The Representation of the Moroccan Culture in the Works of Ayoub Normal

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ABSTRACT

Ayoub Abid, also known as 'Normal,' is a highly esteemed graphic designer, illustrator, and muralist hailing from Agadir, Morocco. His artistic prowess is evident through his distinct style characterized by complimentary colours, intricate compositions, and captivating forms, garnering him a devoted following within the Moroccan art sphere. This study delves into the visual components that contribute to Normal's widespread appeal, dissecting his visual compositions, analyzing his meticulous colour selections, the deliberate arrangement of forms, and the profound cultural significance embedded in his visual symbolism. By unraveling the nuances of how he articulates his Moroccan heritage through his artwork, a deeper comprehension emerges regarding the resonance his creations hold with the local audience.

Keywords – Visual identity, Moroccan culture, Cultural authenticity, Illustration art

1.   Introduction

Ayoub Abid, also known as "Normal," is a graphic designer, illustrator, and muralist based in Agadir city, Morocco. He developed a passion for art and music at a young age, which led him to pursue a degree in graphic design from the ArtCom Sup school in Rabat in 2011. With a multidisciplinary approach, Normal explores various mediums and has developed a distinctive style and colour palette. Since 2014, he has collaborated on significant cultural projects such as Boulevard (2017, 2018 & 2019 – poster and graphic chart), Gnaoua Festival (2018 & 2019 – posters), and British council (POP UP Studio 2018). Additionally, Normal has created numerous murals both in Morocco (Tiznit, Rabat, Casablanca) and abroad (Fresh Paint OLLN, City of Ottignies Louvain-la-Neuve).

Normal initially focused on revamping musical groups' albums and visuals until he started making acquaintances who involved him in muralism. Inspired, he began creating his own frescoes, viewing walls as his canvas and the streets as his gallery. Normal's ambition is to spread the art of street art muralism to other cities in Morocco. He believes this project requires meticulous logistical planning and the involvement of the city's residents. He emphasizes the growing interest from the general public in their work but stresses the need for greater appreciation and support from investors and decision-makers (Elkhodari, 2022).

In recent years, Morocco has experienced a notable surge in the emergence of a new generation of Moroccan artists who are actively engaging with public spaces to express their artistic visions on a grand scale. This movement has had a transformative effect on cities such as Rabat and Casablanca. Initially, street art was not taken seriously, often seen as mere decoration for the exteriors of high schools and primary schools, occasionally accompanied by awareness messages. These early illustrations were often created by amateurs or beginners, lacking in colour choice, composition, and content. Consequently, they failed to garner public recognition or appreciation as either a legitimate art form or a means of communication. However, with the growing interest in street art among diverse Moroccans, the quality of these visual creations has undergone a significant change. The public is now witnessing large-scale illustrations that are aesthetically appealing and convey subtle messages.

Fig1 - By Mohammed Tours known as Ed Oner, dedicated to the Qatar World Cup 2023

Fig 2 - Frescoes done by Mehdi Anassi for his old high school in Casablanca

Fig 3 - Frescoes done by Sami Gsnoussi in Casablanca

A wide range of styles and colour palettes have been utilized to reconstruct and modernize Street Art in Morocco. Normal, a prominent figure in this field, has actively participated in and led numerous workshops and festivals of street art both within Morocco and internationally. In an interview conducted by Fresh Paint (2021), Normal discussed his approach to his Mural work (figure 4), highlighting his tendency to draw inspiration from subtle elements such as images or elusive feelings that can be challenging to capture.

Fig 4 - Normal's Mural illustration with Fresh Paint OLLN in Belgium (Taken from:
https://www.freshpaintolln.be/artistes/normal/)

Normal's artistic practice is characterized by ongoing experimentation within a unified visual framework. His work spans various forms, including murals, both commercial and personal poster designs, screen-printed illustrations, tattoos, and wood installations. The artist appears to be in a

perpetual quest for a medium that aligns with his creative vision; nevertheless, this exploration has culminated in a distinctive visual authenticity. This cultural accuracy not only forges connections among the diverse mediums he employs but also consistently engages and resonates with the local audience. A predominant theme throughout his work centers on three key elements: polarities (opposites), the expression of feminine figure, and an exploration of mysticism or spirituality.

2.   Preliminary study

A preliminary study was undertaken to explore the representation of Moroccan identity within the local visual arts sector. Participants were administered a total of eight questions via a Google Form, necessitating a Gmail account for participation. The data collected were subsequently analysed using Google Sheets, which facilitated the generation of a comprehensive summary of responses. The survey was conducted in Arabic, with translations provided in English to ensure clarity and accessibility for the research objectives. This methodological approach allowed for a systematic examination of the intersection between cultural identity and visual expression in Morocco. The study primarily involved young Moroccan artists and designers between 25-30 residing and working in urban areas. The sampling targeted three main art domains: visual artists (including illustrators, painters, and animators), filmmakers, and graphic designers.

Based on the responses, it was explained by the majority of participants that Morocco's ethnographic diversity poses a challenge in terms of establishing a consistent and coherent national style. This challenge arises from the wide range of elements such as Arabian tiles, Amazigh tattoos, and African patterns, all characterized by strong colours. Furthermore, the geographic diversity of Morocco also contributes to this challenge, as it is not easily summarized by one or two single colours. In the northern part of Morocco, the predominant colours are white, blue, and green, whereas the southern region is represented by orange, red, yellow, and brown hues. However, Participants recognize Morocco's diversity as an opportunity for inspiration, drawing from a wide range of visual elements. They mentioned the Moroccan visual aesthetics that is characterized by a vibrant blend of Arab, Berber, and Islamic influences, incorporating elements of Mediterranean, African, and Andalusian traditions. When participants were asked to identify a Moroccan artist who effectively conveys the richness of Moroccan culture through visual art, Ayoub Normal emerged as one of the top three selected artists. His work has consistently garnered appreciation from audiences, as it offers a unique interpretation of Moroccan identity that diverges from the clichés prevalent in the Moroccan painting scene since the 1980s. Ayoub Normal appears to have developed a novel approach that not only provides a contemporary perspective on local culture through modern mediums but also incorporates nuanced local symbolism within his forms and color palettes.

