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# "Rifolution". Songs of the Hirak of the Rif Against the Repression of the Makhzen (2017–2021)<sup>1</sup>

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Fig. 1: Song to "Molay Mohand"



Source: Photomontage within a video clip, based on a song by the group Twattoun.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIpiviUHYzE> (last accessed 10 October 2021).

**Abstract:**

In 2011, North Africa experienced a cycle of revolts against post-colonial regimes. Although there were some common elements to the revolts, such as the struggle against the lack of human rights or the existence of great social inequalities, it should be noted that each local population expressed its own particularities. This was the case in the Rif, an Amazigh region in northern Morocco, where the accumulation of previous protests in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not stop in 2011 but exploded in 2017 with the Hirak movement. In this article I will analyse the historical roots of this movement and look at the role played by oral culture and protest songs in the political dynamics of the Hirak. The Moroccan state (*Makhzen*) and the army were the main focus of criticism of the songs and slogans in the demonstrations. With the arrest of its main informal leaders, such as Nasser Zefzafi, songs denouncing the repression and linking the current protest to mythical figures from the Rifian past, in particular 'Abd al-Krim al-Khattabi, also emerged as an emblem of the struggle against central power.

**Keywords:** 'Abd al-Krim, Arab Spring, memory, Morocco, revolts, Rif, songs

**Introduction**

Forms of political protest can follow multiple paths, beyond institutional channels. During the uprisings in North Africa around the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, many such expressions of protest emerged, disseminated during the mobilisations in physical space or in other formats through the new social networks. Here I refer to slogans and songs that circulated during the uprisings, as texts of social critique, within a repertoire of protest forms in which we can include both oral and written forms, such as graffiti (Al-Sowaidi, Banda and Mansour 2017; Vicente 2013; Werbner, Webb and Spellman-Poots 2014; Belarbi 2019). In this article I will focus on one of these protest movements, the Hirak of the Rif, which emerged a few years later and within the logic of this cycle of revolts.

The Amazigh region of the Rif, in northern Morocco, has a particular history of tension with the central state throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, first in relation to the French and Spanish controlled colonial state, and from 1956 onwards in relation to the independent Moroccan state itself (Mouna 2018). The Hirak movement emerged in 2017 in a new scenario, as a consequence of social discontent in the central Rif region in the face of the treatment received by the state and under a neoliberal economic context that has excluded the Rif region, leaving it dependent on emigration to Europe, smuggling with Melilla and the informal cannabis economy. The Hirak movement is therefore part of a more general cycle of protests, which began in 2011 and which in Morocco generated movements such as the 20 February one (Desrues 2012), but above all in a long chain of cycles of protest within the Rif itself, since colonial times (Alvarado 2017). As a result of this context of mobilisations during the Arab Spring, the Moroccan monarch ordered a constitutional reform, approved in a referendum on 1 July 2011. Although

formally important reforms were introduced, such as the recognition of Amazigh as a co-official language, the Rif's economic, social and political challenges were not resolved in practice.

To analyse the contents of this protest in the Rif, I will examine the products of the oral culture that the movement's followers have generated since its emergence at the end of 2016. At the methodological level, this research is inspired by the anthropological tradition focused on the study of oral culture understood as collective production (Vansina 1985). Since I could not carry out a synchronic investigation of the events for reasons of absence, I have analysed in a qualitative way the audiovisual products of that oral culture exposed on the internet, mainly YouTube.<sup>2</sup> Thus, unlike classical ethnographies, the main source has not been the survey of the actors who devise or sing the songs nor the participant observation of the demonstrations but the compilation of songs published virtually: from there I have selected the songs and slogans that are most repeated in the recordings of the demonstrations, as well as songs produced and published by activists and sympathisers of the Hirak.

The Hirak is a movement that is characterised by its detachment from political parties, it is in fact a reaction to the population's lack of protection from this party system, which is part of the political system controlled by the Makhzen and the monarchy.<sup>3</sup> Protest songs were an essential mechanism in this mobilisation for several reasons: they were a way of expressing and conveying the message in a clear and understandable way for all sectors involved; they could be disseminated quickly; finally, during the specific moments of the protests in the streets and squares, they were a community vector that contributed to generating ties and emotions, and offered a symbol of identification.

Police and judicial repression have ended Hirak's formal success, but the songs and their political message have remained in the social imagination, accumulated in a long history of discontent that may surface at any other time.

### **The Emerging and Repressed Hirak**

The Hirak Sha'abi (Popular Movement) of the Rif emerged between late 2016 and early 2017. The causes of its emergence were an accumulation of grievances linked to the living, social, economic and cultural conditions of the excluded population (Wolf 2019). The trigger for this explosion was a tragic incident that took place in November 2016, with the death of Mohcin Fikri. Fikri was a fish trader in the port of Alhuceima. Police seized a consignment of fish from him and threw it into a rubbish truck. Fikri tried to retrieve the goods by climbing into the truck and was then horribly crushed to death. The news of his death spread like wildfire through Alhuceima and sparked off impromptu reactions of anger, and within days the first demonstrations began. From then on, all the anger contained in Fikri's case was channeled through hitherto anonymous people who emerged in the public sphere, launching speeches denouncing the situation suffered by a large part of the Rifian population.

