

Libyan Berbers struggle to assert their identity online

By Aisha al-Rumi

Spring, 2009. In Tmazight *tawalt* means “word.” In 2001, one of Libya’s leading Berber activists in exile chose *Tawalt* as the name for a website that he had conceived as a forum open to Libyan Berbers who wanted to have their voice – or words – heard. Over the following eight years *Tawalt.com* became more than just another blog for the Libyan community in exile. Mohammad Umadi, who was 30-years-old when he launched the website and has since adopted the Berber name Madghis, started collecting scholarly publications on Libyan Berbers, and assembled the largest digital database on the history and language of his native community, including poetry recordings and downloadable books. True to its name, *Tawalt* gradually became the main cultural and political conduit for Libyan Berbers, a platform they also used to press for greater rights and recognition for their community, which the government allegedly discriminated against. The following it drew among the exiled community as well as inside the Jamahiriya led some scholars to believe that *Tawalt* was contributing to the birth of a Libyan Berber civil society.¹

In February 2009, however, *Tawalt* suddenly froze all its activities. Those discussion forums and recorded words, which had previously launched the site as a loquacious meeting point for the Libyan Berbers, were gradually removed. Umadi stopped updating the website and posted the announcement “*Tawalt* closes its doors” on its Arabic homepage. Users were warned that by the end of 2009 the website will be removed altogether from the ether. Had *Tawalt* been forced into silence? Had this nascent Berber civil society muffled itself? Reached by phone, Umadi declined to comment on the decision to shut down his website. “I hope you understand...” he pleaded, leaving possible explanations unaddressed.²

Some exiled Libyans believe that *Tawalt*’s closure is a “goodwill” gesture aimed at paving the way for negotiations with the Libyan government. Others suggest that Umadi’s family in Libya might have exercised pressure on him to put an end (at least temporarily) to his on-line activism, after they had become victims of an unprecedented display of anti-Amazigh sentiment. On December 24, 2008, some 300 people from among the so-called Libyan Revolutionary Committees and “Libya Tomorrow,” a group linked to Sayf al-Islam al-Qaddhafi, the more reformist son of the Libyan leader, surrounded the house of a relative of the founder of *Tawalt*, and shouted slogans like “the Revolution will not stop” and “Amazigh entity shall be destroyed.”³ While some pelted the house with

stones, others painted "the next time death" on the walls of Salem Umadi's house in Yefren, a town of 20,000 in Libya's Jebel Nafusa, a mountainous region 100km south of Tripoli where many Libyan Berbers live.

Mouthing the Libyan government's views, this hostile mob accused the house's owner of having ties to the *Congres Mondial Amazigh* (CMA), a Paris-based NGO for Amazigh rights, which they blamed for spreading seditious ideas that undermine Libya's "social unity." A spokesperson for the demonstrators read out a list of Libyan Berbers who had attended the annual meeting of the CMA in Morocco in November 2008, and pointed the finger at them for being separatists and traitors working for "Western and Zionist imperialism." Some protesters, wearing unthreatening white baseball caps, promised death for those who continued to take part in Amazigh activities, and announced that "punitive expeditions" will take place in other Berber towns in Libya. Since this clash, the CMA has reinforced its criticism of the Libyan government, which it accuses of instigating anti-Amazigh hatred and racism.⁴ A Libyan Berber activist in Morocco, Fethi Benkhalifa, has called this incident a return to the persecuting environment that characterized Libya in the 1970s, when public trials were commonplace.

These two interrelated events raise important questions on the fragile nature of Berber-state relations in Libya, a topic that has so far received little scholarly attention. Gellner and Micaud's landmark study on Arabs and Berbers does not even mention Libya and, similarly, the more recent comparative studies on the Berbers of the contemporary Maghrib have regrettably stopped short of analyzing what takes place on the Libyan side of the Jebel Nafusa. However, the inflammatory footage of the Yefren incident, which made it to the evening news of major Arabic satellite channels, has raised a certain degree of public concern on the status of the Libyan Berbers.

Consequently, it has become necessary to sketch the defining features of this community and trace the roots of what appears to be an emerging "Berber problem" in Libya today. The sudden decision to close the main Libyan Berber website compels us also to evaluate the impact that exiled Libyan Berbers, such as Umadi, and transnational Amazigh associations such as the CMA are having in mobilizing public perceptions of the Libyan Berbers both inside and outside Libya, a country where political activism along sectarian lines is banned. Most importantly, however, these two recent events lead us to wonder whether websites like *Tawalt* actually reflect the way Berbers inside the Jamahiriya perceive themselves, or whether web-based activists are inadvertently contributing to the construction of a new, "imagined" Libyan Amazigh identity that stands at odds with the homogeneous national character that the Libyan state has attempted to forge.

