

LEILA ALAOUI
THE MOROCCANS

musée
YVES SAINT LAURENT
marrakech



Exhibition catalogue of *The Moroccans*
(30 September 2018 – 5 February 2019)
at the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech.

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Photo Lab : PICTO

The Fondation Jardin Majorelle would like to thank Les Amis de la Fondation Jardin Majorelle for their generous support.

The Fondation Leila Alaoui would like to thank Yasmina Alaoui, Yousra Jarni and the Galleria Continua for their help in preparing the exhibition.

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The work of Leila Alaoui is represented by the Galleria Continua:
www.galleriacontinua.com

www.editions-hermann.fr

ISBN : 978 2 7056 9790 7

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LEILA ALAOUI THE MOROCCANS

with texts by

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Serge Lutens

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Björn Dahlström


hermann
Depuis 1876



‘Like others before and after her, Leila Alaoui was someone committed to helping others, and who travelled the world to bear witness to their suffering; it was when doing so that she accomplished her most beautiful work.

She held deep convictions. The manner in which she left us justifies my lifelong struggle to defend tolerance. When I think of Leila Alaoui, I remember the words of André Gide: *My old age will have begun when I am no longer offended.*

— Excerpt from a speech given by Pierre Bergé in Marrakech on 14 April, 2017, when Leila Alaoui was posthumously awarded the title of Commandeur de l’ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Republic.

Serge Lutens

AN AUTOPSY OF ABSENCE

IN JUST A FEW LINES, I am supposed to describe the photographic series hanging on the walls of the musée YVES SAINT LAURENT marrakech, or otherwise reflect on the distance that the artist, a Moroccan, had to establish between herself and those she photographed in order to title the series, *Les Marocains*. There is very little in these images that reminds me of Leila (The Night).

Nevertheless, the garments we see – whether cotton, wool, silk, or even rayon or nylon, which could trick or mislead us about how Moroccans ought to dress (as if they would be any less Moroccan otherwise) – without a doubt made an impression on the three-year-old child when she left France and arrived in Morocco; just as they had left an indelible imprint on the darkened background of my memory.

The words ‘love’ and ‘happiness’ continually come to mind; their recurrence prevents me from using them as an excuse to bring thoughts to the surface which have been rejected by memory. I’ll therefore evoke Leila without indignation or emotion. This is an autopsy. Let’s begin with the entrails.

I feel that a sense of urgency animated Leila’s existence. The panic that ensued was channelled by a disorder that governed her. This perfect chaos – a mirror image of my own – interrupts our examination, and then moves us onward.

In order to convince his students that, through the power of suggestion and against all logic, one could obtain a contradictory result, Professor Charcot asked a patient to place her hands on two stones. The left one had been heated beforehand, and should have flushed or swollen the surface of the hand touching it. Defying all logic, it was the right hand that received the stigmata.

Having a Moroccan father and French mother implies one’s culture is split; I’m mentioning this to point out that for every place or situation, its reverse exists: Leila was proof of it.

This text is rambling. I fall to pieces.

And so what? The Night has died. I will be silent.

Guillaume de Sardes

LEILA ALAOUI:
AN EPIPHANY OF FACES

WHEN SHE PRESENTED HER SERIES *Les Marocains* in 2015 at the Biennial of Photography in the Contemporary Arab World, Leila Alaoui used the words 'lens' and 'gaze' as if they were nearly synonymous. In this way, she let us know she wanted to integrate her eye with her camera's lens, and in so doing, allow *objective*¹ images to appear. We should keep in mind that the words 'documentary' and 'archive' are even more apt if one is referring to the recording of the world's beauty and diversity.

One doesn't need to review the typology – in other words, the classification or study of those photographed – to understand her work. We could always ask ourselves if the comparison she makes with the legendary series by Robert Frank, *The Americans*, really extends beyond similar titles. Leila Alaoui did not photograph scenes from Moroccan life, but rather portraits, in the strictest and most classical use of the term. Her work can be compared to that of Richard Avedon, one of the greatest portraitists of the 20th century, who said, '*A photographic portrait is a picture of someone who knows he's being photographed, and what he does with this knowledge is as much a part of the photograph as what he's wearing or how he looks. He's implicated in what's happened, and he has a certain real power over the result.*' This is clearly in line with Leila Alaoui's vision: there is nothing in her images that appears stolen. The mobile studio she travelled with on her Moroccan road trip signals, without a doubt, what she was expecting from those chosen to be photographed: that they *assume a pose*, to use a phrase that is a bit outdated, but has the ability to place the young photographer's work in the context of a long history of secular images.

Indeed, how can one not notice the important pictorial dimension of Leila Alaoui's images? The greatest portrait painters of the past – such as Tintoretto, Van Dyke, Ingres – often would rely on devices that she in turn used: a neutral background (in this case, black), and a direct, frontal pose. As in classical portraiture, the role played by garments, whether sumptuous and full of colour, or everyday and mundane, almost makes us forget the presence of the body. The men and women who stand before Leila

1. Translator's note: the French word 'objectif' can mean both 'lens' (of a camera) and 'objective'.

Alaoui's camera are clearly not there to seduce. And yet, the disappearance of the body under clothing allows a real epiphany of the models' faces. One can bet that those who see this exhibition will remember above all the faces, the gaze of the models. In only one photo, that of a bride who is about to be taken to her in-laws, is the entire face hidden by a veil. Other women only let us see their eyes, which by their very isolation acquire an extraordinary intensity. The way the children and adolescents look at us is also unforgettable: they seem determined to obey the photographer, widening their large, dark and intensely velvet eyes.

The older models, marked by age with deeply furrowed cheeks or brows, exude a powerful sense of humanity, in keeping with representations of everyday life by masters of classical painting. The craggy face of the old man carrying a chicken could easily have been that of a Neapolitan or Spaniard from the 17th century. The woman and the young man, appearing perfectly centred before the camera, without leaning to either side, recall those that appear so beautifully in the work of Piero della Francesca, as in his *Madonna del Parto*, or figures from another of his evangelical scenes. They share a serious demeanour, are nearly filled with gravitas, and are aware of the earnestness of the moment.

The back and forth between photography and painting is of interest because it removes these images by Leila Alaoui from a geographic specificity, something the artist is quick to warn us about. She clearly states that she conceived her series as a manifesto against Orientalism, as the word is defined in the critical human sciences since the work of Edward Said. Her models' expressions, at once humble and powerful, are neither 'Moroccan' nor 'African'; they are simply human. Their attire is approached in the same manner. It is clear Leila Alaoui wanted to avoid producing *pictur- esque*, postcard images. The picturesque is anathema to real photography. In giving prominence to what she calls, '*the aesthetic Moroccan universe*,' she reveals its intrinsic beauty, one that is *absolute* in the sense that it is *liberated* from socio-historic conditioning. It makes absolute sense to display *Les Marocains* in a museum devoted to the work of Yves Saint Laurent: certain pieces of jewellery photographed by Leila Alaoui have the same shimmer and unique qualities as pieces imagined and realised by the great couturier.

