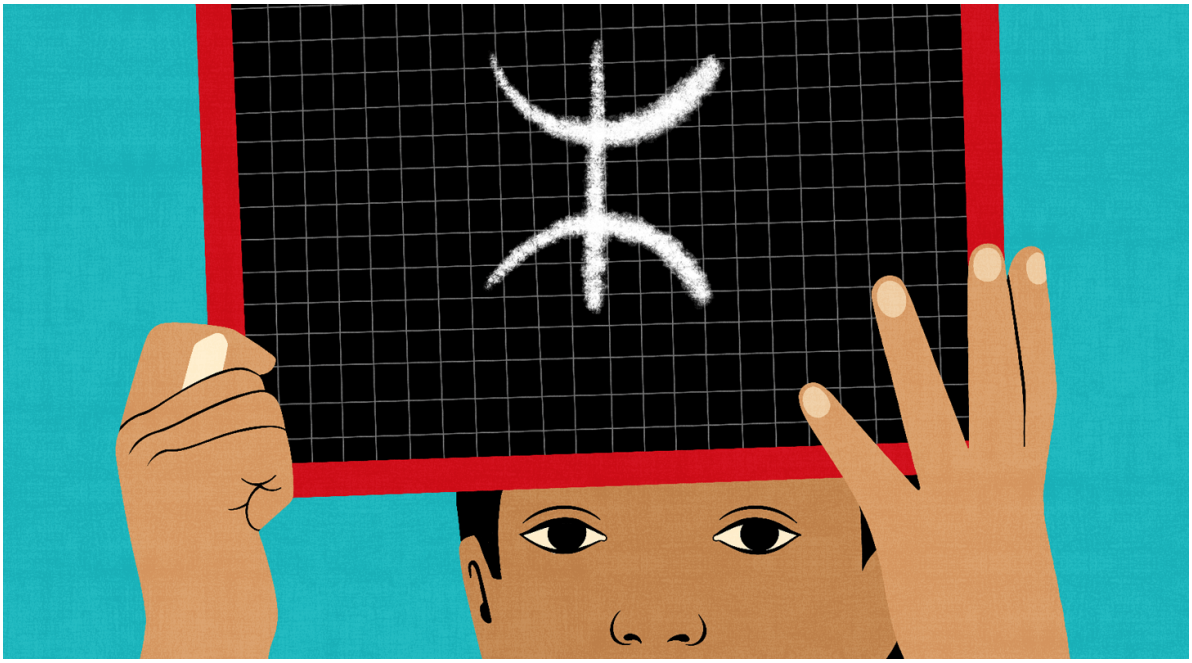
CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

# Linguistic Inequality is a Social Inequality

## The Berber Example in the Southern Mediterranean

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Il·lustració de Carole Hénaff

According to Pierre Bourdieu [1], social problems are political problems; we can therefore categorically argue that the same thing happens with linguistic issues. Language is, undoubtedly, a means of communication between individuals but it is far from being reducible to this single aspect. Socially and symbolically owned, it is endowed with a specific capital on the market of symbolic assets.

Dominant groups tend to valorise their language and want to impose it on dominated groups. This has happened in the history of humanity and, particularly, in the case of the Mediterranean since antiquity. Without retracing the history of languages and the power relations that have characterised them, I would like to return to the linguistic problems in North Africa and specifically to the phenomenon of a long-lasting linguistic dominance. As one of the ancient Mediterranean languages it is discredited (literally, without credit) as a result of its longevity and effect on the status of those who use it.

This language is called Berber and with Basque it has survived the great written and erudite languages such as Greek and Latin, which vanished in a historical period of the Mediterranean basin.

It is used in Libya (Zuara, Nefusa), Algeria, Morocco, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Tunisia (Djerba), Egypt (in the Siwa oasis). Most speakers are in Algeria (Kabylia, Aures, M'Zab, Hoggar Mountains, Gurara, but also in the mountains of Blida and Ouarsenis) and Morocco (Rif, Middle and High Atlas and Anti-Atlas). A large part of these populations historically turned towards the Mediterranean mainly during the Carthaginian, Roman and Byzantine eras in which it played a major role in history. Along with their language, Berbers spoke Latin and Greek [2] and bequeathed highly renowned wise men and figures of the Church to history (Lucius Apuleius, Saint Agustin, Saint Cyprian, Tertullian, etc.). Politicians have also left their mark on history, such as Jugurtha, Massinissa, Syphax, Juba II, the Queen of the Aurès Mountains Al-Kahina or Tariq ibn Ziad.