3.   Identifying Ayoub Normal's colour palette

In order to comprehend the appeal of Normal's work to the audience, we must first examine his visual elements. One of the reasons for his fame lies in his colour choice, which, although not original or new in the Moroccan market, when combined with his composition, illustrations, and forms, creates a distinctive style. Our analysis will focus on two significant aspects: colour and form. To better

understand the development or changes in his palette, we have gathered various artworks from different periods and organized them in a precise timeline (figure 5).
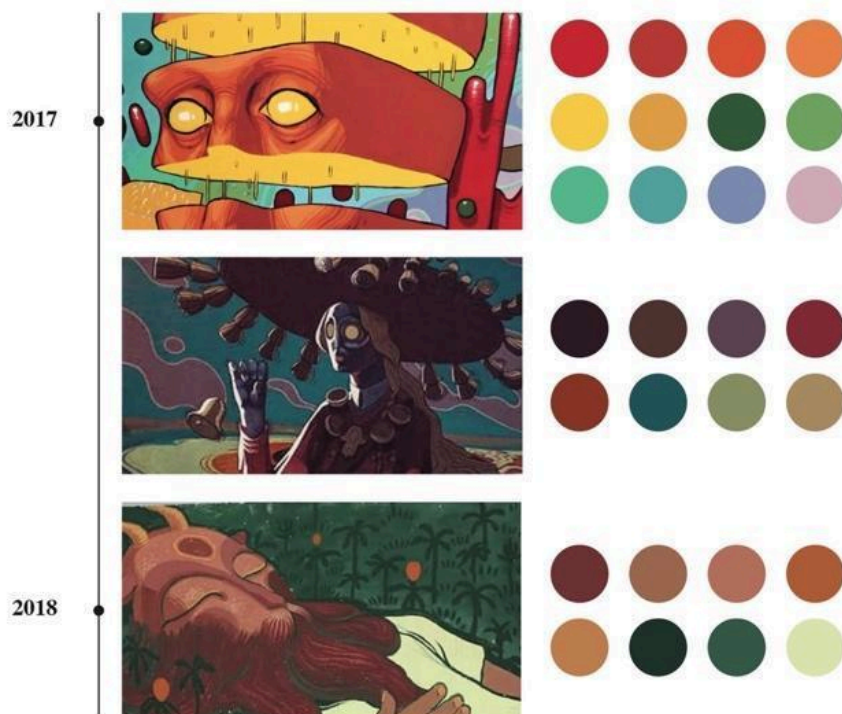

Fig 5 - Normal's artwork between 2017 and 2018

Based on Sanzo Wada's online colour dictionary, Normal's first piece prominently features Spectrum Red #f20000, Red Orange #e81900, Olive Green #718600, and Krongberg Green #759243. Additionally, it is worth noting that this artwork falls within three colour combinations suggested by Sanzo Wada, as depicted in figure 6 were the artwork exhibits a striking use of bright colours.
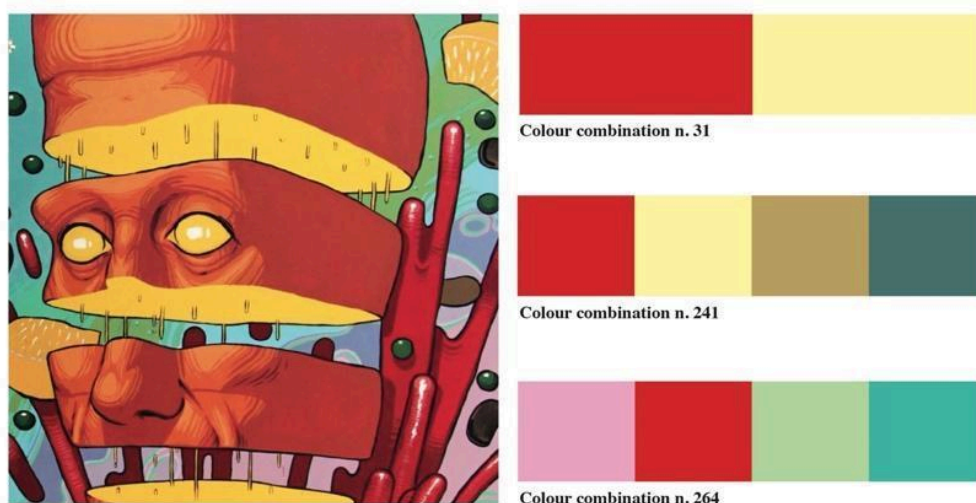

Fig 6 - Normal's 2017 – 2018 artwork 1 depending on Sanzo Wada colour combination

On his second artwork on figure 7, the artist also demonstrates his skill in working with a darker palette, employing dim shades with and pale tones. According to Wada's colour framework, there are three dominant colours which are, Vistoris Lake #5C2C45, Blackish Olive #324E2A and Hay's Russet #681916. The artwork matches two combinations, with the number 63 where the Cerlian Blue is replaced by Andover Green.

