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To the Nation, Belong the Archives: The Search for Manuscripts and Archival Documents in Postcolonial Morocco

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Abstract

The trajectory of the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts, a government initiative begun in the late 1960s to locate rare manuscripts in private collections, is a potent example of the role Arabic-script manuscript culture played in post-colonial nation-building in Morocco. This article presents the history of the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts, demonstrating how Moroccan bureaucrats used the recovery of archival documents and especially historic manuscripts in Arabic-script, as part of a multi-faceted nation-building project after European colonization. Their project included connecting historic manuscripts to Moroccan identity and territorial sovereignty. It contends that the ramifications of linking these policies with documentary heritage would affect what came to be discovered, valorized, and preserved in the “national collection” and subsequently, what histories could be written.

Keywords: archives; colonialism; Arabic-script manuscripts; Morocco; nation-building

Historic manuscripts are a formative part of Moroccan identity, so said the newly appointed Moroccan minister of culture and communications, Muhammad Laaraj, in 2017, as he discussed Morocco’s “living manuscript culture” in a prepared speech at the auditorium of the National Library of Morocco (Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc, or BNRM). He addressed an audience of several hundred people who were there to attend the awards ceremony for the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts, a government initiative begun in 1969 to locate rare manuscripts in private collections. Sitting among the audience were the prize winners themselves, as well as government officials and some noted Moroccan intellectuals who presented the awards. In the foyer of the auditorium, select manuscripts from those submitted for the prize that year were exhibited in glass cases.

The 2018 iteration of the ceremony took place in the same auditorium, with the newly appointed Prime Minister Saad Eddine Othmani as guest speaker. Othmani began his speech with the declaration, “I have a personal relationship with the Hassan II Prize.” He spoke seemingly unscripted about his father’s repeated participation in the Hassan II Prize, which he attributed to the former’s vast interest in Amazigh (Berber) and Arab culture. Othmani related his family’s experiences to a named collective Moroccan heritage before thanking those who had submitted for the prize that year, people whom he described as those who “carry and sustain culture.” After noting that among the submissions that year were manuscripts from the 9th and 10th centuries (CE), he surmised that there must be “more out there to be discovered . . . in spiritual hostels (*zawāyā*, sing. *zāwiya*), in old, traditional Islamic schools, [and] in personal libraries.”¹ Othmani ended

¹ Hassan II Prize Awards Ceremony, BNRM, Rabat, Morocco, December 12, 2018.

by promising to work to increase the amounts of the cash prizes awarded by the Hassan II Prize to participants so that more Moroccans felt encouraged to come forward with their manuscript collections.

Participants in the Hassan II Prize are not selling or giving their manuscripts to the Moroccan government. They are temporarily putting their materials into the custody of the government so that the bibliographic information is cataloged and the materials themselves are digitized. After those two separate activities are completed (usually within a year), the manuscripts and archival documents are returned to the original owners.² In 2018, the grand prize winner received approximately 3,000 USD. In 2022, the grand prize was raised to 10,000 USD, and in 2023, it was again raised to the equivalent of 13,000 USD. The ubiquity of manuscript ownership in the country has allowed the prize to run almost continuously for more than fifty years.

The celebration of the historical manuscript heritage of Morocco is not the modern print-based “imagined community” of Benedict Anderson, who theorized that the idea of the nation was able to take hold during the modern period once other cultural concepts, such as a religious script–language or belief in a monarch with divine dispensations, lost their hold on societies, or as he put it “lost their axiomatic grip on men’s minds.”³ In Morocco, during the battles against French colonization (1912–56) and afterward, nation-building did not dispense with these concepts but harnessed them to create the idea of the Moroccan nation, headed by a sultan (later king) who would claim the title of Commander of the Faithful, with the religion of Islam and Arab culture seen to be foundational components of the decolonization toolkit.⁴

Anderson identified print and print capitalism as the technology of communication that made modern communities, that is, nations, imaginable.⁵ He was dismissive of “manuscript knowledge” as “scarce and arcane lore,” juxtaposing it with a print knowledge, that he described as reproducible and disseminating.⁶ And yet the introduction of printing in Morocco has been called an “untimely accident,” because manuscript book production, as a service industry for the elite, already had systems in place that allowed for a satisfactory level of reproduction and dissemination of knowledge to meet demand.⁷ Morocco’s transition to printing involved a long period in which lithography was the predominant form. Lithography allowed the format of the manuscript page and the beauty of calligraphy to be retained with the convenience of more rapid reproduction and without the introduction of errors that can be common with typography.⁸ Not only was there an attempt to hold onto the material form of the manuscript codex, but there was also continuity with the kinds of texts disseminated. Gretchen Head has shown that Morocco’s engagement with print did not radically change the “types of textual discourse that characterized . . . manuscript culture” and that reading practices and reading publics retained connections to traditional modes of literary engagement for a long period after the widespread use of print. Manuscripts,

² The subject of financial compensation for participating in the Hassan II Prize is complex. Although a majority of prize administrators assume that the prize money is the only reason people participate in the competition (not that they necessarily have a problem with this), participants are actually motivated by multiple intellectual and cultural heritage concerns in addition to the financial incentive which many believe to be inadequate and not in keeping with the cultural value of the materials and with the prices for which Moroccan manuscripts sell in (licit and illicit) international markets.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2006), 36.

⁴ Marie Therese and Ellis House, “Al-Andalus As a Metaphor of Collective Identity for 1940s Moroccan Intellectuals,” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 101–26.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷ Fawzi Abdulrazak, “The Kingdom of the Book: The History of Printing as an Agency of Change in Morocco between 1865 and 1912” (PhD diss., Boston University, 1990), 35.

⁸ Muhammad As-Saffar, *Disorienting Encounters: Travels of a Moroccan Scholar in France in 1845–1846*, trans. Susan Gilson Miller (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 204.

moreover, as “pre-existing forms” did not lose their significance with Moroccan reading publics. Over time they left the public sphere of reading, but were (and still are) part of a vibrant private space that this paper will explore.⁹

Reverence for manuscript culture and knowledge did not abate in postcolonial Morocco. And although newspapers and journals played an important role in the success of the nationalist movement, they were also instrumentalized by Moroccan postcolonial intellectual bureaucrats to communicate a concern for the state and care of historic manuscripts held in private collections.¹⁰ The newspaper of the nationalist Istiqlal Party, *al-ʿAlam* (The Flag), was an important tool used to reach everyday Moroccans who were believed to have documentary heritage materials in their possession. For example, in an anonymous editorial published in *al-ʿAlam* on March 8, 1969, the author noted a resurrection of traditional Moroccan culture taking place in the country and encouraged owners of manuscripts to see their collections as “intellectual and historical trusts” (*amānat al-ʿilm wa-l-tarikh*).

The Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts and its fifty-year trajectory is a potent example of the role Arabic-script manuscript culture played in postcolonial nation-building in Morocco. In this article, I present the history and workings of the prize, demonstrating how Moroccan bureaucrats used the recovery of archival documents, and especially historic manuscripts in Arabic script, as part of a multifaceted nation-building project after European colonization.¹¹ Their project included connecting historic manuscripts to Moroccan identity and territorial sovereignty. I contend that the ramifications of linking these policies with documentary heritage would affect what came to be discovered, valorized, and preserved in the “national collection” (*al-raṣīd al-waṭānī*).¹² This article, which is an effort to address the “inadequacy of modern scholarship on Maghribi manuscripts,” is written from the perspective of the field of archival studies.¹³ Archival studies concerns itself with material repositories, be they analog or digital, and with understanding how archival records as documentation of human activity influence and are influenced by social contexts, “axiomatic constructs” like power, evidence, and heritage, and the processes by which records are collected, maintained, and used for secondary purposes.¹⁴ It does not consider such archives to be synonymous with the extradisciplinary concept of “the archive,” which is a potent metaphor theorized in other fields.¹⁵

Morocco’s Written Heritage

Manuscript production and manuscript culture persisted in Morocco longer than in other parts of the Muslim world and could be found well into the 19th century. Fawzi Abdelrazak believes that Moroccans, although aware of printing and its benefits, were slow to see the need to change their traditional method of book production, that of hand-writing manuscripts, because they did not need it to meet the needs for elite consumption of books. There already existed a sufficient corpus of scribes and systems in place for producing

⁹ Gretchen Head, “Print Culture and Sufi Modernity: al-Tuhami al-Wazzani’s Embodied Reading of Morocco’s *Nahda*,” *Philological Encounters* 6, no. 1–2 (2021): 179–213.

¹⁰ Therese and House, “Al-Andalus.”

¹¹ France officially colonized Morocco from 1912 to 1956; Spain colonized other areas of Morocco during this same period.

¹² This term is frequently used by the Moroccan Ministry of Culture in its publications about the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts.

¹³ Umberto Bongianino, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Islamic West: Maghribi Round Scripts and the Andalusī Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 2.

¹⁴ Anne J. Gilliland, “Archival and Recordkeeping Traditions in the Multiverse and Their Importance for Researching Situations and Situating Research,” in *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, ed. Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish, and Andrew J. Lau (Clayton, Australia: Monash University Press, 2016), 45.

