The changing scene of Amazigh poetry

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Cet article a pour objet de démontrer à quel point un ensemble de genres (tamawayt, izlí, tamdyazt, etc.) de facture résolument archaïque, a pu évoluer pendant les quarante dernières années en obéissant à divers facteurs socioculturels, économiques et politiques. En plus des supports techniques en évolution constante (mini-cassette, vidéo, internet et you-tube), la pérennité de la poésie orale chantée des Imazighen du Moyen-Atlas est à mettre au compte d’une volonté de ne pas négliger la langue, de soigner, d’améliorer leur « produit », fièrement perçu comme marqueur identitaire. De réels talents ont vu le jour, aussi bien du côté des poètes, que chez une nouvelle vague de jeunes chercheurs amazighes. En outre, malgré quelques objections de la part des partisans de l’« authenticité », la volonté de l’I.R.C.A.M. de sauvegarder pour la postérité ces joyaux de l’oralité amazighe en les consignant par écrit, a également joué un rôle positif.

Developments of the early 20th century

While classic Middle Atlas poetry has long suffered from being somewhat static in form and content, it would be realistic to determine to what extent it has undergone transformation in recent years. For centuries before colonisation, during what I have elsewhere called the “Heroic Age” of the Imazighen, the poetic genres of the area blossomed and bloomed without let or hindrance. The situation was to undergo drastic change, however, with the onset of the French military at the turn of the 20th century. Luckily, before this priceless material vanished for ever, colonial Berberists were sufficiently inspired to record some masterpieces of oral literature during the twilight period of the “Morocco that was”. Arguably, such items as have come down to us represent poetic forms that Berber bards had been using throughout the previous century or so.

During the final stages of armed resistance by Morocco’s mountain Berbers (1923-1933), a first observable change came over their poetry. Whereas the focus had earlier been on religious, or amorous themes, emphasis was now laid on uncompromising firmness, bravery on the battle-field despite hopeless odds, and denunciation of the invader with his advanced technology, as some kind of

2 Foremost among these were M. Abès, S. Guennoun, E. Laoust, D. Loubignac, F. Reyniers, J. Robichez & especially A. Roux.
3 From the title of a classic by W.B. Harris, Morocco that was, London: Blackwood (1921).
4 Around 1900, while residing in Fez, French Berberist Moulieras committed to paper for the very first time a short corpus of Middle Atlas poetry, several items of which are still with us today. Cf. H. Stroomer & M. Peyron (2002: 67).
unspeakable, diabolic monster, the commonest epithet used being axenzir (‘swine’). The production of this period includes numerous epic poems of the tayffart and tamdyazt genres, many of which have been saved from oblivion.\(^5\)

Then, from 1933 till the end of the 1970s, during the colonial period and aftermath of independence, Amazigh poetry underwent a revival of its earlier tradition of courtly love, especially in the genres izlan and timawayin, though modern influences soon left their mark.

Simultaneously, timdyazin- and tinccadin-type ballads remained the standard forms of expression for historical and political themes. Unfortunately, this evolution went hand-in-glove with some impoverishment of artistic talent, together with a slight decline in linguistic purity, partly due to the intrusion of French loan-words, but also because of the guilt complex many Imazighen were made to feel towards the specificity of their culture in post-Protectorate Morocco. True, this trend was reversed in the early 1980s with the general revival of interest in Amazigh culture, coupled with pride in one’s origins, while modern broadcasting and recording techniques contributed to a broader diffusion of izlan and timawayin. Later, however, there arose an ethical debate over methods of collecting and publishing oral poetry. Simultaneously, a less well-informed popular perception of poetic art tended to blur the issue, resulting in confusion over definitions of the various genres.

