

BRIEF NOTES ON THE CONCEPTS
OF *LISĀN* AND *LUGHĀ* WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK
OF THE MEDIEVAL BERBER LANGUAGE THROUGH
SOME EXAMPLES*

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This study seeks to subject to scrutiny a range of data concerning some regional variants of the Berber language in medieval Maghreb. Offering information taken from different types of Arabic sources, we examine concepts of “language” possibly embodied in the term *lisān* (plural *alsina*, *alsun*), and of “dialect(s)” illustrated by the use of the word *lughā* (plural *lughāt*). The content presented enables an exploration of the ideas that Arabic writers used the language as an instrument for transmitting facts, and thereby establishing the outlines of debate as to whether the Berber language occupied a privileged position in medieval Maghrebian society.

Key words: Medieval Maghreb, Berber language, dialects, history, geography

Concerning tribes and language(s) through the geographical framework in medieval Maghreb

Textual items relating to Berber in medieval Maghreb are scattered throughout different texts such as chronicles, genealogical texts, Ibadī sources, hagiographic works, legal compilations or geographical documents. It is however possible to find, here or there, some references dedicated to the forms in the Berber language used to express the names of Berber tribes, names of

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language(s) in use and names of regions linked to linguistic variants of Berber.¹ These are the points that will guide us over the following pages for the purpose of delimiting as precisely as possible the forms of employment of linguistic varieties of Berber in close relation with the tribes that peopled different geographical spaces at particular moments in the history of North Africa.²

From our point of view, it is fundamental to take into account the trinomial of tribe, language and space to attempt to gain a better understanding of the areas of diffusion of each particular Berber variant in terms of the political and religious situation of each specific tribe, at any given moment in the history of medieval Maghreb. The continuity use of languages such as Berber, Arabic, Latin, Greek, and even Punic are known to have depended greatly on the crucial role played by political and religious events. In addition to the linguistic factor, we must add the cultural question, understood as a capacity to produce literatures in different languages. Concerning the contemporary scientific discourse as to whether one or various variants of Berber existed, we must comment briefly on the sometimes polemical debates that have taken place among recognised specialists in the field.³ In this regard, it is appropriate to make some short observations regarding our remarks above on language. For it is important to recall and emphasise the validity of the concepts of “language” and “dialects” that should be focussing our attention. Thanks to the Arabic sources studied, in our opinion it is unacceptable to uphold the hypothesis according to which Arabic authors had some awareness of the conceptual and semantic difference between the terms “language” and “dialect”. The word *lisān*

¹ GHOURGATE, M. Le berbère au Moyen Âge. Une culture linguistique en cours de reconstitution. In *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2015, Vol. 70–3, pp. 577–580, EL HOUR, R. Reflexiones acerca de las dinastías bereberes y lengua bereber en el Magreb medieval. In *Miscelánea de estudios árabes y hebraicos*, 2015, Vol. 64, pp. 43–45, and MEOUAK, M. La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses, pp. 1–18.

² LEWICKI, T. Le monde berbère vu par les écrivains arabes du Moyen-Âge. In GALLEY, M., MARSHALL, D. R. (eds.). *Actes du premier congrès d'études des cultures méditerranéennes d'influence arabo-berbère (Malte, 3-6 avril 1972)*, 1973, pp. 37–39.

³ On these questions, see GALAND, L. La langue berbère existe-t-elle ?. In *Mélanges linguistiques offerts à Maxime Rodinson, in Comptes rendus du Groupe Linguistique d'études chamito-sémitiques*, 1985, pp. 175–181, *idem*. Regards sur le berbère, pp. 1–39, and CHAKER, S. Dialecte, pp. 2291–2295. The first author mentioned considered it appropriate to postulate the existence of a Berber mother tongue that would actually have laid the foundations for the formation of linguistic variants of Berber. The second author, meanwhile, debated the ideas of the former arguing that different variants or dialects of Berber were in use in regions within the geographical-linguistic Berber environment.

