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Representations of the Berber Tongue and Its Circulation in Medieval Historical Chronicles

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Abstract

This study tackles the intricate methodological problematic of the Berber tongue's transition from its orally circulated sphere into the scriptural molds of the Arabic language within medieval Maghribi historical sources. Rather than confine itself to a statistical inventory of Amazigh lexemes, the research adopts an analytical approach that scrutinizes the very mechanisms of historiographical writing—namely translation, Arabization, and the domestication of terminology—aiming to uncover the cultural underpinnings and methodological controls that shaped the formulation of this linguistic heritage within the written textual tradition.

The findings reveal that the Berber tongue was far more than a daily communicative tool; it evolved into a potent ideological channel for shaping and localizing alternative religious discourses, and the study further highlights the phenomenon of linguistic alternation between the Masmūda and Zanāta dialects, a shift that mirrors broader transformations in political centres of gravity.

Keywords: Linguistic question; Medieval Maghrib; Berber tongue; Historiography; Orality and scripturalization.

1. Introduction

The linguistic question in the space of the Islamic Maghrib during the medieval period falls within one of the most intellectually fertile and methodologically contentious fields of knowledge, given the nature of the cultural and ethnic diversity that has characterized the population of the Maghrib throughout its history. While the Arabic language dominated the cognitive landscape as the sole official tool for chancery documentation, jurisprudential codification, and literary discourse, the Berber tongue remained ever-present in the communicative sphere as the language of daily life, tribal communication, and even a vehicle for religious guidance and preaching at decisive political and historical junctures led by local states and emirates during this medieval phase. However, this linguistic duality—between a circulating oral reality and a dominant written system—has produced a complex methodological impasse for researchers. The Berber tongue remained confined to orality, while its recording and documentation came through a historical corpus written in a different script: the Arabic alphabet.

This compels us to pose the following question: How did medieval historiographical thought interact with the constraints of transitioning the Berber tongue from its authentic oral sphere to the molds of Arabic script?

And what were the mechanisms of translation, Arabization, and integration of Amazigh terms that historians adopted within the textual structure of their chronicles?

Addressing this question does not stop at the boundaries of descriptive statistical observation of words or phrases appearing in texts; rather, it goes further to examine the mechanisms of historical writing itself, questioning its methodological capacity to absorb the circulating oral phenomenon and domesticate it within the written heritage text. This, in turn, can reveal the cultural backgrounds and methodological controls that governed the formulation of the Berber tongue.

2. Characterizing the Berber Tongue in Eastern and Local Informative Sources

The reading of historical texts from the medieval period that touched upon the history of Berber elements occasionally and faintly pointed to the nature of the local linguistic heritage of the Maghrib as a means of communication among its various populations. However, the Eastern historical sources at our disposal did not pay sufficient attention to grasping the reality of this linguistic heritage. Their discussion of it occurred within the context of their clear interest in the origins of these elements newly integrated into the orbit of Islamic civilization.

The Eastern narrative did not go beyond affirming the characterization of the Berber tongue with three terms: "ar-ratāna" (barbarous speech), "al-barbara" (incoherent jabber), and "al-ʿujma" (non-Arabic speech, unintelligibility). The texts of Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 257 AH/871 CE)[1], al-Balādhurī (d. 302 AH/915 CE), al-Ṭabarī (d. 311 AH/923 CE), al-Masʿūdī (d. 346 AH/956 CE), and even later texts such as those of Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630 AH/1233 CE), al-Nuwayrī (d. 732 AH/1333 CE), and al-Qalqashandī (d. 821 AH/1418 CE), suffice as examples. They did not provide us with a clear perception of the nature of the Berber tongue, remaining confined in their content to the meaning of "a mixture of incomprehensible sounds."[2] As for "al-ʿujma," it falls under the Arab conceptualization of the linguistic environment: all peoples speaking a language other than Arabic, such as Goths, Syriacs, Persians, Romans, and Berbers, were designated as "al-ʿajam" (non-Arabs). Yet, it is evident that these epithets, despite their inadequacy in analyzing and clarifying the nature of the Berber tongue, were not rejected in local informative texts. Indeed, Maghribi historiography throughout the medieval period remained captive to the Eastern conception, even adopting these characterizations, such as "al-Barbariyya" (Berberness)[3], "al-lisān al-barbarī" (the Berber tongue)[4], "aʿjamī al-lisān" (non-Arabic speaking)[5], "shadīd al-ʿujma" (extremely unintelligible)[6], "ar-ratāna," "raṭāna al-Barbar" (Berber gibberish) [7], and "ʿūj al-alsun" (crookedness of tongues)[8]. In this context, Ibn Khaldūn devoted a separate chapter in his work *al-ʿUmrān* (The Muqaddimah)[9] to discussing the issue of *al-ʿujma* found in the tongue of the Berber people and others, and their inability to acquire the faculty of the Arabic tongue.