### Lexical evolution

In a survey undertaken in 1986, the present writer systematically compared some 300 izlan and timawayin then contained in his Middle Atlas corpus with about 230 similar poetic items collected by French researchers in the 1920s. Acting on the basis of a specimen 150-word vocabulary, he established the rate of occurrence of each lexical item. On completing this task he observed that:

“In the light of the statistics thus obtained, an obvious conclusion is to be drawn: far from declining, the poetic language of the Middle Atlas appears to have done better than survive. When comparing present-day discourse with that of the earlier period, one is struck by its unchanging, homogenous word-patterns, featuring the same diversity, the same key-expressions and formulae. In brief, the poems of 1926 and those of 1986 belong to a readily-identifiable, overall lexical system.”\(^6\)

Certain significant trends, however, had come to light. There were more numerous references to parts of the body, chiefly ‘head’, ixf, and ‘heart’, ul; possibly reflecting distress of heart and mind caused by the troubled 1920-1930 period. Many verbs of action were also noted: bbey (‘to cut’), ddu (‘to go’), mmet (‘to die’), and wvet (‘to strike’), serving as a vivid reminder of bitter fighting during the Atlas campaigns, coupled with the wanderings of displaced persons. Even more relevantly, the term ‘encampment’ (amazir, pl. imizar) frequently appears in the oral literature of the 1920s, a time when most Imazighen still lived in tents, the term taddart (‘house’) being absent. Today, however, this last-named term is in

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widespread use, sedentarization having become a fact of life for most inhabitants of the Middle Atlas.

However, perusal of to-day’s verse frequently reveals verbs such as *bdju* (‘to part’), and *ttu* (‘to forget’), apparently pointing to greater mobility and a simultaneous decline in the quality of human relationship, sadly at variance with traditional behavioural patterns prioritizing solidarity.

Conversely, the term *tamazirt* (“country, homeland’), almost unknown sixty years earlier, often occurs in the contemporary period, highlighting notions of national identity and patriotism. If modern times have been conducive to the appearance of French loan-words, these are relatively few in number, though still uncomfortably present, and could die out within a generation or two.\(^7\)

**Amazigh poetry at the turn of the 21st century**

Looking back over the past twenty years, it is obvious that the basic, complementary genres *izlan* and *timawayin* still have a bright future. The same applies to the traditional Middle-Atlas *ahidus* dance, which the local Berbers indulge in whenever the occasion arises, and in which many of the *izlan* are performed. However, there are some obvious nuances. There is, for example, a noticeable difference between a put-on show at the annual Imi lchil brides’ festival, when tired-looking Ayt Hadiddou participants perform half-heartedly in broad daylight for the benefit of foreign tourists, and a spontaneous summer evening *ahidus* performed round the camp-fire by shepherds and their girl-friends in some forgotten nook of Jbel ‘Ayyachi’.

Another factor should not be overlooked: for command performances professional dancers are often brought in, such as *ccixat* from Khenifra or elsewhere. In a parallel development, a certain band-leader became a celebrity all over the Middle Atlas during the 1990s. Moha ou-Houssayn Achiban hails from Ayt Lahssen near Khenifra. A simple yeoman-farmer in everyday life, he undergoes metamorphosis once a feast-day is announced. Swapping his wooden plough for a well-tuned tambourine, he dons a handsome black cloak to become the famous “Maestro” of the magic drums. As one traveller has remarked, “with a mere flick of the wrist he can stop his twenty-three drummers, unleashing them again a couple of seconds later by merely raising a finger.”\(^8\)

After featuring in documentary films by Christian Zuber (1989) and Izza Gennini (1992), “Maestro” achieved full stardom. This writer has admired his likeness in the window of a downtown Meknes photographer’s studio, and inspected his video-cassettes on display in a nearby music-shop. His somewhat showy choreography is possibly his greatest asset, having inspired numerous imitators, thus providing present-day Amazigh music with a much-needed shot-in-the-arm, a factor that argues in favour of the continuing good health of Middle-Atlas lore. In fact, the “Maestro factor” will probably make itself felt for some years to come.

\(^7\) A few examples: *žnafu* (‘I couldn’t care less’), *lafut* (‘fault, mistake’), *ţtomobil* (‘car’), *brussi* (‘law-suit’), *žadarmiya* (‘gendarmerie’), and *ďifendi* (‘forbidden’), etc.

\(^8\) Cf. Zuber (1987).
even though the great man himself is now in semi-retirement, and often too tired to perform with his customary energy.

Elsewhere, the picture is quite promising. In the Tounfit area, formerly home to the tamdyazt, in connection with the Sufi influence of nearby Zawit Sidi Hamza, that noble genre underwent a slight decline when Hammou Zahra of Ayt Slimane retired in the late 1980s. Luckily, his son reportedly followed in the paternal footsteps, while neighbours ‘Aqqa of Tounfit and the famous ‘Lesieur’ (ccix lisyur) of Ichichawn (Ayt Yahya) did likewise. Elsewhere in Amazigh country Sakkou, Lbaz and Ou-Hachem, together with an Azrou-based group, Inechchaden, continued to keep the tamdyazt flag flying well into the new century. Thus various kinds of poetry, most of them with musical back-up giving rise to song and dance, are regularly performed throughout the Middle Atlas by musical groups, some of them professionals, most of them amateurs.