To understand this state of affairs, it is necessary to go back years, when the foundations for the inequalities of the present were laid. Already in colonial times, the Rif suffered a series of wars that altered tribal political structures, and major transformations took place from the Spanish penetration through Melilla in 1909 to the establishment of the protectorate in 1912. First, the war against the Spanish divided Rifian society itself into factions for and against the colonial advance. After the initial revolt of Sharif Amzian in the eastern Rif in 1909–1912, which ended with his death at the hands of the Moroccan colonial troops, the main resistance came from the famous Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Krim al-Khattabi, leader of the Rif Republic (1921–1926). This was an unprecedented para-state entity in the area, which paradoxically eliminated much of the existing Amazigh legal system and established a reformist model of Islam based on Sharia law (Hart 1976). The defeat of the Spanish in the summer of 1921 enthroned 'Abd al-Krim as a mythical figure of the resistance, whose image in banners and photographs was to be taken up by the social movements of the Rif from the 1980s until the Hirak. Once the armed resistance was defeated, Spanish colonisation had an impact on Rifian society, introducing the salarisation of labour,<sup>4</sup> exploiting the mining resources of the east, and occupying communal lands for agricultural colonisation by Spanish companies or for the benefit of a few local notables (Seddon 1978; Aziza 2003). Some of the men joined the colonial army and during the Spanish Civil War thousands of them were cannon fodder in the conflict in Spain and were manipulated to create terror among the Spanish civilian population (Madariaga 2015). Other more unknown effects include deforestation and the progressive impoverishment of peasants, who migrated first to other areas of Morocco, with the droughts of the 1940s, and later to Europe, after independence. The result was social stagnation in relation to other areas of Morocco, which was exacerbated by the process of independence, leading to more than disillusionment.

Thus, in 1958–59, following Morocco's independence in 1956, the Rif was to take centre stage in one of the revolts that took place during those years in other Amazigh regions. This was a cycle of revolts caused by a struggle between the monarchy, the Istiqlal party, which led the independence and national liberation army, and other factions that had been excluded by the Istiqlal (Gellner 1973; Hart 1999). These revolts were encouraged by the monarchy to weaken the Istiqlal, so that eventually the newly created Moroccan army, controlled by the king, became the arbiter. This was the case in the Rif, where new elements were added to create local discontent. Local elites were replaced by officials from the former French protectorate zone who spoke neither Rifian nor Spanish, which generated a feeling of exclusion among the local population. The rebels attacked Istiqlal posts and the army's repression was brutal, with hundreds of deaths and injuries, arrests and the alleged dropping of chemical weapons, a fact yet to be documented (Aziza 2019). The Rif region acquired the status of a militarised zone from that moment until today, a circumstance that will be mentioned in the songs.

This conflict was deeply etched in the memory of the Rifians, and as I will show, it will reappear again in the rhetoric of later mobilisations such as the Hirak. To all this, we must add the Arabisation of education and of the state apparatus itself, so that Amazigh culture never entered into the identity plans of the new nation-state. It was only after the mobilisations and the emergence of the Amazigh cultural movement in the 1980s and especially the 1990s that the state reacted by creating institutions to prevent these cultural mobilisations from taking on a political tone, and thus the Institut Royal de Culture Amazigh was founded in 2001.

Since the 1958 conflict, the new Makhzen ruled with an iron fist throughout the country and established a system of political control that spared no resources to eliminate political enemies, in a period known as the *years of lead* from the 1960s to the 1980s under Hasan II (Feliu 2004).

In the 1980s, another cycle of revolts began throughout Morocco and also in the Rif. Pressure from international institutions to force Morocco to comply with structural adjustments (Seddon 1984) and the progressive penetration of neoliberalism increased inequalities in the Rif, and various sectors such as students dragged other excluded sectors into their protests. Thus, in 1984, an urban mobilisation exploded in Nador over an increase in the price of school fees and basic products such as flour (Suárez Collado 2019). Again, the repression of the Makhzen was relentless, and there were deaths, injuries and graves with disappeared people. Other demonstrations followed, such as the general strike of 1990 and other social mobilisations, which were joined by another agenda of protests, on the one hand, led by Islamist movements, and above all by the Amazigh cultural associations. This cultural movement grew after the so-called Berber Spring in Kabylie (Algeria) in 1980. In reality, these cultural expressions also conveyed an accumulated social protest around the idea of the marginalisation of the North and the Rif. During these mobilisations, the recourse to memory, to recall the figure of 'Abd al-Krim as a symbol of resistance against the (colonial or post-colonial) state, could already be observed, and he was remembered in slogans or appeared on banners and placards.

As we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the earthquake in Alhuceima in February 2004 showed that social and political conditions had not improved and that the general population remained dissatisfied, despite the promises of the new King Mohammed VI, presented since his accession in 1999 as "the king of the poor". The Makhzen's failed reaction to the earthquake and the mismanagement of humanitarian aid provoked new popular demonstrations in the area (Aarab 2019). It was raining on wet ground. And so we come to the latest cycle of protests that began across North Africa in 2011 with the Arab Spring. In the Rif the protests were intense, and the movement known as 20-F achieved notable success. The protesters in Alhuceima were accumulating grievances similar to those in other regions of Morocco, and added to a long history of mobilisations, as I have noted so far.

Despite the (rapid) constitutional reform undertaken by the King in July 2011, months after the uprisings, and the salary improvements for civil servants, the excluded classes continued to see no improvement in their situation. We thus come to the events of 2016 and the death of Fikri and the rise of the Hirak. The Hirak emerged primarily as a movement outside the party and trade union system. It arose from below, around a few charismatic figures who managed to unite the mobilisation (Rhani, Nabalssi and Benalioua 2020). Importantly, the movement succeeded in mobilising many women, both among the leaders and among the protesters.

