Orality as Aesthetic Device: Articulating Language, Religion, and Authority in Mohamed Akounad's Tawargit d Imik

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Orality as Aesthetic Device: Articulating Language, Religion, and Authority in Mohamed Akounad’s *Tawargit d Imik*

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Abstract

This article explores Mohamed Akound’s novel *Tawargit d Imik*, which focuses on protagonist Ssi Brahim who struggles to convey the essence of his religious sermons to an exclusively amazigh audience amidst societal opposition. By examining Ssi Brahim's character as the author's alter ego, the study aims to assess the novel's portrayal of religious concerns and activism for Tamazight and identity, particularly in relation to orality. Employing a sociolinguistic approach drawing from Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*, the analysis delves into the intersection of religion, authority, and language, placing orality at the heart of their role within the narrative. This study proposes a dual analytical approach, comprising textual and transtextual analyses, in order to unravel the protagonist's journey and explore intertextual connections with sacred texts.

Keywords: orality, intertextuality, language, linguistic capital, symbolic capital, Tamazight, religion, power

Born in 1950 in southern Morocco, Mohamed Akound is regarded by critics as a major figure in the emerging field of Amazigh literature (Amarir 115). Akound started his studies at a young age, immersing himself in the teachings of the Quran. Like many children of his generation, he began attending the mosque at a very early age. He committed the entire Quran to memory six times over (Akound). After completing his primary and secondary education, he went to
Taroudant at fifteen, where he enrolled in the prestigious Islamic Institute of the city (Akounad). During those formative years, he delved into the Prophet's biography and the intricacies of *hadith* interpretation, acquiring the qualifications of an exceptional imam while fearlessly advocating for Amazigh culture as a member of associations like “Tamaynout” in Agadir (“Mohamed Akounad”). Within the dialectical tension between these two facets of the author, the tapestry of Akounad’s work, particularly *Tawargit d Imik* (Dream and a Little Bit More), takes shape. Addressing societal, identity, and linguistic inquiries, his literary creations mirror the concerns of an era and a people yearning for cultural renewal. The narrative revolves around the story of a *fqih* (religious scholar) who fervently strives to convey the essence of his sermons to an exclusively Amazigh audience. In the face of numerous challenges, he resolves to convey his message in Tamazight, much to the dismay of many, eliciting reactions from residents, religious figures, and authorities alike. In his anthropological study, Mohamed Oussous asserts the presence of “thirdness,” indicating that these three aspects are intertwined and influence each other within the social dynamics of the Amazigh village where the narrative takes place (Oussous 80). We aim to frame this third dimension around orality as the novel's core, recognizing that orality is a cultural element of the Tamazight language, which has been transmitted.

Indeed, Tamazight has historically been transmitted orally from generation to generation. This oral tradition encompasses various forms of communication, including storytelling, poetry, proverbs, songs, and rituals (Banhakeia 14). Orality, understood as the aesthetic utilization of language that achieves generic codification, thus conveying a collective representation of reality, is fundamentally reliant on performance. Performance is characterized as the intricate process through which a poetic message is transmitted and perceived in the present moment (Zumthor 32). Our sociolinguistic approach draws from Bourdieu's work *Language and Symbolic Power*, which explores the intersection of religion, authority, and language. This approach underscores the significance of the cultural dimension and examines the implications of power within linguistic contexts. The novel not only provides a platform for the author to delve into the contentious issue of the Tamazight language's position in the Moroccan cultural panorama, but it also sheds light on a more critical aspect: it serves as a profound stylistic contemplation of the significance of orality as the primary cornerstone of Amazigh culture and language. Thus, orality, employed as both a stylistic and aesthetic device, permeates the entirety of the narrative. I propose a dual analytical approach to examining the

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1 Taroudant is a city in the Sous Valley in southwestern Morocco. Renowned for its well-preserved ramparts and vibrant medina, the city hosts esteemed educational institutions such as the Islamic Institute.
novel in this study. Firstly, textual analysis is essential to unravel the main character’s journey and the identities of other personas (Azur, Taydert, İṭtu n Īd Bella). Secondly, a transtextual analysis uncovers intricate intertextual connections with sacred texts (Genette 83-84).

Ssi Brahim, the novel's main character, is the author's alter ego. He embodies the author's religious concerns regarding using Tamazight in worship and activism for the Tamazight language and identity (Bouyaakoubi). In this article, we will explore to what extent these elements prevail in this novel, examining their interconnections around the concept of orality.

