

BERBER, A “LONG-FORGOTTEN” LANGUAGE OF FRANCE

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I. THE BERBER LANGUAGE: SOME BASIC FACTS

The Berber language is one of the branches of the large Hamito-Semitic linguistic family (or “Afro-Asiatic”, according to the American terminology initiated by J. Greenberg), which includes, other than Berber, Semitic, Cushitic, ancient Egyptian, and more distantly, the Tchadic¹ group. With all that this notion implies, the Berber language can be considered as the “aboriginal” one of North Africa because currently there is no positive trace of an exterior origin or of the presence of a pre- or non-Berber substratum in this region. As far back as one can go², the Berber language was already installed in its present territory. Particularly, the toponymy has not allowed us to identify, up till now, any kind of pre-Berber linguistic sediment. Despite numerous theories suggested by linguists since the 19th Century in favor of an external origin of the language (Middle East or East Africa), neither prehistoric archeology nor physical anthropology could show the movement of a population coming from elsewhere; it has even been solidly established that man has been present in North Africa, in a continuous manner, for at least a million years (*cf.* Camps 1974, 1980).

Tamazight (the Berber word for language) covers a vast geographical area: all of North Africa, the Sahara, and a part of the West African Sahel. But the countries

¹ Of which the most commonly known is Hausa.

² That is, starting from the first Egyptian accounts: *cf.* O. Bates 1914 (1970).

principally concerned are, by order of demographical importance: Morocco (35 to 40% of the total population), Algeria (25% of the population), Niger and Mali (Tuaregs).

The Berber-speaking Regions

In Morocco, spoken Berber is spread into three large dialectical areas that cover the totality of the mountainous regions: in the north is the Rif (*Tarifit* dialect); in the center, the Mid-Atlas and a part of the High-Atlas (*Tamazight* dialect); and in the South/Southwest (High-Atlas, Anti-Atlas and Under), the Chleuh domain (*Tachelhit/Ta_eliit*).

In Algeria, the principal Berber-speaking region is Kabylia. In a relatively limited but densely populated surface area, Kabylia alone has two-thirds of Algeria's Berber speakers. The other significant Berber-speaking groups are: the Chaouias of the Aures region, having in all likelihood a million people, and the people of the Mzab (in Ghardaia and other Ibadhite cities), having a population of between 150,000 and 200,000. There are in fact other Berber-speaking groups in Algeria, but these are modest linguistic islands of only several thousands to tens of thousands of speakers.

The third large group of Berber speakers is the Tuaregs, straddling several countries across the Sahara-Sahel zone, principally in Niger (\pm 500,000 people) and in Mali (450,000). The other countries: Algeria (Ahaggar, Ajjer), Lybia (Ajjer) Burkina-Faso and even Nigeria, have more limited Tuareg populations. The total Tuareg population is well over one million individuals.

The other Berber speaking regions are isolated, often threatened areas, spread out across the south of Mauritania (Zenaga), in Tunisia (in Djerba, in part, and in several villages in the south-central part of the country), in Libya (where Berber-speaking groups are clearly larger and more resistant), and in Egypt (the Siwa Oasis).

But these are only the traditional locations: from the beginning of the 20th Century and especially since decolonization, worker emigration and the massive rural exodus that took place throughout the Maghrib have been the basis for the formation of Berber-speaking communities in all the major cities: Algiers and Casablanca are the most outstanding examples. And Paris is one of the three principal Berber speaking cities of the world, perhaps even the largest!

Berber and Arabic in North Africa

Originally, the Berber language covered the entire Maghrib region and the Sahara. The current Berber speakers, identified by a specific linguistic practice, represent a demographic minority only because the Maghrib has known a slow linguistic "Arabization" since the Middle Ages, following the implantation of Islam in the 8th Century and the arrival of nomadic Arab populations coming from the Middle East in the 11th Century. But the base of the population in North Africa is of Berber origin: the huge

majority of current Arabic speakers in the Maghrib are in fact Berbers who were “Arabized” at various times in history.

At this time the most immediate and indisputable criterion for identification of Berber populations is the language. There are, of course, other distinctive socio-cultural traits, but all the other parameters have a lesser discriminating power.