¹⁵ See also Michelle L. Caswell, “‘The Archive’ is not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstructions* 16, no. 1 (2021).

multiple copies of texts.¹⁶ The private manuscript library (*al-khizanā al-khāṣa*) that emerged as a cultural institution early in Muslim societies across diverse geographic regions also thrived in elite Moroccan society. Manuscripts were collected by scholars who established private libraries to support their own teaching and study. Manuscript collections were bequeathed from one generation to another according to a “well-established patrilineal system,” with the contents of the private library often reflecting the intellectual interests of the original collecting scholar.¹⁷

The number of Arabic and Islamic manuscripts (which may be in languages other than Arabic) in public repositories worldwide are estimated to be more than three million, with “an unknown but substantial number still in private hands.”¹⁸ Due to the plethora of private collections in Morocco, Ahmed C. Binbine, a leading Moroccan manuscript scholar and the director of the Royal Library, called “the Moroccan [manuscript] library” one of the most important in the world, abundant in authentic and rare manuscripts.¹⁹ He also said that the quantity of manuscripts in private hands in the country “without a doubt” comes close to exceeding those that are found in the country’s public repositories.²⁰ Earlier, in 1967, Ibrahim al-Kattani, a Moroccan manuscript scholar and former head of the Moroccan General Library, iterated a similar statement when he said that he believed “with certainty” in the existence of unknown private libraries throughout Morocco’s vast territory, where there must exist “large quantities of unidentified manuscripts whose contents had yet to be read.”²¹

In a comprehensive work on the history of libraries in Morocco, Latifa Benjelloun-Laroui described six types of private manuscript libraries in the country based on the final disposition of their collections. Among the private libraries she listed were: those in which the proprietors died and the manuscript collections were sold; those whose collections were confiscated by the government during the life of the proprietor for political reasons; those in which the proprietor was deceased, but the collection remained intact in the distributed possession of several descendants who had not sold their portions; those in which the proprietor was still alive and in possession of the collection; those in which the proprietor was deceased, but the collections were either donated or sold intact to another person or institution; and finally, those in which the collections were made available to the public either during the lifetime of or after the proprietor’s death.²² Although written in 1990, for the most part, the aptness of these descriptions still holds true today.

Binbine attributed the “miserable” condition of some present-day Moroccan private manuscript collections to purposeful hiding and concealment to avoid confiscation during the time of European colonization. He explained:

When they perceived the readiness of Europeans to take control of the country, Moroccans sought refuge in the concealment of [their] books. And this phenomenon of concealing books can especially be noted during the reign of Sultan ‘Abd al ‘Aziz [r. 1894–1908]. And so that valuable manuscripts and religious books would not fall into the hands of disbelievers or atheists, as it was expressed in the language of that era, Moroccans built walls around collections or buried books deep within the

¹⁶ Abdulrazak, “Kingdom of the Book.” The author states that the first book printed in Morocco was *al-Shama‘il al-Muhammadiyya* by al-Tirmidhi in 1865.

¹⁷ Granziano Krätli, “The Book and the Sand: Restoring and Preserving the Ancient Desert Libraries of Mauritania,” *World Libraries* 14, no. 1 (2004): 21–44.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Roper, “The History of the Book in the Muslim World,” in *Oxford Companion to the Book*, ed. Michael Suarez and H. R. Woudhuysen (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 323.

¹⁹ Ahmad Shawqi Binbine, *Dirasat fi ‘ilm al-Makhutat wa-l-Bahth al-Bibliyughrāfi* (Marrakesh: al-Matba‘a wa-l-Waraqā al-Wataniyya, 2004), 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

²¹ Latifa Benjelloun-Laroui, *Les bibliothèques au Maroc* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1990), 301.

²² *Ibid.*, 301–20.



Figure 1. Image from the Istiqlal (Independence) Party's 1953 booklet on French administration in Morocco. *Morocco under the Protectorate: Forty Years of French Administration*, 10.

Earth. . . . And even the royal library in the sultan's palace in Fez actively practiced concealment and built a wall around its many manuscripts during the year in which the French Protectorate came to pass.²³

It was manuscripts, many hidden from the sight of French colonists to avoid confiscation, that were employed by nationalists prior to independence to support the call for liberation from European rule. In an English language booklet issued by the Istiqlal Nationalist Party in 1953 from their office in the United States, Morocco's extensive manuscript culture was cited to "prove" precolonial autonomy. In the booklet, members of the Istiqlal Party remind the reader that prior to French domination, "Morocco was an independent state for more than one-thousand years," and that, unlike other parts of North Africa, it never fell under the control of the Ottoman Empire. Morocco's "great history," evoked by the Istiqlal booklet, includes the advancement of scholarly fields in science and mathematics during the medieval period. In the booklet, this autonomous cultural heritage is exemplified with a photograph of a scholarly looking man wearing a traditional Moroccan jellaba. He stands, holding open a manuscript in a library replete with manuscripts. The caption invokes "Morocco's Heritage" (Fig. 1).²⁴ Moroccan nationalists were keen to use manuscripts and historical documents as evidence of the country's precolonial cultural autonomy in an effort to disprove the apologetic colonial discourse that forgave colonial violence because of the perceived cultural advances it had brought to the country.

²³ Binebine, *Dirasat fi 'Ilm al-Makhtutat*, 202.

²⁴ The Istiqlal (Independence) Party of Morocco, *Morocco under the Protectorate: Forty Years of French Administration* (New York: Moroccan Office of Information and Documentation, 1953), 9–10.

New Sources, New History

As members of the Istiqlal Party partnered in managing the postcolonial government with the Moroccan monarchy after independence in 1956, the responsibilities of establishing a new nation did not distract their attention from the predicament, which some of them considered to be dire, of historic manuscripts and archival collections in the country. The intellectuals turned bureaucrats who began the Hassan II Prize saw historic manuscripts as key documentary traces for helping Morocco recover its precolonial cultural heritage while supporting a new, postcolonial historiography. They positioned handwritten codices as both the material evidences of Moroccan heritage and attributes of Moroccan identity. Partha Chatterjee, who takes issue with Anderson's model, believing it actually constrains the imagination of the colonized, offers his own model in which "anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty," even prior to its political struggle with colonial powers. In Chatterjee's model, anticolonial nationalists separate "social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual." Western technological superiority is acknowledged in the material, but in the spiritual, "the 'inner' domain bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity," the formerly colonized can "preserve the distinctness" of their culture. Chatterjee contends that in its fashioning of a modern national culture that is intentionally not Western, is the imaginative community building of nationalist movements that is not explicitly political.²⁵ For those familiar with Moroccan culture, the designations of *Rūmī* (Western or foreign) and *bildī* (local, i.e., Moroccan), which are used as terms of differentiation across multiple parts of society, fit nicely into Chatterjee's model. This distinction was also made within the field of historiography, with Moroccan intellectuals feeling the need for primary sources that would support decolonial history writing.²⁶

In their need to write against French colonial histories and ethnographies of Morocco, Moroccan intellectuals needed new archives. They could not depend on the vast colonial archive established by the French, which Burke termed the "Moroccan colonial archive." This colonial archive was accumulated primarily from 1890 to 1930. The core of the archive was the periodicals which disseminated research by French historians, ethnographers, and military officers such as *Archives Marocaines*, *Archives Berbères*, and *Villes et Tribus du Maroc*. The deformity of much of this research that sought to document the everyday life and customs of Moroccans was that, according to Burke, although it constituted a "formidable intellectual achievement," it was shaped by Orientalist and essentialist views of Morocco that justified colonization and aided in the development of its structures.²⁷ In the postcolonial moment, Moroccan historians were clear that they had to "settle accounts" with colonial knowledge production, "but to dismiss colonial historiography meant that historians had to turn to national sources which were either inaccessible or needed critical editing when in manuscript form."²⁸ Their need to access new primary sources to sustain innovations in Moroccan historiography, including an eventual turn toward social history in the 1970s, fed the search for private collections, the "national sources" that eventually led to the development of the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts.²⁹

²⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6.

²⁶ Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Sumayya Ahmed, "Archives du Maroc? The Official and Alternative National Archives of Morocco," *Archives and Manuscripts* 46, no. 3 (2018): 255–68.

²⁷ Edmund Burke III, "The Creation of the Moroccan Colonial Archive, 1880–1930," *History and Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2007): 1–9.

²⁸ Muhammad El Mansour, "Moroccan Historiography since Independence," in *The Maghrib in Question: Essays in History and Historiography*, ed. Michel Le Gall and Kenneth Perkins (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), 113–14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

Moroccan Archival Imaginaries

The search for “national sources” was also driven by affective archival imaginings as theorized by Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell.³⁰ Allal al-Fassi, one of the architects of Moroccan nationalism, declared in 1954 that “no other country has suffered so much loss of historical records as Morocco has experienced throughout the ages.”³¹ The loss of possession, or even the lack of access to these materials during the colonial period, was felt to reflect proportionately on the loss of cultural identity, reflecting Rowlands’ observation that “ethnic nations and groups prove their existence and gain respect by conserving and preserving their property.”³² The loss of material heritage is all the more striking of a loss for the postcolonial person who, as a cultural hybrid due to the colonizing event, is at once alienated from precolonial cultural heritage, even when it is in their possession.³³

Al-Fassi’s conception of what territory constituted Morocco was itself the product of generous “statal imagination.” He and other nationalists promoted the “return” of a “Greater Morocco” (*al-Maghrib al-Kabir*) which included not only the southern territories, known as the Western Sahara, but also modern-day Mauritania and parts of Mali and Algeria.³⁴ For al-Fassi, recovering documentary materials was intimately linked with recovering land, but also tied to his commitment to spearheading a return to Islamic origins. The lost records al-Fassi laments, similar to never-were or imagined records, can serve real social and political functions in a society due to the “weight of their absence.” Hidden or “purely speculative” records take on social and cultural prominence while producing affective responses from the communities attuned to their absence and awaiting their reappearance.³⁵

It is through the Hassan II Prize that we see the melding of the “imagined community” with “archival imaginations.” Anderson did not address the role of libraries or archives in his model, but he did devote some thought to the place of the museum, saying that that “museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political.”³⁶ Collective remembering occurs in a variety of cultural heritage institutions and sites, but “perhaps most especially through archives.”³⁷ Abdallah Laroui described the colonizing event in Morocco as a total breach, with continuity existing solely “in the minds of men.”³⁸ In Morocco, a collective archival longing saw archival documents as the keys to historical continuity.

