



The Berbers of Libya

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PREAMBLE

Before listing the main forms of discrimination suffered by Libya's Berber-speaking communities and our proposals to eliminate them, it is important to recall a number of historic facts on North Africa. This would allow the reader who is unfamiliar with the cultural issues which seriously divide North Africa to understand the extent of suppression of the Amazigh culture and language in Libya, and in North Africa in general (Part I).

As is the case with their brethren in Algeria and Morocco, Libya's Berber-speaking population suffers all kinds of discrimination which does not only threaten their language and culture but also their survival.

We shall attempt to pinpoint the main forms of discrimination for which the Libyan state is responsible and which violate the principles of the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (part II).

Finally, we will present our proposals and suggestions on how to eliminate this discrimination.

Part I Background

A. General

As is the case with the rest of North Africa, Libya has engaged on a very serious cultural and identity denial based on discrimination which forms the basis for the actions of the nation state. The Libyan state sees itself as Arab and Muslim and spares no effort to Arabicize the Berber-speaking population.

By constitutionally imposing on the nation state the Arab-Muslim character, the government policies blatantly violate the principles of the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.

This is an extremely serious infringement on the cultural rights of the Amazigh people. Such rights are recognized by all international laws and charters, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, which Libya chooses to ignore.

This policy, which can be described as “language imperialism”, naturally deprives society of genuine democratization which is necessary to fight and overcome underdevelopment. An important “social energy” is thus being wasted through opposing the ancestral values and identity of the Amazigh people instead of using them as a foundation to establish an open, pluralistic and democratic society.

The Arabicization is therefore at the heart of a state policy which denies Berbers the most basic human rights.

B. North Africa an Amazigh land.

All the historians of North Africa have attested that this corner of the world had been populated by the Berbers since time immemorial. In his *Histoire des Berberes* book, the celebrated 14th century Arab historian and sociologist Abd-al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun wrote about the so-called the Maghreb, which the Berbers call Tamazgha or the land of the Amazigh, that: “Since time immemorial, this human race - Berbers - has populated the plains, the mountains, the plateaux, the countryside and the towns of the Maghreb.” (Ibn Khaldun, *Histoire des Berberes*, Paris, Geuthner, 1999, p. 167).

Regarding the Amazigh language, Tamazight, Ibn Khaldun wrote: “Their language is a foreign idiom which is different from all others. This is the very reason why they were called Berbers.” (*Ibid.*, page 168).

Finally, regarding North Africa’s religious life, Ibn Khaldun wrote: “Among them there were [tribes] which practised Judaism. There were Christians and pagans who worshipped the sun, the moon and other idols. As they were ruled by kings and other leaders, they waged several famous wars against Muslims.” (*Ibid.*, p.177).

For Gabriel Camps, “Thousands of years have passed and despite trials and tribulations of a history which is particularly characterized by conquests, invasions and assimilation attempts, the Berbers have survived in the immense territory which stretches from Egypt to

the Atlantic Ocean. Currently, Berber-speaking populations continue to live in a dozen African countries, from the Mediterranean to southern Niger and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Nile River. (Gabriel Camps: *Les Berberes, Memoire et Identite*, edition Errance, Paris, 1987, p. 5).

For now, any reader wishing to know about the views of celebrated experts on Berber issues, can read *L'Encyclopedie Berbere*, published in France in cooperation with UNESCO's International Council of Philosophy and Human Science.

C. Undeniable linguistic and cultural presence

One of the contemporary studies on Libya is the book by Jacques Lanfry: *Ghadames; Etude Linguistique et Ethnographic*, published in 1968 by Editions du Fichier de Documentation Berbere (Fort National, Algeria). The book was published following the author's field research in the Ghadames Oasis between 1944 and 1946. While Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi's regime was something unthinkable at the time, it was possible to conduct linguistic research in the Berber-speaking regions.