Status

Without official recognition in Algeria and Morocco until recently, *Tamazight* has, nonetheless, the status of “national language” in Niger and in Mali (Tuareg) since these countries gained their independence in 1960.

In the Maghrib, the dominating (and official) Arab-Islamist ideology is globally hostile to the Berber language, the mere existence of which was perceived as a danger to national unity. The linguistic and cultural policy implemented after independence was that of Arabization, aiming to eradicate at the same time the French language, the language of the former colonial power, and Berber, the language of a “bothersome” minority. As a result, until the beginning of the 1990s, Berber was excluded from all official places, as well as from teaching, including at the university level.

The last few years have shown an easing in the position taken by the state in regard to the “Berber question”, both in Algeria and in Morocco. Even if the fundamental texts and effective linguistic policy remain globally unchanged, attitudes, since 1990, have moved progressively from a declared hostility to a marginal tolerance. The most notable events are: the creation in 1990 and in 1991 of the Departments of Amazigh (=Berber) Language and Culture at the Universities of Tizi Ouzou and Bejaïa in Kabylia; the royal speech of August 20, 1994 in which Hassan II gave his approval to “the teaching of Berber dialects”; the creation in May, 1995 of the High Commission on Amazigh Affairs reporting to the Presidency of the Algerian Republic and the beginning of optional Berber language courses in intermediate teaching establishments (middle schools), especially in Kabylia; at the end of 2001, the creation of the Royal Institute For Amazigh Culture in Morocco; and in May, 2002, the constitutional modification which gave “national language” status to the Berber language in Algeria, with Arabic remaining the “official and national language”.

At the same time, the Arabization policy has been regularly reaffirmed in Algeria (a law for the generalization of the Arabic language went into effect on July 5, 1998), bringing an immediate reaction of protest in Kabylia. And, above all, in Algeria as in Morocco, the measures taken in favor of Berber remain marginal and without a real effect on the linguistic and cultural policies or on the predominant sociolinguistic trends. We would seem to be far indeed from any kind of perspective involving a historic compromise between the Algerian and Moroccan States and the existence of the Berber language and culture.

In particular -- and herein lies an element remarkably common to the official approach of both countries to the question-- *any recognition of linguistic or cultural rights of Berber speakers is explicitly denied*. They are refused consideration as ethno-linguistic minorities, entitled to the benefit of the protection of international judicial texts

regarding the rights of minority linguistic and cultural groups. The official word, both Algerian and Moroccan is clear on this point: “*The Berber language and culture are not the property of a particular region (or regions) but are an element of the common and indivisible cultural patrimony of the Nation*”³. This “patrimonialist” approach --the ideological and judicial sources of which are typically French⁴! -- must be analyzed as an attempt to neutralize a linguistic demand that evokes fears of destabilization of the foundations and even the forms of the Nation-States of the Maghrib.

A contemporary renewal

In all the Berber-speaking regions, one can see a strong social demand for the Berber language and culture. This return to the Berber language, this affirmation of the cultural rights of Berber speakers, is translated everywhere by vigorous cultural dynamics, notably in literary production and in a passing to the written form. These dynamics, which are extra-institutional, are bolstered by the cultural elite (artists, creators, and university people) and by active and very committed associations.

More and more, Berber speakers are writing in their own language. New literary forms are being established and are gathering strength (novella, novel, theater). The Berber language is finding its way into the press and even into scientific use. In a region like Kabylia, where this linguistic and identity awakening is not new and is particularly noticeable, one can even speak about Berber linguistic demands and of an open conflict situation with the central State.

II. THE BERBER LANGUAGE IN FRANCE

The Quantitative Data

Mixed with the entire Maghribi immigration, the Berber speakers are included, in the usual classification, in the so-called “Arab” or Maghribi population. The nationality criterion tends to accentuate this lack of distinction since the Berber speakers are first counted as Algerians, Moroccans, even Tunisians and ...French. Recall too that the censuses of the population in France aren't interested in the mother tongue of the surveyed⁵. Any attempt to quantify Berber speakers in France can therefore be only an approximation.