What we take away from Leila Alaoui's artistic project is that it is also, and perhaps primarily, an ethical project. She herself has used the beautiful words '*dignity*' and '*pride*' to describe it. The latter, in particular, describes an emotion communicated by several of the models she photographed. They appear to be focusing their attention, since bringing forth beauty is a serious matter, but they also display the hint of a smile; not the artificial smile of one desiring to show that he or she is at ease or materially well-off, but rather the satisfied smile of someone who understands that, by the grace of the image, a form of eternity will be conferred on his or her work and presence. While never overtly emphasising it in her oeuvre, we are struck by the majesty exuded by Leila Alaoui's portraits, a majesty that has everything to do with intensity and silence. There is no better way to say that the young artist thoroughly fulfilled her desire to bear witness to both a '*grand elegance*' and '*fierce independence*.'

Björn Dahlström

A MOROCCAN LOOKING GLASS

A STRIPED, MULTICOLOURED CAPE, sequined headbands, an esparto grass hat with jumbled pompoms, wool djellabahs, gnaoua headdresses trimmed with cowrie shells, choukara saddlebags of embroidered leather: Leila Alaoui's portraits are testaments to the variety and exuberance of traditional, rural Moroccan attire. This diversity is also found in the complexion and facial features of those who wear them. From the matte hues of southern Morocco to the fair complexions of women from the High Atlas and Rif Mountains, all are manifested in *Les Marocains*. Whether Mediterranean, Atlantic or African, this ethnic mix – Berber, Judeo-Berber, Arab, Central African and European – defines today's Morocco as a unique intersection of geographies and histories.

What Leila Alaoui set out to do was to produce a '*visual archive of traditions and aesthetic Moroccan universes that are disappearing in an era of globalisation.*' One senses in her work the urgent need to inventory these last representatives of an endangered culture, both material and intangible. The rural exodus that began in the 1960s profoundly upset traditional frameworks. Little by little, those from the countryside – or 'Aroubis' as the city dwellers would mockingly call them – traded in their woollen gandouras for ones made of synthetic fabrics and imported from halfway across the world; Darija, the Moroccan lingua franca supplanted the Berber language; storytellers, healers and public scribes were replaced by television, pharmacies and smartphones. These thirty portraits of Moroccans, shown together, reflect the gradual social upheaval that so gripped the country and the photographer herself.

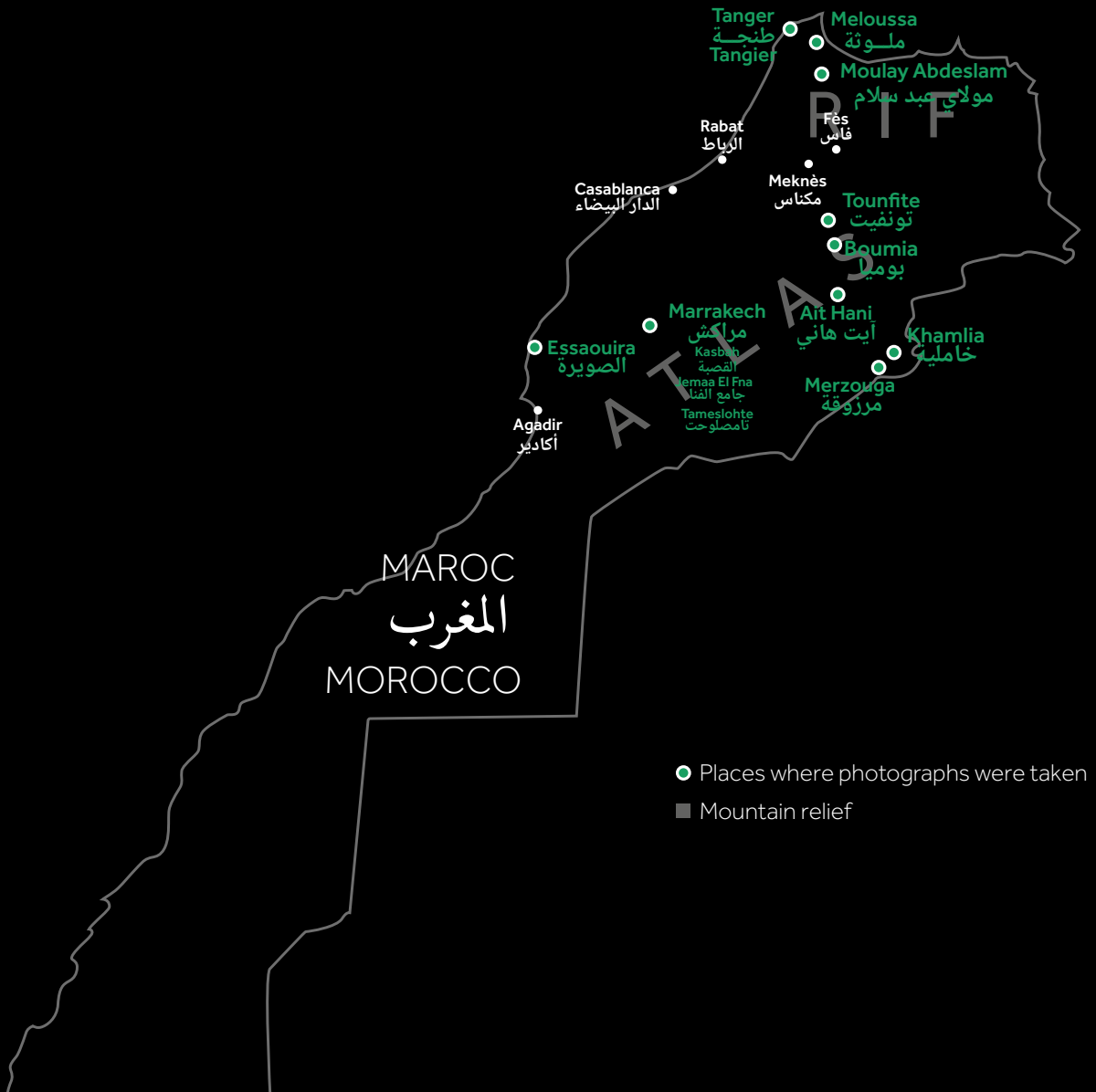
The frontal, full-length pose, as well as the occasional monumental format, bestow a certain formal and noble character to those who agreed to be photographed by her. Some of their professions are signalled by accessories we see (musical instruments, fortune-telling cards, snakes used by charmers, etc.), in keeping with the tradition of classical portraiture. And yet the method reveals a certain ethnographic approach. The photographer selected her subjects in the street from their small, covered stalls; they were quickly immortalised by her lens in a cramped mobile studio she had erected among them. This is the paradox underlying this photographic series, one that is in-between a document and creative work. It is an approach perfectly mastered by Leila Alaoui, who fought against '*a rustic,*

bucolic photography that perpetuates a condescending, Orientalist viewpoint' in favour of one that 'shows its subjects fiercely independent and profoundly dignified.'

