

## **Tamazight Language Maintenance and Rights in Morocco & Algeria**

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*When high school students are expelled and even tortured – yes, you heard me, tortured – for writing their names in Berber; when employees – some of whom are here in the witness box – lose their jobs for trying to protect their language and culture; when daily encounters with the state administrative bureaucracy turn into altercations with the state security forces for even the most basic of procedures, it should come as no surprise that we wish to defend human rights. Rather, it's a miracle that until now we have responded to this repressive madness by peaceful means.*<sup>1</sup> (Goodman 2010; 103)

From the 8<sup>th</sup> century the Arabic language has been in direct and sometimes competing contact with the Tamazight language of North Africa, and after over a thousand years of language contact Tamazight continues to be spoken by millions. The question can be posed as to how the language has endured for so long without any official support? As well, what are the prospects for continued maintenance that will ensure the survival of Tamazight in a region that is undergoing rapid socio-political change? This paper aims to discuss the historical processes which have encouraged Tamazight language maintenance in this context and more recent developments in the field of language planning and policy that may help or hinder the prospect for continued maintenance. By examining the specific cases of Morocco and Algeria, it will be possible to shed light on the practical steps that have been or can still be taken to encourage language maintenance in these communities while ensuring the protection of the rights of Tamazight speakers throughout the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Said Sadi before the Algerian Court of State Security on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1985 qtd in Goodman 2010; 103.

A linguistic classification of Tamazight places it as part of the larger Afro-Asiatic language family alongside Semitic, Chadic, Egyptian, Cushitic, and Omotic (Afro-Asiatic: Ethnologue). Today, communities of Tamazight speakers exist from the Siwa oasis of Egypt in the East to Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Mali in the West (Ethnologue: North Africa). It is important to note that in much of the scholarship on the language the various dialects and sub groupings of Tamazight are commonly referred to as Berber. Furthermore, one often finds the term Amazigh used to describe the collection of Tamazight languages as well as the culture of which they are a part. Although not all of the languages under this label are mutually intelligible in many cases these distinctions denote different dialects which could fall under the larger umbrella term, Tamazight.<sup>2</sup>

Although written records of the language are scarce, Tamazight remains one of the major indigenous languages of North Africa. The community of Tamazight speakers pre-dates the arrival Islam in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, with some scholars dating the existence of the Tamazight community in North Africa as far back as 5,000 years (Faiq 1999: 142). To further illustrate the long history of the language in the region, when the Paris-based Académie Berbère was founded in 1968 to encourage a cultural and linguistic revival of Tamazight, a calendar was produced which dated the history of the language and community back to 950BC. This date coincides with the ascent of the pharaoh Sheshonk I, of the mixed Libico-Berber Meshwesh tribe, and the beginning of the “Libyan Dynasties” (Maddy-Weitzman 2011; 15). Both of these points highlight a long history for the Tamazight community in the region and one that may date back as far as five millennia.

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<sup>2</sup> The term Tamazight will be used throughout this paper to avoid confusion.

Two major waves of Arabization can be cited which serve as two potential motivating factors for Tamazight language maintenance. When Arab invaders entered North Africa they did so with the purpose of Arabizing the African continent and spreading the influence of Islam. However, invading armies faced significant resistance from the Tamazight speaking populations of the region, particularly so in the cases of Algeria and Morocco. In the case of Morocco a large number of Tamazight speakers were and continue to be natives of the High Atlas and Rif mountain ranges, while in Algeria a majority of speakers reside in the rural Kabyle region. These groups continued to live on in these areas after Arab armies took control of the major population centers. The fierce resistance to Arab invasion and the subsequent retreat of Algeria and Morocco's Tamazight populations to the periphery after conquest can be seen as an initial motivating factor for language maintenance in these two cases which has helped to ensure the survival of the language for over a thousand years post-conquest.

Moving forward to the end of colonial rule on the African continent, another instance of Arabization can be cited which may have aided language maintenance by fostering linguistic and cultural solidarity among Tamazight speakers in opposition to the ruling Arab authorities. With the rise to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in the 1950's a wave of Pan-Arab sentiment spread across the Middle East. One facet of the larger Pan-Arab ideal was a standard language policy that located Standard Arabic as the official state language over the various Arabic dialects and minority languages of the region (Haeri 2003; 10). Pan-Arabism reinforced an ideology very much reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of legitimate language and the installation of Standard Arabic as the official language across the region evidences this point (Bourdieu 1991; 45). These policies effectively relegated minority languages such as Tamazight to the periphery and held Standard Arabic specifically, and Arabic more generally, as the only official language

of the region. For Tamazight speakers in the newly independent Morocco and Algeria developing a facility in Arabic was crucial to becoming an active part of society. An initially uneven distribution of bilingualism in Morocco and Algeria created a situation in which bilingual Tamazight-Arabic speakers were predominantly working aged males, who traveled to larger cities in the hopes of securing employment.

