



Social Capital and Its Role in Advancing Heritage Tourism and Preserving Local Distinctiveness in Algeria: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social capital in advancing heritage tourism and preserving local distinctiveness in Algeria. It highlights the close relationship among cultural heritage, collective identity, social cohesion, and tourism development, with particular emphasis on the contribution of social networks, trust, shared values, family ties, civil society, and public institutions. Using an analytical approach, the study explores the concept, sources, and developmental significance of social capital and assesses its potential contribution to the protection and promotion of Algeria's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It also considers selected heritage sites of national and international significance, including the Casbah of Algiers, Tipasa, Al Qal'a of Beni Hammad, Djemila, Timgad, the M'Zab Valley, and Tassili n'Ajjer. The analysis indicates that Algeria possesses substantial cultural and heritage assets capable of supporting sustainable tourism development. However, effective valorisation of these assets requires stronger collective engagement, greater institutional coordination, enhanced public awareness, and more active investment in social capital. The study concludes that strengthening social capital can contribute significantly to safeguarding cultural heritage, reinforcing local identity, promoting community participation, and improving the competitiveness and sustainability of heritage tourism in Algeria.

Keywords: social capital, heritage tourism, cultural heritage, local distinctiveness, cultural identity, sustainable tourism, Algeria

Introduction

Algerian history has been shaped by successive civilisations, invasions, colonial encounters, and enduring local cultures. Together, these historical layers have produced a rich and diverse cultural mosaic that varies across the national territory and has been transmitted from one generation to the next through culture, history, literature, civilisation, art, crafts, traditions, and customs (Boudhan, 2013). Heritage is not confined to the past; it also encompasses the



cultural patterns individuals acquire through the groups to which they belong, including inherited customs, traditions, and beliefs (Imad, 2006). Many of these everyday cultural practices form part of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and have increasingly attracted local and international attention because of concerns about their disappearance, appropriation, or loss. Human societies have long recognised the importance of development, although the relative priority assigned to its components has changed over time. Economic development initially received the greatest attention, and physical capital was regarded as the principal instrument for achieving development objectives. The limitations of this orientation subsequently became apparent, leading to greater recognition of social development and human capital. Social capital, however, remained a comparatively neglected dimension until the emergence of sustainable human development, which drew attention to lessons from the past, biological and institutional diversity, and the role of social capital in development (Abu Zaid, n.d.). Algeria's heritage is highly diverse and includes historical monuments, Sufi traditions, crafts, melhoun poetry, traditional dress and dance, visits to shrines, wa'dat or ta'am, and occasion-specific traditions such as celebrations of the Prophet's birthday in Béni Abbès and other regions. Accordingly, this study examines the current state of heritage tourism in Algeria and the role of social capital in its preservation and development.

The Concept of Social Capital

Social capital has been conceptualised in diverse ways, and definitions vary across researchers and disciplinary traditions. This section therefore traces the historical development of the concept and reviews several influential definitions. Despite differences in emphasis, these approaches generally recognise the importance of social relationships in enabling individuals and groups to gain access to information, support, and other benefits (Hewala & Al-Shorbaji, 2014). Development studies have traditionally emphasised physical and human capital as key resources for social and economic progress, while social capital has often received less attention despite its role in connecting material and human resources. The concept became particularly prominent alongside debates on human development and sustainable development. From this perspective, social capital is viewed as relevant to sustainable development because it extends beyond individuals' positions in development to encompass interpersonal relationships, social networks, and the collective capacities generated through social interaction (Abu Zaid, n.d.). Social relationships should therefore be valued not only for their immediate benefits but also for their contribution to social development and collective advancement.

The early history of the term 'social capital' is contested. Some accounts trace its intellectual roots to nineteenth-century discussions of democracy, whereas others identify L. J. Hanifan's 1916 writings as an early explicit use of the concept in relation to social groups and



social practices. Pierre Bourdieu later contributed to its modern development through his work on forms of capital, including cultural and social capital (Al-Kafawin, 2017). Robert Putnam subsequently played a major role in transferring the concept into political science and in shifting attention from the individual level to the collective level. In this perspective, social capital reflects features of social organisation that can facilitate development and social progress (Hamad, 2015). Rather than focusing on disputes over conceptual ownership, the present discussion emphasises the meaning and social significance of the concept, particularly in contexts where excessive emphasis on material capital may contribute to individualism and weaken collective solidarity.