That is precisely what she does here. The objectivity of these photographs attests to a vision devoid of folklore and artifice. The old Jebala women from northern Morocco are perhaps the last to still wrap themselves in red and white striped foutas, woven cotton and wool rectangles, and to wear straw hats adorned with midnight-blue strips and pom-poms. We stumble upon them in the marketplace in Tangier, selling their homemade cottage cheese called jben, or busily tending their fields in the valleys of the Rif region. At the wedding moussem-festivals, brides from Imilchil in the High Atlas still wear their handiras or striped woolen capes, and around their necks, heavy amber or loubane necklaces as fertility charms. In Khamlia, in southeast Morocco at the gateway to the Sahara, the tradition of ghostly-appearing married women, their faces covered with blood-red vegetable silk veils, also continues to this day. Nor should we forget the great square of Marrakech, the Jemaa El-Fna, with its musicians, acrobats, palm readers and water carriers.

By the signs proudly worn or displayed by the subjects of these images, which immediately confer their social or tribal identity, the artist therefore presents us with a map of Morocco. It is this diversity that defines Morocco; a multitude of rites and customs that the photographer must have discovered while travelling throughout the country as a child, and which she wanted to record and exalt in this series before they would change or disappear, in the same way that Moroccans are inclined to rediscover their rural origins today, now that the necessary phase of acculturation imposed by a rural exodus is a thing of the past. This explains the intense emotion these images evoked when Leila Alaoui left us; they were seen throughout the country and on social media as a precious testament shared by the artist with each of her fellow Moroccans.

