

## The Idea of Tamazgha: Current Articulations and Scholarly Potential

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### Abstract:

This article seeks to historicize the idea of Tamazgha and articulate its transnational and academic potential. Drawing on Arabic sources mostly, this article argues that the notion of Tamazgha is not new contrary to what a primary focus on Amazigh activists' discourse and activism might suggest. In fact, Allal al-Fassi was probably the first Arabic-speaking intellectual to have defined and deployed the idea of Tamazgha as a homeland of Imazighen in his exile in Cairo as early as 1948. As the article demonstrates, al-Fassi used the same notion that Amazigh activists are using today to advocate for Tamazgha in order to counter colonial propaganda in colonial North Africa and advocate for independence. Despite this fact, the founding myths of Moroccan nationalism prevailed against Amazigh identity, which Moroccan nationalists associated with colonialism. A transnational Amazigh Cultural Movement (ACM) emerged against the backdrop of marginalization and exclusion, culminating in the publication of *Mithāq Tamazgha* (The Tamazgha Declaration) in 2018. By historicizing Tamazgha and uncovering its multilayered stakes, the article also demonstrates its transformative academic potential for the study of the area currently called the Maghreb or North Africa.

### Keywords:

Tamazgha, Imazighen, North Africa, Citizenship, Race.

ⵜⴰⴳⴷⵓⴷⴰ, تامازغا, or Tamazgha is a concept that has acquired a transnational cultural and political significance among Amazigh speakers since the late 1990s. Often described as a neologism, Tamazgha can be simply defined as the Amazigh homeland. Located between the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean and the oasis of Siwa in west Egypt, Tamazgha is both the discursive and geographic embodiment of an Amazigh imaginary of a language and culture that were once unified and had their own territory. Although Amazigh activism has remained mostly localized within different nation-states where Imazighen (Amazigh people) live, the emergence of Tamazgha as a larger territory that is home to myriad expressions of Amazighity has given these local Amazigh sociocultural aspirations a supranational umbrella. Unlike many transregional assemblies that are connected by established economic and cultural alliances, Tamazgha is first and foremost envisioned as a space whose people share a family of Amazigh languages. Because of the multiple colonizations and the cultural domination by more powerful languages and their cultures, Tamazghit and its culture have been subjected to the hegemonic legacy of foreign conquests. In this context, Tamazgha is more an aspiration toward the recognition of Imazighen's civic rights

than an endeavor to construct a political entity. Despite the impracticality of its establishment as a unified space, Tamazgha is the locus of debates and activists' struggle to redefine the parameters of an Indigenous land that has always been defined by outsiders (Benmaissa 2010:13-15). Whether defined in relation to the Middle East, the Mashriq, or sub-Saharan Africa, the use of the term Tamazgha marked the first time Imazighen consciously developed their own toponymy to describe this large territory (Benmaissa 2010:15). I argue that by articulating Tamazgha, Amazigh activists have engaged in a momentous project to remap geography according to an Indigenous understanding of territory, reconfiguring how their "imagined" homeland connects territorially, culturally, and demographically with the different human and geographic extensions of it. Drawing on sources produced by Amazigh activists and intellectuals primarily in Arabic, this article shows how the idea of Tamazgha is conceptualized, debated, and deployed in their activism and discourses. The article also reveals the academic potential for the use of Tamazgha as a framework for Amazigh Studies.

Social scientists have paid particular attention to the development and implications of the notion of Tamazgha since the founding of the *Académie Berbère* in Paris in 1966. Emphasis has been put on Amazigh nationhood in the diaspora and its links to the domestic challenges faced by Imazighen in their home countries (Harris 2023). Tamazgha appears in this diasporic context as a bond that ties Imazighen to a land of origin where the mother tongue is not allowed to thrive (Amiras 2009, 280). These diasporic articulations of Amazigh nationalism and identity have had local ramifications for activists who have engaged with global discourses while attending to the local needs of their activism. Amazigh activists have faced challenges in their "attempt to 'scale-up' local struggles to the attention of global institutions such as the United Nations, or 'scale down' a transnational discourse on 'self-determination' or 'Indigenous rights' to specific local concerns over natural resource distribution" (Silverstein 2013, 771). Although Tamazgha is not necessarily the topic of anthropologist Paul Silverstein's assertion here, the idea lends itself to the examination of how the World Amazigh Congress (WAC) has articulated Tamazgha in its literature since 1997. The contributions of the "Pan-Amazigh" institutions and their myriad acts of borrowing, exchanges of symbols, music, and political solidarities to the imaginative construction of a shared feeling of Amazighity have also been essential to this project (Maddy-Weitzman 2022, 97-98). In Maddy-Weitzman's words, the "Amazigh grand narrative rebrands all of North Africa and the Sahel as the land of 'Tamazgha,' belonging to the Amazigh from time immemorial" (Maddy-Weitzman 2022, 11). As this small sample of scholarly works indicates, Tamazgha is embedded in diasporic politics, local strategies, transnational imaginaries, and colonial as well as post-colonial politics of space and identity in North Africa. Nonetheless, these insights beg for further development and a novel historicization of Tamazgha based on Arabic sources that have been produced since the 1930s. This historicization demonstrates that Tamazgha, as a homeland unified by the Amazigh language, served as a source of legitimacy for the construction of Arab nationalism North Africa before its reclamation by Imazighen in the 1990s.