A strained history

The attitude of the Libyan government towards its Berber population has been ambiguous, alternating between a recent attempt to promote Berber folklore, on the one hand, and a flat out denial of their existence, on the other. While the government has promoted the renovation of landmark Berber architecture around the country – mainly

for the benefit of foreign tourists – it has suppressed all forms of cultural and political mobilization along sectarian lines.

On a number of occasions the Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi has stated that Libya is an Arab country and that Berber identity is nothing more than a colonial invention. In a speech to Tuareg tribal leaders in Niger in 2007 al-Qaddafi went so far as to deny the existence of Berbers in the whole of North Africa. “We in North Africa are Arabs, and North Africa is 100% Arab,” he stated.⁵ In another speech that year, al-Qaddafi stated that “Berbers are the Arabs that came via land (*barr barr* in Arabic)then colonialism arrived and said that Berbers are a different people from the Arabs.”⁶

While it is true that Italian authors wrote extensively about Berbers in Libya, colonial scholars would have overall tended to agree with al-Qaddafi’s portrayal of the Libyan Berbers as ethnically mixed Arabs. Indeed, many described Libya as being mostly populated by what they called “Arab-Berbers,” to indicate the mixed descendants of some thirteen centuries of cohabitation. Although the Italians awarded judicial and religious autonomy to Berbers because the majority was (and still is) Ibadi, a Muslim sect that spread during the Arab conquest of North Africa, ethnically and culturally, however, authors writing in the early twentieth century already described Berbers in Libya as being heavily Arabized. According to an Italian ethnographic study conducted in 1932, there were no purely ethnic Berber tribes in Libya and, linguistically, they had already become Arabic-speaking.⁷ Even the colonial population census of 1936 did not differentiate between Arabs and Berbers, lumping them under the single heading: “Libyans.”

Similarly, today’s population statistics group Arabs and Berbers together and, as a result, no official numbers for Berbers are available. The problem of quantification is that it would first require a commonly agreed definition of who should be considered a Libyan Berber, and identity politics is always contentious. If on the one hand the government denies out right the existence of a Berber population in Libya, on the other, some Libyan Berber activists have gone as far as to claim that more than 80-90 percent of the country is Berber, a term that they do not consider to be based solely on ethnic or linguistic distinctions, but on a very porous notion of shared cultural and historical legacy. According to some of the exiled Libyan Berbers, even the Arabic-speaking and ethnically Arab inhabitants of the Jebel Nafusa should be considered Berbers. As Umadi put it, “Being Berber is a cultural thing, not just an ethnic distinction.”⁸

My own non-scientific estimates, however, would place the percentage of Libya’s Amazigh-speaking population (including the Tuareg and the inhabitants of Ghaddames) and their descendants at around 10 percent, or less, of the population. Unlike the rest of the Maghrib, the majority of the Libyan Berbers are Ibadi, who differ from the country’s Maliki population on a few points of political philosophy and theology. Western scholarship tends to refer to the Ibadiya as neither Shia nor Sunni. However, due to the lack of knowledge of the community’s peculiar history and theology, most Libyan Ibadis perceive themselves as Sunni Muslims. Today Libyan Ibadis do not have their own

shaykhs or mosques, and on Fridays they pray alongside all other Muslims. Some of them, however, have forged ties with Oman, the only existing Ibadi-ruled state, for religious teachings and books on the Ibadiya.

Berber activists claim that the Libyan state has pursued a “forced arabization” and has attempted to annihilate Berber cultural identity in a number of ways. They claim that the 1969 *Constitutional Declaration* discriminates against them, as the document defines Libya as an Arab nation and Arabic as the country’s only official language.⁹ Consequently Berber languages are not officially recognized and cannot be used in public institutions. Even the 1977 *Declaration of the Establishment of the Authority of the People*, which replaced the Constitutional Declaration, places repeated emphasis on the Arab nature of the Libyan state, which is called the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya – a wording that some Berbers criticize.¹⁰ An attempt to forge an Arab identity of the Libyan nation is also present in the education system, entirely in Arabic, and in the text books, where there is no mention of a Berber past – or present – in North African history. Until 2007 a controversial law banned Berbers from giving newborns Berber names and forced children with Amazigh names to adopt traditional Arabic names to register for school.

When prompted, Umadi acknowledges that the process of linguistic arabization of the Berber community and the state-controlled Arab depiction of the country’s history predate the rise to power of Muammar al-Qaddafi in 1969. It was in part the result of the pan-Arab euphoria that moulded the political climate in the post-colonial period and of the influence of Libyan intellectuals who returned to their country in the early 1950s after living in exile in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria during the colonial period. Additionally, Egypt and Egyptian schoolteachers, who were brought in to organize Libya’s post-colonial education system, also played a determining role in projecting an Arab character on the country.

