



**SPECIAL FOCUS ON AMAZIGH LITERATURE: CRITICAL AND CLOSE
READING APPROACHES**

From the Heights of the Atlas: A Panorama of Traditional Poetry in Tamazight

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Abstract

Traditional oral poetry in Takbaylit, Tachelhit, Central Moroccan Tamazight, and Tarifit dialects has been the subject of numerous studies ranging from ethnographic to linguistic. Rather than duplicate what is already widely available, the following brings together comments on a number of representative poems from across the Maghreb to give the reader an idea of the variety of types, styles, and themes of Tamazight poetic tradition. The selections, which are translated into English here for the first time, range from the moving devotional poem in Tachelhit “Like the Beads of a Rosary” to the beautiful love poem in Takbaylit “To Whom Should I Complain.” Among the poets whose works are included are Mririda n’Ait Attik (Tachelhit), Al Hadj Ammar ou al Hadj (Takbaylit), and Taougrat Oult Aissa (Central Moroccan Tamazight).

Keywords: oral literature; traditional poetry; Tamazight; Takbaylit; Tachelhit; Tarifit

Introduction

For centuries, oral literature in Tachelhit, Tarifit, Takbaylit, and Central Moroccan Tamazight¹ dialects was the dominant form of cultural expression in Tamazight. The fall into disuse of the *Tifinagh* alphabet, which the Maghrebis used in ancient times, and the fact that until the independence of Algeria (July 5, 1962) and Morocco (March 2, 1956) the majority of Tamazight-speakers were illiterate precluded the emergence of a written literature in the Maghreb’s oldest language. Regardless, Tamazight poetry

¹ *Tamazight* stands for the language that encompasses the Maghrebi dialects Tachelhit, Takbaylit, Tarifit, Tachawit, Tamachek, and the dialectic, also called *Tamazight*, that is spoken in the Middle and High Atlases and in the South East region of Morocco. To avoid confusing the language with the dialect, the latter will be referred to as *Central Moroccan Tamazight*.



encompasses a great variety of types, styles, authors, and themes. It includes lyric, narrative, ritual, and epic poems; poems that are short and simple, and others that are long and elaborate; poems of personal and of collective nature; village and professional, religious and secular poems. Like the written poetry in Arabic and in French, Tamazight poetry speaks of life's joys and sorrows, of unfulfilled love, homesickness, death, colonial repression, and the struggle against European imperialism. It also often invokes God and asks for his compassion and forgiveness.

Unlike written poetry, however, much Tamazight poetry was meant to be sung to drums or other musical instruments in the presence of an audience, especially at festivals called *ihidousen* (sg. *ahidous*) in the Middle and High Atlases, *ihwachen* (sg. *ahwach*) in the Anti-Atlas and the Souss Valley, and women's gatherings called *ourar* in the Djurdjura Mountains of the Tell Atlas in Algeria. Audiences often participate in the performances by handclapping and/or dancing while repeating the same words or phrases over and over. Also, unlike written poetry, Tamazight poetry used to be an integral part of the life of the community. It served as an educational instrument to transmit the group's history, standards of conduct, and religious beliefs to the youth, to raise morale during war, to entertain, or simply to ease the burden of daily chores such as working in the fields, child rearing, weaving, cleaning, and cooking.

Several scholars highlighted the complexity of classifying Tamazigh poetry.² The different Tamazight-speaking groups distinguish the types and styles of their poetry on the grounds of length, theme, occasion, style of delivery, or even, as in the case of *izli* (pl. *izlan*) and *tamawayt* (pl. *timawayin*) of Central Morocco, whether they are sung by an individual or a group. However, the categories are loosely defined and include subcategories. The types often overlap within and across dialects in many regards such as structure, performance mode, and theme. Thus, the couplet *izli*, which predominates in Central Moroccan Tamazight, becomes a *tamawayt* when sung solo and in a fast rhythm and an *ahllel* (pl. *ihlallen*) when it has a religious content. It also enters into the composition of longer and elaborate *timedyazin* (sg. *tamedyazt*). Across the dialects, from a formal point of view the Amazigh *izli*, the Rifan *izri* (pl. *izran*), and the Chalhi *tahwacht* (pl. *tihwachin*), are equivalent; they are concise and fairly simple in construction couplets. They differ in the manner in which they are performed: while *izlan* and *izran* are sung by men and women together in Central Morocco and in the Rif region, *tihwachin* are sung exclusively by women in the Anti Atlas and by men in the Souss valley. Furthermore, devotional poems are called *tiqsidin* (sg. *taqsidt*) and love poems *izlan* in both Tachelhit and Takbaylit even though the structures of the poems are different; poems in Takbaylit are often well structured, with set numbers of rhymed lines and syllables. Finally in all the groups there are professional poets called *imediyazen* (sg. *amedyaz*) in Tarifit and Central Moroccan Tamazight, *rrways* (sg. *rais*)