Fig 7 - Normal's 2017 – 2018 artwork 2 depending on Sanzo Wada colour combination

In 2020, the artist has made a deliberate shift in his colour choices, opting for paler tints. On figure 8, there are two artworks by the artist that prominently feature Coral Red #FF7399, Cream Yellow #FFB852, Dull Blue Violet #6E66D4, and Antwarp Blue #008AA1. These two illustrations fall into two distinct Wada combinations, namely number 9 and number 320 as it is showcased in figure 9.
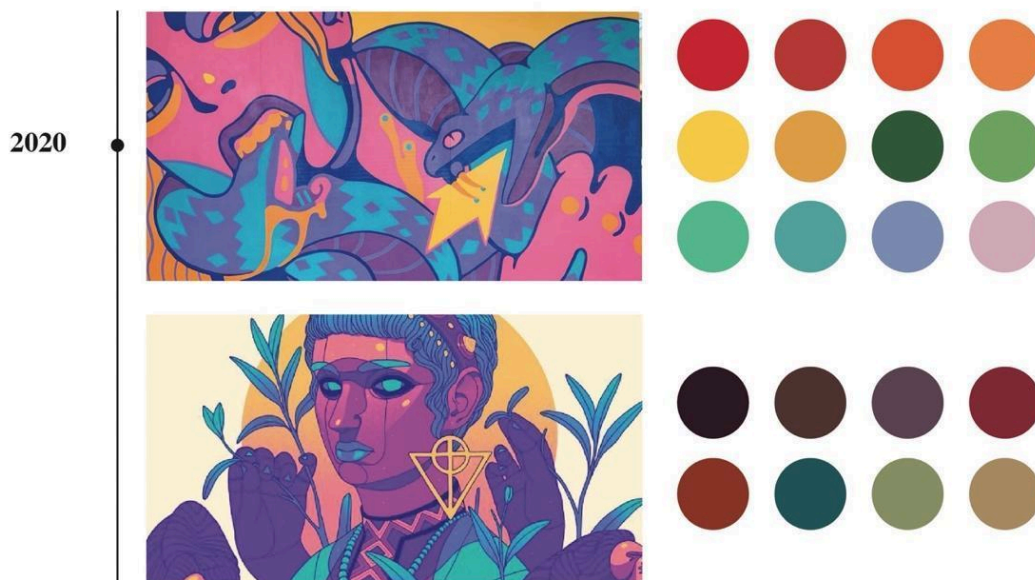

Fig 8 - Normal's artwork in 2020

Fig 9 - Normal's 2017 – 2018 artwork 3 depending on Sanzo Wada colour combination

From 2017 to 2020, the artist explored various colour shades and tints as part of his visual research process. However, in 2021, as depicted in figure 10, the artist began to focus more on his colour choices, aiming for greater consistency. In his artwork from 2021, the artist employed complementary colours to create a sense of dynamism. Specifically, he used shades of blue and orange, alternating between the two, as well as yellow and violet. The dominant colours of his 2021 artworks are Peach Red #FF3319, Violet Blue #202D85 and Deep Grayish Olive #505423.
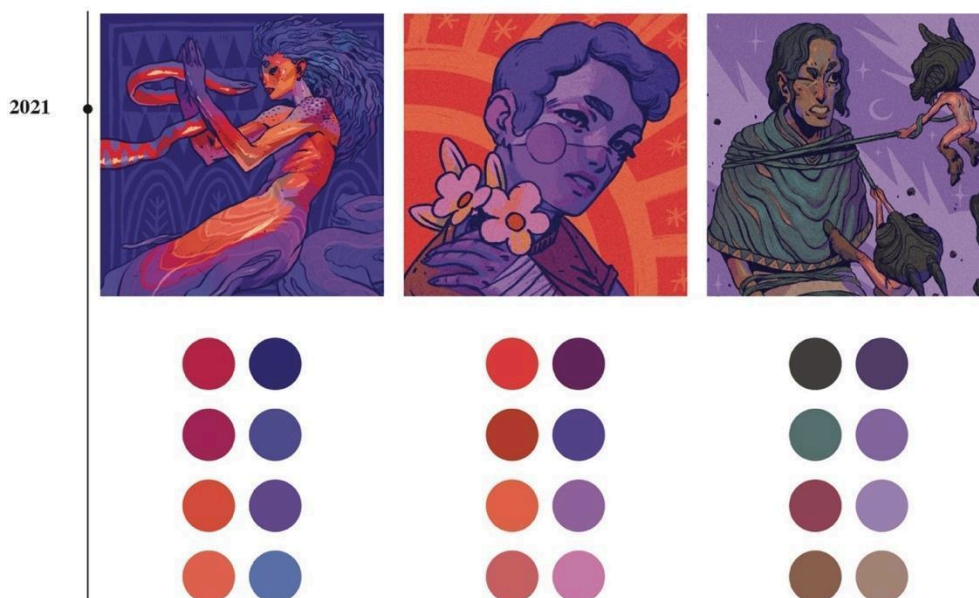

Fig 10 - Normal's artwork in 2021

As depicted in Figure 11, the artist's artwork can be categorized into eight Wada colour combinations: numbers 89, 115, 146, 274, 297, 309, 339, and 343. By matching with numerous colour combinations proposed by the Sanzo Wada framework, it becomes evident that the artist has successfully identified complementary shades that enhance the vibrancy and

