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Orality and Cultural Preservation: A Study of Imuhaɣ (Tuareg) Oral Literature and Its Enduring Legacy

الشّفهيّة والحفاظ على الثقافة: دراسة في الأدب الشفهي للإموهاغ (الطوارق) وإرثه المستدام

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Abstract:

This article explores the rich literary heritage of the Amazigh people of North Africa, emphasizing its deep roots in oral tradition. Despite historical challenges such as colonization, cultural assimilation, and language shifts, Amazigh literature has endured thanks to its integration into daily life, rituals, and social structures. From poetry and folktales to myths and sacred chants, literary expression was not limited to elite but was shared by entire communities. The article also highlights the early contributions of Amazigh figures such as Apuleius and the influence of Mediterranean and Arab cultures. While primarily oral, the Amazigh literary tradition has also been preserved through the use of the Tifinagh script and continues to play a key role in cultural identity. The discussion calls for greater recognition of Amazigh literature in global literary discourse.

Key words: Amazigh literature; Oral tradition; Cultural heritage; Literary marginalization; Poetry and storytelling.

الملخص:

تتناول هذه المقالة التراث الأدبي الغني للشعب الأمازيغي في شمال إفريقيا، المتجذّر في التقاليد الشفوية القوية. وتُبرز كيف تمكّن الأدب الأمازيغي من الصمود في وجه الاستعمار والاندماج الثقافي وتغيّر اللغة، بفضل اندماجه في الحياة اليومية والطقوس الاجتماعية. وتشمل الأشكال الأدبية فيه الشعر والحكايات الشعبية والأناشيد المقدسة، التي كانت تُتداول جماعيًا دون أن تقتصر على النخب. كما تتتبع المقالة إسهامات مبكرة لشخصيات أمازيغية مثل أبوليوس، مع الإشارة إلى تأثيرات البحر الأبيض المتوسط والثقافة العربية. وعلى الرغم من طابعه

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الشفوي، فقد تم توثيق هذا التراث أيضًا بحروف التيفيناغ. لا يزال الأدب الأمازيغي يلعب دورًا محوريًا في الهوية الثقافية، وتدعو المقالة إلى الاعتراف الأوسع به في الخطاب الأدبي العالمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الأمازيغي؛ التقليد الشفهي؛ التراث الثقافي؛ التهميش الأدبي؛ الشعر والسرد القصصي.

Introduction:

The Amazigh people have inhabited North Africa since ancient times. Their millennia-long presence has shaped a unique cultural heritage, where linguistic and artistic diversity stands as one of the most distinctive features of this civilization, which is both Mediterranean and African. This dual identity has allowed the Amazigh to act as cultural mediators between sub-Saharan and Mediterranean worlds, a role that enriched their artistic expression and narrative traditions across time. Their continuous interaction with other Mediterranean peoples fostered a thriving cultural and artistic landscape, demonstrating a society that was dynamic and deeply engaged in intercultural exchange. As Basset points out, all Amazigh-speaking groups in North Africa undoubtedly possessed a rich and ancient literary tradition (Basset, 1920, p 30). This affirmation counters common assumptions that equate oral cultures with a lack of literary complexity. Instead, it affirms the existence of structured narrative forms and refined poetic expression deeply embedded in communal life.

One crucial historical detail that deserves special attention is that the first known novel in literary history, The Golden Ass (or Metamorphoses), was written by a Romanized Amazigh, Apuleius of Madauros (Mammeri, 1980, p 52). Far from being a mere anecdote, this fact reveals the Amazigh contribution to classical literary heritage, demonstrating that Amazigh individuals were not only participants but innovators in the literary canon of antiquity. This is not a coincidence; the literary tradition in North Africa was already well-established, nurtured by a society capable of producing and preserving a flourishing literary culture. This land has always been a cradle of poetry and storytelling, where words carried the memory of ancestors. As Jean Amrouche noted (1939, p 12), this poetic voice, transmitted from generation to generation, served not only to express emotion but to archive a collective memory absent from written records.

In all traditional Amazigh-speaking societies, literature was not confined to an elite; rather, it permeated everyday life, shaping both mundane moments and significant social events. This democratization of literary expression contrasts sharply with the hierarchical nature of classical literatures, where access to

writing and literary prestige was restricted. Among the Amazigh, the poem could belong to the shepherd, the elder, or the bride-each carrying meaning through voice. Poetry, songs, folktales, myths, and legends formed the very essence of Amazigh culture. Seasonal and annual celebrations, including religious rituals, cultural festivals, weddings, circumcisions, and funerals, were all reflected in popular poetry and sacred chants, serving as both artistic expressions and means of oral preservation (Chaker, 2006, p 13). These performances were not passive; they were dynamic and participatory, often improvisational, constantly shaped by communal response and historical context.

Literature (whether oral or written) remains a faithful mirror of the society that creates it, embodying its imagination, values, and moral order. Among the Amazigh, it has always functioned as both a means of expression and a forum for collective reflection, where social harmony and ethical balance are maintained through words. The literary act, therefore, is not merely aesthetic; it is ethical and communal, rooted in the community's need to negotiate identity and cohesion. In Tuareg society, this conception finds an even more concrete expression: poetic and narrative production becomes a pedagogical tool, a means of transmitting values, educating the young, and voicing the collective imagination. Importantly, women have traditionally played a decisive role in this process. As the primary transmitters of oral literature, they ensured its continuity across generations through highly codified practices of narration, memorization, and performance. Their agency in sustaining this literary corpus underlines the gendered dimension of cultural preservation and the vital role of women as custodians of Tuareg oral heritage.