Bourdieu conceptualised social capital as the actual or potential resources associated with possession of a durable network of relationships based on mutual recognition and group membership (as cited in Al-Kafawin, 2017). Coleman likewise linked social capital to rational action, trust, obligations, and resources that can be mobilised when needed; recurrent interaction and reciprocal obligations can, in turn, generate more generalised forms of social capital (as cited in Al-Kafawin, 2017). Fukuyama emphasised the capacity that arises from the prevalence of trust within society or within particular sectors of it, from the family to wider national and intermediary groups. From this perspective, social capital is embedded in shared values and norms and may be transmitted through cultural mechanisms such as religion, traditions, customs, and historically rooted practices (as cited in Al-Radwani, 2016).

Social capital can therefore be understood as the network of relationships that binds individuals and groups together and contributes to shared identity, traditions, and collective belonging. It may also be understood as the relationships formed among individuals, families, and groups that provide access to benefits, opportunities, and valuable resources (Abdel Azim, 2012).

Sources of Social Capital

Networks of social ties and relationships, together with prevailing values, are fundamental to the establishment and continuity of social structures. The sources of social capital range from primary social groups, such as the family and neighbourhood, to informal institutions, including associations and social actors, and to formal organisations such as trade unions and political parties.

Studies of social capital in developing societies have identified several principal sources of social capital, including the following:

a. Family. The family is the first institution in which social capital is developed through solidarity, mutual assistance, and the provision of services and support during periods of



economic or social difficulty. These practices strengthen relationships and reciprocal obligations among family members.

b. Ethnic or religious ties. Ethnic and religious affiliations can constitute important sources of social capital because they influence socialisation, contribute to the formation of self-understanding and perceptions of others, and create bonds among individuals that may facilitate the pursuit of shared objectives.

c. Civil society. Civil society is an important source of social capital, particularly in societies characterised by high levels of public awareness and participation in civic life. Its organisations can create networks of cooperation and may exert meaningful influence on decision-making processes.

d. Public sector. Public institutions can contribute to social capital by strengthening citizens' trust in state institutions and by improving relationships both within public administration and between public officials and citizens (Al-Kafarna, 2015).

Social capital can also function as a mechanism for organising collective action and improving its efficiency by facilitating participation, cooperation, and shared problem-solving within organisations. It contributes to the development of intellectual capital through the exchange of information and knowledge via social relationships, which may be more effective and less costly than exclusively formal mechanisms, thereby strengthening an organisation's intellectual capacity (Hewala & Al-Shorbaji, 2014). The significance of social capital extends across the economic, social, and political dimensions of society. Economically, it can support relationships and market practices that are not based solely on profitability. Socially, it can reinforce collective action, develop collective identities, support marginalised groups, integrate dispersed social formations, and promote concepts associated with political stability and civil society. The relationship between social capital and civil society is therefore frequently connected with political and institutional action (Hamad, 2015).

The Importance of Social Capital in Valorising Cultural Heritage and Achieving Tourism Development

The protection of heritage and archaeological sites forms part of the policies adopted by states to preserve their civilisational legacy and architectural history, safeguard collective memory, and enhance tourism appeal. Cultural tourism based on visits to archaeological and cultural sites has expanded substantially worldwide because of the enduring value of such places (Zeghib & Zireq, 2012). These developments fall within the broader framework of cultural tourism. Despite the proliferation of charters and conventions devoted to cultural heritage protection, the 1976 Cultural Tourism Charter was significant in identifying both the positive and negative effects of cultural tourism on historic sites and monuments and in promoting the



integration of cultural assets into economic programmes while respecting their heritage value (Euromed Heritage, n.d.).

Heritage is commonly divided into tangible and intangible forms. Tangible cultural heritage includes historic buildings and places, monuments, artefacts, and other material remains considered worthy of protection and preservation for future generations. Such heritage is valuable for archaeology, architecture, science, and technology because material evidence contributes to the study of human history and provides an authentic connection with the past (UNESCO Cairo Office, 2017b).

Intangible cultural heritage includes, among other forms, traditional festivals, oral traditions, epics, customs, ways of life, and traditional craftsmanship. It has become a major priority within UNESCO's cultural activities (UNESCO Cairo Office, 2017a, 2017b; Torggler et al., 2013). The 2003 Convention identifies several domains through which intangible cultural heritage may be expressed, including:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage
- Performing arts
- Social practices, rituals, and festive events
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- Skills associated with traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO Cairo Office, 2017b)

Many elements of intangible cultural heritage may belong to more than one of these domains. At the international level, UNESCO has played a significant role in broadening the understanding of cultural heritage. Whereas earlier approaches often concentrated primarily on monuments and archaeological remains, the concept has progressively expanded to encompass social and intangible dimensions of cultural heritage (Nassar, 2013).

