

BERBER CHALLENGE IN ALGERIA: THE STATE OF THE QUESTION [1998]

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Even for the non-expert observer of the Maghreb, the Berber parameter has now become an essential element of the political, social and cultural scene in both Algeria and Morocco.

In Algeria, since 1989, a whole series of spectacular actions confirmed the significant adherence of the Kabyle population to the Berber claim, among them several general strikes in Kabylia, and large-scale demonstrations in Tizi-Ouzou, Bougie and Algiers. These actions reached their highest point when a general school boycott was organized during the 1994-95 academic year. The latest demonstrations across the region by Kabyle youth in June-July 1998 following the assassination of Lounes Matoub remind us that the embers of Berberism are ready to be fanned into flames at any time.

In Morocco, the August 29, 1994 royal address in favor of the teaching of Berber took place in a quieter landscape, but it truly represents the rise of a Berber aspiration. Albeit admittedly lacking organization and political character, the Moroccan political power machine undoubtedly wanted to anticipate and neutralize it to avoid a possible evolution in “the Algerian way.”

This paper will be limited to a presentation of an update of the situation of the “Berber question” in Algeria, the forces involved, its actors, and the recent and current developments. In addition, the paper will analyze the nature and the possible outcome of the Berber claim. Even if the political context in Morocco is rather different, the strong trends identifiable in Algeria may well be valid there.

I. BACKGROUND

The Berber language is currently being spoken in nearly ten countries of the greater Maghreb-Sahara-Sahel region: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Niger, Mali, Burkina-Fasso, Mauritania, Libya, and Egypt. Algeria and Morocco are by far the countries that count the most significant Berber-speaking population (~25% in Algeria, 35 to 40% in Morocco). They are also countries where the « Berber question » arises with the most strength.

Incidentally, one must realize the importance of these figures: 25% in Algeria, 40% in Morocco, which translate into at least 7 to 8 million people in Algerian and 10 million in Morocco. The demographic weight of the Maghrebic Berber-speaking world is considerable and amounts to significant portions of the populations, at least in Algeria and in Morocco. The “Berber political risk” is primarily in the demography that contains frightening potentialities: Ethnic conflicts have taken place with much smaller populations. Surely, if it were not for the geographical fragmentation of the Berber-speaking world, there would have already been a Berber State in North Africa. One must not lose sight of the fact that this fundamental fact remains an important one because it helps better understand the fierceness of

the debate that ensues when the “Berber question“ in the Maghreb is brought up. The stakes and the risks are considerable, whatever the point of view.

Because of this geographical fragmentation, the current situation of the Berber-speaking world and the Berber claim is obviously not homogeneous in the various concerned areas, and even within Algeria: The Aurès region is different from Kabylia and each area reacts and evolves in its own way with regard to the Berber language and identity. The data, analyses and assumptions presented here focus primarily on Kabylia, which, in a demographic sense, is the principal Algerian Berber-speaking region. One should therefore avoid any systematic extrapolation to the whole of the Algerian Berber-speaking world and, a fortiori, to Morocco.

A hostile ideological and political environment

In Algeria, since independence, the State has defined itself as Arabic and Muslim: The successive constitutions since 1963 have remained unchanged with regard to this matter. The linguistic and cultural policy put in place by the FLN (National Liberation Front), and the different governments, has been that of Arabization and of re-Islamicization. In this regard, it may be useful to recall that the Algerian Islamists did not “fall from the sky”: They are largely a product of the cultural and educational policy that has been continuously pursued since 1962. This dominant Arabo-Islamic ideology - which was firmly established in the National Movement since its beginnings (see the work of Mr. Harbi) - considers linguistic diversity a danger to national unity and a seed of division. The construction of the nation will thus be completed by linguistic unification.

This strongly hostile environment had decisive consequences, especially in the last decades, which can be characterized by a definite awakening of the Berber identity consciousness. During this period, indeed, important protest movements had shaken Kabylia since March 1980. Detailed analyses about the conditions, the remote and immediate causes, and the significance of this 1980 “Berber Spring of Kabylia” can be found in the literature¹. These protest movements constitute true historical turning point and they were indeed lived as such, not only by Kabyles, but also by the majority of the other Berber-speaking areas. In 1980, for the first time in the history of North Africa, a Berber-speaking group clearly claimed its right and will to exist as such, through a demand for an institutional recognition of its language and culture.

Kabylia, thus, holds a special status: one of a pioneer in relation to the “Berber question”. A secular tradition of autonomy and resistance to the central power, a deep and already old Western acculturation (through French schooling and emigration), and an important and powerful elite made the region the vanguard of the linguistic claim. It is incontestably in Kabylia that developments of the Berber movement can be followed with the most accuracy, in particular, its explicit cultural, ideological, and political translations.