overall appeal of his work. This exploration of colour coordination not only adds visual interest but also contributes to the artwork's overall aesthetic appeal.
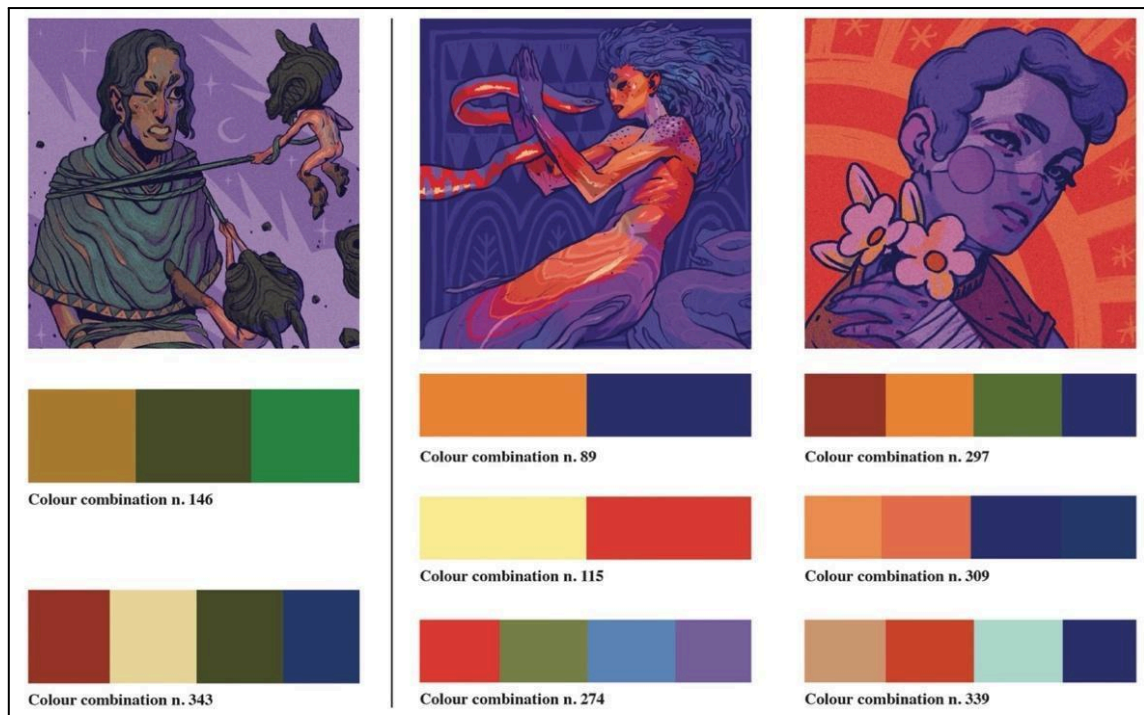

Fig 11- Normal's 2021 artwork depending on Sanzo Wada colour combination

From 2021 to 2023, the artist's use of colour has shown a consistent pattern. Over the years, the palette choice has gradually become more limited, with a maximum of 8 dominant colours used (excluding blended shades). These colours are balanced between cold and warm tones.

In the artwork of 2023, as depicted in figure 12, we observe a recurrence of previously used colours, such as Violet Blue #202D85, a slightly darker version of Cream Yellow, and Antwarp Blue #008AA1. Additionally, two new colours have been introduced: Brick Red #A32100 and a slightly darker version of Fresh Colour #CA4F55. On figure 13, we noticed that the 2023 palette matches 9 of Sanzo Wada colour combinations, number 37, 85, 89, 106, 114, 140, 172, 208 and 246.

Fig 12 - Normal's artwork in 2023

Fig 13 - Normal's 2023 artwork depending on Sanzo Wada colour combination

After carefully examining the colour timeline of Normal's work and his palette construction, we have deduced the final palette displayed in figure 14. Throughout the artist's body of work, we observed a technique of blending, resulting in various tones that are merely a gradient version of the primary colours used. Our analysis reveals that the artist utilized a combination of six colours, evenly distributed between cold and warm tones. Additionally, there are four secondary colours present, including light beige, light green, and two distinct shades of violet.
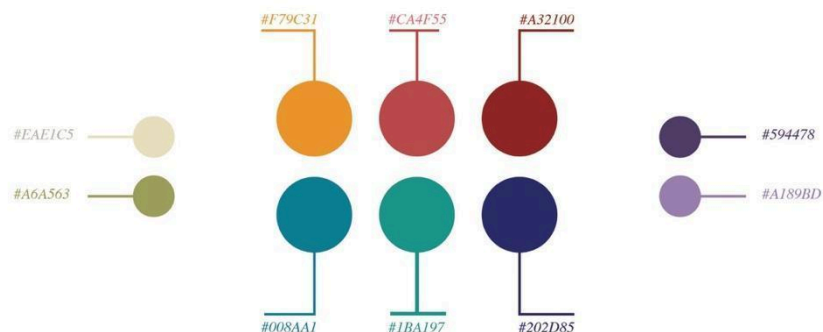
Fig 14 - Normal's palette – the colours are referenced according to Sanzo Wada's dictionary

In our analysis of Normal's deducted palette, we focused on the six major colours he utilizes and their saturation range. On figure 15, we conducted a study that revealed Normal's tendency to employ a combination of both darker and muted tones. The findings indicated that the artist's chroma consists of 30% light colours and 70% darker ones. Notably, Normal displays a preference for tones with an earthly, natural appearance. Rather than relying on vivid colours for dynamism, he achieves this effect primarily through his use of complementary colours.
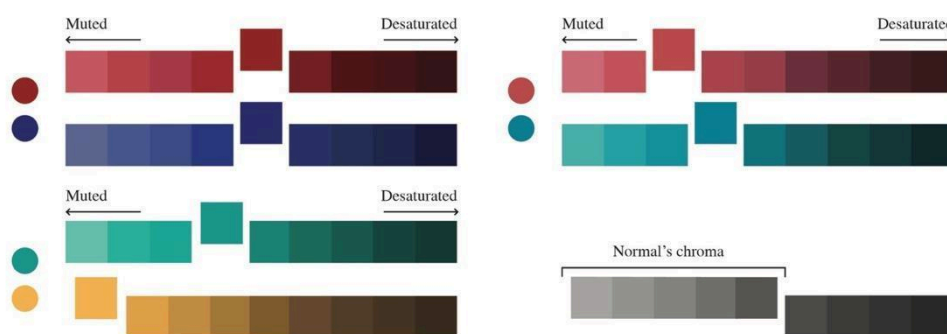