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills, together with associated instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces, that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. Transmitted from generation to generation, this heritage is continually recreated in relation to communities' environments, their interaction with nature, and their histories. In doing so, it contributes to a sense of identity and continuity and promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO Cairo Office, 2017b).

Heritage and identity are closely interconnected: identity draws upon heritage, while heritage contributes to the formation and continuity of identity. They are therefore complementary components of both individual and collective identity (Al-Tuwaijri, 2011). The



cultural and civilisational identity of a nation consists of relatively stable, essential, and shared characteristics that distinguish its civilisation and give its national identity a recognisable character. Contemporary national identities may nevertheless be exposed to numerous pressures and risks. In Arabic, the term *huwiyyah* (identity) is derived from *huwa* ('he') and is associated with the essence and reality of a thing. Identity may therefore be understood in terms of distinctiveness or uniqueness; cultural identity, in particular, encompasses distinctive customs, patterns of behaviour, inclinations, values, and understandings of the world and of life.

Cultural identity expresses the human need for recognition, acceptance, and appreciation in relation to individual and collective distinctiveness. It is shaped through the dialectic between the self and the other, as human groups continually reinterpret their cultures through contact with other cultures and through processes of acculturation. Cultural identity is therefore not a fixed or final entity; rather, it develops and changes internally as values and behaviours evolve and externally through interaction with the surrounding environment. As Al-Jabri argued, cultural identity is an evolving collective entity that may move towards either contraction or expansion and is enriched by people's experiences, aspirations, achievements, and interactions with other cultural identities (as cited in Khalafallah, 2010).

Preserving heritage requires the mobilisation of material and human resources through documentation, transmission, reinforcement, and celebration. Cultural globalisation can place some forms of heritage and cultural diversity under pressure. It has been described as the outcome of interactions among unequal cultures and societies, accompanied by new influences that may affect customs, traditions, values, and moral frameworks. At the same time, cultural globalisation has strengthened connections among individuals and peoples by transcending national and regional boundaries despite differences in cultural, individual, and social identities (Al-Hayari, 2017). This context highlights the importance of building cohesive social capital capable of protecting local identity, strengthening historical awareness, and supporting civil society. In Algeria, heritage tourism remains comparatively underdeveloped compared with neighbouring Maghreb countries. This may be associated with limitations in tourism infrastructure and, importantly, with insufficient collective engagement and social capital directed towards heritage tourism. Greater collective commitment is needed to preserve and promote heritage and to strengthen the tourism sector. Algeria nevertheless possesses numerous and diverse heritage assets that reflect the histories of its regions. Algeria ratified the World Heritage Convention on 24 June 1974, and seven Algerian properties are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO, Algerian National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, 2018). The following sections consider several of these sites.



The Casbah of Algiers

The Casbah of Algiers is a distinctive historic urban site. The term casbah means 'fortress' and is commonly used in the Maghreb to refer to fortified urban structures combining defensive, residential, religious, and public-service functions (Al-Khallasi, 2007). The Casbah occupies an elevated position overlooking the Mediterranean and reflects multiple historical phases, including Zirid and Ottoman development. Its dense urban fabric is characterised by narrow, winding streets and closely clustered dwellings. Ottoman architectural features are particularly evident in the upper Casbah, while later French colonial interventions transformed parts of the lower area. Important landmarks include mosques, palaces, markets, and historic residences such as Dar Aziza. The Casbah has therefore become a major symbol of Algiers' urban identity. It was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992. In 2018, more than 22,000 tourists visited Algiers during the first half of the year, with the Casbah identified as a principal attraction for many foreign visitors (El Khabar, 2018).