(plural *alsina*, *alsun*) might be equivalent to “language” or “mother tongue”, while the term *lughā* (plural *lughāt*) could, with all due caution, indicate the notion of “dialect” or regional and tribal variant.⁴ Having said this, we must acknowledge that these complex issues of learning lie beyond our expertise and, in consequence, we have only been able to point to certain basic elements.

Due to the dispersed nature of the information that has come to light and to the great variety of texts involved, we were obliged to reconnoitre the whole Berber linguistic area and cover a period that begins in the 9th and ends in the 16th century. This working perspective undoubtedly gives rise to various methodological problems and we are aware that the results, placed systematically in their chrono-geographical production context, are sometimes hard to interpret within the framework of a comparison with linguistic features from post-medieval times. This being the case, we have taken the trouble to distinguish between direct linguistic evidence, where the information is formulated by the writers by means of clear indications of the linguistic variants within a geographically tribal framework of Berber; and indirect reports, through which hypotheses and conclusions could be proposed in the light of passages that do not directly formulate the content of the materials sought and then found.

Making oneself understood, the Berber language and socio-linguistic status: some examples

Below we outline some details concerning the problematic of inter-comprehension in medieval Maghreb, involving historical and genealogical sources composed in the Almohad period (1130 – 1269). Medieval Maghrebian historiography preserves information about issues relating to the linguistic tools that individuals had at their disposal for making themselves understood within such a vast geographical area as Maghreb. This subject is complex and the accompanying bibliography is voluminous. We will, therefore, only raise general points.

To begin with, we will now see what we are told regarding the Masmudian tribe of the Ganfisa, who, we are given to understand by written documentation, had a specific status in relation with the fact that they utilised a variant of Berber.⁵ Indeed, the Maghrebian chronicler ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī

⁴ HASSEN, M. Évolution des parlers citadins et ruraux d’Ifriqiya (XI^e-XV^e siècle). In MEOUAK, M., SÁNCHEZ, P., VICENTE, Á. (eds.). *De los manuscritos medievales a internet: la presencia del árabe vernáculo en las fuentes escritas*, 2012, pp. 40–44, on the Berber language in medieval Ifriqiya.

⁵ About the Ganfisa and other tribes in the medieval Maghreb history, see MONÈS, H. La conquête de l’Afrique du Nord et la résistance berbère. In EL FASI, M. (dir.). HRBEK,

(*circa.* 1270) described the speech employed by the members of the Masmudian tribe as being a Berber dialectal variant, when he said the following: “Then the Ganfīsa: it is a noble and powerful tribe; its dialect is the best of the dialects and the purest in this language {Berber} (*wa-lughatuhā ajwad al-lughāt wa-aḡṣaḡahā fī dhālika al-lisān*).”⁶ One of the most interesting features of this short item resides in the presence of two main terms to represent the concept of “language”, in the shape of *lughā* and *lisān*. We think it is possible to pose the hypothesis by virtue of which we are looking at a dialectal variant (*lughā*), that of the Ganfīsa, elevated to the highest rank of variants within the framework of Berber (*lisān*). This *lisān* would to some degree be the mother tongue, and even a kind of pan-Berber known on a broad regional scale. But, for these brief observations to be admissible, they would have to be re-examined as part of a deeper and more detailed discussion, particularly bearing in mind works by linguists specialising in pre-modern Berber.⁷

In another text from the Almohad period, bearing the signature of al-Baydhaq (end of the 12th century), we find a story that poses the question of inter-comprehension between individuals. The *Tārīkh al-muwahḡidīn* echoes a dialogue, between the *mahdī* Ibn Tūmart (ob. 1130) and two characters, that basically underlines the need to master languages. Let us study this situation in detail:

“One day, two men arrived on their way East: one was called ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, and the other ‘Abd al-Ṣamad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm. Questioned by the *imām*, they replied that they had come from Maghreb. And they were, from the moment of their arrival, completely astonished. He asked them: ‘What’s the matter with you, why don’t you speak? (*mā lakumā, lā takallamā?*). We don’t understand Arabic (*naḡnu mā naḡhamu al-‘arabiyya*)’, they replied in their language (*bi-lisānihimā*). And they added: ‘Oh *faqīh*, we come from Daran, from Tīnmallal!’”⁸

For the same Almohad period, we came across an item concerning the use and mastery of various languages including Berber and some sort of “secret”

I. (codir.). *Histoire générale de l’Afrique* III. *L’Afrique du VIIe au XIe siècle*, 1990, pp. 253–256.

⁶ AL-MARRĀKUSHĪ. *Kitāb al-mu‘jib fī talkhīṣ akhbār al-Maghrib*, p. 247, and MEOUAK, M. *La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses*, p. 114.

⁷ There is certainly no short-term resolution for the problematic differences between *lisān* and *lughā*. More texts will have to be researched, taking into account the geographical and cultural contexts in which those texts were produced.

⁸ AL-BAYDHAQ. *Tārīkh al-muwahḡidīn*, p. 57/88.

language. Thanks to the *Kitāb al-ansāb fī ma'rifat al-aṣḥāb* we are able to know something else about this subject that certainly enables a better understanding of situations in which language plays a decisive role and might also serve the political institutions of the day. Indeed, those in political power may be assumed to have used the language question for their own religiously motivated ends, in order to promote Arabic to the detriment of Berber. Perhaps the following example can illustrate our point:

“Mallūl b. Ibrāhīm b. Yaḥyā al-Ṣanhājī was likewise adopted by the Hargha following the order of the impeccable *imām* Ibn Tūmart who said to him in the Western language (*bi-l-lisān al-gharbī*): **mallūl an wuhlghū** [= ‘in the white robe’]. Together with Sulaymān **Āḥaḍrī** was the secretary of the *imām*. He was eloquent and understood a variety of languages. He wrote in Syriac and in secret characters (*bi-l-suryāniyya wa-l-rumūziyyāt*) as well as in other languages, at which he excelled.”⁹

Finally, in relation with the previous item we can add a point about the linguistic notion of *‘ujma*, or about not expressing oneself correctly, “uttering barbarisms”, which illustrates another designation that medieval Arab-Muslim writers gave to other languages such as Berber. This is indeed what we believe to have detected in the *Nufāḍat al-jirāb fī ‘ulālat al-ightirāb* by the Granada historian Ibn al-Khaṭīb (ob. 1374). This work offers a brief compilation profiling an individual, a member of a Sufi brotherhood, who did not speak Arabic (*li-l-ṣūfiyya a‘jam al-lisān*) and who, according to the context of the passage, one might conjecture to be a speaker of Berber.¹⁰

Berber language(s), tribes and geographical spaces in medieval Maghreb

We have insisted that Arabic texts provided a substantial amount of information about Berber, and must again point out that there is a close correlation between tribal names, linguistic variants and geographical spaces. However, it must be noted that information about the Arabic intellectual elites’ incomprehension of the language and lack of knowledge of Berber peoples

⁹ *Kitāb al-ansāb fī ma'rifat al-aṣḥāb*. p. 39/59. On the Berber segment, see MARCY, G. Les phrases berbères des “Documents inédits d’histoire almohade”. In *Hespéris*, 1932, XIV-1, p. 71. Henceforth, we will write Berber words in bold so that they stand out from other transliterated terms.