Tuareg society, like all Amazigh societies, developed a rich literary heritage despite relying primarily on oral tradition. While their culture remained largely oral for centuries, their literary output was remarkably vibrant and multifaceted. This richness is particularly evident in the poetic form known as *aseqqal*, often performed during gatherings, which intertwines metaphor, historical allusion, and personal reflection. Several studies confirm this richness, shedding light on the diversity and depth of the oral literature of the *Imuhaɣ* (Tuareg people). In this discussion, we will explore the key aspects of this literary tradition, analyzing how it managed to survive and evolve despite the challenges of oral transmission. Crucially, oral traditions required not only

memory but a sophisticated system of education, often informal yet highly structured, where young individuals were trained to memorize, recite, and even compose literary works. The presence of various literary genres serves as strong evidence of the antiquity and depth of this cultural heritage, which was not only meant for entertainment but also played a crucial role in educating the people, preserving values, and maintaining traditional social structures.

Despite its rich and ancient literary tradition, Amazigh literature remains largely understudied in mainstream literary and historical discourse. The dominance of written literature in modern historical narratives has often led to the marginalization of oral traditions, creating a gap in the recognition and preservation of Amazigh literary heritage. This oversight has long-term consequences, not only for the academic field but for cultural preservation and identity politics. It reflects a colonial legacy that privileges alphabetic cultures while undervaluing non-written epistemologies. Given the oral nature of much of its literary output, how has Amazigh literature managed to persist across generations despite historical challenges such as colonization, cultural assimilation, and linguistic shifts?

The endurance of Amazigh literature may largely be attributed to the strength of oral transmission, where storytelling, poetry recitation, and ritualistic chants have played a crucial role in preserving knowledge and cultural identity. This mode of transmission relies on repetition, communal reinforcement, and emotional resonance, ensuring that even as words shift, the meaning and structure endure. This literary tradition persisted not only because of its artistic and narrative richness but also due to its deep integration into social, religious, and political life, making it an essential component of Amazigh cultural continuity. Although primarily oral, Amazigh literature also benefited from early writing systems such as the Tifinagh script, which contributed to the documentation and survival of certain works. Tifinagh inscriptions found across the Sahara indicate an early literacy that coexisted with oral culture, suggesting a hybrid system of memory and writing. At the same time, external influences, particularly through interactions with Mediterranean and Arab cultures, shaped Amazigh literary expression by introducing new themes and storytelling techniques, even as these influences sometimes threatened the continuity of indigenous traditions.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for preserving Amazigh literary heritage but also for recognizing its rightful place in world literature. In the following discussion, we will explore the key aspects of Amazigh literary traditions, highlighting how they have endured and evolved over centuries. By doing so, we also challenge the conventional binaries of oral vs. written, local vs. universal, and ancient vs. modern, demonstrating that Amazigh literature belongs to all these categories at once.

Although the introduction establishes the historical and cultural significance of Amazigh orality, a more precise statement of the research problem is needed. This study therefore addresses the persistent underrepresentation of Amazigh oral literature (particularly Tuareg (*Imuhaɣ*) traditions) in contemporary scholarship on African and Mediterranean literary systems. The main research question guiding this paper is: How does Tuareg oral literature function as a means of cultural preservation and identity continuity within the broader Amazigh context? The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of orality not as a vestige of pre-literacy but as a living epistemological system that sustains collective memory, social cohesion, and artistic innovation. By articulating this aim, the paper seeks to bridge the gap between descriptive ethnographic accounts and analytical interpretations of Amazigh oral traditions, situating the Tuareg experience within the global discourse on intangible cultural heritage.

1. An Overview of Amazigh Oral Literature

Culture is not a static entity that can be grasped definitively; rather, it is a fluid and evolving construct, shaped by thought, experience, and historical processes. It takes on different forms depending on time, space, and the individuals who create and transform it. Culture is not a fixed inheritance but a process of continuous formation, as Amrouche observed (1939, p 25). This perspective invites us to view Amazigh oral literature not as a relic of the past, but as a dynamic and adaptive cultural phenomenon, constantly reconfigured in response to historical transformations and collective memory. In an anthropological sense, culture encompasses all forms of a society's production, whether material or immaterial, modest or sophisticated. It serves as a mirror of a community's worldview, reflecting its relationship with its environment and its historical trajectory (Lévi-Strauss, 1973, p 40). Through its oral literature, Amazigh society expressed its ecological intimacy with the land, its resistance to

foreign domination, and its moral compass, using language as both a tool of survival and a repository of cosmology.

This view of culture as a living process also implies that oral literature, far from being merely a form of entertainment, constitutes a vital mode of knowledge transmission and identity construction. For the Amazigh, as for many ancient societies, to speak was to create, to tell was to preserve, and to perform was to renew the collective bond. Oral literature thus became an institution of learning and moral reflection, articulating the relationship between individual creativity and collective wisdom.

