Social Actors and Preservation Mechanisms of Manuscript Heritage: A Sociological Approach to the Digitization Experience at the Ain Salah Repository

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Abstract

The preservation of manuscript heritage is not limited to its material and technical dimensions related to document maintenance and protection against deterioration. Rather, it extends to constitute a social action reflecting kinship structures, symbolic power relations, and forms of collective organization within local communities that possess this heritage. This paper seeks to approach the phenomenon of manuscript preservation and digitization from a sociological perspective, taking the Ain Salah repository in the Tuat region as a field case study. The study employs Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and symbolic capital to understand how manuscript possession transitions from private family ownership to an organized associative action responding to the imperatives of digital transformation. The study adopted a qualitative case study methodology, utilizing a semi-structured (in-depth) interview with the head of the Manuscript Repositories Association in Ain Salah as the primary respondent. Interview data were supported by a critical review of relevant local and international literature. The study concludes that digitization is not merely a purely technical procedure; rather, it is a social redefinition of the relationship between the individual/family and the group/institution in managing heritage. It serves as a mechanism to ensure the continuity of the region's collective memory against the risks of both material and symbolic obliteration.

Keywords: Social action; Manuscript heritage; Collective memory; Symbolic capital; Digitization; Ain Salah repository.

Introduction

Manuscript heritage represents one of the most dense and significant forms of collective memory, acting as a material carrier for a system of religious and social knowledge and practices transmitted across generations through kinship mechanisms and traditional religious education. However, the sociological perspective on this heritage goes beyond the purely archival dimension to question the social conditions governing its production, possession, and preservation, as well as the transformations imposed by technological development on these preservation patterns. The possession of a manuscript repository (Khizana) in contexts like the Tuat region in southern Algeria is not merely the material ownership of a collection of documents; it is a symbolic status inherited by families and clans, granting its possessors a position and status within the local social structure as custodians of the community's memory and its religious and cultural identity.

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Conversely, contemporary technological transformations, represented by digitization techniques, have compelled these traditional structures to reorganize their relationship with the manuscript. Preservation has transitioned from an individual/family act with limited capabilities to an organized collective act, embodied in the establishment of specialized associations and the conclusion of institutional partnerships with official financial, scientific, and national bodies. However, a review of the subject's literature reveals a significant duality in its treatment. Specialized Algerian and Arab literature has primarily addressed digitization from an archival-library perspective or a cultural identity angle, without subjecting the structure of family possession and the associative relations surrounding the manuscript to an independent sociological analysis that deconstructs the mechanisms of symbolic power and inheritance.

In contrast, international literature related to digital heritage and collective memory has deeply analyzed the political and epistemological dimensions of heritage digitization and its impact on reshaping collective memory. Yet, it has predominantly formulated its approaches within Western institutional contexts (libraries, museums, national archives) and has not given sufficient attention to cases of traditional family/tribal possession in the societies of the Global South, with the exception of rare studies such as the preservation of Ambon manuscripts in Indonesia (Wibowo et al., 2024). This partially intersects with the problematic role of possessing families in the preservation process. This dual gap motivates us, as researchers interested in this subject, to bridge it locally by placing the social actor and kinship structures at the core of the analysis rather than settling for technical description, and internationally by focusing on a field case from the Algerian Saharan context through a comparative discussion on the relationship between traditional possession and digital transformation.

Hence, this scientific paper proceeds from the following sociological inquiry: How do traditional social structures (family and tribal) in Ain Salah, Algeria, interact with the requirements of digital transformation in preserving manuscript heritage, and what are the social and symbolic implications of this transformation?

A set of sub-questions branches out from this main inquiry, exploring:

• What is the nature of the relationship between the family/tribal structure possessing the repositories and the cultural and symbolic capital represented by the manuscripts?

• How has associative organization contributed to transforming manuscript preservation from an individual/family act into an organized collective act?

• What are the social and structural obstacles hindering the full digitization of the repositories' collections?

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1. The Manuscript as a Social and Cultural Given

Terminologically, a manuscript is defined as everything written by hand before the advent of printing, whether on paper, parchment, or other mediums. A specialized science, codicology, has emerged alongside it, concerned with studying its material elements (paper, ink, binding, pagination) and the social and historical conditions in which it was produced (Moulay, n.d.). Arab manuscripts are divided by nature into several types, most notably the original (Umm), the attributed, the transitional, the ambiguous, the illustrated, and the compilations (Gueriza, Bouyah, & Wanes, 2022).