However, al-Baydhaq (6th c. AH/12th c. CE) constituted an exceptional case in this period, uniquely employing a description different from what was common for the Berber tongue in Maghribi informative sources. He used the term "al-lisān al-gharbī" (the Western tongue) on eight occasions, observed in his two books, *Akhbār al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart*[10] and *al-Muqtabas*[11]. It appears that this designates the language of the West, i.e., the dominant language in the Maghrib region according to the Maghribis and Andalusians. In other words, the criterion al-Baydhaq adopted was a geographical one, based essentially on the spatial domain where this tongue was prevalent. Notably, he did not include any of the other epithets in his writings. This description was transmitted from him by Ibn al-Qaṭṭān in his book *Naẓm al-Jumān*[12].

3. The Berber Tongue and the Formation of Alternative Religious Discourse in Areas of Non-Arabic Speech ('Ujma) in the Medieval Maghrib

It is impossible to approach the linguistic reality of the Islamic Maghrib during the medieval period in isolation from the region's complex geographical and topographical nature, which decisively contributed to shaping its human and linguistic map. The "Berber tongue" was never a unified expressive pattern or a rigid

linguistic mold; rather, it was a living embodiment of a diverse geographical environment extending from the desert oases and high mountains to the coastal areas. This necessarily resulted in notable dialectal diversity and distinct linguistic branches that imposed themselves on the daily communicative reality of the Maghrib's inhabitants. Hence, observing the manifestations of this diversity and deconstructing the internal variations of the Berber tongue does not merely reflect the vitality of this oral heritage and its ability to adapt to spatial fragmentation; it also reveals the methodological boundaries faced by medieval historians attempting to reduce this dynamic linguistic multiplicity and frame it in writing.

In the context of tracing the mechanisms of forming alternative religious discourse and localizing it within communities of non-Arabic speakers in the medieval Maghrib, local informative chronicles provide exceptional texts that reveal the depth of the ideological utilization of Berber linguistic diversity. The text of the geographer Abū ʿUbayd al-Bakrī (d. 487 AH/1094 CE) in his book *al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik* emerges as one of the earliest and most reliable textual testimonies. He does not stop at observing linguistic diversity; he presents highly significant informative material on how the linguistic specificity of the "Barghawāṭa confederation" was exploited as a communicative channel for instilling a new religious doctrine among its followers. By adapting the local tongue and formulating legitimate synonyms in Berber, these prophetic movements succeeded in overcoming the obstacle of non-Arabic speech ('ujma), transforming dialectal diversity from a mere geographical trait into an instrument for producing an alternative doctrinal legitimacy that attracted the tribes under the banner of this confederation.

Al-Bakrī explicitly states that the prophet Ṣāliḥ ibn Ṭarīf had composed a Qur'an for his Barghawāṭa followers to be recited in their own tongue[13]. For our research topic, the merit of al-Bakrī's narration becomes even more evident in his transmission of the speech of the envoy of the Barghawāṭa leader—namely Abū Ṣāliḥ Zamūr ibn Mūsā al-Barghawāṭī—who addressed the Umayyad Caliph in al-Andalus, al-Ḥakam al-Mustanṣir in Cordoba, in the Berber tongue. The significance of this episode is heightened by the presence of an interpreter from the "Masṭāsa" tribe, Abū Mūsā ʿĪsā ibn Dāwūd ibn ʿAshr al-Masṭāsī, who translated Zamūrī's speech from Berber into Arabic for the Umayyad ruler. Al-Bakrī also recorded a significant number of phrases uttered by Zamūrī in Berber, alongside their Arabic meanings, including the opening verses of the "Sūrat Ayyūb," which served as the *Fātiḥa* (opening) of the Qur'an composed by Ṣāliḥ ibn Ṭarīf[14]. This phenomenon extends to the "Ghumāra" tribe in the land of "Nukūr," near "Tīṭāwān" in the northern Maghrib al-Aqṣā, where Ḥamīm al-Muftarī also prophesied. Al-Bakrī's narrative confirms that he, too, composed a Qur'an for his followers in their own language, with al-Bakrī recording translated texts in his *Masālik*[15].