II. RECENT SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

The above background briefly described the “classical” situation of the Berber language and culture in Algeria. It is characterized by exclusion and quasi-structural repression since Algeria’s independence (1962) until the end of 1988. However, within the general framework of the political opening

¹ These positions and analyses have been developed in various articles published during the 1980 decade, in the *Annuaire d’Afrique du Nord*, the *Revue de l’Occident Musulman et de la Mediterranee*, *Tafsut-Etudes et Debats* and some other more accessible media. A synthesis can be found in *Berberes aujourd’Hui* (Paris, 1989) or *Imazighen ass-a* (Algiers, 1990).

and the abolishment of the single party system, the data have changed drastically since 1989. It must be emphasized that, based on observations, changes noted since 1989 are many and diverse and they deal practically with all aspects of the social environment.

The cultural arena

Publishing and newspaper media

It is known that Berber-language publishing disappeared in Algeria in 1962 despite the fact that Algiers had been, since the end of last century, one of the main centers of Berber-language publishing. Algiers had many specialized publishers and had been a source of very active scientific and financial impulse through the School of Arts of Algiers.

Starting in 1989, the first signs of a revival of Berber-language publishing appeared with initiatives started by cultural associations, private publishers and even, recently, with some institutional publishers such as ENAG (Entreprise Nationale des Arts Graphiques), which has gradually become more open to the Berber field². This revival should, however, be taken with caution. Difficult material constraints (layout difficulties, paper shortages, high costs), weakness of the distribution networks and, especially, the risk and uncertainties created by the political setting have not yet allowed Berber publishing to fully develop. There is not a consolidated Berber Publishing in Algeria. In fact, the inventory of concrete achievements is still limited, and the sector is still confronted with incredible logistical difficulties.

In addition to the publishing sector, there were several attempts to create a Berber-language newspaper: Each of the “Kabyle” political parties, the FFS and RCD, launched a periodical in Berber that only produced a few issues before disappearing from the shelves. Several regional and national newspapers tested or are testing a “Berber page”. These tests, however, are not yet conclusive from both sales and distribution standpoints, which remain weak.

The audio-visual arena

The situation in this sector has evolved more significantly than the previous one. The Kabyle radio broadcasting channel (Channel 2), whose existence was threatened several times in the 1970's, has seen its status and role strengthened. The airtime has been appreciably increased and dialects other than Kabyle have been introduced in some of the programs (Shawi for the Aures region and Mozabite for the Ghardaia region). Because of this, it now deserves the name “Berber Channel” and this aspect will certainly be emphasized in the future.

Another important change is television. Since the end of 1991, there is a brief daily broadcast of the TV news in Kabyle and Shawi. Although there is no regular show or program in Berber, it is likely that one will soon be produced and broadcast either in a Berber Hour time slot or on a new channel altogether. Project studies for such a channel have been conducted for many years.

The higher education arena

² Details on Berber-language publications in Algeria can be found in «Chroniques des études berbères» by S. Chaker (Cf. Bibliography). Approximately 15 publications devoted to Berber language and literature came out in Algeria since 1989. In most cases, however they were re-editions or co-editions of publications that initially were published in France.

One of the recurring claims of the Berber movement starting in 1980 was the creation of a Berber department at the University of Tizi-Ouzou. After very long negotiations, the Amazigh (Berber) Language and Culture Department was created in Tizi-Ouzou at the end of January 1990. The goal of this institution was to set up a Master level graduate program in Berber language. The official announcement of its creation was on the eve of January 25, 1990, the day of an imposing demonstration by the Berber Cultural Movement in front of the National Assembly Building in Algiers. After a decade after the events of spring 1980, the Algerian Higher Education Ministry had finally accepted the presence of Berber (cf. Chaker 1989/90, chap. 9). One year later (October 1991), a second Berber department was created in Bougie under far more precarious conditions. Since their creation, the two departments have been operating under very difficult conditions. The results, in particular with regard to the training of young researchers, have remained extremely limited³, especially in Tizi-Ouzou which, at the beginning, was granted more funds and a larger number of faculty. Regardless of the current political motivations and the conditions put in place⁴, it may be stated that in terms of the university practices, significant progress has been made.

Finally, it may be noted that at the beginning of the 1996 academic year, a decision from the Ministry of Higher Education imposed the establishment of a *licence* degree in Berber Language and Culture in the two Berber departments. However, Berber experts and many of the faculty in charge locally expressed reservations, considering the fact that minimum conditions to ensure a satisfactory training had not been met yet. According to the latest information, the establishment of this degree did not receive much follow-up. The number of registered students in the two areas of specialization was negligible (less than 10 students for both departments). Far from being realistic and obviously premature, the decision to create a *licence* degree in Berber had in fact, political motivations, as will be indicated later.

Thus, given the aspects examined previously, the overall situation has changed considerably. In the long run, if it is maintained, the impact for the Berber language and culture will be significant: Many spaces, which used to be closed to Berber, are now open. The development of the local Berber publishing and the development of important research efforts has become possible. Cultural life could gain in intensity, and the dissemination of the written word would accelerate... It may therefore, be said that the objective situation of the Berber language and culture in Algeria may be significantly strengthened in the years to come.