Recovery

The first postcolonial government in Morocco began recovery missions to find lost records, take stock of the country’s manuscripts, and identify its rarest existing texts soon after independence. Muhammad al-Fassi said that the work of appraising and cataloging manuscripts had begun “in the months just after independence” during which time manuscript scholars (he specifically mentions Ibrahim al-Kattani) set out to inventory the manuscript collections of small libraries and *zawāyā* throughout Morocco that had been “jealously guarded” during

³⁰ Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 53–75.

³¹ Allal al-Fassi, *The Independence Movements in Arab North Africa* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, [1954] 1970), 87.

³² Michael Rowlands, “The Power of Origins: Questions of Cultural Rights,” in *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. Victor Buchli (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2002), 126.

³³ Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, “Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity,” in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, ed. Linda M. Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (London: Blackwell, 2003), 312–29.

³⁴ Jerome Weiner, “The Green March in Historical Perspective,” *Middle East Journal* 33, no. 1 (1979): 22.

³⁵ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries,” 55.

³⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 178.

³⁷ Terry Cook, “What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (1997): 18.

³⁸ Abdallah Laroui and Ralph Manheim, “The Renascent Maghrib,” *International Journal of Politics* 7, no. 3 (1977): 19.

colonization.³⁹ In 1959, a royal decree annexed the manuscript collection of the library of the famed Muhammad ibn Nasir (d. 1674) in the southeastern desert town of Tamgroute, placing it under the control and care of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*al-Awqaf*).⁴⁰ The word *zāwiya* literally means “corner or nook [of a building],” and in North Africa has come to refer to a building or compound used to support the operation of sufi brotherhoods.⁴¹ *Zawāyā* had strong educational components. Makdisi considered them to be “cognates of the madrasa” that appeared “early as institutions of learning.”⁴² *Zawāyā* in the larger cities of Morocco had good access to books and developed collections to support their “spiritual or educational activities.”⁴³

Zawāyā are of special interest to those interested in rare manuscripts and archival records in Morocco, given their propensity to serve as literal storehouses of residual texts for centuries. The Moroccan Arabic axiom, “*mā zāla fi zawāyā, khibāyā*” (the *zawāyā* are still hiding things), attests to the conviction that some texts and other rarities are still “in hiding” within their walls.⁴⁴ The collection that had accumulated over the centuries at the Nasiri Zawiya through trade, pilgrimage, and study was hidden behind a fake wall during colonization to avoid confiscation by the French. With the pronouncement of the 1959 decree, a leading Moroccan manuscript scholar, Muhammad al-Mannuni (d. 1999), who would later become an integral part of the Hassan II Prize team, was tasked with evaluating and cataloging the collection. Its choicest codices were sent to the National Library in Rabat, albeit against the wishes of some of the community in Tamgroute.⁴⁵

Ten years after the transfer of approximately 1100 manuscripts from the Nasiri library to the National Library, the first minister of culture, building upon years of cultural heritage strategizing, established the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts in 1969 as a monetary award to be given annually for manuscripts from private collections “that relate to Moroccan history and life or Islamic traditions [in general].”⁴⁶ A 2014 decree (no. 3246.14) clarified that submitted documents could be in Arabic, Tamazight (Berber), or Hassani, a dialect of Arabic used in the Saharan region of Morocco. (Occasionally documents are submitted and accepted in other languages as well, such as Judeo-Arabic or French.) In submitting for the prize, participants allow descriptive information to be created about their manuscripts and for reproductions to be made, via microfilm in the earlier years of the prize, and now by digitization. After cataloging, judging, and digitization, the original manuscripts are returned to the owners and the reproductions and catalog information are kept at the National Library and National Archives. Judging of all submissions is carried out by members of a national committee. The committee is usually made up of seven people, invited to be judges because of their expertise with regard to subjects related to Moroccan history including, for example, al-Andalus (Islamic Spain), Islamic jurisprudence, and Amazigh language and culture. Due to the consistent submission of Tashelhit manuscripts (written in Arabic

³⁹ Muhammad al-Fassi, “Les Bibliothèques au Maroc et Quelques-uns de leurs Manuscrits les Plus Rares,” *Hespéris-Tamuda* 2 (1961): 137.

⁴⁰ Sa‘id al-Mourabati, “Muqadimah,” *Fihris al-Maktutat al-‘Arabiyya: al Mahfudha fi al-Khizana al-‘Ama bi-l-Ribat*, vol. 7, *Harf Qaf* (Rabat: Khizana al-Awqaf, 2001), 8–14.

⁴¹ Sheila S. Blair, J. G., and C. Hamès, “Zāwiya,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁴² George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 11.

⁴³ Abdulrazak, “Kingdom of the Book,” 54.

⁴⁴ The saying was reiterated by the director of the Royal Library, Binbine, at a roundtable discussion on manuscripts at the Jacques Berques Centre in Rabat, Morocco, on 23 May 2022, reflecting a continuing reality.

⁴⁵ In his 1961 article on rare manuscripts in Morocco, al-Fassi noted thirty-three manuscripts found across public or semipublic libraries, the first being *Hidhq al-Quraysh*, which he called “the oldest Arabic manuscript in the world,” dating from 810. He said that it had recently been “discovered” in the Nasiri Zawiya library in Tamgroute. See also al-Fassi, “Les bibliothèques au Maroc,” 135–44.

⁴⁶ Moroccan Royal Dhahir [Decree], August 1979, number 1234.79.

script) to the Hassan II Prize, having a scholar who is a Tashelhit speaker is considered a requirement for convening the national committee.⁴⁷

There is another prize given in Morocco to encourage discovery of Amazigh manuscripts. Since 2006, the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe, or IRCAM) has also administered a manuscript prize, the National Amazigh Manuscript Prize (NAMP). There are Moroccans who participate in this prize and also the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts. The National Amazigh Manuscript Prize (NAMP) is one of several cultural prizes given out by the institute to encourage the advancement and revival (*nuhūd*) of Amazigh culture. The NAMP is intended to bring together Amazigh manuscripts from around Morocco, preserving them so that “they will not be lost” and making them available to researchers. This includes those in which Arabic script has been used to vocalize a dialect such as Tashelhit, as well as bilingual Arabic-Tamazight manuscripts in which Arabic script is used for both languages. Although in recent years the Amazigh nationalist movement has promoted the use of the neo-Tifinagh script, for centuries in Morocco Tamazight languages were written with Arabic script.

Muhammad Aït Hamza, a senior administrator at IRCAM who spoke with me in 2015, said that the NAMP committee looks for pedigree and originality (*āṣāla*) when they appraise the submissions for their prize. Among the submissions they have found important manuscripts related to tribal relations dealing with subjects such as water and land rights. The subject matters of the submitted manuscripts span all fields, however, including medicine and poetry. Like the Hassan II Prize, NAMP makes digital copies of the manuscripts and returns the originals to owners. Amazigh manuscripts or archival documents written in Arabic script are highly valued by Amazigh scholars interested in learning how the language was spoken prior to the encounter with and influence of Arabic. Because many of the early manuscripts found are primers, dictionaries, or encyclopedic in nature, created to help Tamazight speakers learn Islamic concepts and Arabic terms in their native languages, they have proven to be exceptional resources for modern-day linguists and social historians.⁴⁸ The appearance of Amazigh manuscripts or documents, similar to the appearance of Judeo-Arabic texts among the submissions to the Hassan II Prize, is welcomed, and if the content is seen to be rare the manuscripts are celebrated.

In carrying out its evaluation and documentation of records submitted for the Hassan II Prize, the national committee adds symbolic and monetary value to the manuscripts and historical documents it judges. The committee is chaired by the director of the Royal Library, and composed of local scholars with their individual research agendas and priorities, who each call upon their experience to gauge the rarity of what is placed before them. They are expected to be able to articulate why a certain text or document is significant to Moroccan or general Islamic history and culture. One of the scholars of Islamic law who consistently serves on the national judging committee for the Hassan II Prize described to me his own appraisal criteria for spotting rarities among the submissions. For him, rare meant being “reliably dated back to the 3rd or 5th century” (9th or 11th century on the Gregorian calendar). He elaborated by saying that manuscripts that piqued his interest as a judge were those written by famous Islamic scholars, especially if they were complete codices and could be authentically dated. However, he knew that for other members of the Hassan II Prize national committee a rarity might be identified based on other factors. For example, he surmised that others might be interested in a text due to the uncommonness of its script or its paper, or because it was the only known copy of a text to survive.

Materially, the Hassan II Prize was the culmination of nationalist ambitions related to the discovery and preservation of historic manuscripts and archival documents.