Through the data provided by al-Bakrī regarding the composition of a Qur'an in the Berber language spoken among the followers, he reveals the close connection between the Berber linguistic heritage and the prophetic phenomenon that the Maghrib experienced. On the other hand, his historical texts unveil the circulation of the Berber tongue among the various tribes involved in this phenomenon, in stark contrast to the near-total absence of the Arabic tongue. However, the persistent question—difficult to answer definitively due to insufficient historical data—remains: Were these religious texts composed in Berber merely transmitted orally among the followers, or did they also exist in written form?

4. The Presence of the Masmūda Tongue in the Almohad Chronicle: From Oral Pattern to Modest Written Documentation

It seems that discussing the attempt to compose a Qur'an in the Berber language and teach it, a phenomenon predating the 5th/11th century, inevitably leads us to a similar case from the early 6th/12th century, albeit with some variations in fundamental aspects. Here, I refer to the case of the Berber Masmūda tribe, which also witnessed a process of indoctrinating followers in the Berber tongue. However, this time it did not concern a sacred Quranic text but rather a set of religious teachings and guidelines proclaimed by the

Almohad Mahdī, al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart, as a reformist project aimed primarily at undermining the Almoravids. Consequently, the informative texts covering the beginnings of the Almohad movement confirm that al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart taught his followers the call to monotheism in the Berber tongue[16].

From this date onwards, we observe the ascendance of the Berber tongue's status, particularly the Masmūda dialect, which was further reinforced when the new rulers of Marrakesh implemented a highly significant measure affecting, for the first time, speakers of the Masmūda Berber tongue. This involved reserving the office of preaching (*khuṭba*) and leading prayers (*imāma*) in the mosque for those who had memorized the profession of monotheism (*al-tawḥīd*) in the Berber tongue, excluding others[17] ; Indeed, the appointment of mosque preachers in the Almohad state was based on this criterion. The list of preachers who officiated at the Mosque of Fez, as provided by Ibn Abī al-Zaraʿ al-Fāsī (d. 726 AH/1326 CE) in *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*, suffices to illustrate this. The essential condition was the use of the Berber tongue, including figures like the jurist ʿAlī ibn ʿAṭiyya (d. 558 AH/1163 CE), who delivered his first sermon at the al-Qarawiyyīn Mosque in 540 AH/1145 CE, and the jurist Yaskur ibn Mūsā al-Jūrā'ī (d. 572 AH/1176 CE), of whom Ibn Abī al-Zaraʿ said he was "non-Arabic speaking (*aʿjamī al-lisān*) and extremely unintelligible (*shadīd al-ʿujma*)"[18]. Due to this unintelligibility, he would lead the prayer but not preach, appointing someone else to deliver the sermon on his behalf. This practice of professing monotheism in Berber appears to have continued among the Masmūda until at least the first half of the 8th/14th century[19].

Based on this, it is unsurprising that a visitor to the Almohad court, the Andalusian scholar Abū Marwān ibn Zuhr, upon arriving in Marrakesh, the seat of the state, found people conversing in the Masmūda tongue at the court, which sparked in him a desire to learn it. This anecdote is recorded by Ibn Marzūq (d. 781 AH/1379 CE) in his *Musnad*[20].

