic villages because it has allowed them to accelerate their development and to manage to protect and conserve it.

But despite the fact that tourism and heritage are closely linked and have multiple relationships, their development policy is still lagging behind in our country, Algeria, despite the efforts made.

III. THE AURÈS REGION AND ITS HISTORICAL VILLAGES

III.1. Heritage and tourism in Aurès

The Aurès is a partly mountainous region in north-eastern Algeria, distinguished by a rich and varied cultural and natural heritage, which makes it one of the best tourist destinations in Algeria (Fig. 1).



Figure 1- Geographical location of the Aurès

Source : www.google.com/Aurès Algeria

The villages of this region are distinguished by a particularity in the architecture and a specificity in the topography and the climate. These constraints have guided the inhabitants of the Aurès to take all possible measures to harmonise their habitat with this natural environment.

The construction techniques used are still visible today and reveal the genius of its builders.

This vast territory is composed of several historical villages that are geographically almost identical, with a diverse world of traditional lifestyles and cultures that are the main sources of inspiration and attraction for culture-loving tourists. But these remain little or not valorised; a situation that leaves us with a great desire for their safeguarding and valorisation. For it is this cultural and natural heritage that makes this part of the country so unique.

Indeed, this region has many cultural and natural resources that could be used to promote its tourism and develop its economy. It also allows the development of a variety of tourism products thanks to its great cultural, archaeological and religious potential. However, these

resources are still under-exploited and are deteriorating day by day. It is our duty to enhance this heritage, starting from the grassroots level, i.e. the local level, which will undoubtedly allow this region to open up to the outside world and to pass on its history and its riches, and this can only be done through the tourism sector. Thanks to **cultural and sustainable tourism**, aimed mainly at people wishing to discover the cultural richness of the historical and traditional villages and the great natural spaces, this part of the country can become a real tourist pole capable of competing with the other tourist villages in the country.

However, tourist visits will allow tourists to discover the richness of the Aurès with its various natural sites, its tourist products as well as its historical and cultural heritage which has encompassed all the human civilisation that the region has known.

Furthermore, the concept of tourism requires the implementation of a strong, attractive and long-term communication strategy. However, the integration of the socio-cultural factors specific to the Berber population of the region is essential for the successful development of cultural tourism in its historic villages.

It is not only a question of preserving a cultural potential, but also of allowing a maximum number of visitors to enjoy the enchanting landscapes of the region and its historic and traditional villages. One of the most important of these is the historic village of Rhoufi, a traditional village with vernacular architecture that has always attracted a large number of visitors. Its architectural and natural particularity has made it one of the best tourist destinations in Algeria, which has always aroused the curiosity of culture-loving tourists despite its degraded state. It should be noted that, despite the interest given to historic towns and villages in Algerian legislation, several regions with cultural riches that could meet all the motivations inherent in tourism and promote the economic development of the country have remained forgotten. This is particularly true in the mountainous or rural areas where the best historic villages are located. These villages, which performed vital functions in the life of traditional societies, are now empty and totally abandoned. This situation is getting worse every day and requires urgent action.

III.2. Tourism potential of the historic village of Rhoufi

The village of Rhoufi has a great potential for tourism. The diversity of its natural data, the richness of its culture, combined with its ethnic diversity constitute a real variety of landscapes, people and customs. This potential is still largely under-exploited and under-valued.

This diversity of wealth constitutes a definite development opportunity for this village and the entire region, especially as it suffers from territorial marginalisation (it is not located on the axis of regions with development potential). Also a lack of reliable economic resources and underemployment to stabilise

its inhabitants, who abandon their native village in search of better and more modern living conditions in other localities, creates among the Berbers of the Aurès an attachment to this land. This can only be done with the participation of the local actors and the population and by enhancing all the local assets.

III.2.1. Presentation of the village

Rhoufi is a vernacular village located in the heart of the Oued Labiod valley, which is one of the main valleys of the Aures region. In addition to its geographical position, this village has always been characterised by a vernacular architecture perfectly integrated into its natural context. It was built with one main concept in mind: "seeing without being seen". The spirit of protection against the various types of attacks led the indigenous population to choose a site that was inaccessible but had many prospects.