### **Allal al-Fassi (1910-1974): An Unlikely Conceptualizer of Tamazgha**

Tamazgha was not solely the brainchild of the *Académie Berbère* in the 1970s and the Amazigh World Congress in 1997. Although not necessarily referred to as Tamazgha, this territorial entity linked to the Amazigh language and its speakers is a historical fact. French historian Ernest Mercier wrote that "the history of a land is the history of its people, and these people in North Africa are the Berbers, whose land extends from Egypt to the [Atlantic] Ocean and from the Mediterranean

to Sudan” (Mercier 1888, iv, my translation). The Académie Berbère may have invented the word Tamazgha, but the existence of a land where different varieties of Amazigh languages were spoken preceded the creation of the Académie itself.<sup>1</sup> Although colonial scholars like Mercier could be taken to task for their self-serving, colonialist agendas, it is difficult to dismiss nationalist scholars when their research and arguments prove that Tamazgha is a homeland for Imazighen. A primary example in this regard is Allal al-Fassi; known for his Arab-Islamic nationalism, al-Fassi wrote a book in 1948 entitled *al-Harāk al-istiqlāliyya fī al-maghrib al-‘arabī* (The Independence Movements in the Arab Maghreb). The book contains a significant, albeit differently named, conceptualization of Tamazgha in an effort to demonstrate the Maghreb’s historical independence from France. Al-Fassi’s desire to counter colonialism led him to inadvertently put Tamazgha at the center of Arab nationalism. Al-Fassi was writing at a time when the idea of Arab nationalism was still taking shape as a constructed identity of what he calls *al-Maghrib*, and his main theoretical effort went into showing the continuities between Arabs and their Amazigh ancestors in sustaining Maghrebi nationalism. He writes that “nationalism in the sense of self-defense, the sense of the [homeland] entity, and the propensity towards individual and social freedom are among the most salient characteristics that distinguished the Maghrebis in the entirety of their historical life and experiences” (al-Fassi 2003).<sup>2</sup> For al-Fassi, freedom and liberty were equivalent to a form of nationalism that made Maghrebis distinct from their colonizers.

However, this assertion is not enough for al-Fassi to demonstrate that al-Maghrib, which he leaves unqualified, had its own identity in contradistinction to the colonial discourse which considered North Africa to be an extension as well as a residue of the Roman Empire. To further distinguish this independent Maghreb, al-Fassi provides an important battery of information that now undergirds the existence of Tamazgha as an Amazigh homeland. Al-Fassi writes:

The Maghreb was known, before the Franks, as the *Amazigh homeland* (Italics is mine), which means the free homeland, and its inhabitants, who were the ancestors of the Berbers, were known as Imazighen, which means the free people. This name is proof of the spirit that filled our first ancestors with the love of life in a free homeland (al-Fassi 2003, z).

It cannot be said that al-Fassi had the interests of Imazighen in mind when he wrote this and clearly stated that Tamazgha was a historical concept that was tied to the history of Imazighen in this territory. In particular, al-Fassi confirms the foundational nature of the Amazigh language as a unifying factor in this space when he writes that “a family of Berber speakers extended from Egypt to the Red Sea to Senegal, and from the Mediterranean to Nigeria” (al-Fassi 2003, h). Further confirming his assertions, al-Fassi takes one step further to meet Amazigh activists’ later definition of Tamazgha as a linguistic and cultural space where varieties of Tamazight were/are spoken in concluding that there is a “unity of the elements who inhabit the space between the Red and the Mediterranean Seas and which extends to Senegal and Nigeria” (al-Fassi 2003, h). Nonetheless, al-Fassi’s goal was to prove the independence and freedom of the (Arab) Maghreb, which included all the countries colonized by France at the time, in order to build a counter-imaginary to colonialism based on the original Amazigh identity of the land. Instead of retaining the original Amazigh name of the place, however, al-Fassi swiftly branded the land as an Arab-Muslim entity,

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Mercier’s notion of “Berbérie” is an important concept to keep in mind. Al-Fassi cites Ernest Renan in his engagement with the notion of the Amazigh homeland, but he doesn’t mention the word Berbérie. This said, it is clear that al-Fassi wanted to rightly upend this colonial imaginary and redirect it to his own decolonial project.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Fassi’s book replaces page numbers with the Arabic alphabet to order the pages, hence the reproduction of this system in the references.

*al-Maghrib*. He thus strategically drew on North Africa's Amazighity to defend its Arabness in the face of colonialism. Hence, the Amazigh identity of this Amazigh population, particularly "its love of freedom and its struggle for glory and dignity," (al-Fassi 2003, h) becomes a condition for the very idea of both the difference and the independence of the Arab Maghreb from colonialism.

Al-Fassi was not a proponent of Amazighitude, by which I mean the consciousness of one's Amazigh Indigeneity and the undertaking of action to redress its marginalized situation (El Guabli 2021b). He was rather an ideologue of the Arab-Islamic Maghreb, which he defended from his position as an *'alim* as well as a nationalist leader in the post-independence period. However, he needed to garner support for his pan-Maghreb independence project by returning to an original state that showed the territory called North Africa had been "an Amazigh homeland" for an Indigenous people united through a shared language that encompassed the space between the Red Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Al-Fassi's self-serving deployment of the historical idea of Tamazgha required him to blur the differences between Imazighen and Arabs to simply consider the latter a continuation of the former. In fact, al-Fassi's assertions are consistent with the arguments made by the Amazigh Cultural Movement (ACM) that the majority of Arabic speakers in North Africa today are descendants of Arabized Imazighen. Nonetheless, the civic and political implications of these findings did not interest al-Fassi since his abiding goal was to build on the continuation of the Amazigh spirit of freedom and independence to serve his broader objective of creating Maghrebi nationalism.