The study is a testimony about the particularity of the language spoken in this region of Libya, a dialect belonging to the family of the Berber language spoken all over North Africa. It also serves as a testimony about the presence of a culture which conveys the ancestral values of the Berber civilization. It contains nearly 400 pages on the study of the Ghadames Berber, in addition to a collection of poems, adages, puzzles and songs.

As is shown in the bibliography attached to this report, a number of studies have been conducted on the Berber language in Libya. This indicates the importance of this language in this region of North Africa.

The numerous Berber-speaking regions of Libya (Nefusa, Zwara, Sukna, Awjila, Ghadames, Awbrai, Ghat, Jalu, ...) still maintain their Berber characteristics. Berber is their mother tongue and Berber culture is part of their daily lives.

For this reason, the Berber language in Libya cannot be ignored. It is alive and is the language of hundreds of thousands of people.

When we surf Internet web sites, we come to realize the importance of the Berber language in Libya. Even web sites of travellers who have been across Libya give an account of this culture and of this language which is different from Arabic, which is officially presented as the only language of Libya.

The CERD members themselves, acknowledge the presence of Berber-speakers in Libya. In their conclusions (CERD/C304/Add.52) following the examination of Libya's 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th reports, they underlined the presence of Berbers and Tuareg that the Libyan state refuse to admit.

Part II

Main Violations of the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination.

1. Official and constitutional denial of the Amazigh (Berber) reality.

Anti-Berber discrimination is a deliberate and official fact which is present in the Libyan state institutions. It aims at denying the deep-rooted identity of the Berbers through their forced Arabicization and integration in the dominant and politically motivated concept of Arab-Muslim ideology.

Thus, the 11 December 1969 constitutional declaration illustrates the official discrimination suffered by the Berbers.

Article 1 of this declaration stressed that the Libyan people were part of the Arab nation. There was no hint or reference to the country's Berber characteristics.

Article 2 of the same declaration referred to Islam as the religion of the state. It also stressed that Arabic was the country's official language. Again, there was no mention of the Berber language, and accordingly Berber was not recognized despite the fact that it was, and still is, a living reality in Libya. The Berber language was officially excluded.

Article 5 which noted that all citizens were equal before law cannot be applied to the Berber-speakers who saw themselves deprived of their non-recognized language.

In its institutional reforms, education was one of the sectors to be affected. However, the reforms were announced in the following way: "[...] It means to reform the future citizens in a way to believe in their Islamic religion and to be proud of their Arabness". (See Taoufik Monastiri, "Chronique Sociale et Culturelle" *Annuaire de l' Afrique du Nord* 1974, p. 479). Another measure excluding the Berber element. This is the case of various state texts based on the policy of Arabicization and the denial of Libya's Amazigh identity.

The Libyan leader, Mu'ammār al-Qadhafi, has always been hostile towards the Berbers. For him, "... the will to use and maintain the Berber [language] is reactionary, inspired by colonialism ...". (See Ebert Gerlinde & Hans-Georg: *Zu Einigen Aspekten der Sprachsituation und Politik un der SLAVJ - Libya- under Besonderer Berucksichtigung des Italienischen*, p. 386).

"Al-Qadhafi's virulent and unprecedented anti-Berber policy is well known", (See Salem Chaker: *Une Decenie d'Etudes Berberes, 1980-1990*, Bouchene, Alger, 1991, p. 123).

It is worth noting that the Libyan state's official report made no mention of the country's ethnic make-up or the languages used by the population. The report (CERD/C/431/Add.5) reduced Libyans to a mere Arab ethnic group and ignored anything else which could be different. It particularly ignored the presence of a people whose culture and civilization have survived thousands of years and are still alive.

Following its 1998 examination of the official Libyan 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th reports, the CERD expressed its concern about the fact that the Libyan state “stressed that there were no ethnic minorities on its territory and had particularly overlooked the presence of Berbers, Tuareg and Black Africans, who - according to some information - were victims of discrimination because of their ethnic origin”. (CERD/C/304/Add.52, paragraph 12). In Paragraph 14 of the same document, the committee recommended to the concerned state to provide in its next report detailed information on the demographic make-up of its population [...]”.

