



SPECIAL FOCUS ON AMAZIGH LITERATURE: CRITICAL AND CLOSE  
READING APPROACHES

## The Absent Dimension: Anti-Racism in Mbark Ben Zayda's Amazigh Poetics

Brahim El Guabli 

Williams College, Massachusetts  
Email: [be2@williams.edu](mailto:be2@williams.edu)

### Abstract

Racism is a scourge that has not spared any society or community. Moroccan society is not different in its grappling with the legacy of the complex history of slavery and racialization in North Africa. Although social scientists have dedicated much scholarly attention to the study of race in Morocco, they have not accounted for Amazigh language's rich documentation of and grappling with race and racism. Ethnographic work has emerged to explain racial dynamics between Imazighen and *isuqiyin* (Blacks) or Haratines, but these crucial interventions fall short of examining primary sources in Tamazight to explain how Amazigh communities negotiated racism openly in the public sphere. This article draws on the experience of the Black Amazigh poet Mbark u-Ms'ud Ben Zayda to demonstrate that racism was not, and is not, entirely silenced in Amazigh-speaking Morocco. In fact, Amazigh sources and terminology reveal that poetic performances in this social environment have not only unsilenced racism but actively grappled with its multilayered dimensions. Adopting a close reading methodology, the article interprets portions of Ben Zayda's poetry and its response to the explicitly racializing compositions of his contemporaries.

**Keywords:** Amazigh; poetry; Ben Zayda; race; racism; performance

Race and racism have resurged as a scholarly topic in Morocco and the rest of the Maghreb in the last decade. Part of a larger context of sub-Saharan African migration into the northern part of the continent, racism is again a salient focus that historians, anthropologists, art historians, and literary critics have addressed across disciplinary boundaries.<sup>1</sup> In the Amazigh areas specifically,

<sup>1</sup> Studies in this growing body of works include: Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Race, Gender, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013); Laura Menin, "Shadows of Slavery Part Two: Race, Colour and Origins in Northwest Africa and the Middle East," *Open Democracy* 6 (August 2018), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/shadows-of-slavery-part-two-race-colour-and-origins-in-northwest-africa-an/>; Cynthia Becker,



anthropologist Paul Silverstein has examined the dynamics of race and “masquerade” in the Amazigh-speaking town of Goulmima in Errachidia.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, anthropologist Aomar Boum draws on his ethnographic work among Amazigh speakers in the governorate of Tata to retrace the life of a former slave who memorized the Qur’an in the region of Tissint through his Qur’anic tablet, revealing the imbrication of Qur’anic knowledge and manumission in this community.<sup>3</sup> Apart from these two prominent examples, recent scholarship has not sufficiently – if at all – drawn on sources created by Imazighen (Amazigh people or Amazigh speakers) in their native language. More specifically, there is a palpable dearth of studies that examine Black Imazighen’s own pushback against color-based discrimination in their communities. This exclusion of Amazigh sources in studies of race and racism has created what I propose to call an “absent dimension” whereby Amazigh cultural production’s denunciation of racism and its development of an anti-racist consciousness among Imazighen have not yet been captured in current scholarship.

Since the 1950s at least, Amazigh oral poetry has been at the helm of an anti-racist performative discourse. One such example of this anti-racist art was embodied by the poetic output of Mbark u-Mas’ud, also known as Mbark Ben Zayda (c.1928–1973),<sup>4</sup> who was at the forefront of anti-racist poetic battles in the Moroccan Anti-Atlas region.<sup>5</sup> Not only did Ben Zayda use his poetic genius to denounce racism, but also, according to some accounts, lost his life as a price for his unmatched exposition of all manners of racist attitudes expressed toward black people in his community.<sup>6</sup> Contextualizing Ben Zayda’s life and conducting a close reading of his poetry, this article demonstrates the various ways in which Ben Zayda was racialized and how he used poetic license to respond and as a tool against racialization. I argue that this “absent dimension” in studies of race and racism in Morocco redresses the widespread notion that stories of enslavement and racism are silenced in

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*Blackness in Morocco: Gnawa Identity through Music and Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Silverstein, “Masquerade Politics: Race, Islam and the Scale of Amazigh Activism in Southeastern Morocco,” *Nations and Nationalism* 17.1 (2011): 66.

