

## **The Officialization of the Amazigh Language in Morocco: A Historic Event**

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### **Abstract:**

This article exposes the problem of the constitutionalization of Amazigh in Morocco as an event invested by the written press and which has raised many controversies. Indeed, the Amazigh associative actors emphasize that even official recognition, particularly in the texts of the law of the Moroccan State, could not serve to exalt and ensure the proper functioning of a language in a multilingual context. Especially if the latter is in contact with a language and or languages that have a certain legitimacy and supremacy attested by the speakers themselves. The use of events seems able to further consolidate the recommendations of the 2011 constitution.

**Keywords:** Constitutionalization, Amazigh, press, events, multilingualism

## Introduction

In Morocco, language contact generates sociolinguistic phenomena that not only impact the language behavior of speakers, but also decide their choices about how to live in society. The promotion of one language to the detriment of others is the corollary of a hierarchy, of inequality in the status of languages that share the same territory and whose functions are not the same<sup>1</sup>. We thus speak about living languages that are rich, effective, written, with its oral idioms, folkloric, non-scholarly, inefficient, and lacking in vitality. This reality of plurilingual communities allows speakers who have the chance to acquire a rewarding language to be fulfilled in society, to enjoy linguistics and "cultural security"<sup>2</sup>. It also guarantees "convenience" in their personal and professional lives. While speakers, who have not had the chance to learn the so-called "strong" languages from a socio-economic point of view, remain on the sidelines in the face of the frustrations and hindrances inflicted by social "injustice".

Indeed, the event of constitutionalization is just another point that further accentuates the tensions between the supporters of Amazigh (Berber) and the defenders of the standard Arabic language. It should be noted that the language issue in Morocco is not resolved.

Since Ajdir's speech in 2001 which recommended the recognition of Amazigh as fundamental part of the Moroccan identity, the speeches of the militants -those who defend the linguistic rights of a community to which they belong- consider that the preservation of their identity is dependent on the promotion of their mother tongue.

Their conflicts respectively show a concealed social divide. Amazighophones, like Arabic speakers, seek to protect their languages against domination by another. Indeed, from an ideological point of view, the discourse of the elite divides Morocco into two different linguistic communities which share the same territory but which do not adopt the same logic. This leads, as we see in the written press, to a futile controversy because neither party could deny the existence of the other. Linguistic diversity is worthy of recognition as long as it reflects the coexistence of different social groups in terms of their languages and their ways of life. This difference which constitutes, moreover, a richness does not prevent "living together" and tolerance vis-à-vis the other.

## Amazigh in a multilingual context

In a complex community like Morocco, the languages in contact maintain power relations insofar as each has a social status, a social value and a social weight which ensures its permanent or limited use. Indeed, multilingualism in Morocco alters the status and use of vernacular languages. Amazigh is among the language practices "damaged" by the predominance of other languages present, French and standard Arabic in this case. Without forgetting the extraordinary evolution of Moroccan Arabic (the *darija*).

1 CALVET L-J., 2011, *Il était une fois 7000 langues*, Paris, Fayard.

2 BOUVET L., 2015, *L'insécurité culturelle*. Paris. Fayard.

The latter is the language of communication between all Moroccan Arabs and Amazighs. Despite its unofficial status, Moroccan Arabic is present in the media and in the Moroccan sociolinguistic landscape (notices, advertising, etc.). While the Amazigh continues to try to gradually integrate the effective social field. This is how this cohabitation of languages co-present in Morocco leads to conflict and friction between the languages in contact and between those who adopt them.

### The Reasoning of policy makers

It must be said that the language policy adopted after Morocco gained independence did not take into account the linguistic diversity that characterizes the country. We especially wanted to get rid of the foreign culture and the language of the colonizer to restore esteem to the language of the nation: Arabic. The Arabization process was a political strategy to be able to ensure social cohesion in which “the language was the symbol of a collective identity”<sup>3</sup>. The concern was therefore to homogenize the different social communities, to revalorize the “national identity against that of the invading foreigner, and to defend the national cause against the interests of the colonizer”<sup>4</sup> The marginalization of the Amazigh, especially in the institutional context, has caused movements to arise claiming the rights of the mother tongue: Amazigh (or Berber) practiced by a Moroccan population.

The hierarchy between languages and between those who practice them in Morocco continues to mark the speeches of activists and associative actors of Amazigh since the creation of associations in 1960 who largely supported the birth of the Amazigh Cultural Movement (MCA). The objective was to institutionalize their mother tongue, to exalt it so that it was at the same level as the so-called dominant languages and therefore to have the same privileges.