Organizational supports of the “Berber question”

A dense network of associations

Until 1989, the right to establish an association included in all the Algerian Constitutions (e.g.: Article 56 of the Constitution of 1976), was subjected to tremendous limitations. The control of political power, *a priori and a posteriori*, was particularly severe: To exist, an association was subjected to a preliminary certification. The law (in particular ordinance 71-79 of December 3, 1971) gave the administration all necessary discretionary power. The consequence was that no Berber cultural association could ever legally work in Algeria before 1989. All the Berber cultural groups that existed between

³ Because of its regular collaboration with Inalco, Bougie was able to graduate four masters degrees. Two others are expected to defend their theses soon. In Tizi-Ouzou, the situation is expected to get better starting in 1996, thanks to Inalco as well.

⁴ For an account of the creation of these departments, reference may be made to the note I wrote in *Etudes et Documents berbères*, 7, 1990 (p.186-188) or to "Langue et littérature berbères. Chronique des études, IX, *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, XVIII, 1989 (p. 765).

1962 and 1989 were either unofficial or underground. In some instances, they had as their fronts preexisting official organizations such the student committees in colleges and universities, local high-school student committees, and even local units of the Youth Organization under the umbrella of the FLN. These groups operated in a parasitical fashion, and lasted just long enough for the higher Algerian authorities to retake control of the organization in question and drive out the "Berberists."

The legal existence of Berber cultural associations only became a reality at the end of 1988 and beginning of 1989 following the political and legal changes introduced after the October 1988 events. Since then, the number of cultural associations had increased and by July 1989, 154 were already registered in Kabylia alone. Currently, their number has reached several hundred. Almost every village in Kabylia has its cultural association. One can add to this list many others registered in the Aures region as well as in other Berber-speaking regions such as the Mzab, Shenwa, and Ahaggar-Ajjer, and the Kabyle Diaspora in Algiers, Oran, and Constantine. The associations of this Berber "nebula" are obviously very different. Many of them have a local character and are founded on the promotion of an element of the heritage of a village or a small area: poets, singers or local heroes and activists, archeological sites, specific folk art and customs⁵. Their activities in these cases clearly target the general public, and are mainly cultural and artistic: organization of festivals, official receptions and concerts, and conferences. Other associations, smaller in number, are college-type associations that are led mainly by students and/ or teachers⁶. Their goals are educational and even scientific. They generally try to intervene in the field of publishing, teaching of the Berber language, and organizing somewhat ambitious conferences.

One can only make a mitigated evaluation of this associative activity. Their proliferation shows the spreading of the interest in the Berber language and culture among the younger generations, as well as a certain maturity and willingness to take charge of the cultural life in an autonomous manner. However, tangible results are few and sometimes even disappointing. Many of these associations are short-lived. Some could only exist in an intermittent or cyclic fashion. Some appear only for an annual concert or festival. The majority are materially and intellectually very poor. After a few months of operation, there remains generally little from the great initial cultural projects. Association-based work remains for the moment inefficient, and is marked by a great dispersion and a lot of amateurism. The only field where there has been a constant investment which, in the long run, will certainly have significant repercussions, is that of Berber language teaching, since many of these associations provide courses that help promote literacy in the Berber language.

Despite its current fractured character, the world of the Berber associations is regularly crossed by a desire to regroup and reunify: Several attempts have been initiated since 1989. Many meetings attempted to assemble all interested parties. FNACA (Agraw Adelsan Amazigh, Tizi-Ouzou), a national federation of Berber associations, was founded in order to coordinate the associations' actions. This, however, had limited concrete results. In fact, all these projects of coordination went up against the almost insurmountable obstacle of the hour: the political rift of the Kabyle "Berberist" environment and the rivalries that resulted from it. The harsh competition for the same ground by the two "Kabyle" parties, FFS and RCD, coupled with the intervention of marginal but active political groups, and the innumerable quarrels between the leaders, has so far prevented any effective convergence.

⁵ For example the associations Si Mohand of Larbaa-nat-Iraten, Slimane Azem of Agouni-Gueghrane, Laïmèche of Tizi-Rached, Roman Ruins Association of Tigzirt, Weaving Arts of Aït-Hichem...

⁶ This is for example the case of "Idles" and "Agraw Adelsan Amazigh" of Tizi-Ouzou.

The “Berber Cultural Movement”

It is in this environment that can be placed the most important Berber rallying pole(poles, in fact): the “Berber Cultural Movement” (MCB). It held its first meeting in July 1989 in Tizi-Ouzou, with the ambition to coordinate the initiatives and actions in favor of the Berber language and culture, and to establish a permanent representation of the “Berber civil society”. Again, the results are not clear although the MCB can be credited for many large gatherings. These were very important in terms of the number of people they were able to mobilize. Examples of such gatherings are a series of imposing demonstrations in favor of the Berber language and culture including the one held in Algiers on January 25, 1990, several general strikes in Kabylia, and the general school boycott in Kabylia. The latter was an act of massive civil disobedience that started in September 1994.

The weaknesses and limits of the MCB are obvious from the standpoint of both its philosophy and organic existence. No true projects or precise objectives emerged from it. Furthermore, the MCB was unable to resist partisan tensions, so much that it was divided into at least two main tendencies: one directly controlled by the RCD, and the other having close ties to the FFS. The MCB still lacks an effective and permanent organic structure. In fact, it is a people’s movement, that is deeply divided, has a weak structure, and whose actions are spontaneous in nature.