<sup>3</sup> Aomar Boum, “The Life of a Tablet,” in *Islam through Objects*, ed., Anna Bigelow (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 143–58.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad al-Munadi states that his date of birth was in 1925 while Ahmad Asid lists his year of birth as 1910. However, Moustauoui, who had interviewed ben Zayda in person and grew up in the same region as him, gives 1928 as his birth year. See Ahmad al-Munadi, *Mbark u-ms’ud (ben Zayda)* (Rabat: Al-Ma’had al-Malaki li-al-Thaqafa al-Amazighiyya, 2015), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Sources about Ben Zayda’s life are very scarce. There is no complete biography of him, and most of what is available exists on blogs and Facebook pages. The biographical information as well as the poetic samples that I analyze in this article are drawn from these sources: Mohammed Moustauoui, “al-shi’r al-amazighi al-munadil didda al-’ubudiyya wa-al-istirqaq,” in *Jam’iyyat al-jami’a al-ayfiyya bi-agadir; A’mal al-dawra al-ula: Al-thaqafa al-sha’biyya al-wahda fi al-tanawwu’ min 18 ila 31 ghusht* (Agadir: Jam’iyat Jami’a al-Sayfiya bi-Agadir, 1986): 234–55; Brahim Oubella, “Shi’r al-jur’a wa-al-tahaddi fi al-atlas al-saghir,” *Tawsna* 2 (1995): 21–28; Belkacem Idir, “Ibn Zayda shahid fann dderst: Raqsat ahwash al-amazighi,” *Amazigh Afra* [blog], [http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post\\_14.html](http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post_14.html).

<sup>6</sup> Belkacem, [http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post\\_14.html](http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post_14.html).

Moroccan society. As Ben Zayda's story reveals, Amazigh performative poetry has functioned as a locus for the dissemination of an advanced anti-racist consciousness among Amazigh audiences. Although the contemporary examples of anti-racist performers abound (See Oudadene in this issue), I prefer to focus on Ben Zayda's pioneering endeavor to highlight how he navigated his status as a racialized black Moroccan and descendent of former slaves. In foregrounding Ben Zayda's experience, the article opens up space to question dominant scholarly claims about race in Morocco from a novel angle not afforded by scholarship due to the lack of Amazigh language training and the ensuing absence of engagement with sources in Tamazight. This article draws attention to the wealth of sources in Tamazight that will potentially develop a new academic approach to the study of topics related to Tamazgha – the broader Amazigh homeland.

I have already demonstrated the existence of a “sub-Saharan African turn” in Moroccan literature in an article I published in 2021.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on novels published in Arabic and French, this essay revealed that an increasing number of Moroccan writers have been locating the settings of their works either partially in sub-Saharan Africa or by including sub-Saharan African characters. The literary works that I examined in this study were set against the backdrop of Morocco's transformation into a destination for sub-Saharan African immigrants. This novelistic output participates in this turn reflecting a literary consciousness of the need to fight color-based racism, especially as it threatened to jeopardize Moroccan society's relationship with the rest of Africa.<sup>8</sup> This sub-Saharan African turn also indicates an increasing awareness of the various dimensions of Morocco's imbrication with the rest of the African continent. However, I later realized that this article reproduced the same blind spots of predominant scholarship on race and racism in Morocco since it failed to explore or even gesture to Amazigh cultural production. Against the propagated discourse that assumes the silencing of racism in Moroccan society as a result of its evocation of histories of enslavement,<sup>9</sup> it is crucial to extend our analysis to the Amazigh language and its literary output to gain a fully informed understanding of the variegated ways in which race and racism are addressed in Amazigh sources, including poetry. It is in these linguistic spaces that black poets have openly challenged racist slurs, undermined their opponents' sense of racial and social superiority, and created a liberated space where poetic expression is, in itself, the locus of equality of all humans independent of their skin color or social class.

The imbrication of race and class in the Amazigh community is attested to in Ben Zayda's deployment of his poetic skills in the performative arena to tackle all the classist and racial insults directed at him. As literary scholar Ahmad al-Munadi writes, Ben Zayda found himself in an “environment that

<sup>7</sup> Brahim El Guabli, “The Sub-Saharan African Turn in Moroccan Literature,” *MERIP*, <https://merip.org/2021/04/the-sub-saharan-african-turn-in-moroccan-literature-2/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> El Hamel, *Black Morocco*, 13–14.

was not yet liberated from the master-slave dichotomy; a hierarchical environment that required that the black person be in charge of petty jobs and tasks, like running errands, babysitting, digging wells, and carrying harvests from the fields to the houses.”<sup>10</sup> In this context, the black individual that Ben Zayda was had to fight to find his own social place. Poetry allowed him not only to declaim words, but also to undermine his community’s racism and shed light on its devastating impact on people like him. Since he outperformed his opponents in the poetic arena and debunked their feelings of superiority over him, they, according to various accounts, conspired to put an end to his poetic genius by poisoning him.<sup>11</sup>

### Instantaneous Poetic Compositions and the Amazigh Public Sphere

Amazigh poetry is not a private affair. It is, rather, a performative art that can only achieve its potential when composed and sung in the public sphere. In this sense, Amazigh poetry’s value is cheapened if it fails to find its way into the space of performance where audiences can appreciate the force of the word and the beauty of the composition. Amazigh audiences interact with the poets and admire their ability to create *lm’na* (wisdom, lasting truth, memorable words, and meaning) extemporaneously in the dialogical space of the performance arena.