The most famous figure was Nasser Zefzafi, along with others such as Nabil Ahamjik, the singer Silya and Nawal Benaissa. Thus began a series of demonstrations that mobilised thousands of people in Alhuceima above all, but also in Nador and in semi-urban areas, with the support also of Rifians who had emigrated to Europe. The demonstrations were intense in the summer of 2017, in the city and even on the beaches. These demonstrations were widely followed on social media, with dozens of films that generated enthusiasm and daring to challenge the Makhzen. And along with this very active mobilisation in the streets, the Hirak generated a remarkable dissemination on social networks of materials, news, reflections that reinforced and spread the protest. Among them, the protest songs that will accompany the Hirak, and which will be the fruit of singer-songwriters and participants in the movement. The texts of the songs are a testimony to the history of the conflict itself and the yearnings of the excluded, as I will show below.

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Analysts have noted the symbolic role played by the Rif Republic flag or the Amazigh flag in the demonstrations (Maddy-Weitzman 2012), but they also point out that the Hirak's demands were not only identity-based but also reflected social unrest over the lack of basic health, education and labour infrastructures, and widespread corruption. They also point out that the rhetoric of the main leader, Zefzafi, was not only focused on the cultural demands of the Amazigh movement, but was a mixture of religious rhetoric and social reformism. Many of his speeches were in Arabic, and the Hirak's own demonstrations included collective oaths invoking God (Esmili 2018).

The demonstrations were a challenge to the Makhzen and its repressive arms. After weeks of demonstrations, the police began to intervene and clashes became widespread. Violence escalated, until in May 2017 the state moved into the next phase. The official propaganda of the government or its related press branded the movement as a puppet at the hands of foreign sectors or various conspiracies, a classic resort of authoritarian regimes to deny the voice and autonomy of local protests. The excuse for Zefzafi's arrest was his intervention at a mosque where he criticised the imam's Friday sermon. On this basis, Zefzafi was arrested on 29 May, followed by the arrests of other public heads of the movement. But the crackdown was not limited to the informal leaders, but also targeted hundreds of people. In June 2018 there was a trial, and most of those tried, 53, were sentenced to severe sentences of up to twenty years, for endangering the security and territorial integrity of the country or defaming public institutions.

Since then, the detainees have been on hunger strikes and have denounced their situation. This repression provoked a backlash, especially among Rifians in the diaspora. The Hirak in the Rif itself took a logical step back, fearing reprisals. Hence, the main demonstrations of support were repeated in different European cities such as Paris, Brussels and Barcelona.

Before we begin to analyse the songs of the Hirak, it should be noted that this political and artistic expression did not appear overnight. It was a new episode in a long history of oral genres that had been bearing witness to Rifian history since ancient times, and which had adapted to the times.

### Protest Song and Sung Protest: Precedents and Revivals

Several anthropological works on the Maghreb show how the worldview of different social actors is expressed through oral genres. One of the first references to this type of oral literature during the colonial era is the work by René Basset (1892), who recorded the poems composed during the Kabylie insurrection in Algeria in 1871. A similar process took place in Morocco, and tribal resistance, in the form of jihad, also became part of oral history (Roux 1992; Peyron 1995; Joseph 1980). In the Spanish protectorate zone, this social chronicle was expressed through various genres, both in the Berber-speaking and Arabic-speaking regions. In the Rif, the most popular genre was the songs known as *izran*, performed by single girls or by Imdyazan musicians, and the rhythm of the *ya ral-la buya*. In both the Rif and Jebala, women were the main authors of the oral genre, a circumstance that confirms the active participation of women in the constitution of the collective, as narrators of social events. The oral genre was not only a representation of resistance and colonial relations, but also played an important role as a means of propaganda and social mobilisation. During the Rif War, 'Abd al-Krim was aware of this role of oral genres and used rhymed epic poems (*raqsiyyat*) as a means of propaganda and attracting recruits (Chtatou 1991: 207).

These oral genres were transformed during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, relegated to the ceremonial cycle of weddings, but they were also recomposed and adopted by new cultural forms. The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of Rifian singer-songwriters who introduced the protest song genre, incorporating rhythms or rhetoric typical of the aforementioned styles.

In Morocco in general, the group Nass al-Ghiwan stood out, a group emblematic for the social criticism of its lyrics and for the ability of its musical style to bring together popular musical styles from all over the country. In the Rif, protest songs were of great importance. Young Rifian poets, whether residents or emigrants to Europe (Ziano or Chacha in Holland) or the most celebrated singer-songwriters (Walid Mimoun, Twattoun) revived traditional rhythms, such as *ya ral-la buya*, and reclaimed local identity from a mythical past. The compilations of living songs and poems from Rifian oral history have provided us with documents from the time of the anti-colonial revolts,

which demonstrate the living weight of that tradition; and in the face of a process of generational disappearance, we are witnessing its incorporation and adaptation to modernity through new mass media. Once created to encourage recruitment or to give morale to the Rifians, the verses of the anti-colonial resistance have been reappearing since the 1980s as a longing for times gone by. 'Abd al-Krim constitutes the ideal spirit for a modern model of freedom and equality, and is taken as an incarnation of Mazigh, the primordial ancestor.<sup>5</sup>

The new generations trained in the Arab school and in the myths of the modern nation-state react with the defence and revival of Amazigh culture (Chtatou 1997: 21). The *tribal* heroes closest in time, Amzian, as a Guelayi (Guelaya, Eastern Rif), and 'Abd al-Krim, as a Rifian (Central Rif), share the market of symbols and iconographies (postcards, posters, etc.) with the mythical founders. Thus, pictures of 'Abd al-Krim can be seen in Imazighan calendars, alongside representations of Masinisa, Yughurta (Numidian Kings) or Kahina (Amazigh Queen).

With this new genre, social and political criticism is observed live at concerts but will also be recorded for later reproduction and dissemination. In other words, the texts are circulated by means of reproduction. Protest songs are then transferred to cassettes (1970s-80s) and CDs (1990s), and then disseminated via the internet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and through new musical and aesthetic genres such as rap, as a mirror of globalisation (Salois 2013).