**Tamazight and its Sacredness heightened by Orality:**

Within the village of Ayt Usul, the author's village, located in the Souss region of Morocco, lives Ssi Brahim. The protagonist, the *fqih* of the local mosque, is responsible for delivering the Friday sermon. However, he is faced with a drowsy audience. Ssi Brahim distinguishes himself from the other *fqih* through his evident dedication to fulfilling his duty and transmitting the Word of God. At first, Ssi Brahim attempts to ornate his sermon using classical Arabic language, employing sophisticated stylistic techniques, elaborate language, and drawing from his deep understanding of religious texts to enhance his linguistic capital and engage his audience. As Pierre Bourdieu discusses in *Language and Symbolic Power*, linguistic capital can function as legitimate competence, “producing a profit of distinction on the occasion of each social exchange” (Bourdieu 55). This concept suggests that the proficiency and legitimacy one possesses in language can yield advantages, allowing individuals to stand out and garner attention through their linguistic prowess. Unfortunately, Ssi Brahim’s efforts only exacerbate the situation, leading to misunderstandings that mock the instructive intentions of his sermon.

To illustrate this situation, the narrator recounts an incident involving Hemmu, a humble and illiterate man. Upon hearing the *fqih* utter the phrase “*naḥnu aqrabu*” in classical Arabic, which means [we are the closest], Hemmu instead hears “*aḥanu Yuqwrab*” or “*aḥanu n uqwrab*” (Akounad 12) in Tamazight, which translates to “the pocket of the backpack” or “the pocket inside the backpack.” Faced with this challenge, Ssi Brahim turns to his fellow villagers, hoping for help, but their advice proves ineffective. The absence of a solution or guidance from the other *fqih* alludes to the limits of religious scholars. However, it opens up other perspectives, represented by the proverb that comes to him as a form of inspiration: “Wanna illan Ɣ tillas, ur ar istay ger iƔarassen” (Someone who is in the dark cannot choose between paths).

Indeed, Ssi Brahim spends entire nights contemplating the mosque's roof until a simple and seemingly insignificant idea crosses his mind: to preach in Tamazight on Fridays. This idea
appears to be more than a dream, but as the novel's title (Dream and Little Bit More) suggests: a divine inspiration. Disoriented, he finds himself guided by chance to the mosque's roof. Amidst the darkness, he ponders upon a popular proverb: “Wanna illan Ɣ tillas, ur ar istay ger iƔarassen” [Someone who is in the dark cannot choose between paths] (Akounad 5). This proverb echoes the verse, “Allah leaves straying whom He wills and guides whom He wills” (Surah Ibrahim, verse 4). This verse is an excerpt from the surah that bears the protagonist's name. This onomastic strategy decontextualizes the verse and reflects our protagonist's messianic project. The inspiration from the proverb leads to an irresistible decision: “Mac zeg assa d, rad awen sselkmeƔ tussen Ṛebbi s wawal nnun lli yawan yadelli isti lliƔ kwen isker” [From today, I shall convey to you the divine knowledge in the language that God had already chosen for you when He created] (Akounad 20). This inspiration parodies the verse, “Never have We sent a Messenger but he has addressed his people in their language that he may fully expound his Message to them” (Surah Ibrahim, verse 4). Akounad emphasizes the sacredness of the Tamazight through the intertextuality with Ibrahim's surah. Brahim's linguistic choice becomes a potent tool for challenging established power dynamics and asserting the legitimacy of Tamazigh within religious discourse. It exemplifies how language, imbued with symbolic power, can be wielded to challenge dominant narratives and empower marginalized voices.

Behind the character's naivety and legitimate endeavour to get his audience involved, the protagonist makes a profound declaration, which can only be attributed to the author's voice, given his strong religious background: “The language that God had already chosen for you when He created you” (Akounad 20). The manipulation of language perpetuates social hierarchies and maintains certain groups' dominance over others. Bourdieu captures the profound impact of this linguistic manipulation by illustrating how it “divides each word against itself” (Bourdieu 145), suggesting that the imposition of a sacred/profane divide penetrates language at its core, distorting meanings and creating layers of interpretation. This concept underscores the pervasive influence of language in shaping perceptions of reality and reinforcing systems of power and control.

In contrast to the Arabic language, Tamazight, the indigenous language of North Africa, is not specifically associated with any religion. Akounad emphasizes that language is not merely a tool but carries divine significance. This is exemplified by the character's use of Tamazight to convey the message of God and that this language is a divine choice. This is why the protagonist decides to fulfil what the prophets began: to bring divine knowledge to this population in accordance with God's choice. As a result, Tamazight acquires a religious status and becomes equal to Arabic, a language revered alongside all others of the word, particularly...
notable as Arabic is the language in which the Quran was revealed. Extending this line of reasoning, one can deduce that sacredness is more closely related to the abstract concept of “language” rather than being arbitrarily attributed to a particular language. Indeed, as demonstrated through Ssi Brahim's experience with the locals, the sacredness of language ultimately resides in its functionality for understanding and perfectly disseminating divine teachings. Thus, it becomes necessary for Ssi Brahim to convey these messages in a language that the locals understand: Tamazight. By doing so, the Tamazight language becomes no less sacred than Arabic.