Libya persists in denying the presence of Berbers on its territory and refuses to provide information on the ethnic make-up of its population, thereby reducing Libyans to mere Arab ethnic group.

In its 2001 report on Libya, the US State Department noted a “number of examples of discrimination based on the status of the tribe, particularly against the Amazigh in the country’s heartland and the Tuareg in the south”. The same report noted that in order to maintain its power, the Libyan government also manipulate and corrupts tribes.

The Berbers are scattered in a number of regions in Libya. Today. They are particularly concentrated in Adrar Infusan - the toponymy is being Arabicized to become al-Jabal Al-gharbi. The costal city of Zwara. There is also the Oasis of Ghadames and Ghat.

Decreeing Arabic as the only national and official language of the Libyan state explains the authorities’ will to Arabicize the Berber-speaking populations. The Berber language has no official status and all Libya’s Amazigh foundations have been deliberately ignored. Given this policy, an important section of the Libyan population is *de jure* excluded from history. This treatment which is contrary to the text and the spirit of the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination constitutes an intolerable attack against one of the basic rights of the Libyan Berbers who have been subjected to an oppressive Arabicization.

Texts dealing with Libya’s history do not even refer to the country’s Berber origin, or the Berber origin of North Africa in general. Such texts falsify history since they refuse to acknowledge that the first inhabitants of the country were Berbers; a fact which is hard to deny since all historians pinpoint the presence of Berbers on these territories since time immemorial.

For the Libyan state, the Berbers, their history, language, culture and civilization had never existed. Libyan history school books refer to the original Berber inhabitants of the territory as “ancient Arabs”. This is a deliberate will to deny the existence of the Berber characteristics and a part of the state’s Arabicization policy which aims to bury all signs of the country’s Berber identity.

2. Programmed Arabicization and assimilation.

Even if the Berber language in Libya, as is the case in the entire North Africa, had been able to resist almost all the conquering empires (Phoenicians, Byzantines, Romans etc.), Arabic, the language of the Koran, had succeeded in weakening it and seriously threatening its survival. Today, more than two thirds of Libyans are completely Arabicized and have lost the use of their ancestral language which had resisted in isolated areas (mountains, desert, oases etc..).

Libya's language policy would lead to a slow death of the Berber language, while Arabic enjoys considerable cultural power in the land of the "Great Jamahiriya". It is the language of the nation, of the religion and of the school (...). Being also the language of radio and television, Arabic surrounded the Berber from all sides and pushed it back to its last retreat, which is its use within family and in the Berber villages and oases.

This is the worrying state of the Berber language in Libya. The only responsible for this situation is the Libyan state which, with its exclusion policy, violates the most basic principles of the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.

By persisting in this forced Arabicization and assimilation of Berbers, the Libyan state commits one of the most terrible crimes, namely depriving the country of an important component of its history, culture and identity. The entire humanity would be deprived of thousands of years of history. This represents wealth not only to Libya but to the entire humankind.

The Libyan state needs to make all the necessary efforts in order to protect this Berber-speaking minority, its language and culture.

3. Official exclusion from the fields of culture and education.

It is obvious that the Berber language does not benefit from Libya's education system. There is no mention of the Berber history and civilization in the Libyan school books. Programmes for developing and promoting culture have overlooked the Berber culture. Only arts of Arabic expression benefit from state's aid. Worse, not only Berber heritage is being ignored but also banned. Despite the fact that there is no official text which bans Berber culture, it is very well known that in Libya Berbers do not dare to express their difference or work to safeguard and promote their culture within a legal framework.

Known to be a repressive regime, the Libyan state does not tolerate any individual or collective attempt to express Berber identity. Any will to take charge of Berber culture is being smothered. Expressing Berber identity is tantamount to an attack against the state's interests and integrity.