³ See for example the whereases of the Algerian decree of May 28, 1995 creating the High Commission for Amazigh Affairs.

⁴ See in particular the French debate on the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages in 1998-2000, where the official approach and argumentation posited clearly that “Breton, (the language of Brittany), is not the property of Breton speakers or Brittany, that these regional or minority languages are part of the *indivisible patrimony of the Nation*, and that it is the responsibility of the Republic (i.e., the central State) to manage them ...!” (Carcassone and Cerquiglini Reports to Prime Minister L. Jospin; see Chaker 2003 a).

⁵ On the occasion of the last census, an auxiliary survey regarding linguistic practices was conducted, but was inconsistent.

What is certain is that the Maghribi emigration toward France (and Europe) was first Berber speaking, both from Algeria and Morocco⁶: the oldest centers of emigration are Kabylia (starting at the beginning of the 20th century) and the Sus region (after 1945). More recently (after 1960) other Berber speaking zones also became centers of emigration: the Aures for Algeria and the Eastern Province for Morocco.

Altogether, one could reasonably estimate that the number of Berber speaking individuals in France is close to 1,500,000, of which two thirds are Berber speakers of Algerian origin, and one third is of Moroccan origin.

A clear majority of this population has French citizenship and this proportion will continue to rise with time due to integration and relatively liberal citizenship requirements.

A Strong Scientific and Cultural Presence

The above demographic information would suffice in itself to explain the strong presence of the Berber language in France; other historic, ideological and institutional factors deserve to be mentioned as well.

On one hand, the long and substantial presence of a Berber speaking population has for a long time made France an important pole of Berber, and particularly Kabyle, cultural life. Since at least the 1930s Paris is the hub of Kabyle song; France has been the birthplace of the Kabyle record, cassette, compact disc and book⁷; it remains a nearly compulsory passage point for all for all Kabyle creators and artists.

On the other hand, the exclusion of the Berber language and culture which has long prevailed in North Africa has caused, particularly in Algeria, the massive displacement of the Berber language-fostering activity toward France and Paris. Since 1962, the majority of the production in or regarding the Berber language was carried out in France. This “delocalization” has of course affected the militant Berber cultural and political activities, but also scholarly production and education, and even a very large part of the cultural production.

This explains why, for the past thirty years, a rather developed Berber association network has existed in France, that is active particularly in the large metropolitan areas where most of the speakers of Berber are located (Paris, Lyon Marseille, Lille, etc.). This also explains why the activities of these associations have a very militant and committed general tone, bordering on the political: this Berber association network is one of the principal bases of the Algerian Berber (Kabyle) protest movement. Some of these associations are linked to Algerian political parties with a strong Kabyle presence, and

⁶ Note that the important work of Mr. Tribal (see references) suggests a markedly lower proportion of Berber speakers (28%). This percentage is quite certainly much lower than in reality: the study conducted by Mr. Tribalat centered on recent immigration still poorly integrated, where the proportion of Arabic speakers is in fact higher.

⁷ The first novel in the Berber language (Kabyle) was published in France by an Occitan publishing company: R. Aliche, *Asfel*. 1981.

most are the relay in France and in the world, of the Berber struggles taking place in North Africa. Very recently, the first Berber television channel (BRTV) broadcasting mainly towards Kabylia was born in this environment.

The French university and research world haven't been absent. In Morocco and Algeria, the chairs of Berber disappeared in 1956 at the Higher Moroccan Studies Institute (Rabat), and in 1962 at the University of Algiers. As a result, a considerable number (over one hundred) doctoral thesis about Berber have been defended in France since decolonization, mainly in Paris, but also in the rest of the country (Aix, Toulouse, Montpellier, Nancy, etc.). Currently, in spite of a marked internationalization, France keeps a hegemonic position in Berber studies, in university education, research, and publishing.

Two academic confirmations

Berber at INALCO

At the INALCO, Berber has moved within a few years from the category of “small languages” to that of “medium languages”, with a number of registered students stabilized around 100 since 1993. What is the reason for this numerical progression? Considering only external objective elements, the answer is obvious: the important evolution of the demand, and this in three distinct ways:

- A strong demand from students of Berber origins (“second generation”), holders of the French “Baccalaureat”, and most often French citizens. Most of these are students in the first two years (“first cycle”), generally undertaking literature or language studies at other Parisian universities.