You could say that for the MCA, the rival of their language is Standard Arabic. Admittedly in a world of globalization, this language does not escape a kind of degression, at least in its learning and its use in the daily life of Moroccans. But it has always had special attention and supremacy at the level of market for linguistic and symbolic goods in the country. In fact, one might wonder what its operation would have been, if it were not the language of the sacred book. The language of “Allah”.

Amazigh activists are aware that a language that is not used in state bodies and that is not taught has no value for users and then it is likely to disappear and die<sup>5</sup>. It is therefore obvious that Amazigh runs the risk of being dissipated over time as long as it is only spoken by its users in non-formal contexts. Especially since its use remains restricted and minimal because it is not recognized by law. We understand by this that a language recommended by the authorities of the State is a language that is indeed valued/Rewarding.

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3 FILALY-ANSARY A., 2019, La question des langues au Maghreb, pour une approche informée et responsable, Rabat, La croisée des chemins, p.13.

4 Ibid

5 Voir HAGEGE C., 2000, HAGEGE C., 2000, Halte à la mort des langues, Paris, Odile Jacob.

It is for these reasons that the associative actors believe in the constitution of Amazigh as a support that they have been seeking for years. It would strengthen, for them, the place of their mother tongue in the Moroccan sociolinguistic landscape and especially in the official contexts which are the sources of a country's progress (education, administration, media, job market, etc.).

### The Officialization of Amazigh: A Historic Event

The announcement of the constitutionalization of Amazigh was an event celebrated by all Moroccans. Some see it as the achievement of a certain linguistic democracy, a sign of recognition of linguistic diversity in Morocco and of equity in favor of Amazigh. Others see it as a historic event reflecting the culmination of actions carried out by associative actors (militants) who have always campaigned for the institutionalization of this language since the creation of the Agadir Charter in 1994. They are aware that by this approach, they encourage the State to recognize and promote the Amazigh language. For them, the exaltation of Amazigh essentially passes through its constitutionalization since a language, recommended by the constitution, acquires the approval of the State. The constitutionalization certainly gives Amazigh a new breath, a new image by revitalizing it after having been a “historically and socially marginalized”<sup>6</sup> language.

How has constitutionalization served Amazigh?

It seems that all the measures taken for the promotion of Amazigh since Ajdir's speech in 2001 until its constitutionalization in 2011 (The Creation of The Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM), integration into schools, its media coverage, its institutionalization), indeed constitute decisive stages in the socio-political transformation of Moroccan society on the one hand, and in the radical change experienced by the status of Amazigh on the other. The latter, which emerges from a situation of marginalization especially in the institutional context, preparing to assume the functioning of the official languages.

Moreover, all IRCAM's efforts to promote Amazigh and to impose it do not evade, at least as Amazigh activists aspire to do, the status of standard Arabic or even that of foreign languages, like French, in the dynamic sectors of society and in the representations of collective memory. It seems, in fact, that Amazigh still has this “popular” and “folkloric” aspect. In this regard, it should be pointed out that the languages supported by the institutions, and which are recommended by the constitutional text, continue to be used in education, in the media, in administration, etc. Their use is certainly intensive. These languages dominate the national socio-economic market to the detriment of mother tongues, in particular Amazigh. We understand by this that Amazigh is recommended by law, but its use remains almost the same. This is why the official discourse, in the eyes of MCA activists, remains superficial because it masks the reality of a language “co-official with Arabic in the new Constitution in Morocco of July 1, 2011”<sup>7</sup>

6 CHAKER S., 2009, Aménagement linguistique de l'amazighe : motivations, méthodologie et retombées, Rabat, Asinag, 3. IRCAM, p. 164.

7 BOUHIJAR A., 2012, De la langue du terroir à une langue au pouvoir : officialisation de la langue amazighe (berbère) au Maroc. Lenguas. Revue de sociolinguistique, (71), p.29.

which is still trying to find a place among the so-called dominant languages in the Maghreb in general and in Morocco in particular. Indeed, activists argue that Standard Arabic remains the primary official language. Its supremacy is manifested in the logic of linguistic policy as the cement of the different sociolinguistic communities in Morocco. Arabic is then essential for the Moroccan speakers - Amazigh and Arab - insofar as it represents for them an identity and a reference. However, its highly valued status does not prevent the recognition of other components of Moroccan identity such as Amazigh.