According to the narrative, the protagonist appears animated by an enthusiasm that drives him to believe that this decision is essential for establishing a deeper connection between the believers and the Word of God. However, he is unaware that it could be perceived as a departure from Islamic tradition in Morocco and might elicit hostile reactions from conservative members of the community. Despite this, Ssi Brahim courageously put his decision into practice and the following Friday delivers his sermon in Tamazight.

The initial moments are marked by surprise and incomprehension, but reactions to his decision gradually manifest. The message starts gaining traction and acceptance. Ssi Brahim slowly finds his place within the community, surrounded by his faithful. However, Hemmu, after his comic reaction to the verse “nahnu aqrabu,” returns to raise a serious question by questioning the acceptability of praying in a language other than Arabic: “Ass ad is ka ncelleḥ a Ssi Brahim! Ur ssenγ is nit tezri tẓallit neγ, neγ d uhu!” [Today, we spoke in Tamazight! I don't know if our prayer will be accepted or not] (Akounad 21). Ḥemmu raises the question of a mere change in the message’s transmitting code. Arabic is the language of the Quran (Ash’-shu’ara, 192-195); it is the language through which God chose to address humanity, communicating His message and will. It serves as the unique liturgical language for all Muslims worldwide, shedding light on Islamic texts (Majma’ al-Fiqh al-Islami al-Dawli).

Replacing Arabic with Tamazight during the sermon, particularly in a North African region long influenced by Maliki jurisprudence, seems to present more challenges than merely changing the language used in sermons. The protagonist's decision to convey divine knowledge and his parody of the Quran verse in Tamazight reflects a recognition of the symbolic power inherent in language. By using Tamazight, they not only make the teachings accessible to the local population but also elevate the status of the language itself. This highlights Bourdieu's

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2 The Malikites assert that the sermon must be delivered in Arabic, and it is not permissible to do it in any other language, even if the audience is not Arabic speaking. (Shikh Rahmani, pp. 162-163).
notion that language is a vehicle through which symbolic power is exercised and reproduced in society.

Ssi Brahim's journey begins as he initially contemplates replacing the Arabic language with Tamazight to engage his audience more effectively and convey a deeper understanding of the divine message. At this juncture, he realizes that he intends to change not just the language of the sermon but also encounters the question of the sacredness of the Arabic language. He implicitly argues, and through a parody of the Quran, suggests that Tamazight is also a sacred language. This reveals his profound contemplation, prompting readers to question whether the protagonist or the author is behind this declaration. However, at this stage, he remains unaware that introducing Tamazight into religious spaces signifies more than a mere change of the sermon's language because the cultural dimension of the Amazigh language becomes entangled in his sermon. Later, he will argue with fervent defenders of Tamazight's identity after and amid his sermons.

Orality at the Heart of Transformation: Learning from Poets and Poetesses:
Ssi Brahim did not fully grasp the full implications of using Tamazight as a medium for his religious sermons. Thus, his initial sermon about theft reflects the widely held Islamic perception of theft, where theft is punished equally regardless of its scale. Ssi Brahim's linguistic capital lacks a full understanding of the cultural and intrinsic value of Tamazight. This oversight is evident in his failure to incorporate the cultural dimensions of Tamazight into his first sermons, neglecting its significance as a language deeply rooted in the history and identity of the Amazigh people. In contrast, Azrur, one of the tribe's notables and an imminent Raïs, is widely known in the village for his unwavering commitment to the Tamazight language and culture. His words hold great importance, but they need to be carefully understood. Azrur warns Ssi Brahim that he should address real theft and not solely focus on petty theft:

\[ \text{Ẓil mayad lli f aγ tsawelt a ssi Brahim Tiklit ad, mac is ur ar ttannayat is aγ tsawalet f rukkerḍa imeẓẓiyen, tfelt tukkerḍa imeqquren? [So, you discussed the subject you mentioned this time, Mr. Brahim, but why did you mention petty thefts and overlook high-value thefts?] (Akounad 27).} \]