In the same context, the dynamics of recording the Masmūda Berber tongue within the Almohad informative corpus is confirmed through the mechanism of textual fixation of spoken phrases, followed by their direct translation into Arabic. This is a clear phenomenon notably prominent in the works of the historian al-Baydhaq, particularly in his two books, *al-Muqtabas min Kitāb al-Ansāb* and *Akhbār al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart.* We have counted over 13 phrases that were transcribed phonetically in Arabic script while preserving their Berber pronunciation. This reflects an ideological and functional desire to record the "oral" and codify it within the Almohad cultural structure. These phrases are mostly attributed to al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart—a finding justified by al-Baydhaq's status as an eyewitness and his close political ties, being a close companion of the Mahdī and enjoying favor within the early Almohad circles. The table below deconstructs the structure of those phrases with their Berber pronunciation, juxtaposed with their semantic equivalents in Arabic as provided by al-Baydhaq.

Phrase in the Berber Tongue	Speaker	Meaning in Arabic	Source
Āwūmurn mallūlīnīn an sūs ādāwun nāk	al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart	The path belongs to the Muslims, yet you obstruct it; this is not permissible in Islamic law.	*Akhbār al-Mahdī*, p. 26
Abū Marwān dīzm yalūlān tanbudūt wa-ryūkīl arṣāṣ	al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart	Words describing the Mahdī's characterization of one of his followers.	*al-Muqtabas*, p. 41
Malūl an wūh laghū	al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart	Words from the Mahdī describing one of his followers as eloquently spontaneous, capable of writing in Syriac, symbols, etc.	*al-Muqtabas*, pp. 41-42
Yarūl al-ḥaqq āy al-bāṭil ar dās yaksham afrī ayāghnā an al-bāṭil mak flās yafgh al-ḥaqq yāwut ard ak yashīgh ādān ans ītz warīn nāldūnīt	al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart	Words addressed to the Almoravids, describing them as falsehood and *zarājina* (a disparaging term).	*al-Muqtabas*, pp. 42-43
"Āsāfū"	ʿAbd al-Mu'min ibn ʿAlī	One of the names of the Mahdī.	*Akhbār al-Mahdī*, p. 61
"Ānghzū al-sunnat wārdam nabḍī"	The Almohad army	Uttered in response to their commander ʿAbd al-Mu'min's call to raid.	*Akhbār al-Mahdī*, p. 61
Māzkagh wārāngh tafīsm ngh yūshak wāndā krānghīdūn yisannlakman	ʿAbd al-Mu'min ibn ʿAlī	Words expressing reproach and rebuke towards the Berber tribe of Hintāta.	*al-Muqtabas*, p. 21
"Ātūmart āynū āysk āyyūī", "Yāk yāk Tūmart"	The mother of al-Mahdī	Expresses joy and happiness at the newborn; hence the Mahdī was called Ibn Tūmart.	*al-Muqtabas*, p. 27

This linguistic recording is not exclusive to al-Baydhaq's text; we find its echoes extending through the quotation of Masmūda words in later informative sources, such as Ibn al-Qaṭṭān's *Naẓm al-Jumān*—concerning the words "Asfū" and "Amā Wallal"[21]—and in Ibn Marzūq's *al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, which contains four words: "ībzgdn," "ylbkht," "ūsh," and "Arnū"[22]; as for Ibn Khaldūn's *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*, we find the term "Hintāta"[23].

5. Representations of Linguistic Alternation between Zanāta and Masmūda in Medieval Informative Texts

The textual presence of Berber tongues in the chronicles of the medieval Maghrib is structurally intertwined with shifts in centers of tribal power and waves of political transition. The informative text, including Ibāḍī biographical works[24], was not isolated from the sphere of the ruling dynasty's partisanship (*ʿaṣabiyya*). From this perspective, the transition from Masmūda hegemony to Zanāta ascendancy was not merely a transfer of political control between the 7th and 8th/13th and 14th centuries; it was a dynamic of linguistic alternation that redrew the boundaries of linguistic circulation within the court and within the contemporary historical texts themselves. To the extent that the Masmūda tongue receded textually with the collapse of its political ideology, the Zanāta tongue emerged as an identity and expressive element accompanying the new ruling elite—an alternation whose outlines began to take shape in the language of historians and their terminology.