The poet in Tamazight is called *amarir* or *anddam* (the one who composes or puts words in order).<sup>12</sup> *Ndm* or *tanddamt* is the art of composing poems that are most often accompanied by singing and dancing in the famous musical art called *ahwash*, mostly practiced throughout the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Amazigh areas.<sup>13</sup> *Anddam* is the master of the performance space called *asays*, where two or more poets challenge each other to entertain the audience and give them a satisfying experience of witnessing several master poets deftly manipulating words to leave their mark on the poetic scene for generations. In addition to being the art of composing and declaiming poetry instantaneously, *tanddamt* is most importantly the art of addressing significant cultural and sociopolitical questions in ways that widen the capacity of the public sphere to include or accommodate opinions that may not be initially welcome by conservative sections of society. Racism, and social hierarchies inherited from the

<sup>10</sup> Al-Munadi, *Mbark u-ms’ud*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> There is disagreement about whether he was poisoned or whether his death was caused by throat cancer. Moustouai and Belkacen contend that he was poisoned after he brutally routed and humiliated a white poet during a performance, whereas Brahim Oubella advances the idea that his death was natural. Given the fact that Moustouai’s article was written in 1980 and that he had actually met with Ben Zayda and interviewed him the 1970s while Oubella’s was only published in 1995, there is reason to believe that Moustouai was closer to whatever local society thought about the way he died. He may well have suffered from cancer, but the proximate cause of his death was poisoning, according to Moustouai. It is difficult to understand the motivations of the writers who try to divert attention to his illness.

<sup>12</sup> For more information about this art, see Ahmad ‘Asid, *Imarirn: Mashahir shu’ara’ ahwash fi al-qarn al-’ishrin* (Rabat: al-Ma’had al-Malaki lil-al-Thaqafa al-Amazighiyya, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> See Lahcen Zaheur, *Al-Adab al-amazighi al-hadith bi-al-maghrib: Al-nash’a 1967-2000* (Ait Melloul: Manshurat Tirra, 2022), 100–10.

time when slavery was still legal, in Ben Zayda's context was one of these topics that poets tackled in their poetic exchanges.<sup>14</sup>

An *anddam*, the practitioner of *tanddamt*, has the capacity to create *lm'na* (coded or metaphorized meaning) by rearranging words and infusing them with intense imagery.<sup>15</sup> Hence as creator of *lm'na*, an *anddam* also has a supernatural force, allowing them to communicate with forces beyond the reach of ordinary people. Similar to the pre-Islamic Arab poets who declaimed the *qasida*, *anddam* is a "*sha'ir*," a person who is able to transcend the human and enter the mystical or mythological world of spirits.<sup>16</sup> The poet is therefore in contact with the world of prophecy and revelation, access to which is facilitated through *agurram*, or "saint," who gives the gift of poetry to the seeker who becomes a poet.<sup>17</sup> This quality disposes him to be both worldly and otherworldly, capable of communicating with the realm of spirits.<sup>18</sup>

*Inddamn* (plural of *anddam*) have a social mission in addition to their poetic prowess. Particularly in rural areas, as Moustouai argues, the poet is "the newspaper, the book, the theater, and the cinema."<sup>19</sup> Beyond entertaining audiences, an *anddam* also provides them with news and helps them gain a critical awareness of the world around them. Instead of a static function that pins them down only to singing and merrymaking, the poet in this illiterate Amazigh context is a conscience-builder who harnesses all the socio-cultural possibilities afforded to them by their privileged position in order to elevate their audiences' critical ability to denounce injustice and tackle problems of importance in their community. Many generations of Amazigh poets have used *asays* to grapple with the exclusion of their language and culture from the public sphere, pointing to their own roles in making some reforms possible and in pushing toward a more inclusive program.<sup>20</sup> The same way television works as an informative or pedagogical platform, *asays* is the *anddam's* domain to disseminate ideas and impress audiences who, in turn, further spread their message.

This is what gives the construction of *lm'na* its transgenerational significance. As a mnemonic sphere, where ideas are transferred and transmitted

<sup>14</sup> Al-Munadi refers to the fact that Ben Zayda even prohibited his wife from continuing the tradition of black women kissing the hand of *amghar* ("the elder"), which al-Munadi considers a "habit of enslaved men's wives" at the time when slavery was still legalized. See al-Munadi, *Mbark u-ms'ud*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Asid discusses the qualities of the poet in the introduction to his book *Imarim: Mashahir shu'ara' ahwash fi al-qar al-ishrin* (Rabat: al-Ma'had al-Malaki li-al-Thaqafa al-Amazighiyya, 2011), 5–22.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, much of the way poetry works in the Amazigh context resembles what Roger Allen documents in his book *The Arabic Literary Heritage: The Development of Its Genres and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Munadi recounts Ben Zayda's experience and how he received the gift of poetry from his saint. See al-Munadi, *Mbark un-ms'ud*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> In the Amazigh context, poets have some rituals that they follow, including calling on saints to sustain them during performance. This practice is decreasing now, but it was almost expected from the poet to acknowledge a saint who gave him the gift of poetry.