Al-Fassi's focus remained on Arabization and Arab pan-nationalism, though his articulation of the contours of what would later be called Tamazgha was helpful in nature. His attempt to chart a path for Arab nationalism in the Maghreb inadvertently produced an early Arab-Islamic-oriented version of Tamazgha, with one of its clearest definitions being furnished by one of the hardliners of Moroccan nationalism. After Morocco's independence, this knowledge of the history of Tamazgha did not make al-Fassi a proponent of Amazigh linguistic and cultural rights. Instead, he defended Arabization and turned it into state policy, but his self-serving exploitation of the original idea of Tamazgha supported the ACM's effort to recover for this toponym a historical legitimacy that even the hardcore opponents of Amazighitude cannot deny. The shift from al-Fassi to the ACM, however, marks a passage from a preconscious stage in which Tamazgha was exploited for Arab-nationalistic purposes to an actively conscious era of Amazighitude where it has become the marker of a marginalized identity, now enmeshed in a complex network of local and global conversations about Indigeneity, resources, and human rights.

### **Amazigh Cultural Activism and the Emergence of Tamazgha**

The emergence of Tamazgha as a horizon for supranational Amazigh activism is the culmination of a long process that started with modest local efforts to document Amazigh heritage. When older generations of educated Imazighen engaged in the earliest Amazigh-focused projects to recover and ensure the documentation of Amazigh heritage, their projects were focused on their home countries or, to be even more specific, on very specific regions within each given country. From Algerian linguists Saïd Cid Kaoui and Saïd Boulifa to the Moroccan *'alim* al-Mokhtar al-Sūsī, the proponents of an early Amazigh consciousness focused on local languages, cultures, and social

expressions of Amazighity in Kabylia and the Souss under colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Even when their work opened up their sphere of action beyond the local, as when Boulifa was sent to Morocco to study Tashlḥīt and when Cid Kaoui worked on Tamasheq, their focus was hyperlocal. It is true, however, that Cid Kaoui and Boulifa were French citizens who had the privilege of navigating the colonial system from within its academic institutions, whereas al-Sūsī's worldview was particularly shaped by his Arab-Islamic education (El Guabli 2021a). They each contributed to Amazigh consciousness through their compilations and encyclopedic work. However, the general observation is that their Amazighitude was lived and practiced from within local frameworks that were connected to supranational entities, be they the French colonial empire or the Arab-Islamic umma, which were both guided by transnational imaginaries in which Imazighen were insignificant.

This would not remain the case in the post-independence period. The impact of the nationalist struggle against the colonial “Berber policy” in Morocco and its predecessor or “Kabyle myth” in Algeria were immediately felt in all fields (Lorcin 1995). This anti-Amazigh thinking, which had already existed in the nationalist literature published in 1930s, had all the means to be implemented once its propagators were in charge of their independent countries. As reported in al-Makkī al-Nāṣirī's 1932 book entitled *Faransā wa siyāsatuha al-barbariyya bi-almaghrib al-aqṣā*, some of the demands of the emerging Moroccan nationalists were clearly directed at aborting any renewal of Amazigh language and culture during the colonial period (al-Makkī al-Nāṣirī 1993). Although al-Nāṣirī rightly captured the tenets of the colonial “Berber policy” in Morocco and Algeria at the time, his book was a blueprint for the exclusion of Imazighen and their language and culture from the public sphere in the post-independence period in Morocco. His book, for instance, records a demand made to the Sultan of Morocco that required “[r]especting the Arabic language, the country's religious and official language, in all administrations of the Sharifian state and also in the courts as well as not granting any of the Berber dialects any official capacity, including not writing it in the Latin alphabet” (al-Makkī al-Nāṣirī 1993, 100). This demand was connected to the French establishment of the *École supérieure de langue arabe et de dialectes berbères* in 1913 (al-Makkī al-Nāṣirī 1993, 20) as well as the establishment of the *Comité des études berbères* in 1915. Although al-Nāṣirī was clearly aware of the fact that France was instrumentalizing the Amazigh language and culture to advance its own colonial agenda, he made no effort to spare Imazighen from the impact of being caught in the crossfire of French colonialism and Arab nationalism.

This position, born of the struggle against the colonial administration's Berber policy, would ossify after independence to become the position of the nationalists vis-à-vis Imazighen and their language and identity. It translated into a merciless dismantling of the Amazigh pedagogical and scholarly infrastructure that the French colonial administration had put into place in Morocco and Algeria (El Guabli, forthcoming). Not only did the newly independent nation-states marginalize the existence of their Amazigh-speaking citizens, but they also actively focused on demonizing them by associating them with colonialism. Demonizing Imazighen provided the endorsement the Arab nationalists needed for the brutal termination of the little gains Imazighen had made under colonialism. Salem Chaker has cogently captured the aftermath of this post-independence policy in writing that “decolonization induced the total and brutal disappearance of

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<sup>3</sup> Although they each produced several works, a representative corpus of their publications reveals the significance of their early Amazigh consciousness (Cid Kaoui 1900); (Boulifa 1908); (al-Sūsī 1960).

the field of Berber Studies in Algeria (as was the case before in Morocco)” (Chaker 2012, 111). The list of academic units, institutions, and journals that vanished starting in 1956 in Morocco and 1962 in Algeria is enormous. In Morocco, the authorities shut down the *Institut des Hautes Études Marocaines* and terminated any institutional recognition of Tamazight as an administrative language. In Algeria, the loss was even greater. Not only was the field of Amazigh Studies cleared from the University of Algiers, but all the parallel institutions that fed research and scholarship in this field disappeared. As a result, both Amazigh activism and scholarship on Amazigh issues moved to Paris in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s (Chaker 2012, 111).