Despite common ground at a syntactic level, the lexicon can feature differences depending on the groups. These variants are notable depending whether we are in the East or the West (in Libya or Morocco), in the North or South (in Kabylia or Hoggar Mountains).

Spread over a very wide area and with a very long history, the Berber languages (called Amazigh) soon experienced domination (and a great fragmentation) by the different conquerors going back as far as Antiquity.

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Although these populations were able to write, using the Tifinagh alphabet, [3] almost three thousand years ago it disappeared very soon as a written language of the administration and power (the oldest trace dates back to the Dougga stele [4]), and was eclipsed by Greek, Latin, and, later, Arab, Turkish and French.

No longer in everyday use, [5] the writing of the Berbers appears as traces of memory in the form of Libyan inscriptions present throughout North Africa: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and the Canary Islands, and forms part of the richness of world heritage.

However, the spoken Berber language is very much alive. Characterised by a highly dynamic literary and artistic creation (poetry, music, architecture), it is currently used by a large number of speakers in the Southern Mediterranean and in the diaspora through Europe (France, Spain, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany) and North America (Canada, USA).

## Some history

Overtly vindicated or not, Berber speakers feel discriminated against throughout the world because of their language. Kabylia is emphasised for historical reasons because it was here that it emerged in a relatively ancient form and specifically opposed to Arab-Islamic ideology. It rose up in 1948, which gave way in 1949 to a head on conflict between nationalists and the “Berber-nationalists” also called “Berber-materialists”. The issue of the language re-emerged crucially during Algerian independence in 1962 [6].

The so-called 1949 crisis was, so to speak, a founding moment in the history of the national movement that put the country exclusively on the path of Arab-Islamism defining its (Arab) identity and language and identifying it with a religion, Islam, in keeping with the doctrine of the leader Ulema Ben Badis [7].

The movement of the Algerian Ulemas, although favourable to the assimilation of Algerians into French language and culture, has however assumed the paternity of nationalism and the defence of Arab-Islamism as a sole foundation of the Algerian nation [8]. The elements favourable to an Algerian Algeria, that is non-Arab and non-Muslim (secular), were removed from the movement and labelled as “Beber-materialism” and excluded from their own country. No North African region has experienced such a situation; that is, in this case, the rooting in ancestral Berber culture paired with a projection in “modernity” (secularism, pluralism, democracy) as a key element of resistance to colonisation and a principle according to which the future nation will be built.

For this reason the Kabylians, although they participated in the liberation of Algeria, were fought because of the rejection of the pure and simple assimilation into Arab-Islamism. From 1963, which corresponds to the “dissent” of the historical leader of the FLN Ait Ahmed [9], Kabylia did not stop fighting the established power to reclaim their history [10].

It would be necessary to return to the start of Islamisation to understand this articulation between history and politics deeply rooted in North African countries and that has consistently fed a confusion largely maintained by supporters of Arab-Islamism between language and identity. This situation has enabled Kabylian people to reach an awareness that became the oil slick that spread out to neighbouring countries [11]. In Morocco, we find the same effects with demands that evolved according periods and areas.

This shows that linguistic inequalities are socially and historically constructed and that they have been conveyed since ancient times. The last colonisers of North Africa (French, Spanish, Italian) reactivated the power relations and accentuated the divisions between Arabic speakers and Berber speakers considering Arabic (although also dominated by its own system) as a superior language as it was written and legitimised by the Koran. In fact, this view has endured since the conquest of North African by the Arabs, who imposed their religion and language.

This debate made rivers of ink flow during the colonisation of Algeria and under the

protectorate in Morocco without managing to grant a status to the Berber language limited to the ethnological and linguistic research characteristic of university. It is worth recalling that the teaching of Berber in France was officially established in 1913 and effectively began in 1915 at the School of Oriental Languages in Paris.

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With independence recovered, the Berber populations continued to use their language in their regions of origin but also in the cities where they were discriminated against. Often of very modest classes, they lacked the citizen cultural capital to integrate themselves other than renouncing their identity and their specific values. This is how many Algerians are Kabylian (de-Kabylianised) and Casablancais (de-Berberised). The power of the cities is very important and it is within them that the 1930s fundamentalist movements emerged. The movement of the Ulemas in Algeria and of Istiqlal in Morocco advocated return to Islamic foundations. They integrated the nationalist movements and imposed their ideology. It was within them that the issue of identities and languages was raised at different levels [12].