In this intertwined trajectory, the reign of the Almohad Caliph Idrīs al-Ma'mūn ibn al-Manṣūr (d. 629 AH/1232 CE) seems to have marked the harbingers of change. His retreat from the ideological foundations of Mahdism was not confined to purely doctrinal boundaries; it was accompanied by a series of pivotal measures affecting the state's linguistic structure. Foremost among these was his denial of the practice of establishing doctrines and proclaiming the call to prayer in the Masmūda Berber tongue. This measure provides a decisive indicator of the beginning of the undermining and decline of this tongue's status, at least within the sphere of officialdom and the decaying caliphal court. With the breaking of the Masāmida's power and the disintegration of their political system, the tribal alternative emerged, represented by the Zanāta partisanship, which reshaped the political geography of the Islamic Maghrib. The Marīnids imposed their control over the Maghrib al-Aqṣā, while their cousins, the Zayyānids (Banū ʿAbd al-Wād), founded their state in the Maghrib al-Awsaṭ. This geopolitical shift opened the door wide in informative texts for discussing the "Zanāta tongue" as an expressive force paralleling the dominance of the ruling tribe. This dominance was not monolithic; it was based on a vast and extensive human and tribal reservoir, meticulously detailed by historical sources in their descriptions of the components of this confederation. Owing to their political empowerment in the 7th and 8th/13th and 14th centuries, the Zanāta tongue transitioned from a mere local tribal language to an official communicative tool that imposed its presence and terminology on chroniclers within the nascent courts.

The testimonies of this presence and linguistic distinctiveness of Zanāta do not stop at the ruling courts in urban centers; they extend to field observations by travelers. For instance, al-Ḥājj ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ al-Mudajjan noted in the second half of the 8th/14th century, during his visit to the city of Sabta (Ceuta) and its environs, the linguistic diversity within a single geographical area, highlighting the linguistic specificity of the Zanāta tribes settled there, stating: "In it are the generous tribe of Ghumāra and Zanāta, the people of the non-Arabic languages that resemble not one another"[25]. In a similar historiographical and analytical vein, Ibn Khaldūn grounded his reading of the social and tribal distinctiveness of Zanāta by relying on the linguistic determinant as a distinguishing identity marker and a natural barrier protecting the tribe's solidarity. He asserts while discussing the origins of this Berber tribe, its linguistic distinctiveness: "Their distinguishing mark among the Berbers is the language they speak among themselves, which is well-known for its type

among the rest of the Berber gibberish (*raṭāna*)"[26].

The author of *al-ʿIbar* did not stop there; he proceeded to document the Zanāta linguistic material by recording a significant number of terms and expressions current among their tribes and explaining them in Arabic. In an effort to deconstruct this glossary and highlight its semantic characteristics, I have surveyed some linguistic examples and classified them in the statistical table below to illustrate their original Zanāta form and their corresponding meanings in Arabic.

Word as given in the Berber Tongue	Its Meaning in Arabic	Page in *al-ʿIbar*
Yafran	The cave	7/15
Tāmiṣā	The ghoul	7/68
Āyt	Relative attributive particle, as in their saying "Āyt al-Qāsim"	7/97
(Spelling of name 'Abd al-Ḥaqq ibn Manghafād)	Ibn Khaldūn corrects the name "Manghafād" as used by historians and attributes it to the original pronunciation in the Zanāta language.	7/98
Tilimsān in the Zanāta language, composed of two words *Talm* and *Sān.*	Its meaning: the gathering of two things, referring to the land (soil) and the sea.	7/102
Dādā	A term denoting extreme veneration in their language.	7/123
Tīrīghīn	The congregation/community	7/221
Ī ʿjūb	Title (laqab) for ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yaʿqūb ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq al-Marinī	7/238

These textual examples reveal that the linguistic presence of Zanāta was not limited to daily communicative circulation or isolated lexical items; it extended to take on ideological dimensions rooted in the tribal mentality by preserving its historical and epic heritage, transmitted orally across generations. This is clearly evident in the *Rajaz al-Ḥadathān* attributed to the historical soothsayer of Zanāta, Mūsā ibn Ṣāliḥ. This is a poetic text composed in the Zanāta tongue, concerned with foretelling the epics and political destinies that would befall this Berber tribe, including his prediction of the destruction of the city of Tilimsān at the hands of the Marīnids in 760 AH/1359 CE[27].

