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# The Amazigh Issue in Post-Qaddafi's Libya: Mobilizing History for Occupying a Political Vacuum

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## Abstract:

The article analyses the Imazighen's role in Libyan uprising of February 2011, historically problematizing the emergence of the ethnic issue in nowadays Libya, as well as Imazighen's struggle to bring the ethnic discourse on the transitional political agenda, after over 42 years of Qaddafi's pan-Arab oppression. Amazigh communities of Jabal al-Nafusa and Zwara have performed their mobilization within the public space of revolutionary Libya not only as an armed revolt against Qaddafi's regime but also as a 'laboratory of belonging', inextricably linking the credibility of Libya's democratic transition to the constitutional recognition of their linguistic and cultural specificity. Eventually, the cultural themes of Berberism were coupled to a nativist rhetoric, sustaining a process of ethnic identity's (re)construction. Arguably both local activists and town leaders have usually preferred to strive for their particular interests in a peaceful way, despite constantly showing an oppositional attitude toward transitional authorities. Yet, in order to build a unitary linguistic and cultural community, ethnic categories were mobilized, which are often inherited from the colonial past. Ultimately, ethnicity served Amazigh leaders as a political tool for bargaining local interests with a weak political center, eventually seeking for wider margins of autonomy and the control of local resources.

**Keywords:** Libya, Amazigh, ethnicity, minorities, transition

## Introduction

In February 2011, some areas of Tripolitania responded to the Cyrenaica uprisings against Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi's regime by immediately joining the revolt. This led to

the mobilisation of the area ranging from Jabal al-Nafusa to Zwara in the western part of the region, where the large-majority Berber-speaking towns sided with their Arabic-speaking neighbours to overthrow the *Jamahiriyya* leader. The so-called Berber or Amazigh militias<sup>1</sup> were thus created. Their participation in the anti-Qaddafi struggle at the end of August 2011 also contributed to the liberation of Tripoli (Lacher, Labnouj 2015). For the previous forty-two years, in fact, al-Qaddafi relentlessly portrayed Libya as a wholly Arab nation. In his effort to "erase Berber identity from Libyan history",<sup>2</sup> he banned speaking, printing, and writing Tamazight, the Amazigh language. After the Libyan revolutionary forces toppled the *Jamahiriyya* leader, however, political fragmentation re-emerged alongside conflicting representations of individual and collective belongings. Qaddafi's regime breakdown allowed for new political dynamics and group mobilisation experiments at a local and regional level, where formerly excluded actors devised an appropriation of the Libyan public space that was previously hostage to the regime.

Recent analyses have underlined the emergence of different articulations of Libya's current crisis in terms of its 'politics of identity'. These articulations, however, have mostly focused on the armed competition for power, by emphasising the role of militias created on local, religious, and ethnic bases (Sawani, Pack 2013; Cole, McQuin 2015). Moreover, the 'tribal paradigm' has prevailed, for Libyan *qabilas* have alternatively been presented as the main challenge to the process of achieving stability in post-Qaddafi's Libya, or as the only possible solution to its crisis (Ouannes 2012 and 2016).<sup>3</sup> Within this interpretative framework, except for rare cases (Baldinetti 2014; Kohl 2014), ethnicity was only intended as an intervening variable in the Libyan chaos equation. After 2011, for instance, Cherif Bassiouni wrote: "Violence fuelled by ethnic differences erupted between Arab and Tebu communities, as well as between Arab and Amazigh groups, such as the Tuaregs. These divisions, along with the proliferation of non-state armed actors and renewed militarism in the country, became important aspects of post-Qaddafi Libya" (Bassiouni 2013: xlvi).

While effectively representing one of the most critical elements of nowadays Libya, such interpretations overshadow the unarmed articulations of the political dialectic, involving Libyan individuals or group actors in the production of ethnically connoted 'politics of identity'. Ethnicity, in fact, revealed a multifaceted political project in itself, whose pursuing has seldom entailed armed confrontations. As for the Amazigh mobilisation in Libya, arguably both local activists and town leaders have usually preferred to strive for their particular interests in a peaceful way, despite constantly showing an oppositional attitude toward transitional authorities. They did so while relying on the international discipline of human rights, and more specifically on the doctrine of minority rights and the rights of indigenous people. Therefore, ethnic affiliation, as well as the affiliation to the *qabila*, is hardly the result of conflicting ideological values *per se*, but rather "a part of the ongoing contested socio-political dynamics in the post-Qaddafi era" (Jebnoun 2015: 838).

Katherine Hoffman argued that in the aftermath of the Qaddafi regime collapse, new articulations of 'Self' and 'Other' emerged in Libya, which have been setting the Amazigh minority against the Arab majority. These were the result of mediation processes, not just conflict, and involved people both at a national and at a transnational level (Hoffman 2018: 149). The Libyan Amazigh activists associated with the World Amazigh Congress (CMA) found their chance to mobilise regional and international networks in the anti-Qaddafi protests. These networks not only succeeded in supporting home-grown activists in their fight against the regime but also solicited further local activism. Accordingly, the actors involved in this process embraced their own share of the 'politics of identity', by leveraging on ethnicity as an instrument of community building at different levels, so as to sustain particularistic claims on a national scale. Studies and research concerning not just the Amazigh linguistic specificity but also Libyan pre-Islamic history were promoted – history proved crucial in sustaining "the rationale for giving rights to the Amazigh" as indigenous people, and an oppressed minority (Lee 2012: 299).

This article will reflect on the Amazigh activists' efforts to retrace Libyan history, by demonstrating how it constituted a crucial dimension of their broader strategy of community building. Starting from a historical overview on the emergence of the ethnic issue in Libyan history, an assessment of how ethnicity repeatedly proved strategic in providing the Amazigh groups with effective agency in contrasting central government policies, as well as their local competitors, will be made. It will emerge that contemporary Amazigh activists have been sustaining ethnic revivalism also through the production of a new historical narrative. This strategy ultimately turned a sentiment of group belonging, historically grounded on local dynamics, into a more powerful ethnic one.