This institutionalized anti-Amazighism did not go unnoticed. The aggressive and exclusionary policies of Arabization led to the emergence of Amazigh consciousness among the educated youth in Algeria and Morocco in 1960s. As Mohamed Aarav Bessaoud explains in his memoir, the establishment of the Académie Berbère in Paris in 1966 was not just an opportunity to create a structure for Kabyle activism but also, and most importantly, an “*agraw*” (a point of assembly/gathering space) for all Imazighen independently of their countries of origin. Given the presence of many Imazighen in France, the “Académie Berbère was for a decade the space of encounter for a whole generation of Amazigh activists who were mobilized for the defense and rehabilitation of the Amazigh identity and language of the Amazigh countries” (Monde Amazigh 2023). In addition to giving visibility to Imazighen, the Académie also created a direly needed space where Amazigh consciousness shifted from local activism to a transregional awareness of the existence of a transnational Amazighity. Hence, and maybe for the first time, Amazigh speakers from different countries had a space for the crosspollination of ideas about the repressive conditions in their respective countries. Additionally, this transnationalism had a positive impact on the initiatives taken by the Académie Berbère. For instance, the adoption of Tifinagh script was suggested to Bessaoud by Mahjoubi Aherdane (Bessaoud 2000, 91). Epistolary correspondence with Imazighen worldwide allowed the people in charge of the Académie to create and sustain a unifying imaginary whereby the nebulous contours of an Amazigh homeland were defined. Bessaoud captured the Académie’s pioneering role in Amazigh consciousness in writing that that “the Kabyle locomotive had pulled behind it all the other Berber wagons, which had been waiting in the train station of the ‘Arab Maghreb’ (Bessaoud 2000, 89).” It is edifying to note that the founders of Morocco’s *al-jam‘iyya al-maghribiyya li-al-baħt wa-al-tabādul al-thaqāfi* (the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange, AMREC) in 1967 were directly inspired by their encounter with the Académie in Paris. The new Amazigh consciousness was not only channeled locally but also transnationally in ways that were impossible in the post-independence states in North Africa.

New actors would appear in the 1990s to give Amazigh activism an intentionally crafted transnational dimension, leading to the centralization of Tamazgha in the post-Soviet era. While the 1980s witnessed a generalized repression of the activities of Amazigh associations in Morocco and Algeria as a result of the Amazigh Spring in Algeria in 1980, the 1990s witnessed the advent of a new era for human rights globally. Against the backdrop of the repressive 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of the Western Bloc fostered a human rights wing within the ACM. This human rights orientation has since been represented by lawyers who have sought to challenge the status quo of Amazigh cultural rights in light of their countries’ commitments to international agreements on human rights. These lawyers have activated their dialogues with international human rights organizations to leverage their states to implement their obligations under UN conventions (El Guabli 2023). As a result of the state’s disregard for their demands in 1992, some Moroccan Amazigh lawyers participated in The World Conference on Human Rights,

Vienna, in 1993. This conference would later be transformative for Amazigh activism throughout North Africa for two reasons. First, these Amazigh activists encountered the idea of Indigeneity and they immediately saw how it spoke to the condition of Imazighen in their own homeland. Second, the idea for the establishment of the World Amazigh Congress (WAC) was born in Vienna. Hassan Id Balkassam, one of the lawyers who attended the Vienna Conference, has declared that the establishment of the WAC was the brainchild of a limited number of Amazigh activists who met in Vienna in 1993, despite the fact that it did not materialize until 1997 (Maghrebvoices 2023).

The formation of the WAC in 1995 added a supranational layer to Amazigh activism.<sup>4</sup> The local layer of Amazigh activism maintained its program to induce institutional change in their home countries. These local struggles varied from country to country, but generally included the right to bear Amazigh names, the right to teach the language, and the right to public media as well as rights to ancestral customary laws, all of which governments were not ready to accept. Local activists resorted to rallies, petitions, and strikes to draw attention to their cause. However, the move to an institutionalized supranational activism entailed other strategies, too. Hence, this supranational layer has been manifested in Amazigh activists' endeavor to create a transnational Amazigh identity that transcends the national borders of the different countries in which Amazigh populations live. This is clearly defined in the WAC's own branding of itself as an NGO that "brings together Amazigh associations that have a social and cultural mission as well as those that work in development and in the protection of the environment in the countries of Tamazgha (North Africa and the Sahara) and the diaspora" (Congrès Mondial Amazigh, n.d.). Hence, the WAC is an organization of organizations that work in all aspects of Amazigh life within the countries of Tamazgha. The supranational structure now works on a supra-Amazigh level, which is called Tamazgha, to advance the Amazigh issue on a level that requires strategies and discourses that were not necessary or even conceivable for local activism.

In 2018, the WAC published an important document in this regard, the *Mithāq tāmāzgha* (The Manifesto of Tamazgha). The WAC's "Manifesto of Tamazgha for a Democratic, Social and Transborder Confederation Founded on the Right to Regional Autonomy" refigures and complicates Tamazgha as a supranational Amazigh entity. Drafted first in 2011 and adopted in 2015, the Manifesto is heavily influenced by the human rights-oriented discourse of lawyers. The Manifesto is also deeply steeped in the international human rights conventions, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Geneva Convention (1950), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1989), the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995), and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), among others (El Jamai 2023). The list of conventions and international agreements listed in the Manifesto's preamble clearly indicates the effort to integrate its conception of Tamazgha within a more globalized activist discourse. Tamazgha, as reimagined by the Manifesto, is founded "on the indivisible universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality, and solidarity" (El Jamai 2023). Speaking to the neoliberal understanding of human rights, the Manifesto underlines how "the Movement of Tamazgha places the individual at the heart of its work to anchor Tamazghan citizenship" (El Jamai 2023). It is crucial to note here that, in contrast to their predecessors, the proponents of Tamazgha have shifted their attention from the community as a holder of rights to the individual.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the WAC was created in France in 1995, it only held its formal general assembly in 1997 in the city of Tafira in the Canary Islands. Thus, these two dates come up a lot in scholarship, and this process has created some confusion as when the WAC was established.