The historical importance of this *rajaz* lies in Ibn Khaldūn's confirmation that it was not a vanished relic but remained alive among the Zanāta tribes, circulated in their original jargon until his time in the second half of the 8th/14th century. This is a highly significant historiographical finding. On the one hand, it demonstrates the capacity of the Zanāta tongue to carry the historical and political lore of the tribe outside the Arabic textual domain. On the other hand, it confirms how Zanāta orality, at a moment of political ascendancy, transformed into an instrument for legitimizing major shifts and justifying internal conflicts between its ruling branches, the Marīnids and the Zayyānids.

In contrast to this poetic linguistic presence in epic folklore, we possess decisive historical evidence confirming the circulation of the Zanāta tongue in more elite political spheres. Its use was not restricted to the daily discourse of the common people in cities like Tilimsān; it deeply permeated the very heart of the Zayyānid sultanic court, becoming the language of address and official occasions for the sultans themselves.

This is illustrated in the narratives of the two Ibn Khaldūn brothers. The writer Yaḥyā ibn Khaldūn (d. 780 AH/1378 CE) documents in his book *Bughyat al-Ruwād* an aspect of the dialogues of the founder of the Zayyānid state, Sultan Yaghmurāsan ibn Zayyān (d. 681 AH/1283 CE), in the Zanāta tongue, transmitting the original phonetic formulation in its Berber pronunciation and Arabic script[28]. This historiographical data intersects with and is supported by his brother ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the author of *al-ʿIbar*, who likewise records Yaghmurāsan's use of Zanāta jargon in his famous stance when he rebuffed genealogists who attempted to elevate his lineage to the Idrīsid sharifs, preferring the reality of his tribe's solidarity and its original tongue over borrowed claims of legitimacy[29].

This linguistic behavior was not confined to the founding generation; it extended to the expressive practices of the generation of strength and consolidation. The author of *al-ʿIbar* mentions, in his discussion of Sultan Abū Ḥammū Mūsā al-Thānī (d. 791 AH/1389 CE), his use of the word "Dādā"—a formula of honor

and veneration in the Zanāta tongue meaning grandfather or great teacher[30]. Thus, it becomes clear how the Zanāta language, within the Zayyānid domain, transformed from a mere local tribal tongue into a communicative tool expressing the pride of the state and its political identity in the face of attempts at cultural Arabization.

The permeation of the Zanāta tongue did not stop at the boundaries of rule and the sultans' courts; it extended to the cognitive field and the sphere of the scholarly elite. Historical texts reveal models of scholars and judges from the urban centers of the Maghrib al-Awsaṭ, particularly Tilimsān, who reached an excellent standing in mastering this language and its literature. In this context, the figure of the master of rational sciences, Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ābilī (d. 757 AH/1356 CE), stands out. He was the reference master for the two Ibn Khaldūn brothers, and he was not merely a transmitter of philosophical sciences but also a narrator and oral source well-versed in the Zanāta linguistic environment[31]. This is evident in the transmissions of his two disciples: Yaḥyā ibn Khaldūn records in *al-Bughya* some of his linguistic narrations, including elucidating the etymological meaning of the name "Tilimsān," praising his precise knowledge of that language, stating, "He was a memorizer of the language of the people." In the same vein, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn relied on his master al-Ābilī as a living witness who had experienced events in Tilimsān and as a trustworthy transmitter of the tribe's linguistic concepts, including recording in his *ʿIbar*, transmitted from him, the specific honorific meaning of the word "Dādā"[32].

The second model illustrating this cognitive and linguistic interplay is the jurist and judge Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Nūr (d. 749 AH/1348 CE). His contemporary, Ibn Marzūq al-Khaṭīb, in his *Musnad*, explicitly mentions that this scholar possessed a dual rhetorical mastery, making him "among the most eloquent people in both Arabic and Zanāta, proficient in the language of Zanāta and their poetry"[33]. Although Ibn Marzūq did not provide further details about the extent of this mastery, this brief reference stands as a highly significant testimony. It proves that mastering the language of power and the tribe—Zanāta—and familiarity with its poetry had become a communicative cornerstone and a cognitive distinction for the judicial and scholarly elite, enabling them to adjudicate legal cases and grasp the cultural sensibilities of both Marīnid and Zayyānid society.