### The colonial origins of the ethnic discourse in Libyan history

Since the first half of the XIX century, French colonial officials in Algeria launched the effort to ethnographically catalogue their subject populations. European colonial authorities controlling North African territories undertook the search and identification of the pure 'Berber type' by relying on linguistic, religious and regional differences with the rest of Maghrebi colonial subjects, who were assumed to be Arabs instead. Accordingly, an ethnically connoted *divide and rule* policy was experimented in North Africa's French colonies which negated multiple belongings and was later generalised to other colonial domains in the Maghreb at large (Ageron 1976: 331-348; Chaker 1982: 331-89; Boëtsch 2006). European colonial Powers did not invent the plurality of ethnic and religious groups that studded the colonial space. However, they did make a completely new use of this social, linguistic, and religious pluralism (Spear 2003; Tiyambe Zeleza 2006), so as to obtain "authoritarian possibilities", namely turning the political potential of Maghrebi plural societies into conflicting dynamics of belonging

(Mamdani 1996: 21). Italian former colonies in North Africa – namely Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan – were no exceptions. Tripolitania's Berber leaders and local groups, in fact, had always played an active, and often proactive role in establishing and re-discussing regional political balances throughout the region's history. Starting from 1911, their political prominence both in the anti-Italian resistance front and among those local leaders who would intermediate with Italian authorities, moved Italian colonial authorities to look at the way French colonial authorities used ethnicity in their strategies for the social and political control of Algerian populations. Between 1912 and 1913 Pietro Bertolini, the Italian Minister of the Colonies, decided to offer Tripolitania's Berber leaders the recognition of a special administration (*idara mukhtara*) for Berber-majority territories, by relying on Berber linguistic and religious specific characteristics – Arab-Tamazight bilingualism, and their adhesion to Ibadi Islam (Cresti 2015a; 2015b). Archival records show that Italian colonial authorities repeatedly leveraged on ethnic specificity so as to promote *divide and rule* policies in their strategies for addressing Western Tripolitania's demands for either local autonomy or independence. Nevertheless, the latter was rather inspired by both local interests and the rhetoric of anti-colonial pan-Islamism and pan-Ottomanism. Indeed, the Ibadi and Berber leader of local resistance, Sulayman al-Baruni, was repeatedly appointed Ottoman senator, both before and during Italian colonialism. Moreover, he mobilised Berber *qabilas* against the Italians, as well as Arab ones, and joined the most prominent Arab notables in founding the Tripolitania Republic, in November 1918 (Baghni 1981; Anderson 1990). Starting from 1915, Khalifa Bin 'Askar, another Berber local leader from Nalut, took the lead of some Arab and Berber armed groups from western Tripolitania and southern Tunisia, leveraging on pan-Islamic ideals rather than ethnic solidarity. He then managed to couple anti-Italian resistance with a new wave of uprisings against French authorities (Abdelmoula 1987: 85-100). Therefore, the Berber leaders of Tripolitania did not initiate the process of claiming ethnically connoted minority rights, yet they mastered the use of the Italian colonial authorities' ethnic strategies for their own profit. Some of them, such as Sulayman al-Baruni and his fellow *mujahidin* (i.e. anti-colonial fighters), leveraged on linguistic and religious specificity as an effective means to barter a higher level of local autonomy from the colonial power. However, they haggled with the Italians on ethnic bases with the actual aim of pursuing one of the regional Arab-Berber revolt's main objectives – the Italian recognition of Western Tripolitania's autonomy.<sup>4</sup> Others Berber notables, such as 'Issa 'Abu Sahmin from Zwara, and the local leaders from the Jabal, Mussa Qrada and Sassi Khzam, soon abandoned the anti-colonial struggle and instead seconded the Italian ethnic policy in order to prevail against their local competitors. The Italian authorities then started referring to them as the 'Berber party'.<sup>5</sup>

Both cases demonstrated how ethnicity emerged as a social and political category during the colonial period, providing both colonial authorities with an instrument of

social control, and local leaders with an instrument of agency. Yet, on his turn, Qaddafi repeatedly recalled the colonial origins of the 'Berber issue' to accuse Berber-speaking groups of being "the enemy of the revolution", while defining the Tamazight language as "the milk of the colonialist, [...] their poison".<sup>6</sup> This ideologically biased approach to the historicity of the Berber issue ended up overshadowing how ethnic and religious identities were intermittently and functionally displayed within more complex regional and trans-imperial networks of alliance, both of solidarity and competition. It is not by chance that Amazigh ethnicity, as well as its history, became both an instrument of political contestation and a disputed political tool in independent Libya, as was the case for post-colonial Maghreb at large.

### The emergence of Berberism as a reaction to state pan-Arabism

Even though the Berber ethnicity emerged as a politically relevant tool during the colonial period, the independence of former French and Italian colonies of North Africa progressively witnessed the emergence of Berberism, defined by Gabi Kratochwil as the activism of those mobilising on culturalist positions for the recognition of the Amazigh language and culture (Kratochwil 1999). In particular, Mohammed Chafiq has expressly linked the emergence of Libyan Imazighen's (pl. of Amazigh) political and cultural activism to the need of reacting to the post-independence regimes' state pan-Arabism, just as was the case for Berberism in the former French colonies of the Maghreb (Chafiq 2005: 80–81). The political use of the ethno-racial categories with control and social mobilisation purposes, in fact, survived the decolonisation in Libya. It mildly transited along Idris' Kingdom, which recognised Berber groups with some margins of local autonomy in Jabal al-Nafusa in exchange for social peace in the region, and the recognition of the Sanusi Crown (Dupree 1958: 33–35). However, it was during Qaddafi's regime that Berber groups were relegated to cultural and political oblivion. The 1951 Constitution – sanctioning the birth of the Independent United Kingdom of Libya under the Sanusi monarchy – did not grant any official recognition to non-Arab groups. It guaranteed the equity of citizens without any religious, ethnic or linguistic discrimination, and Article 24 contemplated the possibility of using any language in private transactions, religious and cultural matters, as well as the press, publications, and public meetings. Nevertheless, in 1952, the Law on Arabic Language established Arabic as the only official language of the State (Baldinetti 2018: 420). In the meantime, as stated by Anna Baldinetti: "Libya became the main arena where Nasserism tested its pan-Arabism" by promoting, among other things, its educational model centered on the Arabic language and culture (*ivi*: 422). After Qaddafi's Free Officers' Coup, in September 1969, a provisional constitutional chart was published, confirming Arabic as the only Libyan official language, and giving no recognition to other ethnic or linguistic minorities. This approach was later reaffirmed by the five-point project to set out Libya's Arabic cultural revolution, which was presented by Qaddafi in 1973 in the