⁴⁷ Tashelhit is a dialect of Tamazight spoken in southeastern Morocco.

⁴⁸ Aomar Afa, “Tarikh al-Makhtut al-Amazighi al-Maktub bi-l harf al-‘Arabi fi Mintaqat Sus,” in *al-Makhtut al-Amazighi* (Rabat: IRCAM, 2004), 63–74; Abdallah Amennou, “Lexicon of Ibn Tunart: Illuminations on an Arabic-Amazigh Manuscript from the Middle Ages,” *Etudes et Document Berberes* 45/46 (2021): 9–37.

Benjelloun-Laroui described the prize as a platform by which those who had inherited historical manuscripts allowed “their patrimony [to] be known in exchange for monetary compensation.” Although she hoped that the Hassan II Prize might make some headway with the inheritors of manuscript collections in the country, she asked if the prize could “really bring about what is expected of it.”⁴⁹ It was expected that the Hassan II Prize, as part of a post-colonial recovery in which a newly independent Morocco looked to salvage its political autonomy, history, and documentary heritage, would support new ways of understanding the past with its infusion of unknown or lost texts. Binebine has stressed repeatedly that one of the goals of the prize has been to discover “known texts that have disappeared,” meaning texts referred to and cited by earlier scholars that no modern-day scholar has ever encountered.⁵⁰

There are few publications about the Hassan II Prize other than the materials produced by the Ministry of Culture to solicit participation or the catalogs of submitted materials published after each round. In 2015, while I was discussing the prize with an employee of the Ministry of Culture, the noted Moroccan historian Aomar Afa, who has been involved in judging for the prize over several decades, entered the room. The employee asked Afa (seemingly on my behalf) if he knew of any early articles or books specifically on the topic of the Hassan II Prize. “No,” Afa explained, “at that time we did not think of the prize as a subject, but as a source that brought forth material (*muntij*).” Consider Afa’s comment in light of Terry Cook’s declaration that in the present era archives have changed from unquestioned storehouses of history waiting to be found into contested sites for identity and memory formation. Cook explains that today, “the archive is thus transformed *from source to subject*.”⁵¹ This transformation is also a point where historiography meets book history, which Kathryn A. Schwartz says can not be separated from the work of scholars, particularly historians, as book history fuses “text and context together.”⁵²

It can be argued that the prize continues today, although relatively anemically funded by the Moroccan government, because of the ongoing vigor of the collective Moroccan archival imagination. In the next section, I look at how the Hassan II Prize was initiated to understand the original intent behind its creation, its relation to nation-building and cultural identity, and its continued relevance in the present day.

Origin Stories of the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts

The official origin story of the Hassan II Prize put forward by the Ministry of Culture credits Muhammad al-Fassi, the first minister of culture (1968–71) as its creator.⁵³ Al-Fassi, whom Laroui described as “a typical product of the Moroccan bourgeoisie with all its

inconsistencies,” is said to have “favored literary arts and the Arabization of institutions.”⁵⁴ The Arabization al-Fassi favored entailed the displacement of French in public education and the valorization of Arabic as the official language of Morocco. Postcolonial Arabization envisioned a

⁴⁹ Benjelloun-Laroui, *Les bibliothèques au Maroc*, 295.

⁵⁰ Hespress, “Bensaid Yatara’as Hafli Tawzi’ Ja’izat al-Hassan al-Thani li-l-Makhtutat,” YouTube video, 7 March 2023, <https://youtu.be/vUeHkvDzEcl>.

⁵¹ Terry Cook. “The Archive(s) is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape,” *American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (2011): 631. Emphasis is mine.

⁵² Kathryn A. Schwartz, “Book History, Print, and the Middle East,” *History Compass* 15, no.12 (2017): 1.

⁵³ At that time the official title was Ministry of State in Charge of Cultural Affairs and Traditional Teaching (*Ministère d’Etat Charge des Affaires Culturelles et de L’Enseignement Originel*).

⁵⁴ Abdallah Laroui, “Cultural Problems and Social Structure: The Campaign for Arabization in Morocco,” in *Humaniora Islamica*, ed. Herbert W. Mason, Ronald L. Nettler, and Jacques Waardenburg (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1973), 37; Katarzyna Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 30.

return to an “authentic” Moroccan past intimately linked with Arabic culture and the religion of Islam.⁵⁵

Prior to becoming minister, al-Fassi says that he tried for years while working at Muhammad V University in Rabat to simply buy manuscripts from owners with the hope of preserving the intellectual heritage of his country; however, there was seldom anyone interested in his offers.⁵⁶ At a 1974 conference on archives in the Arab world, al-Fassi recounted his attempts, after Morocco’s independence, to use the news media to acquire, at minimum, temporary access to manuscripts in private collections so that they might be microfilmed. Upon his appointment as minister of culture, he says that he decided to ask King Hassan II “to found a prize carrying his name with an endowment of 20,000 dirhams.” The original name of this prize in this retelling was the “Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts and Original Unpublished Documents (*inédits*).”⁵⁷ It may have been fitting to name the prize after Hassan II, not only because he was the reigning monarch during what could be seen as the peak of his popularity, but also because he has been portrayed by those close to him as having a passion for Moroccan history. Abdel Wahab Benmansour, Hassan II’s royal historian, credited the monarch with being a leader in recovering precolonial Moroccan history through his opening of long-closed royal libraries in Fez and Marrakech and having the documents and manuscripts therein taken to Rabat for inspection and conservation.⁵⁸

In 1968, al-Fassi became minister of culture and was able to channel his personal and academic interest in Morocco’s documentary heritage into policy. Amina Touzani says that the personality and disposition of each individual minister has had a strong effect on the “conception and objectives” that are carried out by the ministry during their term, with each minister being invested with a certain amount of cultural and financial power to implement programs of his or her choosing.⁵⁹ As minister of culture, al-Fassi was able to mobilize the cultural and financial power vested in his position. In February 1969 he held a press conference to explain the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts and Archival Documents to the general Moroccan public. The “archival documents” part of the prize’s name would be dropped when it was officially registered as a government program a few years later. However, the prize did, and continues, to receive submission of documents, decrees, correspondences, etc., that fit the designation of archival documents (*wathā’iq*).

Although the 2019 celebrations of the 50th year of the prize coordinated by the Ministry of Culture highlight al-Fassi’s role, it is too limiting to attribute the creation of the prize to him alone. We should first identify a certain political and cultural moment in time: the post-colonial 1960s, when new nations were vying to express their modern identities, often through the creation of national libraries and archives, and often with the help of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁶⁰ In Morocco, specifically, there was an attempt to identify or redefine the nation’s essential (precolonial) character. For an elite, and ironically mostly foreign-educated, group of Moroccan intellectuals, the manuscript heritage of the country, which could include Tamazight texts written

⁵⁵ Spencer D. Segalla, *Moroccan Soul: French Education, Colonial Ethnology, and Muslim Resistance, 1912–1956* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

⁵⁶ The motivations and concerns of manuscript owners are nuanced, at times converging with the priorities of the government, and at others diverging.

⁵⁷ Mohamed El Fasi, “Les Archives et Les Sources Inédites de l’Histoire du Maroc,” in *Les Arabes par leurs Archives (XVI – XX siècles). Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique 555*, ed. Jacques Berque and Dominique Chevallier (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1976), 47–53.

⁵⁸ Abdelwahab Benmansour, “al-Wathā’iq al-Maghribiyya fi ‘Ahd Jalalat al-Malik al-Hassan al-Thani,” *Da’wat al-Haq*, 174 (1976), <http://habous.gov.ma/daouat-alhaq/item/4628> (accessed 31 July 2022).

⁵⁹ Amina Touzani, *La culture et la politique culturelle au Maroc* (Casablanca: Editions la Croisée des Chemins, 2003), 15.

⁶⁰ Liam Buckley, “Objects of Love and Decay: Colonial Photographs in a Postcolonial Archive,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 20 no. 2 (2005): 249–70.

with Arabic script in addition to Arabic texts, was an integral part of a new postcolonial identity that harvested the materials of precolonial intellectual history.⁶¹

When Muhammad al-Fassi introduced the prize on the morning of February 18, 1969 at the Ministry of Culture, he told reporters present (and it was printed in the newspaper the following day) that the prize was intended to “expose” (*ābrāza*) archival documents and manuscripts that lived ostensibly “underground” (*maṭmūra*) in private libraries, wooden chests, and the homes of people who considered them valuable in their own right, not because of their contents.⁶² Although materials in private collections might be valuable on the market, the pieces in a collection often “have meanings to the owner that result in the material being pulled from circulation, removed from the world of markets and circulating commodities, at least for the lifetime of the owner.”⁶³ The affective and spiritual significance of the documents, especially their connection to family histories, and not necessarily their historic or intellectual content, is one reason that some Moroccans have been and continue to be less than forthcoming when it comes to publicly acknowledging the manuscripts and archival documents in their possession. It was this hesitancy that al-Fassi hoped to overcome. During his announcement, he proclaimed, “We call on [Moroccan] citizens to be aware of the value of what it is in their coffers and homes,” and then provided examples of manuscript and archival document “finds” that demonstrated the importance of Morocco as a storehouse for primary source materials. He explained:

Since the announcement of this prize we have received some very important documents.⁶⁴ For example, one citizen found amongst his belongings a document by which we know that one of his ancestors was an admiral, and this document is one-hundred and fifty years old. And another example is a medical license given by a jurist and a judge in Fez. And another document, centuries old (*‘arīqa*), deals with the system of customs in the Sous region of Morocco.⁶⁵