<sup>19</sup> Moustouai, *al-Shi'r al-Amazighi*, 236.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, this dialogue between Ahmed Outaleb and Lahcen Ajmaa, "Ahwach Ajmaa Avec Otab 2014," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWHrXeu-Jw8>.

through memorization, *lm'na* gives the poem the power to carve out its life beyond the limitations of time. *lm'na* is *awal iddirn* (living speech) that never dies; it is an insight that survives the author, endowing them with a transgenerational afterlife. By aspiring to achieve *lm'na*, the Amazigh poet really aspires to defeat death by ensuring that they will be remembered long after they are deceased. *lm'na* in this sense is the endeavor to capture an insight that would speak to humans through the infinite wisdom and the endless interpretive potential intrinsic to its very composition. Arabic and Amazigh speakers in Morocco certainly know the names of the poets Sidi Hammou Talb and Abdurrahman El Majdoub. Both men lived centuries ago, but their words cannot be more appropriate to our time. They managed to capture the essential aspects of human existence and its struggles in ways that speak to listeners beyond their own time.

Despite its importance, *lm'na* is not the poet's end goal. The *anddam* is aware that the refined and multilayered word is "a tool for the expression of the people's pains and aspirations by expressing his own suffering and that of his own local society."<sup>21</sup> The verbal masters of Tamazight engaged in sociopolitical and economic critique. Some of them, Mohamed Albensir Demsiri (1936–1989), even elicited the anger of the agents of the repressive Years of Lead (1956–1999) when they addressed the hardships of the structural adjustment crises that caused deep economic and social strife among the vulnerable. Albensir, one of the most gifted Amazigh poets and musicians, spent time in jail for his snide critique of the economic crises engendered by the structural adjustment in the 1980s.

This deep engagement with societal issues in their communities is not limited to just parochial concerns. In fact, many of the Amazigh poets address issues relevant to them as members of a larger humanity. Hence, the number of poems and songs that Imazighen have composed about the occupation of Palestine and the wars in Iraq is remarkable.<sup>22</sup> It is in this poetry that the Amazigh poet reveals and consecrates the indissoluble connections between Tamazight and Arabic and the deep connections that tie Tamazgha – the larger Amazigh homeland extending from the Canary Islands to the Siwa oasis in southwest Egypt – to the Arab world. Even if some conservative Amazigh intellectuals sustain a dream of disengagement from Arab issues by retrenching to isolationism, Amazigh poets empathize with victims of war and imperialism beyond Tamazgha's borders.

These local and universal dimensions of Amazigh poetic engagement are all the more significant due to the spaces in which they take place. As I argue in a forthcoming article, the performance arena is the space where they practice their art, mesmerize audiences, and outperform their opponents. The poets, both men and woman, are aware that whatever they say in *asays* is beyond mere entertainment.<sup>23</sup> The stage is a platform for self-expression as well as a socially-sanctioned loudspeaker where things not ordinarily verbalized, like

<sup>21</sup> Moustauoui, *al-Shi'r al-Amazighi*, 235.

<sup>22</sup> Zaheur, *al-Adab al-Amazighi*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> Brahim El Guabli, "Widening the Scope: Conceptualizing the Indigenous Media in the Amazigh-YouTube" (forthcoming).

open discussion of racism, are permitted. The stage endows the poet with an unlimited and socially-sanctioned immunity against legal or moral judgments. Because the stage, both as a physical and mental space, eschews censorship, the poet is supposed to remove all inhibitions. In fact, the stage is inherently antithetical to censorship and self-censorship.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that it has no ethical constraints. *Lm'na* requires the poet to be creative and avoid crude language, like calling his opponents donkey or mule, which usually elicits the audience's instant condemnation. However, the poet can say anything they want if they skillfully weave it into their poetic language to uncover issues that may go unnoticed in ordinary life.

Racism is one of the topics that the Amazigh poetic arena has unsilenced in confrontational ways. In fact, by paying attention to Tamazight, Imazighen, and their cultural production, it is clear that their mostly, albeit variably, egalitarian society has allowed them to confront the question of race beyond any shame and in ways that are reminiscent of democratic agoras in other places. Amazigh social memory is replete with names of families who owned black slaves, and some, like Abdessadek El Glaoui, went as far as to write about their own family's practice in this regard.<sup>25</sup>

### Contextualizing Racism in Amazigh Poetics

African American historian Michael Gomez has written that race “refer[s] to the culturally orchestrated, socially sanctioned disaggregation and reformulation of the human specificities into broad, hierarchical categories reflecting purported respective levels of capacity, propensity, and beauty, and in ways often tethered to phenotypic expressing.”<sup>26</sup> Before the evolution of this phenotypical hierarchization based on pseudoscientific research in the nineteenth century, cultural difference and national origins were the mechanisms by which racialization operated. However, racism and race-based policy as methods of “social control,” as historian Paul Lovejoy has asserted, were developed in the United States where “African slave owners established their own methods of domination.”<sup>27</sup>

Rather than simply creating categories for the sake of categories, racialization has real world effects on the racialized. Dominated or minoritized groups are forced to deal with the far-reaching effects of the codification of random traits that serve as a basis for discrimination. In the Amazigh-speaking Morocco specifically, discrimination against black Imazighen ranges from living in separate neighborhoods, being buried in separate cemeteries, and forsaking intermarriage, to treating racialized individuals by pejorative terms, such as *asuqi*, which combines blackness

<sup>24</sup> Oubella, “shi'r al-jur'a,” 23.