Berber-majority town of Zwara. On that occasion, the *qa'id* addressed the Amazigh-majority population as "the enemies of the revolution". Similarly, Libya's Arabness was underlined in the 1977 Declaration of the Establishment of the People's Authority (Baldinetti 2018: 423–424). Forced Arabisation occurred alongside discriminatory policies towards the Libyan Amazigh, who were forbidden to speak Tamazight in public, or even to give Amazigh names to their children (Dbeez 2017: 61–62). Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, "Libya's treatment of minorities was a combination of integration and assimilation" (Kohl 2014: 424), and the regime strongly opposed any expression of cultural activism that was alternative to pan-Arabism. This resulted in truncating an emerging Libyan Amazigh culturalism. The scholarly work of the Amazigh linguist and poet from Jadu, Sa'id Sifaw al-Mah'ruq, was continuously opposed by the regime, as his research about Tamazight grammar, Berber mythology and his poetry collections, were clandestinely circulated in Tripoli, Jabal al-Nafusa and Zwara, as well as outside Libya.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Amazigh activists from Yafran who would publish *Ussan*, the first Berber magazine clandestinely circulating in Libya, were kept under strict surveillance by the regime. In 1980, forty activists from Zwara, Jadu and Yafran, who had autonomously travelled to Algeria for buying and secretly introducing in Libya forbidden Amazigh books and music, were arrested for allegedly constituting a Berber party, charged with 'Berber activism', and sent to jail in 1981. Three of them were executed, engendering the decision of many other Amazigh activists to leave the country and continue their activism from exile.<sup>8</sup> It is not by chance that the Libyan Imazighen joined the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, which plotted to attack Bab al-'Aziziya and depose Qaddafi's regime in 1984 (Lacher, Labnouj 2015: 261). Nevertheless, the Amazigh sharing of anti-regime activism abroad did not account for the development of an ethnic-oriented political agenda, and Berberist cultural activism remained extremely limited. The emergence and evolution of Berberism and Berber studies in former French-Maghrebi colonies led to a process of 'maghrebisation' of the discipline, which led to its gradual decolonisation.<sup>9</sup> The development of both Berberism and Berber studies in Libya suffered instead from the cultural and political isolation to which the Country was condemned by the Qaddafi's regime's international policy. Until the 1998 suspension of UN multilateral sanctions against Libya, which were eventually lifted in 2003, Libyan Amazigh remained relatively marginal in the debate concerning Berberism, both in North Africa and abroad (Morone, Pagano 2016). Except for very few cases, the Libyan Amazigh managed to participate in the development of a Berberist agenda for North Africa only in the second half of the 1990s and, more concretely, in the early 2000s, also as a result of the regime cosmetic political liberalisation (Di Tolla 2012; Baldinetti 2014). Some Libyan Amazigh, in fact, took part in the founding session of the CMA, which was held in Saint Romain de Dolan (France) between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1995.<sup>10</sup> However, the Libyan Tamazight Congress was only founded in 2000, a few years after the homologous Amazigh movements of Algeria and Morocco. The

Congress started to coordinate with these movements in order to "protect, defend and develop the Amazigh existence, identity, and culture within the Libyan nation".<sup>11</sup> In 2001, Mohammed Umadi, a young Amazigh activist originally from Jadu who was educated in California, launched a website called *Tawalt* ("word" in Tamazight) with the aim of collecting oral testimonies, as well as documents and manuscripts in Tamazight, and make them available to its users along with international historical, literal, and purely linguistic scholarships specialised in Berber studies.<sup>12</sup> The web's relative liberalisation of those years also allowed the emergence of new initiatives aiming at creating clandestine classes for the teaching of Tamazight language and script in the Jabal. It was the case of the Tripoli based activist Hassan Abu Saghar, who involved twenty-five colleagues from Jabal al-Nafusa in the project of using the internet to secretly learn Tamazight in night classes.<sup>13</sup> In the same period, Mazigh and Madghis Buzakhar – the twin-sons of the Amazigh intellectual and poet from Yafran Fathi Buzakhar – established an informal centre for collecting and disseminating documents and pamphlets in Tamazight in Tripoli. In fact, they could rely on a regional and international network of activists they had joined since the exile of their family in Australia. This allowed them to find bibliographic materials and music in Tamazight that they could spread clandestinely in the Jabal.<sup>14</sup> Between December 2005 and January 2006, a delegation of the World Amazigh Congress led by Belkacem Lounés was hosted in Tripoli by Colonel Qaddafi, who was the first pan-Arab leader to launch an institutional interlocution with the Amazigh transnational movement (Maddy-Weitzman 2011: 140). However, as argued by Anna Baldinetti, the Libyan regime lenient attitude toward the Amazighs and their language was only the result of its need to normalise international relations with Western countries (Baldinetti 2009). The latter was indeed very active in projecting *soft power*, especially through UN General Assembly resolutions, and UNESCO activities for promoting the safeguard of minority rights, as well as ethnic pluralism. The very same institutions that had supported the Maghreb state Arabisation during the 1960s, after the end of the Cold War, and increasingly starting from the 2000s, instead began to focus on themes such as cultural diversity and the rights of the indigenous peoples (Medici 2018), hence, al-Qaddafi's cosmetic openings to the transnational Amazigh movement. Despite this, the *qa'id* continued to show a contradictory attitude towards the Libyan Imazighen.