Political organizations

The Algerian political arena has seen a sudden change. The most significant political event was without any doubt the creation of an indisputably sociologically-based “Berberist” party: The Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD). It has been often presented by the international press to have a “Berberist of social-democrat” tendency. It joined on the political scene the more traditional Socialist Forces Front (FFS) of Aït-Ahmed whose constituency is almost exclusively Kabyle, and which explicitly has integrated the Berber cultural and linguistic claims in its political platform since 1979.

During the entire 1980 decade, the Berber movement did not want to be a structured political force, even though it was acting around certain more or less formalized poles and even if some of its groups of activists had already belonged to the FFS. It was, therefore, a social and cultural movement rather than a party. The political opening that was started in 1988 in Algeria shattered this non-partisan approach. The result was that the various tendencies that had made up the “Berberist” arena started to express themselves more openly. Consequently, one was able to distinguish between two politically organized branches, close to RCD or FFS, and the “culturalists” branch, made of activists who were determined to continue their action in an autonomous way in the MCB or in the cultural associations. This process of organic diversification has probably not been completed yet, and a potential for a “third force”, a more explicitly “Berberist” one, is often perceived. Such an evolution might take place because of the obvious political failure of the strategies of the two Kabyle parties, RCD and FFS⁷.

However, for the moment, there is no “Berberist” party in Algeria. There are political parties with Berber social anchoring but no party that develops a mainly or specifically Berber project. All of the organizations fit explicitly in a national perspective and the Berber linguistic and cultural claims are

⁷ One of the common denominators between these two parties, which are in direct competition, is the fact that they define themselves with constancy as Algerian «national» parties. This is in flagrant contradiction with their constituency and their true electoral anchoring. Consequently, since 1989, they spared no effort to position themselves on the national political arena especially in the different political alliances.

only one particular aspect of their more global political positioning. The last of these organizations to come of age, the RCD, continues to affirm itself with insistence as a “democratic and republican” organization, and not a Berber party, by reminding everyone of its nationwide establishment at every occasion. As for the FFS and its founder, Hocine Aït-Ahmed, until now they have never truly wanted to be “locked up” in the “Kabyle ghetto”⁸ nor be engaged in a specifically Berber strategy.

However, the introduction of the “Berber question” in the political arena largely exceeds the framework of the “Kabyle parties”. Practically all of the Algerian political organizations were forced to clarify little by little their position on the matter. Even those who were fiercely opposed to it for decades such as the FLN had to adopt a more moderate position. A certain recognition and the adoption of a more responsible position on the “people’s Amazigh linguistic and cultural heritage” has become part of the program of all of the somewhat important political parties. This was noted during the last years on several occasions, particularly:

- In the “San Egidio Platform” signed in Rome on January 13, 1995 by a number of opposition parties, including FIS. It stated that: *“the components of the Algerian personality are Islam, Arabness and Amazighness; the culture and the two languages contributing to the development of this personality must find within this unifying framework their place and their institutional promotion, without exclusion or marginalization.”*
- In the “National Agreement” document signed in September 1996 by a group of political “Arabo-Islamist” parties (FLN, PRA, Hamas, Ennahda) supporting the actions and directions of President Zeroual⁹.

Of course, the correct meaning of this recognition must be studied concretely and in a detailed manner in each case. The detailed analysis of the texts is essential because the terms “recognition” or “people’s cultural heritage”, often used by both the government and the political parties, correspond in fact to very different concrete positions. For instance, the FLN’s position on the matter, as well as the position included in the “National Agreement” document, clearly do not go farther than the traditional 1986 framework (“Amended National Charter”) with its simple reference to “the people’s Amazigh cultural heritage” without a real implication. However, today, a real and significant change has taken place in the Algerian political discourse as a whole, and the Berber parameter has become an element in the political game that everyone now has to consider.

The creation of The High Commission for Amazighness (HCA) on May 28, 1995: a turning point?

On the government side, the year 1995 will have been that of important measures, which at first sight, can be considered as a first step towards the recognition of the Berber language. After a massively followed school boycott in Kabylia starting in September 1994, the government engaged in negotiations in March-April 1995 with certain factions of the Berber Cultural Movement (the “MCB National Coordination”, close to the RCD and the representatives of the students’ parents). The government rejected the initial claim for recognition of Berber as a “national language” alongside Arabic, arguing the fact that would necessitate a constitutional amendment, which was not part of the prerogatives of the government (and of the de facto presidency at the time). However, the authorities admitted the legitimacy of the Berber demand for the institutionalization of their language, particularly its teaching. “The High Commission for Amazighness” close to the presidency was created by a decree dated May, 28 1995:

⁸ Hocine Aït-Ahmed discussed this issue many times with the “Berberist” activists and confirmed explicitly his refusal of the “Berber isolation” in his writings, especially in his book published in 1989: pp. 114-115 and 126-127.

⁹ In this document, one can already see the outline of a future parliamentary majority that would support president Zeroual.