While he recognizes that schools in the Jebel Nafusa have always been in Arabic and that Tmazight was never a taught subject, Umadi nevertheless lays most of the blame for the cultural loss of the Berber community on the flattening cultural policy enforced by al-Qaddafi and the so-called cultural revolution (*al-thawra al-thaqafi*) of the late 1970s when books on Berbers, together with numerous other publications deemed reactionary, were burned. In this same period, Libya’s first Amazigh association, the *Rabita Shamal Afriqiya*, was also crushed and its members arrested on charges of *hizbiya* (creation of political parties). “Previously Arabic was not forced on us” Umadi said referring to the period when Libya was under monarchical rule, when the 1951 constitution granted freedom of language.¹¹

Activism across generations, across borders

The gradual censorship of anything related to Berber identity inside Libya, coupled with an increased internal migration to the country’s capital, has led a younger generation of Libyan Berbers to loose ties with their community’s cultural heritage and language. Umadi, who is now 37 and has lived in exile since he was fourteen, says that when he was growing up he was not aware of an Amazigh history or tradition because books on the

Amazigh simply did not exist inside the country. His family spoke Tmazight, but it was only after he left Libya at fourteen and, later in the U.S., that he started becoming aware of the cultural heritage of the Jebel Nafusa. "It was only when I was in University in the US that I found in the libraries a number of books on the Amazigh of Libya, and I started to realize that we have this culture," he explained. Umadi later moved to France, then to Morocco, and has since become one of the most ardent advocates of Libyan Berber culture.

Berber-speaking areas of Libya, such as Jebel Nafusa, Zwara, Sukna, Awjila, Ghadames, Ghat and Jalo, still maintain their Berber characteristics and inhabitants of these towns still use Tmazight alongside Arabic in their daily lives. The younger generation of Berbers living in Tripoli, however, do not even speak Tmazight and take little interest in their community's customs and traditions. Most of them take issue with the picture of the Berbers as a persecuted minority as is at times depicted by foreign websites. "I do not consider myself and other Tmazight speakers as an ethnic minority - as many do" wrote an anonymous Libyan who offered his personal email for responses. "We are Libyan Tmazight speakers and Libyan Arab speakers, because I have never experienced that I am different from other Libyans nor the other Libyans treated me differently or as a stranger," he added.

Writing on the al-Jazeera website, which now has a dedicated section on the Amazigh, Libyan scholar Fahmi al-Khshim uses Qaddafi's same public rhetoric to deny the existence of a Berber problem in Libya. "There is no Libyan Amazigh issue: the Amazigh are simply Arab, and Amazigh language was originally Arabic. Everybody speaks Arabic, nobody in Libya speaks only Amazigh," he stated.¹²

In response to the cultural loss of this community and to counter the homogenizing narrative of the Libyan state, a number of activists have attempted to use the web to reconnect Libyan Berbers with their language. Until its announced closure, *Tawalt* was the richest such cultural website, offering not only downloadable grammar books but also audio recording of grammar classes of Tarifit, Tashalhit, and Nafusa, different branches of the Tmazight language. Unlike *Tawalt*, which is in Arabic (they claim to be the first ever Amazigh website in Arabic), two other Berber cultural websites, *Libyaimal.com* and *Adrar.5u.com*, are exclusively in Tmazight.

One group that has a more political agenda and accuses the current Libyan government of curtailing the recognition of the country's Berber identity is the Libyan Tamazight Congress (*Agraw a'Libi n'Tmazight*, ALT). Based in the UK since 2000, they demand that the government make official reference to Tmazight in the constitution and that it recognize Berber culture as part of Libyan national identity and culture. As stated on their website, they demand the recognition of Tmazight language, along with Arabic, as a national and official language, and that support be offered in educational institutions, governmental and public offices and media. They also demand the immediate cancellation of all suppressive orders and actions against Berbers and their rights.

A number of Berber activists do not restrict their criticisms of the government to “language imperialism,” but also accuse the government of the “physical elimination” of a number of Libyan Berbers, including prominent intellectuals, such as Ibadi religious scholar and Cambridge PhD graduate Umru al-Nami, who was imprisoned in 1981 and is believed to have died in prison (though there is no official news of him since 1984). A number of Berber websites show a black and white photo of this bearded man flanked by the question “Where is al-Nami?” (*Eina al-Nami?*). Another member of the pantheon of Berber martyrs is Libyan poet Said al-Maghrug, known as Sifaw, who wrote in Arabic and in Amazigh and who in 1979 was involved in what activists refer to as a dubious “road accident” that injured him permanently. Another is Yusuf Khraysh, a political activist who fled the country on foot in 1979 and was allegedly assassinated while in exile in 1987.¹³ According to some news reports, people are still being arrested for their affiliation to the Amazigh party.¹⁴