In 2007 the Amazigh World Congress was convened for the first time in Tripoli to discuss educational and social integration of the Libyan Imazighen, and the Amazigh families were allowed to name their children with Amazigh names. In December 2008 some Amazigh activists from Yafran travelled to Meknés, in Morocco, to participate in the Amazigh World Congress. This showed the Imazighen from Libya joining the regional networks of Amazigh activism – and not just the diaspora. Amazigh activists from Libya and their families, however, were immediately and violently targeted by fierce protests orchestrated by the reformist youth organisation called *Libya al-*

*ghad* (i.e. "Libya of tomorrow"), headed by Sayf al-Islam al-Qaddafi, and the Yefran Revolutionary Committee's members. During these protests, Amazigh activists were accused of treason and separatism, and threatened with death.<sup>15</sup> These events, which also targeted Mohammed Umadi's family, led to *Tawalt* website's closing and ushered in a new wave of harsh regime's repression.<sup>16</sup> The latter was crucial in determining Libyan Imazighen's late involvement in the regional debate concerning the themes of Berberism, and the development of the Amazigh movement. Yet, international scholars' relatively scarce interest in developing studies concerning Libyan Berbers also contributed to this marginalisation. This academic lag was particularly striking in the Italian case (Abrous 1992; Chaker, Ferkal 2012), for it was mostly in Italy that studies concerning Libyan Berbers had developed during the colonial period (Cresti 2015b). Qaddafi's repression at the internal level and, to a lesser degree, the academic marginalisation on an international scale prevented culturalism to emerge and develop strongly among Libyan Amazigh activists until very recently. It was mostly after the uprisings of 2011 that the ethnic factor started to play a relevant role in shaping the process of rethinking Libya's national fabric (Maddy-Weitzman 2016-2017: 245). Non-majoritarian social groups, then, progressively started to appropriate European *soft power* strategies concerning the promotion of minority cultures for contesting the mono-cultural identity based on Arabism that has been promoted by the ruling class of their respective nation-state up until today (Baldinetti, Boutieri 2018). Amazigh activism in post-2011 Libya constitutes a striking example of how claiming multiculturalism has become one of the most effective strategies for both bargaining higher margins of group recognition on a national scale and legitimising anti-systemic political positions in front of the international community. In this process, the ability to retrace and mobilising history for political purposes proved crucial for sustaining the ethnic revivalism that constitutes the base of Amazigh community building. However, it has also engendered anxiety and sometimes-hostile reactions among non-Amazigh groups and individual actors, resulting in an escalating confrontation between some Amazigh groups and Libya's transitional authorities.

### Anti-regime revolt as an opportunity for political legitimization

The 2011 Libyan revolution has shed new light on the themes of Berberism and minority rights at large in Libya. The Amazigh militias of Jabal al-Nafusa and Zwara's participation in the West Tripolitania's uprising brought about a new political legitimacy to Amazigh cultural activism, as well as an increased self-confidence among Amazigh-majority towns. Their mobilization together with the powerful Arab militias of Zintan and Misrata, in fact, contributed to Tripoli's liberation, with the decisive support provided by NATO Air Forces. Nevertheless, after toppling the *Jamahiriyya's* political center, Libyan revolutionary forces proved unable to effectively cooperate on a unitary transition. Ethnicity became an instrument for political mobilisation as well as political

contestation, akin to religious affiliations and/or the sentiment of belonging to a *qabila* (Lacher, Labnouj 2015).

Since the very beginning of Jabal al-Nafusa's uprising against al-Qaddafi's regime, the war Amazigh militias conducted together with the Arab fighters was coupled with cultural activism. Back then, the struggle against the regime increased local cohesion and incentivised political mobilisation in Tripolitania's Amazigh cities. The Amazigh activists who started mobilising in Libya during the early 2000s, therefore, took their chance to increase their internal base of support. Moreover, several Amazigh and anti-Qaddafi activists in exile chose to return to Libya, further contributing to the process of both cultural and armed militancy. This was the case of Fathi Ben Khalifa, who spent his exile in Morocco and, following an international arrest warrant issued by Qaddafi for allegedly being involved in crimes against the *Jamahiriyya*, had to flee to Holland to avoid extradition. After the outbreak of the revolt, Fathi Ben Khalifa reached the Tunisian border, from where he coordinated the contacts between Jabal al-Nafusa revolting communities and the so-called Stabilisation Group, which had been created in Djerba for supporting anti-Qaddafi rebels. Due to his role in mobilising international and regional support to the profit of the revolutionaries, Fathi Ben Khalifa was appointed a representative of the National Transitional Council (NTC), the body set up by Libyan rebels to coordinate in the fight against Qaddafi, from which the first provisional Libyan government would emerge. He was also recognised a prominent role from CMA that appointed him president on October 2011.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the Amazigh-majority towns' armed struggle against Qaddafi's loyalists merged with a renewed Berberist militancy. On 19 February, the Buzakhar twins managed to escape from the Tripoli prison they had been detained in since December 2010 as a result of their Amazigh activism, and immediately headed to Jadu in Jabal al-Nafusa. There they coordinated with other Amazigh militants to occupy a building previously owned by Sayf al-Islam al-Qaddafi, and from which the *Tilelli* (i.e. freedom in Tamazight) experiment was launched. It was a newsletter focussing on Amazigh cultural issues, which published texts and news in Tamazight, Arabic and English.<sup>18</sup> Shortly thereafter, new offices were opened in Yafran and Nalut, coupling the aim of contesting Libyan monolingualism with the aim to recover and promote a new reading of Libyan history through Amazigh eyes. The Buzakhar twins' fellow activists also decided to sustain their cultural activism by creating new research groups coordinated by the *Tira* association for Amazigh studies and research. Websites, radios and TV channels promoting Amazigh cultural specificity multiplied, focussing primarily on the recovery of the Berber history of Libya, and the spread of Tamazight (Buzakhar, Buzakhar, Buzakhar 2016-2017: 188-194). Thanks to Berberist militancy, those citizens who did not want, or could not join the armed mobilisation were offered the opportunity to become the central characters of a brand new process of social, and political identification, which aspired to strongly affect the Libyan democratic transition (Morone, Pagano 2016).