At the present time, the most famous Middle-Atlas singer undoubtedly remains Mohammed Rouicha from Khenifra. True, critics accuse him of being “less genuine” than some of his rivals, especially since he achieved star status after touring Moroccan guest-worker communities in Europe. Purists also disapprove of his tendency to sing both in Arabic and Berber, and criticize some devices he has introduced into performance of timawayin and timdyazin. Most of this criticism is, of course, a case of “sour grapes”, as his experiments with the two above-mentioned genres are probably dictated, not only by commercial motives, but by a commendable desire to update and revitalize them. Another famous practitioner and a real purist was Meghni, acknowledged by Rouicha himself as the best lütarna-player in the country, the two musicians having occasionally performed together. But no two persons could have been less alike, Rouicha having become part of the star system, while Meghni remained resolutely confidential and unassuming in his approach.⁹

Their great rival was Bennaser ou-Khouya from Zawit-ech-Cheikh. Pundits generally dismiss him as not being a musician, merely a singer, this because a member of his group accompanies him on the fiddle. No matter, he has deservedly attained stardom, together with this famous feminine soloist, Hadda ou-Akki, a true professional with a wonderful, variable tone voice originally from Ayt Ishaq, at the eastern edge of the Tadla region. Though no beauty, as she herself readily admits, she has a striking, commanding presence, heightened by her distinctive facial tattoo marks, having become sufficiently famous to be included in an izli:

A wayd issin tamazirt n ḥadda wekki!
Is iyya zzin-nns a wnna tegga ḥya?
Could I but see the land where dwells Hadda ou-Akki!
Is her countenance as beautiful as her voice?!¹⁰

The above-mentioned professionals dominated the Middle-Atlas musical scene at the turn of the century, replacing earlier exponents such as the immortal Hammou

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⁹ Sadly, according to a report heard in Asul, Ayt Merghad, June 2009, Meghni died in the spring of that year.
ou-Lyazid (Rouicha’s mentor), Moha ou-Mouzoun, Moha n-Itzer, ‘Abouzzan and Tuharrrazt, Lahssen w-‘Achouch, not to mention Haddou Chaouch, since deceased.

By the mid-1990s a new generation of poets was making its presence felt on the local scene, chiefly in the Azrou area. These included a gifted tamawayt-singer called Chrifa (who sometimes performed alongside Rouicha); two musicians from the Azrou region: Lkas and Azelmaâd (a left-handed performer, as his name implies); also a youngster from Khenïfira named Mounir, and a lone lady, answering to the name of Illis n-Tmazirt (‘local girl’), reputedly of Austrian origin and married to a Berber11, first heard by the author between Lqbab and Aghbala in December 1994.

**Thematic evolution**

If the lion’s share of Middle-Atlas poetic production, centred on izlan, still goes to classic themes (courtship, jealousy, lovers’ quarrels, parting, melancholy), simultaneously, other criteria have appeared. Chief among these has been the intrusion of modernity, with many couplets alluding to its various symbols: petrol, the gas-cylinder, the steamship, the aeroplane, the bus and the car, highlighting the all-pervading travel theme, as in the lines:

\[
A \ta, \; ddix \; taneggarutt, \; mc \; iyya \; \check{\text{h}}al \; i/ \\
mc, \; ay \; adda \; w\; r\; a\; x\; trurid, \; a\; t\; \text{\textasciitilde{t}}\; \text{\textasciitilde{t}}\; \text{\textasciitilde{t}}\; \text{\textasciitilde{t}}\; \text{\textasciitilde{t}}\; \text{\textasciitilde{t}}\; s\; ixamn!
\]