This authority, nominated by the “president of the State” on June 7, 1995, was to take all necessary initiatives and make any propositions with respect to the teaching of Berber.

The detailed legal and political analysis of the government's decision alone would require a full study. Its impact is still difficult to evaluate and its political repercussions are still not clear. However, from simple observations based on available data, several contradictory facts can immediately be easily established:

- It is indeed a significant breach and turning point of the official policy with respect to the “Berber question”. For the first time, a North-African state includes in its institutions the Berber parameter.
- It is an explicit political and administrative measure (a decree). It is not a recognition in law, be it of a constitutional or legal nature. It thus remains fragile and revocable.
- The highest authorities of the State (Prime Minister and President) and the HCA's founding document are very explicit on a crucial point: The opening to the Berber language and culture is conceived as a rehabilitation of one of the components of the national culture and identity of *all Algerians*. *It is in no way a recognition of linguistic or cultural rights of a particular area or minority*. The nomination as head of HCA of Mohamed Idir Aït-Amrane, a nationalist movement activist and veteran with training in Arabic and a passion for Berber, fully symbolizes this aspect.
- Consequently, the authorities refused categorically to recognize Berber as a national language of Algeria, with generalized teaching in the Berber-speaking areas. Arabic remains practically the only national and official language. Berber will be introduced as a language that can be studied in certain secondary schools.
- The human composition of the HCA also deserves scrutiny, at least in its general outline. Its leadership includes neither a single known authority in the Berber language nor a single known personality of the Berber culture. Instead, the majority of its officers are representatives of the related state institutions, and generally little known activists from associations.
- On the immediate political level, it is clear that the consequence of the government’s concession was to further divide the forces within the Berber Movement. The unified efforts prevalent at the time of the school boycott immediately splintered, and the Berber Movement became even more divided. The resulting factions can be described as “collaborationist/ reformist Berberist,” generally close to RCD, increasingly integrated in the strategies of the government and “oppositional Berberist” (independent or close to the FFS). The immediate political benefit was thus not negligible for the Algerian authorities.

Concrete outcome

At the beginning of the 1995 academic year, under the sponsorship of the HCA, several initiatives in favor of Berber teaching in secondary schools were taken: Training courses for teachers (of other disciplines) were organized and Berber courses were started in several schools. On these experiments and initiatives, several observations can be made:

- On one hand, it does not appear that the prerogatives and outline of responsibilities between the HCA and the concerned ministries (National Education especially, but also Higher Education) are clearly established. Even the status of the courses does not appear to be clearly defined. Are these courses “optional”, complementary, or regular courses that are integrated in the course of study that is required from each student taking the Baccalaureate test? There remains serious disagreement (or hesitation) between the various authorities on this subject. Their clarification, which will necessarily be made soon, will be very revealing.

- The means put forth are for the moment very limited; so much so that the action of the Berber associations, in terms of teaching and teacher training, appears still much more significant than that of the HCA. The latter, by the way, largely resorts to the help provided by some “friendly” associations.

By making factual-data based observations, we are led to ask if the HCA’s role would not simply be an operation of “domestication,” to use an expression coined by R. Bellil in 1985, which is the take-over of a field the Berber associations' activism had, until now, developed outside the control of the state.

III. ELEMENTS OF ANALYSIS

Before any attempt to interpret and evaluate the recent developments, it is essential to recall the existence in Algeria, at least since 1980, of a movement with Berber linguistic claims, strongly established in the Kabylia region. The numerous and important demonstrations and various protests, which took place in this region in favor of the recognition of the Berber language, clearly prove the social anchoring of the Berber linguistic claim (cf. Chaker 1989/90). On this matter therefore, the Algerian authorities have had to face a long and multi-form challenge over many years. The current developments can only be understood if one disregards this fundamental data. This parameter - the existence of a broad social base to the Berber claim - distinguishes the Algerian situation from that of Morocco.

An ideological and legal continuity

At first sight, the Algerian landscape has known major changes in the field of the Berber question during recent years. However, one must immediately reject the theory that there have been radical changes in Algeria’s language and culture policy. If the Berber element now has the possibility of legally expressing itself, it must do so within the general framework of the liberalization of the legislation on cultural and political associations and within the larger opening of the media. The general political situation has certainly progressed. However, the State’s discourse and policies have not gone through any fundamental change in regard to cultural and linguistic policies.

The Constitution of February 23, 1989, in which the term “Berber” was absent, reaffirmed without ambiguity the previous options in terms of language and culture:

- Article 2: “Islam is the religion of the State.”
- Article 3: “ Arabic is the national and official language.”

It carefully prohibits the creation of political organizations on a regional basis (Article 9/2) or those that could threaten national unity (Article 40/2). And the law on “political organizations” voted in July 1989 by the National People’s Assembly is even more explicit since it prohibits the creation of political parties on a *linguistic basis*.

The new constitution¹⁰, which was put to referendum on November 28, 1996, did not bring the slightest change to the two articles mentioned above (Article 2: “Islam is the religion of the State”; Article 3: “Arabic is the national and official language”). However, it added Article 178 which specified that no constitutional amendment could pose a threat to Islam as a religion of the State or to Arabic, as the national and official language.