<sup>25</sup> See Brahim El Guabli, “Imaginary Testimony: Dada l'Yakout and the Unexplored History of Enslavement through Abduction in Morocco,” *Expressions maghrébines* 21.2 (2022): 88–89.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 285.



with the word *suq* (market) to refer to the association of blackness with slavery.<sup>28</sup> In the Tashlhit variety of Tamazight, the first meaning of the word “amazigh” is the white free person, which is the opposite of *asuqi*. *Imazighen*, therefore, means white and noble people, which semantically stands in opposition to “*isuqiyn*” (plural of *asuqi*), who are black. The terms “*isuqiyn Imazighen*” or “*Imazighen ungaln*” or “*imazighn ihrdn-n*” (Black Imazighen) constitute what I have called an oxymoronic identity in which a word and its opposite are used to refer to the same identity.<sup>29</sup> Amazigh intellectuals, like Boujamâa Hebaz who has been “disappeared” for his Amazigh activism since 1981, have complicated this oxymoronic identity by asserting their Amazighity despite their blackness.<sup>30</sup> By using the word Amazigh to refer to all Amazigh speakers, including black Imazighen, the logical dissonance latent in the oxymoronic identity liberates the term from its racializing connotations. A black Amazigh saying “we Imazighen” literally says “we black white free people” in the same breath. In fact, Amazigh Cultural Movement’s claiming of the adjective “amazigh” has a deracializing force beyond merely advocating for linguistic and cultural rights.

The Amazigh distinction between Imazighen and *isuqiyn* has real effects on the people. Depending on your place and position in a variegated “racial topography,” your skin color determines your place in a local social hierarchy. My mother’s side of the family is all black and they lived in a predominantly black and brown village in the outskirts of the city of Ouarzazate. The fact that my mother’s family’s racial topography is predominantly brown meant that hierarchies were between people of the same color or those whose skin color were close to each other. Nevertheless, the first insult my mother received from people with fairer skin was *tasuqiyt* (“female black slave”). Theoretically, this is a community in which people’s skin color is not easily distinguishable from each other, but still there is always space for some racial slur. *Asuqi*, *abaqqar* (black cow), and *ismkh/ismg* (slave), which describe different shades of blackness, are just some of the words one growing up hears in this environment.

Skin-color-based racialization is compounded by lineage, particularly in Amazigh areas where some people consider themselves both white and *iguramn*, or descendants of the prophet. *Shurafa’* are then pitted against *i’amiyn* (ordinary people), who most often are racialized. The combination of lineage and skin color complicate the way race works in an Amazigh context. A few years ago, a very successful white friend of mine from an *i’amiyn* family made a marriage proposal to a girl from an *igguramn* family, but the girl’s

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these terms, see Brahim El Guabli, “Forgettable Black Bodies: Boujamâa Hebaz and the Racial Politics of Amnesia,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (forthcoming) and Brahim El Guabli, “Racial Transitions: Islam, Transitional Justice, and Morocco’s (Re)Africanization,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Race and Islam*, ed. Zain Abdullah (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> Brahim El Guabli, “My Amazigh Indigeneity (the Bifurcated Roots of a Native Moroccan),” *The Markaz*, September 15, 2021: <https://themarkaz.org/my-amazigh-indigeneity-the-bifurcated-roots-of-a-native-moroccan/>.

<sup>30</sup> El Guabli, “Forgettable Black Bodies.”



family rejected his proposal. Although race was not adduced as a factor because of his whiteness, the difference in lineage and whether it was permissible for *i'amiyn* to marry *tigurramin* (women of sharifian descent) was referenced. However, race permeates this case, which shows how a group of people considers its color and social heritage purer, distinguished, and more valuable than any other relationships that can be forged by people. When people cannot intermarry or mingle socially because of their awareness of some invisible divide that makes them unequal, racism is at work. As elsewhere, racism in the Amazigh context has social, economic, territorial, and spatial dimensions that Ben Zayda's poetic experience helps us to critically elucidate.