- A more modest but very regular demand of Berber language training from international students (Europe: Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Austria, Finland; USA) who already hold a first degree (Bachelor's or Master's degree) in a general field (linguistics, anthropology, comparative literature, history, etc.). They are looking at INALCO for a Berber language training they cannot obtain elsewhere.

- In the “third cycle” (doctoral studies), a very regular demand, mainly from Algeria and Morocco, but also from European countries (Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, etc.). The training of young researchers of Berber, both from the Maghrib and Europe, takes place mostly in France.

At a more general level, it not less obvious that the increase in students of Berber is also a direct consequence of the recent evolution of the socio-linguistic situation in the Maghrib, marked by:

- A strong linguistic and cultural demand movement in favor of Berber.
- The beginning of the acknowledgement of the Berber language by the Maghrib states. The impact of the measures in Algeria (1995, 2002) and Morocco (1994, 2001) in favor of the Berber language has been immediate: numerous students have started working toward national degrees (Bachelor's and Master's degrees⁸), with the explicit goal of teaching Berber.

⁸ The INALCO has been authorized to grant Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Berber since 1995.

Another wider confirmation: Berber at the “Baccalauréat”

Berber has always been on the list of the numerous languages for which an optional oral exam may be taken. In 1978 and 1979, for the three “academies” (education district) of Ile de France, 30 and 40 students have taken that exam. In 1987, their number was 544, and since 1992, it has exceeded one thousand! In the nation, Berber was the most requested language for this optional oral exam, after the regional languages of France.

Since the 1995 “Baccalaureat” exam, the optional exams of “rare” languages have had a written format. Under an agreement, the INALCO has the responsibility of preparing the test and grading the exam papers. At this time, three dialects are offered: Kabyle, Tachelhit and Tarifit. The first exam session in 1995 was a complete surprise, since, contrary to all previsions which were expecting a sharp drop in numbers, 1534 candidates have taken the exam in all “academies” in France proper (with an overwhelming majority in the Paris region, and in decreasing order, Aix-Marseille, Lille, Lyon, St. Etienne).

With some variation from year to year, the breakdown among the dialects is as expected: a strong majority for Kabyle, (over 60%), and 40% for the two Moroccan dialects – with a strong increase for Tarifit which is nearly equal to Tachelhit. Since 2001, over 1800 candidates have taken the exam.

These quantitative data are particularly interesting from the point of view of sociolinguistics because they reflect a strong bond of the young Berber speakers of France to their language: one can even speak of a militant adhesion, since the difficulties associated with writing, for which the overwhelming majority have not been prepared in school, have not dissuaded them. These data thus confirm that Berber is in fact objectively “a language of France”.

III. THE FRENCH STATE AND THE BERBER LANGUAGE

Until Recently, an Ignored Language, In Spite Of a Strong Presence

In fact, in spite of this strong long-time presence, the French State and the entire political French tradition have until 1998-1999 almost totally ignored Berber as the language of a population living on its territory. For the French institutions, Berber had existed only as an academic discipline since 1913 at INALCO (and also until the decolonization, in Algiers and Rabat). This academic integration was justified by the fact that it was the language of one part of the population of North Africa under French sovereignty. There are in fact only rare and weak traces of an institutional consideration of the presence of a Berber speaking population in France:

- There have been radio programs in Berber (Kabyle of Algeria and Tachelhit of Morocco) until 1974 within the former ORTF⁹. Of course, these radio programs, which

⁹ Office of French Television and Radio, a State monopoly until 1984.

could be received only in France, were meant for the Berber speaking “immigrant workers” residing in France.

- Besides, in all the courthouses in the major metropolitan areas (Paris, Lyon, Marseilles, Lille, Toulouse, etc.) there are sworn interpreters/translators for the Berber language, in several of its regional variations (notably Kabyle and Tachelhit).