¹⁰ Published extensively in the Algerian press: for example, in the newspapers *Liberté* and *El Watan* Wednesday, October 3, 1996.

The text also renewed the stipulations of former Article 40/2, which became:

- 42 (§ 3): «... political parties cannot be founded on a religious, linguistic, racial, sexual, corporate or regional basis.
- 42 (§ 4): «political parties cannot resort to partisan propaganda referring to elements of the preceding subparagraph.»

The only new element appears in the preamble of the Constitution which states, in an incidental way, that «... *the fundamental components of its identity [...] are Islam, Arabness and Amazighness.*» However, this mention of Amazighness (Berberness) is purely rhetorical since, in the same preamble it is expressly stated that Algeria is: «land of Islam, an integral part of the Greater Maghreb, an Arab, Mediterranean and African country.» Thus, the Berber dimension is dismissed immediately after being mentioned.

Therefore, the situation in Algeria after 1989 does not incorporate in any manner a legal recognition of the Berber dimension. In terms of identity and culture, the policies and legislation in effect since 1976 (*National Charter* and the *FLN Central Committee's Resolutions on Culture* of 1981, and the “amended” *National Charter* of 1986) have not brought any change to the fundamental theses: Algerians are Arab and Muslim. Berbers existed in a distant past that one cannot resurrect. Consequently, Berbers belong in history books, museums, folk festivals and, possibly, in the universities as an object of scholarly study.

If one considers simultaneously the creation of the HCA in 1995 and the new constitutional amendment, it clearly appears that the action of the Algerian authorities fits along the line of the “amendments” of the *National Charter* of 1986: To integrate the Berbers as an element of the «national heritage», but deny the national language status to Berber. Above all, by nationalizing it in a vague mention in the official discourse and by some modest institutional measures, the attempt is to neutralize the Berber element as a political potentiality. In fact, with regard to the Berber question, the amended Constitution has a single objective, and that is to reinforce the legal basis for the prohibition of possible Berberist political parties¹¹.

Consequently, there has been no ideological departure in Algeria: The strategic options in terms of linguistic and cultural matters remain unchanged despite a few tactical compromises. Arabization remains the basis of the country's linguistic policy. Furthermore, as it was proven during the adoption by the APN (December 1990) of a law on Arabization, which was clearly directed against French and Berber in the dominant spheres, the approach to the question of languages remains marked by an exclusive and ultra-repressive conception¹². A freeze on the law, in 1992 (largely unimplementable without draconian and coercive measures) was expressly presented as provisional and “technical”, and was in no way putting into question the objective of generalized Arabization. The reality was spectacularly confirmed in September 1996 when the Algerian government exhumed this law by announcing a vigorous revival of Arabization.

Ultimately, the dominant position regarding the “Berber question” stems from the foundations of Algerian nationalism itself: Berber reality as an autonomous cultural dimension, coexistent with the Arab dimension, is denied because that would imply the recognition of the cultural diversity of the nation which would pave the way to the question of “rights of minorities,” and possibly to a prospect of federalism and/or secession.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that from this point of view the *potential* Berber danger has been legally handled exactly in the same manner as the radical Islamist movement.

¹² Cf. *Le Monde* newspaper dated 12/28/1990; Law # 91-05 dated 01/16/1991, *Algerian Official Journal* No. 03 dated 01/16/1991.

But a deeply changed political situation

The flexibility displayed with respect to the Berber language appears rather as a compromise that can be related to a new political environment. In it, the Algerian government is in a difficult position, after having lost many of its organic and ideological means to control society. It is most probably within this upset political climate that the governmental measures in favor of the Berber language and culture must be re-analyzed and understood. Since 1988/89, the immediate and main danger for the Algerian regime has come from the Islamists' side and there has been a total reconfiguration of the forces and their interactions since 1988. Indeed, in such an environment, independently of the magnitude of their hostility to the Berber ideas, the dominant political forces can consider that:

- The "Berber question" does not represent an immediate political danger;
- It would be strategically difficult and risky to manage a conflict on two fronts ("Islamists" / "Berberists");
- The neutrality and even the support of the Berber-speaking populations (especially Kabyle) must be sought to counter, or at the very least, slow down the Islamist pressure. The existence, since at least 1988, of this political approach within the government cannot be doubted. It explains immediately the way in which the Berber question has been handled by the authorities since October 1988. This approach seeks neutralization and encourages division. Under pressure from the Islamists, the authorities needed "calm" in Kabylia and probably understood that some minimal gestures would enable them to achieve this goal. Overall, they have, up to now, succeeded.

IV. THE UNCERTAINTY OF TOMORROW:

The question that obviously arises is whether the current situation of neutrality/neutralization of Kabylia is going to last and whether the political system can integrate the "Berber question" in the long run. For a whole array of structural reasons, one can seriously doubt it. Neither the primarily identity-based nature of the Berber claim, nor the nature of the Algerian State and its political tradition appear to allow such an evolution.