## Songs and Political Protest in the Hirak

### *Hirak Songs Against the Makhzen and the Army*

In the following section I will analyse a corpus of songs from or about the Hirak sung during the demonstrations and disseminated by social networks linked to the movement. For the translation of the songs, I have used versions circulating on social networks, especially a corpus of songs subtitled and translated from Rifian into Dutch by Rifians in the diaspora, under the name De Jonge Imazighen Community and finally I have checked them with Rifian colleagues to adjust the meaning and interpretation of the texts and key words. Some of the songs are the ones that were repeated as slogans in most of the Hirak demonstrations.

The most chanted slogans in the 2017 demonstrations were those that correspond to these two songs: *The Rif Belongs to All of Us*, and *No to the Militarisation*. These songs became popular and well-known, becoming slogans that sum up the malaise and central aspirations, such as the demand for justice and freedom and an end to repression by the Makhzen and the army. The success of the slogans was not only based on their content, but also on their sonorous rhythms and their suggestiveness (Ayats 2002).

In *The Rif Belongs to All of Us* the main themes focus on the death of Mohcin Fikri and the lack of justice. They also pick up on previous events linked to the protests, such as the appearance of several young people dead and burnt inside a bank during the



protests of 20-F in 2011, deaths that have never been clarified by the police. The song blames the Makhzen for all these acts of repression: "[w]ho burned our brothers?". "[i]t was the Makhzen, oh mother!".

The song wonders about the origin of the problems: what have the Rifians done wrong to be marginalised by the state and the courts? And it denounces a state of militarisation, which originated in the revolts of 1958–59. In other words, the memory of history occupies a central place in the protests.

*The Rif Belongs to All of Us*<sup>6</sup>

*Who has killed our brother Mohcin [Fikri]  
In front of the authority [mahkama - court - in the original]?  
Who has burned our brothers [in a Bank of Alhuceima]?  
It was the Makhzen, oh mother.  
Who has killed our brother Mohcin  
In front of the authority?  
It was the Makhzen, oh mother.  
We are all sad  
Because the Makhzen kills us all. (bis)  
What has the Rifian done wrong  
To be so oppressed?  
He only seeks his rights in this life,  
But they are denied him. (bis)  
We are all angry  
Because the Makhzen now strikes! (bis)  
The Rifian Movement [Anhezi n Arrif]<sup>7</sup> unites the villages,  
The cry for freedom makes the mountains tremble! (bis)  
We are all sad  
Because the Makhzen kills us all. (bis)  
We want freedom!  
We don't want militarisation [-'askara].  
The Rifian people have decided  
To stop militarisation.  
We want freedom,  
We don't want any oppression.  
The Rifian people have decided  
To stop militarisation.  
The Rif belongs to all of us!  
The Makhzen must go! (bis)  
Who has killed our brother Mohcin  
In front of the authority?  
It was the Makhzen, oh mother! (bis)  
We are all sad.  
The Makhzen kills us all.  
We are all sad  
Because the Makhzen kills us all.*

The following song *No to Militarisation* is equally explicit in the text. The lyrics are self-representational, reference is made to the Hirak himself in emphasising the power of the demonstrations and the importance of the unity of the Rifian people. And the target of the protest is again the Makhzen: "the Makhzen disdain us! The Makhzen is unfair to us".

The text emphasises the plural and open character of the movement with people coming from different parts of the Rif: "[w]e come from all the cities to demonstrate". It calls for unity, dignity, justice and freedom. One of the most repeated slogans in the demonstrations was the one claiming freedom, "al-hurriya al-li bghina" (the freedom we want), as well as dignity (*karama*) and justice (*'adala*). In this version performed with guitars in the open air, Nasser Zefzafi can be seen behind the musicians and singing the song. Nabil Ahamjik is listed as the interpreter. Both Ahamjik and Zefzafi were sentenced to the highest penalties, with twenty years in prison.

### *L-la al-'askara (No to militarisation)<sup>8</sup>*

*We leave our homes to demonstrate.*

*Dignity is what we want,*

*But the Makhzen scorns us.*

*Justice is what we want,*

*But the Makhzen is unjust to us.*

*Freedom is what we want*

*But the Makhzen oppresses us.*

*Hand in hand, oh youth of dignity.*

*Hand in hand, oh youth of justice.*

*Hand in hand, oh youth of freedom.*

*Until victory in this struggle.*

*We left our homes to demonstrate,*

*We came from all the cities*

*To demonstrate.*

*We have had enough of humiliation*

*And the Makhzen oppresses us.*

*Hand in hand, oh youth of dignity.*

*Hand in hand, oh youth of justice.*

*Hand in hand, oh youth of freedom,*

*Until victory in this struggle.*

*We leave our homes to demonstrate.*

*Dignity is what we want,*

*But the Makhzen scorns us.*

*Justice is what we want,*

*But the Makhzen is unjust to us.*

*Freedom is what we want  
But the Makhzen oppresses us.  
Hand in hand, oh youth of dignity.  
Hand in hand, oh youth of justice.  
Hand in hand, oh youth of freedom,  
Until victory in this struggle.*

### **'Abd al-Krim and Revitalised Anti-Colonial Memory**

The figure of 'Abd al-Krim has been central to the Hirak mobilisations. Several authors have highlighted this symbolic presence. The intergenerational transmission of memories of the past and its struggles has played an important role in this remembrance (Karrouche 2017). Claiming 'Abd al-Krim vindicates resistance and opposition against those who seek to oppress the Rif. And thus anti-colonial resistances are evoked for post-colonial times; it should also be remembered that 'Abd al-Krim did not return to Morocco after independence and remained in Cairo until his death in 1963, in this sense defying the new established authority.