This shift may be dictated by the experiences of the leadership, who are significantly internationalist in their vision, and also most likely by the efficiency of deploying such discourses in lobbying efforts in Europe and the United States. Those who have studied Amazigh activism will have noticed that the Manifesto is a document that reconciles two main trends within the ACM. Linguist Ahmed Boukous has made a distinction between the “independentist approach” and the “integrative approach” that are the main tendencies within Amazigh activism (Boukous 2016, 249-250). According to Boukous, the former represents a form of “Amazigh fundamentalism” that seeks to make change through political action, including the mobilization of the idea of Tamazgha, while the latter is a cultural approach that aims to create space for Tamazight within an inherently diverse nation (Boukous 2016, 249-250). This position of the second tendency is best captured in its motto “*al-wahda fi al-tanawwu’*,” or “unity in diversity.” The reconciliatory and aspirational tone of the Manifesto is indicative of the maturity ACM has reached and its ability to adopt a multipronged and multistrategic approach to achieving its goals. Much of this Manifesto will not see the light of day anytime soon, given the WAC’s lack of political authority to implement its ideals, but it remains an advanced conceptualization of Tamazghan citizenship that will further solidify the pan-nationalist bonds between Imazighen based on their Amazighitude undergirded by a shared language and culture.

Legitimacy appears to have been important for the drafters of the Manifesto. They assert that their initiative is representative of both the desires and the needs of people of Tamazgha. As such, this supranational entity works to “unite the people of Tamazgha and endeavors to defend the rights and the identity of Imazighen” (El Jamai 2023). However, Tamazgha is not solely inhabited by Imazighen; it is a multilingual and multicultural space that is home to diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Therefore, the Manifesto also acknowledges this reality by underlining the existence of “different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups” in Tamazgha (El Jamai 2023). Because of this complex composition, “participative democracy,” which probably refers to Amazigh deliberation, is foregrounded as a mode of government for “all the people who live in the space of Tamazgha” (El Jamai 2023). Article 6 of the Manifesto grants the freedom of religion to all the citizens of Tamazgha, whereas Article 11 outlaws human trafficking and Article 12 prohibits slavery. Taken together, these values can be construed as responses to the history of religious persecution as well as histories of enslavement and racism that unfolded in the region and whose legacies Amazigh activists are attempting to repair. The Manifesto also carefully navigates the question of colonial borders by asserting their irreversibility (El Jamai 2023). Not questioning colonial borders spares the WAC from the predictable criticism of being an agent of division and allows it to work from the existing nation-states to achieve the Amazigh dream of Tamazgha as a larger confederal alternative to the current regional ensembles. Tamazgha is clearly conceptualized as an African project that is rooted in its straddling of different parts of Africa. Thus, Tamazgha is in itself positioned as a contribution to African unity. Instead of shaping it as an isolationist Amazigh island, Tamazgha is envisioned as a multilingual, multiethnic, and multinational space that is organized according to local national laws but that also has a transnational dimension as an ancestral Amazigh homeland tooted in a vision of an interconnected Africa. Accordingly, WAC’s Imazighen demonstrate an acute awareness of the complexity of their endeavors as well as the transformative impact of their effort to rebrand their Indigenous space amidst a political reality where state borders have been set before the emergence of Amazigh activism.

Tamazgha’s construction as an Amazigh homeland is the product of a conscious endeavor to give territorial visibility to the Amazigh revivalist both at home and in the diaspora. Lawyer and



human rights activist Ahmed Degherni attended the aforementioned Vienna Conference in 1993, and his writings form a unique intervention in which he fleshes out some of the implications of Tamazgha's concretization. His seminal books *al-'amal al-jam'awī al-amāzīghī bi-al-maghrīb* (Amazigh Associative Work in Morocco, 1998) and *al-badīl al-amāzīghī* (the Amazigh Alternative, 2006) make significant contributions to the theoretical edification of the Tamazgha (Degherni 1998; 2006). Tamazgha, Amazigh civil society, and Amazigh knowledge production are facets of the same project that seeks to rehabilitate Imazighen in their ancestral homeland. For Degherni, Tamazgha goes hand in hand with the development of *Tamazghit* or Amazighology, which he defines as “the knowledge of Imazighen in the past and in the present” (Degherni 1998, 8). Degherni elevates “attention to the notion of Tamazgha, which symbolizes belonging to the Amazigh homeland” (Degherni 1998, 31) to a pillar of Amazigh civil society's work to restore its language and culture in its homeland. Writing about the impact of colonialism on Imazighen, Degherni draws attention to Tamazgha's successive colonizers' misconception that Amazigh identity could be fully incorporated into theirs. This focus on colonialism and its impact allows Degherni to elaborate a comprehensive theory in which the construction of Tamazgha as an Amazigh homeland functions as a counter-imaginary to the attempts of successive colonizers to impose languages, cultures, and identities on Imazighen, who already have their own.