In the same context that highlights the dynamic interaction with the local environment, it is worth exploring the prominent presence of "Berber genealogists" (*nassāba al-Barbar*), those knowledgeable about the origins and tribal genealogies belonging to the various branches of the region, such as the genealogists of Zanāta, Ṣanhāja, Hintāta, Maṭmāṭa, and Kūmiyya. These figures constituted the most important field reference for Ibn Khaldūn in formulating his historiographical project to deconstruct Berber genealogical structures. He returned to their now-lost chronicles, interrogating them, most notably the traditions of Kahlān ibn Abī Lūwā, Hānī ibn Yaṣdūr al-Kūmī, Sābiq al-Maṭmāṭī, Ibn Abī al-Majd al-Maghīlī, al-Burzālī, and others. The circulation of this genealogical-linguistic heritage was not limited to the Khaldūnian era; its influence extended to later periods, finding an echo among scholars of the 13th/19th century, including the author of *al-Tarjumāna al-Kubrā*, Abū al-Qāsim al-Zayyānī (d. 1249 AH/1833 CE), who benefitted from these genealogical sources during his visit to the city of Tilimsān and his stay at the famous Mosque of al-ʿAbbād[34].

Based on this cumulative knowledge and information, we arrive at a highly significant methodological issue: medieval historiographical works were not merely channels for transmitting political events; they were living scriptural spaces teeming with the names of tribes, places, and personalities in their phonetic pronunciation and Berber linguistic root. Chroniclers found themselves facing a historiographical imperative that obliged them to record proper nouns and tribal names (*anthroponyms*) and geographical locations (*toponyms*) in their local phonetic spelling, as no Arabic equivalents could adequately convey their tribal and

geographical meanings. Consequently, these historical texts and geographical chronicles transformed into lexical repositories that preserved Berber roots and recorded their historical pronunciation. Names such as Tilimsān, Tūjīn, Kūmiyya, Tīgharast, and Maghīla have remained as documentary linguistic fossils within the Arabic text, persisting even in contemporary usage. This proves the indigenous tongue's resistance to total Arabization and its imposition of terminological authority on chroniclers, standing as a continuous linguistic structure and an authentic identity source.

6. The Decline of Berber Tongue Circulation in Favor of the Arabic Tongue

The trajectory of linguistic change and the recession of the Berber-speaking environment in the Maghrib did not escape the penetrating observation and meticulous attention of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn. He turned his attention early to observing the phenomenon of the local tongue's decline before the advance of the Arabic tongue, establishing for it a theoretical foundation that closely links the "power of the state" with the "sovereignty of the linguistic material." The author of *al-ʿIbar* opines that the language of the dominant party and the holder of kingship and sovereignty inevitably imposes its scriptural dominance. He records this in a unique historical text documenting the absence of written heritage for Berber groups: "For writing and script belong to the language of the state and the tongue of the king, while the non-Arab tongue is concealed under its wing, sheathed in its scabbard. This generation of Zanāta, in ancient times, did not possess a kingdom that would compel the people of letters to take care in recording their days and chronicling their history... So they remained neglected until much of it faded away, and only scattered remnants reached us after their rule"[35].

This Khaldūnian approach reveals an advanced awareness of the dialectical relationship between politics and language. The lack of documentation for the ancient eras of the Berber Zanāta, due to the absence of a political entity that would foster writing and record works, becomes a primary cause for the loss of large portions of their oral cognitive heritage.

Parallel to this political explanation linked to mechanisms of governance and chancery offices, the most significant demographic and social event of the 5th/11th century emerges: the "Hilālian migration." The influx of Arab tribes—Banū Hilāl, Banū Sulaym, ʿIyāḍ, al-Athbaj, and others—had a profound and far-reaching effect on reshaping the linguistic map of the Maghrib. The intermingling here was no longer merely political contact; it evolved into deep social integration. This led many Berber tribes, especially those that joined the nascent partisanship or neighbored the newly established Arab settlements, to gradually abandon their local linguistic heritage and adopt the Arabic tongue, which had become the language of daily life, religious jurisprudence, and sultanic discourse alike.