Fig 15 - Normal's palette - colour chroma

Normal's use of complementary colours is evident in his choice of an Orangish Yellow #F79C31 paired with both Violet Blue #202D85 and a slightly darker version of Antwarp Blue #1BA197. By selecting a colour that falls between yellow and light orange, he creates a foundation for two

complementary combinations. Additionally, the green #1BA197 serves as an anchor for the darker version of Fresh Colour #CA4F55 and Brick Red #A32100. Figure 16 further illustrates that Normal's artwork consistently achieves a well-balanced blend of warm and cold colours. However, in certain artworks, the artist deliberately emphasizes a specific colour, such as Violet Blue #202D85, Brick Red #A32100, or the orangish yellow #F79C31, resulting in either a complete warm or cold dominance.

Fig 16 - Normal's palette – complementary colour combination and colour dominance

We have noticed a striking resemblance between the shades used by Normal and the traditional Moroccan tiles. In a documentary by Business Insider (2023), we gained an insight about the process of making Moroccan Fezi tiles. In the last steps of making, they are taken to a wood-fired kiln for a first cook. Then they are glazed and put back into the kiln for a second firing, ensuring that the colour won't fade. "It also gives the Zelij tiles one of their most distinct features, heat doesn't circulate evenly in a traditional Moroccan kiln, which is why each tile, even those with the same colour glaze, will have a slightly different shade".

Figure 17 showcases the similarities between the colours achieved in Fezi tiles through the use of natural elements and various firing processes. These colours bear resemblance to Normal's palette, as he appears to favour subdued, earthy tones over vibrant ones.

Fig 17 - Palette similarities between Normal and Fezi tiles

4.   The cultural symbolism in Ayoub Normal's artwork

In his book "Kokra in Amazigh Mythology", Mohamed Ossouss (2008) talked about this union of polarities as a concept that is rooted in the Amazigh thinking. As he mentioned the myth about the origin of day and night, he explains how it reflects a cosmological vision deeply ingrained in the collective unconscious of the North African culture. This vision is characterized by dialectical dualities, such as day/night, which give rise to various layers of meaning. These layers encompass concepts such as good and happiness versus evil and inauspiciousness, right and left, black and white, green, and dry, light and darkness, the human world and the world of goblins, spirits, and the dead, as well as an underworld and upper world, domesticated nature and savage wild nature, and life and death. These dualities form the foundation of traditional Amazigh thinking, shaping their ritual themes and influencing their efforts to maintain balance or mitigate the dangers associated with these dualities through rituals and behaviours.

The artist has expressed before that he aims to visually express the concept of polarities, emphasizing his goal of merging opposites to achieve harmony through contrast. This artistic approach is reflected in his colour choices, which we have previously analysed and found to heavily rely on complementary combinations. Examining figure 18, we can observe that approximately 90% of the artist's work features a female figure or a neutral figure with feminine characteristics.

Fig 18 - Prominent female figure in Normal's work

The star symbol holds great significance in Moroccan culture and history. It has been used in various forms such as coins, tiles, flags, fashion, and architecture. Its presence throughout Moroccan history is undeniable. Figure 19 showcases the earliest documented banner featuring the star shape. Nabil Mouline (2023) explains that this banner, used during the battle of "Las Navas de Tolosa," emphasizes the core belief of the Almohades. Additionally, he highlights the significance of the eight-star shapes, which are nested within one another, and the presence of eight crescents at the bottom of the flag. This repetition of the number eight is a reference to Islamic texts that state the throne of God is held by eight angels. It is a symbolic representation of the Almohades' ambition to not only rule north Africa, but also to become the caliphs of the Islamic world.
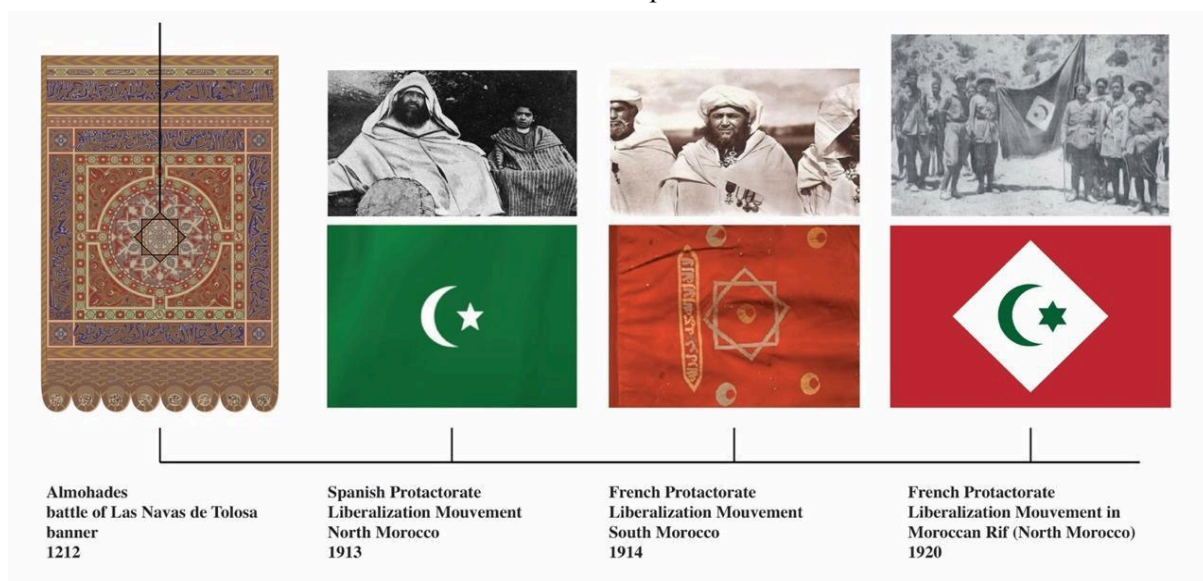