### **The constitutionalization of Amazigh as an event in the written press**

Since the start of the Amazigh rehabilitation process in 2001, an Amazigh press has begun to emerge in the Moroccan market. A press that is exclusively interested in the Amazigh cause in Morocco and even elsewhere (Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Siwa...). Several newspaper titles are emerging: Amadal Amazigh, Tawiza, Agraw, Al-amazighiya, Aztta, Tilouah, etc. They expose the particularity of the speech of the MCA compared to the speech conveyed in the other national newspapers. Regular and irregular Amazigh newspapers in their publication, the majority of which are subsidized by the associative actors themselves, attempt through their discourse to materialize the ideas and thoughts of the "protest movement". These newspapers offer, in fact, to the defenders of the Amazigh cause a space to express their points of view, their disputes and claims, their reasoning as to the process of integration of their mother tongue in the different sectors of society. The Amazigh constitutionalization was an event that also made the scoop for the national press: Al-tajdid, Al-yawm, Al-alam, Al-ahdath Al-maghribiya, Al-Itihad Al-Ichtiraki, Akhbar Al-Aawm, Al-Ousboua, Al-Ar'y, Al-Sabah, Al-Bidaoui, The Economist, etc. They devoted a page, sometimes more, to the announcement of the constitutionalization of this language. Admittedly, it was not the information that counted for these newspapers but it was above all the questioning of this state measure and its challenges.

By reading the press articles on the event of the constitutionalization of Amazigh, one could detect different, even diametrically opposed points of view. Arabic speakers express a certain fear considering that the introduction of another element could disturb the socio-political stability of the country, others rather delighted in considering that the institutionalization of Amazigh is a democratic act responding to a political openness and to social democratization. As for the Amazigh activists, they question, through their discourse, the procedure envisaged by the government to meet their expectations. They wonder about the intention of the State after the officialization of Amazigh.

They also express their fears towards the implementation of this constitutionalization. Would the official Amazigh assume an effective and efficient functioning? Would it find a place in the job market? Would it be able to remedy the social frustrations of Amazighophones or would it remain a formality and an artifice?

Admittedly, the Amazigh written press took charge of the dissemination of information but also the animation of the debates on the event of the constitutionalization expected for many years. In fact, they represent two totally opposite visions, each of which militates for the preservation of its own identity, which essentially passes through language.

For the supporters of Amazigh, "the constitutionalization of Amazigh rationalizes linguistic diversity in Morocco by taking into account all the components of identity"<sup>8</sup>. Others believe that "the right to difference and diversity does not necessarily mean the constitutionalization of all the languages of the different communities"<sup>9</sup> and that "the policy of the French colonizer continued even after obtaining independence by attempting to create conflicts between the Arabic-speaking and Amazigh-speaking communities so that their languages survive and prosper"<sup>10</sup> adding that "the constitutionalization of Amazigh for the moment will weaken both the status of Arabic and that of Amazigh in favor of French Language "<sup>11</sup>.

In any case and despite the opinions that oppose it, the officialization of Amazigh has effectively changed the configuration of the languages in contact in Morocco. The appropriation of a new status re-launches the process of its integration into state authorities. It should be noted that the new government has allocated a fund of 200 Million MDH to use Amazigh in public administration<sup>12</sup>. Added to this is the decision taken in January 2022 by the government to integrate Amazigh into the legal system. The role of the constitutional text is therefore not negligible. On the contrary, the process of rehabilitation may be slow but gradual. Its importance lies not only in the positive change of status - from a non-official language to an official language - but also in the encouragement of officials to take seriously its integration, especially in the educational sector, in the media field nationally and even in the legal sector. It is in these dynamic fields of society that a language thrives.

It seems that "Amazigh is able to gradually perform the same functions as Arabic thanks to its constitutionalization" <sup>13</sup>. It is through the controversy raised by the national written press that we could speak of an antagonism representing two ideologies that reflect "a social divide".

### Events as demonstration communication strategy

One of the privileges of the constitutional text is to authorize Amazigh militants to organize demonstrations to express their demands relating to the sociolinguistic, economic and political reality of Amazighophones, but also to show their pride in belonging to this social group.

Some activists are not satisfied with this loyal act. They continue their demands through the media (written and electronic press, social networks). Their speech shows great ambition. They constantly recommend the implementation of their mother tongue (Berber). As long as Amazigh has not reached the level of use and the expected weight on "the market of symbolic goods" (Bourdieu, 1982) the associative actors and the IRACM continue to multiply their efforts in a world of technology and of economic power whose languages are in competition.