¹⁰ IBN AL-KHAṬĪB. *Nufāḍat al-jirāb fī ‘ulālat al-ightirāb*, p. 78.

frequently crops up in medieval Arabic records.¹¹ It is sufficient to give the example of the verb *tabarbara* employed by Ibadi writers Ibn Sallām al-Ibādī (circa 887) and al-Darjīnī (second half of the 13th century): the first one refers to the fact that there ended up “being many (*tabarbarū*) Berbers”¹², and the second assures that Arabs said: “they became barbarian, that is, they multiplied (*tabarbarū ay kathurū*)”.¹³ In addition to the latter, another interesting example can be added, taken from the work entitled *Kitāb Maḥākhir al-Barbar* (circa 14th century), which says, textually: “The Arabs said: gabble, meaning to be brutish (*fa-qālat al-‘Arab: barbarā, ay tawahḥasha*).”¹⁴ Lastly, in the famous *Kitāb al-‘ibar* by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khaldūn (ob. 1406), we find reference to the language, or dialect, of the Berbers likened to a mere “non-Arabic jargon”, and even described as incomprehensible (*lughatuhum min al-riṭāna al-a‘jamiyya*).¹⁵

In some medieval Ibadi sources we dug up a story that achieved some success due to its content and possible impact on society. The account contains interesting elements such as a moralising epilogue dealing with the practice of religion and a particular sense of generosity. This is, of course, what we think we detected in the story transmitted by three writers who lived between the 12th and 16th centuries.¹⁶ The main figure in it is an individual who makes some purchases in a market in Ifrīqiya and, among other articles, he acquires some lambs for a specific price. At the end of the transaction, the protagonist comes face to face with the owner of the lambs, who asks him for the amount agreed in exchange for the animals. After a curious dialogue between the two men, the owner requests the money, using the “dialect of the Ṣanhāja”¹⁷ and the buyer gives it to him. In the end, once the operation is over, the buyer gives the lambs and other beasts to another person as alms. The versions of this account are

¹¹ On these topics, see MEOUAK, M. La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses, pp. 316, 317.

¹² IBN SALLĀM AL-IBĀDĪ. *Kitāb fīhi bad’ al-islām wa-sharā’i’ al-dīn*, p. 123.

¹³ AL-DARJĪNĪ. *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mashā’ikh bi-l-Maghrib*, Vol. I., p. 17. On the verb *b.r.b.r.*, see COLIN, G. S., Appellations données par les Arabes aux peuples hétéroglosses. In *Comptes rendus du Groupe Linguistique d’études chamito-sémitiques*, 1957, Vol. VII., pp. 93–95.

¹⁴ ANONYMOUS. *Kitāb Maḥākhir al-Barbar*, p. 238.

¹⁵ ‘ABD AL-RAḤMĀN B. KHALDŪN. *Kitāb al-‘ibar*, Vol. VI., p. 104. On these linguistic details, see LUFFIN, X. L’évolution sémantique du terme *riṭāna* dans les parlers arabes soudano-tchadiens. In *Annales Aequatoria*, 2003, Vol. 24, pp. 162–164.

¹⁶ See MEOUAK, M. La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses, pp. 324–326.

¹⁷ See PREVOST, V. L’ibadisme berbère. La légitimation d’une doctrine venue d’Orient. In *Annales Aequatoria*, 2003, Vol. 24, pp. 66–67.

almost identical apart from some nuances and they revolve around a keyword: the Berber verb **arrā (dha'r?)**¹⁸, which can mean “give”, “bring”, and even “give back”, which in Arabic is *hāt/hāti*. We will now look at the versions collected in chronological order¹⁹:

a): al-Wisyānī, a biographer and historian, lived for part of his life in Ajlū (a region of *wādī Rīgh* in the southeast of Algeria) in the 12th century. This writer left us the *Kitāb al-siyar*, in which we find some points about Berber. Below we offer the fragment of the story whose main character was the sage Abū l-Khaṭṭāb ‘Abd al-Salām b. Maṣṣūr b. Abī Wazjūn al-Mazātī:

“Abū l-Rabī‘ said: ‘Abd al-Salām bought some lambs in a market in Ifrīqiya; their owner came with him to collect the sum of money; he said to him: **ḍha'r!** in the dialect of the Ṣanhāja (*bi-lughat Ṣanhāja*), the meaning of which is give!/bring! (*hāt/hāti*)”²⁰

b): al-Darjīnī, a famous writer who was originally from the town of Tamījār in *jabal Nafūsa* (northeast of what is Libya today), is the author of the *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mashā'ikh bi-l-Maghrib* composed after the year 1253. In the piece dedicated to our Ibadī sage Abū l-Khaṭṭāb ‘Abd al-Salām b. Maṣṣūr b. Abī Wazjūn al-Mazātī, al-Darjīnī follows in the footsteps of al-Wisyānī to tell us the story of the buying of the lambs:

“He remembered that ‘Abd al-Salām bought a lamb from the market in Ifrīqiya; when he claimed it, its seller turned up to collect the money, and said to him: **ḍarrā!** And the meaning of this word in the dialect of the Ṣanhāja (*bi-lughat al-Ṣanhāja*) is give!/bring! (*hāt/hāti*).”²¹

c): in the *Kitāb al-siyar* by the historian al-Shammākhī (ob. 1522), who was from a village in the Īfrān oasis in *jabal Nafūsa*, we find the same account of the

¹⁸ We are unaware of the exact sense of the term **dha'r**, the vocalisation of which is hypothetical. We may fairly safely assume that we are dealing with an incorrect spelling of the word **arrā**.

¹⁹ For the following information, see also MEOUAK, M. *La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses*, p. 325.

²⁰ AL-WISYĀNĪ. *Siyar mashāykh al-Maghrib li-Abī l-Rabī‘ al-Wisyānī*, p. 27.

²¹ AL-DARJĪNĪ. *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mashā'ikh bi-l-Maghrib*, Vol. II., p. 408. On the hero of the story, see PREVOST, V. *L'aventure ibādite dans le Sud tunisien (VIII^e–XIII^e siècle)*. Effervescence d'une région méconnue, p. 208.

lambs in the biography of Abū l-Khattāb ‘Abd al-Salām b. Manṣūr b. Abī Wazjūn al-Mazātī himself, which we offer below:

“Once, he was said to have bought some lambs in Ifrīqiya; their seller wanted to collect the sum due; he said to him: **ǰarrā!**, which means give!/bring! in the dialect of the Ṣanhāja (*bi-lughat Ṣanhāja, hāt/hāti*).”²²

The Berber term **arrā** (ǰ**dh**a’r?), when compared with the Arabic verb *hāt/hāti*, acts as the real key for this section of our study. For, indeed, this suggests that some Berber-speaking writers in medieval Maghreb showed a constant concern to translate or, at least, assist readers not familiar with Berber in understanding certain words, as in the example presented above. If a willingness to translate in order to transmit language and culture produced in Berber leads one to induce a behaviour with substantial roots in Ibadī *milieu*, the sources certainly provide us with some samples of such an engagement.

As a last additional point, we found some information that backs up what has previously been said by various Ibadī authors.²³ For instance, al-Darjīnī devoted a long item about an Ibadī sage called Abū ‘Uthmān al-Mazātī al-Dagmī. In this biography details are collected about the linguistic variant of *jabal Nafūsa*, as follows: “His name was known in the Nafusian dialect (*bi-l-lughā al-naḫūsiyya*); when they mentioned him, they said Bāthmān, which means (*ya’nūna*) Abū ‘Uthmān.”²⁴ Then, in the same text, we find an item that points to the use of the “language of the Berber speakers”, contained in a tale featuring Bāthmān himself and a jackal. On this last point, we offer just a brief passage from the account: “Then, he observed a jackal and Bāthmān

²² AL-SHAMMĀKHĪ. *Kitāb al-siyar*, p. 379.

²³ See also MEOUAK. M. *La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses*, p. 321.