3 In the Souss region of Morocco, a “Raïs” refers to a local musician or singer specializing in performing traditional Amazigh music. The term “Raïs” is specific to the cultural context of the Souss region and is often associated with musicians who play traditional instruments like the lute or the tambourine. These musicians are highly respected within their communities and play an important role in preserving and promoting the region's rich musical heritage. Their performances are often lively and energetic, accompanied by rhythmic dances and poetic lyrics that reflect the cultural traditions and values of the Amazigh people in the Souss region.
Azrur, who regarded truth as an essential criterion of Raïs, did not appreciate that Ssi Brahim omitted to speak about forest and land thefts, which were the true theft for him, and instead spent the entire sermon condemning petty thefts. This discrepancy stems from two different visions of theft: the Islamic one and the Amazigh one embodied by the Raïs as one of its major representations. For the Raïs, nuance is essential, and hierarchization is necessary. The severity of the punishment depends on the nature of the theft and the context in which the theft was committed. According to Azrur, courage lies in speaking the truth (“Awal n tidet”) about the real theft (land and forest), and he viewed Ssi Brahim’s sermon as a betrayal of the ancestors, being too focused on expressing only petty theft. In response, Azrur invites Ssi Brahim to introduce the words of Assays, a space where poetic jousts take place: “Awal n ufel a yad a Yazrur! Awal n usays a yad!” [It is a supreme speech, Azrur! The speech of Assays!] (Akounad 28). Given his cultural background, Ssi Brahim understands the message of Azrur, but he is confused and does not realize how the word Assays can be told in a mosque space. He does not realize that he has to move from the erudite religious books to the wisdom of the poetry of Assays, which symbolize oral Amazigh culture.

As the story unfolds, the tribe becomes divided between supporters and opponents of Ssi Brahim. Women, in particular, seem more enthusiastic about listening to a sermon in their language. Thus, after the first sermon in Tamazight, four women approached him to inquire whether they could attend the Friday sermon: “Is aƔ izger nekkw enniti timƔarin ad nettẓalla, nessfeld i tgellayt n was n ljamƐ? Nnan aƔ ar tsawalt s wawal neƔ, awal n tmaziƔt lli akw nessen” [Can we, as women, pray and listen to the Friday sermon? We were told that you speak our language. The language of our country that we master] (Akounad 24). The women attend the sermon, delivered in a language they understand, and feel engaged with its content. Ssi Brahim grants women the right to attend the Friday sermon without relying on religious texts to justify it. Instead, he draws on his understanding of the mosque space, which he does not consider exclusively reserved for men: “timẓida ur teẓli Ɣas s irgazen” [the mosque is not solely reserved for men] (Akounad 24). However, he asks them to respect their boundaries: “iƔ tessnemt iwutta nnunt” [You have to respect your limits] (Akounad 24). In reality, similar to the Aḥwach dance under the direction of a Raïs, there are strict rules to be observed in the mosque space.

Culturally, Amazigh art exemplifies the involvement of Amazigh women in the community’s life. In southern Morocco, for instance, Raïs (or Raïssate) do not exclude women...
from their audience or singing troupes. Inspired by the Rwayes tradition, Ssi Brahim aims to address an increasingly broad audience and willingly includes a feminine presence among his listeners. Hoffman, in her book *We Share Walls: Language, Land, and Gender in Berber Morocco*, listed in the table the presence/absence of women in different Amazigh dances. She confirms that *Ahvac* figures a dance where women are present (Hoffman 30).

It should be noted that the discourse on theft was not the first instance where Ssi Brahim incurred the wrath of the Rwayes. His second sermon, which revolved around the “status of women in Amazigh society,” similarly failed to meet expectations and highlighted a stark divergence between Islamic and Amazigh cultures. Iṭṭu n Idbella, a renowned poetess who has won epic duels against great poets, is among the four women in the mosque to attend the Friday sermon. After listening to the sermon, Iṭṭu n Idbella openly expresses her discontent with Ssi Brahim's discourse, which she deems misogynistic. She emphasizes that the woman portrayed in his sermon bears no resemblance to her perception of an Amazigh woman. Iṭṭu is a well-known woman in the village, celebrated for her courage, “Tguzult,” her freedom, and her poetry, “umarg Y usays”: “Ur ar ttizdiren imarien meqqrnin ad dis mmeYnalen Y wawal” [Even great poets fail to challenge her] (Akounad 56). She believes that Ssi Brahim's speech displayed, at best, a lack of discernment and, at worst, complete ignorance of women: “Illa fellak ad tessent atig n temyrta a ṭṭaleb,” [You must recognize the value of women, preacher] (Akounad 106). In general, the *fqih*, as a religious authority, is often limited in his understanding of the role and place of women in Amazigh society. This limitation often stems from traditions, restrictive interpretations of religious texts, and a predominant patriarchal vision. However, Akounad's attention to this aspect is significant. He highlights the need to recognize and value the important role of women in Amazigh society. Their contribution to community life, whether in art, music, poetry, or local governance, is invaluable (Yacine 350). While we do not want to claim the matriarchal nature of ancient Amazigh societies here, it is fair to acknowledge the significant role played by Amazigh women in political, economic, social, and cultural realms throughout history. Prominent figures such as Zaynab Nafzawiya (wife of Youssef ben Tachefine), Kenza Awrabiya (wife of Idriss I), and especially Dihya (Ouhibi Aitsiselmi 119) are examples that testify to this glorious past.