Al-Fassi continued by citing examples of important manuscripts that had been found in Morocco in the years prior to the prize. For example, an unknown work of al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-Burṣan wa-l-‘Urjan wa-l-‘Umyan* (The Book of the Leprous, the Lame, the Cross-Eyed, and the Blind) and a copy of the text *Kitab Nasab Quraysh* (The Book of Genealogy of the Tribe of Quraysh) from the 9th century that he called the “greatest manuscript in the Arab world,” which had been located in a Moroccan *zāwiya*.⁶⁶ In his talk, al-Fassi situated Morocco as a place that still held great treasures of manuscripts, some of known published titles, and others of theretofore unknown titles. He asked that the “citizen” who might have access to such written heritage “show them to us and do not leave them hidden in chests, for

⁶¹ Karim Mezran, *Negotiation and Construction of National Identities* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2007), 33. Mezran defines the Moroccan elite at the time of independence as being composed of the “rural establishment (caids, sufi shayks, notables); urban upper and middle class; . . . [and] the *makhzen*, which is the Sultan, his bureaucracy and the top echelons of his police and army officers and functionaries”; Ahmed, “*Archives du Maroc?*”

⁶² “Insha’ Ja’izat al-Hassan al-Thani li-l-Makhtutat,” *al-‘Alam*, 19 February 1969, 1.

⁶³ Majorie Akin, “Passionate Possession: The Formation of Private Collections,” in *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Cultural Studies*, ed. W. David Kingery (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 105.

⁶⁴ This seems to have actually begun in November 1968, according to a statement by al-Fassi in another publication.

⁶⁵ Insha’ Ja’izat al-Hassan al-Thani li-l-Makhtutat, *al-‘Alam*, 19 February 1969, 1.

⁶⁶ This book is described as “discovered in Morocco fairly recently” in the 1990 publication, *Abbasid Belle-Lettres*, edited by Julia Ashtiany, T. M. Johnstone, J. D. Latham, and R. B. Serjeant (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 82. See also Geert Jan van Gelder, “Kitab al-Bursan: al-Jahiz on Right and Left Handedness,” in *al-Jahiz: A Muslim Humanist for our Time*, ed. Arnim Heinemann, John L. Meloy, Tarif Khalidi, and Manfred Kropp (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2009), 239–52; and Katrina Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

the sake of the greater good and for the historical value as well as intellectual and literary value found within these documents.”⁶⁷

An Alternative Origin

A possible alternative origin that diverges from official accounts may seem tangential in relation to the rare historic texts and archival records to which the prize has afforded access. However, it may be worthwhile to see how salvaging Morocco’s written heritage could intertwine not only with postcolonial nation-building, but also with the quest for territorial integrity with which some Moroccan politicians were, and continue to be, preoccupied.⁶⁸ A possible alternative origin for the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts revolves around the person of Abdelwahab Benmansour, the aforementioned royal historian of King Hassan II.⁶⁹ Key moments in Benmansour’s professional life illustrate how his interests in archival documents could have influenced the establishment of the prize. We review them here to examine the credibility of an alternative origin and what this other origin might mean for the intention and goals of the Hassan II Prize.

In 1957, the year after Morocco gained its independence, King Muhammad V (r. 1927–54; 1957–61), Hassan II’s father, appointed Benmansour to a position in the royal cabinet, as head of the political division. A year later, his responsibilities were increased as he was tasked with the management of multiple palace libraries kept throughout the country, some of which had been literally sealed off from public view during French colonization. Part of his responsibilities included gathering and organizing documents from all of the royal palaces as well as acquiring orphaned documents and those taken home by former government employees through purchase or “legal repossession.”⁷⁰

Benmansour worked determinedly in recovering Moroccan records, archival documents, and manuscripts from families of former government employees in the country as well as copies of documents relating to Moroccan history from foreign governments, including 198,000 documents from the French Foreign Ministry.⁷¹ In light of this, the Hassan II Prize seems like a natural extension of his all-consuming, ceaseless goal to recover Moroccan history through its documentary heritage. Yet, if he was involved in the development of the prize, his role was not and has not been openly acknowledged, although it is privately considered to be a fact among some Moroccan scholars. In a 1976 article “Moroccan Archival Documents during the Time of His Majesty King Hassan II,” which Benmansour published in *Da`wat al-Haqq* (The True Supplication), a prominent magazine published by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, he mentioned the Hassan II Prize as just another component of the nation’s search for its archival records and praised the Ministry of Culture for its work in “copying the records that were exhibited each year” (during the initial years of the prize, submitted documents were put on public exhibit).⁷²

In that same article, Benmansour discussed two problems that had contributed to a scarcity of Moroccan documents in the time immediately after independence: the large-scale seizure of Moroccan administrative documents by French and Spanish colonial forces on the eve of Moroccan independence, and the culture of local government employees

⁶⁷ “Insha’ Ja’iza al-Hassan al-Thani li-l-Makhtutat,” 1.

⁶⁸ Muhammad El Mansour, in discussing the development of historiography in Morocco after colonization, talks about nationalist parties needing certain histories to meet their political aims, one of which was, for the Istiqlal Party, “to prove that independent Morocco as it stood in 1956 represented only one-fifth of the real historical Morocco.” See “Moroccan Historiography since Independence,” 113.

⁶⁹ A Moroccan academic confided in me about the role of Benmansour as the mastermind behind the prize. After learning about his life and reading his works, his influence on the prize seems plausible.

⁷⁰ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Tilani, “Biyughrafiyya al-Ustadh ‘Abd al-Wahab bin Mansur,” in *Tarikh al-Hadara wa-l-Sulta bi-l-Maghrib: Min Khilal Kitabat al-Mu’arikh ‘Abd al-Wahab bin Mansur*, ed. ‘Abd al-Latif Shuta and ‘Abd al-Qadir JanJay (Casablanca: Ben Msik Faculty of Science and Letters, 2000), 61–68. It is not clear if there is a specific law that was put into practice, but the authority of the royal palace was surely enough to elicit complicity.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Benmansour, “al-Watha’iq al-Maghribiyya fi ‘Ahd Jalalat al-Malik al-Hassan al-Thani.”

erroneously believing that because their names were mentioned in records, that those records were their personal property. This led to employees taking documents home with them when they left their positions.

Notably, Benmansour tied the life of archival records to the postcolonial difficulties Morocco experienced recovering lands in the Western Sahara, and believed in the evidentiary nature and role of archival documents in offering clarity regarding such political disputes. He wrote that public records and archival documents are in themselves capable of “clarifying opinions and discovering the truth, whether it is for us or against us.” Without documents, he explained, history “becomes only conjecture (*takhmīnāt*), suppositions (*taqdirāt*) and individual judgements (*ijtihādāt*),” and it becomes impossible to then express firm points of view.⁷³ Benmansour was writing just after the Green March (al-Masira al-Khadra’) of November 1975, in which Hassan II led hundreds of thousands of everyday Moroccans into the Western Sahara to claim it for Morocco after the withdrawal of Spanish colonial forces. In fact, in 1975, Morocco’s delegation to the International Court of Justice submitted multiple early colonial era documents, primarily agreements made with European powers, as well as records showing the historic allegiance of some Saharan tribes to Moroccan sultans, as proof of their historical right to the land.⁷⁴ Abdeslam Maghraoui says that some of the submitted documents were “simply ignored [by the International Court] while others were subject to conflicting interpretations.”⁷⁵

It is not difficult to imagine Benmansour, who was appointed director of the Office of Royal Archival Documents (Mudiriyya al-Watha’iq al-Malakiyya) established by King Hassan II in January 1975 as, at the very least, one of the people behind, if not the main architect of, the Hassan II Prize. In 2015, a research informant from the Sahara, whose family had a large manuscript collection, mentioned to me without any prompting that Benmansour had once contacted his family asking about any historic documents they might have concerning the “Moroccanness” of the Sahara and encouraging them to submit the relevant documents for the Hassan II Prize that year. It seems that Morocco’s claim to the Sahara could have been one of the initial motivators for creation of the Hassan II Prize, powerfully connecting documentary heritage, national identity, and expectations of territorial “recuperation” in a conflict often labeled “intractable” and still considered unresolved in spite of recent US declarations to settle the issue.⁷⁶ Al-Fassi, Benmansour, al-Mannuni, and other intellectuals with deep interests in written heritage and political sovereignty all played a part in the early days of the prize, using the tools made available to them to capitalize off of a unique postcolonial nation-building moment.

The “Archival Silences” of Moroccan Manuscript Holders

To recover documents in private collections, the Moroccan government first has to overcome the “natural archival silences” of the general Moroccan population.⁷⁷ Rodney G. S. Carter distinguishes these “natural” archival silences, when communities decline to have their materials acquired by formal archives, from the more politicized, top-down silences when archivists knowingly acquire or decline to acquire collections to fit a narrow

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier, *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms, and Geopolitics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

⁷⁵ Abdeslam Maghraoui, “The Ambiguities of Sovereignty: Morocco, the Hague and the Western Sahara Dispute,” *Mediterranean Politics* 8, no.1 (2003): 120.