In general sociological and political terms, the Berber question in Algeria presents itself as follows:

- Kabylia is strongly and durably mobilized for the recognition of its language and culture;
- The organic framework of this claim remains extremely loose due to the fragmentation of the Berber Cultural Movement and the network of associations;
- For the moment, there exists no specific political project based on this linguistic claim;
- The "Kabyle" political parties relay (or use) this claim but expressly refuse to make it their main line of action.

Consequently, the situation and its evolution appear to be hesitant and uncertain- Will this hesitation of Kabylia to become a specific political force based on its own agenda last? - Can the central political system succeed in integrating the "Berber question" in the long run? - Is the emergence of a line of rupture between Kabylia and the centralized State probable, or even inescapable? - Moreover, what will become of the "Berber question" and what margin of action will it have?

In the prevailing situation in Algeria, with its lasting tensions, instability and opaqueness, an attempt to settle this issue and to give clear-cut answers to these questions would be hasty. Nevertheless, one can try to explore the potential for evolution, based on a number of assumptions and appreciations

on the sociological and ideological nature of the Berber claim, given the global political situation of the country. Indeed, it would seem that some of the fundamental data already in place would not be changing soon.

An identity problem: linguistic and cultural autonomization

The character of the Berber claim has been essentially based on an identity (see in particular Chaker 1989/90). Its outline can be easily defined through an analysis of Berber social discourse: song, poetry, modern literature, cultural action, social and ideological discourse, protest movements... In Kabylia at least, this quest can easily be studied because its numerous and diverse expressions span over an already considerable length of time: It is clearly a claim for recognition of a particular linguistic entity, i.e., a *problem of cultural minority*. All of the specifically Kabyle-Berberist cultural or ideological expressions revolve around the demand for constitutional and geographical acknowledgment of an objective particularism and the cultural rights that result from it; in particular, the right to live in and live by one's language. Kabyle "Berberists" ultimately reject the founding thesis of a modern Algeria which states that "Algeria is Arab and Muslim", and substitute for it another definition: "Algeria is Berber and Arab". The Berber aspiration in Kabylia is, in the writer's opinion, of an undoubtedly identity-based nature, perhaps even nationalist.

All of the concrete developments in the fields since 1989 corroborate this interpretation. This is not expressed in terms of immediate political results, but rather in terms of the linguistic and cultural work achieved by the "civil society". All of the spontaneous work (non-institutional, at least) supports the idea of a particular collective identity, in rupture with the remainder of the country. A certain number of emblematic practices are highly significant - even if their promoters are not aware of it. Thus:

- The rapid and generalized Berberization of the environment (sign posts, names of businesses...) literally makes Kabylia the "other country".
- The increasingly more popular choice for public writing using the Berber *Tifinagh* alphabet is extremely symbolic and physically differentiates the landscape and, in a way, creates a border.
- There is a strong and widespread will to standardize and modernize the Berber language, and to make it a communication tool adapted to today's world, in particular in public expression and in education in the various levels and fields of study, including science education, which saw the development of vocabulary for mathematics, computer science, etc.)
- The rapid development and spreading of Berber courses in a number of contexts.

The demonstrations following Lounes Matoub's death and the enforcement of the law on the generalization of arabization have very clearly confirmed this analysis: the theme of autonomy, and even independence of the region is now very explicit among the claims of Kabyle youth.

Observation of the dynamics in the field indicates that, without engaging in a head-to-head political claim (regional autonomy for example), the activists and producers of Berber culture are in the process of creating the conditions for a *de facto* autonomy. In terms of "identity production", the direction is towards the creation and consolidation of a specific linguistic and cultural world largely distinct from the national environment.

A de facto political autonomization

The linguistic and cultural gap between parts of the Algerian society has a strong parallel in political behavior. The three electoral tests of June 1990, December 1991 and November 1995¹³ showed that the small Kabyle linguistic island was also politically distinct. They precisely confirmed the analysis developed in our article "La voie étroite"¹⁴: The establishment of the "Kabyle" parties is strictly limited to Kabylia and the cities with an important Kabyle population (Algiers especially). Outside of Kabylia and the Algiers region, the results achieved by FFS and RCD are insignificant. Conversely, the geography of the FIS's electoral strongholds showed that the entire country had been deeply affected by the Islamist phenomenon, except Kabylia and some less significant Berber-speaking areas¹⁵.

Of course, the concerned political organizations will dispute this analysis and will attest to their "Algerian nationalist good will" by showing their alleged national establishment. However, it is impossible to follow the Kabyle parties in terms of what may be considered political slogans. Neither RCD, nor FFS, in spite of their efforts, managed to come out of the famous "Kabyle ghetto". Even outside Kabylia, their electoral base remains strictly Kabyle. The tabulation of the results of the first round of legislative elections (December 1991), and that of the 1995 presidential election, leave no doubt: The FFS and RCD exist electorally only in Kabylia and in the towns with strong Kabyle emigration (certain districts of the Algiers region in particular). The few isolated cases of Arabic-speaking people - always intellectuals - who joined these parties, will not change this strong tendency. The results of the 1995 presidential election are obvious from this point of view: The only Kabyle candidate, RCD's secretary-general S. Sadi, was able to win a very large majority of the votes in Kabylia but he was almost unrepresented in the other regions¹⁶.