Despite what would appear to be the complete dominance of Arabic in all public spheres, locating it as a truly legitimate language in Morocco and Algeria remains challenging. As Bourdieu notes, “In order for one mode of expression among others...to impose itself as the only legitimate one, the linguistic market has to be unified” (Bourdieu 1991; 45). The survival of Tamazight and the resistance to the influence of Arabic over the past six decades, despite a rise in bilingualism, offers a compelling argument against the unity of the linguistic market in or the true legitimacy of Arabic as an official language in Bourdieu’s terms.

Numerous examples of open resistance to the dominance of Arabic and state policies can be noted which may have furthered Tamazight language maintenance since the period of independence from European rule. Perhaps foremost among these examples are the student strikes and demonstrations of the 1980 “Berber Spring”. In this instance resistance was directed towards the Algerian government, which had introduced policies of forceful repression of the Tamazight community and encouraged the rapid Arabization of the Algerian educational sector (Grand’ Henry 2006; 55, Maddy-Weitzman 2011, 79). In the case of the Berber Spring, ethnic disputes which were tied to linguistic realities reinforced the ‘otherness’ of the Tamazight language and its speakers, further marginalizing them in a newly independent Algerian state.

In contrast, the situation in Morocco during this period did not result in open rebellion or the forceful repression of the Tamazight community. It instead resulted in a situation in line with Ayo Bamgbose's statements on language policy in Sub-Saharan Africa; "Language policies in African countries are characterized by one or more of the following problems: avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation and declaration without implementation" (Bamgbose qtd in Skutnabb-Kangas 1995; 335). Tamazight was given no official recognition in Morocco and from the period of independence until very recently the discussion on the fate of Tamazight has been limited to small circles of academics and activists. The Moroccan Tamazight community was relegated to an almost subaltern state, with the largest proportions of Tamazight speakers remaining in the High Atlas and Rif mountains and traveling to major cities only to seek work. However over the past two decades a significant resurgence in Tamazight cultural and linguistic solidarity appears to have begun to turn the tide in the Moroccan state to one that recognizes the importance of this large minority community to Moroccan cultural identity and heritage (Pelham 2001).

In spite of repression and lack of recognition many of the Tamazight dialects of Algeria and Morocco have been maintained, although in Algeria numerous dialects of the language are currently threatened (Algeria & Morocco: Ethnologue). In the case of Morocco, Katherine Hoffman cites what is perhaps the most important figure in the continuing struggle for Tamazight language maintenance; the Tamazight woman. As Hoffman notes:

Women have been crucial to the reproduction of the countryside, of the Tashelhit language, and of Ashelhi identity. As repositories of both (past-oriented) nostalgia and (forward-oriented) aspirations, they bore the brunt of performing authenticity

for the estranged men whose relationship to the land and language was more compromised. (Hoffman 2008; 72)

At the same time, however, linguistic and cultural maintenance supported by the role of women in the Tamazight community has coincided with increasing levels of Arabic-Tamazight bilingualism in both countries. Official reports on the number of bilingual speakers are limited; however scholars agree that monolingual Tamazight speakers are now a dwindling minority. The increase in bilingualism has been attributed to increased access to social mobility, socioeconomic conditions such as available work being in large Arabic speaking cities, and intermarriage between Arabic and Tamazight speaking families (Ennaji 2010; 408). Today, Tamazight is a dominant language only in the countryside of Morocco and Algeria, with the remaining monolingual speakers tending to be rural Tamazight women (Hoffman 2006; 150).

When examining recent changes in language planning and policy in Morocco and Algeria which may offer increased protections of linguistic rights and encourage continued language maintenance, it is Morocco that has taken the lead in this regard. Following the handover of power to King Muhammad VI in 1999 there was an almost immediate push for more formal recognition for Tamazight as well as efforts in language planning and policy that would work to improve the status of the language and introduce it into the Moroccan education system. Beginning in 2003, Tamazight was introduced as a language of instruction in 300 primary schools in Morocco. Students received three hours of instruction in Tamazight per week and a goal was set for Tamazight to be offered in all Moroccan schools by 2013, with an additional push to train 20,000 teachers in Tamazight instruction (Tomastik 2010; 107). Although up to date information is not yet available, it does appear that policy reforms have made a significant impact. Tamazight is being used across the country in schools and among the younger generation

more awareness seems to exist now than in previous decades about the Tamazight community, its language, and its importance in the history of Morocco.