One of the most prominent tribes Ibn Khaldūn highlighted in analyzing this phenomenon is the "Hawwāra" tribe, which inhabited the Aurès Mountains and beyond, in the lands of Ifrīqiya and its plains, extending to Āba, Marmajāna, Sabība, and Tibarsaq. He explicitly mentions that they abandoned their non-Arab language and adopted the language of the Hilālian Arabs, even forgetting it as if it never existed—"that is the condition of the vanquished in emulating the victor"[36]. However, this tribe did not only abandon its Berber linguistic heritage; this also included relinquishing their customs, doctrines, emblems, and distinctive markers in attire, dress, and modes of travel and nomadism[37].

Based on Ibn Khaldūn's conclusions, it can be argued that the phenomenon of Arabization and near-total abandonment of the Berber linguistic heritage initially affected the territories of Berber tribes that experienced direct contact with the Hilālian Arabs—essentially the regions of Tripolitania and the plains of Ifrīqiya. Conversely, the Berber tongue remained in circulation in areas distant from the major cities (*amṣār*). He states: "The Berbers in this western region (*al-ʿadwa*) are its inhabitants, and their language is its language, except in the cities (*amṣār*), for there they are immersed in a sea of their non-Arab speech and Berber jargon"[38]. This confirms that the process of abandoning the Berber tongue in the Maghrib occurred

gradually and over successive periods, while remote and marginalized mountainous areas resisted Arabization and have preserved their local linguistic identity to this day.

7. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, we can assert that the local Berber linguistic heritage possesses a unique specificity, manifested in its diversity, differentiation, and cultural distinction during the medieval period. This tongue was not merely a tool for daily communication; it transcended that to become a pivotal medium for religious and ideological influence. The proponents of local daʿwas and sects recognized the importance of employing the Berber tongue to disseminate their ideas and ensure the response of its native-speaking followers, as occurred in the Barghawāṭa sect and the daʿwa of Ḥamīm al-Muftarī. They reformulated concepts and laws in the local language to enhance their influential and symbolic authority among community members.

However, we note a marked decline in this tongue's circulation following the extensive Arabization process the Maghrib underwent after the Hilālian migration in the 5th/11th century. This was accompanied by some Berber tribes abandoning their customs and way of life, adopting Hilālian traditions—including forsaking their original tongue for Arabic.

Historical testimonies also embody the reality of the close association and early linguistic and cultural coexistence between Arabic and Berber, which stamped the region's identity and shaped its civilizational features across the ages. Consequently, the profound symbolic significance, as reported in some informative sources, becomes evident: among the precious gifts carried by Zīrī ibn ʿAṭiyya al-Maghrawī to al-Andalus, presented to the Ḥājib al-Manṣūr ibn Abī ʿĀmir in 384 AH/994 CE, was "a bird that spoke in Arabic and Berber."

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that delving into such intricate aspects of the history of the Islamic Maghrib during the medieval period in general, and the Maghrib al-Awsaṭ in particular, remains in dire need of further in-depth studies and serious academic research. Such scholarship would adequately and objectively reveal the specificity of this tongue, which remains alive and spoken in many regions to this day, such as the Kabylia region, the Shawiya lands, and others.

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[2] Ibn Khaldūn, *al-ʿIbar*, review by Suhayl Zakkār, Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 2000, 6/117.

[3] Ibn al-Qaṭṭān, *Naẓm al-Jumān*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAlī Makkī, Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, Beirut, 1990, p. 90.

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[7] See: Ibn Abī al-Zaraʿ al-Fāsī, *al-Qirṭās*, p. 226; Ibn Khaldūn, *al-ʿIbar*, 6/116.

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[14] al-Bakrī, *al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik*, 2/324.

[15] al-Bakrī, *al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik*, 2/383.

[16] Ibn al-Qaṭṭān, *Naẓm al-Jumān*, pp. 129, 173; Ibn Abī al-Zaraʿ, *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*, pp. 226, 223; Ibn Khaldūn, *al-ʿIbar*, 6/303.

[17] Ibn Abī al-Zaraʿ, *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*, p. 77.

[18] Ibn Abī al-Zaraʿ, *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*, pp. 87-89.

[19] Ibn Abī al-Zaraʿ, *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*, p. 223.

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