The broader implications of Degherni's intellectual work on Tamazgha can be seen in his book *al-Badīl al-amāzīghī*. Published in 2006, this book came out at a time when Morocco was taking important steps towards recognizing the Amazigh language and culture. The Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture had already been established in 2001, and the Equity and Reconciliation Commission's truth-finding mission regarding human rights violations during the Years of Lead (1956-1999) was underway. Organized as a political manifesto that laid out the foundation for an Amazigh political party, the *Amazigh Alternative* attends to the notion of Tamazgha as a linchpin for a new Africa. In this book, Tamazgha emerges in all its complexity as a unifier and connector for trans-African solidarities that have implications for civic, economic, cultural, racial, and social ties between Africa south of the Sahara as well as Africa north of it. With Tamazgha, the Sahara becomes an endogenous terrain that is fully integrated into Africa through a family of shared Amazigh languages and cultures that Imazighen on both sides have had in common for millennia. In Degherni's analysis, Tamazgha is imbricated “geographically, historically, and humanistically” in Africa (Degherni 2006, 8), but the Arab Maghreb “has no objective foundation” to exist as a regional assembly because of its imposition of Arabism as a cultural identity on an Amazigh region (Degherni 2006, 18). Hence, foregrounding Tamazgha and African unity solidifies intra-African continuities between Imazighen and the rest of the continent, especially through shared pasts and unfolding presents of migration. In this sense, Degherni envisions Tamazgha as an ecumenical space that diverse African people can call home regardless of their identity markers (Degherni 2006, 54-55).

As these samples show, the idea of Tamazgha evolved historically in Arabic sources between the 1940s, when al-Fassi used it to legitimize Arab nationalism, and the mid-2000s, when Degherni deployed it to articulate an African futurity for Imazighen. Between these polarities, Tamazgha has also been debated among Amazigh activists themselves. My research reveals that Amazigh activists, outside the WAC and the human rights wing of the ACM, do not necessarily agree with some of the premises that undergird the idea of Tamazgha. Brahim Akhiyyat, the founding president of AMREC, expressed reservations about the use of Tamazgha despite its factual history. In Akhiyyat's words, “Tamazgha is the Amazigh name for North Africa and is, as such, the alternative to the Arab Maghreb, but both logic and objectivity compel us to avoid

provocative racial terminologies to return to stable terminologies” (Degherni 2006, 122). Akhiyyat was a pragmatist who built a tentacular network of connections within and outside the state, compelling him to adopt a calmer and less militant approach to activism. Although he shared the same horizon of re-Amazighizing North Africa, his method was characterized by a strategic use of soft power locally to chip away at the power of Arab nationalist hegemony. Similarly, Boubaker Ounghir, an Amazigh activist and scholar, asserted the racializing nature of the use of Tamazgha to refer to places where “Imazighen exist in the world” (Ounghir 2023). Ounghir wonders about the logical dissonance in the ACM’s acceptance of an Amazigh homeland while rejecting the Arab homeland in North Africa. A response to Ounghir’s questioning came from the prolific author Mohamed Boudhan, who wrote an article entitled “Hal ṣaḥīḥ anna lafz ‘tāmāzghā’ dhu [sic] shuḥna ‘irqiyya?’” (Is It True That the Word ‘Tamazgha’ Has a ‘Racist Implication?’) Of course, Boudhan’s answer is “no,” since Tamazgha is not used to describe everywhere that Imazighen exist in world. According to Boudhan’s interpretation, Ounghir’s misconception of Tamazgha as a racial space was based on confounding the “Arab world,” which refers to the Arab race and subsumes non-Arab areas, and Tamazgha, which only describes a geographic location inhabited by Imazighen since antiquity (Boudhan 2013, 108). Boudhan pushes this distinction further in establishing an opposition between the Arab world’s tendency to deny “other races” by incorporating them into the Arab identity, on the one hand, and Tamazgha’s neutral “territorial and geographical” meaning, on the other (Boudhan 2013, 109).

Millions of Imazighen live and work abroad. Their diasporic condition has not prevented them from participating in the expansion of the notion and borders of Tamazgha to include communities in metropolitan centers in France, Holland, Belgium, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States to name just a few. These diasporic embodiments of Tamazgha are tied to local struggles to assert Amazigh rights through reenactments of Amazighity in the form of language courses, cultural events, and community-building to preserve Amazigh identity. Whether in Paris, Boston, or London, Imazighen have turned Tamazgha into a cultural symbol that gives them a sense of shared purpose beyond the divisive policies of nation-states in North Africa. Before the emergence of Tamazgha and Amazigh activism, nationalisms tied to specific countries obstructed cooperation between immigrants from North Africa. North African governments’ consular agents strove to maintain the isolation of their immigrants through their *Amicales*, which were mainly run by intelligence services, where erroneous ideas were circulated about Moroccans and Algerians to deepen the rifts between them. While this did not always succeed with students and trade union members, it was quite successful with the uneducated workers. However, the emergence of the Amazigh consciousness among Amazigh diasporas has created more avenues for Tamazghan solidarities among Imazighen from all parts of Tamazgha. The absence of political repression of cultural activism in the diaspora has allowed Amazigh communities to thrive and engage in conversations that many of them would probably not have had a chance to hold in their homelands. Specifically, the United States has been an important location for Amazigh engagement with notions of Indigeneity and its transformative potential for the Amazigh cause. Today, Amazigh-Americans have emerged a dynamic category of carriers of Amazighitude in a country where identities are valued and where community recognition is part and parcel of civic engagement. These factors make the United States a fertile soil for the growth and prosperity of Amazigh activism and scholarship, including the idea of Tamazgha, in the years to come.