LOCALISATION



THE MOROCCANS

المغاربة

Essaouira

الصورة

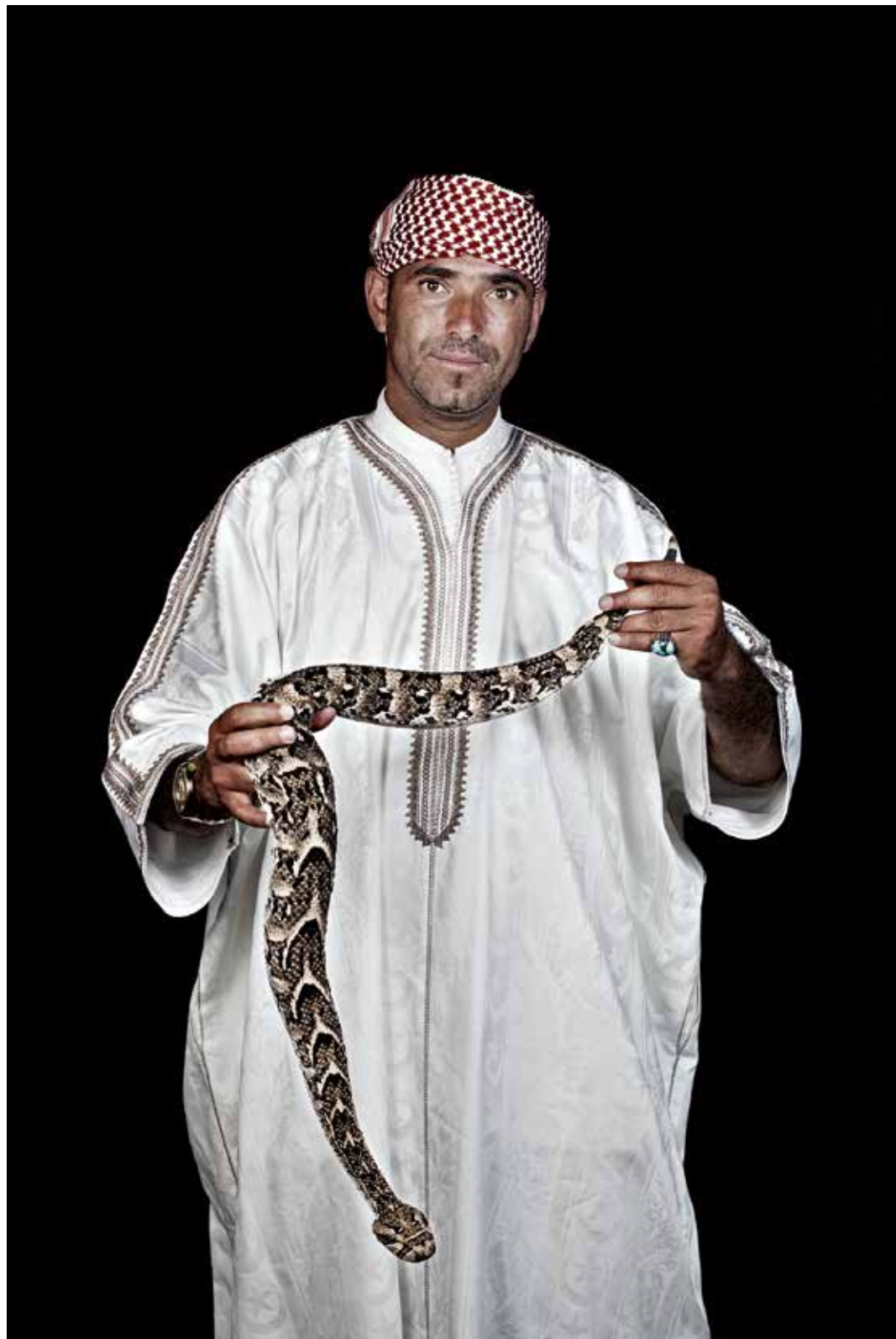






Marrakech

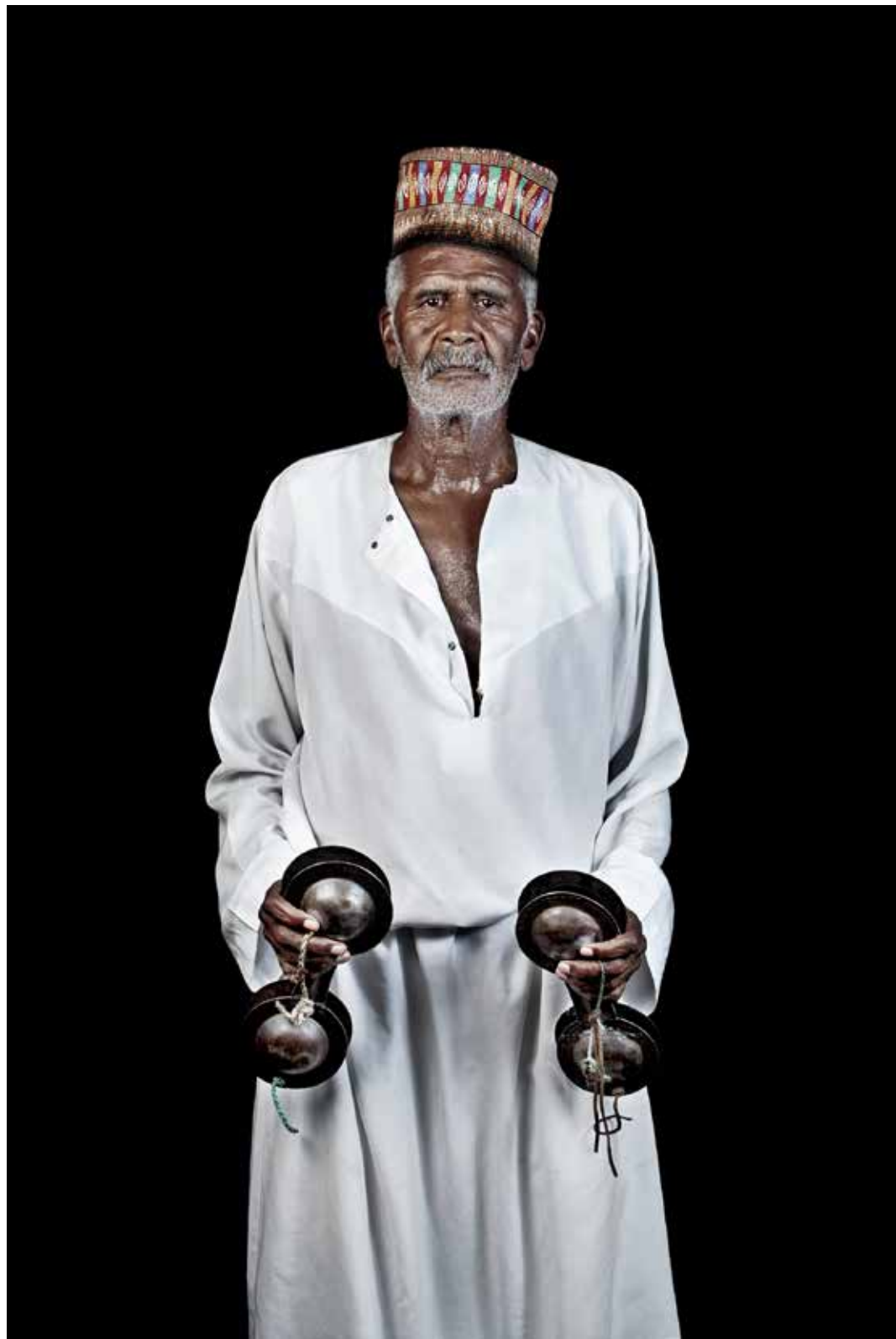