The land is in the form of natural balconies, cut into the rock, which attracted the Berber man (Chaoui) because of the mildness of the climate of the region and the protection offered in case of trouble. Indeed, this natural shape of the land has made this village famous on the national and international territory under the name of : "Rhoufi balconies" (Fig.2).



Figure 2 - Natural balconies cut into the rock.

Source: Author

On the territory of Ighassiren in a municipality of Ghassira in the Aurès, the Oued Labiod has carved out a veritable canyon in the sedimentary rock of the subsoil, at the bottom of which stretches a ribbon of

palm groves, following all the meanders: it is the "Canyon of Rhoufi" (Fig.3) and (Fig. 4).



Figure 3 - Rhoufi Canyon

Source: www.google.com/Rhoufi



Figure 4- Palm groves at the bottom of the Canyon

It is a rugged, deeply ravined plateau, with an average altitude of 700 metres, sloping from north-east to south-west, and wedged like a corridor between two folds of the massif: the Djebel Krouma chain to the north-west and the Djebel Ahmar Khaddou to the south-east. The houses are clinging to the limestone walls of the canyon and have the same colour as the rock. The historic village of Rhoufi is located here (Fig.5).

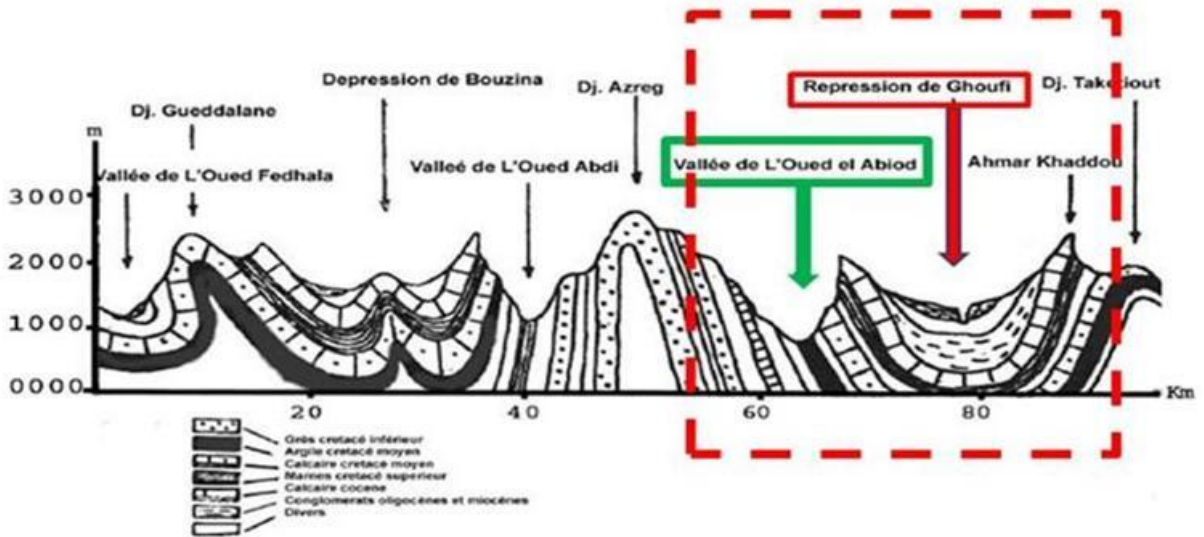


Figure 5 - Cross section of the Aurès massif
 Source: Phillippe Thiriez, 1986 / Processing: Author

The historical village of Rhoufi is located at the south-western end of the Aurès in a pre-Saharan area at the southern end of the commune of Ghassira, daïra of

T'kout, along the national road RN°31 leading from Batna to Biskra (Figure 6), (Figure 7) and (Figure 8).