A number of exiled Libyans take issue with the way the Libyan Berber opposition depicts the persecution of members of their community and argue that the cultural and political repression actuated by the government does not specifically target Berbers, but is a common feature that affects all Libyans, Berber or not. A leading opposition leader, Ashur al-Shams, who has been in exile since the late 1970s claims, for example, that the depiction of al-Nami as a victim of anti-Berber persecution is wrong. “Al-Nami and I were friends. Although he was a leading Ibadi religious scholar, that was not the reason for his arrest,” al-Shams explained. “He was targeted because he had ties to a number of opposition figures – including myself – who in those years were particularly active abroad.” Al-Shams accuses the Berber opposition of dividing what he views as mainly a political issue into sectarian terms. “It does not make any sense. We should stay together rather than pursue individual agendas,” he added.

Although criticized by the non-Berber Libyan diaspora as well as some Berbers inside the country, until 2007 the Libyan Amazigh opposition and their websites appear to have been effective in raising a greater awareness on the Berber issue and in paving the way for negotiations with the Libyan government. After abolishing the law that banned Berber names, in 2007 the Libyan government convened the first Amazigh Congress to discuss education and social integration of the country's Berber communities and allowed individuals to display Tmazight signs at government-sponsored events. Unlike in previous years, former Libyan Prime Minister al-Baghdadi al-Mahmoudi and Sayf al-Islam al-Qaddafi made high-profile visits to Berber regions.

As late as autumn of 2008, the government allegedly offered to meet personally with exiled Berber activists to discuss their demands, but as a result of the government-sponsored demonstration that took place in Yefren in December of 2008, all negotiations seem to have come to a standstill. The most important Berber website closed down and political Berber activists await the Libyan government's next move.

What that next step is could become clearer closer to the 40th anniversary of the Revolution this upcoming September when the government will disclose the text of the

country's new constitution – an endeavour promoted by Sayf al-Islam al-Qaddafi. Given Berber activists' insistence that Tmazight and Berber cultural legacy be awarded official recognition in the Libyan state, the final text of this Constitution could very well be a barometer revealing the direction that the Libyan government will be taking in its handling of Libya's Berber problem. The Libyan state, today, has a historic opportunity to re-establish its legitimacy by making the transition from a repressive unitary state that rejects diversity to one that embraces pluralism and manages it peacefully through mechanisms of cultural and linguistic inclusion.

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¹ Baldinetti, Anna. "Le Istanze Amazigh in Libia: la nascita di una società civile?" Unpublished paper that Baldinetti kindly shared with this author.

² Phone interview by the author with Muhammad (Madghis) Umadi, March 17, 2009.

³ Images of the Yefren incident, which took place on December 24, 2008, were broadcasted on al-Arabiya and NBC and can be seen on www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKzsWnl1im4, accessed on March 18, 2009.

⁴ Congres Mondial Amazigh Website. <<http://www.congres-mondial-amazigh.org/-/index.php>> accessed March 25, 2009.

⁵ "In overture to Iran, Qaddafi declares North Africa Shi'ite and calls for establishment of New Fatimid State," MEMRI Special dispatch n. 1535, April 6, 2007.

⁶ Speech held during the celebrations for the anniversary of the Jamahiriya, 2 March 2007, www.akhbar-libya.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5149&itemid=51

⁷ De Agostini, Enrico. *Prospetto etnografico delle popolazioni libiche* (1932), p. 31.

⁸ Interview with the author March 17, 2009.

⁹ "The Berbers of Libya." Report submitted to the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), United Nations Economic and Social Council, at the 64th session of the committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Geneva, from Feb. 23 to March 12, 2004.

¹⁰ "Declaration on the Establishment of the Authority of the People." Online at <http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ly01000_.html> accessed March 25, 2009.

¹¹Document online at:

<<http://www.altlibya.org/Amazighiat/Tmazight%20Legal%20Spotslights.200407>>.htm accessed March 25, 2009.

¹² Al-Jazeera's section on Berber section at: <<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/AFAFF60F-D439-47A0-AA3B-D9CFB8B0E70D.htm>> accessed March 25, 2009.

¹³ Profile of Khraysh on al-Jazeera's "Libyan Personalities" sections at <<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/42F38967-5B67-4CDA-BBC9-FD94EADED57B,frameless.htm?NRMODE=Published>> accessed March 25, 2009.

¹⁴"Victims' dismay at Libya's rehabilitation." BBC News. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/africa/7422494.stm>> accessed March 25, 2009.