² Abdallah Bounfour, *Anthologie de la poésie berbère traditionnelle: Tachelhit, taqbaylit, tarifit, tamazight* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), v-viii.

in Tachelhit, and *imaddahan* (sg. *amaddah*) and *ifsihan* (sg. *afsih*) in Takbaylit. While there are marked differences between the literary styles of the different Tamazight-speaking groups, they nevertheless share many qualities.

The following highlights the major characteristics of traditional Amazigh poetry, with an indication of the types of that poetry, emphasizing their similarities and differences; and offers a representative selection of Tachelhit, Takbaylit, Central Moroccan Tamazight, and Tarifit poems. Due to the magnitude of the material, the selections are representative, but, obviously, not exhaustive.

Tachelhit (Moroccan Anti Atlas and Souss Valley)

The most important genres of poetry in Tachelhit are *amarg*, *tahwacht*, *aqsid*, and *lqsit*.

1 Amarg

Amarg is sometimes used to refer to poetry in general and sometimes to love poetry. Most often, however, it stands for poetry whose authors are known. The most prominent tachelhit authors of *amarg* are undoubtedly, Sidi Hamou Ettaleb (1706-1789) and Mririda n'ait Attiq (c.1900 - c.1940s).

1.2: Hamou Ettaleb

Famously known as *babn'umarg*, "the poetry master," Sidi Hamou Ettaleb was one of the most celebrated Tachelhit poets. Little is known about him except that he was a beloved itinerant poet and singer who was versed in the Koran, *hadith*, and Islamic jurisprudence. He composed poems about the whole range of human experience: love, marriage, virtues and vices, friendship, family, money, society, politics, morality, reason, and happiness. He also wrote about the afterlife. His poems are characterized by precise imagery; they are also concise and to the point. Here are four of his most gripping and powerful compositions:

In the first, the speaker is so infatuated with his beloved's beauty that he thinks her birth can only be the result of heavenly intervention; some saint must have interceded with God on behalf of her parents:

O Fatima! What saint did your father and mother visit?
When you were born both the sky and the earth shimmered.³

In the second poem, he describes the pain of not knowing if one's love for someone is reciprocal or not:

³ Omar Husayn Amrir, *A-shi'r al-amazighi al-mansub ila sidi Hamou al-Taleb* (Casablanca: Maktabat Bruvans, 1987), 65.

The disease that crushes the bones and tears the heart
is the much-loved who does not say either “I love you” or “I don’t love
you.”⁴

The third is a not-so-veiled critique of the powers that be:

Thank God in the afterlife there is no *cadi* [judge], no *cheikh* [ruler], and
no *morabit* [cleric].⁵

Finally in the following poem the speaker expresses his anguish that he may
die without expressing in words and in deeds his gratitude to those who aided
him in times of dire need:

Do not take me, O angel of death
until I give back wheat to those who were generous enough to lend me
barley.⁶

1.3: *Mririda n’ait Attiq*

Tachelhit’s other grand bard, *Mririda n’ait Attiq* (c.1900 – c.1940s), was a poet
of a character quite different from that of *Ettaleb*. Her poetry is wounded and
intensely personal; she composed a great deal about the hardships she suffered
throughout her life, her disappointments, and her unfulfilled love as is shown
in the following:

Bee, Maid of the Prophet,
Bee, full with blessing,
You who flutters from flower to flower,
Fly to my village
And go from girl to girl
And going from girl to girl
To each you will whisper my name.
My beloved, you will recognize her
It will be the one who will begin to cry
when you tell her who sent you.
Tell her that I consume myself for her,
Separation eats away at my mind
The way trunks of walnut trees hollow out,
And sorrow grinds my heart
As grinding wheels crush grain
Bee, Maid of the Prophet,
Lay gently on her ear,
Plead with her to wait for my return,

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Amrir, A-shi’r*, 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

for my heart is full of her
 If I do not see her soon again,
 I would then have only one wish
 to join the dead without delay.
 The tomb is a thousand times better than separation.
 Bee, Maid of the Prophet,
 Bee full of blessings,
 Fly to my village.⁷