⁷⁶ In 1969, Sidi Ifni was returned to Morocco and no doubt gave the government hope that other areas of the Sahara would also be returned. As early as 1956, Morocco established an office of Moroccan Services of Saharan and Border Affairs, with the goal of completing independence with the “return” of what the country considered to be its territories. See Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

⁷⁷ Rodney G. S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 215–33.

mandate, often at the expense of historically excluded and marginalized communities. For many manuscript owners in Morocco, archival silence “is a forceful strategy of resistance,” albeit one that can be said to compromise societal memory.⁷⁸ Michelle Caswell notes that “disempowered groups bring significant legacies of distrust” to their interaction with formal archives; as such, archival pluralism “takes into account a multiplicity of past, current, and future uses of records, which allows for divergent definitions of records to coexist,” necessitating an allowance “for varying degrees of disagreement, discord, and nonparticipation” by owners of archival records.⁷⁹

Thomas K. Park ascribed Moroccan manuscript owner silence to fears that, should the national government decide to appropriate their collection, the holders’ claims of ownership would not be duly recognized.⁸⁰ Holders of manuscripts who chose not to disclose their manuscripts to the public for fear of possible confiscation by the state are conscious of what Verne Harris has described as the elite use of the archive: “Those who have power—the elites—use ‘the archive’—unconsciously if not consciously—as an instrument of power, whether they be elites in repressive states, emerging democracies, or established democracies.”⁸¹ However, a Moroccan religious scholar who served as a judge for the Hassan II Prize multiple times told me that he did not believe that confiscation would be fruitful in present-day Morocco. He said that even if there were a law allowing for government confiscation of manuscripts, it would not be effective because most people do not publicly acknowledge their ownership of manuscripts in the first place.⁸² (Of course, previous confiscations of manuscript collections were carried out by Moroccan authorities without a law; no such law seems to exist.) For the scholar, government confiscation of private collections “is not a cultural act,” and not even about the manuscripts per se. Rather, it is essentially a means to punish the current owner and their heirs, and is an inherently political act. Nevertheless, collections previously confiscated by either French colonial forces or the post-colonial Moroccan state are an integral part of the current manuscript collections of the National Library in Rabat.⁸³

In spite of tensions between manuscript holders and the state, the Hassan II Prize has been successful in expanding what Jeanette Bastian has described as “the definition of custody in which access, in addition to control, plays a central role in fulfilling the custodial obligation.”⁸⁴ Although Bastian was arguing for access by postcolonial communities to government-created and government-controlled colonial-era documents, the Hassan II Prize represents a case in which the Moroccan government is seeking to promote an expanded definition of custody which it applies not to itself, but to private manuscript holders. This is what Bastian refers to as a “step in the evolution of post-custodial theory” in which access is seen as the primary responsibility of the custodian of the documents.⁸⁵ Benjelloun-Laroui hoped for such a step and proposed the development of a campaign to overcome the distrust and suspicion held by private manuscript holders to encourage greater divulgence and sharing of private collections that directly linked facility of access by manuscript holders with civic duty.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 223, 227.

⁷⁹ Michelle Caswell, “On Archival Pluralism: What Religious Pluralism (and Its Critics) Can Teach Us about Archives,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 276, 284.

⁸⁰ Thomas K. Park, “A Report on the State of the Moroccan Archives,” *History in Africa* 10 (1983): 395–409.

⁸¹ Verne Harris, “Jacques Derrida Meets Nelson Mandela: Archival Ethics at the Endgame,” *Archival Science* 11, no. 1 (2011): 121.

⁸² Author interview, July 2015, Rabat, Morocco.

⁸³ Jocelyn Hendrickson, “A Guide to Arabic Manuscript Libraries in Morocco, with Notes on Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Spain,” *MELA Notes* 81 (2008): 15–88.

⁸⁴ Jeannette A. Bastian, “Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century,” *Archivaria* 53 (2002): 81.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁶ Benjelloun-Laroui, *Les Bibliothèques au Maroc*.

Although Rowlands asked us to see cultural heritage as a part of a process that reproduces existing social relationships, it could be argued that the Hassan II Prize is producing new relationship dynamics between the government and the general Moroccan public.⁸⁷ The traditional relationship between the Moroccan king and the Moroccan people has been culturally constructed as one based on *al-ri'āya* (tacit principles of guardianship) between patron (king) and client/subject (Moroccan citizen) which “presupposes the dependence of the client on the generosity and goodwill of the patron” and does not imply “any form of political participation.”⁸⁸ When Muhammad al-Fassi first spoke publicly about the Hassan II Prize, he addressed prospective participants as *muwaṭīnīn* (citizens). The use of “citizen” was purposeful and served as a modernizing break with the idea of a royal subject. It signaled a change in the way individuals related to their government, despite the fact that the terms *raʿīya* and *muwaṭīn* continue to be intertwined in Moroccan political discourse.⁸⁹ The Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts, as an example of a “patronage scheme channeled through state institutions . . . such as the Ministry of Culture,” changes the nature of the client-patron relationship, positioning the state as being in a position of need.⁹⁰ This is because, although bearing the stamp of the monarchy, and despite the claim that the appropriate place for privately held manuscripts is in the government-managed “national collection,” the existence of the prize shows the extent to which the state is not the sole protector of documentary heritage. It allows us to acknowledge the role of families and individual Moroccans in preserving history’s primary sources generation after generation and to acknowledge their capability of safeguarding their own heritage materials without national or international interventions.

The Mechanics of the Prize

The mechanics of the Hassan II Prize have no doubt changed over the fifty years of its inception and are modified slightly with every round.⁹¹ The intake, processing, and cataloging process begins with manuscripts and archival documents being submitted by their owners to one of the designated branch offices of the Ministry of Culture, from which they are later taken to the Office of Manuscripts and Heritage Libraries in Rabat.⁹² Once in Rabat, a formal count of each submission is made and a stamped written receipt is given to the branch office worker who delivered the manuscripts. When I served as a participant observer of the 2015 prize round, many branch offices had already produced their own documentation of the submitted manuscripts and archival documents and had given their own version of a receipt to the manuscript owner who had submitted the documents at their local branch. The branch office had the owners complete forms that included their contact information, a copy of their identification, and information on the number of archival documents and manuscripts submitted along with tentative “titles” by which they could be identified, most often the incipit, or opening line of the text of the manuscript, or a general description of the subject of an archival document. Some branch offices had even begun basic cataloging of the submissions, such as noting the name of the text, author, and subject matter. This was appreciated by the main office, but not presumed to be accurate. Most people who submitted their manuscripts did not provide a title or author’s name. There were

⁸⁷ Rowlands, *Power of Origins*.

⁸⁸ Said Graïouid and Taieb Belghazi, “Cultural Production and Cultural Patronage in Morocco: The State, the Islamists, and the Field of Culture,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 25, no. 3 (2013): 265; Driss Maghraoui, “The Ambiguity of Citizenship and the Quest for Rights in Morocco,” in *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Roel Meijer, James N. Sater, and Zahra R. Babar (London: Routledge, 2020), 260.

⁸⁹ Maghraoui, “The Ambiguity of Citizenship and the Quest for Rights in Morocco.”

⁹⁰ Graïouid and Belghazi, “Cultural Production,” 265.

⁹¹ The prize is usually held annually or semiannually. There have been forty-two rounds held in fifty years.

⁹² The 2014 ministerial decree discussed in an earlier chapter changed the number of branch office submission centers from seven (Oujda, Tetouan, Fez, Rabat, Agadir, Marrakech, and Layyouné) to sixteen. The number and location of submission centers often changes with each round.

the rare exceptions when it was obvious that the person submitting or a previous owner of the manuscript had scholarly knowledge and had listed titles and authors in the inside covers of the manuscript. Once again, the office director that year, Abdel Aziz Essouari, saw this information as helpful, but not authoritative, and he did not rely upon it during cataloging. Several of the branch officials who brought manuscript submissions to Rabat expressed their nervousness at “the responsibility” of having to care for them, and they were relieved once the official handoff to the ministry was concluded. Once officially in the care of the Office of Manuscripts and Heritage Libraries, the manuscripts were assigned numbers and temporarily labeled. Labels included the name of the owner, city of submission, and number assigned to the manuscript. This part of the process was performed to prepare the manuscripts for their subsequent digitization at the National Library (BNRM), which would occur after they were cataloged, reviewed, and judged.

The official cataloging of Hassan II submissions is arduous, yet full of anticipation. Arabic and Amazigh (Berber) manuscripts (in Arabic script) that are hundreds of years old do not have title pages. Sometimes the author of the text mentions the title he or she has given the text in its opening lines, or a scribe might mention the title in the closing lines (colophon) of the text. At other times an owner may have penciled in the name of the text in a margin or inside cover. There are times when neither the title nor author is apparent from a quick scan of the text, which may be all that can be done due to staffing and time constraints. In 2015 Essouari made use of his extensive, decades-long knowledge of manuscripts as well as of printed manuscript catalogs, online catalogs, websites, and digital manuscript libraries. All of these sources helped him to uncover important identifying information about submissions, to locate them and other related copies historically and geographically, and also to estimate the relative rareness of the texts. Cataloging was primarily text-centered, with little attention given to outer bindings or to inner marginalia, with a few exceptions. The poems or small treatises placed among a central text in a bound volume were not noted in the cataloging information. Once the initial cataloging was completed, an assessment of all the submissions was carried out by the invited members of the national judging committee.