The Libyan state cannot justify this state of affairs and cannot continue to pretend to ignore the lamentable state in which Berber-speaking communities are living. The state is responsible for the slow death of the Berber language and culture. It needs to urgently review its linguistic and cultural policy.

All these facts pinpoint the cultural and language discrimination suffered by at least 10 per cent of Libyans.

4. Repressive and authoritarian anti-Berber policy.

According to testimonies by Libyan Berbers who have been, for years, living in exile in Europe and in the US, the Berbers are the subject of repression even for the fact that a family turning down the marriage of their daughter to Al-Qadhafi. This very same testimony (an excerpt of which is in Appendix 5), speaks about various forms of repression, including physical elimination of opponents who dare to express their attachment to their Berber identity.

- Berber toponyms are systematically Arabicized. Books referring to Berber are set to fire in public places. Berber is banned in schools, in the administration and in the public service.
- At one time telephone conversations in Berber were systematically interrupted as soon as they were intercepted.
- A propaganda is being orchestrated to encourage mixed marriages as a way to Arabicize Berbers.
- The Libyan state transfers Berber-speaking civil servants and employees from their regions of birth to Arabic-speaking regions. It also sends Arabic-speaking civil servants to Berber-speaking regions in order to implement the strict use of Arabic language.
- The Libyan state brings together population of different communities (Arabic-speaking and Berber-speaking) in the same municipalities in order to control Berber-speakers.
- Repression of Berber-speakers' religious practices such as the Ibadite rite (Non-orthodox minority Muslim rite practised by some Berber groups in Libya, southern Tunisia and southern Algeria).

5. Prohibitions

a) Prohibition of the use of languages other than Arabic

This prohibition aims primarily at suppressing the Amazigh language. Tamazight is a mother tongue to more than 10 per cent of Libyans and the only language spoken besides Arabic.

This was evidenced in the circular by the Communication Office of the Revolutionary Committees – Internal Actions Section, directed to the individuals in charge of the regional revolutionary activities and, for information, to the various members of the revolutionary committees, under the subject "information", and dated June 18, 1995 (see Appendix 1, document in Arabic). In this document it was stated that "it is prohibited to use a language other than Arabic in the various local administrative relations." The circular requires revolutionary committees and regional revolutionary working groups to examine this kind of phenomenon [non-observance of the exclusive use of the Arabic language] and to take the necessary measures so as to obtain "concrete" results.

This circular indicates that the languages used in "Dealings with outside or foreign partners" are not concerned by the prohibition. This shows, once more, that the suppressive measures are intended only for the local languages different from Arabic, i.e., the Amazigh language.

It is important to consider the consequences of such a circular and its enforcement in the Amazigh-speaking areas. Indeed, many people were fined or arrested and imprisoned. In extreme cases, they were tortured simply because they had to use their natural language in their everyday life.

According to testimonies by Amazigh speaking Libyans in exile in Europe, a whole arsenal of directives, circulars, official and semi-official laws... similar to the document cited (Appendix 1) aims at imposing the sole use of the Arabic language and the implicit and explicit suppression of the Amazigh language.

Consequently, the Libyan Amazighs are condemned to a slow but inescapable Arabicization.

b) Prohibition of Amazigh first names

Amazigh first names are prohibited by the Libyan administration. Amazigh parents are effectively forced to choose first names from a pre-established list of Arabic first names. They thus cannot choose an Amazigh name for their newborn.

c) Prohibition of Amazigh cultural activities

Amazigh cultural activities are prohibited and when citizens try to organize anything even within a restricted framework such as within a small village, the authorities intervene to stop the activity and arrest the organizers.

d) Prohibition of Amazigh cultural associations

Amazigh cultural organizations are prohibited as much as are other independent organizations that do not fit the model imposed by the regime.

e) Prohibition of Amazigh festivals, musical and artistic events

Amazigh artistic events and festivals are prohibited. The only activities tolerated are those where the language of expression is Arabic.