However, settling for this archival description keeps the analysis confined to the technical philological dimension, whereas what matters to the sociologist is the manuscript as a social artifact: who produces it, who possesses it, by what legitimacy its possession is transferred, and what symbolic functions it performs within the local community on the one hand, and the national

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community on the other.

2.2. Collective Memory and the Function of the Manuscript in Consolidating Local Identity

Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is not a purely individual faculty; rather, it is a social construct framed by the group through shared frames of reference (such as family, religion, and place), and that individuals remember as members of groups, not as isolated subjects (Halbwachs, 1925).

In this sense, the manuscript in the Ain Salah repositories is not merely a cognitive or religious document. It is a material frame of reference to which the local community clings to consolidate its religious and historical identity, as manifested in the repositories' retention of documents with special local significance, such as the manuscript related to the Battle of Feguiguira, which encapsulates an event from the memory of local resistance. From this perspective, preserving the manuscript is a preservation of the community's presence and continuity in time, more than the preservation of an artifact.

2.3. Cultural and Symbolic Capital and Repository Possession

The ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu contribute to explaining the social status granted by the possession of a manuscript repository to its owners. The repository, as a family inheritance, as is the case with the repositories of the Babrahim family and the clan of Al-Azzi Awlad Belkacem, represents a form of embodied cultural capital (knowledge and practices associated with the manuscript) and symbolic capital (the status and prestige granted to the family of the "Keepers of the Repository" within the local social structure). Here, this capital is transmitted through the mechanism of family inheritance, making the maintenance and preservation of the manuscript part of the family habitus; that is, the acquired dispositions that drive the members of these families to feel responsible for this heritage as an extension of their identity and status.

What increases the suitability of this framework to the context of the study is that Bourdieu himself formulated the concepts of habitus and symbolic capital based on his foundational ethnographic work in the Kabylia region of Algeria (Bourdieu, 1977). This grants the employment of his concepts in analyzing another Algerian case, such as the Ain Salah repositories, an additional contextual legitimacy that is scientifically intriguing for specialized researchers.

2.4. From Individual Preservation to Associative Organization

The transition from individual family preservation to organized associative work can be read in light of Émile Durkheim's distinction between mechanical solidarity, based on the similarity of isolated social units (each family preserving its repository in isolation from others), and organic solidarity, based on the division of labor and the integration of functions.

The establishment of the Association of Manuscript Repositories and Historical Documents in Ain Salah, its inclusion of twenty-seven repositories, and the distribution of tasks among its managers—between inventory, maintenance, digitization, and cataloging—reflects a transition from a logic of closed individual possession to a logic of specialized collective work. This reinforces collective awareness of the value of this heritage and transforms its preservation from a family commitment into a shared societal responsibility.

2.5. Digitization as a Social Act of Adapting to Technological Transformation

From the perspective of the sociology of technology, digitization is not reduced to being a mere transfer of content from a paper medium to a digital one. Rather, it is a social act that reshapes the actors' relationship with the object of preservation, raising issues of disparity in the ability to adapt to this transformation (what is known as the digital divide) between traditional possessors with limited educational levels on the one hand, and specialized institutions and associations possessing technical

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competencies on the other. Here, the partnership between the Repository Association and the National Center for Manuscripts in Adrar, as well as with a banking institution, emerges as a social mechanism to compensate for this lack of resources through a network of institutional actors.

This proposition intersects with what international literature concludes: digitization is not a neutral technical process, but a process governed by political and social choices and decisions regarding what is chosen for preservation and who is granted access to it (Zaagsma, 2023), and that it redistributes agency between human and non-human actors (platforms, databases, software) in the production and circulation of collective memory (Mandolessi, 2023).

3. Previous Studies: A Critical Sociological Reading

Locally, the study by Zoulikha and Boughoufala (2021) examined the manuscript digitization experience at the National Library of Algeria, concluding that the library adopts a policy of simultaneous preventive and curative preservation to ensure the continuity of this collection. The thesis by Soufi (n.d.) addressed the reality of the technical processing of manuscripts at the annex of the National Center for Manuscripts in Biskra Province, highlighting the impact of the shortage of specialized human cadres in delaying processing operations.

Manari's (2020) study focused on the stages of manuscript authentication as a scientific endeavor combining intellectual pleasure with the difficulty of accessing copies. In the same context, Kehli Guellab's (2017) study addressed the digitization of heritage in cyberspace from the perspective of the identity problematic, concluding that the digital valorization of heritage depends on collective and associative activity. This is one of the few Algerian studies that touched upon the associative dimension, although its approach remained closer to the field of information and communication sciences than to the sociological analysis of kinship structures and symbolic power relations.