8 Le journal Al-yawm, 2011/5/29/28, n°6347

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid

12 200 MDH en 2022 pour les premiers pas de l'amazighe dans l'administration publique - Medias24 . Consulté le 15 janvier 2022.

13 Le journal Al-Ahdad Al-Maghribia, 14 octobre 2011, n° 4482.



They thus resort to events as an effective communication strategy in the dissemination and promotion of their language (Congresses, festivals, celebrations, traditions, publications, caravans, literature competitions, etc.) in short, anything that could serve their identity as an ethnic group in its own right.

Obviously, the events and festivals were mobilized in favor of the promotion of the mother language: Amazigh. The main objective is to transmit a message and to make propaganda through an atmosphere that holds a significant connotation. We then highlight in these festivities all the characteristics and details that refer to the Berber identity: design, color, song, music, costume, popular symbols (the famous symbol of Tazarzite, the letter "Yaz" (ⵢ) (see figures 1 and 2) and even a flag representing the Berber-speaking community to the whole world. For the Amazigh, each symbol carries a story of their identity. This means that the event invested by the Amazigh actor fulfills its representative function of the Amazigh culture. These festivities would give added value to the Amazigh language. They constitute a strategic challenge for this language to be able to represent a linguistic and symbolic asset. Events are also a means by which the Amazighs show their attachment to ancestral origins. Through events, the Amazigh people mediate a reality which, for them, comes in third place after standard Arabic and French. They restore, as soon as the opportunity arises, an existence of a social group that has its own particularities (language, way of life, traditions, etc.). They express pride and at the same time denounce their marginalization. A pride of belonging to the Berber identity and a discomfort of suffering from social inequalities.

In the same perspective, IRCAM, guardian of the promotion of this language in Morocco, ensured that Moroccan speakers celebrate the Amazigh "Yennayr" New Year which recalls the history of Berber ancestors. A day that coincides with January 13 of each year that associative actors celebrate not only in Morocco but in some western countries where the Amazigh diaspora resides. World Mother Language Day is also celebrated annually on February 21<sup>14</sup>. An event that encourages the democratization of multilingual contexts on the one hand, and the rehabilitation of so-called "dominated" languages which are threatened with loss if the State does not protect them<sup>15</sup>. In addition, the International Women's Day celebrated on March 8 every year. On this occasion, the Amazigh pay homage to Moroccan women in general, but they do not fail to underline the role of the Amazigh woman "like the impregnable citadel of the Berber language"<sup>16</sup> in the transmission of the mother tongue from one generation to another by reaffirming its place in society.

In addition, IRCAM and Amazigh associations organize, in different cities, international conferences dedicated exclusively to the question of "Amazighity" in Morocco. It is responsible for the publication of books and journals in various disciplines of Amazigh. It organizes competitions and awards prizes in Amazigh literature. It also organizes painting exhibitions in which artists highlight the Berber artistic aspect (landscape of the Berber world, symbols relating to the Berber cultural heritage (Tifinagh, jewelry, architecture, etc.) IRCAM also deals with the training of teachers and inspectors in Amazigh.

14 Al-Alam Al-Amazighi, mars 2011/2961, n°129.

15 Ibid.

16 CHAKER, Op., Cit., p.165.

It also contributes to the subventions for the production of cinematographic films in Amazigh language, etc.

Now, this language has a legal reference, the constitution which legitimizes the organization of events not only to disseminate the Amazigh language and culture to Moroccan speakers, but also to restore esteem to this language which constitutes for the Amazigh an essential component of the Maghreb identity.

### Conclusion

Diversity in unity is the foundation of the language policy adopted in Morocco. This policy ensures that all Moroccans are united while recognizing the components that build the identity of social groups. It is true that the linguistic communities do not speak the same so-called “mother tongue”, which refers to an identity, but share “the same geo-social space”<sup>17</sup> which brings them together. They belong to the same identity sphere which is after all the nation. Arabs or Amazighs are all Moroccans. It is true that history differentiates them but the present and the future bring them together. It is in this sense that the constitutional text recommends the formalization of Amazigh to establish an agreement between the different components of society.

Amazighophones are aware that their role is essential in the popularization of their mother tongue. The constitution alone could not meet their ambitions. We could say finally that the constitution was only the trigger which opens the way to several actions allowing the Amazighs to spread their language, in particular by the use of events which have several facets where festivity and propaganda mingle as well as cultural and political aspects.

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17 CALVET, L.J., Op., Cit.



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## Appendix

Figure 1 : Tifinagh Symbol



Figure 2 : Amazigh Flag

