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AMDYAZ, THE WANDERING BARD OF BERBER POETRY

par
Michaël Peyron

The purpose of this talk is to introduce you to a particular aspect of *amaziy* poetry, and possibly its noblest form, that is, bardic poetry. This tradition, linked to agro-pastoralist *tamaziyt*-speaking communities, still thrives in the eastern High Atlas, chiefly around the historically famous religious centre of Zawit Sidi H'amza, south of Jbel 'Ayyashi, and among the nearby Ayt Sliman (Ayt Yah'ya) of the T'ar'art valley, although bards are also to be found in Ayt Murghad, Ayt H'adiddu and Ayt 'Atta, or even closer to home in the Azrou area. My talk is based on information obtained both from data personally collected in the field and material stored in archives, together with the result of previously published research¹.

This kind of poet is generally referred to as *amlyaz*, or *amdyaz* (pl. *imdayzn*). He is, by definition a poorly-clad wanderer, after the ancient Sufi tradition, and likewise, his art places him in constant communion with the Almighty. Criticized by some Moroccans as a thinly-disguised beggar, the *amdyaz* nonetheless enjoys considerable power, as he has received from God, or a local saint, the gift of fluent speech. With his sharp tongue, for which he constantly craves inspiration, he can readily make or break reputations. Nor is he merely an uncouth, unlettered, country bumpkin. His ability to memorize lengthy poems, wielding elegant, well-constructed formulae, not to mention the sheer beauty of most of his verse, places him fairly and squarely in the category of "rural intellectual"², apart from providing his work with an undeniable "literary" quality.

1. Throughout the period 1973-1992, I travelled extensively in the area in question collecting numerous poetic items on tape, most of which were decoded with the help of Rkia Montassir from Zawit ech-Chikh. This was supplemented by further material stored in the Roux Archive, IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence, to which Claude Brenier-Estrine, library supervisor, facilitated access; for which thanks.

2. Not my phrase; actually coined by H. Jouad, «Prédicateurs profanes au Maghreb», *RMMM*, 51, 1989-1.

From late spring to early autumn he tours highland areas, helping with the harvest, and counting on the traditional kind of hospitality he expects to meet with along the way. In exchange, he and his fellows give recitals of classic *amaziɣ* poetry, especially the genres *izlan* and *timawayin*, which figure in his repertoire, and which include “praise songs” to honour the generous host of the moment. However, as one great bard told a French researcher at the beginning of the century, “our job is to advise people / *da ntweçça midden*”³. Indeed, in his ballads (*timdyazin*), he acts as the conscience of the Middle-Atlas Berber community, either relating famous historical events, or criticising the profligacy of modern times in which corruption, deceit, and other forms of Godlessness stalk the land, all the while exhorting his fellow-countrymen to follow the straight and narrow path of a virtuous life. A ballad refrain will frequently contain some potent reminder of this, such as: “*a bunadem, ur tyid xes ašafar axatar!* / O son of Adam, you are naught but a great unbeliever!”⁴. Or else it will contain a somewhat philosophical acceptance of the present unhappy state of things:

Mayd as ttinix dyi? ssaet ettx, ay ijebbalin, ur t zedil!

What can I say now? O mountaineers, evil are the present times!⁵

That today’s troubled times provide him with much material there is little doubt. The most superficial discourse analysis reveals a whole chain of evils which are vigorously denounced, typical examples mentioning: “the putrefaction of cities / *uxemmuj n temdinin*”, near which are to be found “streams clogged with rotting corpses / *wasif ixemj illa wksum unettin*”⁶. The reader is amazed at the wealth of the lexicon employed when it comes to castigating the errings of humanity. The catalogue of choice ephiphets will include “bastard / *aneɣdim*”, “lunatic / *ah’yud*”, “wretch / *amxib*”, “vile creature / *ameddallu*”, “pauper / *amzlude*”, “lies / *tih’ellal*”, “treachery / *lyedr*”, “arbitrary / *derreɛ*”, “favouritism / *tudmawin*”, “evil / *lbla*”, and many more.

One of the most troubling aspects of changing times is that strict observance of religion becomes an early casualty. This fact was observed by an *amdyaz* during the first phase of the French conquest: “When the moslem prays not, he has done with his faith! *mš ur da ytz’alla wryaz anslem ur ili ddir!*”⁷. More recently, while admitting his own waywardness in this respect, another troubadour comes to a similar conclusion:

Usar zzullix g id, usar zzullix s wass,

inselmen da ttemmeɣdarr ur diysn ili lamin!

3. Note to *tamdyazt n ttuh’id I*; A. Roux, quoting chikh Nbarç of Tazruft, § 53.3.

4. *Tamdyazt*, n° 3, chikh Lisiwr, Midelt, autumn 1983.