For centuries, the Amazighs lived within a predominantly oral tradition, with no significant transition to writing. This aspect of their cultural history stands in contrast to neighboring Mediterranean civilizations, such as the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Byzantines, who all established strong literary traditions. This divergence underscores a deliberate epistemological path: privileging the spoken word as a vessel of truth, beauty, and knowledge, even when surrounded by cultures that fetishized the written archive. Despite their prolonged contact with these cultures, the Amazighs did not systematically develop their own written literature. This is particularly intriguing given the existence of the Tifinagh alphabet, an ancient script that dates back thousands of years (Chaker, 2006, p 10). Tifinagh's symbolic use, inscribed on stones, jewelry, and ritual objects, suggests that its primary function was sacred or emblematic, rather than administrative or literary, reaffirming the primacy of orality in the Amazigh worldview.

The symbolic presence of Tifinagh also testifies to a hybrid conception of communication, where visual and oral codes coexist. The inscription of sacred signs on material objects mirrors the inscription of knowledge in collective memory — both are durable, yet mutable, forms of preservation. This coexistence of inscription and utterance further illustrates that Amazigh thought never opposed writing to speech but regarded both as complementary channels of meaning.

Rather than adopting external writing traditions, the Amazighs chose to maintain an oral literary culture. This decision was not due to a lack of exposure to writing but rather a deliberate cultural preference. It reflects a vision of literature rooted in performativity and immediacy, where transmission occurs through voice, rhythm, and collective experience. While some efforts were made

to establish a written tradition, they remained limited in scope and impact. A few literary fragments were transcribed during the Islamic period, particularly religious poetry, in regions where literacy was more widespread. Yet, for the most part, oral expression remained the primary mode of transmission. This phenomenon was not exclusive to a single Amazigh community but rather a shared reality across North Africa, one that posed a significant challenge to the long-term survival of oral heritage (Nacib, 1993, p 39). Nonetheless, this common reliance on oral modes also fostered a regional coherence in narrative themes, poetic styles, and performative rituals.

Despite the absence of an extensive written tradition, history does reveal isolated attempts to document Amazigh literature. One of the earliest known examples is the Quran of Prophet Salah of Barghouata, an effort to transcribe religious texts in the Amazigh language. Similarly, during the Almohad dynasty, El Mahdi sought to elevate Amazigh to a more prominent literary status. However, these attempts remained marginal, as Arabic became the dominant literary language in the region (Chaker, 2004, p 6). These moments of linguistic assertion signal a political and spiritual will to inscribe Amazigh identity within broader narratives of religious and cultural legitimacy.

The reluctance to establish a written literary tradition calls for a deeper exploration of sociological, historical, and anthropological factors. The Amazighs, while influenced by Greek, Roman, and Punic cultures, did not extensively engage in written documentation. This preference for orality, rather than signaling a cultural limitation, reveals a sophisticated and deeply ingrained mode of literary expression. Through oral transmission, Amazigh societies succeeded in preserving their myths, histories, and cultural production for centuries (Mammeri, 1980, p 15). This resilience shows that orality, far from being ephemeral, constructs mnemonic architectures capable of resisting oblivion.

In this sense, the oral word functioned as an archive of collective consciousness, flexible enough to adapt to historical change, yet stable enough to ensure cultural continuity. The act of narration itself became a political gesture, asserting identity through speech in contexts where writing was either inaccessible or ideologically contested.

The vast geographical expanse of North Africa contributed to the richness of Amazigh literature. The region, encompassing modern-day Libya, Tunisia,

Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, has been shaped by diverse environmental influences, from the Mediterranean coastline to the depths of the Sahara (Chaker, 2004, p 16). Within this broad territory, Amazigh communities developed distinct oral traditions, each reflecting their specific sociocultural and historical contexts (Basset, 1920, p 42). This polyphonic diversity is at the heart of Amazigh literary identity, revealing a federation of voices that span mountains, oases, and steppes, yet converge around shared metaphors, rhythms, and ancestral values.

Oral literature in Amazigh society was far more than entertainment; it was a vital repository of knowledge and collective memory. While storytelling, poetry recitation, and riddles were often enjoyed during leisure time, they also served an educational function. Proverbs, folktales, and epic narratives instilled moral lessons, preserved historical accounts, and reinforced communal values. Historian Ibn Khaldun famously remarked that the Amazighs know so many stories that if one took the time to write them all down, they would fill hundreds of volumes (Adli, 2001, p 15). This observation reveals the scope of oral archives, where each tale is a stratified text encoding myth, pedagogy, and sociopolitical commentary.

As numerous ethnolinguistic studies have shown, these narratives did not only entertain but also disciplined, guided, and educated. In many cases, oral literature fulfilled the same function as formal institutions in literate societies: it produced ethical citizens and transmitted the principles of justice, solidarity, and honor.

Across Amazigh societies, a diverse array of literary genres emerged, including tales, legends, myths, adages, proverbs, and poetry composed by both men and women. These oral traditions conveyed essential messages about history, culture, and social order. Notably, women played a pivotal role as custodians of oral literature, particularly in matrilineal memory chains where song, lullabies, and ritual lamentations were key narrative forms. Their prevalence across North Africa underscores the antiquity and resilience of Amazigh literary production.

This gendered division of literary labor is especially visible in Tuareg society, where women are the principal transmitters of oral heritage to children. Through lullabies, elegies, and teaching songs, they not only preserve linguistic

beauty but also maintain the ethical and emotional architecture of the community. Literature here becomes both a feminine art and a moral institution.