### **Mbark Ben Zayda: Declaiming Anti-Racism in Tamazight**

Amazigh communities have grappled with the double-edged sword of racism and racialization. Amazigh intellectuals and activists have denounced post-independence state racism against their language and culture for decades. One can find many statements in which the Amazigh Cultural Movement draw attention to the discriminatory and racist Arabization policies implemented by post-independence states to displace the indigenous language and culture of Tamazgha. This focus on the larger project of rehabilitating Amazigh linguistic and cultural rights has overshadowed the equally important cultural productions that form a critique of intra-Amazigh color-based racialization. An early attempt in this regard was presented at the first summer university of the *al-jami'iyya al-sayfiyya bi-agadir* (The Agadir Summer University) in 1980, and its author was none other than poet and Amazigh activist Mohamed Moustouai. Entitled *Shi'r al-amazighi al-munadil didda al-'ubudiyya wa-al-istirqaq* ("Amazigh Poetry Struggling against Slavery and Enslavement"), this study, which is a pioneering text and a prescient understanding of the importance of studying race in the Amazigh context, provides a then-novel reading of Mbark Ben Zayda's poetic resistance against racialization.<sup>31</sup> His poetic life has piqued scholars' interest. As al-Munadil argues, Ben Zayda was "able to establish his poetic experience through the practice of social critique and rebellion against the negative, discriminatory perceptions and position that were predominant at his time."<sup>32</sup>

Moustouai demonstrates that Ben Zayda suffered from the exploitative condition under the authority of a white family. Born fourteen years after the French Protectorate (1912–1956) was imposed on Morocco, Ben Zayda was the child of Ms'ud and Zayda, who were owned by two different slaving families. Accordingly, Ben Zayda was owned by the owner of his mother as per the laws of slave ownership at the time.<sup>33</sup> It is also the reason he is called Ben Zayda (the son of Zayda), attributing him to his mother instead of his father. Moustouai describes Ben Zayda's context:

traditional families believed, because of their ignorance, that a person of color was created to do hard labor from morning to evening; his salary

<sup>31</sup> Moustouai, "Shi'r al-amazighi," 234–55.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Munadi, *Mbark u-ms'ud*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Oubella, "Shi'r al-jur'a," 23–24.





᠘᠕ᠢ ᠙᠙᠒᠒ ᠷᠢᠮᠮᠢᠰᠢ ᠬᠡᠨᠡᠨᠢ ᠰᠢᠮᠤ ᠷᠠᠠᠨᠠ ᠰᠤᠨᠠᠨᠠ  
ᠰᠢᠮᠤ ᠲᠡᠶ᠋ᠨᠠᠨᠠ ᠰᠢᠮᠤ ᠠ ᠰᠤᠨᠠᠨᠠ ᠰᠤᠨᠠᠨᠠ ᠷᠢᠮᠢᠰᠢᠨᠠ

All people know my father and also my mom  
And my siblings are known to everyone<sup>44</sup>

Ben Zayda here explicitly owns family history and does not try to distance himself from it. By reasserting his pride in his lineage, Ben Zayda foiled this “bullet” and turned it into an empty shell that required the opponent to come up with something better and stronger as their public performance unfolded.

Racism blinds people to ethical considerations, pushing them to even commit acts that would be considered sacrilegious within their faith. We know that enslavers of all religions presented themselves as people of faith, though their religious traditions did not condone slavery. Enslaver in the American south still attended church and reconciled their faith with owning slaves. This is certainly also true for Islam, which theoretically created a framework for the manumission of slaves.<sup>45</sup> However, slave owners managed to reconcile their ownership of other humans with their ritualistic practice of Islam. In post-independence Morocco, these dehumanizing acts could not continue due to the abolition of slavery upon French colonization of the country in 1912. Dehumanization, nonetheless, continued in the form of social stigma and repetitive reminders that black people occupied a category apart in predominantly racist communities. Here, for instance, Ben Zayda’s own facial features are attacked by his former master during a performance:

ᠰᠤᠨᠨᠨᠢ ᠰᠤ ᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢ ᠢᠰᠢᠰᠢ ᠰᠤᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ  
ᠰᠤ ᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠰᠤ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ  
ᠢᠰᠢᠰᠢ ᠰᠤᠨᠢ ᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠰᠤᠨᠢ ᠢᠰᠢᠰᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢ

By God, Mbark, I want to ask you a question  
What happened to your camel-like lips  
I am not insulting God’s creation, but I just wonder<sup>46</sup>

Obviously, this is a way to call Ben Zayda ugly. Ben Zayda, in his response, took the higher moral ground by drawing attention to the sinful nature of his opponent’s words:

ᠰᠤᠨᠢ ᠰᠤᠰᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢ ᠰᠤᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ  
ᠰᠤᠰᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠰᠤᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ  
ᠰᠤ ᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠰᠤᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢ

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>45</sup> The theoretical possibility of manumission did not mean that Muslim enslavers abided by the rules. They rather found ways to circumvent the religious injunctions to keep the slaves. The literature engaging with Islam and slavery has grown exponentially in recent years, but readers can check out El Hamel’s *Black Morocco* and Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (New York: OneWorld Academic, 2019) for more information about the politics of manumission and re-enslavement.

<sup>46</sup> Belkacem, [http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post\\_14.html](http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post_14.html).