مراكش



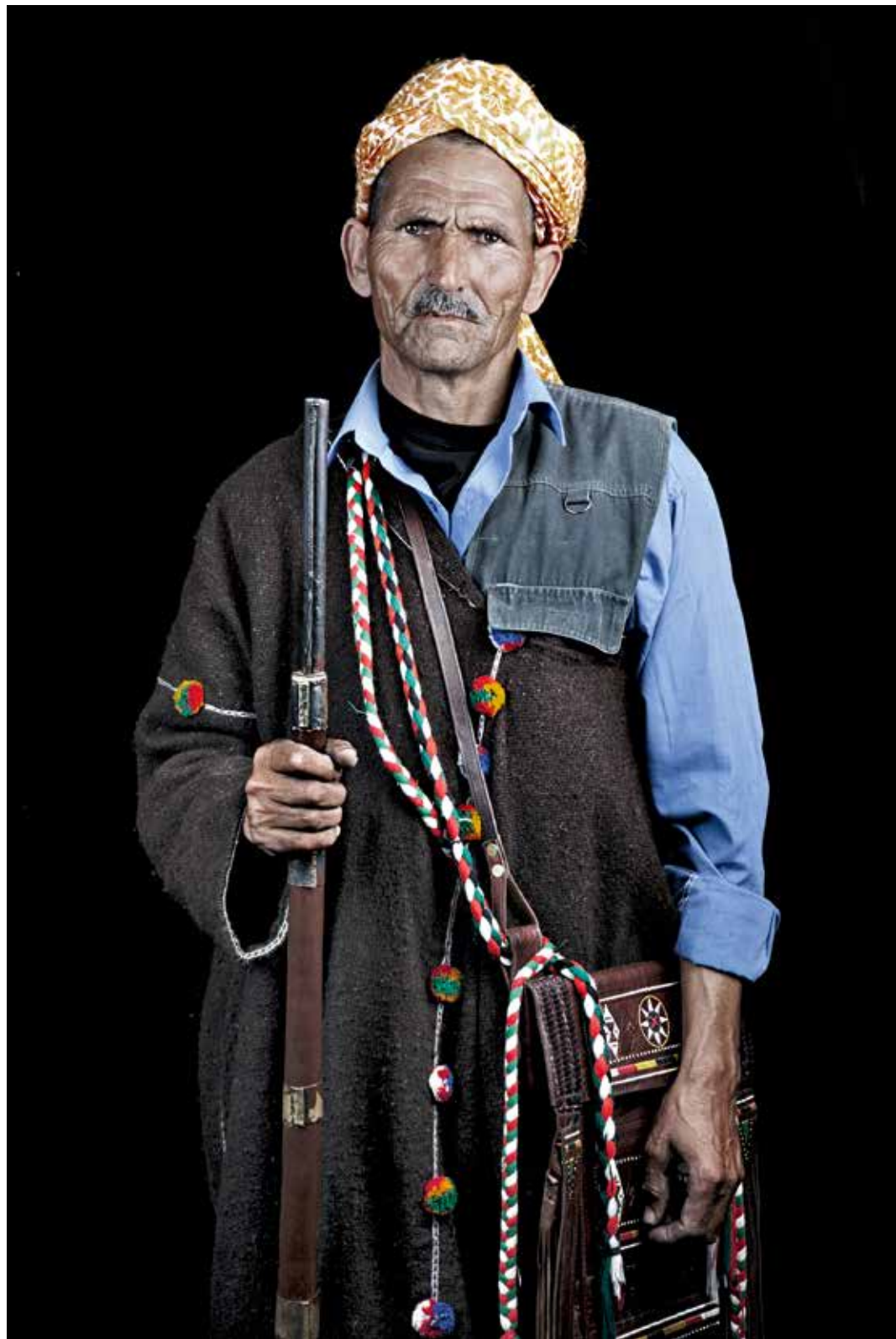




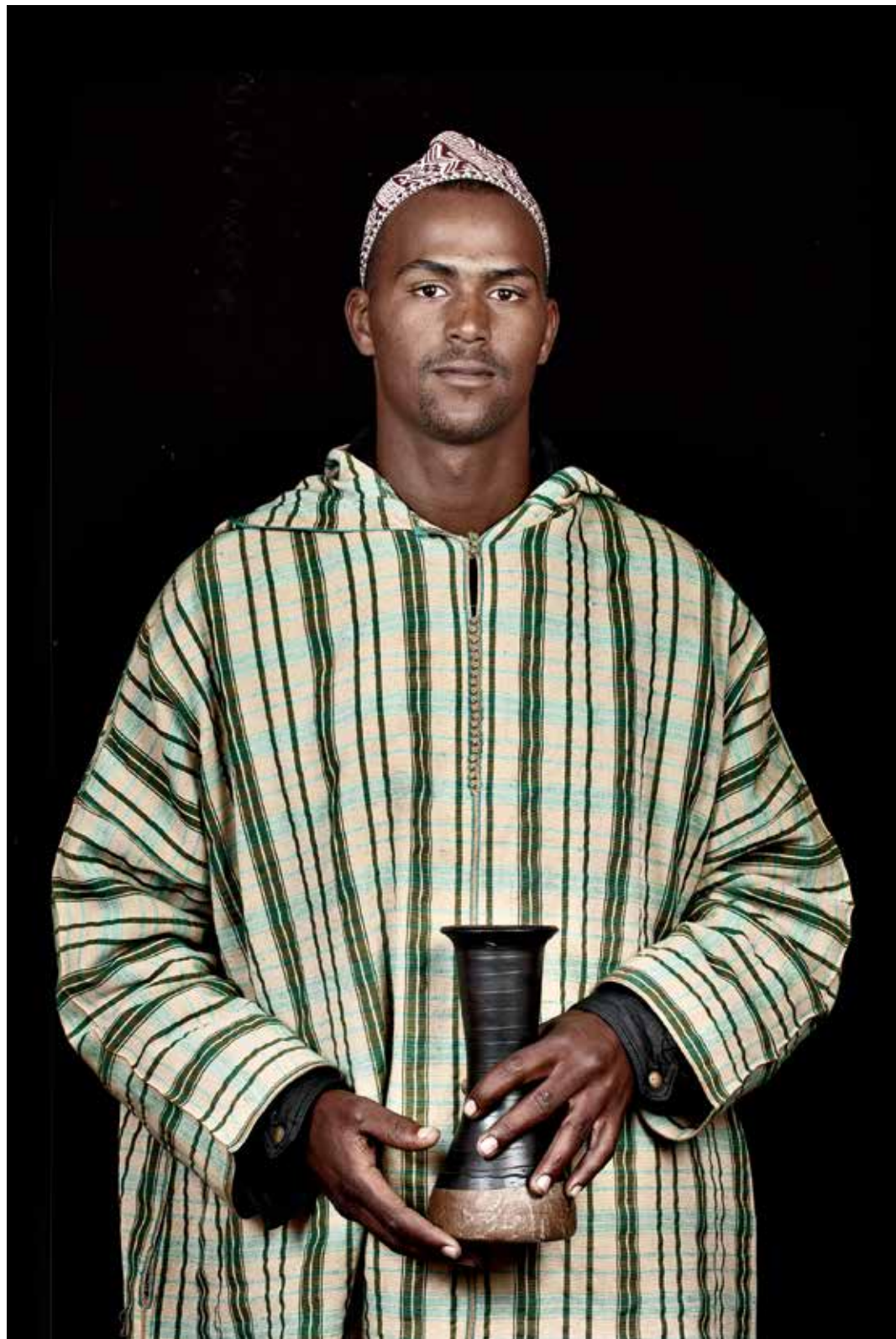






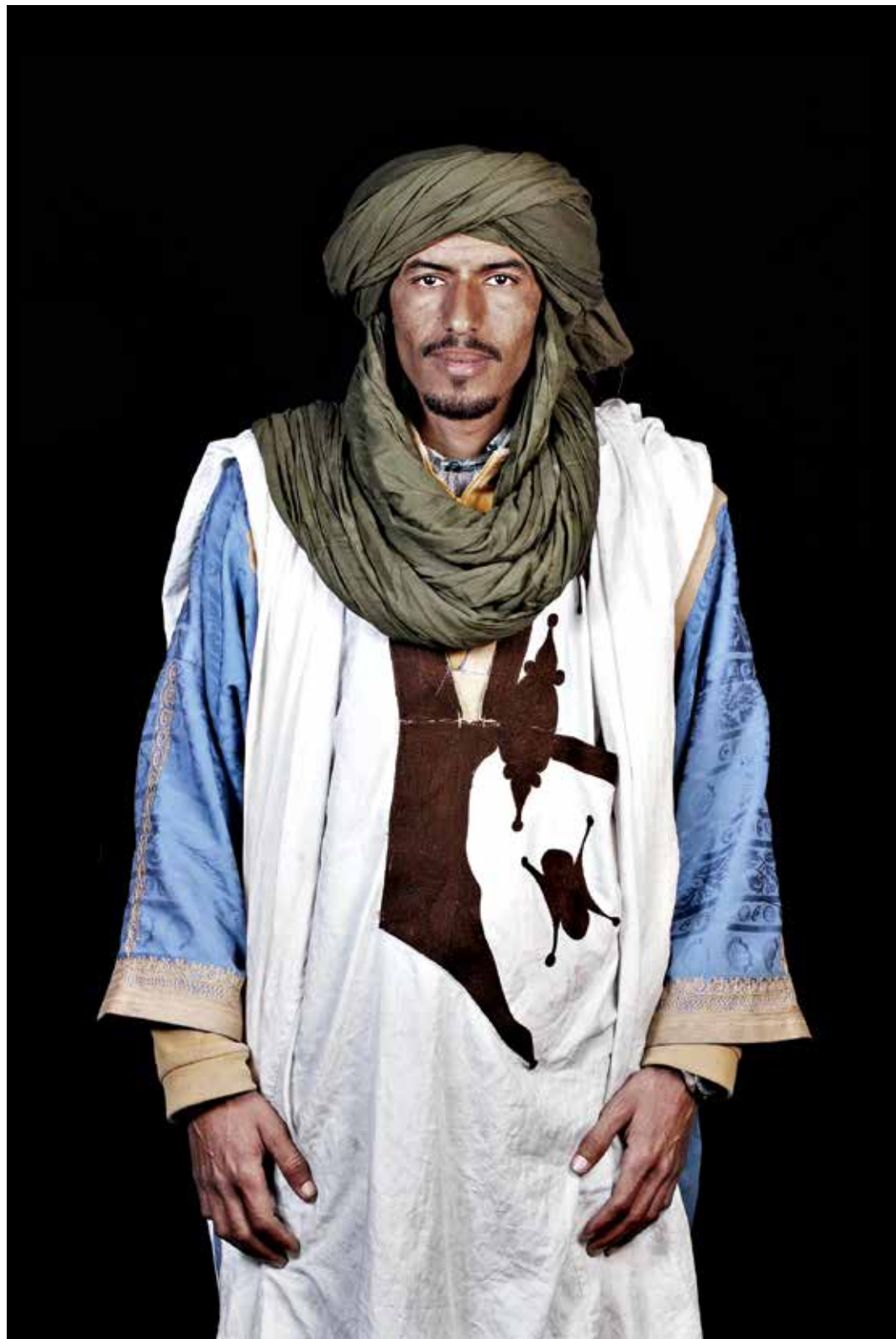






Merzouga