The Libyan revolution gave the Tripolitania Amazigh activism an opportunity to emerge from illegitimacy. However, unlike the Amazigh military mobilisation – which was conducted in coordination with all the other major Arab militias of Tripolitania – the cultural declination of the Amazigh mobilisation tended to mark the specificities by characterising Libyan 'Amazighness'. However, in so doing, Amazigh social and political mobilisation leveraged since the beginning on the themes of culturalism in a rather problematic way. Reproducing a trend that had also characterised Algeria's and Morocco's Amazigh culturalism, a liberal-secular narrative of Berber identity was promoted also in Libya and "some Amazigh militants wholeheartedly embrace[d] the colonial narrative of innate Berber superiority and undifferentiated Arab-Islamic imperialism and oppression" (Maddy-Weitzman 2016-2017: 245). New politics of identity emerged, which were alternative to Qaddafi's homogenising Arab identity politics, as it was promoted from the bottom-up and concerned the affirmation of particular belongings as the key for enhancing democratic pluralism. And still, these politics of identity proved to be ideologically biased as well. In the Amazigh activists' rhetoric, the Arab language and partially Islam started to be strictly associated with the regime's pan-Arab politics, while the recognition of Amazigh linguistic and cultural specificity was presented as a bench test for the democratic attitudes of transitional authorities (Buzakhar, Buzakhar, Buzakhar 2016-2017).

As social sciences have largely demonstrated, "there is no one-to-one relationship between culture and ethnicity [...]; cultural differences cut across ethnic boundaries; and [...] ethnic identity is based on *socially sanctioned notions* of cultural differences, not real ones" (Eriksen 2001: 43). Nevertheless, the Amazigh activists engaged in a process of community (re)building which progressively resulted in an exclusive attitude rather than an inclusive one, especially as far as Arabs were concerned. Cultural activists started promoting Tamazight language together with an increasing effort to document the pre-Islamic history of their ancestors. On one hand, this process had the scope of (re)imagining and thus strengthening Libya's Amazigh community. On the other hand, it aimed to demonstrate this community's indigenesness, historically retracing and accordingly justifying some sort of primacy in their relationship with the territory, as well as its management, with respect to the Arab component. Within this scope, Amazigh activists started promoting historical studies by either demonstrating the Tamazight or non-Arab origins of most Tripolitania's toponyms or by retracing how Arab toponyms have progressively replaced Amazigh ones (Buzakhar, Buzakhar 2015). Already in 2012, by specifically addressing the connection between antiquities and cultural property, Kim Lee explained that 'protecting artefacts' and claiming cultural properties also become pivotal in reviving the Amazigh presence in Libya (Lee 2012). Eventually, recovering a non-Islamic history of Libya served to both the redefinition of Amazigh's ethnic particularism and the rhetoric of nativism, which progressively allowed Amazigh-majority towns' leaders to frame local interests in terms of minority rights.

The 'minority issue' proved strategic in reframing fragile power balances in fractured Libya. In the meantime, the Libyan Arab-Islamic identity reexamination project, which insisted on its pre-Islamic history, engendered discontent among some other Libyans. Someone raised concerns about the risks of introducing elements of ethnic division, thus unraveling an already fragile social fabric (Lacher, Labnouj 2015).

### **Amazigh identity politics in transitional Libya, and the use of history**

On September 1<sup>st</sup> of 2011, the head of Libyan NTC, Mustafa 'Abd al-Jalil, proclaimed the end of the revolution. However, the beginning of the transition almost immediately revealed "the lack of societal process constructively addressing past marginalisation of certain minority and regional interests without creating new imbalances and grievances" (Sawani, Pack 2013: 524). On the one hand, the majority of Amazigh *thuwwar* (i.e. revolutionaries) enthusiastically greeted the beginning of this phase of institutional experimentation, under the banner of a united and free Libya.<sup>19</sup> Amazigh intelligentsia, on the other hand, immediately began to set conditions for its participation to the ongoing transition, namely the official recognition of Tamazight as a Libyan national language together with Arabic, and Imazighen inclusion in the transitional political structures through institutional appointments.<sup>20</sup> The first elements of tension between Amazigh élites and Libyan transitional authorities gathered in the NTC emerged right after Tripoli's liberation, and primarily concerned the terms of the provisional constitutional declaration approved by the NTC on August 2011. While ensuring "the cultural rights of all components of Libyan society", defining "their languages, national languages" (Art.1), and rejecting any linguistic, racial, ideological, political and religious discrimination (Art. 6), the document did not make any specific reference either to Tamazight, or Imazighen existence.<sup>21</sup> As a reaction, on the 17th September 2011, Amazigh activists reunited for the first session of Libyan Amazigh National Congress (ANC), which they consider "the first expression of an Amazigh political identity in Libyan history".<sup>22</sup> The ANC executive commission lamented the discriminatory ratio followed by the NTC for appointing its members, as it excluded Amazigh representatives. ANC thus declared the formation of the new provisional government illegal.<sup>23</sup> The NTC's political declarations were condemned as "tribal and racist": the legacy of an attitude that was typical of Qaddafi's pan-Arab politics.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, ANC anti-governmental positions were mitigated by the decision of some other members of the Libyan Amazigh community to participate in the elections for the General National Congress (GNC) on the 7th July 2012. Some Amazigh citizens, indeed, competed as independent candidates in the districts of Jabal and Zwara and were also elected. Back then the majority of the Amazigh intellectuals agreed the movement's priority was, above all, to debunk the folkloric connotation attributed by Qaddafi's regime to the Amazigh cultural specificity since the 2000s. A necessity thus emerged to actualise the Amazigh belonging through cultural associations – in addition to the