Almohades
battle of Las Navas de Tolosa
banner
1212

Spanish Protactorate
Liberalization Mouvement
North Morocco
1913

French Protactorate
Liberalization Mouvement
South Morocco
1914

French Protactorate
Liberalization Mouvement in
Moroccan Rif (North Morocco)
1920

Fig 19 - The history of Morocco's flags and their star shapes

The star shape has appeared multiple times on the Moroccan flag. In 1913, it resurfaced during a liberalization movement in north Morocco led by Ahmed Rissouni against the Spanish protectorate. It reappeared in 1914 with another liberalization movement led by Mohamed Ben Abdelkarim El Khettabi in south Morocco against the French protectorate. Once again, in 1920, it was used in a movement led by Moha Ouhamou Zayani, in north Morocco, against the same regime. The official flag for Morocco, which included a green five-pointed star and a red background, was assigned during the French Protectorate in 1915. Figure 20 showcases the variations of today's Moroccan flag in different banners.

Fig 20 - The variations of the Moroccan star in military forces banners

The eight-pointed star, much like the six-pointed Najmat Dawud, has been found in different forms throughout various civilizations and cultures (figure 21). It has been used as an architectural element in medieval Hindustan, specifically in Indo-Islamic architecture, by both the rulers of the Delhi Sultanate and the later Gurkanis. This star has a rich history and has been interpreted in different ways across the world. The Islamic Najmat-al-Quds and its predecessor, the Rub-el-Hizb, are distinct variations of the eight-pointed star. Both designs feature a set of overlapping squares at their core, which adds to their unique aesthetic. The Islamic Najmat-al-Quds, in particular, holds cultural and religious significance within the Islamic tradition. These intricate star designs showcase the rich artistic heritage of Islamic art and architecture (Mukherjee, 2018).
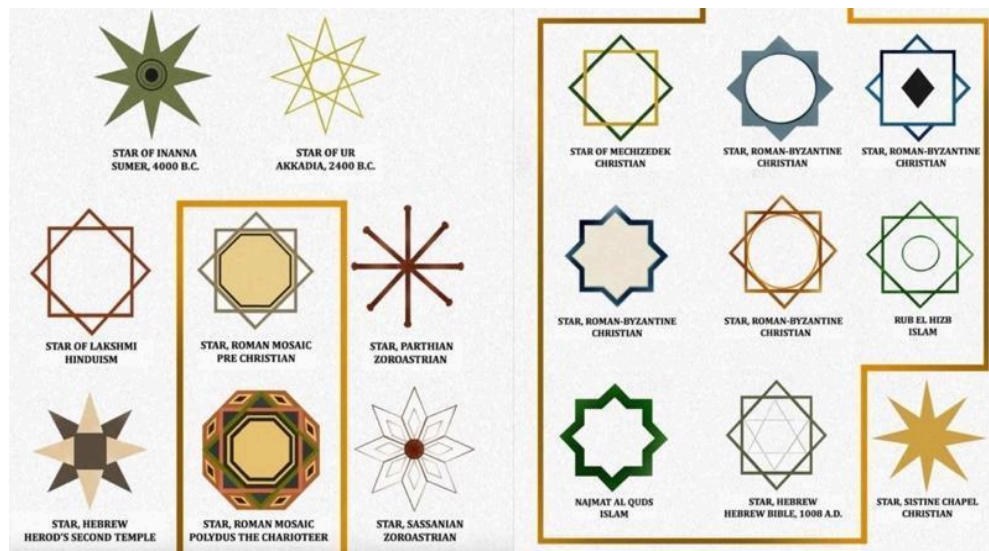
Fig 21 - The development of Najmat-Al-Quds

The earliest dynasties that ruled Morocco originated from the Middle East and brought with them Islam, along with language, knowledge, and ideologies. The five-pointed star symbolizes the five pillars of Islam, which include monotheism, prayer, zakat, fasting, and Hajj. This star confirms the importance of these pillars and their connection to the monotheism of God Almighty. On an anthropological and mythological level, Moroccans associate the five-pointed star with moving shepherds, particularly in the desert, as it serves as their guiding light towards the north during the night. On the other hand, the eight-pointed star in Islam represents three sacred elements. Firstly, it signifies its sanctification due to the presence of an eight-pointed star drawing. Additionally, it alludes to the gates of Paradise mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. (According to the authentic Prophetic hadith): Referral to the eight angels who carry the throne of God Almighty. (Surat Al-Haqqa, verse 17: "and the angels [will appear] at its ends, and, above them, eight will bear aloft on that Day the throne of thy Sustainer's almightiness"). On figure 22, 23 and 24, we can see the representation of the different stars in the Moroccan artisanal objects, coins, and architecture.
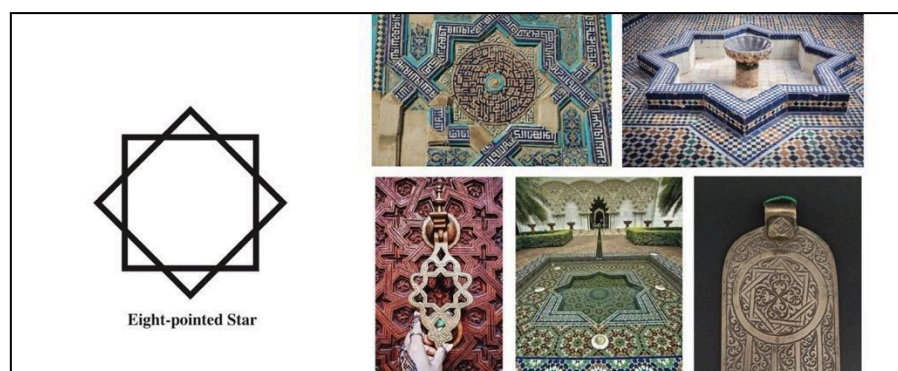