6. Libya's report: The contradictions

The naming of the Libyan State: In the general introduction of its report (first paragraph), the Libyan state defines itself as "Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya". This ethnicist definition alone shows the pure and simple exclusion of all that is not Arab and thus of the Amazigh character of Libya. The recurrence of the reaffirmation of the "Arabness" of Libya is only one symptom of the doubts that Libya's leaders entertain about the true identity of the people they govern.

In paragraph 3 of the report (chapter titled "Population"), it is stated "Libyans who are all of the same racial origin, have Islam as their religion and speak Arabic". The official definition, which is based on race (and thus on the rejection of the other) does not do justice to the Amazighs who have always defined themselves on a linguistic and cultural basis regardless of the colour of their skin, creed or way of life. The ethnicist and racist definition by the Libyan state are unworthy of the values of the twenty-first century.

It cannot be admitted that a people be defined only on the basis of race (which one?) especially when we know that North Africa was and still is the crossroads of multiple civilizations which, in their syncretism gave birth to the current civilization. It is important to recall that the North African lands have seen throughout history the successive invasions by the following civilizations: Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Moslems, Turks, and British. In terms of religion, North Africa has also been affected by all the monotheist religions that Humanity has known.

A racial or "racist" definition of the identity of Libya at the very least is foolish and presents no credibility.

In its report, the Libyan state quite simply ignores the ethnic and linguistic make-up of the country's population. A whole reality is thus occulted.

In paragraph 11 of its report (chapter titled "Religion"), the Libyan state affirms that "all the Libyans profess the Islamic faith... ". Does this mean that a Libyan citizen cannot be of a religion different from that issued officially, i.e., Islam? What protection and guarantees does the Libyan state provide to non-believers, atheists, and free thinkers...?

How can the Libyan state explain the repression of Ibadites, a minority sect of non-orthodox Islam different from that of the Malikite majority? Ibadites are Amazigh and thus represent a double minority.

In paragraph 19 of its report, the Libyan state categorically affirms that there is no racial discrimination of any kind in Libya. There are no groups or communities defined by their religion, race, language, sex, skin colour or political affiliations [...]. The fact that all Libyan citizens have the same origin, religion and language have without any doubt contributed decisively to the absence of racial discrimination in the country."

Aside from the confusion introduced in this paragraph, the report conceals a major contradiction. Indeed, how can the state claim to use all means necessary to fight discrimination in all its forms while it categorically affirms that discrimination does not exist on its territory.

Assuming that there is no discrimination, how can we accept at the same time that a Libyan does not have the right to adhere to a religion different from that chosen by the state? Don't the Amazighs have the right to use their language in spite of the state's imposition of Arabic as the official language?

As there is also historical identity suppression, the Libyan populations are in their vast majority of Amazigh origin and the Arabicization of part of these populations cannot justify their forced linguistic, cultural or religious assimilation today. The Amazighs have always asserted their language and culture that they have practised to date.

In paragraph 22 of the report by Libya, it is stated that "[...] any citizen has the right to exert the authority and self-determination within congresses and people's committees. The right to be a member of these bodies or to be elected to the office of secretary cannot be denied to any citizen who fulfills the requirements."

Some rights! Should we understand that a Libyan who does not belong to a "people's Congresses" or "Committee" does not have the right to organize himself/herself in a political party or independent trade union. No law, in fact, allows the creation of political parties.

In 1977 "were condemned in the name of Hizbiyah (membership in a political party) an unspecified number of people who were arrested since 1973 without anyone knowing exactly to what sentence." (Bessis, p. 158). In April 1980 "28 intellectuals were arrested and brought before the criminal court for violation of the law on Hizbiyah..." (Bessis, p. 169). Libya does not recognize political parties and trade-union pluralism.

In paragraph 23, Libya praises its adherence to the various international pacts and conventions relating to human rights.

We can affirm with certainty that no convention with provisions relating to linguistic, cultural, religious, trade-union and political diversity is enforced in Libya. The Libyan law takes precedence over international conventions. Worse, certain provisions of the international conventions against all forms of racial discrimination are violated by Libya. In paragraph 27, the Libyan state refers to Article 1 of the 1991 Law No. 20 which "guarantees" the freedom of expression and association to all citizens.