Mririda also faced up to the hard facts of life: injustice, inequality, poverty, and women's deplorable condition. Moreover, she was not afraid to denounce loud and clear the rich and the local rulers who sometimes abused their authority and power to intimidate and treat people in a harsh and dishonorable manner:

It is always so
 there is always someone above
 There is always someone below
 And it is always so in this world
 On top, fortune.
 Below, the wretched
 Below, the weak.
 On top, strength, strength
 And it is always so in this world
 Mortars are made to receive the strike of pestles
 as anvils are made for hammer blows
 Dormant wheels undergo rotating wheels
 Mules buckle under the weight of their packs all their lives
 Terraces weigh heavily on the beams that support them
 And the whims of the Cadi
 Also weigh heavily
 Do not go sing my song to him!
 Good people, have I forgotten anything?
 Women who are always defenseless!
 Women who are always below.⁸

Still, despite the sorrow she carried in her heart, Mririda had her stoic side and saw her misfortunes and those of the poor and underprivileged as part of the larger workings of fate as she expresses in the following:

Like the grains of the rosary of prayers, days slip through our fingers one by one,
 Sometimes made of joy, sometimes made of tears

⁷ René Euloge, *Les Chants de la Tassaout: Poèmes et chants berbères de Mririda n'Ait Attik* (Casablanca: Presses de l'imprimerie Idéale, 1986), 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

According to the will of the Master of us all
 These are the beads of the rosary of life.
 Your thumb can stop the flow
 Of the beads of the rosary of prayers.
 Whether they are happy or unhappy, one cannot stop
 The course of the beads of the rosary of life.
 In the palm of your hand slide your hopes,
 Your fervent invocations to the saints of the land,
 To God generous and merciful.
 Each spilt grain puts balm in your heart.
 Your anxious hopes want to force destiny
 But whatever your faith and fervor
 Nothing can change what is written
 In the book of happiness and adversity,
 The beads of the rosary of life⁹

While maintaining that everything that happens is predestined, Mririda, nevertheless, ends her poem with the expression of her conviction that a person's destiny is a part of God's design and may serve some greater purpose in ways humans cannot understand:

God is great May his name be exalted!¹⁰

2 *Tihwachin*

While the previous genres of poetry are composed by professional poets, *tihwachin* (sg. *tahwacht*), another major type of Tachelhit poetry, is also popular and is synonymous with song. *Tihwachin* are generally brief, and they begin without introduction or exposition. They are sometimes tercets but most of the time couplets repeated over and over in a fast rhythm when sung. Two typical illustrations of *tahwacht* are the following that warn against the danger of pride and arrogance:

By God and by God! Poor reed!
 No matter how hard it pushes upward, it ends up bending toward the ground.¹¹

And:

Wood might well be proud, God sent it a saw.
 The king might well be haughty, God struck him down.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bounfour, *Anthologie*, 7.

¹² Ibid.

In addition to the danger of pride and arrogance, *tihwachin* often deal with the ephemeral quality of life and humanity's inevitable doom:

Say! All those you remember: where are they?
Sooner or later you will realize that life is nothing but a passage.¹³

3 *Aqsid*

Another prominent Tachalhit poetic genre is *aqsid* (pl. *iqsiden*). It is the equivalent of Central Moroccan Tamazight's *tamedyazt* and Takbaylit's *asefrou* (pl. *ise-fra*); it is the domain of seasoned poets. While *tihwachin* are often composed in a lyric style in the shape of brief songs and love poems, *aqsid* is a demanding form of poetry that tackles reflective themes and uses stricter structures. It is characterized by a slow rhythm and complex language and imagery. A poem in which these qualities merge is the following in which the poet grieves over his being away from home. Consumed with guilt and remorse, he asks the land of his birth for forgiveness:

We prayed as much as God wanted, O land [of our ancestors], forgive us!
We think about the death of our parents only when it occurs,
We think about the thorns of flowers only when they stab us.
If I knew, exile, that you were going to exist,
I would have drunk you, poison, before learning to talk.¹⁴

4 *Lqist*

From Arabic *qissa* (story), *lqist* refers to narrative poetry in Tachalhit. There are *lqisatin* (pl.) on themes as varied as fables, adventures, and the lives of the prophets Mohamed, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph, describing their birth, growth, exploits, or death. *Lqist* adventures are based on real people but are partly fictional. A famous example of *lqist* is the story of Yamna Mansour:

Yamna Mansour, may God prolong your days!
May He increase your beauty!
As for nobility of soul, he has already blessed you with plenty of it.
The Caïd Taïeb wrote letters To Cheikh Mansour. He told him: "Grant me your daughter's hand and I'll give you Azanif and Tinjert; they will be yours."
Cheikh Mansour said to his daughter: "Yamna, listen to me! Do you want the pasha to be your husband? He is the lieutenant of the nobleman whom the angels in heaven proclaim to be king."
Yamna said to her father, "Abandon these words! Were the High Atlas to turn into a gold bar, my father, with Loudini I will not be united."
Cheikh Mansour tells his daughter "Yamna, listen to me! If Loudini does not marry you, he will not respect the law."

¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

Yamna said to her father, "Give up these words! And what would my father say at the assembly of chiefs who share power and enmity with him?"

Yamna tells her father, "Abandon these words! I swear with my hair, silk scarves, and henna!"

"Come on, Father, let's hide in the mountains until the time of Loudini is over."

Sheikh Mansour said to her, "Yamna, I am following you."

Then Loudini gathered his soldiers. It is of locusts that he was the leader. He destroyed all the houses, he destroyed all the villages.

Mt. Aquechtim, that's where there are men of valor, people with silk belts, people of their word.

Yamna Mansour, may God prolong your days!

May He increase your beauty!

As for nobility of soul, he has already blessed you with plenty of it.

May God reduce Loudini to misery because he is damned.

I ask God for forgiveness; I've talked too much.¹⁵

Central Moroccan Tamazight (Moroccan High and Middle Atlases)

I Izli

Poetry in Central Moroccan Tamazight is marked by a couplet called *izli* (pl. *izlan*) of about fifteen syllables. Other genres no less important include *tamawyt* (pl. *timawayin*), *ahllel* (pl. *ahllilen*), and *tamedyazt* (pl. *timedyazin*). The two lines of *izlan* are composed of two hemistiches each and include internal, or external rhymes, or both. *Izlan* are the basic form of poetry in Central Moroccan Tamazight; they enter into the composition of all the other forms.¹⁶ They combine visual images with strong yet subtle meanings as is clear from the following anonymous poems:

My heart is torn like a tattered garment;
to put a patch on it is of no use!¹⁷

I am like the snow that covers the hills,
like the heat wave, my beloved makes me melt!¹⁸

O darling, I set you free, go to whomever you want.
No matter how far away you travel, like me you will never find!¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 45-48.

¹⁶ Bassou Hamri, *La Poésie amazighe de l'Atlas central marocain: Approche plurielle* (Rabat: Institut royal de la culture amazighe, 2011), 55.

¹⁷ Michael Peyron, "Izli." In *Encyclopédie berbère*, 2003, <http://journals.openedition.org/encyclopedieberbere/1459>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

I feel like fainting when contemplating your picture.
So much time spent together to end up with a piece of paper in my hand!²⁰

Even though love and loss are the main motives of *izli* composers, they did not turn their backs on the tragic events taking place around them. The following poem expresses vividly the deep sorrow and affliction a poet feels about the suffering of his people after they were defeated by the enemy:

I witnessed the defeat; I will never laugh again,
you see, the poor souls spent the night in ravines.²¹

Still, the Imazighen remain defiant:

I prefer to die than to slave away
moving dirt for the benefit of the cannon master.²²

In addition to love and protest *izlan*, such as the above, there are occupational *izlan* to accompany harvesting, fulling, sheep shearing, etc.; lullaby *izlan*; *izlan* for rogatory prayers; as well as *izlan* for weddings and other celebrations.²³ *Izlan* are also performed in festivals called *ihidousen* (sg. *ahidous*) in which, standing elbow to elbow, men and women swing back and forth rhythmically, repeating the same poem again and again, accompanied by the sound of drums called *bendir*.

2 *Tamawayt*

Tamawayt (pl. *timawayin*), literally “the one that is carried along” or “that keeps company” is formally equivalent to *izli*; both are short and fairly simple in construction. *Timawayin* are cries from the heart; they are laments and distress calls of people who feel lonely to ease their pain.²⁴ They are usually sung in a high-pitched voice. Below are examples of *tamawayt*:

The roots of hair go down into the heart,
When one suffers, hair turns white!²⁵

How could you reach me in the mountains?
The cedars are cut, O melancholy of love!
Did you arrive on the wing, or were you carried by the west wind?²⁶

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bounfour, *Anthologie*, 171.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hamri, *La Poésie*, 33,35.