The songs are illustrated in video clips that are a collage of recycled ideas and images. In this remembrance not only 'Abd al-Krim appears but also other anti-colonial heroes such as the Sharif Muhammad Amzian, leader of the revolt preceding 'Abd al-Krim in 1909-12; or battles and victories of the Rifians over the Spaniards, such as that of Dhar u-Barran in 1921.

The figure of 'Abd al-Krim occupies a much more prominent place than Amzian in the construction of the memory of this anti-colonial struggle. While Amzian disappeared from the scene in 1912, 'Abd al-Krim performed an internationally renowned leadership that embraced more territories and war scenarios with much more relevant consequences in the struggle with Spain and France. But there is an aspect to be developed in future research that concerns how these two personalities have been reconstructed in different ways and from different places. Amzian is a figure more vindicated in his region of origin, in Guelaya and the eastern Rif, an area that has sometimes been perceived from the central Rif as a territory of traitors, due to its proximity to Melilla, so that these different memories would also be reflecting stereotypes and inter-regional tensions within the Rif itself.<sup>9</sup>

In this new handling of colonial images initiated in the 2010s, a video clip stands out that uses images from a B-movie starring Jean-Claude Van Damme, *Le légionnaire* (1998), which shows battles with an enemy who is 'Abd al-Krim. In the montage, photographs of 'Abd al-Krim appear continuously, alternating with the flag of the Rif Republic. The song in the video is by the band Twattoun, which plays an old song about the battle of Dhar u-Barran.<sup>10</sup> Based on this same song by Twattoun, there are other video montages about the colonial period.<sup>11</sup>

The lyrics coincide with the song about that battle that David M. Hart had already

noted in the central Rif during his fieldwork. However, Hart explains that the songs of Dhar u-Barran went unnoticed until years after independence. During the protectorate they were censored by cadis and notables close to Spain, as they were an ode to a Rifian victory over the Spanish (Hart 1976: 374). Hart transcribed the lyrics of the song, which coincide with later versions recreated at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were songs of the *izran* genre, which were sung by the girls from 1921 to 1926. The text is in praise of the Rifian warriors and their bravery, which led them to defeat the Spanish army, and to which specific references appear, such as that of Captain Huelva:

*Oh Dahar Ubarran, how many bones lie upon you!*  
*With what you have brought, you have brought hunger also.*  
*The same thing that the rowboat on the water has brought.*  
*The Aith Waryaghar are going into battle with 1200 men.*  
*When they reached the Nkur plain it was full of people.*  
*Oh Shaikh 'Amar, who died upon the top of the barbed wires,*  
*The people of Tizi 'Azza [Thimsaman] are still fighting right now,*  
*Fighting with their hands, and even their women are fighting.*  
*The Spanish hakim Captain Huelva, they have caught him by the throat*  
 (Hart 1976: 375)

Several versions of this song are circulating on the networks with collages and visual montages. Dhar u-Barran's version sung by Bouarfa Ayawar<sup>12</sup> has been used in video montages with historical images of the colonial war, as in this documentary example on '*Abd al-Krim. Legend or Freedom Fighter*'.<sup>13</sup> There are other versions, such as the one created by the group Agraf.<sup>14</sup> These are versions that predate the emergence of Hirak, indicating the strong reservoir of colonial images that were re-emerging as metaphors for the present.

The singer-songwriter Walid Mimoun (1959-) also dedicates a song to this battle.<sup>15</sup> It should be remembered that Walid Mimoun has been one of the most popular singer-songwriters since his first album, *Ajjaj* (Thunder) in 1980, banned by the Moroccan government. He was later imprisoned and expelled from university. Aware of the difficulties encountered in Morocco, he emigrated in 1991 to various European countries (The Netherlands, Spain and finally Belgium), from where a creative cultural movement grew up, without the censorship existing in Morocco, and which will play a fundamental role of external support for the Hirak.

Other groups, such as Ayawn<sup>16</sup> or the group Ihoudhriyen,<sup>17</sup> dedicate a song to 'Abd al-Krim, and designate him by the popular name by which he was known, Muley Mohand. The group Twattoun also dedicated a song to 'Abd al-Krim/Muley Mohand.<sup>18</sup> The figure of the Sharif Amzian is also mentioned alongside him on banners and in songs dedicated to him.<sup>19</sup>

But like all symbols, the figure of 'Abd al-Krim is polysemic, and we also find some interpretation of the figure constructed from a different epic vision than that of groups adopting traditional Rifian rhythms. In the following example, the author of the video clip employs a *nashid*, a modern Sunni Islamic revivalist musical style that uses a cappella vocals, due to the stigmatisation of instruments as forbidden. The video refers to the "Guerre du Rif", "Bataille d'Annual", "'Abd al-Krim" and the author has a revealing name, "Ahl sunna" (the people of the sunna). The images illustrating it are again the film of Van Damme and the legionnaires.<sup>20</sup> Among the comments, some wonder why the Rif is shown by a desert and a song in Arabic, discussing in this sense the Islamic/Arab interpretation of the character.

### ***Songs for Zefzafi and the Prisoners. Criticisms of the Repression of the Makhzen***

As I have already explained, Nasser Zefzafi is undoubtedly the most public face of the Hirak. But this leadership was not something designed by any marketing cabinet, nor was he put in place by any party. His charismatic profile, with good oratory skills, did the most important thing, saying what people wanted to hear, after decades of social inequalities, ignorance and marginalisation. Zefzafi was not highly educated and did not belong to the local elite. At the time of the uprising he was unemployed, he had no university education, but he was the son of a teacher and had a good background in Arabic language and Islamic religion, which he used in his speeches, even though it was far from being a religious movement. Zefzafi was the leading voice, along with other comrades, until his arrest. It was then that the character took on a new, even more powerful dimension. His imprisonment has generated all kinds of protests in the Rif and outside the Rif. And these have also been expressed through various songs to denounce his situation.