One defining characteristic of Amazigh oral literature is its collective nature. Unlike written works, such as novels, essays, or plays, that are typically shaped by individual authors, oral traditions are the product of an entire community. This communal aspect forges a direct connection between literature and society, encapsulating shared experiences, beliefs, and concerns (Tabti, 2019, p 19). Such literature is co-created and co-performed, giving it a democratic texture that resists commodification and canonization.

Beyond serving as a mode of expression, oral literature also played a crucial role in shaping collective consciousness. The oral tradition ensured the continuity of communal memory, with knowledge passed down through generations. Within families and tribal structures, elders transmitted stories, wisdom, and traditions to the younger generation, reinforcing social cohesion. This transmission was not an occasional practice but rather a daily and year-round responsibility (Tabti, 2019, p 30). It was embedded in the rhythm of life, woven into agricultural cycles, seasonal migrations, and life passages, thereby ensuring its relevance and renewal.

Amazigh oral traditions were deeply integrated into both social and ceremonial life. They played a significant role in weddings, seasonal festivals marking the agricultural cycle, rain prayers, harvest rituals, and dances performed during plowing seasons. Large gatherings, particularly those centered around the tombs of revered saints, provided further opportunities for oral transmission. Women, too, played a crucial role in preserving oral literature, particularly in communal activities such as weeding, firewood collection, and textile production (Tabti, 2019, p 32). This integration reveals a literature inseparable from ritual and daily labor, where poetic expression coexists with survival practices.

The themes of Amazigh oral literature frequently referenced historical figures, mythical places, legendary heroes, deities, and pivotal events. These narratives transmitted values, beliefs, and cultural norms unique to Amazigh identity. Through myths and legends, they provided insight into the symbolic and religious foundations of Amazigh society, reflecting the cultural codes and mythological frameworks that shaped collective identity. These foundational myths did not merely describe the world, they shaped the way Amazigh

communities acted within it, preserving a cultural ecology rooted in balance, honor, and resilience.

Oral literature also fulfilled a political and ideological function, helping to structure communal imagination and respond to socio-political challenges. It reinforced societal values, played a crucial role in educating children, and served as a vehicle for preserving historical memory. Moreover, oral storytelling instilled a sense of civic responsibility, fostering an awareness of governance and social participation (Amala, 2019, p 25). In times of oppression or upheaval, it became a form of resistance and a means of imagining alternative futures.

Thus, Amazigh oral literature emerges as both archive and arsenal- a means of conserving cultural knowledge and contesting domination. It constitutes a living discourse where ethics, aesthetics, and politics intersect, ensuring that the spoken word continues to articulate freedom even in contexts of silence.

Despite its longevity, Amazigh literature remained overwhelmingly oral for centuries, while written traditions in North Africa were dominated by foreign languages. The arrival of the French in the 19th century marked a turning point, accelerating the documentation of Amazigh oral heritage. Initially, this effort was led by French military and academic figures, but it was later continued by indigenous intellectuals, including scholars such as Boulifa, Ben Sdira, and Sid Kaoui. In the 20th century, a significant literary movement emerged, seeking to transcribe Amazigh oral traditions. Figures such as Mouloud Feraoun, Taos Amrouche, and Mouloud Mammeri played instrumental roles in this transformation. Notable works like Chants berbères de Kabylie (1939), Les poèmes de Si Mohand (1960), and Le Grain magique (1966) reflect this pivotal shift from orality to written documentation (Chaker, 2004, p 6). This transition opened new horizons for Amazigh literature, ensuring its survival while sparking debates on authenticity, translation, and cultural ownership.

Among the earliest and most significant contributions to this documentation stands Adolphe Hanoteau's Essai de grammaire de la langue tamachek (1860). Beyond its grammatical purpose, this work is remarkable for including, at its conclusion, a collection of Tuareg texts (tales, proverbs, and poems) which constitute one of the first systematic attempts to record both the language and the literature of the Imuhaɣ. Despite its colonial context, Hanoteau's compilation remains an invaluable source, offering early ethnolinguistic insights into Tuareg imagination and oral aesthetics. A critical

rereading of such texts, however, must go beyond mere documentation to interrogate the power relations and interpretive biases they contain.

Methodologically, our approach follows a similar trajectory: we first examine the broader framework of Amazigh literature and its various genres, before focusing more specifically on Tuareg literary production -its imagination, its social role, and its embeddedness in daily life. This progression allows for a comprehensive understanding of Tuareg literature not as an isolated corpus, but as an organic extension of the wider Amazigh literary continuum. Finally, selected excerpts from Tuareg oral texts will be analyzed, both to illustrate the richness of this tradition and to elucidate its symbolic and sociocultural functions.

2. The Oral Literature of *Imuhaɣ*: An Ancient Culture Rooted in Oral Tradition

Following the general overview of Amazigh oral literature, the case of the Tuaregs offers one of its most complete and enduring manifestations. The Tuaregs are nomadic Amazighs inhabiting the vast Saharan expanse, spread across Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. Their territory stretches from Djanet to Timbuktu and Agadez, passing through Tamanrasset. They are organized into several confederations, the main ones being those of Hoggar, Aïr, and Aoullimidens, and they share a common language called Tamasheq (or Tamahaq, Tamajaq, Tamajaght). The Imuhaɣ primarily inhabit oases, deriving much of their livelihood from trade with peripheral regions of the Sahara. This intermediary position between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa transformed them into cultural mediators and intellectual bridges, shaping their cosmopolitan worldview and giving their oral literature a distinctly trans-Saharan character.