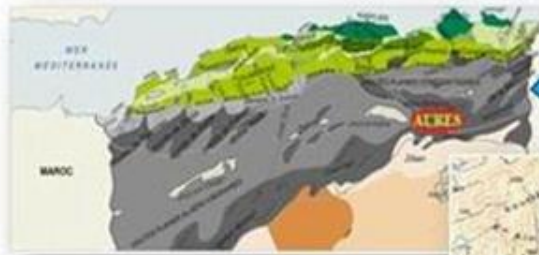


Figure 6- Geographical location of the Aurès



Figure 7-Geographical location of the village Rhoufi



Figure 8: View from the bottom of the village Rhoufi
 Source: Author

III.3. Cultural characteristics of the historic village Rhoufi

The historic village Rhoufi is characterised by a centuries-old practice and way of life, testifying to a strong bond between Berber man and his natural environment. The topography of the land led the inhabitants to build solid and resistant dwellings in the form of caves clinging to the hillside, which still defy the various hazards of time (Figure 9).



Figure 9- vernacular dwellings in the village Rhoufi

Source: Author

The village had also attracted one of the most prestigious hotel chains of the time. The Transatlantic, which built a hotel there in 1902 for the tourist comfort of French army officers, colonists and metropolitans. It was part of the hotel chain of the time, as the region was considered one of the best tourist destinations in Algeria. It was therefore a sort of stopover lodge integrated into the regional tourist circuit. It is a long building with a surface area of 605 m², and with its fourteen rooms (14), it constituted a place of rest for tourists after the hard hikes (Fig.10).



Figure 10- The transatlantic hotel in Rhoufi village

Source: Author

Indeed, other socio-cultural and economic spaces are still present, such as places of worship, education and gathering, which strengthen the links between members of the same community: mosques and prayer halls, Koranic schools, zaouïas, collective granaries, etc.

But the life of this Berber village is not limited to the particularity of its vernacular architecture, its universe is also diversified in terms of traditional ways of life and oral expression. It is in this part of the Aurès that the oral tradition has remained the most deeply rooted. Songs, which for thousands of years, still punctuate daily life, no wedding, no seasonal festival, no religious celebration is done without the dance and song of the "Rahaba". A Chaoui (Berber) dance is admired by all tourists who come to discover the culture of the region as shown in the figures above (Fig.11).



Figure11- Rahaba song and dance

Source: Author

The woman had an important place in the economic life of the village, which is why her presence in the souk (market) is a sign of strength and dynamism alongside the man thanks to the different handicrafts she makes, which have always fascinated and attracted a large number of tourists. Thus, the houses were centres of different handicraft activities of the women such as weaving wool or goat hair, pottery, esparto and so on . which they always try to pass on to their children as shown in the following figures (Fig.14-15)



Figure 12-Berber women's dance

Source: www.google.com/culture in the Aures



Figure 13- Berber horse dance

Source: Penterest.com

There were also other activities practised by men in this village such as ironwork, leatherwork, babouche makers, jewellers, etc but the essential work was that of the land with a very old irrigation technique practised since the Roman presence. Thanks to the physical and climatic diversities that have given this region a very varied agriculture (forage crops, market gardening, cereals, etc), the methods of cultivation and breeding passed on by the ancestors have also been preserved and some men try to pass them on to their children in the hope of preserving these ancestral practices.

All the elements around which the life of the Berbers of the historical village Rhoufi was organised, constitute its cultural heritage: a richness, a culture and an art that reflect contemporary life and bear witness to the history of this Berber society.

Because of the richness, diversity and quality of its potential, this village lends itself well to an operation to enhance its endangered cultural heritage, a real asset for promising tourism development.

Investing in heritage is a way of guaranteeing its economic development and saving its history and identity.

IV. RESULTS

This study showed that the village of Rhoufi is rich in cultural potential but poor in action due to its marginality and the total absence of a policy for the promotion and enhancement of its heritage, which has made it poorly known and underdeveloped economically and for tourism. Indeed, the tourist offer of the region presents a certain number of weaknesses, such as the total absence of hotel structures and infrastructures, the abandonment and degradation of historical and traditional villages and the degradation of the natural environment, which only a tourism policy could remedy.