You are aware you just insulted God’s creation  
 Your father was crippled his entire life  
 But I never evoked it nor did it even occur to me to say it.<sup>47</sup>

Here Ben Zayda refuses to weaponize the opponent’s father’s physical disability in an insult, but he still reminds him of it. However, Ben Zayda chose to limit himself to what can be said and not transgress God’s laws and his creation. The lesson was that the racist master committed an injurious act against God and not against Ben Zayda.

Ben Zayda’s insurgency against racism stemmed from his acute awareness of his privileged social status as a poet. As I have already explained, poetry is not given to just anyone, Ben Zayda’s opponents used his social status to question his poetic legitimacy. However, his response was one full of pride in declaiming that:

□ΛΙ □.ϣΙ ρϣϣ ϭ□ϭξϣΙ ρ.○.○Ι †.†:×  
 ††.† †.○ϭ.ϩ ϭ†.††.† □.†.○ξ† ††.†.○  
 ξ†.† †.○ϭ.ϩ ††.†.ϩ †.†.†.† ††.†.○  
 †:†.† †. ρ†.†. †ξ.† ††.†.† ††.○.ξ.□

People strive to diminish me but I only outmatch them  
 There is an income that you can gain by manual labor  
 And another you can gain by sweet talk  
 And everyone enjoys the gift God bestowed on them<sup>48</sup>

Obviously, Ben Zayda’s gift is in composing and reciting poetry, which belongs to the form of work that did not require the hard manual labor that his former enslavers thought was more worthy of him. In fact, Ben Zayda made a living as a poet, and freed himself from hard labor, further fanning the hatred of the racists. Hence, in this poem, one addresses him:

ξ†.† ††. ρ. ††.†.□ □.ϣ ††.†. †.†.†  
 †.†. ††.†. †.○.†.†.† □.†.†.○.ξ† †.†.†

Your kind does not compose poetry  
 For where would he have the authority to declaim it  
 You should remain a beast of burden  
 Only good for carrying soil<sup>49</sup>

As it is clear from this verse, *awal* in Tamazight means poetry, speech and authority. In the mind of his poetic opponent, Ben Zayda did not have any

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>48</sup> Oubella, “Shi’r al-jur’a,” 24.  
<sup>49</sup> Moustauoui, “Shi’r al-Amazighi,” 243.



combustible substance. Gasoline and fire can only lead to the death of the person who is soaked in fuel. Again, the insult only incited Ben Zayda's incendiary poetic genius to destroy his opponent. He is the fire that could devour them discursively, poetically, and figuratively. Poetry afforded him the space where he could battle social and racial stigma and, more crucially, where he could prove that his skin color or slave origins made no difference in his defense of his humanity.

Racism is not merely a verbal speech act. It is also a palpable and brutal mistreatment of the racialized. The hierarchical world that the racists build in their minds translates itself in their language, but it is also oftentimes embodied in actions that humiliate or reduce the racialized individual or community to nothing. Moustaoui explains a verse in which Ben Zayda addresses a situation in which he was mistreated as a worker. Amazigh work traditions dictate that when you hire workers you must also provide them with meals as well as shelter, particularly if they are not from the same area. Taking into consideration the social change that happened in Amazigh communities in the last seventy years, one could only imagine that this was an even nobler act fifty years ago. However, Ben Zayda was asked to spend the night in the mosque instead of being invited to sleep in the house of the person whom he worked for. Ben Zayda makes sexual allusions in his rendering of this event:

IXΛC Λ.Ο ΣΗΞΘ .Λ.ΠΥ ΣΟΖC ΟΘΘΞ  
 ΣΗΚ.ΣΥ ΣCICΘΞ ΣEEΣΣΣΞ Θ ΨCΚΧΞΛ.  
 ΣΖΙΑ ΨΞΧCΞ ΙΘ .Ο.ΥΛ ΨCICΞΛ  
 Λ.Μ.ΣΙΙΞ ΙΞΚ ∴Ο.Θ ΧΞΥ ΜΗΞΘ  
 ΙΕΗ. ΞΚΘ∴Λ .Λ .ΘΙΑ ΞΗΥ .C∴Λ

I worked for a hyena; may God release me from him  
 He served me dinner and expelled me to the mosque  
 Closed his door and watched me [from afar]  
 But I am not blaming him  
 I am black, and he is scared of inheriting my seeds<sup>53</sup>

It is very well possible that the person in this situation did not have enough rooms in his home. However, in this charged context, where humiliation breeds explosive responses, Ben Zayda made fun of the socially white father for fearing to have black children.