aforementioned *Tira*, the *Jami'at al-Yafran* for Tamazight literacy was created, as well as the *Adrar n'Infusen* centre for historical research and the *Ifri* association for the study of Berber places' topography and toponymy (Di Tolla 2012: 85). Initially, the promotion of the Amazigh identity did not target the whole population. Instead, it identified towns and groups considered to be of Amazigh origin which had undergone a process of Arabisation as priority targets.<sup>25</sup> The recovery and expansion of Libya's Amazigh language and history proved pivotal to the construction and delimitation of a stronger Amazigh identity in Tripolitania, independent from the Arab-majority one. An idea that, up until the uprising, was anything but obvious.

Libyan Amazigh cultural mobilisation, in this sense, represents a textbook example of ethnic boundaries negotiation. The latter is crucial to (re)constructing ethnic identity as "a composite of the view one has of oneself as well as the views held by others about one's ethnic identity" (Nagel 1994: 154), hence the importance of involving both "internal and external opinions and processes" in the dialectic of ethnicity building (*Ibidem*). The Libyan Imazighen's promotion of initiatives aiming at retracing and redefining cultural boundaries, in fact, progressively transcended the scope of internal community building, and tried to affect external opinion and processes. This can explain Imazighen's intransigence concerning the recognition of Tamazight as an official language. And indeed, Amazigh activists did not consider any of the other concessions obtained by transitional authorities a political success. For instance, they immediately obtained the support of the Libyan List for Freedom and Development that, however, only gained one seat at GNC. Furthermore, the Chief of the National Congress, Mohammed Magaryaf, strongly supported Amazigh activism (Buzakhar, Buzakhar, Buzakhar 2016–2017: 184), at least until his resignation in May 2013, after the approval of Libyan Political Isolation Law.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in August 2012 the Council of Ministers approved Decision Number 266, creating the Libyan Centre for Local Cultures, whose aim was to introduce the concepts of linguistic and cultural diversity in transitional Libya, and to accordingly enrich the country's democratic culture. With this in mind, the Centre was expected to sponsor and organise festivals and cultural activities, meetings and lectures, historical and linguistic studies concerning the multiplicity of Libya's local cultures, i.e. not just the Amazigh, but also Tuareg and Tabu.<sup>27</sup> As reported by the Centre's Director of Research and Studies Department, Tawfiq al-Shaqrani, the Centre's activities continue today and are financed by the Tripoli Government's Ministry of Education. The provision concerning the governmental appointment of the Centre's directive board of four members may lead to assume a relatively centralised control on the activities promoting Libya's local cultures, jeopardising its autonomy and making it an instrument for the central government to control the promotion of Amazigh, Tuareg and Tabu specificities. Nonetheless, Mr. al-Shaqrani has confirmed the directive board acts in complete autonomy and is composed of researchers who are also active members of Amazigh cultural associations. It is not by chance that the contents

published online on the Centre's Facebook page show an explicit focus on research themes as well as cultural initiatives related to the documentation of Libyan Amazigh's historical heritage and linguistic specificity.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, at least at a local level, the Amazigh activists – who are often also members of Amazigh-majority towns' municipal councils – soon obtained the introduction of compulsory Tamazight teaching in the schools of Jabal al-Nafusa and Zwara for the 2012/2013 school year.<sup>29</sup> The political endorsement of Amazigh cultural initiatives at both the central and local levels was also politically followed by the appointment of Nuri 'Abu Sahmin, an Amazigh from Zwara, as GNC's President after Magaryaf's resignation. These accomplishments may forecast higher degrees of governmental acceptance of Amazigh requests. And yet, they also produced resistances. Some Libyans, in fact, interpreted the activists' claims for the constitutional recognition of Amazigh linguistic and cultural specificity as the first step toward the delimitation of not just cultural, but also geographical boundaries.<sup>30</sup>

### The minority issue in post-2014 political crisis

The perceived risk of encouraging separatism through the constitutionalisation of ethnic pluralism in post-Qaddafi's Libya led the already weak transitional authorities to indefinitely postpone the decision to follow up on the Amazigh activists' requests. This engendered the radicalisation of the Amazigh movement's positions. In July 2013, the GNC's Amazigh representatives resigned following the Parliament's refusal to approve a bill that declared Tamazight as the Libyan official language.<sup>31</sup> An institutional crisis then began that reached its peak on February 2014, i.e. the GNC mandate's expected expiry date. After the elections for the new Constituent Assembly (*al-Mu'tamar al-Dusturi*) were announced, Amazigh activists rejected those provisions of Electoral Law n. 17 of July 2013 that concerned minorities. They lamented that despite being estimated between 9 and 10% of the Libyan population, the Imazighen were only recognised two reserved seats as less numerous minorities, namely the Tuareg and Tebu.<sup>32</sup> At the end of September 2013, the Amazigh movement's lobbying strategies worryingly aligned with those of the Cyrenaica separatists: a group of young Amazigh militants from Jabal al-Nafusa and Zwara took control of the Mellitah gas pipeline, about 100 km east of Tripoli, following the example of some Cyrenaica militias who had seized exclusive control of the region's energy resources, resulting in a 90% reduction of oil production. Furthermore, some Amazigh groups from Jadu showed open support for the Political Bureau of Cyrenaica, which had self-proclaimed as Cyrenaica's autonomous government in October 2013.<sup>33</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Amazigh movement equipped itself with a new national coordination body: the Amazigh General Congress (AGC), which promoted the motto "we will not recognise those who does [*sic*] not recognise us".<sup>34</sup> The AGC asked the High National Electoral Commission guarantees that Tamazight constitutional recognition as one of Libya's official languages would have been a priority of the *Mu'tamar* agenda. Moreover, an amendment of the electoral law was requested