مرزوقة



Khamlia

خاملية







Ait Hani

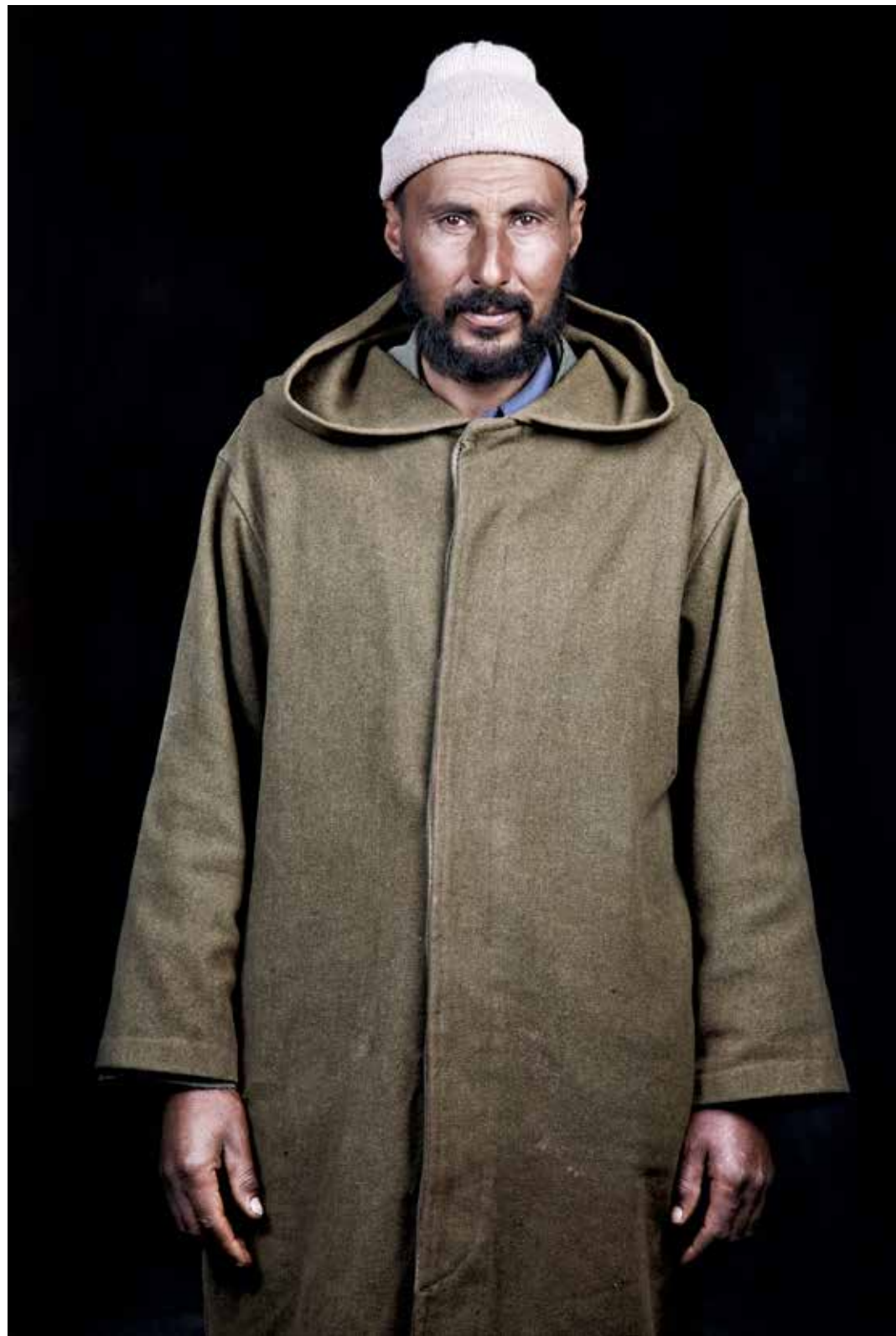
آیت هانی



Boumia

بوميا

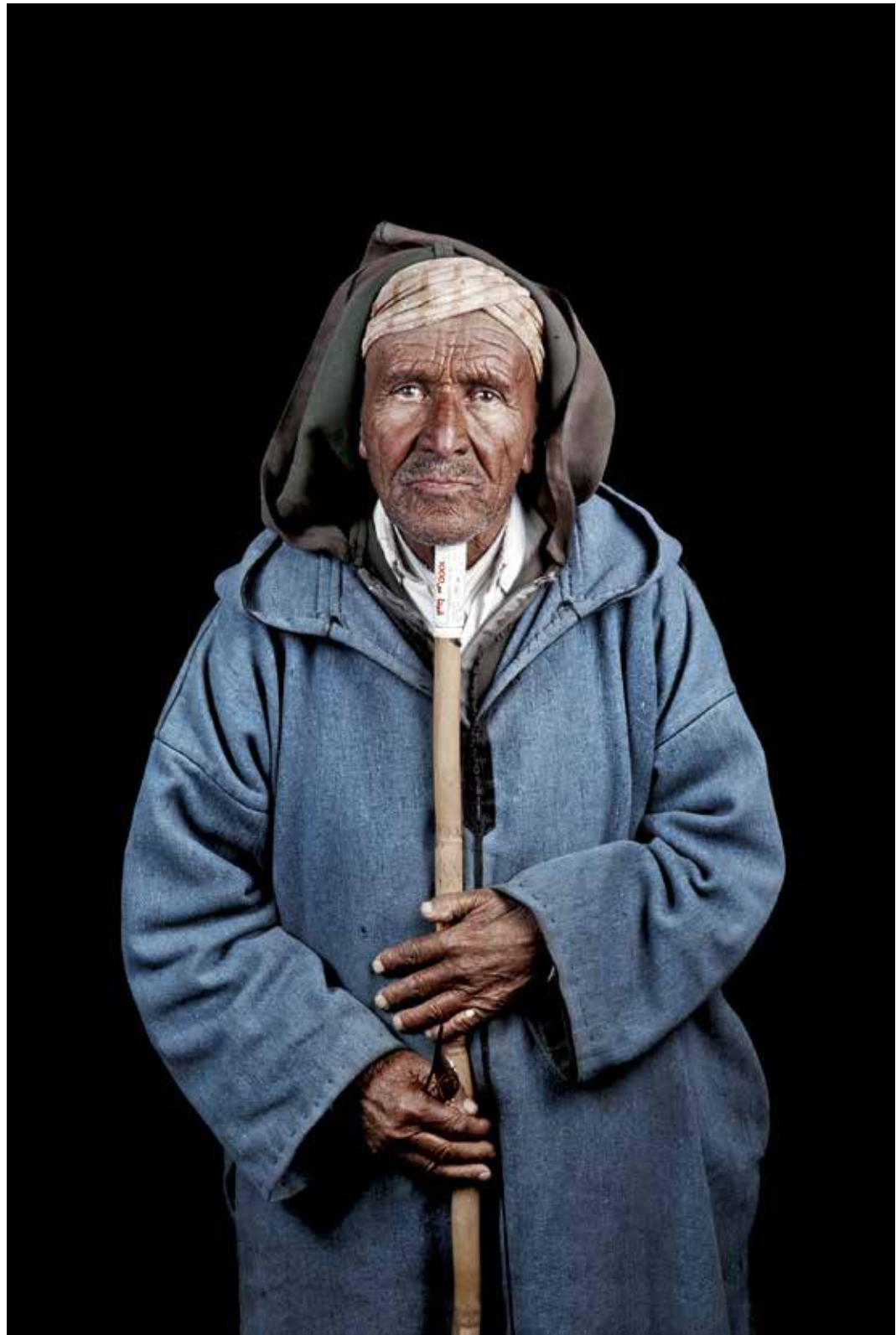