Viewing these studies from a sociological angle, it is noted that they generally adopted a technical and archival (library) approach to the phenomenon, focusing on the technical procedures of preservation, cataloging, and authentication, without subjecting the social actors surrounding the manuscript (possessing families, associations, kinship networks) to independent sociological analysis.

Internationally, this study intersects with the literature on the sociology of digital heritage (Zaagsma, 2023; Mandolessi, 2023), which treats digitization as a complex political and social act, and with comparative case studies on manuscript possession in the societies of the Global South (Wibowo et al., 2024). However, we do not find in this literature a direct treatment of cases of tribal/family possession in the traditional Saharan societal space. This is what the present study seeks to overcome on both fronts by placing the social actor and associative organization structures at the core of the analysis, not as a background to the technical phenomenon, but as a subject of sociological understanding in itself, and by situating this Algerian field case within a broader comparative discussion.

Furthermore, a comparative reading of international literature on the digitization of documentary heritage reveals two complementary trends useful for deepening the theoretical framing of this study. The first trend relates to analyzing the societal dimensions of digital heritage initiatives, where Burkey's studies (2019, 2021) show that heritage institutions are gradually transitioning from monopolizing official narratives of the past to involving heritage-possessing communities in building a participatory digital memory. In the context of the current study, this parallels the transition of manuscript possession from a singular family authority to an associative act that redistributes the authority of "official remembering" among actors.

The second trend relates to case studies dealing with societies of the Global South that traditionally possess manuscript heritage, most notably the study by Wibowo et al. (2024) on the Ambon

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manuscripts in Indonesia. This study warns that digitization projects often exclude the original manuscript owners from the preservation process despite their profound heritage knowledge, and suggests involving them as cognitive actors rather than passive vessels for the manuscript. This conclusion aligns with what the Ain Salah case reveals: that associative organization did not exclude the possessing families, but reintegrated them within a broader organizational structure that distributes roles among inventory, maintenance, and digitization.

Conversely, a recent Bulgarian survey study (Kostev et al., 2026) shows that the absence of legal frameworks and the weakness of qualified human resources remain among the most prominent obstacles to digitization even in more organized institutional contexts. This intersects with the structural impediments monitored by this study in the Algerian context through addressing the issue from the perspective of identity and symbolic representation in cyberspace, without delving into the deconstruction of kinship structures and power relations within the possessing families, which this study attempts to transcend.

4. Methodology and Tools

This study adopted the qualitative method with a case study approach, as it is the most appropriate method for understanding the social and symbolic implications of the act of manuscript preservation, which are difficult to reduce to quantitative indicators, especially in a geographically and institutionally limited phenomenon like the Ain Salah repositories. It also relied on the semi-structured (in-depth) interview as the primary tool for data collection, following a purposive sampling method. The interview was conducted with Mr. Babrahim Ismail, the supervisor and president of the Manuscript Repository Association in Ain Salah. As the main respondent, he possesses, by virtue of his organizational position, direct and comprehensive knowledge of the reality of the repositories, their social history, and the actors involved in them, which justifies relying on a single respondent in this exploratory phase of the study.

The interview was conducted via telephone due to the geographic distance between the researchers and the field of study, after obtaining the explicit consent of the respondent to record the interview and cite his name and organizational capacity, as he is an institutional actor known by his public capacity and not a respondent whose identity must be concealed. The responses were recorded, then transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis according to an open and then axial coding approach. Accordingly, the data were categorized into four sociological themes: the family structure of possession, associative organization, social obstacles, and digitization as an adaptive act.

The interview data were supported by a review of available knowledge sources on the history of the Tuat repositories and their social structure, to mitigate the limitations of relying on a single human source and to avoid the bias of the respondent's individual narrative. For methodological integrity, we must acknowledge as researchers that relying on a single primary respondent represents a methodological limitation that restricts the generalizability of the results. This necessitates in subsequent studies expanding the sample of respondents to include representatives of the various possessing families and partner institutional bodies (the National Center for Manuscripts, the partner banking institution), as well as supplementing them with quantitative approaches that measure the extent to which the observed trends can be generalized across the Tuat region as a whole.