Figure 1

The Casbah of Algiers



The Roman Ruins of Tipasa

Tipasa, located west of Algiers, possesses significant natural, historical, and archaeological resources. The site reflects successive periods and civilisations, including Numidian, Phoenician, Roman, Vandal, Byzantine, Arab-Islamic, French colonial, and post-independence phases. Among its most important monuments is the Royal Mausoleum of Mauretania, commonly known locally as Qabr al-Roumia, a circular funerary monument traditionally associated with King Juba II and Queen Cleopatra Selene II. The archaeological landscape also includes remains of temples and a historically important harbour whose origins are associated with Phoenician maritime activity. The archaeological parks contain a lighthouse,



an amphitheatre of approximately 80 metres in length, and a theatre near the Caesarea (Cherchell) Gate that retains significant elements of its architectural form (Razzaz, 2011).

The site also includes a Roman forum with surviving paving, the so-called Museum of the Nymphs, the Decumanus, temples, administrative structures, churches, baths, fortifications, and other archaeological remains. These features collectively illustrate Tipasa's historical development and its importance as a point of interaction among indigenous, Punic, Roman, and later cultural traditions (Razzaz, 2011).

Figure 2

Roman remains at Tipasa, with the Royal Mausoleum of Mauretania on the right and the archaeological park on the left.



Al Qal'a of Beni Hammad

Al Qal'a of Beni Hammad was the first capital of the Hammadid dynasty and was founded in 1007 CE, before the formal consolidation of Hammadid independence. The site occupies a strategic position along important historical trade routes. Its major monuments include the Great Mosque and a smaller mosque associated with Qasr al-Manar. The Great Mosque measures approximately 160 metres by 120 metres and contains a mihrab decorated with Qur'anic inscriptions. The minaret of the Great Mosque is among the oldest surviving minarets in Algeria. Built of stone and rising to more than 24 metres, it is distinguished by its decorative composition and architectural significance. Some researchers have argued that its design influenced later Almohad minarets, including the Giralda in Seville (Belarbi, 2009).

Figure 3

Al Qal'a of Beni Hammad, M'Sila Province





The Archaeological Site of Djemila

Sétif Province contains several important historical sites, including Byzantine fortifications, Roman remains, Ain El Fouara, and the archaeological site of Djemila. Djemila, the ancient Roman city of Cuicul, was founded around 96-97 CE during the reign of Emperor Nerva and occupies approximately 42 hectares. Built on mountainous terrain, the city developed through both pagan and Christian periods, and its urban form includes central public spaces, principal streets, and residential areas. Originally established as a Roman settlement, it later became an important commercial and agricultural centre supported by cereals, olive cultivation, and other farming activities. Its strategic location along mountain ridges and between major routes enhanced both its defensive position and its regional importance. Djemila was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1982 (Farouk, 2014; UNESCO, Algerian National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, 2018).

Figure 4

The archaeological site of Djemila, Sétif Province



The Archaeological Site of Timgad

Batna Province contains a large number of archaeological sites, including nationally classified properties and World Heritage sites. Among the most important are the Numidian Mausoleum of Medracen and the archaeological city of Timgad. The Romans founded Timgad in a strategic position along a road crossing the northern Aurès and linking the region with Khenchela, Tebessa, and Carthage (Matmar, 2011). Established around 100 CE by order of Emperor Trajan, it was intended in part for veterans of the Roman army who subsequently became landowners. Ancient inscriptions record forms of the city's Roman name, including Colonia Marciana Ulpia Traiana Thamugadi (Matmar, 2011).

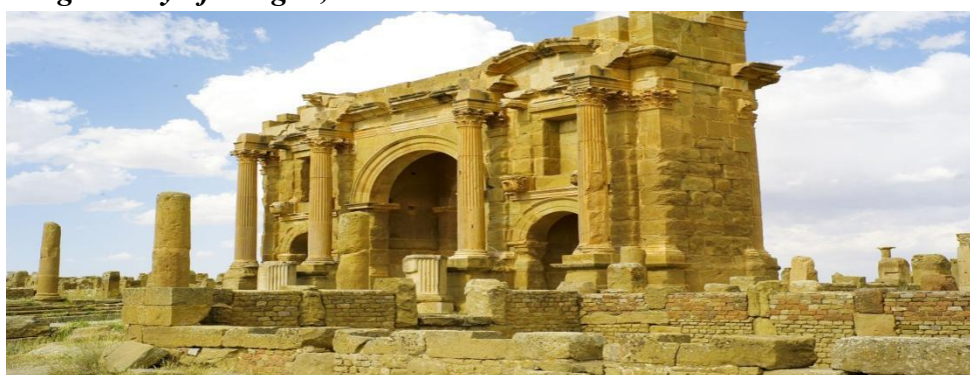
Timgad was laid out according to a regular grid plan organised around two principal axes intersected by secondary streets, creating blocks allocated for residential and public construction.