I leave, never to return, so long as circumstances remain unchanged/,

Unless, O car, back to the encampment you can swiftly bear me!12

Unfortunately alcohol (lankul) has also made inroads into these poems. Thus, near a small Moulaouya township, do young bloods, possibly inspired by some material in the Rubayyat of ‘Umar Khayyam, give this bastardized rendering of an old-time tamawayt taqdimt:

\[
A \; \text{wayd} \; \text{asn} \; \text{innan} \; i \; \text{yu} \; \text{gix} \; \text{taxamt} / \\
afella \; n \; \text{bumia}, \; \text{yas} \; \text{rru\textasciitilde{z}} \; \text{as} \; \text{te\textasciitilde{e}q}!
\]

Who will tell my beloved: above Boumia have pitched my tent,

With naught but red wine my thirst to quench! 13

Another theme has come to the fore over the past two decades: emigration. There is an entire category of couplets devoted to the trials and tribulations of ayt frans, or fakans, as these expatriates are styled in Tamazight-speaking areas. Each summer, at the wheel of a newly-acquired car, they steer recklessly south towards Amazigh country with presents for the family in the boot and money in their pockets. Objects of frustration for local drivers after narrowly-avoided collisions, or of envy

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11 An interesting development, paralleling the appearance on the Soussi musical scene in 1991 of a young Franco-Portuguese girl, Karen Chaussard, now a star who sings in Tashelhit as “Raïssa Kelly”.
for the less fortunate stay-at-homes, they are nonetheless perceived as extremely eligible by fathers with unmarried daughters, all these themes being highlighted in contemporary verse.

\[Iwin\ d\ imksawn\ \text{ṭṭumubilat\ n\ franṣ},\]
\[ay,\ ayd\ i\ yežran,\ ixub\ y\ ḫerruyn!\]
\[A\ wa,\ liix\ i\ lmuyrib,\ aygḫiy\ a(y)\ tettax,\]
\[iwa,\ ēčix\ tiyḡiyn,\ ur\ idd\ am\ fakanṣ!\]

The recordings are of vastly improved quality in order to keep abreast of the competition; in fact, this has become something of a growth phenomenon with several firms attempting to dominate the market.

From France shepherds by car have returned.
God help me! Just look at the way they’re driving!
In the Maghrib did stay feeding on fresh flowers every day,
Sweet flowers I did eat, such as emigrants never tasted!\(^{14}\)

The intricacies of local politics constitute another favourite topic. In this connection, an occasion which gave rise to some memorable izlan was the 1975 “Green March”, or \textit{tawada\ tazizawt}, when Morocco peacefully recovered its Saharan provinces. Here is an example composed by Benasser ou-Khouya:

\[Tamazirt\ inu,\ tamazirt\ inu,\ ṣṣeḥra\ itikkan,\ ur\ idd\ as\ ttu!\]
\[in\ as\ i\ sbaliwn:\ “meqqar\ tekkit\ alf\ eam\ ḫebs\ ar\ iterže,\ a\ sebta”\!\]
O country of mine, tho’ it be over, Saharan crisis is far from forgotten! / Warn the Spaniard: “Should you spend a thousand years in bondage, we shall recover you, O Ceuta!”\(^{15}\)

In the case of unhappier events, however, such as the abuse of authority and hank-panky, disaster, or godlessness, the \textit{tamdyazt} is the chief means of expression. A typical example:

\[Ssiwl,\ a\ mayd\ aš\ nnix,\ ḥežžeb\ ay\ ad\ yulin?\]
\[A\ wa,\ eawd,\ ay\ imi\ yxhub\ i\ dunnit!\]
Speak, what can I tell you of the strange things that will come to pass?
O my mouth, speak again of misfortune which is rife in the world!\(^{16}\)

A further theme is that of the generation gap, vividly portrayed in a genre similar to \textit{tamdyazt}, known as \textit{ahellel} in the Azrou region. Old-timers are thus lambasted by youngsters for their inadequate, impractical traditional garb:

\[Matta\ yebann\ nna\ da\ tnessad\ dyi,\ a\ ccix\ muḥa?\]
\[yas\ aderbal\ xf\ tedawt\ ar\ ennḍi\ leafit,\]


\(^{15}\) This \textit{izli} was collected by Rkia Montassir, Zawit-ech-Cheikh, summer of 1984.

\(^{16}\) From an unpublished \textit{tamdyazt}, probably belonging to the repertoire of sheikh Lesieur (\textit{lisyur}), recorded by the author at Anefgou, near Imilchil, May 1988.
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illa waggu la cid ittnuy adffas nnun bexxin!
What clothes are these you’ve slept in, O sheikh Moha?
Why those rags on your back as you crowd around the stove?
See how your coats are with smoke blackened!