The colonial conquest of Tuareg lands was not fully achieved until after World War I. General Hanoteau, who had already authored the first Kabyle grammar in 1858, published the first Tuareg grammar in 1860. During this period, Tuareg prisoners captured by French troops were used as informants, providing detailed information about their language, customs, and oral traditions. Hanoteau's manual, which includes numerous poetic and narrative samples, was followed by dictionaries compiled by Masqueray (1893) and Cid Kaoui (1894, 1900). Although these works emerged from colonial projects of linguistic control, they paradoxically preserved fragments of oral heritage that

might otherwise have disappeared. A postcolonial rereading of these texts thus reveals a dual movement (appropriation and preservation) through which oral memory survived despite asymmetrical power relations.

Father Charles de Foucauld, who settled in Tamanrasset in 1905, left behind an extraordinary body of work that profoundly advanced the study of Tuareg language and literature. His posthumous writings form a vast ethnolinguistic corpus — dictionaries, poems, stories, and grammars, that remains unparalleled in scope and precision. Despite their missionary and colonial overtones, Foucauld's texts inadvertently document the poetic vitality and cosmological depth of Tuareg culture. His fascination with Tuareg spirituality, though filtered through an outsider's gaze, opened the way for later anthropological and literary studies that sought to understand rather than domesticate the Tuareg voice.

In Tuareg society, as in most traditional cultures, orality is not merely a means of communication but a structuring principle of existence. Oral literature embodies the collective soul of the community (Bounfour, 1999, p 36). The language of everyday life is simultaneously the language of poetry and philosophy, carrying tales, fables, riddles, and proverbs, many of which reveal a rich intertextuality with neighboring civilizations (Djellaoui, 2007, p 60). This hybridity of expression shows that the Tuareg oral corpus is not isolated but dialogical (it borrows, adapts, and transforms) thereby asserting a cultural intelligence rooted in exchange rather than purity. Myths and legends, at the heart of ritual and social practices, transmit cosmological and moral conceptions that ensure the harmony of the clan and the reproduction of its ethical structures. The performative act of retelling these myths renews collective identity; each performance is both a remembrance and a re-creation of the social order.

Tuareg literature is both abundant and diverse, reflecting the historical depth and moral imagination of this nomadic people. It encompasses epic poems, love songs, and heroic tales transmitted orally across generations. A contemporary extension of this tradition can be found in the works of Ibrahim Al Koni, the Libyan novelist from Ghadamès, whose allegorical prose reinterprets Tuareg mythology for modern readers. His novels, blending myth and metaphysics, demonstrate how oral imagination can survive within written modernity. Likewise, scholars such as Dominique Casajus have deepened the study of Tuareg poetry and society, showing how oral forms continue to

structure social relations and self-representation. Al Koni's work illustrates the transformation of orature into literature (he passage from the collective voice to individual authorship) while preserving the ancestral rhythms of the desert and the ethical weight of speech.

Tuareg society is founded upon a moral and symbolic order in which speech (awal) functions as both law and art. It serves as the foundation of social harmony and continuity. Poets occupy a privileged position as guardians of memory and mediators of justice. Their eloquence not only entertains but legislates: a well-chosen word can reconcile feuds, affirm honor, or condemn wrongdoing. In this sense, the poetic act assumes a juridical force, to speak is to act, to recite is to bind. This performative dimension, as theorized by Austin and later by ethnolinguists, finds a natural habitat in Tuareg culture, where the word itself is endowed with social efficacy.

The Tuareg code of conduct accords the spoken word an almost sacred status, modulated according to gender, age, and social hierarchy (Amalia, 2015, p 25). Mastery of oral performance (poetry, mythology, genealogy, or customary law) is a sign of wisdom and authority (Amala, 2019). Eloquence functions as a form of social capital, where rhetorical skill determines prestige and power. Language thus becomes an instrument for navigating social hierarchies while maintaining harmony. Indirect speech and coded expressions serve to mitigate conflict and preserve dignity — crucial in nomadic societies where interdependence ensures survival. Avoiding direct negation or verbal aggression is not mere politeness; it is a pragmatic philosophy grounded in the ethics of coexistence.

Within this system of controlled discourse, women display exceptional verbal artistry. They employ metaphor, song, and rhythm as subtle means of asserting agency. Their use of innuendo and poetic allusion enables them to express dissent without transgression. This form of linguistic resistance, often overlooked, transforms domestic speech into an aesthetic and political space. Female poets, especially through genres like izlan, convert emotion into coded expression, reaffirming the gendered dimension of oral power.

The izlan genre- (short sung poems composed of two distiches) is the most emblematic example of this aesthetic economy (Laoust, 1920, p 59). Typically centered on love or desire, izlan are performed as verbal duels between young men and women, especially during festivals, weddings, or circumcisions. Yet, if

these same verses are uttered outside their ritual context, they can provoke scandal or even violence. This ambivalence reveals the sacred boundaries of speech: language possesses transformative power but must be contained within culturally sanctioned frameworks. The poet thus operates at the threshold of creation and transgression, mastering both beauty and danger.

Tuareg tales represent another major component of their oral heritage, encapsulating their nomadic worldview, desert environment, and social values. These stories, transmitted across generations, celebrate intelligence, endurance, and moral cunning. Animal tales (featuring the jackal, the hedgehog, or the fox) valorize cleverness over brute strength, reflecting an ethos of adaptation to a harsh environment. Such narratives enact a pedagogy of survival, teaching that flexibility, prudence, and wit are superior to domination. Similarly, Tuareg riddles and proverbs serve to educate youth, preserve collective wisdom, and sharpen reasoning abilities, reinforcing the intellectual dimension of oral transmission.