In his public appearances while he was free, Zefzafi already conjured up his discourse by invoking 'Abd al-Krim as an exemplary figure. In some interviews at his home, Zefzafi can be seen accompanied in the background by a large portrait of 'Abd al-Krim. After his arrest, his parents will carry out live broadcasts on Facebook to denounce his situation. The setting, the home office, is perfectly arranged to show portraits dedicated to their son Nasser, but also to the figure of 'Abd al-Krim, in a clear link between past and present.<sup>21</sup>

Since his arrest, Zefzafi has been the subject of songs praising him and denouncing repression. In this case, I have selected some songs recorded by singers with no great means, just a guitar and the strength of the lyrics. The first song analysed is an omen, entitled *If they Could Catch You, Nasser* and composed before the arrest. An anonymous singer, hands on guitar, wrapped in the Amazigh flag, sings in the open air, with the Rif in the background.

***If they Could Catch You, Nasser***<sup>22</sup>

*If they could catch you, Nasser,  
They'd break your legs.  
But you're too smart for them,  
Like the cheikh with the [Spanish] captain [capitán in the original].  
If they could catch you, Nasser,  
They'd cut off your fingers  
But you're too smart for them.  
Like the wolf among the vines  
The grapes would still be too sour.  
They asked me what I want:  
I want my rights.  
The ones that were taken away from me.  
I want my rights.  
The ones they took away from me.  
They asked me why I cry.  
I cry for my mother,  
Who was taken from me.  
I cry for the mother,  
Who was taken from me.  
Let us join hands, Amazighs.  
Oh, son of Tamzgha,  
Fight for a piece of land,  
It's better than running away!  
Let's join hands, Amazighs,  
Oh, son of Tamzgha.  
Fight for a piece of land, it's better than running away!  
Better than running away! (bis)  
They asked me what I want.  
I want the rights that were taken from me. (bis)  
They asked me why I cry.  
I cry for the mother,  
Who was taken away from me. (bis)  
If they could catch you, Nasser,  
They'd break your legs.  
But you're too smart for them,  
Like the cheikh with the captain.  
If they could catch you, Nasser,  
They'd cut off your fingers.  
But you're too smart for them.  
Like the wolf among the vines,  
The grapes would still be too sour.*

Here a punishment is predicted that would certainly come. The author handles the symbolism of the Amazigh movement, by recalling Tamzgha as territory, by speaking of the land as the mother, or by comparing Zefzafi's bravery with colonial times, in the phrase "like the cheikh with the captain", that is, recalling the Moroccan authority that was capable of outwitting the Spanish authority. Or comparing Zefzafi to the intelligence of the wolf.

In the next piece, again an anonymous singer with a guitar, sings in this case from inside a house. The song already denounces the arrest of Zefzafi. The Makhzen and its enforcement arm are presented as the monster that has kidnapped Zefzafi, for fighting against oppression. This oppression is described with metaphors, where the monster (the Makhzen) "has devoured the flesh to the bone" and drunk its sweat, that is to say, has exploited the Rif to the maximum. This exploitation is presented as a curse, but the author hopes that one day this impunity will end and that a purifying rain will reverse this situation.

***O Monsters, What Do you Seek Here?***<sup>23</sup>

*What are you doing to us?*

*Oh monsters, what do you seek here?*

*Our flesh you have devoured to the bone.*

*Why are you not yet satisfied?*

*You have kidnapped Nasser and drunk our sweat.*

*This is the curse you cast upon us.*

*Our flesh you have devoured to the bone.*

*What do you want from us? (bis)*

*But there will come a day when the purifying rain will fall.*

*The mask will be washed away,*

*And all that was hidden all this time will be uncovered.*

*The mask will be washed away,*

*And all that was hidden all this time will be uncovered.*

*Oh wolves, what are you doing to us?*

*Oh monsters, what will you give us?*

*Oh wolves, what are you doing to us?*

*Our flesh you have devoured to the bone.*

*What do you want from us?*

*You have kidnapped Nasser and drunk our sweat.*

*This is the curse you cast upon us.*

*Our flesh you have devoured to the bone.*

*What do you want from us?*

*You have kidnapped Nasser and drunk our sweat.*

The next track is also dedicated to the prisoners of the Hirak. In the foreground appears the singer, guitar in hand, with Tifinagh letters inscribed on the instrument, and wrapped in the flag of the Rif republic. This *Ode to the Prisoners of the Rif* appeared in June 2017, after the arrests.

### *Ode to the Prisoners of the Rif*<sup>24</sup>

*Don't cry, mother,  
Even if I go away. (bis)  
There will come a day  
When I will come back to you.  
There will come a day  
When I will come back to you,  
I will see my brothers,  
The people of Alhuceima.  
We will shout,  
We will unite our words.  
Our soul [ruh] and blood [dam],  
We will offer it to you, Nasser. (bis)  
Freedom will triumph,  
Whether they want it or not.  
Our Rif is united,  
Many have died for it. (bis)  
The woman is proud  
And with her head held high.  
Silya<sup>25</sup> has already been arrested.  
We still have energy.  
The woman is proud  
And with her head held high.  
Silya has been arrested.  
We still have energy.  
Our soul and blood,  
We will offer it to you, Nasser. (bis)  
We went outside, mother,  
In a peaceful way,  
But we collided with the Makhzen,  
They are prepared with sticks. (bis)  
Mulay Mohand is dead,  
But his sons are still.  
They will continue peacefully,  
They will finish their marches. (bis)  
Our soul and blood,  
We will offer it to you, Nasser. (bis)*