As the city expanded, development extended beyond the original defensive walls into new quarters. The site includes the forum at the centre of the city, municipal and administrative buildings, temples, judicial structures, a market, a public library, Trajan's Arch, and the Capitol complex, which stands on an elevated platform reached by a monumental staircase (Traveller Encyclopaedia, n.d.).

Figure 5

The archaeological city of Timgad, Batna Province



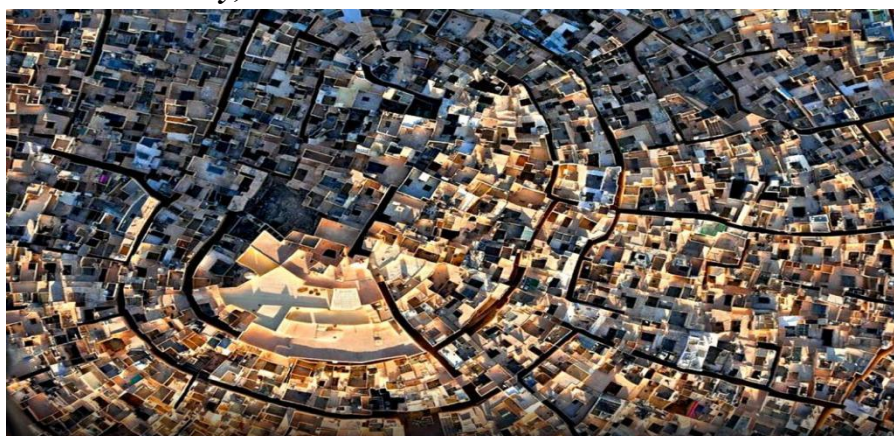
The Ksour of the M'Zab Valley

The M'Zab Valley is a distinctive cultural landscape that was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1982, received national protection in 1971, and was designated a protected sector by the Algerian Ministry of Culture in 2005. Its historic pentapolis comprises five ksour founded by Ibadi communities from the eleventh century onwards. These settlements are characterised by compact, fortified architecture surrounded by extensive oases and by an urban design adapted to communal life and enduring family and social structures (Office de Protection et de Promotion de la Vallée du M'Zab [OPVM], 2011). The valley contains numerous historical monuments and sites representing religious, economic, social, and architectural functions. Archaeological evidence also attests to prehistoric occupation in the region, with some remains dated to around 5000 BCE. Historic settlements and monuments are distributed across locations including El Atteuf, Ghardaïa, and Bounoura. Their preservation enables the study of distinctive ways of life and architectural traditions that remain fundamental to the identity of the M'Zab Valley. The heritage landscape also includes mosques within the ksour, oasis mosques, and funerary prayer spaces (OPVM, 2011).



Figure 6

The ksour of the M'Zab Valley, Ghardaïa Province



Tassili n'Ajjer

Tassili n'Ajjer is a mountain range in Illizi Province in south-eastern Algeria, within the central Sahara. It is characterised by vast sandstone formations, rocky plateaux, mountains, dry valleys corresponding to ancient watercourses, and caves shaped by erosion (Bouزيد, n.d.). Tassili n'Ajjer was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1982. Successive human populations left extensive archaeological evidence, including pottery, rock engravings, and polychrome paintings. More than 15,000 rock drawings and engravings have been recorded, contributing to the site's international significance (Mustapha, 2016). In 2017, tourism activity in Illizi Province included more than 1,100 foreign visitors and more than 5,000 domestic tourists during the reported season (Echorouk Online, 2017).

Figure 7

Tassili n'Ajjer, Illizi Province





Conclusion

This study has highlighted the importance of Algeria's cultural heritage and the need to strengthen social capital as a means of preserving, transmitting, promoting, and valorising that heritage. Many countries rely on tourism as an important source of revenue and economic development, and contemporary media provide increasingly powerful means of promoting destinations and raising awareness of their cultural assets. Algeria's heritage regions contain not only archaeological monuments but also artistic traditions, craft knowledge, social practices, and longstanding customs. Other areas may still require further archaeological investigation and documentation. Safeguarding these resources therefore requires sustained collective participation, institutional coordination, and public awareness so that cultural heritage can be transmitted effectively from one generation to the next while contributing to sustainable heritage tourism and the preservation of local distinctiveness.

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