However, the strength of attraction of our study area lies in the importance of its cultural and natural wealth, which predisposes it to become a very important tourist area, both nationally and internationally. The region, in general, is ready to play the role of engine for the development of the whole country, but the mastery of its space must pass by the valorisation of all its cultural and natural components. Despite competition from

other regions, this part of the country manages to maintain a leading role thanks to its attractive landscapes, its climate and its historical, cultural and artistic heritage. These assets offer strong opportunities for tourism development in terms of discovery tourism and ecotourism. On the cultural level, many elements of the historical and traditional heritage are able to reinforce the landscape products.

The analysis of the potential of Rhoufi village highlights the contrast between its natural (landscape diversity) and cultural (tangible and intangible) assets and the importance of enhancing them. Their development will contribute to the influence of the whole region and to its economic development.

We believe that the promotion of the tourism sector in our study area will slow down the rural exodus by creating jobs, bringing support to this area, allowing the local development of transport, hotel (accommodation), educational, administrative, cultural and leisure infrastructures and could have considerable financial benefits that will allow the maintenance of its heritage. In addition, many other sectors such as agriculture, architecture, handicrafts and cultural activities can benefit, to varying degrees, from the tourism industry.

This research has also shown that cultural tourism is the main means of keeping alive the cultural heritage of the historic villages of the Aurès region, notably the village Rhoufi, and has a very important economic and socio-cultural impact on their development. However, it offers visitors the opportunity to discover the history and living heritage of the region.

Indeed, this type of tourism is a credible economic activity in this part of the Aurès. On the condition that this sector is controlled in order to avoid the harmful effects that it can cause, such as the degradation of the landscape, the destruction of fundamental traditional values, pollution, etc.

Consequently, any planning and development policy must integrate the preservation and enhancement of cultural and natural resources. This development requires a global approach to the territory, supported by effective knowledge. The involvement of the local population is a determining factor in the success of these development projects.

In this respect, the brand image of this Chaoui country can be based on the elements which characterise its identity and which are:

- The different valleys with a diverse world in terms of traditional ways of life, human densities, material cultures and particular topography;
- The presence of a unique forest massif in Algeria;
- The variety and quality of its cultural and natural wealth between (archaeological sites historical or traditional villages and national park)...

Nevertheless, the development of these undeniable potentialities can give rise to a thriving tourism industry.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The cultural heritage of the historic villages is a very impressive attraction for tourists, it shines in their eyes. In this context, it should be promoted in the sense of deepening the knowledge of foreigners about the customs and culture of the inhabitants of these villages, especially those located along the valleys. It must be stressed that the task of enhancing cultural heritage is difficult when financial means are lacking. It is all the more difficult when the area to be enhanced is located in a poor, isolated region, progressively abandoned by its human potential, without which no preservation action is possible. Indeed, the involvement of this population and the orientation of its work force, both at the level of projects and punctual and daily actions, is a determining factor. Reversing this trend requires, above all, a committed political will (financial aid, subsidies and supervision) and the mobilisation of all the active forces in society (local authorities and communities, technical services, and so on.). And this, in order to achieve the objectives of enhancement which allow the revitalisation of this rich heritage and

its development as a tourist attraction. In this case, cultural tourism must be taken into account in tourism development studies.

It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and its decentralised structures to participate in these studies and to provide guidelines for the enhancement of cultural heritage, including the vernacular architecture of historic villages. The combination of purely technical restoration efforts and social, cultural and environmental rehabilitation would allow these historic villages to regain the architectural quality and landscape beauty they are losing, as well as their integration into contemporary life. In order to achieve this, cultural tourism must allow the reuse or conversion of old abandoned buildings and ensure the financing of restoration actions. The conservation of these historic villages is therefore of great importance for the national culture, identity and economy, and is of great international interest. Indeed, cultural heritage needs tourism to ensure its globalization and sustainability. From this point of view, **tourism is a better solution for the protection of Rhoufi village, a historical village in the Aurès, in response to our research question.**

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