- One can also add the existence of the optional Berber language exam at the “Baccalauréat”, a national exam of the national French education system (see above). However, one should stress the fact that that exam has no associated teaching or preparation within the public education institutions: the candidates must prepare for it on their own or through associations.

One will easily agree that these traces are tenuous and do not represent an “acknowledgement” of Berber or of the Berber speakers of France: this is at the most a discreet consideration, a marginal tolerance of the sociolinguistic reality.

This apparently paradoxical situation is not very surprising within the French political and legal context.

A stubborn illusion: “migrant workers”

On one hand, for a very long time – at least until the mid-1980’s --, the populations of Maghribi origins were considered by the public opinion and by the French political decision-makers as “foreign immigrant workers”, without a vocation to remain permanently in France, and this in spite of their number, the length of their presence in the country, the fact that many of them already had French citizenship¹⁰, and that the families, notably of Algerian origins, were numerous. In fact, the myth of the “return”, cultivated both by the Maghribis living in France, by the countries of origin and by French public opinion, has long hidden the social, cultural and psychological realities and has caused these populations to be considered as “migrant workers” and not as “immigrants”. In such a configuration, the language, the culture or the religion of these “transient” populations was not an issue for the French institutions and society.

A linguistic unification tradition hostile to diversity

One also needs to keep in mind that France is a highly centralized country, where the State has a quasi-monopoly on education, intervenes heavily in cultural matters, and has forever been conducting a linguistic policy exclusively oriented towards French: for several centuries, the linguistic policy of the French State has explicitly aimed at eradicating the regional languages of France, and even now, these languages only have a very marginal position in the education system. It is therefore not surprising that Berber and the teaching of Berber have not been a preoccupation of the French public institutions.

¹⁰ Algeria had the status of French departments and all of its inhabitants were French citizens, even if there were important inequalities in the way “Europeans” and “Moslems” were treated.

Berber represented in the official French sphere a genuine “Unidentified Linguistic Object”! For the French administration only knows and recognizes two categories of languages besides French, official language of the Republic and therefore language of the national education system: the modern foreign languages, languages of foreign *States* that can be taught within the national education system, and the regional languages of France (Breton, Occitan, Basque, Alsatian, Corsican, etc.), legally recognized (Deixonne law¹¹) and marginally addressed by the national education system in the corresponding regions. But Berber is neither a modern foreign language (as understood by the French administration), nor a regional language of France! Consequently, within the regulations pertaining to the teaching of languages in France, there was no possibility of teaching Berber.

Finally, beyond the sociopolitical and legal aspects, it is certain that there was and still is within the French national education system, extremely powerful opinion trends hostile to the teaching of minority languages, be they regional languages or the languages of populations of foreign origins, considered as an impediment to integration into French society¹². In fact, the predominant linguistic ideology in the circles of French teaching remains that of linguistic assimilation, implying the disappearance of the language of their origins: the Republic indeed welcomes into French citizenship, but demands that all visible or audible traces of an external origin be erased and is tenaciously opposed to any “communitarian” drift¹³!

The geo-political constraint

One should of course not minimize the quasi-structural political prudence of the French authorities since decolonization regarding anything Berber: relations with Algiers or Rabat, and more generally with the Arab world are an essential dimension of French diplomacy, for one should not forget that France has always been a great “Arab and Moslem” power! An excessive solicitude with respect to the Berbers and their language, even on French territory, would risk provoking negative reactions from the part of Algiers, Rabat and the other Arab capitals. It is certain that the French Foreign Affairs have always been reserved, even hostile with respect to any gesture or measure favorable to the Berber¹⁴. In all situations of tension with Paris, the Maghribi capitals never hesitate to protest the “neo-colonial temptation of France”, and do not refrain from recalling and condemning its “(pro-) Berber policy” during the colonial period¹⁵.

¹¹ Law no. 51-46 of 01-11-1951, also called “Deixonne law, which governs the teaching of the regional languages of France.

¹² This is notably the position of the majority of the teachers unions, of the major associations of parents of students, and of the major organizations linked to the education field.

¹³ In France, American (and more generally, Anglo-Saxon) communitarianism is considered as a counter-model by the vast majority of the political class and of the elites!