5. Presentation and Discussion of Results

The presentation and discussion of the results in this section rely on a dual reading: a primary reading that describes and interprets the data in light of the adopted theoretical framework (Halbwachs, Bourdieu, Durkheim), and a second critical reading that questions the limits of this interpretation itself and examines what the dominant discourses of the actors (whether the possessing family or the

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association's leadership) might conceal in terms of power relations and forms of symbolic domination that do not clearly appear at the direct descriptive level. The primary respondent, as the president of a newly established association, is an actor with a symbolic and institutional interest in presenting a harmonious narrative about the transition from family preservation to associative work. This requires us as researchers not to accept this narrative as a neutral description of reality, but to also read it as a discourse producing a new social legitimacy.

5.1. The Socio-Historical Dimension of the Emergence of Ain Salah Repositories

Field data indicate that the accumulation of manuscript repositories in the city of Ain Salah, which alone hosts about thirty repositories, was not isolated from specific social and historical conditions. The most prominent of these are the city's location on the trans-Saharan trade caravan routes, the flourishing of religious education, and the activity of Zawiya (Sufi lodge) scholars who transcribed Qurans and books of jurisprudence and exegesis as endowments for mosques and students, in addition to the delayed arrival of the printed book to the region.

This confirms that the manuscript in this context is the product of an integrated religious-commercial social structure, not merely an isolated artifact from its surroundings. However, this reading, despite its validity, based on the respondent's account reproduces the association's official narrative about the history of the repositories. This is a narrative that naturally tends to present a homogeneous and self-reconciled origin (prosperous trade, sophisticated religious education, legitimate accumulation), while more problematic questions remain unspoken, such as: How was the hierarchy formed between families that acquired large repositories (like Al Babrahim) and others with smaller or less prestigious holdings? Was the accumulation of manuscripts governed only by religious piety and commercial activity, or also by a logic of competition for status within what could be called, in Bourdieu's terms, a local religious-cognitive "field" in which the stakes of symbolic domination are distributed among Zawiyas and tribes? The absence of this conflictual dimension from the available narrative keeps this axis of analysis largely descriptive, necessitating the diversification of historical narrative sources in future research.

5.2. The Repository as a Family Institution Carrying Symbolic Capital

The studied case shows that the manuscript repository often remains an inherited family property, as is the case in the repository of the Babrahim family and the clan of Al-Azzi Awlad Belkacem. This possession transforms the family into what might be termed the "Keepers of the Trust" over the region's collective memory, granting it a distinct symbolic status within the local social field. However, this form of possession carries a structural fragility, as the manuscript's fate remains contingent on the possessing family's awareness and its material and cognitive capacity to maintain it. This was evident in the respondent's reference to the fact that changes in local architectural patterns (the transition to cement building materials) constitute one of the factors threatening the traditional conditions of manuscript preservation.

It appears to us that the concepts of "Trust" and "People of the Repository" utilized by local discourse are not merely a neutral description of the reality of possession. Rather, they are in themselves mechanisms of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, as this discourse convinces the possessing family, and indeed the entire local community, that the disparity in possession (some families owning massive repositories while others own nothing) is a natural and legitimate arrangement dictated by the "Trust," not historical power relations linked to lineage, wealth, and proximity to centers of religious learning. In other words, the family habitus that drives the members of these families to "feel responsible" toward the manuscript is simultaneously a mechanism that reproduces an already existing symbolic hierarchy, transforming historical privilege into a moral duty that appears voluntary

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and neutral.

Furthermore, the interview data do not allow for discerning the position of women within this system of symbolic inheritance. Talk of the "possessing family" likely conceals a patriarchal inheritance pattern (transfer of possession and supervision through male descendants), which calls for a sociological-gender questioning that the current study did not address, constituting a research gap that should be acknowledged rather than overlooked.

5.3. From Individual Action to Organized Associative Action

The establishment of the Association of Manuscript Repositories and Historical Documents, which is barely three years old and includes twenty-seven repositories, represents a qualitative moment of transition from a closed logic of family preservation to an organized associative logic based on the division of roles (inventory, maintenance, digitization, cataloging) among human cadres who have benefited from specialized training courses. In light of Durkheimian analysis, this shift reflects a transition from a mechanical solidarity based on an isolated similarity among possessing families, to a form of organic solidarity based on the integration of functions within a single organizational structure. This enhances collective awareness of the value of this heritage and transforms it from a private affair to a societal cause.

