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The Last Rekkas: Chronicles of a Foot Courier in Southern Morocco, by Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza. Langages du Sud, 2024. 163 pp. ISBN: 978-9920-560-50-4.

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Book Review

The Last Rekkas: Chronicles of a Foot Courier in Southern Morocco, by Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza. Langages du Sud, 2024. 163 pp. ISBN: 978-9920-560-50-4.

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During the postcolonial era, memory and history have played a pivotal role, especially in the academic scholarship produced in the Global South. The intricate relationship between reconstructing history and delving into the collective memory of communities has been a subject of scholarly debate among culturalists, anthropologists, and historians. Framed by the premise that victors write history, the postcolonial trend in historiography is bent on reconsidering collective or individual narratives overlooked by established history. History writing often remains dominated by power dynamics in the Foucauldian sense. Power holders dictate terms and narratives that serve their interests and often neglect those with less power. This systematic exclusion of undesirable groups remains the key factor behind the rise of subaltern studies, which is considered instrumental in the process of rewriting history. In this vein, Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has become a functional theoretical framework, granting voice to those who have been forcefully silenced throughout the (post)colonial era due to a lack of agency, and even during the independence era by their fellow citizens.

In light of this theoretical framing, *The Last Rekkas* by Aomar Boum, with the contribution of his teenage daughter Majdouline, delves into the forgotten memories of his father, Faraji Boum, so as to subvert the imposed historical narratives, memory abuses, and silencing of marginal voices. *The Last Rekkas* fills a critical gap in the scholarship by revisiting the memory of a neglected group of people, the Haratin, who hail from enslaved ancestors and reside in the remote village of Lamhamid in the Anti-Atlas region (50). Boum argues that "historians lack records of the social histories of communities throughout the Anti-Atlas" (12). Hence, *The Last Rekkas*, or the forgotten courier, provides insights into an unexplored realm of research that epitomizes people on the margins: forced laborers whose suffering and contributions have often been neglected not only by Eurocentric historians but also by nationalist ones.

Inspired by Mohammed al-Mokhtar Soussi (1900–1963), a Moroccan scholar, historian, and politician who argues in *Min Afwāh Al-Rijāl* [*From the Mouths of Men*] that historians need to devote part of their work to recording their socio-cultural background (4), Aomar Boum records his father's testimonies on the history of the Moroccan southeast. Professor Boum, the holder of the Maurice Amado Endowed Chair in Sephardic Studies at the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, introduces *The Last Rekkas* as an indigenous multimodal ethnographic counter-narrative, which incorporates written texts, images, and visual drawings. Since 1995, the author has been collecting data through long hours of interviewing his father, Faraji, published in this account in 2024, shortly after Faraji's demise. The central argument of

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this account resides in its centralization of the marginalized micro-history of an individual, epitomizing the entire history of the Global South.

Across twenty-four chapters, *The Last Rekkas* traces the genealogy of a forced labor Across twenty-four chapters, *The Last Rekkas* traces the genealogy of a forced labor messenger's life journey in the remote Sahara, located in the South of Morocco. The prevailing themes of this account are encapsulated in three major topics: colonial history, survival in the harsh environment, and ethnic diversity. Faraji Boum represents a premodern postman and a firsthand eyewitness who suffered from the coerced corvée labor—unpaid work imposed by colonial power and local tribal chiefs, as the author delineates in his account (2). He was appointed as a Rekkas—a traditional foot courier who had to trek almost 60 km per day (15), crossing the untamed wild landscape, where he sometimes had to endure food scarcity and the menaces of wild creatures. When Faraji was not on duty as a foot messenger, he farmed palm trees or managed the water distribution system at a negligible cost for his fellow villagers in the Foum Zguid oasis. This historical personal memoir tracks not only the struggles of Faraji but also the transformation of the village due to the encounter with the French colonizer, as the fifteenth chapter, "From Trail to Road," delineates. This transition, as Faraji depicts it, also touches on the ethno-cultural fabric of the region when French settlers proposed building a church or, as Faraji humorously called it, "a mosque for the Christians" (64). However, this religious proposal was rejected by the indigenous affairs bureau for fear of stirring up the indigenous people, who consisted of Muslims and Jews.