in order to provide Imazighen with a greater number of seats with respect to those reserved to Tebu and Tuareg candidates. The Libyan central government's refusal to accept the non-negotiable conditions imposed by Imazighen representatives eventually saw the AGC announcing the creation of a shadow parliament and an Amazigh executive commission. The AGC also deliberated not to recognise any legitimacy to a constitution approved by the *Mu'tamar* elected on 20 February 2014, and decided to boycott the new parliamentary elections.<sup>35</sup>

Eventually, in August 2015, the elections for the Amazigh Supreme Council (ASC) were held in the Berber-majority district of Western Tripolitania. ASC's activities primarily focused on the promotion of Tamazight, but also carried on the project of leveraging on Libya's pre-Islamic history in order to reach out to all the non-Arab ethnicities of Libya.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, on October 2017, the ASC's Executive Office sponsored a workshop for enhancing the promotion of an inclusive education for all individuals and groups who do not recognise the Arab language as their mother tongue, inviting also Tebu and Tuareg activists. Jabal al-Nafusa and Zwara's experiences of Tamazight's teaching, and Amazigh cultural activists efforts for historically documenting a more plural Libyan history, were presented as a model for other minoritarian Libyan groups willing to claim self-determination and higher levels of local autonomy.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, starting from November 2017, some historical activists of the Libyan Amazigh movement from Zwara, such as the former President of the CMA, Fathi Bin Khalifa, founded a brand new party called *Libu*. This political project also involved Tuareg activists from Ubari.<sup>38</sup> With a name that evokes pre-Islamic Libya, *Libu's* political discourse makes a new use of Libyan history aiming at describing the country as a more pluralistic reality than the one all Libyans had been socialised to due to Qaddafi's pan-Arabism. Amazigh activists, however, have continued to document Libya's pre-Islamic history in a quite problematic way, as they rely on ancient texts attesting the Berber presence in pre-Islamic North Africa, often preferring either classical historiography, or European historical accounts of the colonial period, and distrusting Arabic historiography as ethnically biased instead – a political use of history that is common to other Amazigh movements of the Maghreb (Ghambou 2010). Moreover, the Libya imagined by the *Libu's* party is one whose secular history is retraced in order to reappraise the Arab cultural weight on the nation's new identity building, namely by putting greater emphasis on the impact the Amazigh, as well as Saharan and Sub-Saharan groups, Romans, Byzantines, Christians, Jews, and European, have had in creating the 'real' Libyan identity: one that is intrinsically plural.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusions

In the aftermath of Qaddafi's regime breakdown, ethnic particularism gained new momentum in Libya, eventually proving instrumental to the Amazigh local leaders' aims to connect their regional struggles to broader political agendas concerning North Africa's democratisation through the recognition of ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism.

The reconstruction of long-term Libyan history, however, has proved functional to both Amazigh claims for greater margins of internal pluralism, and the rhetoric of ethnic particularism, which was sometimes related to more radical claims of regional autonomy in Western Tripolitania. In fact, while claiming inclusiveness, the Amazigh historical revisionism tends to discredit those Libyans who instead claim an Arab identity, condemning them as a legacy of Qaddafi's pan-Arabism. Libyan Imazighen have thus recurred to new historical accounts of the Libyan past to occupy the current political vacuum. This strategy allowed them to present the constitutionalisation of the very ethnic specificity they have pursued through culturalism and the ethnicisation of group belonging as the only efficient means for building a more inclusive national identity. In this particular declination, pluralism is the aggregate of distinct communitarianisms rather than a cross-cultural combination of the country's internal differences, which reaffirms ethnic boundaries between social groups rather than overcome them. This demonstrates how, by pursuing democratisation in an unproblematic way through multiculturalism, minority rights' safeguards, and the defence of indigenous peoples' claims, international institutions have ultimately provided minority groups with strategic international support for promoting status-seeking politics. The aspiration to ethnically revise any future administrative boundary has gradually emerged, with the risk of creating ethnically connoted territorial enclaves – a possible evolution of current Libyan transition, which has often been underestimated.

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## NOTES:

- 1 - Somewhat simplistic definitions of North African groups alternatively identified as 'Imazighen' or 'Berber' describe them as "the indigenous people of North Africa" and, therefore, Libya. Such definitions, however, understate the historical intertwine between the peoples that have inhabited North Africa both during the pre-Islamic era (Roman and Punic settlers) and after VII Century's Arab conquest. This has put scholars in a difficult position when explaining who the Imazighen are. Fentress and Brett tended for a definition of Imazighen as "people speaking Berber languages" (Brett, Fentress 1996: 7). Here I will use the term with the same meaning.
- 2 - International Crisis Group (ICG), *Divided We Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts*, «Middle East/North Africa Report», n. 130, 14 September 2012: <https://tinyurl.com/ybuhnr3z>.
- 3 - Also see M. Ben Lamma, *The Tribal Structure in Libya: Factor for fragmentation or cohesion?*, «Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman et du Sahel», September 2017: <https://www.frstrategie.org/web/documents/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/publications/en/14.pdf>, and P. Cole, F. Mangan, *Tribe, Security, Justice and Peace in Libya Today*, in «Peaceworks», n. 118, 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW118-Tribe-Security-Justice-and-Peace-in-Libya-Today.pdf>.
- 4 - See the thick correspondence attesting for Italian emissaries Count Ascanio Michele Sforza and Giovan Battista Dessi's negotiations with Sulayman al-Baruni's spokesmen in Tunisia to put an end to Western Tripolitania resistance. Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (ASMAI), "Africa II", 150/14-55.
- 5 - ASDMAE, ASMAI, "Africa II", 122/10-86, Giovanni Ameglio a Ministero delle Colonie, *Situazione in Tripolitania*, 8.4.1916.
- 6 - *Berberism & Berber Political Movements – Berbers of Libya*, "Temehu", n.d.: <https://www.temehu.com/imazighen/berberism.htm>.
- 7 - *Sayd Sifaw al-Mahrouq 1946-1994*, "Temehu", n.d.: <https://tinyurl.com/ycc3rhrv>.
- 8 - *Berberism & Berber Political Movements – Berbers of Libya*, cit.
- 9 - S. Chaker, *Les études berberes: évolutions récentes*, "INALCO, Paris, November 1998, <http://www.centrederechercheberbere.fr/tl/files/doc-pdf/etudes.pdf>.
- 10 - *Le Congrès Mondial Amazigh en Bref*, <https://www.congres-mondial-amazigh.org/cma/>.
- 11 - *Libyan Tamazight Congress Founding Manifesto*, "Temehu", 17 September 2000: <https://tinyurl.com/yd66gmv3>.
- 12 - 'A. al-Roumi, *Libyan Berbers struggle to assert their identity online*, "Arab Media&Society", 6 May 2009: <https://tinyurl.com/y9dfk9uy>.
- 13 - S. Topol, *After Centuries of Oppression, a Libyan Minority sees hope in Qaddafi's Fall*, «The Atlantic», 28 October 2011: <https://tinyurl.com/yasfs9kj>.
- 14 - S. Topol, *Berber Revivals First Big Sell: Convince Libyans they are all Berbers*, «The Atlantic», 30 November 2011: <https://tinyurl.com/yddvc48g>.
- 15 - Society for Threatened People Report, *Libyan Arab Jamahiriyya*, 4 December 2010: <https://tinyurl.com/y9fy4k79>.
- 16 - 'A. al-Roumi, *Libyan Berbers struggle to assert...*, cit.
- 17 - K. Zurutuza, *Creating their own spring*, "Inter Press Service", 26 June 2013: <https://tinyurl.com/yblldr39>.
- 18 - S. Topol, *After Centuries of Oppression, a Libyan Minority ...*, cit.
- 19 - *RE: First Round of STRATFOR questions-Answers*, "WikiLeaks", 2011: <https://tinyurl.com/yazbaxxg>.
- 20 - D. H. Flood, *A Series of Challenges Await a Post-Gadhafi Libya*, "The War Diaries", 22 August 2011: <https://tinyurl.com/y96erw27>.
- 21 - *Draft Constitutional Charter for the Transitional Stage*, 3 August 2011: <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ly/ly005en.pdf>.
- 22 - *The Libyan National Tamazight Congress*, "Temehu", <https://www.temehu.com/imazighen/alt.htm>.
- 23 - Al-Lajna al-Tanfidihiyya lil-mu'tamar al-libi lil-amazighiyya, *Hawla istihqaqat al-haqq al-amazighi fi Libia*, «Libya al-Mostakbal», 17 September 2011: <http://archive2.libya-al-mostakbal.org/news/clicked/13365>. For a French version of the document see also *Communiqué du premier Congrès national amazigh libyen*, a file attached to the article *Le Congrès national amazigh libyen met en garde le CNT*, "Tamazgha", 15 October 2011, <http://tamazgha.fr/Le-Congres-national-amazigh-libyen.html>.
- 24 - *Ibidem*.
- 25 - S. Topol, *Berber Revivals First Big Sell...*, cit..

- 26 - M. Kersten, *Libya's Political Isolation Law: Politics and Justice or the Politics of Justice?*, "Middle East Institute", 5 February 2014: <https://tinyurl.com/y8ylhmn5>.
- 27 - *Iftitah al-markaz al-libi lil-thaqafat al-mahalliya*, video presentation of Libyan Centre for Local Cultures, "Facebook", 4 June 2015: <https://tinyurl.com/y7kqp6pu>.
- 28 - Information obtained from Tawfiq al-Shaqrini through an email interview with the author, 22 May 2018.
- 29 - A. McGregor, *Berbers size Libyan oil terminal to press demands for recognition*, "Aberfoyle International Security", 14 November 2013: <http://www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=759>.
- 30 - M. 'U. al-Mazughi, *Amazigh Libia, min tarsim al-lugha ila tarsim al-hudud*, «Aywan Libya», 25 February 2017: <http://ewanlibya.ly/news/news.aspx?id=91630>.
- 31 - A. McGregor, *Berbers size Libyan oil terminal...*, cit.
- 32 - T. Hasairi, *Amazighs reject Constitutional Committee ahead of elections, plan own parliament*, «Libya Herald», 19 February 2014: <https://tinyurl.com/ybp96275>.
- 33 - K. Zurutuza, *Benghazi 'self-rule' resonates with Berbers*, «al-Jazeera», 6 November 2013: <https://tinyurl.com/ybeofopg>.
- 34 - T. Hasairi, *Amazighs reject Constitutional Committee...*, cit.
- 35 - 'U. Bin Hamil, *Amazigh Libia ya'tazimun ta'assis barlamzn wa lijan tanfidhiyya*, «Haberler.com». 24 February 2014: <https://ar.haberler.com/arabic-news-380574/>.
- 36 - *The Libyan National Tamazight Congress - The Election of the Supreme Council of the Amazigh of (Western) Libya*, "Temehu", n.d.: <http://www.temehu.com/imazighen/alt.htm>.
- 37 - See Amazigh Supreme Council's page on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/AmazighSC/>.
- 38 - R. Karnafuda, *Ishhar hizb al-Libu fi Awbari*, «al-Wasat», 19 November 2017: <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/149915>.
- 39 - See Libu's party page on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Libu.party/>.

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