Piecing Together the Nation’s Collection: Early Finds of the Prize

Muhammad al-Fassi described the initial years of the Hassan II Prize as “brilliant” due to its receipt of approximately three thousand submissions, including a large number of “truly unknown works” and documents.⁹³ One of the most respected manuscript experts who worked on the prize, Muhammad al-Mannuni, declared that there was a serious need to gain access to the contents of private collections and that the prize was intended to discover the huge yield of manuscripts, documents, and legal papers owned and inherited by private families and individuals in the country. In a 1975 article al-Mannuni listed sixty-four manuscripts or documents which he felt were exemplars of the best that had been submitted for the Hassan II Prize up until that time. Among them were a notarial document written on wood from southern Morocco dating from 1773; letters written by members of the Almoravid Dynasty (11th or 12th century), including some by Ibn Abi al-Khisal, an Andalusian writer who worked for ‘Ali bin Yusuf (d. 1143); a legal document from 1445 on deerskin from Granada, Spain, which had some connection to the Nasrid sultan Muhammed al-Ghalib (r. 1232–44), as his signature appears on one of its appendices; and several documents that were produced during the reign of Sultan Hassan I (r. 1873–94) that provided evidence of the technological advances attempted at that time.⁹⁴

⁹³ Muhammad al-Mannuni, “Ma‘tiyat Ja‘izat al-Hassan al-Thani li-l-Makhtutat wa-l-Watha‘iq ‘abr Saba‘a Sanawat,” *Da‘wat al-Haqq* 17, no. 4 (1975).

⁹⁴ Al-Mannuni also singled out what he considered to be “rarities (*nawādir*) and treasures (*dhakhā‘ir*)” related to religious education that had been found through the Hassan II Prize. He noted the presence of *jjāzāt* (diplomas) issued upon the completion of scholarly milestones, such as the complete memorization of the Qur’an and its proper

Moroccan historians also recognized the significance of the Hassan II Prize. Muhammad Mezzine wrote that in the late 1970s, when he began his study of relations between the city of Fez and its surrounding rural areas during the 16th century, he only had at his disposal “a limited amount of data” until “the coming forth of private archives on the occasion of the Hassan II Prize which rewarded the most original private documents.” Mezzine, who mistakenly wrote that the prize was started in 1976, commented in 1997 that “the harvest is no longer as rich as it used to be.” However, for his own research in the 1970s, documents submitted for the prize proved bountiful. He wrote that the prize offered “a harvest of unparalleled documents” that enabled him to understand the relations between Fez and its rural surroundings in another light.⁹⁵

Mezzine was able to capitalize on the prize by reaching out to two families who submitted documents in 1970–72 to ask if they had any other documents similar to those they had originally provided. The al-Raghiwi family had submitted three documents in 1971 and the al-‘Arusi family had submitted a document dating from 1568 written on deerskin. Mezzine wrote that by reaching out to these families and gaining access to the remainder of their collections he was able to access “an entire set of documents,” specifically deeds of sale and purchase, waqf deeds, notarial testimonials of all types, and manuscripts long considered lost, including religious litigation writings that allowed him to examine the “relations between political power and the city and rural socio-religious networks.”⁹⁶

Accessing the Hassan II Prize Manuscripts at the National Library

If we follow the trail of the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts, we eventually end up at the National Library of Morocco (BNRM) in Rabat. An important part of the narrative of “saving” Moroccan cultural heritage that justifies the prize is the eventual preservation of surrogates of prize documents (whether microfilmed or digital). All of the public advertisements for the Hassan II Prize mention its preservation aspect, which is generally summarized as the keeping of copies of documents at the National Library. As of 2015, a decree was issued mandating that another copy of prize documents be kept at the National Archives of Morocco (*Archives du Maroc*) as well. The 2015 announcement (in Arabic) stated:

The ministry asserted that it would take it upon itself to ensure the safety of the participating manuscripts with the goal of returning them to the owners after the celebration party and *after a copy of the records deemed beneficial was made, either on microfilm or digitally, for the purpose of protecting them at the National Library and the Archives of Morocco.* (Emphasis mine.)

It seems most likely that the text of this message was from an earlier iteration of the prize and was simply reused. This might explain why microfilm is still mentioned (when it had ceased to be the duplication method of use) and why the idea that only those records

rules of recitation or the mastery of another subject in the Islamic sciences. Al-Mannuni said that often the diplomas were written on parchment (*‘ala al-riqq*) in a beautiful script, with the oldest one submitted for the Hassan II Prize at that time dated 813 (1410). He also noted a medical diploma issued to a Moroccan doctor, al-Hajj Muhammad bin al-Hajj Ahmad al-Kahhak al-Fassi, in 1248, and a notebook (*kunnash*), the oldest in Morocco according to al-Mannuni, that belonged to Muhammad bin Qasim al-Zjalii, a well-known author from Fez during the third Sa’dian era. It contained within it some ballads (*qasā’id*) that were up until that point unknown. Among the works on medicine and science submitted for Hassan II Prize, he noted a text on the medicinal uses of food by an unknown author from Islamic Spain from the Almohad era and a manual on how to make astrolabes by the Andalusian scholar Abu Qasim ibn al-Safar al-Qurtubi (d. 1035).

⁹⁵ Muhammad Mezzine, “Political Power and Social-Religious Networks in Sixteenth-Century Fez,” in *Islamic Urbanism in Human History: Political Power and Social Networks*, ed. Tsugitaka Sato (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1997), 113.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

deemed “beneficial” would be copied. Appraisal decisions about what materials would be microfilmed was, in the past, determined by the members of the national judging committee who were often guided by their own particular research interests. In the first few decades of the prize only a select few documents were chosen to be microfilmed. According to a former manager of the prize, a decision was made in 2005 to make microfilm of all submissions, and then in 2011 digitization replaced microfilm as the mode of duplication.⁹⁷

The preservation narrative present in all discussions of the Hassan II Prize is directly linked to the National Library as a physical repository as well as its role as the symbolic home of the nation’s cultural heritage and national memory.⁹⁸ It is linked to a shared knowledge Moroccans have about the general lack of attention that has traditionally been given to caring for archival materials in the country. For example, a group of historians of North Africa writing in the 1997 anthology, *The Maghrib in Question: Essays in History and Historiography*, recommended “the provision of technical assistance to libraries and archives in the Maghrib to expedite the preservation, storage, retrieval and classification of documentation of all genres” be a first order of business. The authors noted that often in the region, archival materials were “scattered, in poor condition, . . . [and] some of it is in real danger of being lost.”⁹⁹ The prize presents itself as the fulfillment of this recommendation.

However succinct the narrative for the Hassan II Prize, it is arduous to actually find copies of the manuscripts of participants at the National Library. Although the digitization of manuscripts began in 2011, I was told by a library official in July 2015 and again in 2018 that the library had not established a way for the public to view the digitized manuscripts and that the manuscript reading room at the library was, as of December 2018, filled only with microfilm readers and a few computers that could be used to search the library’s online catalog.¹⁰⁰ However, by 2022 the National Library’s reading room had computers installed on which requested scans of manuscripts could be loaded.¹⁰¹

One of the first obstacles to accessing a Hassan II Prize document in the National Library is knowing how to form the request. Several cataloging issues impede access to prize records, the first being that the National Library has yet to produce a standalone finding aid of prize documents or to make consistent use of metadata or subject headings to identify prize documents within the general library catalog. This means that scholars are ostensibly using texts submitted for the prize and even texts that won the Hassan II Prize without being aware of this significant contextual information. Also, with the exception of the 1981 handbook, the National Library does not have the prize handbooks in its collection.¹⁰² Therefore, a researcher who actually knew about the prize and wanted to locate a text would have to

⁹⁷ Of course, not all submissions are digitized, because they are not all qualifying documents. For example, a page torn from a recently printed children’s book with calculations on the back that was submitted in 2015 was not sent to be digitized. As one member of the national judging committee told me, “people don’t understand [what constitutes] archival documents,” and so sometimes the new policy to digitize all submissions may be sidestepped. It should be noted that in the field of archives, digitization is not generally considered a good form of preservation due to the fragility of digital objects. See Paul Conway, “Preservation in the Age of Google: Digitization, Digital Preservation, and Dilemmas,” *Library Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2010): 61–79.

⁹⁸ A 2010 French language advertisement for the prize that ran in the Moroccan newspaper *Le Matin* (14 May 2010) explained that participation in the prize “contributes to the enrichment of sources for scholarly research and the collection of scattered manuscripts and documents.”

⁹⁹ Michel Le Gall and Kenneth Perkins, eds., *The Maghrib in Question: Essays in History and Historiography* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), 250.

¹⁰⁰ In early December 2018, I was told that the entirety of the National Library’s manuscript collection had been digitized and that the library was awaiting the appointment of its new director before making any further steps toward providing access. On 20 December 2018, Mohammad al-Farane was named the new head of the National Library.

¹⁰¹ This was the situation as of July 2022. Thank you to Armaan Sidiqqi for this information.

¹⁰² The 1969 handbook, which may be the most valuable of the Hassan II Prize handbooks, is not at the National Library in Rabat. However, a copy can be found, surprisingly, at the Juma Majid Center in the United Arab Emirates.

have previous knowledge of a specific title or author through prior access to the handbooks published by the Ministry of Culture. Next, the researcher would have to contend with the fact that prior to 2005 microfilming was done selectively, often based on the research interests of the members of the judging committee. This means that, as of 2015, of the approximately 35,000 records that had been submitted for the prize, the internal documentation of the National Library that I saw indicated that only 2400 microfilm or digitized records from the Hassan II Prize were actually in the possession of the library.