²⁴ Ibid., 66.

²⁵ Michael Peyron, “Poésie amazighe du Moyen Atlas,” Michael Peyron’s Berber website (blog), June 18, 2010, <http://michaelpeyron.unblog.fr/2010/06/18/poesie-amazighe-du-moyen-atlas/>.

²⁶ Bounfour, *Anthologie*, 182.

I am burning; my father went to get an amulet;
He thinks it is fever; little does he know it is love.²⁷

3 *Tamedyazt*

Tamedyazt (pl. *timedyazin*), sometimes called *tanshat* or *tayfat* stands for poetry composed and performed by professional poets called *imedyazen*. It is often moralistic. *Timedyazin* are longer than *izlan* and are usually responses to current events and daily life hassles. To become an *amedyaz* is a difficult and lengthy process.²⁸ *Imedyazen* are the conscience of their communities: they relay information from one area to another and serve as educators and social critics.²⁹ In addition to love, and life's joys and sorrows, the themes that especially concern them are injustice, corruption, emigration, unemployment, the erosion of tradition, and the decline of morality.³⁰ Their critiques are often acerbic. *Timedyazin* always start with an invocation such as the following:

I start with you O Lord, inspire me!
What I desire is in you, without question.³¹

Below is a *tamedyazt* about love:

Flown away the wood pigeon, gone from my home, by my fault flown away,
I did not know how to make a nest for him to stay by my side!
The day declines, the woodpigeons fly by,
He who has a nest will take shelter there!³²

And here is a *tamedyazt* in which the poet comments on current political events:

My conscience gnaws at me, the enemy has grinded the tribes;
The acrid fumes have smothered the torch of courage;
My son is taken by death and the work he bequeathed me tortures me;
Taken away, all my children! I am without my wings, a crow reduced to jumping;
The Imazighen kill one another in order to mark out a passage for the enemy;
The earth shook so many men and the sky cried tears of blood.
O life! You are good only to frighten us!³³

²⁷ Ibid., 183.

²⁸ Hamri, *La Poésie*, 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 23.

³⁰ Ibid., 25.

³¹ Ibid., 32.

³² Michael Peyron, "Poésie amazighe du Moyen Atlas," Michael Peyron's Berber website (blog), June 18, 2010, <http://michaelpeyron.unblog.fr/2010/06/18/poesie-amazighe-du-moyen-atlas/>.

³³ Bounfour, *Anthologie*, 204.

3.1 *Taougrart*

Taougrat Oult Aissa stood above all the other *imedyazen* in imaginative power, emotional range, and courage. Her independent spirit, talent, and anti-colonialist stance made her the *bête noire* of the French authorities as well as the *Makhzen* (the monarchical military and political apparatus of Morocco) and excited the envy of many who spread malicious gossip about her.

In the following poem, she describes the brutality Moroccans suffered in the early twentieth century at the hands of invading Spaniards and French. She chastises those among her countrymen who shrug with indifference at the human misery around them and the terrible events that shake the world:

The countries have broken up, the world was terrible
And yet, they all throw the straps of their satchel
over their shoulders.³⁴

She also exposes the sinister role played by those who bowed to the enemy:

I will see our feet swell, gnawed by hunger
I swear that access to paradise requires sacrifices,
O dogs who have submitted.³⁵

As well as the obsequious people whose conversations revolved around the rulers:

O my God your name is never mentioned
When they talk to each other, it is always about the Hakem [ruler]
As if he were the one who gave birth to them.³⁶

To shame the men who would not stand up to the enemy, the poet urges women to fight for national liberation and independence despite their inability to combat forces that are much more powerful:

Get out Touda, call Yizza, Itto and the others
Let women take up arms and wave the flags.³⁷

And vows to keep fighting:

Our land, which leopards have bequeathed to us with pride
Will not go to Satan's worshippers.