The “oldies”, however, have a ready answer for the whippersnappers:

Iwa, raec a’rer tadawt nns ad tannayd may tensid,
yas Igerśun aya d insa lsissta xfiyīrν!

What a sight, the most unbefitting clothes that you ever did see!
No more ‘n a pair of shorts and, over his shoulder, a jacket!17

Formal evolution

Onwards from the early 1990s in the Middle Atlas there has been an intensification of the social phenomenon evoked above, with predictable repercussions on Amazigh poetry. If, on the one hand, some deterioration in style and greater use of Arabic may be observed, on the other, poetic forms have undergone transformation, principally due to the way they are perceived. Whereas singing and dancing at village feasts in bygone times retained a parochial, almost semi-confidential nature, as a collection of genres Middle-Atlas music has now transcended local borders, this being arguably the greatest single factor of change.

A significant point is the number of itinerant groups which perform Amazigh music all over Morocco. For example, a paterfamilias in Rabat who wants to do things in style for his daughter’s wedding will invite a Middle-Atlas band-leader to provide musical back-up. Thus is Tamazight heard again in areas where it was no longer used. Conversely, Arabic-speaking musical groups from, say, the Gharb, will perform a very creditable rendering of the well-known refrain awi d aman (‘bring me water’), or use devices borrowed from Berber poetry, not to mention lexical terms, a favourite being  badaq (‘passion’). In certain cases one will even hear a short snatch of song in Berber, embedded in Arabic, such as:

A yumu, ay illi,
calbas ur illi!
O my love, O my girl,
Everything’s all right!18

Furthermore, given the proliferation of portable radios with built-in tape-deck, not to mention video-players, pirating has become child’s play. Thus each “Berber evening”, wedding feast, or similar celebration will be recorded and broadcast over a wide area by means of innumerable copies of varying quality. These documents circulate between hamlet and local township where they will be sold out of the

back door at knock-down prices – as low as 8 dirhams in the early 1980s; 15-25 dirhams, if you shopped around, by the turn of the century. Strangely enough, despite patchy recordings on inexpensive cassettes of Chinese or Greek origin, the sound-tracks are of perfectly acceptable quality some twenty years later!

In the early 1990s the situation on the mini-cassette market changed radically, with dealers endeavouring to offer a more polished product. Presentation, an all-important marketing factor, had been upgraded. Not only were the names of the soloist and musicians marked in colour on the package, together with a photograph, but cassettes now bore copyright clauses to deter would-be pirates.

Now appealing to a far broader public, the cassette of Amazigh music has become geared to the requirements of the market, chiefly by developing the aesthetic side of the performance. Thus, where hitherto strictly vocal (often solo) renderings were standard practice, as with timawayin and, to a lesser extent, timdyazin, instrumental accompaniment and back-up vocals are now standard practice, sometimes together with amplifiers, loudspeakers and other electronic devices. The aim, no doubt, being to add harmony and glamour to the performance, with musicians decked out in white shirt and felt hat to provide a touch of modernity.

In the early 1980s, timawayin came to be sung in unison (including a refrain, or llya) with musical accompaniment. As to timdyazin, they had always given rise to solo interpretation by the amdya, with no instrumentals, the chorus being sung in unison by the assistants (ireddadin), to a short ritornello on the fiddle. In August 1989, in Azrou, this writer first heard one of these ballads (timdyazin) consisting of a string of izlan, performed with full musical and vocal back-up. A not unpleasing sound, it was described by the audience a new-style tamdyatz, a genre often called ahellel in the Azrou area, the two terms now overlapping in a manner symptomatic of another present-day phenomenon, namely confusion over definition of the various poetic genres. Nor should we forget the extent to which video cassettes, the internet and you-tube have contributed to Amazigh music over the past decade.