These representative debates indicate the latent potential of Tamazgha. As this discussion has shown, it is a concept that mobilizes human rights, geography, concepts of racial equality, history, and global notions of Indigeneity to situate Imazighen both locally and globally while also

giving voice to their experience of cultural and linguistic dispossession. It is clear that Tamazgha is a polysemic and geographic reimagining of North Africa through an Amazigh lens that rereads and reinterprets both history and geography as colonizable sciences that the powerful can use to erase others and impose their own visions of the world. Tamazgha is also overlaid with meanings of liberation, history, autonomy, nationhood, and transnational solidarities that transcend the borders of Tamazgha itself (El Guabli 2023, 39). The contestation of the use of Tamazgha and the existence of disagreements between different Amazigh constituencies demonstrates that Imazighen do not share the same vision for their activism. It also shows that the ACM is traversed by currents and tendencies that enrich its literature with sometimes antithetical positions, which cannot but be interpreted as a sign of dynamic and democratic debate within the movement.

### **Tamazgha and Its Academic Potential**

The debates taking place in Amazigh and Arabic sources have not been part of the current literature on Amazigh activism. Most scholarship relies on ethnography or sources in European languages, which leaves an important corpus of theorizations outside the “known” in the academic discourses. Moreover, there has not been any scholarship on the academic potential of the notion of Tamazgha, either. This lack of scholarly engagement with its significance for academic works has left a gap that needs to be addressed. Toponymies are not never innocent, since they are rather active endeavors to create and anchor visions of the past based on different understandings of history and identity. The production of knowledge is inherently linked to power dynamics, and the names that academics use to talk about places they study can either contribute to ideologies of liberation or further deepen the status quo. The push towards using Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) instead of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is one recent example that shows that the way a place is named has significant consequences for the way it is approached and the type of connections that can be drawn between its constitutive components. Amazigh activists’ conception of Tamazgha as a horizon for Tamazghan citizenship and futurity not only supplants North Africa, the Arab Maghreb, Francophone Africa, and White Africa, which are underpinned by the original creators’ own ideological and academic arsenal, but also draws attention to notions of history and geography that were overridden by the imbalance of power between Imazighen and their conquerors. In and of itself, this is sufficient for a postcolonial study of the uses of Tamazgha and serves as a starting point for historicizing Amazigh postcolonial thought. Ever since Algeria, the last colonized country in North Africa, became independent in 1962, the question has remained as to whether Imazighen reached a state of postcoloniality or whether they still live under a form of domestic colonialism. Nationalist governments in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia established and implemented anti-Amazigh policies that could be conceptualized as a form of “internal colonialism” (Churchill and LaDuke 1992). American scholars Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke view internal colonialism as the ensemble of neocolonial measures that the United States undertook in order to dismantle Native American sovereignty, displace tribes, occupy their air and water, occupy their bodies with illnesses, and deprive them of their natural resources (Churchill and LaDuke 1992). Although internal colonialism clearly applies to the way Tamazghan resources are extracted, the concept has broader applications for the study of the ways in which the Amazigh language and culture have been subjected to Arabic and French domination since independence.

Tamazgha as a toponymic appellation broadens the academic possibilities for the study of Amazigh issues in relation to broader Africa. While Amazigh activists seek to reconstruct the

Amazigh homeland by re-envisioning space, they are likewise helping scholars re-envision an entire field of study currently called North African or Maghrebi Studies. Tamazgha, given its territorial extension from the Canary Islands to the oasis of Siwa in Egypt and the fact that it encompasses large portions of the Sahel, is home to myriad human groups, languages, and cultures that have been studied separately and in ways that created silos that do not necessarily speak to each other. The use of Tamazgha emphasizes human, economic, social, and cultural continuities between the different parts of Africa; this includes the Sahara, which colonial scholarship mostly conceived of as a barrier. Scholarship has, of course, been conscious of these continuities but the academic potential of thinking through Tamazgha and the new interdisciplinary and trans-African approaches it entails have yet to be tapped into. Therefore, scholars working in linguistics, migration, race studies, literature, and environmental studies could examine their subjects from the extended territory of Tamazgha to understand how considering their questions through this lens could yield fresh results that might shift the way scholarship on the area is produced and presented in ways that account for new ways of knowing that were hindered by the prevalence of specific names or appellations.

Tamazgha would also mark a shift in the continued categorization of Arabic-speaking North Africa as part of the Orient. Orientalist prejudices informed literature and film produced about Amazigh-speaking societies despite the fact that the latter have their own distinct languages and cultures. The culmination of a historical process that probably started with the Napoleonic Campaign in Egypt, the association of North Africa with the Orient has since contributed to an imposition of Arabism as an essential and defining trait of the entire region. Mohamed Arkoun already drew attention to this fact in 1996 with a compelling deconstruction of the various ways in which the prevalence of a nationalist vision that reduced the Maghreb to an Arab-Islamic identity has contributed to the creation of multiple “impensées” (unthought aspects) of this region (Arkoun 1996:83-109). In Arkoun’s words, one of the results of the imposition of this Arab-Islamic identity on North Africa has been for it to be subsumed by the field of Orientalism (Arkoun 1996). As the region is actively rethought through the notion of Tamazgha, Orientalism will not only be irrelevant but—and most importantly—its abusive and reductive association of a significant portion of Africa with ideas that have no real cultural or sociological foundation in the lived experience will become obsolete. Orientalism also had its own consequences for scholarship, which suffered from a lack of fresh approaches, particularly those developed in historical sociology and historical psychology (Arkoun 1996:96). It is almost impossible to find a North African who identifies as Oriental, and it is certainly impossible to find a sub-Saharan African who would willingly accept being called Oriental. Thus, Tamazgha can also be a space for challenging imposed intellectual and scholarly frameworks that have perverted the way this area has been parceled out as an object of study.