More recently, in the wake of the 2011 popular uprisings that swept across the region, King Muhammad VI initiated a series of constitutional reforms aimed at avoiding popular discontent in Morocco. Foremost among these was the establishment of Tamazight as an official language of the state and today Morocco remains the only country to recognize Arabic and Tamazight as co-official languages (Moroccan Const. – Article 5). The exact reasoning behind Muhammad VI's reversal of policy from the era of his father's rule towards a more inclusive linguistic landscape in Morocco remains somewhat unclear. Nonetheless, his apparent enthusiasm for a more inclusive Moroccan state that recognizes the rights of its Tamazight speaking community can be seen as a major step forward in the wider movement for linguistic and cultural rights in North Africa.

However, although on the official level Tamazight has received state recognition in Morocco and is beginning to find a place in government administration and education, the road to increased acceptance of Tamazight from the Arabic speaking population of Morocco is long. Research on language attitudes in Morocco has shown that many members of the Arabic speaking community still do not fully recognize the importance and place of Tamazight in Morocco and generally view the language in a negative light. A 2004 study among Moroccan students in a non Tamazight speaking area showed wholly negative attitudes towards the language (Marley 2004; 38). However, the study hits on an important point in that although attitudes towards Tamazight were generally negative there was a relative degree of support for its institutionalization in education. As the data reflects, "over half of the informants thought that

using other languages (i.e. varieties of Tamazight) would be a good idea, acknowledging that pedagogically it was helpful to use mother tongues for early years teaching” (Marley 2004; 42).

When examining developments in Algeria a somewhat different picture emerges. Despite its position as a sizable minority (Henry 2006; 56, Algeria: Ethnologue), the Tamazight community in Algeria has not seen the rapid developments in rights and protections afforded to the Moroccan Tamazight. While the language is represented in Algerian media, with a dedicated radio broadcast in Tamazight, integration into the Algerian education system has remained limited (Henry 2006; 56). Many of the steps forward in the integration of Tamazight into the education system of Algeria have come in the form of protest rights gained in the wake of the strikes and demonstrations of the 1980’s, and less as a result of true government openness to reform (Saadi-Mokrane 2002; 49).

In illustration of the gains made during this period, following the Berber Spring two university departments for Berber Language and Culture were established at the University of Tizo-Ouzou and Bejaija in 1990-91 respectively (Benrabah 2007; 234). Additionally, following general strikes in 1994-95 that brought the Algerian educational system to a halt, the government was forced to create the High Commission for Berber Affairs which was tasked with introducing Tamazight language into education and media (Benrabah 2007; 235). Perhaps the biggest step forward in the past decade came in 2003 when, after the recognition of Tamazight by President Bouteflika as a ‘national’ language the year before, integration of the language into the Algerian Middle School system began (Benrabah 2007; 235, 246).

However, in 2005 after talks between the Algerian prime minister and Tamazight representatives from the Kabyle region yielded an agreement that would solidify official status

for the language, President Bouteflika expressed open hostility to the idea. In a public address, Bouteflika stated that:

Arabic will remain the only official language in Algeria. No country in the world has two official languages and it will never be the case in Algeria where the only official language, recognized by the constitution, is Arabic. I cannot accept things that work against Algeria's interests. (Benchabane 2005 qtd in Benrabah 2007; 247)

Interestingly, the response from the Kabyle representatives in the face of Bouteflika's hostility was to cite the case of South Africa as an officially multilingual state, which provided an "enlightening example" of the progress that could be made (Benchabane 2005 qtd in Benrabah 2007; 247). The case of South Africa is not without its own unique challenges in terms of language rights, but the employment of the South African case shows an acute awareness by Kabyle representatives of a growing struggle for language rights which allows them to place themselves alongside other groups fighting for those rights on an international stage.

Within the emerging and evolving discussion on Tamazight in North Africa little attention appears to be paid by scholars and activists to the various international mechanisms that currently exist through which to address issues of language rights. Both Morocco and Algeria are members of the Arab League and are parties to the Arab Charter on Human Rights, which contains provisions for the protection of linguistic rights. Article III of the charter stipulates that:

Each State party to the present Charter undertakes to ensure to all individuals subject to its jurisdiction the right to enjoy the rights and freedoms set forth herein, without distinction on grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religious

belief, opinion, thought, national or social origin, wealth, birth or physical or mental disability. (Article III –Arab Charter on Human Rights)

Important to note, however, is that in Article IV an “opt out” of sorts is provided which stipulates that in “exceptional situations of emergency which threaten the life of the nation”, states may forego their obligations under the charter regarding the provision of rights and protection from discrimination for those living in the state (Article IV – Arab Charter on Human Rights).