Fig 22 - Eight-pointed star in Moroccan architecture

Fig 23 - Six-pointed star in Moroccan architecture and pottery

Fig 24 - Five-pointed star in Moroccan coins

Moroccan architects have developed a meticulous outline system to achieve architectural precision in placing the eight-pointed star (figure 25). This system has been further expanded to include more complex forms, such as the 16- or 24-pointed star, as well as simplified versions. Not only does the outline system allow for the creation of diverse star shapes, but it also enables the repetition of smaller forms in patterns, resulting in unique compositions.
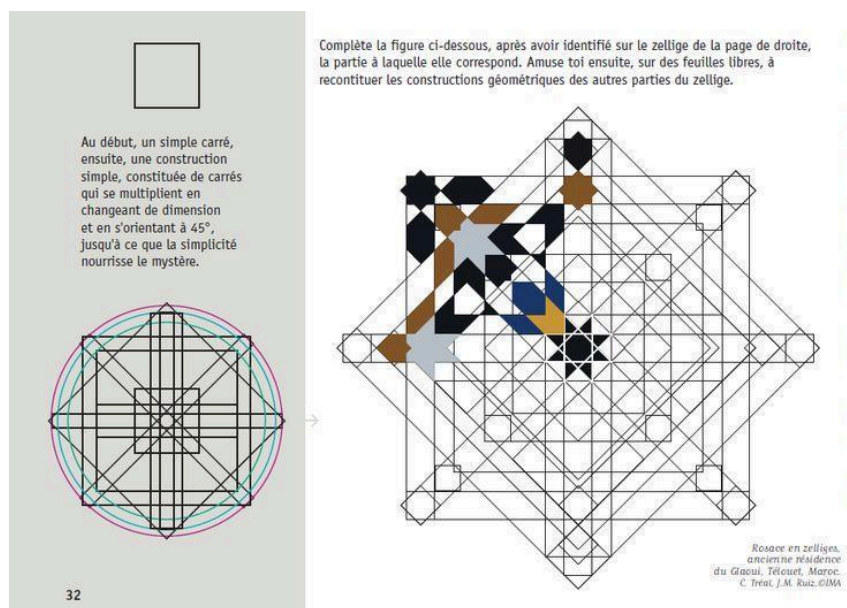
Fig 25 - Zelij star structure system (taken from:
https://www.marrakechguidedtours.com/blog/zellij-the-art-of-mosaic)

Figure 26 displays seven variations of a star shape derived from a single one. These variations are utilized in various compositions, resulting in a wide array of patterns. Consequently, the star shape in Morocco holds significance as a spiritual, religious, and intellectual symbol. Over time, it has transitioned from being depicted in books, seals, flags, and accessories to being incorporated into architecture, coins, pottery, and tapestry as a decorative motif.

Fig 26 - Different variations of the star shape in the Moroccan Zelij (tiles)

For a Moroccan artist, it is customary to incorporate the symbol into their artwork in its many different forms, allowing it to subconsciously emerge. This is a natural choice due to the symbol's deep cultural significance and its ability to convey meanings and emotions unique to Moroccan art. Through the use of this symbol, the artist pays homage to their Moroccan heritage and contributes to the ongoing tradition of Moroccan art. In figure 27, the star shape is prominently featured in various visual compositions of Normal's work such as: short animations, illustrations, installations, and mural art.
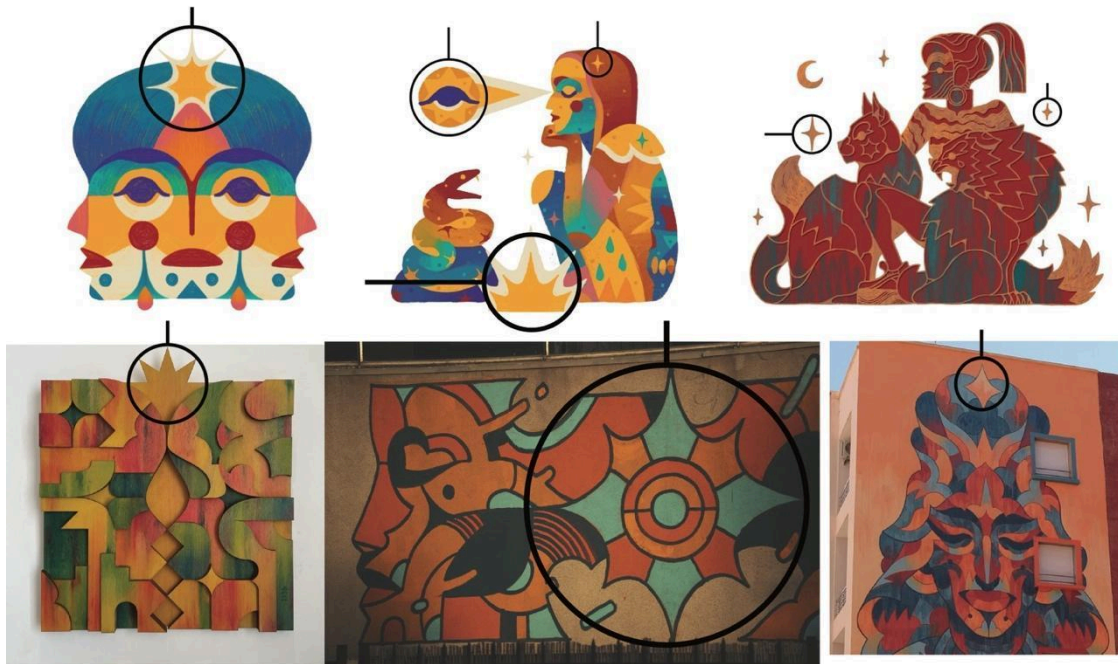