However, settling for a functional Durkheimian reading of this transition risks depicting it as a necessarily reconciled linear path, whereas a complementary Bourdieusian-conflictual reading allows highlighting its other face. The establishment of the association is not only a neutral functional integration, but also a redistribution of symbolic capital within the local field. Some of this capital transfers from the historically possessing families to the association's leadership itself (the supervisor/president), who becomes, by virtue of his new organizational position, a spokesperson for the region's collective memory and an indispensable mediator between the families on one hand and national institutions and financial partners on the other.

This raises a sociological question that the available interview data did not answer: Do all owners of the twenty-seven repositories accept this new mediator voluntarily and equally, or are there potential disparities and tensions between families that see the association as an opportunity to save their inheritance, and others that might fear the "institutionalization" of their possession and its transformation from private symbolic property to a collective heritage overseen by a body outside their direct authority? The absence of the voices of these families from the sample keeps this question open and calls for caution against reading "organic solidarity" as a state of complete consensus devoid of negotiation and silent resistance.

5.4. Social and Structural Obstacles Facing Manuscript Preservation

Despite this organizational transformation, the process of preserving manuscripts in Ain Salah faces several social and structural obstacles. Foremost among them is the weak awareness of some owners of inherited repositories, most of whom—according to the respondent—lack literacy skills and an understanding of the scientific and symbolic value of what they possess. This is in addition to the absence of a clear legal framework that protects manuscripts from smuggling, theft, and alteration, and a weakness in qualified financial and human resources.

These data confirm the hypothesis that the weak scholastic cultural capital of some traditional possessors is linked to the slow pace of digitization, as awareness of heritage value remains a social condition preceding any technical endeavor to preserve it. However, this interpretation, while partially correct, calls for a critical reading of the position of the discourse's source itself. Describing some traditional possessors with "weak awareness" and "illiteracy" stems from an institutional actor (the association president) who occupies a position in the field that grants him, by virtue of his

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training and organizational positioning, the authority to classify others and label them as lagging behind the requirements of modern "heritage awareness." In this sense, the discourse of "possessors' weak awareness" can be read in one of its dimensions as a form of symbolic violence practiced by the rising associative-institutional elite against traditional possessors. This justifies redistributing the authority of supervising the manuscript from the family to the association and partner institutions, transforming the practical and inherited knowledge of these possessors (knowledge of traditional preservation methods, the history of each document and its circulation context) into "second-class" knowledge versus modern "scientific" knowledge monopolized by institutions. This intersects with what Wibowo et al. (2024) concluded in the context of Ambon, Indonesia, regarding the necessity of recognizing traditional possessors as cognitive actors, not merely obstacles needing "awareness." This is a fundamental distinction between an approach that subjects the traditional possessor to a logic of "top-down education" and an approach that recognizes their local knowledge as a competent partner in the preservation process.

5.5. Digitization and the Preservation of Collective Memory: The Significance of the Fire Incident

The incident involving one of the repositories catching fire, and the survival of more than seventy-six percent of its manuscripts due to their prior digitization, reveals the deep functional dimension of digitization in this context. It does not preserve the material document as much as it ensures the continuity of the collective memory encapsulated within this document, such that the material loss of the manuscript becomes a less severe event once its content is digitally secured. From a sociological perspective, this grants digitization the character of a modern mechanism for reproducing collective memory and ensuring its transmission to subsequent generations, alongside its purely technical function.

However, reading this incident requires going beyond the evangelical discourse of digitization as a final and unproblematic solution. The digital copy, on the one hand, introduces another type of fragility less visible than the fragility of fire, represented by the technical obsolescence of formats and software, and the continuous need for necessary funding to maintain servers and databases over the long term. These are risks documented by recent international literature addressing digital heritage initiatives in similar contexts regarding reliance on unstable external funding (see the Kosovo experience in Ajeti, 2026).

On the other hand, the transition of preservation from a paper medium to a digital one raises a sociological question about who actually owns the digital copy and who controls the conditions of access to it after digitization is completed. As much as digitization frees the manuscript from the fragility of individual family possession, it may subject it to a new form of "possession" shared by the association and partner institutions (the National Center for Manuscripts, the banking institution). If this relationship is not clearly regulated contractually and legally, this could lead to the actual stripping of the original family's authority to decide how to use and circulate its heritage digitally. This is what Zaagsma (2023) points to when describing digitization, cataloging, and access choices as decisions of a political, rather than purely technical, nature. Digitization in this sense solves the problem of material extinction but conversely opens a new problematic related to digital property policies and the long-term governance of this collection.