Ambiguity surrounding form and genre

In a general paper on Berber poetry, Akouaou was among the first to point out that “the same term is not used everywhere for the same form, and several terms designate here and there apparently identical forms”. This inaccuracy and lack of rigour is also denounced by Bounfour: “This confusion stems from the fact that authors fail to take into account a host of parameters that are relevant in Tamazight

19 Some of the better-known outfits marketing Amazigh music are: Hassania, Voix Bassatine, Tahiril Disque, Sawt Mellaliphone, Sawt Khénifra, Sawt Ezzaouia, Nachat Ezawia, Variétés Amazighia, Voix Ain Ellouh, Super Edition Berbère, Éditions Al Khair & Fassiphone. The last-named firm has agents in Brussels, Belgium, where many cassettes are now manufactured.
20 M. Taifi (1994: 141). Term ahellel (pl. ihellil) is based on Amazigh radical HL, ‘to intone a religious chant, or litanies’.
country, but perhaps not elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{22} The same phenomenon is observable when researchers collect oral verse from amateur informers. The latter are often incapable of distinguishing between basic genres such as \textit{izli} and \textit{tamawayt}.\textsuperscript{23}

This confusion would appear chiefly to concern the ballad-like \textit{tamdyazt}, also called \textit{tamlyazt} by the Iyerwan. In the “Heroic Age”, according to A. Roux \textsuperscript{24} and J. Robichez,\textsuperscript{25} itinerant bards used to establish a further distinction between religiously oriented \textit{timdyazin}, and \textit{tayffrin} (sing. of \textit{tayffart}), resembling a chain of \textit{izlan}, and dealing principally with important happenings.\textsuperscript{26} Definitions such as these no longer appear totally valid nowadays.

Today, in the Azrou area, the terms \textit{ahellel} and \textit{tanccad} may be used to describe a genre closely allied to \textit{tamdyazt}. Thus does Bounfour take to task American researcher Jeanette Harries for apparently confusing some of these genres,\textsuperscript{27} whereas the latter is not really at fault when she claims that \textit{tamdyazt} can be also termed \textit{tanccad} or \textit{tayffart}. The confusion is all the greater since the term \textit{ahellel} was used early in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century to define short items of poetry and lullabies, not to mention corn-grinding, reaping and pilgrimage songs,\textsuperscript{28} irrespective of specific religious criteria. Interestingly, further to fieldwork in the Moulouya region in the 1930s, Guennoun observed: “\textit{ahellel} is a kind of dirge, a chant common to both sexes, though more feminine in nature and sung at night, as when the housewife grinds corn on the family grind-stone.”\textsuperscript{29} While acknowledging the previous religious status of \textit{ahellel} among the Ayt Myill, Taifi explains that “in the past few decades (…) the genre has evolved from the sacred to the profane.”\textsuperscript{30}

\section*{From orality to literacy}

Another significant shift in attitudes has occurred, especially since the creation of the Rabat I.R.C.A.M., and with the arrival on the Berber studies scene of Amazigh researchers (F. Boukhris, M. Ameur, A. Fertahi, B. Hamri, A. Ikken, H. Jouad, H. Khettouch, A. Kich, M. Moukhlis, Z. Ouchna etc.), whose views may be at variance with those of their non-Berber colleagues. As a result, opinions differ on how to set about collecting oral poetry, with some scholars challenging the very act of putting it into writing (not mention the extra mutilation of translation), dismissing this as a manifestation of Western voyeurism, and as particularly degrading vis-à-vis one of the most authentic outward signs of \textit{timuzya} (‘Berberness’; Fr. \textit{Amazighité}). The first Amazigh academic to express reservations

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item A. Bounfour (1994: 69).
\item \textit{Cf.} M. Peyron, “Chants”, (1993a: 1865); also Lhajjaoui & F. Ghudan, (1996: 20). Another example: some informants in the Aghbala area recite fragments of \textit{timdyazin}, but tell you that they are \textit{timawayin} (May 2006).
\item A. Roux (1928 : 249).
\item J. Robichez (1946: 182).
\item \textit{Cf.} A. Roux \& M. Peyron, (2002), for a comprehensive range of \textit{tiyffrin}.
\item E. Laoust (1939: 281).
\item S. Guennoun (1991: 122).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
on this score was Mouloud Mammeri from Kabylia when he reminded his readers that “Berber civilisation was essentially based on the spoken word.” Acting on this assumption, he claimed that collecting oral poems and consigning them to paper only served to anaesthetize them, and that “their portrayal in the pages of a book deprives them of all the harmonic artefacts that characterize oral transmission.”\footnote{M. Mammeri (1980: 11).} In his last work, Mammeri again criticized “the distortions and deformations to which oral production is exposed.”\footnote{M. Mammeri (1984: 12). It must be stressed that L. Galand-Pernet, (1998), who has also done a lot of research on Amazigh oral literature, tends to concur on this point.}