Fig 27 - Normal's use of the star shape in his artwork

The representation of the "star" holds great significance in Normal's work. According to Fatim Ez-zahra Ben Khallouq (2022), titrrit -which is the female star in Amazigh language- is considered essential among Amazigh women for establishing a connection with the divine "ait uffəlla: those above or those in the heavens". The star serves as a messenger and a confidante, symbolizing the divine presence: "a titritt d yulin lɛar yigam ata yast i rəbbi ad id yigit", "Oh rising star, please pray to God to grant my wishes."

The star in Normal's work sometimes allures also to the sun, especially when combined with the crescent moon. This visual combination between these two polarities is also embedded in the Amazigh mythology. These North African tribes would worship the sun and moon and present sacrifices to them. In a cosmogonic Amazigh myth, we find the process of their creation "In the beginning, there was neither the sun nor the moon, and they were created in the following way: One day a young bull (Azker) and a young sheep (Isimer) met and became friends. Together they were both afflicted with the disease (a tumour that appears on the outside of the animal's eyelid), and the first mother of the world noticed this (…) and extracted the tumour from their eyes by cutting the edge of their affected eyelids in the shape of a crescent, then throwing the edge of the bull's eyelid, into a bowl full of water, and threw the edge of the sheep's injured eyelid into the fire (…) the bull's eye

became the sky (…) As for the tip of his sick eyelid, which was cut in the shape of a crescent, it became the moon (…).As soon as the sheep got rid of his bonds, he rushed towards the fire into which he threw the swollen part of his eyelid (…) after a moment the sun came out of the fire and began to gradually rise in the sky, and from then on it began to illuminate the earth and the sky. "

Normal's palette, which includes Violet Blue for the moon and night sky, Brick Red and Orangish Yellow for the sun and star, align perfectly with the myth's visual universe. The use of the eye as a symbol, along with the shape of the star sometimes interpreted as the sun, further reinforces the artist's cultural influences and origins. In addition to his use of traditional symbols, the artist incorporates facial Amazigh tattoos in his female figures, as seen in figure 28.

Fig 28 - Normal's inspiration from Amazigh face tattoos

It is evident that the artist's framework for cultural representation relies on four key elements. Firstly, tattoos inspired by the Amazigh culture are prominently featured. Secondly, the inclusion of star and moon motifs. Additionally, Moroccan tiles inspire patterns and repetition within the artwork. Finally, the artist's use of colour, previously determined to be inspired by Moroccan artisanal work, completes the overall composition.

5.   Results and Discussion

Understanding the origins and meanings of these symbols, through a qualitative methodology, was crucial in grasping why the artist considers these visual choices as key elements in conveying Moroccan culture. This is due to the existence of a social memory which is a quantum expansion and a historical illustration, becomes the writing of memories dispersed in time. However, it is manifested

through drawings, illustrations, and narrations, which represent the meaning of a social reality always on the run towards other popular or traditional imaginations.

Ayoub Normal's work, heavily influenced by the Amazigh culture, has garnered significant attention due to his distinct colour palette. His use of earthly tones, along with a harmonious blend of warm and cold colours, resonates deeply with local viewers, establishing a strong connection to his art. Noteworthy is the intricate symbolism present in his illustrations, reflecting mysticism and capturing the spiritual essence of Moroccan culture. Upon iconographic examination of the artist's illustrations, it is clear that the female figure plays a crucial role in Amazigh myths. This recurrent depiction often accompanied by star shapes and lunar motifs, evokes ancient Amazigh rituals pre-dating the influence of Islam in the region. Additionally, the star symbol, introduced through numerous conquests in the kingdom's history, has evolved to hold significant cultural, spiritual, and political relevance in Morocco. His work is recognized by this familiar sense of mysticism in his visual universe, which made his artworks not only appealing but also relatable to the spiritual vision of the Moroccan viewer.

Rastko Močnik (2004) argues that identity serves as a means of fostering social cohesion within cultures, which in this case, conveyed through visual forms. This cohesion needs to be consistently maintained through different visual components that ensure the artwork's authenticity. Nevertheless, the approaches to achieving this objective can vary significantly among artists. As distinct individuals inhabiting a common cultural milieu (community, space), our interpretations of this collective experience may differ; however, these variations do not entirely negate one another. The artist's aim is to convey their personal experiences through the framework of shared culture while ensuring fidelity to that experience.

Kim Diaz (2006), in the article "Art, Identity, and Everyday Experience," asserts that an artist's creations serve as a mirror, reflecting and reshaping the components of their daily life. This allows the artist to perceive aspects of their own identity within their work, fostering a sense of connection. Ayoub Normal's cultural identity is inherently expressed through the instinctive selection of colors and forms, which have shaped his understanding of self over time. The effectiveness of this translation into visual representation is validated when a community with a shared cultural heritage recognizes and resonates with these artistic elements.

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