5. *Tamdyazt*, Anefgu, may 1988.

6. *Tamdyazt* 1, chikh Lisiwr, Midelt, autumn 1983.

7. *Tamdyazt*, Ayt Ndir, El Hajeb, 1914-18, verse n° 5, § 59.2, Roux Archive.

I no longer pray night and day,
moslems have abandoned their faith, when they do each other betray!⁸

Understandably, the unsettled nature of the modern era has a predictably adverse effect on the bard's philosophy with its distinctly *blasé*, disenchanted view on life:

*wa tya tatfi n ddunit am unna yetssan
h'alawa tsul ad itteddu tafi n imi.*

The savour of life is like unto the man who, having
eaten candy, tastes not its sweetness,

*waxxa llant ššehwat i wulawn ur nfrih'
da ttinix may d yix ddix anšawer ša*

Though content we feel not happy,
what can I do, to whom may I turn for guidance?⁹

The following extracts from give some idea of the wretchedness of a wandering bard's existence:

εawdat ay imi nw, bedε i d ix f i lqisat (refrain)

O my mouth, say what you must, remind me of what happened.

*εeddant lmejriyat anna da ytekkān γifi!
tenna yzemmēm γifi rebbi da t nawed s idarr,*

Events aplenty have I witnessed at first hand,
as I wandered across the face of God's land.

*usix ša a leεwin, i muna kkix d i leεwari.
wa dix s amazir iferd ad ur γifnēx ilin.*

With meagre provisions and a handful of coins did journey
through the hills,
and countryside, all alone with never a companion to cheer me.

*nnix asen awd yukk ad ur i id ittrah' γel imi
nnix d aynna tsarefd a ditxelles d assa*

Not a single word did I utter, nor did sound escape my mouth,
on meeting someone, did think: "This one will provide for me!"

*iyrix sa leh'sab nettmeε idd is ta nezra ša
rebbi yzemmēm tirra ns yaru γifnēx...*

Thus did greedily calculate whenever mortal did see,
but God carefully notes all that concerns me...¹⁰

8. Chikh Lisiwr, *ihid*.

9. *Tamdyazt* 3, chikh Lisiwr, Midelt, autumn 1983.

10. Fragment 1, *tamdyazt*, man's voice, Asaka, Ayt Yah'ya, winter 1984-85.

The errant bard is obviously very much on his own, though an important *chikh* will have a full retinue of piper (*bu çanim*) and drum-wielding apprentices (*ireddadn*). The theme of loneliness, however, is prevalent, not to mention the all-abiding anxiety as to where the next meal is coming from.

*mur nnli yxf d a namz'a nkessa t alliy nya ah'yud
adjj ad iyi teštāb at tmenqarx i ddunit.*

Could I my brains remove, and become crazy,
across the world would rove, such is my destiny.

*Ur esiqx iberdan ih'man uzaçar d waman,
d usemmid, aynna y illa wzwu kkan d çifi.*

Do dislike the hot trails of the plains, even less
water and bitter cold, or winds which pierce me.¹¹

When the bard sets forth on his travels, he is careful to invoke God's assistance and guidance along the way, as we can see from the following example :

*bdix s, a sidi ya rebbi, jud çuri,
illa çurš wenna rix bla tudmawin!*

'Tis in your name that I start, O Lord Almighty,
your love is straightforward and unconditional!

*a way, a rebbi ya luh'id, aš nezzur i ferrej çifi!
swa g ddunit ula lixra as inn afeç dati.*

O one God that be before all others, help me!
Guide my feet both in this world and in the hereafter.

*a wa, çet't'emnu amergul inw i wbrid an igulu,
derreç issun, a sidi eli bennasr, beddati.*

Safely may I tread the trail and reach my destination,
I come to you, patron saint of hunters, be my salvation!¹²

You will have noticed by now that the notion of path (*abrid*) is closely linked to the bard's existence, both in its literal sense, as the way which he follows, and, also figuratively, as the code of moral conduct he must adhere to. This is borne out by numerous examples :

*nekka d yan ubrid ur djjin t annix i/
selliwn imezzyan lla tyabbayn a/*

One path only do I travel, I see not the/
small, sharp stones that cut my feet.¹³

11. Verses 2 & 14, *tamdyazt* XII, El Hajeb, 1914-18, § 53.3, Roux Archive.

12. *Tamdyazt*, Anefçu, May 1988 + *tayffart* I, Ayt Yah'ya, § 57.1.4, Roux Archive.