This song mentions Nasser (Zefzafi) and Silya, the Rifian singer who also became an icon of the demonstrations, haranguing the mobilisation and who was also imprisoned, like other women such as Nawal Ben Aisa. The song expresses the pain of the Rifians and uses bodily metaphors to show their connection with the victims, to whom they offer their soul and their blood, to regain their freedom. I want to highlight the passage in which 'Abd al-Krim is invoked, as a hero of the past, inspiring for the present in the struggle against the Makhzen and its "bats": "Mulay Mohand is dead / but his sons are still / they will continue peacefully / they will finish their marches". Also remarkable is the remembrance of the role of women, who actively participated in the protests. This role of women was expressed in voices such as the aforementioned Silya, who also dedicated songs to the mobilisation. In addition women handled the local genre of sung poetry such as *izran*. One of these songs praised the Hirak and the resistance, also of women ("they put on their handkerchiefs" would be equivalent to going out into the streets), appealing for unity and criticising the intervention of the Makhzen, who "murder our brothers".

### *Izran*<sup>26</sup>

*When they realised there was a protest march,  
The authorities jumped in.  
They went to the villages  
And put up roadblocks.  
Alhuceima is a flower  
And so are those who live in it.  
They are pure of heart,  
They do not fear the authorities.  
They murder our brothers  
And they manipulate the matter  
And manipulate the matter.  
Here the fair word is also guilty,  
Even our girls put on their handkerchiefs,  
They put on their handkerchiefs.  
This is our Rif,  
We are responsible for it.  
Brothers and sisters,  
Let us join hands,  
Let us join hands.  
Let us unite our hearts.  
We can against this worry.  
Oh, my mother,  
My heart burns  
With what the authorities are doing  
Against my brothers.*

In all these songs, the figure of the mother always appears, as a family reference, and as a metaphor for the Rif. The identification between the mother and the land was already common in protest songs of the 1980s and 1990s. It is not surprising that in the framework of these identifications, songs were dedicated to the Hirak and to the mothers of the Hirak resistance fighters. The Agraf Band pays tribute to the women in a video clip that begins with the image of a young woman crying and expressing her sadness and indignation through the cry of *zagarit*. The track, titled *Yammas Onakraf*,<sup>27</sup> shows images of the protests and passages with mothers expressing their grief for their detained children, including Nasser Zefzafi's mother, Zolikha Zefzafi. Zolikha Zefzafi has been honoured in songs of the *izran* genre sung also from the diaspora in home videos, such as this one performed by a young musician with her *bendir*, from the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup> Women's participation in the movement has been very active, both in the streets, in these chants and oral expressions, in mobilisation and in denouncing repression, in Morocco and in the diaspora.<sup>29</sup>

Fig. 2: Zolikha Zefzafi, Facebook talk<sup>30</sup>



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Ahmedzefzaf1/videos/3675239309366882>  
(last accessed on 10 October 2021).

## Conclusions

The implosion and subsequent repression of the Hirak in the Rif shows a scenario of social conflict between a post-colonial state and populations excluded by it. The conflict analysed here is part of a long history of tensions, protests and impositions. In this paper I have proposed to consider the study of a series of materials such as songs, which allow us to approach forms of political action with a powerful symbolic charge and which easily reach broad layers of the population. Their influence can be as great as other forms of action formally linked to the political sphere. Hirak's songs,

like those of other protest movements, can be read as a political text, as the expression of a collective outcry, and at the same time they are the very (self-) portrait of protest. The songs presented here summarise an ideology of criticism of the marginalisation of the Rif by the Makhzen and synthesise in a clear and explicit way the demands for dignity, justice and freedom. But these songs cannot be understood as a mere representation of reality. The songs had a performative character during the demonstrations with clear effects on reality, as they became an element of union and transmission of the message of criticism and vindication, bringing together men, women and people of different ages. But this collective effervescence came to an end. The mobilisations around the Hirak demonstrated a long-standing malaise towards the Makhzen, understood as a centralist entity that has excluded the Rif and suffers from endemic corruption in its bureaucratic structures. Its repressive apparatus, such as the army, aroused a rejection expressed in the songs analysed, although not so much the figure of the monarch, who does not appear in the lyrics. Be that as it may, the police, judicial and media apparatus slowed down the spread of Hirak, favouring the economic and political elites around the King as the country's main businessman in a neo-liberal context that unleashes class differences and introduces new forms of social control (Bogaert 2018).

In many songs, a continuity of the present with the past emerges. The memory of the struggle is summed up in the figure of 'Abd al-Krim, who is the leitmotif of the songs and imaginary disseminated through the new audiovisual formats. Colonial battles, characters such as Amzian or 'Abd al-Krim and mournful events such as the rebellion of 1958-59 appear in the songs to remind new generations that there are precedents of resistance and that the exclusion of the Rif is reproduced over time.

The songs reflect the very process experienced by the Hirak, from its emergence in 2016-17, to its repression by the Makhzen, where the last songs show the protest against the arrest of the main leaders. The outrage remains, but it is no longer expressed on the streets and in demonstrations, but will be relegated to another virtual, private or diasporic dimension.

But if one fact stands out in this mobilisation, it is the role of women as agents of revolt, singing the songs, creating *izran* and disseminating them on social networks. As in past times of anti-colonial resistance, these oral genres, songs and poetry, were not merely a representation of counter-power, but also constituted practical means of social mobilisation, as the massive demonstrations in Alhuceima made clear.