## The language of the migrants

For over 70 years, the period that corresponds to the dates of recovered independence [13], North Africa experienced a process of accelerated Arabisation, in reality a process of de-Berberisation to lead their people to separate from their language, from their pre-Islamic plural history and their cultural identity. The hegemonic scope of the Maghreb nationalists was to base their states on the French Jacobin model with a single language and a single religion. The procedure consists of culturally transforming entire groups formed in a Mediterranean civilisation that weaves a great cultural diversity (pagan, Jewish and Christian). However paradoxical this may seem, the European countries have adopted the same policy with their immigrants as the nation states of North Africa with Berber populations.

In Europe the law of the majority *dictates the law* and therefore encourages migrants to distance themselves from the mother tongue considered as being “without value” in the social field for both social (integration oblige) and political reasons. With the exception of Holland, no European country has taken into account the linguistic reality of their migrants because respect for the policies of the countries prevailed over the interest of the children and their families. France (in particular) introduced Arabic into education more than thirty years ago although most of the children were Berber speakers.

However, it is well known that the early waves of immigration were mainly made up by Kabylians and Chaouis (for Algeria), Chleuhs, Amazighs and Riffians (for Morocco); according to diverse studies, the native Berber speakers account for half of the French people of North African origin. Arabic speakers certainly use “darija”, the vernacular Arabic

language of this region (not understood in the Middle East), different from the so-called “classical” or “median” Arabic, the official language of these countries since independence. The language that the French state seeks to teach is in no case a mother tongue, as the *Le Monde* journalist Nabil Wakim [14] writes with great aplomb, drawing on the generic term of “Arab” used since colonisation to designate the whole population of North Africa.

Inequality is therefore flagrant if we bear in mind that the mother tongue of these children suffered a painful situation during the struggle of Berbers to reclaim their language from the 1950s [15]. It became more radical from the 1960s (in Algeria and Morocco) until being recognised as an official language, in 2011 in Morocco and in 2016 in Algeria. It is surprising to see how similar amalgams also occur in developed countries and which, for political reasons, consciously or unknowingly participate in the blocking of identities and the confusion of languages. It is important to return to this point that clearly reflects this social inequality based on a lie and cultural domination that runs the risk of leaving indelible marks.

Indeed, in his anti-separatist speech in early October, Emmanuel Macron proposed better teaching of Arabic in schools. The French Minister of National Education added that it was necessary to keep this teaching within the framework of the school system of the Republic in order to avoid seeing it taken up by parallel extracurricular structures that have a more religious than linguistic message. But no one seems to have questioned the pertinence, and even the danger, of associating a language (Arabic) and a religion (Islam). Arabic is not the mother tongue of immigrants. Berber has been (and certainly still is) the first language of France, brought by thousands of Berbers who had come to work in the different regions of the country. Berber, following the example of other languages, must find its place in the school system. The debate on the status of languages must remain completely open.

In a political atmosphere marked by the horrible beheading of a teacher (which nothing can justify and we fully condemn) and by the fight against “separatism”, the Minister of National Education Jean-Michel Blanquer, on 6 October 2020, after Najat Vallaud-Belkacem [16], expressed his desire to strengthen and normalise the teaching of Arabic within the framework of the French school system, in order, he said, to avoid parallel extracurricular structures taking hold of this teaching and giving a more religious than linguistic message.

Hakim el Karoui [17], in a recent report to the government, noted that the number of students learning Arabic at primary and secondary school has halved, but has increased tenfold in mosques. Despite the reality of this drift in the teaching of Arabic, Jean-Michel Blanquer was not unaware that it would raise as many passions as questions, as the teaching of the Arabic language poses a real problem in French society. This language is effectively instrumentalised for political purposes rather than being a language of culture and knowledge like all languages worthy of being taught without secondary aims. .

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> Muslim, which is far from the historical and social reality

However, it seems very dangerous to associate a language (Arabic) with a religion (Islam) and to insinuate that immigration is completely Arab and therefore Muslim, which is far from the historical and social reality. What about the sub-Saharans? The Bambara, the Fula, the Swahili, who still practise Islam and do not know Arabic. Although the Minister of National Education refers only to the immigration that has emerged from the countries of North Africa, it is true that the vast majority are Muslim, but they are far from being Arab and/or Arabic-speaking.

This language “scares” some, such as Luc Ferry, former Minister of National Education, while others find its teaching useful for children from Maghreb immigration. The debate over the teaching of Arabic in schools has been raised in dualistic terms, giving the impression that Arabic is the only object of debate, ignoring the fact that French people of Maghreb origin do not form a linguistically and culturally homogeneous body. Berber speakers are an important community in France: they want to draw attention to the confusion that would make the Berber-speaking community in France the great loser of this debate.