Ssi Brahim's performance during the sermon, taking the form of a “*Tandamt*,” is deemed below the expectations of a true Raïs. *Tandamt* in the Souss region of Morocco is a form of poetic jousting in the space of *Assayes*. This space, reserved for poetic duels, is where poets confront each other on current topics, utilizing their skills and mastery of language and poetry. In these duels, eminent poets (such as Iṭṭu n Idbella), renowned for their talent and expertise,
play a crucial role as judges and respected references. They are the guardians of poetic tradition and assess the performance of participating poets. In this context, a young poet may participate in the joust and engage with the great poets on a subject in the Assayes space. If the poet manages to convince a Raïs, an eminent poet, of the validity of their arguments and the quality of their poetry, the poet will be accredited and recognized as Raïs from that moment onwards. This signifies their success in establishing themselves within the circle of eminent poets and earning their respect. However, if the young poet fails to convince the Raïs in this joust, they learn the lesson through the retort of the eminent poet. This lesson can serve as a source of learning and development for the young poet, helping them progress in their art and refine their mastery of poetry.

Ssi Brahim’s sermons in Tamazight were met with some apparent success among his followers. Still, they were far from achieving unanimity, particularly within the community of Rwayes (Azrur and İṭṭu n Id Bella). Even when Ssi Brahim uses Tamazight, his words are merely a mediocre imitation of religious discourse because they do not reflect the culture of his community. For İṭṭu, as well as for Azrur, he should move beyond the translation of the Arabic perception of women and delve into the Amazigh perception of women. İṭṭu's arguments serve as a great lesson for the protagonist. In his quest to gain recognition from a Raïs, he encountered his first setback, realizing the limitations of his discourse, which primarily relies on the works of the educated (tiṭṭulba): “Ar issiggil ger tefrawin n idlisen ad yaf kra n yan lli darsen ur ittussanen Ɣ tudart nsen” [He searches among the pages of books, hoping to find something unknown to the people] (Akounad 60). Ssi Brahim should move beyond relying on books and instead learn from the Rwayes tradition to better understand his community and meet their needs.

At this point, Ssi Brahim abandons the practice of captivating the audience with erudite knowledge, which is highly valued by religious individuals, according to the story. He realizes that the books are the source of illusions that pervade his arguments: “ttyigilent twargiwin nesen amẓen gis” [illusions that dreams cling to] (Akounad 60). He understands that true knowledge emanates from people's daily lives and everyday actions, and İṭṭu n Id Bella serves as a living example of this. She is a woman gifted with exceptional talent as a poetess (Raïssa) and remarkable courage, who also fulfills her responsibilities as a single mother after her husband's death.

The question of erudite knowledge prompts the protagonist to recognize the significance of the wisdom imparted by the ancestral art, specifically the poetry of the Raïs. İṭṭu provides a perfect example of this through her personal life, drawing inspiration from everyday life,
physical reality, and the experiences of her village. From now on, bookish knowledge will no longer monopolize the realm of preaching. The protagonist decides to merge “tin ṭṭulba i tin n imariren” [the art of rwayes with the knowledge of tulbas, religious scholars] in his weekly sermons, thereby initiating a process that he hopes will lead to the Amazigh appropriation of Islamic worship. Ssi Brahim transitions from intricacies and embellishments in Arabic to improvisation in the Tamazight. It is as if rediscovering his mother tongue relieves him of a burden without compromising the quality of his work in terms of aesthetics. The mosque becomes a space for eloquence and immediate poetic improvisation: “ur t sul ighi ad isti, isgididdi tiguriwin Y tgellayt n wass n ġamɛ, isawal s tufayt iƔ ar tt izeray” [For Ssi Brahim, the challenge is no longer about adorning the words in Friday sermons or striving to raise his voice while preaching] (Akounad 25). This sermon seems to emanate from a hybrid space between dreams and reality. Like a divine inspiration, it results from a vivid imagination or the improvisation of the unconscious. As Ssi Brahim had foreseen, this dual origin seems to integrate the sermon into the fusion of the world of the fqih and that of the troubadours. The exercise proves to be more complex than the fqih had anticipated, as evidenced by the almost hallucinatory state he finds himself in when giving birth to his discourse: “is d helli gigi tengi tagellayt an! lliy uzmez an ger ufrak d twargit” [How this sermon has flowed out of me! At that moment, I was between reality and dream] (Akounad 107).