The myths of creation (such as The Giant Serpent, The Legend of Hero Taznat, or The Myth of the Sacred Mountain (Pandoulfi, 1998, p 58)) express a worldview in which the cosmos, landscape, and morality are interwoven. Mountains, winds, and stars are not inert entities but active symbols mediating between the divine and the human. The desert itself functions as a text (vast, silent, and sacred) to be read through the rhythms of speech. Each legend thus transforms geography into theology, inscribing metaphysical meaning into space.

Tuareg legends, often interlaced with poetry and mystical reflection, continue to shape communal identity. They are performed during social gatherings, celebrations, and nocturnal assemblies where speech becomes both entertainment and initiation. Examples include heroic sagas and cosmological stories that explain natural phenomena or glorify ancestral virtues (Claudot-Hawad, 2000, p 60). These narratives do more than recount the past; they articulate the ethical and existential foundations of Tuareg being. To narrate is to reaffirm the link between memory, place, and destiny.

Although literary genres vary across Tuareg regions, they all share a profound connection to nature, the desert, and invisible forces. These oral expressions transmit values such as respect, courage, harmony, and wisdom, functioning as both pedagogy and philosophy. Ultimately, Tuareg orality is not a

mere cultural residue but a living epistemology, a way of knowing and inhabiting the world through speech. It remains today a vital source of spiritual and aesthetic inspiration, reaffirming that in the Sahara, words are as enduring as the dunes themselves.

3. Some Fragments of the Oral Literature of Imuhagh

This section presents a selection of excerpts from Hanoteau, A. (1896), one of the earliest and most significant works documenting both the grammar and the literary forms of the Imuhaɣ (Tuareg) language. As previously outlined in the methodology, Hanoteau's work was chosen for its dual nature as both a linguistic and literary source, providing authentic material that reflects the structural and imaginative dimensions of Tuareg oral expression.

The following analysis applies the textual and anthropological framework discussed earlier, focusing on key motifs and social functions that emerge in Tuareg oral narratives and poetry..

3.1. The Tales

3.1.1. The Lion, the Panther, the Tahouri, and the Jackal.

A lion, a panther, a tahouri, and a jackal were comrades. One day, while hunting together, they found a sheep and killed it. The lion spoke first and said, "Who among us will divide this meat?" They replied, "It will be the jackal since he is the smallest among us." The jackal then divided the meat into four portions and said, "Let each one take their share." The lion came forward and asked the jackal, "Where is my share among these?" The jackal replied, "They are all the same; take whichever you like." The lion retorted, "Jackal, you do not know how to divide properly!" Then he struck and killed him.

With the jackal dead, they needed someone else to divide the meat. The tahouri said, "I will do it." She mixed the sheep's meat with that of the jackal, divided it again, and made six portions. Seeing this, the lion asked, "We are three; why are there six portions?" The tahouri replied, "The first portion is for the lion, the second is for you, our leader, and the third is for the red eyes."

"Who taught you to divide like this?" asked the lion. "The blow that killed the jackal," replied the tahouri.

Analysis and Interpretation

The tale "The Lion, the Panther, the Tahouri, and the Jackal" vividly illustrates power dynamics and survival strategies in societies where strength dictates hierarchy. In line with our analytical framework (which combines anthropological narratology and symbolic analysis) the story reveals how violence and adaptation operate as structuring principles of social order.

From an anthropological perspective, the narrative reflects a worldview in which authority and legitimacy stem from physical dominance. The jackal, representing an egalitarian impulse toward fair distribution, is eliminated, symbolizing the suppression of equality within systems based on coercive power. Conversely, the tahouri embodies strategic intelligence, learning through observation and reinterpreting experience to ensure survival.

This interpretive approach highlights how Tuareg oral tales function as didactic models: they transmit pragmatic wisdom about navigating hierarchical relations, a motif deeply rooted in the broader Amazigh moral and social imagination. Far from being a simple animal fable, the tale operates as a sociological allegory, illustrating that intelligence and adaptability (not idealism) guarantee survival in a world governed by dominance.

3.1.2. The Goat and the Wild Boar

In the time when animals could talk, a goat, in heat during the spring season, was crying out and filling the land with the sound of its voice. A wild boar heard it and asked, “Hey! Friend Goat, why all this noise?” The goat replied, “I am calling for the goats; they usually give birth to this sound.”

“How many kids does a goat normally have?” asked the wild boar. “A fertile one can have two at a time.”

“Not more than that?” said the wild boar. “Come, I will show you my offspring.”

The goat and the wild boar went together and arrived at the place where the sows spent their days; they found five or six sows, each followed by twenty piglets.

“You see these piglets” said the wild boar, “they are all my children. I do not make noise like you, yet my offspring are far more numerous. The one who is always noisy has nothing but noise within him”.

Analysis and Interpretation

This Tuareg tale conveys a moral lesson grounded in the contrast between appearance and substance. Within our analytical framework, which integrates anthropological narratology and symbolic semantics, the tale operates as a moral allegory reflecting social perceptions of speech, restraint, and value.

The goat, through its loud cries, symbolizes individuals who seek recognition through verbal display and outward expression rather than tangible action. In contrast, the wild boar embodies silent efficiency and productive modesty, representing a culturally valorized ideal of restraint and self-control.