²⁴ AL-DARJĪNĪ. *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mashā’ikh bi-l-Maghrib*, Vol. II., p. 308, and PREVOST, V. *L’ibadisme berbère. La légitimation d’une doctrine venue d’Orient*. In NEF, A., VOGUET, É. (eds.), *La légitimation du pouvoir au Maghreb médiéval. De l’orientalisation à l’émancipation politique*, 2011, pp. 66–67. On these questions, see BRUGNATELLI, V. *La classification du parler de Djerba (Tunisie)*. In CHAKER, S., METTOUCHI, A., PHILIPPSON, G. (eds.), *Études de phonétique et linguistique berbères. Hommage à Naïma Louali (1961–2005)*, 2009, pp. 356–357; *idem*. *D’une langue de contact entre Berbères ibadites*. In LAFKIOUI, M., BRUGNATELLI, V. (eds.), *Berber in Contact. Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, 2008, pp. 44–50, on the hypothetical existence of a Berber linguistic *koiné* among the Ibadīs of the Maghreb.

spoke some words to it in the language of the Berber speakers (*bi-lisān al-barbariyya*) [...].”²⁵

Although items regarding the different variants of Berber tend to appear above all in texts associated with Ibadī circles, on the one hand, and their Almohad counterparts, on the other, and consequently covering a time span stretching from the 8th to the 13th century, it must not be forgotten that there exists a production of interesting works devoted in principle to the study of sanctity and hagiography that also, however, conserve information about the different linguistic varieties of Berber.²⁶ It is the case of Aḥmad al-Tādīlī al-Ṣawma‘ī (ob. 1604), a Maghrebian writer who left us a bibliographical-hagiographic work largely devoted to the saint Abū Ī‘azzā, in which we encounter information about the speech of the tribe of the Zanāta.²⁷ In the two examples below, we can observe how detailed the references provided are:

a): “I am now with a Masmudian individual standing at the door of the mosque saying to me, in the Zanatian language (*bi-l-lisān al-zanātī*) [...].”²⁸

b): “And he continued to implore, in the Zanatian language (*bi-l-lisān al-zanātī*): **jay mazign ay mazign ad rān anzār anzār!**; its meaning is (*ma'nāhu*): Oh my host, oh my lord, my master, my lords there asked me to deliver the prayer seeking rain and it is not in my power!”²⁹

²⁵ AL-DARJĪNĪ. Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mashā'ikh bi-l-Maghrib, Vol. II., p. 308. On Bāthmān, see AL-SHAMMĀKHĪ. Kitāb al-siyar, pp. 123–128. Concerning this point, see also LEWICKI, T. Les noms berbères chez les Nafūsa médiévaux (VIII^e-XVI^e siècle). Observations d'un arabisant (première partie). In *Folia Orientalia*, 1972 – 1973, Vol. XIV., pp. 15–16, 19, 28; *idem*. Les noms berbères chez les Nafūsa médiévaux (VIII^e-XVI^e siècle). Observations d'un arabisant (quatrième partie), p. 108; OULD-BRAHAM, O. Lecture de 24 textes berbères médiévaux extraits d'une chronique ibādite par T. Lewicki. In *Littérature orale arabo-berbère*, 1987, Vol. 18, pp. 89–91; *idem*. Sur une chronique arabo-berbère des Ibādites médiévaux, pp. 24–25.

²⁶ More details in MEOUAK, M. La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses, pp. 92–121 and pp. 297–302.

²⁷ On the Zanāta, see for instance IBN ‘AMĪRA, M. Dawr Zanāta fī l-ḥaraka al-madhhabiyya bi-l-Maghrib al-islāmī, pp. 15–46; BELLIL, R. Ksour et saints du Gourara dans la tradition orale, l'hagiographie et les chroniques locales, pp. 61–66, mainly for the Southern-West of the central Maghreb and based on ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khaldūn's information, and also MEOUAK, M. La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses, pp. 265, 266.