Additionally, Articles XIV and XV afford linguistic rights pertaining to trial and courtroom proceedings which guarantee interpreters and for those accused of a crime to be charged and tried in a language that they understand (Article XIV/XV - Arab Charter on Human Rights).

Finally, Article XXV offers protection for the rights of minorities, stating that, “Persons belonging to minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to use their own language and to practice their own religion. The exercise of these rights shall be governed by law” (Article XXV – Arab Charter on Human Rights). However, it’s important to note that minority is a term left undefined in the charter and thus open to the interpretation of its individual member states.

Another instrument that could be utilized in the continued push for greater linguistic rights for Tamazight speakers is the Cultural Charter for Africa, originally developed by the Organization for African Unity, the predecessor to the African Union. While Morocco is not a current member of the African union, Algeria remains a member and has ratified the Cultural Charter. The primary mention of linguistic rights in the Charter is Article XVIII which stipulates that, “The African States should prepare and implement the reforms necessary for the introduction of African languages into education. To this end each state may choose one or more languages.” (Article XVIII – Cultural Charter for Africa). Although much of the Charter

represents a utopian vision for the future of the African continent, its limited provisions for the rights of speakers of African Languages could be an important tool alongside other international mechanisms for securing future rights.

Additionally, within the framework of the United Nations a number of instruments exist with relevant provisions that could be employed in the argument for greater linguistic rights in Morocco and Algeria. Both states are a party to several United Nations conventions which deal, at least in part, with the protection of linguistic rights including; the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. (United Nations 1976, 1992, 2007) It is important to recognize in this regard that the application of the principles contained within these conventions as they relate to linguistic rights is a sizable challenge, given the complexity of the conventions and the often weak implementation mechanisms that are in place. Still, a firm basis exists within the international community that could aid the Tamazight speaking community to further their claims. The *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* deserve additional comment due to their relevance with the current status of the Tamazight community in these states.

While both of these declarations include provisions for the protection of linguistic rights that are relevant to the cases of Morocco and Algeria it is unclear as to whether or not their successful use as a method of achieving greater rights for Tamazight speakers is possible. To my knowledge, the Tamazight speaking community is not considered an official minority in either Morocco or Algeria and members of the community hold full citizenship. This unrecognized

status could complicate calls within the Declaration for the state to “protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories” and to ensure that “linguistic minorities have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public” (United Nations 1992). Although the Tamazight of Morocco and Algeria make up sizable minorities in each state and have faced institutional discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and language throughout much of modern history, their unrecognized status makes the application of this declaration a challenge.

At the same time, a potentially stronger case for linguistic rights may be made on the basis of the provisions of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. One major demand of the Tamazight community in Morocco and Algeria relates to the protection of not only the Tamazight language but additionally the cultural heritage of the community itself. Article XIII of the Declaration supports this general aim and sets forth a “right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons”(Article XIII – United Nations 2007). Additionally, another major focus within the Tamazight community is a desire for further integration of Tamazight into the educational systems of both countries. Article XIV cites that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning...States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their

communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

(Article XIV – United Nations 2007)

At present, the Tamazight movement in Morocco and Algeria has yet to employ any of the aforementioned mechanisms to a significant degree in their quest for greater rights and protections for the community as a whole. However, given the apparent gains of recent decades and opening up of space within the government for alternative voices in the debate on language planning and policy in regards to Tamazight their future application could prove to be a fruitful tool. Numerous cases exist which have attempted to employ these mechanisms and could offer some guidance should they be utilized in the future.

While Tamazight may not yet have received full acceptance in Algeria and Morocco, the situation today lends itself to cautious optimism regarding the prospects for continued language maintenance and greater rights for the community as a whole. Tamazight has survived invasion and repression spanning over millennia, so despite its status as a minority language in many ways it has proven its linguistic resilience through the efforts of its speakers to keep the language alive. This long term linguistic steadfastness has received major support through the emergence of a strong Tamazight cultural movement and recent developments in language planning and policy by the governments of Morocco and Algeria. As the community moves forward it can begin to utilize the mechanisms called upon by other indigenous communities across the world in a push for greater rights and protections. A multi-tiered approach such as this, which encompasses grass roots community activism, more inclusive planning and policy efforts by

state governments, and the involvement of the wider international community paints a bright picture for Tamazight in not just Morocco and Algeria, but across all of North Africa.

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