A notable shortcoming of this account resides in the fact that Boum leaves readers perplexed and unsure about the genre of *The Last Rekkas*, which blends diverse subgenres. It contains several aspects of writing that problematize its literary category. Put differently, the inclusion of visuals and drawings presents the book as an illustrative story. Still, the wealth of anthropological and historical data introduces it as a historical memoir. But the author's narration about his frequent visits, accompanied by his daughter and wife, to the South turns the book into a travelogue that incorporates the traveler's personal reflections on cultural practices and descriptions of landscapes. The writer cultivates a multi-layered methodological paradigm that synthesizes in one narrative all the aforementioned stylistic features—micro-history, anthropology, visuals, and biography.

The intergenerational and trilingual form of *The Last Rekkas* constitutes two other intriguing and distinctive stylistic characteristics. The book is a collaboration among three generations: the grandfather, Faraji Boum; the father, Aomar Boum; and his daughter, Majdouline Boum-Mendoza. Each offers a part to make *The Last Rekkas*: the personal archive and memories of Faraji, the anthropological and academic skills of Aomar, and Majdouline's illustrations. The entanglement of three generations' efforts shapes this book's intergenerational authorship, foregrounding both the continuity and the polyphony of this narrative. Moreover, publishing *The Last Rekkas* in three languages (Arabic, French, and English) fosters an intercultural and translingual dialogue that not only signals the author's intentionality in reaching a wide audience but also destabilizes monolingual readings, opening the door to comparative textual analysis of the translated editions.

As Gérard Genette argues in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, books' titles function as an instrumental device, bridging the gap between the reading materials and their readers (xviii). In this sense, reflecting critically on the title of Boum's narrative, *The Last Rekkas* conveys multilayered connotations. To elaborate on this point further, the title alludes to dystopia or elegy, mourning the demise of a subaltern figure—Faraji—who is subjected to an unjust life journey, imbued with suffering and oppression. It epitomizes the voiceless groups hailing from the Global South and those neglected forced laborers whom the machinery of the

French colonizer coerced into constructing the grand narrative of the Western "mission civilisatrice."

It is worth noting that *The Last Rekkas* aligns with Charles de Foucauld's account *Reconnaissance au Maroc* (1888), which incorporates the author's geographical, ethnographical, and cultural observations from his expedition to Morocco in the late nineteenth century. However, Boum's account differs from de Foucauld's in its intentionality. In other words, Aomar Boum and Majdouline Boum-Mendoza (a son and a granddaughter of Faraji) embark on an intellectual project to unravel the past, centralizing the margins. By contrast, de Foucauld's work, which is accused of being Eurocentric, represents an Orientalist perspective and reproduces epistemic violence—in the Spivakian sense—of colonial discourse, disclosing the entanglement of scholarly inquisitiveness with imperial ambitions and paving the way for conquest. Given that, the significance of *The Last Rekkas* stems from its counter-narrativity against such monolithic accounts, among which is de Foucauld's. Boum's narrative embodies the subalterns who can speak their minds and articulate their suffering.

In sum, *The Last Rekkas* achieves its primary objective: to be an eye-opening story that delves into the forgotten memories and history of Morocco. Boum's account constitutes an intellectual contribution to Moroccan postcolonial cultural studies that probes the buried memory of decentralized communities in the South of Morocco. Other works by Moroccan authors worth noting are Brahim El Guabli's *Desert Imaginations* (2025), which focuses on abundant Saharan historical scholarship and cultural practices; and Chouki El Hamel's *Black Morocco* (2013), which traces the history of enslavement in Morocco since the seventeenth century under Sultan Moulay Ismail, who created an army from slaves. Similarly, *The Last Rekkas* attempts to democratize history by providing a voice to Faraji Boum, whose life-journey narrative transcends being the story of an individual to become an archetype of a socio-cultural group to which historians turn a blind eye. This account requires a significant degree of engagement, inviting readers to question the official established historical archive, constructed by either nationalist or foreign historians. The audience of *The Last Rekkas* extends beyond domestic scholarship to anyone invested in counter-narratives, decolonial discourse, and the politics of memory in postcolonial Morocco, especially the Southeast region. The significance of this account resides in its insights into epistemic resistance that conventional colonial historiography obscures.

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