How are we to understand the reality of the state of the repository in light of the sacrosanct position of the National Library as the place of national memory and heritage? Is this the final repository for which the archival imaginations of Allal and Muhammad al-Fassi longed? For whom are the copies of the Hassan II Prize manuscripts being kept in near inaccessibility, often lacking provenance information? Abdelmajid Arrif, a Moroccan intellectual who refers to archival projects as “organized forgetting,” juxtaposes the “archival worry” about the lack of viable archives in Morocco heard in the media, with what he describes as a cultural landscape that is satiated with archival symbolism and newly created heritage and museum initiatives.¹⁰³ However, the result is a hypervisibility of archives [that] substitutes itself for its materiality.¹⁰⁴ And even beyond that, recall the statement of Laroui, that in Morocco the point should no longer be to locate more public and private archival collections, but to learn to read, and to develop theories for reading that would enable us to better understand the content and context of those records that are already available.¹⁰⁵

Presently, we are forced to reconcile the official heritage discourse that celebrates the prize with the practical realities of the organization of and access to the collection as it currently exists at the National Library and newly established National Archives.¹⁰⁶ This is nothing new for Moroccan and foreign researchers who are familiar with having limited access to archival records due to the gatekeeping practices found in public and private repositories throughout the country. Sahar Bazzaz has suggested that access restrictions to archival materials may be “emblematic of research in the Moroccan archives,” places where who you are or the subject that you are researching can determine the level of access you are allowed. These interactions in archives remind us of the entanglements of history and “the politics of nationalism.”¹⁰⁷ Harris reminds us that the very activity of maintaining custody of archival material is itself “an exercise of power.” The process of requesting and providing access to archival materials in the custody of state-owned repositories mimics existing power relations and interactions, including the favoritism and degradation that occur outside of the repositories.¹⁰⁸ Yet it should also be said that some of the actions to limit access may be a resistance to perceived extractive and unequal research practices by foreign researchers and the ravenous hunger for Moroccan manuscripts that has developed in more affluent parts of the Arab world. Those who work in Moroccan repositories have expressed apprehension about what they feel may be a repeat

¹⁰³ Abdelmajid Arrif, *Fables d'Archives. Effacement, Oubli, Infidélité*, trans. Theo Dumothier (Casablanca : Editions La Croisée des Chemins, 2015), 30.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 35 (trans. K. Pieprezak).

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Gallagher, “Interview: The Life and Times of Abdallah Laroui, a Moroccan Intellectual,” *Journal of North African Studies* 3, no 1 (1998): 141, 149.

¹⁰⁶ The BNRM and the new National Archives are part of an ecology of Moroccan government-supported memory institutions that includes the previously mentioned Office of Royal Archival Documents (Mudiriya al-Watha'iq al-Malakiyya) established in 1975 and the Centre National de Documentation du Maroc established in 1966, all of which are in Rabat. In addition to these, the King Abdul-Aziz al Saoud Foundation for Islamic Studies and Human Sciences in Casablanca also collects manuscripts and archival records from private collections. Finally, several elite or scholarly families have established foundations through which they open their collections to the public.

¹⁰⁷ Sahar Bazzaz, *Forgotten Saints: History, Power, and Politics in the Making of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 6–7.

¹⁰⁸ Harris, “Jacques Derrida,” 121.

of the appropriation and loss of documentary heritage that occurred during colonization.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

For some Moroccan historians and nationalists, Morocco as a nation preceded the anticolonial nationalist movement.¹¹⁰ The caches of manuscripts around the country serve as the archival evidence of its intellectual history and precolonial autonomy. In the postcolonial moment, the search for “hidden” caches of manuscripts and archival documents was a nationalist priority. As I have shown in this article, the growth and development of the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts was intimately tied to the nation-building prerogatives of the cultured Moroccan political elite and their archival imaginations, sociocultural interests, and territorial ambitions.

The Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts Collection as it exists today, dispersed throughout the larger collection of microfilmed and digitized records at the National Library of Morocco (BNRM), is a sample of the archival riches that have been presented by the Moroccan public to the Ministry of Culture over approximately fifty years. Due to inconsistent and undocumented criteria for preservation of submissions prior to 2011, what is preserved may not be representative of the overall submissions the prize has received. It is likely that most scholars, local or foreign, who use manuscripts that arrived at the BNRM through the Hassan II Prize are unaware of their provenance. Because some people who make submissions to the Hassan II Prize do so strategically, submitting multiple times over several years, but intentionally not submitting their best, most rare, texts, due to their perception that the actual prize money amount does not merit truly exceptional manuscripts, submission statistics are relatively stagnant. Additionally, there is the fear that those submissions which are truly exceptional may not be returned, or may be damaged, stolen or lost during the multi-month period between submission, digitization, prize ceremony, and eventual return. The 2022 grand prize was awarded for what is believed to be the oldest copy of *Kitab al-Tanbihat* (The Book of Admonitions) by the Andalusian scholar Qadi ‘Iyad (d. 1149).¹¹¹ Laila Nasiri, whose family won, spoke to the media at the award ceremony held at Gallery Bab Rouah in Rabat in March 2023 (Fig. 2). She encouraged greater participation, a plea that sounded familiar. Nasiri said that she knew “the old noble Moroccan families (*al-‘ā’ilāt al-Maghribiyya al-‘arīqa*) have many treasures in their houses (*kunūz fif-l-buyūt*) that contain lost knowledge.” She contended that these manuscripts need to be brought “into the light” so that future generations can benefit.¹¹²

At the same ceremony, the most recent minister of youth, culture, and communications, Muhammad Mahdi Bensaid, had three main talking points for his various media interviews. First, he noted that Amazigh manuscripts were among the submissions. This is an assertion that serves the goal of acknowledging and validating the Amazigh presence within the formal Moroccan cultural sphere, which is often inferred to be (solely) Arabic and French speaking. It also serves as an enticement for further participation of such manuscripts in future rounds of the prize. Amazigh manuscripts in Arabic script are often a forgotten aspect

¹⁰⁹ Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, writing in the context of Indigenous archives in the US, remind us that “colonial structures of erasure, displacement, and dispossession can be seen . . . within general calls for open access that refuse to grapple with histories of collection and ongoing historical traumas ushered in by the creation and circulation of digital surrogates of these original physical and analog materials”; “Toward Slow Archives,” *Archival Science* 19 (2019): 98.

¹¹⁰ Hassan Rachik, *Symboliser la Nation: Essai sur l’Usage des Identités Collectives au Maroc* (Casablanca: Editions Le Fenec, 2003).

¹¹¹ *Al-Tanbihat al-Mustanbita ‘ala Kutub al-Mudawwana wa-l-Mukhtalita* is a Maliki *fiqh* (jurisprudence) text, an abridgment and commentary of the *Mudawwanah* of Sahnun.

¹¹² Hespress, “Bensaid yatara`as hafI Tawzi ‘Ja`izat al- Hassan al-Thani li-l makhtutat”



Figure 2. Banner showing pages from Hassan II Prize manuscripts and archival records displayed near Gallery Bab Rouah in Rabat, Morocco, where the 42nd round of the Hassan II Prize awards ceremony was held on 7 March 2023. Photo by A. Essouari.

of Amazigh history due to the fact that they complicate prevalent understandings of Moroccan history and culture. This is because they simultaneously evidence a historic Amazigh written (as opposed to oral) literary culture, and demonstrate traditional Islamic piety within specific local contexts.¹¹³ After acknowledging the presence of these

¹¹³ See Mohamed Saadouni and Harry Stroemer, “Tashelhiyt Berber Manuscripts in Arabic Characters: An Update,” *Études et Documents Berbères* 42, no. 2 (2019): 194, in which the authors say that in Morocco the very existence of such manuscripts, “has often been denied or considered unimportant and its study has been neglected in academic circles” by both Arabs and Imazighen (sing. Amazigh).

manuscripts, Bensaïd then noted, second, that the prize money amounts had been increased and, third, that manuscripts as a part of the “material and non-material heritage” of the country are “jointly preserved by the government, civil society and citizens who [independently] honor and preserve them.”¹¹⁴

My research on the Hassan II Prize has sought to ask questions about the origins of the primary sources upon which histories are written, highlighting the private citizens who often go unacknowledged as the caretakers of the nation’s documentary materials. The ability of these caretakers to steward archival materials over multiple generations, sometimes for centuries, should lead us to want to learn how they have preserved these materials instead of embracing and repeating narratives about the absence or precarious nature of archival material in the region.¹¹⁵ What remains unclear, however, is to what extent the approximately 37,000 manuscripts and archival records that have been submitted for the prize are actually representative of what continues to be kept privately by Moroccans, whether they consider themselves to be subjects or citizens. Therefore, the search for the archival records based upon which innovative Moroccan histories can be written continues both within and outside of the confines of the Hassan II Prize for Manuscripts.

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¹¹⁴ Hespress, “Bensaïd Yatara’as Hafl Tawzi’ Ja’izat al-Hassan al-Thani li-l-Makhtutat.”

¹¹⁵ Instead of embracing such narratives, two things can be done to support access to and stability of collections, that is, to address the preservation and conservation needs of private collectors and improve the overall access to education in archival studies (a subfield of library and information science) in the region so that professionals trained to international standards but attuned to local sensitivities work in both public and private memory institutions.

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