Studying Tamazgha as an Indigenous territory has much potential for the placement of Imazighen within a trans-Indigenous scholarly sphere. Revisiting his seminal book *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*, scholar Chadwick Allen wrote that it “explores both the possibilities and the many challenges—conceptual, practical, and ethical—of organizing work that centers not only multiple Indigenous voices, but also multiple Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and relationalities” (Allen 2023, 284). Allen’s work points out the deeper ramifications and consequences of centering Indigenous people and their methodologies in knowledge production, which connects deeply to Tamazgha. After all, in its current understanding, the idea of Tamazgha emerged in conjunction with the discovery of Imazighen’s belonging to a larger Indigenous community. Thus, the rebranding of North Africa as the Indigenous territory of

Tamazgha is, *mutatis mutandis*, the equivalent of territorialized Indigenous homelands in Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, and North America. The academic use of Tamazgha broadens the application of Indigenous territorial imaginaries to conduct comparative studies that could potentially reveal how Amazigh Indigeneity relates to and is informed by the older traditions that emerged in other regions before the 1990s. Although the notion of Indigeneity is both new and controversial in Tamazgha, its comparative academic use as a critical framework from which to understand the Amazigh condition in relation to other Indigenous experiences can generate useful knowledge for understanding the variable geometry of the concept and its diverse applications. Indigeneity will also open up the small field of Amazigh Studies to newer approaches beyond the philologist tradition that has confined it to literary history and linguistic inquiry, limiting the conversation between Amazigh language and culture with other fields and their methodologies. The integration of Imazighen and their notion of Tamazgha within the trans-Indigenous framework will help develop new methodologies and result in nuanced ways of examining Indigeneity in Tamazgha.

With Tamazgha, Amazigh Studies has the potential to become an interdisciplinary scholarly field. Connected through the critical examination of issues as they relate to the larger territory of Tamazgha, Amazigh Studies will no longer be only focused on Morocco or Algeria—the two countries with the largest Amazigh-speaking populations—but will become a continental concern that seeps into areas as diverse as anthropology, history, linguistics, environmental studies, agronomy, linguistics, political science, and sociology on both sides of the Sahara, which is the current marker of the division between two inherently interwoven parts of the same place. The Tamazghan space could then accommodate new research skills or inspire adventurous students to embark on research endeavors that could expand the borders of scholarly exploration and give a concrete reality to the Amazigh space. Given the existence of Amazigh communities within the French empire, colonial scholars had myriad opportunities to apply this approach, but the establishment of firm national borders after independence has since put an end to these endeavors. Nonetheless, centering on Tamazgha and encouraging students to tap into the myriad questions it allows them to ask can advance our knowledge and also challenge colonialist legacies, particularly their systemic separation of places that encompass historical, linguistic, and cultural continuums.

## Conclusion

This article has retraced the construction of Tamazgha as an Amazigh homeland against the backdrop of the development of Arab nationalism and Amazigh activism in North Africa since the 1930s. It has shown that Tamazgha, both as an idea and a geographic imaginary of a space that shares the Amazigh language as a substratum, had also been used by Allal al-Fassi to undergird the emergence of the Maghreb as an Arab-Islamic space in the 1940s. The shift from Allal al-Fassi's model, which builds on Tamazgha to advocate for Arabism, and the Amazigh one, which claims the initial meaning of Tamazgha as an Amazigh homeland, confirms the strategic importance of toponymy as an active participant in the creation of identities as well as their erasure. The same notion of Tamazgha has been used to undergird two entirely different projects, depending on the needs of the historical period. However, the reaction to Allal al-Fassi's Arab-Islamist-centric project emanated from colonialism whereas the rejection of the ACM's deployment of Tamazgha came from the heirs of al-Fassi's legacy. Therefore, the article has shown that the use of Tamazgha is enmeshed in a vision of Indigeneity, citizenship, and belonging that transcend the current national borders without questioning their legitimacy or calling for their

change, thus turning Tamazgha into a supranational umbrella for the Amazigh Indigenous movement.

The article has also revealed Tamazgha's transformative scholarly potential. Academic paradigms can change when new ideas emerge to shift the way we think about the subjects we study and the nature of questions we ask. The use of Tamazgha as an analytical framework, as this article has argued, could potentially spur new comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of topics that place this Amazigh reimagination of space at the center of academic study. From Orientalism and its misguided inclusion of Amazigh North Africa under its purview to the colonial erection of the Sahara as an impenetrable barrier between the two parts of Africa, Tamazgha reveals the porousness of borders and the continuity of human, cultural, and economic ties that exist between multitudes of people which are, due to the silos in which academic work takes place, currently not foregrounded. Tamazgha, therefore, is not just a reclamation of an Indigenous Amazigh space, but also, and more interestingly for us as scholars, fertile soil for academic innovation.

The project of a scholarly Tamazgha should be seen as a long-term endeavor to build Amazigh Studies. Given its iconoclastic nature, it is a project that will elicit reluctance, if not resistance for various reasons. First, the notion of indigeneity is not accepted in certain segments of the academy focused on Amazigh questions. Second, Tamazgha has the potential to change the terminology, corpuses, methodologies, and approaches from the perspective of a decolonial and transnational Amazigh Studies discipline. History of academic disciplines teaches us that transformations that aim to renew an entire field of study are not always met with acceptance. Nevertheless, the attention of anyone engaged in this project should focus on contributing to the effort to build a state-of-the-art Amazigh Studies in conversation with novel and up-to-date methodologies in the broader academic world.

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