Tounfite

تونفيت

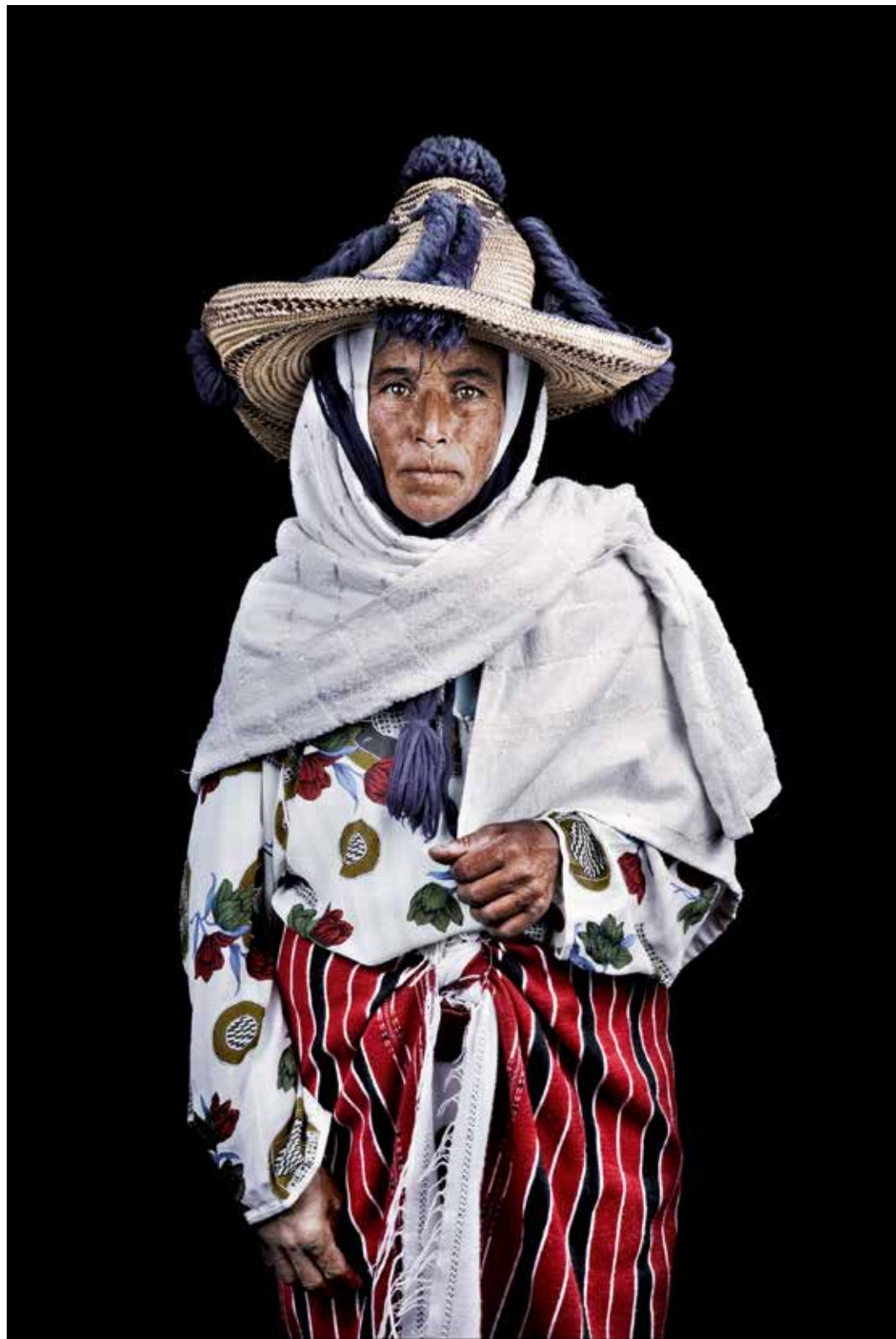






Rif Mountains

جبال الريف





Moulay Abdeslam

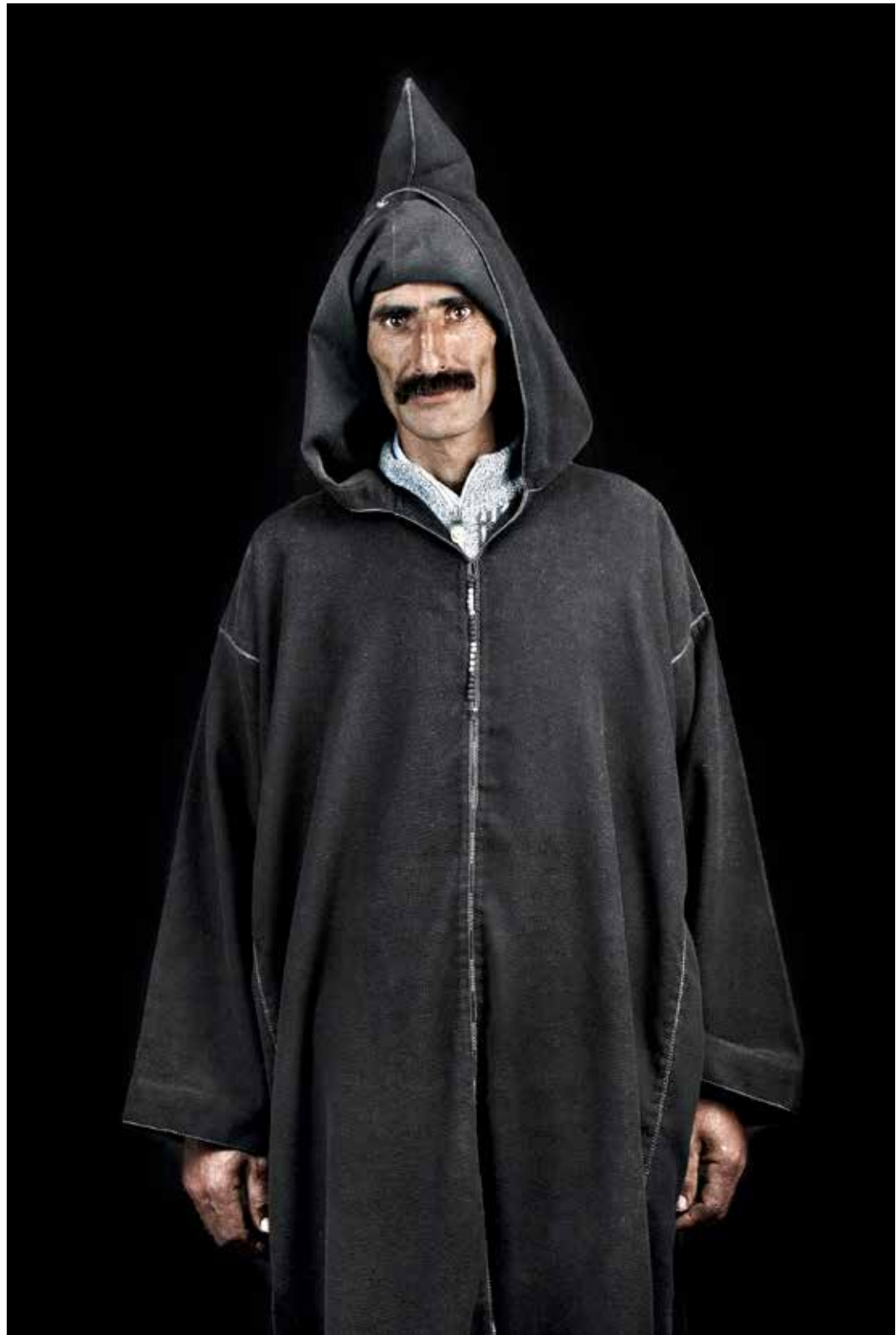