Ssi Brahim’s sermon adopts the form (length, meter, musicality, and non-adherence to rhyme) of the rwayes’s poems. The text adheres to the Alexandrine meter, except for the anaphoric phrase “kti tazzwwit tektit ajedig” [evoking the bee, evoking the flower] (Akounad 109). The text comprises seven sentences with striking musicality, featuring interjections, exclamations, rhetorical questions, and interpellations. It metaphorically expresses admiration for women. Women are likened to bees to symbolize purity, virtue, diligence, and organization. The queen bee represents the historical matriarchal figure in Amazigh society, much like Dihya (Modérán 4102). The sarcastic response from Ḥemmu n Ayt Ėli perfectly reflects this sentiment: “ur ay tennit a ssi Brahim ad nawi tilluna” [it would be better if you asked us to bring the tambourines] (Akounad 113). The mosque becomes filled with joyful and festive camaraderie, reminiscent of Assays. In this context, Tayedert, a young poetess who has yet to

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5 In Surah As-Saffat (37:102), Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) experiences a dream where he sees himself sacrificing his son Isma’il (Ishmael) as an act of obedience to Allah. This dream is interpreted as a divine command, and both Ibrahim and Isma’il submit to Allah’s will. It is worth mentioning that the intertextuality with Surah Ibrahim and the prophetic incident involving Prophet Ibrahim, such as the dream, alludes to the messianic mission of the protagonist. Additionally, Ibrahim is revered as the patriarch of monotheistic religions.
receive accreditation as a Rais, emits a triumphant ululation. Tayedert and Ssi Brahim share the same status: two individuals on a quest for recognition from the masters–Azrur and Iṭṭu n Idbella. At the end of the narrative, while Ssi Brahim acknowledges his continued failure to obtain the precious validation as a Rais, Tayedert is rewarded for her efforts (by Azur) and becomes a Raïssa. Her spontaneous ululation reflects the enthusiasm of a young poetess on the path to realizing her dream of becoming a Raïssa. However, ultimately, Tayedart's ululation is a false accreditation.

Ssi Brahim has learned valuable lessons from the poet and the poetess, embodying the linguistic capital that aligns with the Amazigh vision of the world and its values. His sermon incorporates characteristics from oral poetry, such as the revelation of the truth about women, as he delivers a speech meeting the audience's expectations, especially when he compares women to bees. It also imitates Rways's style because he improvises and does not prepare the sermon as he used to. Oral poetry stands out for its ability to convey personal experiences in pursuit of a higher truth, as illustrated in the novel by discussing theft and women. The audience expects the poet/fqiḥ to possess the skill to improvise, adapt their discourse to different situations, and fully immerse themselves in the community's daily life, thereby experiencing their sorrows and joys. This profound connection with the community is crucial for being a genuine source of inspiration. Under the guidance of Azrur and Iṭṭu n Idbella, the community sees in Ssi Brahim a representative of the ethnos, an objective he was about to achieve.

The Hurdles of Authority and the Redemption of Ssi Brahim:

Transforming the fqiḥ into a figure capable of immersing himself in the people's daily life and expressing their sorrows and joys calls for the intervention of the authorities, represented by the Caid. Ssi Brahim exemplifies individuals who become “agents possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital, i.e., in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group” (Bourdieu 106). Symbolic capital refers to individuals' resources or attributes that are recognized and valued within a social group. In this context, individuals wield power based on the degree of recognition they receive from the group. The more symbolic capital they have, the greater their influence and authority. Traditionally, the fqiḥ is often regarded as a religious figure distant from people's everyday lives, primarily focusing on religious teachings and utilizing a lofty and complex language that leaves people bewildered. The community admired the fqiḥ without truly comprehending their discourse, reproaching themselves for their

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6 Local leader, tribal chief.
ignorance and thus exalting the *fqih*. The author subtly condemns this situation through the novel by portraying the audience feeling sleepy as Ssi Brahim delivers his high-level Arabic discourses, or by highlighting their misunderstandings of expressions like “nahmu aqrabu.” Nevertheless, this new position of Ssi Brahim as a “percipi” signifies in Bourdieu's terms:

[A state of being-known or recognized by others. It allows individuals, or “percipere,” to impose their perspective or vision on others. In essence, the authority derived from being recognized by the group enables one to shape the consensus regarding the meaning of the social world. (Bourdieu 106)]

With recognition, Ssi Brahim can influence the group's collective understanding or interpretation of social reality. He can shape the consensus, or prevailing perspective, on various societal issues, norms, and values. This challenges the traditional image of the *fqih* as a distant authority and raises questions among the local authorities. The authorities, represented by the *Caïd*, perceive this evolution as a challenge to their authority and control over religious practice, fearing that Amazigh appropriation of Islamic worship may fragment social cohesion and incite political tensions. Initially, the protagonist's discourse in the Amazigh language does not reflect Amazigh values because he relies solely on erudite translations and book knowledge. Reproaches from Iṭṭu n Idbella and Azrur lead him to reconcile Amazigh values with the Tamazight language, involving discussions about real-life issues such as theft (forest and land) and the role of women, including Assays' discussions in mosque spaces. The intelligible discourse from the audience, along with discussions about real problems involving the authorities, further exacerbates their fears of losing control over the narrative and societal dynamics.

The *Caïd* made enemies in the community such as Azrur, the master of *Assay*. Indeed, during the inauguration of a new road, the *Caïd* wishes to be welcomed by *Ahwac*, a traditional dance. Azrur adamantly refuses, reminding him that *Ahwac* is reserved for leisure, not work. The *Caïd*, irritated by this response, tries to impose his will, but Azrur refuses to yield. He even slaps the *Caïd* to express his disdain and determination to protect the tradition of *Rwayes* from any political manipulation (Akounad 46). In this scene, the author implicitly contrasts the *Rais* as a figure of incorruptibility and non-manipulation with the easily corruptible and manipulatable *fqih*. Indeed, the *Caïd* is eager to manipulate the *fqih* to his advantage and employs cunning to establish a friendship with Ssi Brahim. The *Caïd*'s incessant invitations for dinner play on Ssi Brahim's naivety by making him believe that he is part of the prestigious circle (Authority elite of the village) until he gradually considers himself superior to the population. A scene in the *Caïd*'s office perfectly illustrates how the *fqih*, once concerned about his integration into society, succumbs to a sense of superiority: “Yufa midden skeren yad adras
dat nes (usirra). ‘Max nekkī giγ zund netteni ad tteqleyγ?! Nekki giγ tṭaleb, gey nnig an ameddakkwel n lqayd’ yini ssi Brahim d ixf nes’ [He (SSI Brahim) found himself in the line (at the Caid’s office). ‘Do I have to wait like the others?! I am a fqiḥ, the Caid’s friend,’ thought SSI Brahim] (Akounad 135). This change in his mindset led to a rupture in the relationship of trust and mutual commitment that once existed between the fqiḥ and the community.

The population began to turn its back on the fqiḥ, realizing that he had succumbed to his vices, enjoying the endless dinner invitations from the Caid, the representative of authority. When SSI Brahim arrived at the Caid’s office one day, he was taken aback by the reception he received. The Caid was no longer as friendly, and his tone had changed. Questions kept pouring in, incessantly irritating the fqiḥ: “Iseqsiten qqurnin, yan idfar gwmas!” [Difficult questions, one after another!] (Akounad 136). The Caid was bothered by the fact that the population had found a new avenue for expression, particularly through an association named “Asirem n Usekka” (Hope of Tomorrow) (Akounad 137). The Caid strongly reproached SSI Brahim for losing control over the population, and, most importantly, he realized that the fqiḥ was completely unaware of these developments, illustrating the total loss of his symbolic capital. Even the drafting of requests (asuter) no longer fell under the fqiḥ's authority. This drafting is a traditional role of the fqiḥ in villages, signifying a decline in his symbolic capital compared to traditional fqiḥs. By losing his influence over the community, the fqiḥ also lost his standing with the local authorities. He is now deemed worthless, and the Caid is prepared to abandon him. This descent into hell pushes the former fqiḥ to question himself deeply and to return to his roots. SSI Brahim thinks about his childhood, recalls his mother's songs, and reviews his journey in the mosque of Ait Usul. He finds redemption in making his entrance to Assays and imploring the inhabitants to accept him.