²⁸ AḤMAD AL-TĀDILĪ AL-ṢAWMA‘Ī. Kitāb al-mu‘zā fī manāqib al-shaykh Abī Ya‘zā, p. 119.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

In relation to the previous information dedicated to the Berber linguistic variant of the Zanāta's tribe, we can add two informations taken from the chronicler Yaḥyā b. Khaldūn (ob. 1378), brother of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khaldūn. In the first example, our author mentions the "place name in the language of the Zanāta (*ism al-mahalla bi-lisān Zanāta*)" about the toponym Tādjārāt (western of what is Algeria today).³⁰ In the second instance, we learn that the founder of the dynasty of the Zayyanids, Yaghmurāsan b. Zayyān, "said in Zanatian 'God only knows' (*fa-qāla bi-l-zanātiyya ʿissant Rabbī*)" to people who wanted to see his name engraved on mosques' minarets of Tādjārāt and Agadir (vicinity of Tlemcen).³¹

Turning to the East again, we will focus on an interesting account gathered by Ibn Khallikān (ob. 1282), in his well-known biographical work entitled *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*, in which he furnishes important information about the Almoravid sovereign Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn (ob. 1106) regarding his linguistic skills. The Middle Eastern writer says that the sovereign did not know the Arabic language (*lā ya'rifu al-lisān al-'arabī*) and that he was helped by "a secretary who knew the Arabic and Almoravid languages" (*wa-kāna lahu kātib ya'rifu al-lughatayn al-'arabiyya wa-l-murābiṭiyya*).³² Although very infrequent in medieval sources, observations of this kind are quite striking because they highlight socio-linguistic situations that seem to point to the existence of some distance between elites of a precise origin (apparently having an only slight grasp of the Arabic language) and all other social groups who were probably even more challenged when it came to expressing themselves in that language. At that time, for the Almoravid case, we can say that, to start with, the sovereigns were Arabized to only a small degree and, in all probability, continued to use one or another of the Berber variants when they spoke. If we rely on the original provenance of the first Almoravid groups, we could assume that these collectives must have used Zenaga language (a variant of Berber often

³⁰ YAḤYĀ B. KHALDŪN. *Kitāb bughyat al-ruwwād fī dhikr al-mulūk min banī 'Abd al-Wād*, Vol. I., p. 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116. On this data, see a very short mention in MEOUAK, M. *La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses*, p. 155.

³² IBN KHALLIKĀN. *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*. Vol. VII., p. 114. On the genesis of the Almoravid's movement, see BOSCH VILÁ, J. *Los Almorávides*, pp. 43–62; MEYNIER, G. *L'Algérie au cœur du Maghreb classique. De l'ouverture islamo-arabe au repli (698 – 1518)*, pp. 75–91; GHOURGATE, M. *L'ordre almohade (1120 – 1269). Une nouvelle lecture anthropologique*, pp. 35–102, in an interesting chapter titled "Le précédent almoravide: rupture ou continuité?"; *idem*. *Le berbère au Moyen Âge. Une culture linguistique en cours de reconstitution*, pp. 585–591, on the use of Berber during the Almoravid period. See also MEOUAK, M. *La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses*, p. 152.

associated with the tribal group of the Ṣanhāja)³³, which is still in use in the southwest of present day Mauritania, and probably, to a lesser extent, utilised the Tashalhīt tongue (south of the Western Maghreb).³⁴

Dialectal Berber variants, language(s) and medieval geographical framework in Maghreb

With the foundation provided by all the linguistic and historical elements offered over these pages, we are of the opinion that all this material could to some degree assist in the re-evaluation of a memory and a culture constructed in the Berber language, qualities that are often striking by their absence from researches on the languages used in medieval Maghreb, and further contribute to the value of participation from the Berber environment to the construction of Maghrebian historical knowledge itself.³⁵

The contents set out for the reader's perusal, with their limitations, provide food for thought on the role of language in the societies of Maghreb. Further, we feel that the information reflected in the study contributes to greater knowledge of the history of Maghreb through the presentation of linguistic building blocks. Between their places of location and areas of use, the variants of Berber form a set of tools intimately bonded with social history. The historian is accordingly able to address some issues such as the depth of the geographical distribution of Berber variants, their real use, morpho-syntactic convergences and divergences between the variants, the area of dissemination of written production for each of these variants, and so forth. The details provided give a fairly precise notion as to what the linguistic variants, or the dialects documented in the medieval sources were. In this regard, there is a striking

³³ On the zenaga Berber branch, see TAINÉ-CHEIKH, C. Le zénaga de Mauritanie à la lumière du berbère commun. In LAMBERTI, M., TONELLI, L. (eds.). *Afroasiatica Tergestina. Papers from the 9th Italian Meeting of Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) Linguistics, Trieste, April 23–24, 1998*, 1999, pp. 299–324.