مولاي عبد سلام



Meloussa

ملوثة



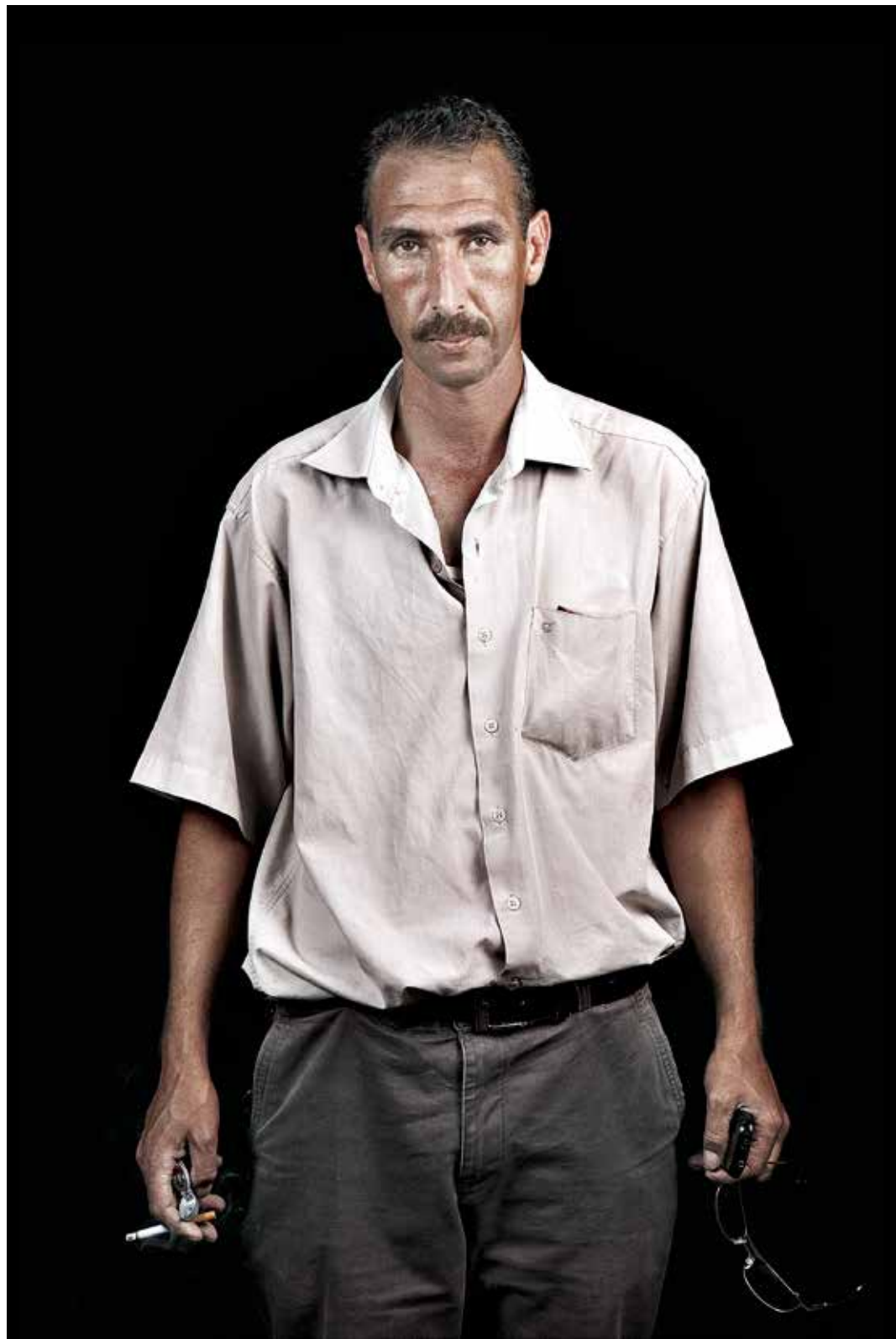






Tangier

طنجة



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