In his novel, Akounad alludes to the region's history, where prominent religious figures failed to make Tamazight a medium for explaining worship to the faithful. The most emblematic example is that of Mohamed Mokhtar Soussi, born in 1900 in the village of Illigh in the Dougadir Valley in Tafraout and died in a car accident in Rabat on November 17, 1963. He was an Islamic scholar and Moroccan nationalist. Soussi was Minister of Habous and Religious Affairs in the government of Bekkay Ben M'barek Lahbil between 1955 and 1956. He established himself in Marrakech, opened a school and focused on teaching Amazigh culture. This drew the ire of the protectorate authorities, leading to his exile twice (Abdelkabir 7). During this period, he seized the opportunity to write his encyclopedic work “Al Maāssoul” (The Mellifluous). The historical effort by figures like Mohamed Mokhtar Soussi to incorporate Tamazight into religious worship is deeply rooted in Moroccan history. It attests to the Amazigh
people's determination to render their language religious, thereby adopting an attitude considered heretical: “amazighicizing Islam” rather than completely assimilating Amazigh identity into Islam originating from the “Mashreq.” The faith practiced by the Beni Tarif tribe (Berghouta) did not completely diverge from Islam. Instead, it underwent modifications to align with an Amazigh interpretation, distinct from the teachings originating in the Eastern Islamic tradition. This adaptation involved the creation of a localized version of the Quran and the recognition of a local prophet (Chtatou, 2021). Abu Ubayd Allah Al-Bakri recounts in his book that worship practices within the Berghouata kingdom were conducted in Tamazight, including prayer (Ibn Khordadbeh, 1865). According to Abu Ubayd Allah Al-Bakri, the Berghouatas (also known as Barghwata or Barghawata), used expressions such as “Abasmen Yakouch” to signify “in the name of God” (Bismillah) and “Maqqur Yakuch” to convey “God is great” (Allahu Akbar). During prayer, “they would recite half of their Quran while standing, and the other half while sitting,” adds Abu Ubayd Allah Al-Bakri.

Historically, the attempt to introduce Tamazight as a religious language failed. In the 1950s, following Morocco's independence, new opportunities arose for the Amazigh population. This pivotal moment finds perfect representation in the novel through the association “Asirem n usekka,” introduced as a symbol of the Amazigh cultural movement. The Amazigh cultural movement espouses modern values such as democracy and the rights of minority peoples. Laura Feliu argues that the struggle of the MCA (Amazigh Cultural Movement) aligns with internationally recognized human rights references, making this shared heritage the bedrock of its activism (Feliu 284). It calls for the official recognition of Tamazight. The MCA seeks to empower Amazigh people in Morocco, Algeria, and across North Africa to reclaim their inherent rights in accordance with international human rights standards, including declarations, charters, and covenants. This movement unites diverse stakeholders, including associations, students, activists, artists, poets, and novelists, who peacefully advocate for the state to enshrine all the rights of Amazigh people in its foundational texts. As noted, the narrator introduces the Assirem association as a beacon of hope for defending Amazigh culture and rights without consulting Ssi Brahim, who is deemed corrupt by the Caid. These rights encompass the official recognition of Amazigh language and identity in Morocco and Algeria, and the acknowledgment of Amazigh identity within the North African context. It is crucial to emphasize that this movement also draws its essence from a reevaluation of Amazigh cultural

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7 Abu Ubayd Allah Al-Bakri is an Arab Andalusian historian and a geographer of the Muslim West. (Lévi-Provençal 155)
heritage, where the art of the *Rais*, particularly in the Souss region, holds paramount importance.

Ssi Brahim's narrative in the village of Ayt Usu parallels the author's evolution from religious scholar to advocate for Amazigh rights. Akounad's early dedication to religious studies, including memorizing the Quran and attending an Islamic Institute, evolved as he matured, leading him to shift his focus towards activism for Amazigh culture by participating in associations like “Tamaynout.” Initially delivering sermons in Arabic, Ssi Brahim transitions to Tamazight, challenging established power structures and asserting the validity of his sermons in Tamazight. This shift initiates community discussions on the sanctity of language and the traditional role of Arabic. Despite facing obstacles, Ssi Brahim adapts by incorporating oral poetry, enhancing his connection with the community, and aiming to reconcile religious teachings with Amazigh culture. The novel advocates for recognizing Amazigh culture and highlights the significance of the Amazigh Cultural Movement in safeguarding Amazigh rights, particularly in the wake of historical failures in religious reform. The novel also underscores the manipulation of religious scholars by authority figures. Mohamed Akounad's literary exploration delves into the intricate dynamics between religion, authority, and language, notably emphasizing the pivotal role of oral traditions. Through the skillful incorporation of oral elements (proverbs, sayings, poetry, *Assays*, etc.) the novel achieves a nuanced aesthetic, fostering potent intertextuality and enriching the narrative with historical depth.

**Works Cited**


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