This study of the songs presents new research challenges for the future. The method used here, based on the analysis of the texts and their contexts, would need to be expanded with fieldwork that gathers the direct voice of those who created the songs and those who sang them, in order to study the meaning that the songs have for the social actors directly involved. This would make it possible to analyse the polysemies of the texts, the *modus operandi* of their creation and the value that this oral genre has had as political capital. The Hirak himself conceals several polysemies, such as the

parallel existence of voices linked to the Amazigh movement's identity claims, while charismatic characters such as Zefzafi followed a path more centred on a pietistic Muslim discourse, with its particular notion of dignity and justice.

Ultimately, the Rifian case shows the importance of informal mechanisms within revolts and counter-power, and their role in everyday forms of resistance. For sectors of the population who do not subscribe to political parties or who distrust a state that imposes its rules of political action, these mechanisms become the most direct and closest channels to their interests and strategies, aimed at denouncing corruption and demanding social justice, a better education and health system, and the recognition of Rifian cultural specificity. This observation can be extended to the rest of the revolts that have emerged since 2011.

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**Notes:**

- 1 - I would like to sincerely thank Muhammad for his collaboration in translating and discussing the songs. I will keep his anonymity at his request.
- 2 - For a bibliography on the methodological challenge of these new sources, see Lupton D. (2021), "Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic", <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cIGjGABB2h2qbduTgfrqbHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit> (last accessed, 23 April 2022).
- 3 - The term *Makhzen* designates the Moroccan state as a centralised form of political organisation and articulated around an army and a bureaucracy (Laroui 1993: 81-91). Historically it has been controlled by the sultan, who became designated as king (*malik*) after independence.
- 4 - Colonialism accelerated a monetarisation of labor that had already begun during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the temporary emigration of part of the Rifian peasants to the Oran area in Algeria, mainly in the service of French colons.
- 5 - Poems by Chacha, in Otten (1992: 154).
- 6 - *De Rif is van ons allen!*, 11 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPVU2dIUM2U> (last accessed on 10 October 2021).
- 7 - Amazigh translation of Hirak Rif.
- 8 - *Nabil Ahamjik Rif protest song 2017*, 14 June 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y mx3x0IP\\_CU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y mx3x0IP_CU) (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 9 - Some testimonies from Guelaya have assured me that in the central Rif ("those of 'Abd al-Krim") they are considered "less Rifian", because of their proximity to Melilla. A proverb explicitly summarizes this image of the Iqar'iyyin: "qla'ai jainun wa iqr'aa sab'a" ("the guelayi is a traitor even if he learns for seven years"). Conversation with a Rifian from Beni Enzar, the border area with Melilla, 4 June 2001. See also Delbrel (1911: 82): "Guelaia?... Jadaia! (Guelaya?...Traidora! [Traitor])".
- 10 - Videoclip retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JUzBWtmpT4> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 11 - *Twatoun: Dhar o'Varan*, 18 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrSmigtswCk> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 12 - *Dhar Oubaran*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TQVqJKFElo> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 13 - *Dhar baran*, 10 January 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29P2W6Bsb8Q> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 14 - *Agraf Band: Dhar u Barran*, 7 October 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S\\_HSmCPPo5g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_HSmCPPo5g) (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 15 - *Adhar Obaran*, 20 October 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hgMYO\\_045g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hgMYO_045g) (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 16 - *Abdelkrim el Khetabi: Chanson du groupe Ayawen Moulay Mohend*, 3 August 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z67sFUbXGWY&list=RD\\_XeZzmnvHhI&index=13](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z67sFUbXGWY&list=RD_XeZzmnvHhI&index=13) (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 17 - *Groupe Ihoudhriyen: mulay muhannd*, 18 March 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gp07vki6J1k> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 18 - *Twattoun: Abdelkrim*, 14 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdpgkTJA1lk> (last accessed 10 October 2021). With this same song by Twattoun, there is a video montage made by third parties that gathers several of the leitmotifs of the Amazigh revindicative movement. It shows images of 'Abd al-Krim, the flag of the Rif Republic today, graffiti, the Amazigh flag, the map of Tamzgha, the geographical area of the Imazighen, and explicit images of the struggle against the Spanish colonisers and against the Moroccan state. Link to this version: *Molay Mohand*, 5 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlpiviUHYzE> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 19 - Example of a song: *Mohamed Amezian*, 3 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xdzx0JuK5n0> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 20 - Videoclip retrieved from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA\\_LeoNFSdw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA_LeoNFSdw) (last accessed 4 July 2021).
- 21 - <https://www.facebook.com/Ahmedzefzaf1/videos/357005489300096> (last accessed 10 October 2021).

- 22 - *Als ze je konden grijpen, Nasser*, 11 June 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ-5q\\_u9jxU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ-5q_u9jxU) (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 23 - *O monsters, wat zoeken jullie hier?*, 16 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toP58HskK-A> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 24 - *Ode aan de politieke gevangenen in de Rif*, 10 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfzF-RwW1Fc> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 25 - Silya, stage name Salima Ziani, was arrested on 5 June 2017, and released in July 2017 following a royal pardon granted to coincide with the throne holiday.
- 26 - *Izran over de protesten in de Rif*, 10 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8msLW4rvsE> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 27 - *Agraf Band: Ymmas Onakraf*, 8 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT7mGHZ3Z3k> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 28 - *Voor yamach Zefzafi*, 26 January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-96oJZMzbYc> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 29 - A. Sanfeliu, J. Figueras, *Las voces femeninas del 'Hirak'. El movimiento popular del Rif, en clave femenina y feminista*, "Revista 5W", 27 September 2018, <https://www.revista5w.com/temas/movimientos-sociales/las-vozes-femeninas-del-hirak-7763> (last accessed 10 October 2021).
- 30 - Talk in Moroccan Arabic. Note the portraits of her son Nasser and 'Abd al-Krim on the lower right.

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