³⁴ About the tashalhīt, see EL MOUNTASSIR, A. De l'oral à l'écrit, de l'écrit à la lecture. Exemple des manuscrits chleuhs en graphie arabe. In *Études et documents berbères*, 1994, Vol. 11, pp. 149–154; AMAHAN, A. L'écriture en tašlḥyt est-elle une stratégie des zawayā ? In DROUIN, J., ROTH, A. (eds.). *À la croisée des études libyco-berbères. Mélanges offerts à Paulette Galand-Pernet et Lionel Galand*, 1993, pp. 437–438; BOUNFOUR, A. Notes sur l'histoire du berbère (Tachelhit). Essai de bilan et perspectives. In DAKHLIA, J. (dir.). *Trames de langues. Usages et métissages linguistiques dans l'histoire du Maghreb*, 2004 pp. 172–175.

³⁵ For instance, see ROUIGHI, R. The Berbers of the Arabs. In *Studia Islamica*, nouvelle série, 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 82–85.

interest expressed by some writers, chroniclers, biographers or historians in spotlighting items and explaining to us, even simply, the different varieties of Berber present during specific periods and in particular tribal contexts: a) *lisān al-Barbariyya*, *al-lisān al-gharbī*, *al-lisān al-zanātī*, *lisān Zanāta*; b) *lughat (al-) Ṣanhāja*, *al-lughā al-nafūsiyya*; c) *al-riṭāna al-a'jamiyya*; d) *a'jam al-lisān*; e) *al-murābiṭiyya*; f) *al-zanātiyya*. This small collection has demonstrated a larger problem, too, which is the need to establish whether or not there were various Berber languages or simply dialects springing from one mother tongue.³⁶

Thanks to the data provided by Arabic documentation, historians and linguists can continue to delve into the different linguistic variants of medieval Berber through the geographical spaces and modes of settlement in the territories. It seems absolutely necessary, therefore, to proceed with the systematic recollection of anthroponyms, toponyms, oronyms, hagionyms, and ethnonyms, in addition to the common lexicon, in order to incorporate them into reasoned classifications. The principal sources of this excavation would, for instance, be biographical and hagiographic texts, documents produced in Ibadi mediums, all complemented in terms of quality by geographical, historical, legal and literary sources. With help from these materials, it would perhaps be possible to more or less faithfully restore the historical-linguistic characteristics of Berber for concrete regions and for precise periods. Even though the items found are still insufficient for linguists, they certainly can bring to bear some indications concerning the Berber lexicon, morphology and phonology through comparative study with other Berber-speaking zones of southern Maghreb, such as some geographical areas of the Sāḥil (Sahel).³⁷ To conclude, the topic can be seen to be very broad and highly complex, and we must acknowledge at the end of this brief exploration that we have no more than scratched the surface of the object under study.

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³⁶ See a case-study in NAÏT-ZERRAD, K. Notes sur des termes berbères dans Nuzhat al-muštāq d'El-Idrisi. In LAFKIOUI, M., BRUGNATELLI, V. (eds.). *Berber in Contact. Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, 2008, pp. 16–17.

³⁷ SOUAG, L. Explaining Korandjé. Language contact, plantations, and the trans-Saharan trade. In *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, 2015, 30–2, pp. 205–209, 209–214, on some linguistic contacts between Berber and Korandjé (a Songhay language); MEQUAK, M. La langue berbère au Maghreb médiéval. Textes, contextes, analyses, pp. 361–363, for geographical and historical perspectives on the subject.

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