The right of association quoted in Law No. 20 is actually not in force. Otherwise how can one explain the non-existence of Amazigh cultural organizations? All attempts to organize associations were prohibited or repressed. People know the fate of those who tried to establish opposition parties. In fact, the freedom to organize is tolerated only within the framework defined by the law, which sets everything based on a restrictive vision, which is that of Al-Qadhafi.

Commentary of paragraph 28. Either some Libyan citizens profess religious rites other than Muslim, which makes the assertion in paragraph 11 ("all the Libyans profess the Islamic faith...") null and void: This would indicate that rites other than Islam are present in Libya, otherwise the affirmation of paragraph 28 is just demagogy.

In paragraph 79, the Libyan state indicates that "Everyone is entitled to education and knowledge and has also the right to choose the education which is appropriate to him/her and the knowledge that he/she wishes to acquire, without being subjected to any force or pressure."

With the exception that this education must be done exclusively in Arabic, a language that is imposed on all Libyans. Indeed, the mother tongue of the Amazighs of Libya is neither taught nor tolerated. The Amazigh-speaking populations who wish to learn the Amazigh language at school and to provide their children with courses on Amazigh history and civilization have no chance to see their wishes come true under current Libyan laws.

Paragraph 83 of the report notes that "Decree No. 268, promulgated in 1985 by the secretary of the People's General Committee, in charge of information and culture, projects the setting up of programmes of spectacles, excursions, sports activities and events for the families. The audio-visual media broadcast children programmes and there are also magazines for children."

Here also, the report fails to note that all that is done is only in the Arabic language. Amazigh children are therefore victims of discrimination because their mother tongue, Tamazight, is excluded from these programmes and activities.

9. Libya: The state of all kinds of discrimination

Based on the elements presented, it appears that the Libyan state has engaged on a policy of forced assimilation. The objective of this policy is, in the long term, to make Arabs out of Amazighs and so that Tamazight becomes a dead language.

By acting so, the Libyan authorities set up a policy whose objective is the simple disappearance of the Amazigh fact. Thus, the repression of Tamazight in Libya constitutes a clear violation of the provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.

In addition, the elements presented above show that the Libyan state is in violation of all the international conventions that require the protection of minorities and their interests.

PART 3.

Our proposals for the elimination of official discrimination

We ask Libya to recognize Tamazight as a national and official language. The Amazigh language needs to be recognized as a national and official language in the official texts and state institutions.

The Libyan state must guarantee to the citizens the right to create associations for the safeguard and promotion of the Amazigh language and culture.

So that one third of the citizens do not feel foreigners or marginalized in their own country, the Libyan state must devote a fair part of its media programmes (radio and television) to the Amazigh language and culture.

The Libyan state must include the Amazigh language in all education and training programmes. In the Amazigh areas, the Amazigh language must be made compulsory at all levels of teaching.

The Liban state must allow Amazigh-speakers to use their language when dealing with the various sectors of the administrations and institutions (administration, Justice...). When necessary, Amazigh interpreters must be provided to help eliminate discrimination and guarantee free speech.

The Libyan state must encourage Amazigh art in all its forms (theatre, music, dance, poetry...).

The Libyan state must establish institutions whose goal is to safeguard, promote and develop Amazigh language and cultural heritage in Libya.

To sum up, the Libyan state must take all the necessary measures to give back the Amazigh people their dignity, and put an end to the discrimination of which they are victims. It must put the necessary efforts and means to ensure the protection of the Amazigh language and culture.

Background

This report submitted by the collaboration of Tamazgha foundation, represented by Mr. Masin Aferkal (founder) and Tawalt foundation represented by Mr. Madi Mohammed (founder), Mr. Amnay (Secretary) , Mr. Mohammed Rabi Ashor (spokes person).