Even if the following may not please the "Kabyle" parties, and whatever their objections may be, "electoral sociology" establishes that the elections in Algeria had an ethnic dimension. The Arabic-speaking people, in spite of the "nationalist" message of the Kabyle political leaders, do not recognize themselves in these parties, which are perceived as "Kabyle". Globally, the data shows that the distinction Arabic-speaking/Berber-speaking corresponds well to a clear social and political division.

From identity to political project?

From these social, cultural, and political realities, a number of strong hypotheses can be drawn. The following are notably well established:

- Apart from Kabylia and some secondary Berber-speaking areas (Mzab), the great Algerian, rural and urban masses have only Islamism and Arabism - largely mixed in the collective consciousness - as ideological reference.
- Berber identity and linguistic consciousness is deeply rooted and perennial among the Kabyle population.
- This specific collective identity, independently of its cultural references, is radically opposed to Islamism as well as to Arabism.

¹³ 1990 = local and municipal elections; 1991 = first round of the legislative elections; 1995 = presidential election.

¹⁴ S. Chaker: "La voix étroite: La revendication berbère entre culture et politique" (A narrow path: the Berber claim between culture and politics"), *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, XXVIII, 1988.

¹⁵ Details on the results of this election (particularly geographical ones) were published in the Algerian press during those elections. For the legislative elections (December 1991), see *El-Watan* of Wednesday, January 8, 1992 or J. Fontaines, "Les élections législatives algériennes : résultats du premier tour...", *Monde arabe, Maghreb-Machrek*, 135, 1992, p. 155-165

¹⁶ RCD won 80% of the votes in the entire Kabylia. Its score elsewhere, including the other Berber-speaking regions was very low.

- Political organizations like FFS and RCD are not able to go beyond their Kabyle anchorage in any significant manner, and are not capable therefore, of bringing forth any alternative that has a national character.

All of these facts confirm the existence of a *potential* fracture line around the “Berber question”. Of course, the potential for rupture does not mean an automatic realization. For this hypothesis to be verified, it will be necessary for certain conditions not yet guaranteed to be realized: in particular, a definite failure of the “Kabyle” parties’ nationalistic projects, and/or a possible compromise between the government and the Islamists who would completely marginalize Kabylia. However, such scenario may not be far from taking place any more.

Is integration possible?

Out of intellectual objectivity, at least, one could not dismiss without a serious examination the possibility of integration: Couldn’t the “Berber question” be neutralized by the Algerian government through certain concessions, such as recognition within the educational framework for instance? Wouldn’t then the recent governmental measures for the integration of the Berber language be the first steps of such an evolution? The recent developments are dubious since they are characterized by the same spirit of dilution and manipulation. Moreover, the government's approach appears to be opportunistic and changing. As seen before, the opening towards the issue was very small, unplanned, and was given no significant resources: The introduction of Berber did not go beyond an improvised and optional teaching and was not sanctioned by any legal means. This indeed does not meet the demands which have mobilized the Kabyle population for more than fifteen years. A true integration of the “Berber question” could only be made with the recognition of Berber as the country’s second national language and that of the linguistic specificity of the Berber-speaking areas. Consequently, there remains a doubt that the military in power and the political system in place, all known for their attachment to the Arabness of Algeria, would take this path. This was clearly confirmed by the last constitutional amendment and the law on the generalization of the use of Arabic.

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In final analysis, the social and cultural realities of Algeria, the basic ideological data, as well as the general political situation are in fact working to increase the tensions: It is hard to see how a regime (and an Islamic opposition) who, up till now has been incapable of handling the contradictions of society other than by manipulation, repression and violence, could miraculously find a harmonious and satisfactory solution for the populations living with this hope.

In other words, if the project of “domestication” can in fact achieve some occasional successes and find certain relays among the Berber activists, it certainly will not find it easy or cheap to transform the “Berber lion” into a “circus animal”.

Symbols and Abbreviations:

- APN = National People's Assembly (Assemblée populaire nationale).
- ENAG = National Company for Graphic Arts (Entreprise nationale des arts graphiques). This state-owned publishing company is an offshoot of the former national monopoly "SNED".
- ENTV = National Television Company (Entreprise Nationale de Television).
- FFS = Socialist Forces Front (Front des Forces Socialistes). An opposition party based in Kabylia founded in 1963 par H. Aït-Ahmed.
- FIS= Islamic Salvation Front (Front islamique du salut), radical Islamists' party.
- FLN = National Liberation Front (Front de libération nationale), unique party which ruled Algeria from 1962 to 1989.
- HCA = High Commission for Amazighness (Berberness) (Haut Commissariat à l'Amazighité).
- MCB = Berber Cultural Movement (Mouvement culturel berbère), a non-political gathering of associations and individuals who defend the Berber claims.
- RCD = Rally for Culture and Democracy (Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie), a party with "Berberist" base, founded February 1989 and led by S. Sadi.

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