13. *Tamdyazt* 2, *chikh* Lisiwr, autumn 1983 & *tamdyazt* by Yamina Darqawi, Asaka, Ayt Yah'ya, winter 1984-85.

Or again :

*ur iz'il ɣas aney adar dat udar,
uma bu ysurfen qqen ad yaɣasal.*

Put one foot in front of t'other, there's nothing finer,
but if you stride, be humble lest you take a tumble.

*unna d iʃfan ixɤ i lejruf is eman,
mš ittuttuy, ur idmiɛ ad ijji, a rebbi!*

O traveller when on a slope you unthinkingly venture,
should you fall, from God may expect no succour.¹⁴

Occasionally, a chance meeting with some beautiful young girl, usually called Aïcha, by introducing a female presence will bring our travel-weary troubadour a welcome, if brief respite. The following example is typical :

*Nekkin ayd iyan umur issaran timizar,
a wa! ufiɣ aɣbalu g tagem eiša yr iberdan.*

A wanderer am I who travels through many lands,
did find Aïcha drawing water from a wayside spring.¹⁵

That the respite is brief will soon be obvious, for these meetings are usually anything but romantic in their consequences, the ill-clad bard usually being rebuffed with angry words such as : “Get thee hence, o ragamuffin! / *a bab n uderbal sussesat inn!*”¹⁶

All this amounts to a single short, oft-heard phrase in the bard's repertory, “heavy is the burden of life / *inɣa yi zzman n ddunit*”, which sums up his existence most adequately. Most direly affected are the poor wretch (*amezlud, lmeskin*), or the shepherd (*ameksa*), social categories with which the bard usually identifies. He is accordingly ever ready to denounce abuse of power or hint of privilege (*tudmawin*), especially in periods of famine (*bu heyyuf*).

In this respect, highland populations have been badly hit by recurrent periods of drought which have affected Morocco in the past twenty years, a theme often touched upon by *indyazn* :

*wenna ɣurs ša lmal, ar ittewh'il ad as d iqqim,
wenna ɣur walu hatin ad immet...
walu n unzar, iqqur aseggwas a...*

He possessor of livestock must fight to preserve it,
the down-and-outer can only lay down and die,
the rains have failed, the year is dry...

14. *Tayffart n tefsutt* XI, chikh Enbarch, Tazruft, 1914-18, Roux Archive.

15. *Tayffart n tefsutt* X, Chikh H'mad u eli, Ayt Sliman (Ayt Yah'ya), § 53.5, Roux Archive.

16. *Tayffart* IV, Ayt Yah'ya, § 57.1.4, Roux Archive.

*idda may d ikerz akk^w ufellah' ur as t ištāb rebbi,
texxa luqt i wryaz ur ilin lmanda tuyla ddunit.*

He who ploughs may lose all, be it God's will,
hard are the times for the unpaid man, life is dear!¹⁷

The poet, however, must take the rough with the smooth and admit, after all, that life in the mountains could be worse :

Wa, h'emdx i rebbi lliy tsikkix s ayt εari!

I glorify God since life do spend among mountaineers!¹⁸

Bardic themes are redolent with useful information regarding everyday life, such as the following example :

*A wenna yqqenn imi ns, ur da tegg^wedn i ša,
Ma awal iēddan, ur da yssufuγ γas wahud!*

You need fear nothing if you keep your mouth shut,
numerous words produce naught but mud!¹⁹

Though not specialized in love poetry, such themes are not totally absent from their work, the emphasis, however, understandably being on the pedagogical aspect :

*a bu taber n tutmin, z'z'ant izγuran g ul
inw, ur i tbadd a t't'alb ak ttemh'un!*

Infatuation with women gnaws at my heart,
rescue me from their magic power, o fkih!

*nedda diq qer t't'alb, nenna idd lēalim,
nnix as : "yat ax sil leh'ruz, i yat šrad".*

Did consult one famous for his learnedness, a fkih,
asked him to prepare for me magic charms three.

innay anx : "i tawla, ibad dix lšad" ;

innay anx : "i tayri, wr aš badr ša!"

"For fever", said he, "charms are useful" ;

"for love, however, are naught but useless!"²⁰

Above all, the bard warns his fellows not to become ensnared by beauty's false charms, a fate which befalls many an unwary wanderer :

*zzin am wasif nna yssurudn imedwan,
iga yam wanu ig taxerrariyt, ggwedγas.*

17. *Tamdyazt* 6, chikh Lisiwr, Midelt, autumn 1983.

18. *Tamdyazt*, 2nd fragment, man's voice, Asaka, Ayt Yah'ya, winter 1984-85.

19. *Tamdyazt n ttuh'id*, chikh Nbarch of Tazruft, El Hajeb, 1914-18, § 53.3 Roux Archive.