³⁴ Aksil Azergui, ed., *Taougrat Oult Aissa et Taoukhetalt: Deux poétesses de l'époque héroïque* (Casablanca: Akalas Azerfar, 2021), 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

If they kill us by day
At night, our shadows will chase them away.³⁸

Throughout, her poetry highlights themes of courage, integrity, and pride, despite adversity:

I prefer to dress in rags and live with Muslims
Than to be a courier for the French.³⁹

Of particular poignancy is the poem where Taougrat felt humiliated to the depth of her being and stripped of dignity at seeing her countrymen drawn to the enemy by abject poverty and misery. She cries out:

When I'm buried, Oh hell
Burn my belly first!
Let the embers devour my entrails
That famine drove to the enemy!⁴⁰

Takbaylit (Algerian Tell Atlas)

I Asefrou

In Takbaylit, *asefrou* (sg.*isefra*) is used to refer to poetry in general. It also refers to a particular well-structured form made of three stanzas of three lines each, according to the following pattern:

First stanza:

7 syllables, rhyme A
5 syllables, rhyme A
7 syllable, rhyme B

Second stanza:

7 syllables, rhyme A
5 syllables, rhyme A
7 syllables, rhyme B

Third stanza:

7 syllables, rhyme A
5 syllables, rhyme A
7 syllables, rhyme B

³⁸ Ibid., 54.

³⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 54.

Some traditional *isefra* are meant to entertain but most are didactic. Indeed, poets were seen less as creators than as the repositories of shared wisdom. Their function was to keep tradition alive and make explicit and clear what is already known by everyone but in an incomplete, fragmented, and often in a confused manner. To compose poetry, *sefrou*, means to untangle, to explain difficult situations and, ultimately, to clarify.

In addition to their social functions and contents, oral poems in Takbaylit differ in their methods of delivery: didactic poems, often of anonymous origins, used to be recited by professionals who travelled from village to village and market to market. They were called *imaddahen* in opposition to *ifsihen* who were fewer and who were capable of both reciting and composing poems. *Imaddahen* – who no longer exist – enjoyed a prominent and respectable position in society: they participated in assemblies and were consulted on difficult situations.

The most outstanding masters of age-old Takbaylit poetic art are Cheikh Mohand ou Lhocine (1836-1901), Mhand ou Mhand (1848-1905) and Lbachir Amellah (1861-1930), whose immortal poems are characterized by the depth of content and great technical perfections. Of all the Takbaylit-speaking poets, however, none has displayed more mastery of *asefrou* than Ou Mhand and Amellah. Here is one of Ou Mhand's most celebrated *isefra*:

Separation is the worst that can come about
My heart, many trials await you!
Who knows, friends, if we'll ever see each other again!

My absence has lasted too long for no fault of mine
and is no longer a matter days.
So be indulgent if I cry!

Worries, boredom and anger
Haunt my heart.
It is from God that I await help.⁴¹

Besides *isfra*, there are three other types of poems in Takbaylit: devotional poems called *adhekker* and *tiqsidin*, love poems called *izlan*, and other secular poems. Each type has its own form. Nevertheless, there are devotional *isefra*, love *isfra*, as well as *isfra* about other topics such as war and emigration; what makes an *asfrou* is its form rather than its content.

A good example of a devotional *asefrou* is the following:

God my Lord I implore you
You are the Almighty
The sovereign King

⁴¹ Bounfour, *Anthologie*, 65.

I invoke you in the name of al-Hashimi⁴²
 Of Abu Bakr⁴³ and Ali⁴⁴
 And those who memorized the entire Book

For me and those who are with me
 Make it that our misery ends
 And that in heaven we enjoy ease and comfort.⁴⁵

Here is a love *asefrou*:

To whom should I complain?
 I have become insane
 Lord, I implore your help.

I neglected my chores,
 I try in vain to sleep:
 His shadow is always in front of my eyes.

You will answer to me the Day of Judgment.
 You left me, I lost my mind,
 Now an exile in my own country.⁴⁶

Finally here is an *asfru* denouncing the brutality of the colonial power and its nefarious consequences:

Since the beginning of the year
 We haven't known a single happy day;
 we are as mute as scavengers!

O you, blue-headed eagle,
 Deploy your wings in the skies
 and descend on Serkadji.⁴⁷

Greet all the prisoners,
 Who suffer from endless absence,
 Patience is dear to God.⁴⁸

⁴² Prophet Muhammad.

⁴³ Companion and father-in-law of the prophet Muhammad. He ruled the Islamic Caliphate from 632 to 634 CE.

⁴⁴ Cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad. He ruled the Islamic Caliphate from 656 to 661 CE.

⁴⁵ Mouloud Mammeri, *Poèmes kabyles anciens* (Paris: Maspero, 1980), 454.

⁴⁶ Jean Amrouche, *Chants berbères de Kabylie: Edition bilingue français-berbère* (Paris: L' Harmattan, 2000), 96-97.

⁴⁷ Former high-security prison in Algiers where many FLN militants were tortured and forty-eight were guillotined during the War of Independence. It is now a national museum.

