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Middle Atlas Berber Poetry

The Atlas mountains of Morocco constitute a vast, varied and complex highland mass, one of the most extensive in Africa – also, one of the most lived in. Its Berber inhabitants, known among themselves as *imazighen*, are a thrifty, hardy and highly likeable people. Having often visited and stayed with these mountaineers, and taught myself *tamazight*, or Berber, I have endeavoured, over the years, to collect a comprehensive sample of their oral literature, including their poetry.

The purpose of this article is to give a brief introduction to the poetic production of a linguistic area embracing most of the Middle Atlas, together with a chunk of the Eastern High Atlas. This region contains some of the highest summits in Morocco, snow-capped from October to May, including Jbel el 'Ayyachi (3727m), Ma'asker (3265m) and Bu Iblan (3192m). There are also vast plateaux, frequented every summer by transhumant shepherds with tents, deep gorges and mercurial torrents fed by snow-melt. The best grazing is on upland meadows called *ilmuten*, often in the vicinity of pristine, monkey-haunted cedar forests. After a short, hot summer the herdsman and their charges regain either fortified villages, called *igherman*, or semi-dispersed village clusters, where other activities, chiefly agriculture and woodcutting, are concentrated. Once the harvest is in, there are collective marriage ceremonies (*timghriwin*), after which all and sundry hunker down to see the winter through. Owing to centuries of abuse and misuse, however, with overgrazing, 'slash and burn', and a high soil erosion factor, coupled with the effects of a semi-arid, intensely continental climate, entire ecosystems are now under threat. Likewise, given the intrusion of the transistor radio, television, mopeds, canned goods and plastic, a whole culture is at risk.

Unsurprisingly, life in such a harsh environment tends to be tough. And yet the Berbers bear up bravely in the face of adversity. Attachment to their roots, together with their proverbial resilience in the face of outside interference, has so far guaranteed their survival. Poetry, produced with instrumental accompaniment, singing and dancing, is arguably the most visible feature of their culture. It is also an excellent way of letting off steam. Hence, apart from set occasions such as weddings, circumcisions, return from pilgrimage and official, or national, celebrations, Middle Atlas Berbers organise several impromptu song-and-dance sessions throughout the year. Participants are members of the village youth association, or *l'amt*, and things get under way on the village square after dark on a moonlit night, to the accompaniment of drum and fiddle or lute. Dancing usually takes

place near a fire, useful for tightening up the skin of a drum, and young girls, sometimes reinforced by widows and divorced women, join in. The most widespread form is known as *ahidus*, with the dancers swaying, side-stepping, hand-clapping in line. The corpus of songs consists mostly of unrhymed couplets, called *izlan*, featuring assonance and alliteration.

Apart from the dancing, attention is mainly focused on the skill, or otherwise, demonstrated by the chief singer, or improviser (*anechhad*) who is supposed to give a flawless performance, especially if a rival bard is on the scene. The dancers are expected to provide back-up vocals throughout, which makes the whole experience a somewhat exhausting one. Despite close proximity of members of the opposite sex, participants are honour bound to respect certain rules of propriety. Although the singing invariably highlights the theme of spurned or unrequited love, the highly coded language remains essentially correct despite oblique allusions to sex, usually by means of symbols known to the community but unintelligible to outsiders. Furthermore, the dimension conjured up by these sung poems is both imaginary and idealised, the moral being that, through dancing and singing about these matters, participants can work off a possible surfeit of sexual frustration.

The main preoccupation in these songs is to honour the tryst with one's lover who lives far away, on the other side of the hill. The meeting-place will be in the densely-wooded area (*'ari*), or close to the mountain peaks which are constantly referred to and perceived as the ideal love-making environment. Apart from parents or rivals, the usual factors that thwart lovers are natural phenomena such as snowfall, a river in spate, or sheer physical distance. Readers will observe how down-to-earth some couplets are, contrasting with slightly more sophisticated efforts, running to several hemistiches, when lovers' quarrels and final partings are evoked. Throughout this poetry there runs a passionate streak, a blind adherence to the code of honour, to the given word, that is one of the main aspects of the Berbers' make-up.

FURTHER READING

Michael Peyron, *Great Atlas Traverse, Morocco*, 2 volumes.
West Col Productions, 1989/90.

On Middle Atlas Berber poetry:

Michael Peyron, "*Isaffen Ghbanin*" (*Rivières Profondes*).
Wallada, Casablanca, 1994.

Middle Atlas Berber poetry

collected and translated by Michael Peyron between 1981 and 1991

Weep not! Snow has fallen in the hills,
The passes are closed; your lover cannot travel!

Greetings lofty mountain, and you,
o countenances sweet!
On this day was written that we were to meet!

Come and rest in the shade, let me quench your thirst,
Shelter by my side from the sun's burning rays,
Comfort and solace will I provide, whatever the price!

O sage, read well your book of magic arts,
Charge the highest fee, but of this passion rid me!
Bow down, o mountain, may you through a miracle
Become a plain, that my beloved I may see again!

Could I but enter the forest,
In the company of wild beasts,
And there sojourn with my beloved,
Safely hidden from prying eyes!

Now you cloak me in the thickest of vapours,
now the clouds
Do float away; o mist, I am indeed your mountain!

Should you hear overhead the raven's croak,
Will be but me reminding you, o beloved,
Of the promise that you failed to keep!

Mother, by the mountains I do swear: sleep I cannot!
 By all that is Holy, God has inflicted upon me
 an incurable disease!
 Had a bullet wounded me, a remedy would find;
 Had a loved one died, consolation would seek
 through weeping;
 My beloved, however, did slightly ignore me!

* * *

Be downcast, o traitorous eyes,
 You who did delude my heart!
 Should the westerlies blow,
 My tent's crossbeam would tremble!
 Have I strength to climb the hill
 Beyond which sojourns my sweetheart?
 Would that she were beside me,
 On this our parting day!

* * *

Like the venerable eagle,
 Would that I could wheel aloft on broad pinions;
 Yet my strength fails me,
 My heart yearns for the topmost peaks!

* * *

Sit down and gaze at the night sky,
 Until the stars do emerge;
 He whom you seek exists not!

* * *

Have long neglected to replenish my foothill store-house,
 Who knows when the snows will force me to seek
 refuge there!

* * *

Life is like unto a piece of carrion!
 God gave it the semblance of a gazelle grazing
 on the mountainslope;
 Down into the plain the hunter pursues her,
 And when his time is come, Fate whisks him away!