In Morocco other specialists took up the cudgels. One condemned the negative effect of committing oral literature to writing,\footnote{A. Boukous (1985: 69-79).} another academic simultaneously distancing himself from the last naïve fumbling of old-fashioned anthropologists,\footnote{A. Akouaou (1987: 71. Amusingly, it was one of this writer’s first articles that Akouaou was thus criticising (Peyron, 1985: 161-185).} while his colleague Bounfour warned that writing down oral verse carries a risk of impoverishing the end-result. Above all, by being presented in printed form these items are “totally divorced from their specific milieu and conditions of performance.”\footnote{A. Bounfour (1986: 188).}

So much for Tashelhit-speaking academics. What, then, of their Tamazight-speaking colleagues? Judging by what Fatima Boukhris has to say, they appear to be of a similar opinion. After having emphasized the “simplistic effect of writing”, she considers that the process maims, or at best fossilizes, oral poetry. She qualifies this by adding that writing may still prove a useful adjunct, so long as one takes into consideration parameters such as vowel stress and phonic constraints, together with the inclusion of a musical score and other particulars regarding the actual performance of izlan.\footnote{F. Boukhris (1992: 181-182).}

Miloud Taifi, her colleague from Ougmes (between Ifrane and Azrou), while allowing that cultural treasures such as ballad-style poetry may be saved thanks to the written word, thus qualifies this viewpoint:-

“Committing an oral poem to paper dismisses the manner in which it is enunciated through eliminating the melody by which the poem qualifies as a song, (…) and in so doing it robs oral poetry of its substance, of its very essence; poetry thus becomes a lifeless, soulless body.”\footnote{M. Taifi (1994 : 147).}

Despite so many messages of singularly outspoken disagreement concerning the written corpus of oral verse, the present writer (himself an avid collector of Amazigh poetry) remains totally unabashed and unrepentant. He is adamant that collection and publication of these items is the only solution to guarantee their survival.
Conclusion

Obviously, putting fragments of popular poetry into writing is the only way to preserve them from falling into total oblivion, and unstinting efforts are being made to accomplish this highly necessary task.

It is precisely through this kind of performance that Amazigh poetry, in the specific way it is sung and danced, will become better known. Developments observed in the Ifrane-Azrou area, also around Khemisset since the spring of 1988 have fully confirmed the author’s confidence in the continuing presence of these art forms. The changing of the guard is under way with promising lūţar-playing youngsters such as ‘Aomar Boutmzought and Rouicha Amezzian; traditional ballads are still thriving, while the “Maestro factor” has revitalized aḥiḍus dancing.\(^\text{38}\) Last but not least, that grand old lady, Hadda ou Akki, the “Oum Keltoum of the Middle Atlas”, is still very much around.\(^\text{39}\)

Another dynamic factor: the research activities and publications of I.R.C.A.M., the Rabat-based Amazigh academy. Colloquia have been organised on Amazigh oral art and numerous publications have seen the light of day. Furthermore, the academy encourages researchers to submit their findings on oral poetry for publication, a case in point being Zayd Ouchna, with his ground-breaking collection of poems by bard Sakkou from South-East Morocco, \textit{Asfaja n twengimt} (‘the awakening of the spirit’).

Field-work has also been funded and supported by I.R.C.A.M., as with the “Tazizaout project” in connection with oral resistance poetry and in which this writer was fortunate enough to participate with Houssa Yakobi.\(^\text{40}\)

In the meantime, the more skilful and imaginative practitioners would be well advised (as some have already started doing) to ponder on possible minor modifications aimed at reconciling the traditional side of this oral production with the requirements of a more demanding public; in such a way that the whole Amazigh musical scene will ultimately undergo rejuvenation.

\(^\text{38}\) \textit{Cf.} B. Hamri (2005).

\(^\text{39}\) She gave a very convincing performance with her new group at Al-Akhawayn University, Ifrane on March 24, 2009.

\(^\text{40}\) \textit{Cf.} M. Peyron (2007: 307-316). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mme Fatima Boukhris for her advice and help with the preparation of this article.
Bibliography


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