⁴⁸ Amrouche, *Chants*, 54-55.

2 *Adhekker*

As is clear from the above, a major characteristic of oral poetry in Takbaylit is its religiosity, even when it is not primarily devotional. There are, however, poems in Takbaylit that are specifically religious. Religious poems in Takbaylit are of three kinds: devotional and mystical poems (*adhekker*), hagiographic poems honoring and paying tribute to saints, and prophetic poems (*tiq-sidin*) based on the lives of Mohamed, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph, describing their birth, growth, exploits, or death. *Adhekker* refers to both a ritual and the religious and mystical poems that accompany it and often includes *tiksidin*. While hagiographic and prophetic poems are recited by *imaddahen*, devotional and mystical poems are sung mainly by members of religious brotherhoods called *lakhouan* and also by choirs of laymen and women during funerals and on the occasion of pilgrimages to shrines of saints called *lawliya*. Sometimes *adhekker* consists in of short lines invoking God and the Day of Judgment, repeated in chorus and punctuated by the repetition of the name of God; some other times it consists mainly in the praise of the Prophet and the invocation of his aid, protection, and blessing as in the following:

We all, surely, will pass away,
 Only God will remain.
 My heart is full of pain, for all my relations, I feel pity.
 Angel from whom we await assistance!
 O! Make us meet the beloved Prophet.⁴⁹

Another representative devotional poem is the following:

Prophet! I pray to you. I pray thousands of times.
 O Mohamed of Arabia! There is no better friend than you.
 I wish you by my side the day my shroud is tied.⁵⁰

3 *Izli*

Unlike *isefra*, *izlan* (sg. *izli*), another prominent type of poetry in Takbaylit, do not follow strict conventions of form and style as seen above. They are love songs performed by women in the presence of exclusively feminine audiences, often at parties called *ourar*. Due to their intimate nature, *izlan* rarely find their way to the public space.

Here are two powerful *izlan* where the speakers grieve over their loneliness suggested by “island” and “high hill” and give vent to their deep longing for love:

When my fate came
 It found me on an island
 Other women were harvesting wheat

⁴⁹ Ramdane At Mansour, *Isefra n at zik*. (self-pub., 1998), 16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

I was gathering weeds
 O my dear comrades
 Such is my destiny.⁵¹

O mother, I climbed a hill
 A very high hill
 I waited for someone to come to my rescue
 But everyone was busy
 O snowy branch!
 What has my heart hidden!⁵²

4 Other secular poems

Other secular poems in Takbaylit often accompany celebrations of births and weddings and chores like plowing, picking olives, and harvesting during which God is also invoked. To the category of secular poems also belong satirical poems meant to criticize or disgrace an individual or a group; elocutionary poems, not principally concerned with conveying messages as much as with displaying a poet's artistic prowess; and finally epic poems praising the feats of warriors, relating the wars between villages, and singing the glory and the misfortunes of the country. The poem "Tuksaa n Lzayer" (The Conquest of Algiers) by Al Hadj Ammar ou al Hadj about the fall of Algiers on July 5, 1830, and its disastrous consequences for Algerians is one of the most representative examples of epic poetry in Takbaylit. Here is an excerpt from it:

[...]

I am bewildered by this deceitful life
 Where everything is upside down
 Good people, you are witnesses to strange events
 The sea has brought us
 Pigs rummaging through the marshes.

They are donkeys without rumps
 With their backs heavily loaded
 And their heads caught in bushels
 They speak a twisted language
 Of which one does not understand a word.

These miscreants drag cannons
 Which they know only too well how to use
 Their shots cause clouds of smoke
 Loaded with projectiles
 To fall like hail in spring.

⁵¹ Bounfour, *Anthologie*, 100.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 99.

[...]

Alas! Queen of towns
With beautiful ramparts
Algiers the backbone of Islam
Has become a graveyard
Surrounded by the evil flag.

[...]