5.6. Social Actors' Perceptions for Enhancing Heritage Preservation

The respondent expressed a set of proposals that can be read as a call for a tighter social organization of the field related to manuscripts, most notably:

• Educating the owners of inherited repositories about the manuscript's importance, considering that

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most do not realize its scientific and symbolic value.

• Enacting a legal framework that protects manuscripts from smuggling and theft, whether by the supervising ministry or local authorities.

• Establishing a special national council for repository owners to unify efforts and provide support to repository supervisors.

• Expanding the authorities of the National Center for Manuscripts to provide direct subsidies to repository owners.

• Utilizing digitization and artificial intelligence technologies to facilitate access to the cognitive content of manuscripts.

These proposals collectively reflect a growing social awareness of the need to transition from a logic of un-legally framed individual protection to a logic of comprehensive institutional organization, which aligns with the study's idea that associative organization constitutes the most effective mechanism for reproducing the preservation of this heritage in a collective and sustainable manner. However, these proposals, while appearing on the surface as a consensus on the necessity of "institutionalization," also carry a dual logic worth pausing at. They all move in one direction: gradually transferring decision-making authority regarding the manuscript from the family/local sphere to a broader institutional sphere (a national council, a supervising ministry, a national center for manuscripts).

This necessitates invoking what critical literature in heritage studies calls the "Authorized Heritage Discourse," developed by Smith (2006). This refers to the tendency of institutional and international actors to monopolize the definition of what deserves to be classified as "heritage" and how it should be preserved, at the expense of unofficial local definitions and practices. The more integrated the Ain Salah repositories become into a national institutional system (legal classification, national council, banking partnerships), the more likely it is that the symbolic capital exclusively held by families will transform into capital whose definition and disposal are monopolized by the state and national institutions, gradually emptying the historical family "Trust" of its differential content.

As researchers, this caution does not mean rejecting the logic of institutionalization, whose objective necessity for ensuring preservation sustainability is revealed by the study. Rather, it is an invitation to view this path as an arena of negotiation between the gains of institutional sustainability and the cost of the potential erosion of the specificity of local symbolic possession, not as a unidirectional, linear development devoid of stakes.

Overall, the preceding results allow for the emergence of two complementary and simultaneously tense readings of the transition phenomenon from family preservation to associative organization and digitization. On the one hand, the functional Durkheimian reading is valid, seeing this transition as a rational adaptive response to objective requirements (obsolescence of traditional preservation tools, growing material risks, limited family resources). It is a response leading to a new organic solidarity based on the division of roles and the integration of functions among actors.

On the other hand, with equal validity, the Bourdieusian-conflictual reading holds true, seeing in the same trajectory a redistribution of symbolic capital and interpretive authority over heritage in favor of rising institutional actors (association leadership, national and partner institutions), at the expense of the historical families' monopoly over this capital. For our part, it can be said that neither reading invalidates the other. Together, they reveal the nature of the social act under study as an act of dual significance: salvific in the functional sense, and redistributive of symbolic power in the conflictual sense simultaneously. The central thesis of this study is that understanding the sociology of digitizing manuscript heritage in Ain Salah, and perhaps in similar contexts of the Global South, requires

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adopting this analytical duality instead of settling for one of its sides. Celebrating associative organization as absolute "progress" ignores its symbolic cost on traditional actors, whereas clinging to individual family possession as the only "authentic" form of preservation ignores its objective fragility against the risks of extinction.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that the preservation of manuscript heritage at the Ain Salah repository is not a neutral technical act, but a multidimensional social act. In it, the symbolic capital possessed by the manuscript's guardian families intersects with the dynamic of associative organization, which has redefined this preservation as a collective responsibility, and with the requirements of digital transformation, which have imposed on these traditional structures new forms of adaptation and institutional partnership. The study has shown that digitization, besides its technical function in protecting the document from deterioration, performs a deeper sociological function represented in consolidating the region's collective memory and ensuring its continuity across generations in the face of risks of both material and symbolic extinction.

Comparing the results of this case with international literature has allowed situating the Ain Salah experience within a broader debate about the relationship between the traditional possession of documentary heritage and the logic of digital institutionalization in the societies of the Global South. This paves the way for future comparative studies between the Tuat repositories and similar cases (such as the Ambon repositories in Indonesia or family repositories in other regions of the Algerian and Mauritanian Sahara). These studies could use quantitative or comparative approaches to address the impact of generational shifts within possessing families on the continuity of this symbolic field, as well as forms of negotiation between the traditional family logic and the logic of modern institutionalization.

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