From an anthropological perspective, this opposition mirrors Tuareg social ethics, where measured speech (tawalt) and discretion (takarust) are esteemed traits linked to wisdom and dignity. The moral is thus not merely individual but societal: true worth is demonstrated through efficacy and continuity rather than noise or ostentation.

This interpretation aligns with a broader symbolic economy of Tuareg oral literature, where animals often embody human moral attributes and where narratives function as vehicles for transmitting ethical and behavioral norms. The tale thus transcends simple didacticism to articulate a worldview in which virtue resides in quiet mastery rather than visible assertion.

3.1.3. The Woman and the Lion

A woman had been kidnapped and taken away by enemies. She escaped along the way and encountered a lion that took her on his back and carried her to her camp. Her friends rejoiced at her return and asked who had brought her. “A lion,” she replied, “he was good to me, but his breath was foul”.

The lion, which was lying nearby, heard this and left. A few days later, the woman went to the woods and encountered a lion who said, “Take a piece of wood and strike me”.

“I will not strike you,” she said, “because a lion once did me a favor, and I do not know if it was you or another.”

“It was me,” said the lion. “Strike me, or I will eat you”.

She took a piece of wood, struck him, and wounded him. The lion then said, “Now you may go”.

Two or three months later, the lion and the woman met again. The lion asked, “Look at the spot where you wounded me; is it healed or not?”

“It is healed,” the woman replied.

"Has the hair grown back?"
"Certainly".
"A wound usually heals", said the lion, "but the harm caused by a bad word does not. I prefer a sword's blow to the wounds inflicted by a woman's tongue." With that, he carried her away and ate her.

Analysis and Interpretation

This Tuareg tale offers a profound reflection on the ethics of speech and the social consequences of verbal transgression. Within the framework of symbolic anthropology and moral narratology, the story uses animal allegory to explore how words can disrupt the delicate balance of social and emotional bonds.

The lion, emblem of strength, protection, and masculine honor, embodies the principle of takarust, dignity and self-control central to Tuareg ethics. His initial generosity contrasts with the woman's careless speech, which violates the cultural ideal of measured expression (tawalt). Her ingratitude transforms a relationship of reciprocity into one of retribution, illustrating that in Tuareg moral thought, speech is an act of power, capable of restoring or destroying social harmony.

The lion's words, "A wound usually heals, but the harm caused by a bad word does not," encapsulate a key moral insight of Tuareg oral philosophy: the permanence of verbal injury. The tale thus transcends a simple moral fable to articulate a cultural theory of speech, where language is both a social bond and a potential weapon.

From an anthropological perspective, this narrative encodes the Tuareg worldview in which honor (asshak) and restraint in speech are essential to social order. The woman's downfall is not merely individual but symbolic, it represents the collective warning that words, once released, cannot be recalled, and that social harmony depends on disciplined language.

3.2. Poetry

3.2.1. Verses Addressed to Marshal Randon by Redda Ag Idda During His Stay in Algiers

We lived in Laghouat, we hated the soul;
Every morning sadness was within us,
I live, I wait for the Marshal,
He remains in Algiers, he governs.
His reputation I always hear, he is powerful,

Like a victorious king, he commands.
He has subdued all these lands,
Those of the plains and also those of the seas;
He assimilates, when he comes, the blind and the crippled;
When they return from him, they all leave laughing.
He is never anxious, whether he leads or follows,
Even when they come to him, when they leave, they are content.
A single word from him is in their soul.
His reputation has reached even Syria;
It has reached Morocco, it has reached the land of the Fulani,
It has traveled through all the lands of the Imouhar.
With it have gone free men and also black men.
We describe him. God knows
That it is no lie what we have always heard about him;
If we return, I will show it to all of Azger.

Analysis and Interpretation

From a textual-anthropological perspective, this poem exemplifies how Tuareg oral poetry functions as a form of historical memory and adaptive discourse within the context of colonial domination. Redda Ag Idda's verses, while apparently praising Marshal Randon, operate on multiple levels of meaning that reflect both strategic accommodation and subtle resistance.

The poem opens with images of grief and expectation "We lived in Laghouat, we hated the soul; every morning sadness was within us" evoking the despair of colonized populations after the French conquest of Laghouat (1852). Yet, this lament is immediately juxtaposed with praise: Randon is depicted as "a victorious king," "powerful," and "beloved by all." Such ambivalence is characteristic of colonial-era Tuareg poetry, which often employed double-voiced discourse, one that simultaneously acknowledges power while encoding moral distance from it.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on postcolonial hermeneutics and symbolic anthropology: the poem's language of admiration can be read as a rhetorical strategy of survival. By glorifying the colonizer, the poet affirms his own community's capacity for eloquence and diplomacy, transforming subordination into an act of cultural negotiation.

Furthermore, the geographic references ("Syria," "Morocco," "the land of the Fulani") situate the Tuareg worldview within a trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean imagination. The poet's awareness of distant lands underscores a cosmopolitan consciousness that transcends the local, portraying Tuareg oral culture as outward-looking rather than isolated.

In this light, the poem becomes more than an instance of colonial praise: it is an anthropological artifact of mediation, revealing how oral poetry served as a discursive tool for cultural preservation under the pressure of foreign power. Through controlled admiration and stylized reverence, the poet maintains his identity as both witness and interpreter of historical transformation.