Stand up! Companions of the Prophet, horsemen with
spurs
With the blessing of our Prophet of noble lineage
Break the oppressor
Are you defeated or wiped out?⁵³

Tarifit (Moroccan Rif Region)

I Izri

Izri (pl. *izran*) is the longest enduring and most popular form of poetry in the Rif region. *Izran* are made up of two lines. Each of them is around twelve syllables long, although some have only nine and others as many as twelve. The theme of *izran* is often love, the joys and torments of which are expressed in frank and powerful language as the following poems show:

He lied he who said that love is sorcery.
Love comes from God; unfortunate is the one it afflicts.⁵⁴

My God! Do not let me die an unjust death!
Make me pass away instead on the breast of the black-eyelashed beauty.⁵⁵

Women often say *izran* to express in a subtle way their love and grief and, on occasion, to dissuade young men who already successfully asked for their hands from going ahead with the wedding. The speaker of the following poem finds the perfect words to discourage a suitor who already has the blessing of her father:

I am going to wash my fringed headscarf; I will hang it on the mastic tree
[for everyone to see]:
Pick up your sugar! You and I aren't good together.⁵⁶

⁵³ Nacib, *Anthology*, 52-57.

⁵⁴ Bounfour, *Anthologie*, 121.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁶ Terri Brint Joseph, "Poetry as a Strategy of Power: The Case of Rifian Berber Women," *Signs* 5.3 (1980): 428.

It used to be the custom in the Rif region for young men to present the fathers of the girls they want to marry with a number of loaves of sugar when they ask for their hands. If the father breaks one of the loaves to make tea; that means he accepts the young man as his future son-in-law; if he politely returns the sugar or uses his own, that means he does not.⁵⁷

2 Epic Rifan poems

From 1921 to 1926 the Rifans fought the occupying Spaniards (joined by the French in 1924). They wrote many poems – made of *izran* – about the battles of Tazagzawt, Badou, and Boughafer, as well as about the leaders of the resistance such as Bouhmara (Jilali ben Driss al-Youssefi al-Zerhouni, 1860-1909) and Mohamed Cherif Ameziane (1859-1912). Below is an excerpt from one such poem in honor of the latter:

Sidi Mohamed Ameziane is a seasoned fighter
 A sword in his right hand and another in the left
 Sidi Mohamed Ameziane is an invincible fighter
 Who strikes with the left and continues with the right
 [...]
 O Sidi Mohamed, O king of the tribe
 He chased the enemy and forced him to retreat to Melilla
 Sidi Mohamed is king of the sky
 [---]
 Sidi Mohamed strikes without fear
 He needs neither a company nor a companion
 [...]
 Our fighter spent the night fighting alone
 It is God and his angels who assisted him.⁵⁸

However, the Rifan epic that is still recited and read today, undoubtedly the most famous, is *Dar Ubarran*⁵⁹, which praises Mohamed ben Abdelkrim El Khattabi (1882-1963). The victorious hero of several battles against the Spaniards and the French, El Khattabi symbolizes the Moroccan struggle against European imperialism and his exploits stirred the patriotic spirit of many Maghrebis. They also earned him the respect and admiration of revolutionary leaders all over the world, notably Mao Zedong and Che Guevara who applied his guerilla techniques in the field.⁶⁰ There is no single author of *Dar Ubarran*, nor is there any standard version of it. Professional poets known as *imediyazen* have adapted it to fit different audiences and circumstances. Here are few lines from it:

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Tirawinino, "L'épopée De Dhar Ubarran: Une Poésie De Résistance Rifaine," tirawinino, August 17, 2017, <https://tirawinino.wordpress.com/2016/04/16/226/>.

⁵⁹ The Dhar Ubarran Battle took place June 1, 1921.

⁶⁰ Mevliyar Er, "Abd-el-Krim al-Khattabi: The Unknown Mentor of Che Guevara," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29.1 (February 26, 2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.997355>.

Abdelkrim is the hero of heroes
 he is not afraid of anything
 neither mountains nor lions
 Abdelkrim is the torch-bearer of Islam
 may God help him
 the Spaniard, our enemy,
 in the mountain hunting the Rifan!
 Sidi Mohammed
 is a magnificent leader
 and a visionary politician
 he swore that he will expel the French to the borders!
 Abdelkrim, the blessing from heaven!
 We wish you a long life!
 The enemy attacked Anwar and Aarwi
 Mohammed ben Abdelkrim
 the invincible fighter!
 Planes fly over the mountain
 Sidi Mohammed is the hero who defends the faith.⁶¹

Conclusion

More than any other literary genre, poetry most closely reflects the soul of peoples. Taken together, the poems included in this article and translated into English for the first time offer an intimate insight into Tamazight speakers' response to the world, their beliefs, dreams, fears, and deepest longings. They are the voice of the Maghreb singing in joy and sorrow. Thanks to the pioneers who collected and transcribed them and saved them from oblivion and to the new generation of writers and scholars, traditional poems in Tamazight have now taken their rightful place in Maghrebi literature.

⁶¹ Tirawinino.