Nationalism is another area in which Ben Zayda surpassed his racist poetic opponents. Even before the question of nationalism became a source of prebends and hagiographic discourses in Morocco, Ben Zayda questioned his contemporaries' allegations to have fought against French colonialism. Ben Zayda recorded in his poems that nationalism became fashionable after humble people like him paid the price for liberation during the decolonial period. Perceiving what was happening around him in this regard, Ben Zayda declaims:

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



◦ ⵔⵉⵏⵉⵏ ⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ  
 ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ

Everyone now claims their nationalism  
 [But] when “long live [Morocco]” was costly, only Mbark used to say it<sup>54</sup>

The reader may wonder what difference it makes if one is a nationalist or not. In reality, it makes all the difference in the world. When some Moroccans were dying in defense of their country’s independence, others were busy improving their business or political careers by collaborating with the French colonial system. However, when the country recovered its independence, these same collaborators claimed to have been engaged in the struggle for liberation. So, when Ben Zayda foregrounds his nationalist past, he really underscores how people like him were left out of history and from the post-independence narrative that made national liberation a matter of white upper-middle-class Moroccans from central Morocco. He explicitly renders this idea when he declaims that “nobody knows those who killed the beast” of colonialism.<sup>55</sup> Again, Ben Zayda snatched the power to tell the truth and redress the historical record in chanting that:

◦ⵏ ⵉⵎⵎⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ  
 ◦ⵏ ⵉⵎⵎⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ ⵏⵓⵔⵉⵏ

There is no Amazigh or *Asuqi* who can  
 Come out to the public arena to say the truth<sup>56</sup>

Only Ben Zayda could say the truth, and he spoke on behalf of those Moroccans, like him, who were left out of the nationalist narratives about Morocco’s independence.

This close reading of Ben Zayda’s poetry shows that race and racism operated on many levels in his surrounding social, cultural, and political context. As a descendent of slaves at the turn of the twentieth century, Ben Zayda was only seen by his opponents as someone destined to serve his masters. Yet Ben Zayda actively embraced his humble origins to upend the performative scene of his Amazigh community and positioned himself as one of the most impactful movers and shakers in the history of Amazigh poetry. Ben Zayda defied the condition of racialization and paved the way for a poetics of anti-racism in the Amazigh hinterland at a time when Moroccan society was still replete with the residues of the not-so-long-forbidden slavery. This Amazigh poetics of liberation has eluded academic studies that have examined race and racism in Morocco. This is due mainly to the fact that most scholars cannot speak or read Tamazight. This situation leaves a wealth of sources in this

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>55</sup> Oubella, “Shi’r al-jur’a,” 25.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

language unaccounted for in the study of racism and the various ways in which Amazighen contended with their racial legacies openly in the public sphere.

## Conclusion

Racist people globally abhor it when those they try to put down have the last word. They strive to align speech, discourse, and the public sphere with their racist attitudes. If they conceive of racialized individuals as less human or less worthy, those who believe in racial hierarchies work to create the conditions for their vision of the world to dominate and shape reality. However, their power-laden script does not always go as planned. Oftentimes, racialized individuals or communities defy their power and mobilize all the means available to fashion their own reality. Morocco is no different. Black Amazigh Moroccans suffered and still suffer from the legacy of racial discrimination, and their racializers have a hard time seeing them regain independence, success, and influence as autonomous individuals and communities. Mbark Ben Zayda was one of these individuals who upended the racist context of his society and used his poetic privilege to fight his contemporaries' racist attitudes.

His sad ending, however, demonstrates that Ben Zayda was victorious in poetry but his opponents outdid him in treachery. During one of his performances, Ben Zayda was supposedly poisoned. When his racializers were unable to subdue him in the performance arena, where their poets were failed to outmatch him in words and declamation, they resorted to the weapon of cowardice and cruelty to put an end to his rebellious and dignified life. Amazigh poet and literary scholar Idir Belkacem writes that Ben Zayda felt the poison when it was served to him in a coffee cup. As poison was settling in his body during performance, he declaimed these verses that will forever be associated with his treasonous death:

ḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤ ḤḤḤ ḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ  
 ḤḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ  
 ḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ  
 ḤḤ ḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤḤ  
 ḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤ ḤḤḤḤḤḤ

O people, bear witness that I was killed in the land of Nhiht<sup>57</sup>  
 Tell Aisha that the one who married you<sup>58</sup>

Was hit by the God-less on his head and he won't recover  
 He may or may not live to see the end of the today  
 May God protect us but I am departing from this life<sup>59</sup>

Hence Ben Zayda's biological life came to an end. However, his poetic tradition outlived him, and his poems continue to be sung by different poets and bands.

<sup>57</sup> This is the name of the village where he was supposedly poisoned.

<sup>58</sup> All the other available version refer to his wife as Zahra and not Aisha. Also, the version cited by Moustauoui calls on Zahra to cry for him and he implores God to make his death softer on his fledgling children. See Moustauoui, "Shi'r al-amazighi," 254.

<sup>59</sup> Belkacem, [http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post\\_14.html](http://amazighafra.blogspot.com/2019/11/blog-post_14.html).

Some of his poems were even recorded in cassette and are major hits in the Amazigh cultural scene, but they are not attributed to him. Recent interest in his legacy, particularly in social media, has led to the discovery of the many hidden facets of his brutally terminated life. Of all the facets that encapsulated his poetic importance is his determined and unrestrained insurgency against discrimination and social death of black people in Morocco.

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