However, from the 1950s onwards, a far-reaching cultural struggle to reclaim the Berber language and culture began. Today it is not a about opposing the teaching of Arabic in France as the language of knowledge for all French men and women who would like to know about Arab civilisation. But it is by no means the only language of immigration.

We point out the existence of an academic Berber language, official in Algeria and Morocco, which would focus more on the aspirations of children from Berber families. Although it is a question, as Jean-Michel Blanquer noted, of establishing a link between languages and civilisations, Berbers would not associate themselves with the idea that all children of immigration are Arabic-speaking; why propose the Arabic language to them if it is not for religious ends?

Berbers have suffered the teaching of Arabic in their country of origin as a depersonalisation, through textbooks that deny their history and language. They also know that medieval and colonial history has been, for them, a culturecidal tragedy. It would be very unfortunate if this scenario emerged again here in France at their expense. Berbers do not want the ideology of the Arab kingdom advocated by Napoleon III, in which the Berber specificity was “forgotten”, in a cheerful amalgam of language and religion.

Salem Chaker, [18] the main architect of an agreement on the teaching of Berber between the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) and the General Directorate of School Education of National Education, recalled in 1995 [19] that in nine years the number of *baccalauréat* candidates who had chosen Berber as a Living Language III has gone from 1,350 to 2,250 for the whole of France. And their numbers keep growing year after year. Let us also remember that, paradoxically, in North African countries,

parents ruin themselves to send their children to French-speaking private schools.

In this climate marked by complexity, it is not necessary to add amalgams to existing amalgams. If the French state wants to reach out to young people in the suburbs, the first thing to do is to abolish the discrimination of which many are victims, and learning Arabic must be a freedom that seeks their development and not an ethno-religious assignment, because they are what they are supposed to be, or as Islamists would like them to be, which certainly goes against the planned strategy.

The second part of this article was written with Pierre Vermeren and Omar Hamourit and was published in *AOC*.

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2 — In the court of the Berber monarch Massinissa, allied to Rome against Carthage, people spoke Greek and the elite sent their children to Athens to learn literature and the arts.
3 — Tuareg women passed on this alphabet. They teach it to their children.
4 — Bilingual stele written in neo-Punic and Berber in homage to the Berber king Massinissa whose mausoleum was built in the Numidian kingdom in the 2nd century BC in today's Tunisia.
5 — Apart from the Tuareg people (a population from the Sahara but also from Niger and Burkina Faso) who have continued to use it. The Berber alphabet known as Tifinagh has now been officially adopted in Morocco to write Berber. Algeria in contrast writes Berber using the Latin alphabet.
6 — I would like to thank Mohand Tilmatine and Thierry Desrues for having authorised to use some excerpts of my article published in *Les revendications amazighes dans la tourmente des « printemps arabes »* (Centre Jacques-Berque, 2017).
7 — M. Tilmatine, «Les Oulémas algériens et la question berbère : un document de 1948 », *Awal*
8 — Their movement is linked to Djamal Eddine El Afghan and Rachid Abdou. The idea was to spread the Arabic language widely and reform Islam by removing local practices and especially Sufism.
9 — Ait Ahmed, anti-colonialist activist, major figure of the Algerian nationalist movement. He was also an important figure of the opposition from 1962 until his death.
10 — From the 1980s to the present, the Berber populations of Kabylie have continued to fight for a democratic regime open to the languages and cultures of the country.
11 — These last few years have shown that a merely cultural demand has been replaced by a redefinition of the political at a statutory, territorial and geopolitical level (which, in some cases, ranges from autonomy to independence).
12 — A branch of the opposition, the MAK (Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie) has a provisional Government in exile.

13 — Morocco became independent in 1956, Algeria in 1962.
14 — Nabil Wakim, “Le bon arabe, c’est celui qui choisit d’être meilleur en français plutôt qu’en arabe”, *Le Monde*, 30 September 2020. .
15 — The Berber Spring as marked the memories of Berbers around the world. In 1980, students rose up in Tizi-Ouzou against the single party to demand recognition of their language in a democratic framework. An unprecedented wave (in Algeria) characterised this period.
16 — Also of Berber descent and playing the card of the dominant system.
17 — Essayist and writer for the Institut Montaigne of the report La fabrique de l’islamisme : 2018.
18 — Academic, specialist in Berber and professor of Arabic.
19 — Catherine Simon, “L’enseignement du berbère en France est aussi une affaire politique”, *Le Monde*, 14 February 2005.

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