3.2.2. Love

We have passed through spring, winter, and summer,
The violin played, Ouh! Ouh! Army! Army!
When they gathered (the armies), I do not know what they did.
They disappeared, just like the leaves of the abilkem tree.
May God despise those who think.
That this year's news is not in the next year.

Analysis and Interpretation

From an anthropological and semiotic perspective, this short Tuareg poem offers a meditation on time, loss, and emotional continuity, expressed through the natural metaphor of the seasons. The cyclical passage "spring, winter, and summer" functions as a poetic representation of the rhythmic temporality of nomadic life, where existence unfolds in correspondence with the environment. This structure reflects what anthropologist Gilbert Rouget (1980) calls "the ecology of emotion" in oral societies, where natural cycles are not only backdrops but mirrors of affective experience.

The interjection "Ouh! Ouh! Army! Army!" disrupts the lyrical flow, introducing a moment of dissonance that may symbolize the irruption of history and violence into the intimate sphere. This tension between lyricism and martial imagery situates the poem at the intersection of love and loss, revealing the fragility of human attachments in times of upheaval. Methodologically, this reading combines poetic hermeneutics with a symbolic-anthropological approach, recognizing the poem's dual nature as both aesthetic expression and social testimony.

The closing lines "May God despise those who think / That this year's news is not in the next year" encapsulate a philosophy of recurrence deeply rooted in Tuareg worldview: the past is never fully gone but reappears in transformed forms, just as seasons return. This cyclical conception of time resists linear Western historicism, emphasizing continuity over rupture.

Ultimately, the poem transcends the theme of love to articulate a broader reflection on impermanence and remembrance, suggesting that emotional and historical experiences are bound by repetition. Through its economy of words and symbolic density, this piece exemplifies the metaphorical sophistication of Tuareg oral poetry, where brevity coexists with profound philosophical insight.

3.2.3. Boukha and Daha

The people of Amegid lament
What we did to Amserha.
The daughter of Alemin has left them;
If only she had defended herself.
Lalla, I am well, Boukha is well,
And we are what Daha loves.
In vain they torment themselves with Amma.

Analysis and Interpretation

Adopting a hermeneutic and ethnopoetic approach, this poem illustrates the central themes of loss, remembrance, and resilience within Tuareg oral expression. The collective lament over Amserha may symbolize not only the mourning of an individual but also the grief over a disrupted social harmony, a recurrent motif in Tuareg poetry where emotional experience often mirrors communal imbalance. The opening line, "The people of Amegid lament / What we did to Amserha," situates guilt and sorrow within a collective frame, reflecting a culture where memory is shared and emotion is communal.

The mention of "the daughter of Alemin" introduces an emblematic feminine figure (perhaps allegorical) whose absence destabilizes the symbolic order of the poem. In Tuareg tradition, women frequently embody both cultural continuity and moral authority; thus, her departure evokes a loss of equilibrium that extends beyond personal grief to encompass a broader existential void.

The latter part of the poem shifts from mourning to affirmation: "Lalla, I am well, Boukha is well, / And we are what Daha loves." This transition from lament to reassurance embodies a movement from collective sorrow toward

individual resilience, suggesting that emotional regeneration is possible through bonds of love or solidarity. The reference to Daha and Amma anchors the text in the intimate sphere, signaling how personal relationships become sites of renewal within collective despair.

From an anthropological-literary perspective, the poem's brevity, fragmentation, and elliptical syntax are not mere stylistic features but narrative strategies rooted in orality. They compel interpretive participation from the listener, transforming poetry into a dialogic act of meaning-making. The tension between absence and endurance, loss and affirmation, encapsulates a worldview where identity persists through memory, and where poetic speech serves as both mourning and reconstruction.

Ultimately, Boukha and Daha exemplifies the poetics of reticence typical of Tuareg oral literature — a form where silence, allusion, and repetition convey emotional depth as powerfully as explicit declaration.

Conclusion

The study of Amazigh oral literature, particularly that of the Imuhaɣ (Tuaregs), reveals a cultural richness and historical depth that transcend mere storytelling. Passed down orally for millennia, this body of work represents a living archive of memory and identity, one that encodes ethical, social, and cosmological knowledge through language, rhythm, and performance.

By adopting an interpretive and semiotic analytical approach, this research has demonstrated that Tuareg oral literature functions not only as an artistic form but also as a medium of collective thought. Its narratives, poems, and proverbs articulate fundamental values such as solidarity, justice, and resilience, while reflecting a symbiotic relationship with the desert environment and the community's nomadic worldview.

However, this intangible heritage faces serious threats due to cultural assimilation, linguistic marginalization, and the decline of oral transmission in younger generations. Preserving it requires urgent and coordinated action. Beyond scholarly efforts, state authorities, particularly the Ministry of Culture and regional cultural institutions, should implement programs for the official documentation, archiving, and promotion of Amazigh oral traditions.

Furthermore, digital technologies can and should play a decisive role in this process. The creation of online repositories, audio-visual archives, and open-access databases would ensure that these oral treasures are not only preserved

but also made accessible to future generations and the global academic community.

In essence, the oral literature of the Amazigh people (and especially that of the Imuhaɣ must be recognized as a vital component of Algeria's national heritage and world cultural diversity. Safeguarding it is not merely a matter of preservation; it is an act of cultural continuity, historical justice, and a reaffirmation of humanity's plural voices.

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