20. *Tayffart n tefsutt* XI, chikh Nbarch of Tazruft, § 53.5, Roux Archive.

Beauty is like the stream which feeds lakes,
but like the deep well can be source of danger.

*wa! zzin am uγerda i rebēin uxbu ayd llan,
unnay as neqgen dav ikk ur issin!*

Beauty is like the rat with forty holes,
block one of them, he escapes through another.²¹

He likewise warns his fellows that the charms of courtesanes do not come cheap, a fact most men have learned to their cost since the earliest times:

*a bubbu iderrefn! unna t iran ar sefsaden,
a wa, ur iqqim bla tarryalin al*

He who covets hidden breasts shall corrupt himself,
in life it's a case of nothin' for nothin'!²²

A part from *tiyffrin* dealing with moral subjects, a large section is devoted to important events. The period of French military conquest obviously gave rise to numerous epic, ballad-style poems, among which are a *tayffart*, by chikh 'Assu of Ayt Sliman, dating back to 1902-1903 and containing references to the Rogui Bu Hmara; a *tamyazt* called *ti n dzuggwart*, dealing with the battle of Boudenib (1908), not to mention numerous others poems, some short, some long, on various episodes of the subsequent campaigns: the battle of Ayt Yaqoub, the siege of Tazigzaout, the failure of resistance leaders Moha u Saïd and Moha ou Hammu to capitalize on early successes at Lqsiba and El Herri, not to mention several poems on the aftermath of defeat and imposition of French rule²³.

*iša yanx d urumiy iγenša war idiwan;
iša yanx d ssekkwr, isemxalaf ddunit!*

The Christian has infected us with a fatal disease,
bringing us sugar and tea, causing strife among men!²⁴

The fact that the major cities of the land, Meknes and Fas, have been occupied by the invader heighten this impression of national disaster:

*a h'emriya! a dar dbibaγ! a lmexzen immut!
lla ssaran inçraniyn i wr da tegg^wedn adu.*

O red city, o Dar Debibagh! gone is the seat of authority!
The Christian struts through our streets with impunity.

*a nall i fas, ad aš alleγ, a mešnas! ay aguray!
a çfru! a tabadut! han irumin jlan aγ!*

21. *Tayffart* IV & V, U-Chrif, Ayt Yah'ya, § 57.1.4, Roux Archive.

22. *Ibid.*, U-Chrif.

23. *Cf.* Documents contained in Roux Archive, Aix-en-Provence.

24. *Tayffart n ssix muh'and aejmi*, Meknes, 1914-24, § 53.5, Roux Archive.

Let us weep over the fate of our towns ; Fas, Meknes, Agourāï,
Sefrou and Tabadout ! Indeed the roumis have caused our downfall !²⁵

More recent efforts in this field include ballads on the Arab-Israïli conflict, on Mrs Golda Meir, Saddam Hussein and other topical characters and events. A favourite subject, rather naturally, is the prevalent state of affairs in the country, usually visualized from a highly pessimistic angle :

..... *matta zzman anna*
inn as walu nγuri lahl mmuten a/
..... what strange times we are living in !
A man will say : “Dead are my parents
djjan ax d ny(a) aγrib ixub wadu nw a/
wenna ylan ixf issen may d qqisx a/
They have left me alone and unhappy !
The intelligent man will know of what I speak.
idda lh'eqq ur yufi may d isawl a/
tih'ellal d lbat't'el a γer da tdeyyazen a/
Gone is justice, people no more mention it,
Lies and unfairness have discredited it.²⁶

Times are hard and indebtedness is a major problem as the bard reminds us :

samh'iyi ma eddan y imerwasn, a wa,
wr zeqqilx awd yiwt l lmeziyt, a wa!
Forgiveness do implore for my debts,
am not aware that I have sinned in this respect !²⁷

So the bards carry on with their ungrateful task, acting as the conscience of the Amazigh community. If their numbers have shrunk somewhat in their original homeland situated deep in the Atlas mountains among the Ayt Yah'ya, strangely enough, closer to the big cities of the Gharb, in El Hajeb and Azrou they still make their voices heard.

MICHAËL PEYRON

25. Anonymous *tayffart*, Meknes 1914-1924, § 53.3. Roux Archive. This is a most revealing piece, showing as it does, contrary to popular misconceptions and notional urban/rural dichotomy, that *imaziγn* do care for the big cities of their country, including Fas, of all places!

26. *Tamdyazt tis snat*, chikh Lisiwr, Midelt, autumn 1983.

27. *Tamdyazt* sung by Mohammed Rwishā, Lqsiba, March 1984.