¹⁴ Since decolonization, numerous indices confirm this attitude, either regarding the events that have taken place in Berber regions (particularly in Kabylia) or regarding the management of the “Berber question” in France.

¹⁵ On this issue of the “Berber policy of France”, which is more a myth created and exploited by the nationalist arabo-islamist ideology than a reality, see Chaker 1998, chap. 7.

In Berber matters, France is in a mine field and “walks on eggs”! Against the importance of the geo-political and diplomatic links, it is difficult for the “Berberophilia” that is widespread in the French opinion and political class, to have a concrete manifestation: next to the Arab world, Berbers only represent a minor, and even negligible stake.

The debate around the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages (1998-1999)

Between June 1998 and May 1999, a fascinating political debate took place in France on the government project to ratify the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages. Besides being of general sociolinguistics interest, that debate was of very direct interest to the specialists of the languages of North Africa, since for the first time, the issue of the status of the languages of foreign origin—including Berber and Maghribi Arabic – was explicitly debated. For the first time, official French documents have proposed to consider Berber and Maghribi Arabic as “languages of France”.

At the end of 1997, the French government initiated the process that would normally lead to the ratification by France of the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages¹⁶. A long and complex process that the government approached with many precautions. Before initiating the final phase of signature by the government¹⁷, followed by the presentation of a proposed law of ratification by the Parliament¹⁸, the French Prime Minister requested numerous advices and expert reviews¹⁹.

In the preparatory phase of expert reviews, the very detailed legal analysis carried out by G. Carcassone²⁰, then B. Cerquiglini’s report on “The Languages of France”²¹ are in many respects, documents of primary importance. On one hand, they point out the nature and the intrinsic limits of the Charter, and on the other hand, they present, to an extent rarely achieved, the French republican doctrine in the matter of “regional or minority” languages.

¹⁶ Charter of the Council of Europe, adopted in Strasburg on 10/2/1992 and submitted for signature and ratification by the member States.

¹⁷ Signature which took place on May 7, 1999 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Council of Europe.

¹⁸ Since this is an international convention, only the vote of Parliament can make it into law (article 53 of the Constitution).

¹⁹ A first “political” report on the regional languages was requested from Nicole Pery, the socialist Bayonne delegate. In the end, once she was appointed Secretary for Women’s Rights, Bernard Poignant, the mayor of Quimper, completed and submitted the requested report on July 1, 1997.

²⁰ *Study on the compatibility between the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages and the Constitution*, Report to the Prime Minister, La Documentation Française, October 1998, 130 pages.

²¹ § 176: “[Berber] is jointly with French, the inherited mother tongue of hundreds of thousands of us, but is nowhere the official language, not even in Morocco, while it is being fought in the geographical region of Algeria where it is the majority [...]. It is obvious that there would be something unexplainable if France, at the moment it would consider as belonging to its linguistic patrimony the parental languages of Stéphane Guivarc’h, of Bixente Lizarazu or Lilian Thuram, refused to do the same for that of Zineddine Zidane.”

The internal analysis of the Charter and its “French reading” will not be discussed, as these aspects have been developed previously in another publication (Cf. Chaker 2003a). Here, the focus will be on the relationship, for the first time explicit, between the French authorities and the Berber language.

The overture on the languages of foreign origins: a remarkable change

Contrary to the traditionally dominant positioning France, on the left and on the right, G. Carcassone and then B. Cerquiglini have considered in their reports that the adhesion of France to the Charter had to take place while taking into consideration certain languages of foreign origin stemming from immigration (“non-territorial” languages). G. Carcassonne refers with insistence on the case of the Berber language²² (the language of Zineddine Zidane), and proposes a series of specific criteria that appear legitimate, measured, and, with the exception of the difficult case of Arabic, quite easy to implement:

- The demographic importance and the stability of the population: there must be a significant number of French citizens who are speakers of a language for it to be taken into account. According to the provisions of the Charter, it is the responsibility of the government to set the threshold for consideration, but it is obvious that Berber, and notably its Kabyle variant, belongs to the group of languages solidly implanted in France and which should be included in the list of the languages of France.

- The absence of an official status in a foreign State: the Charter’s objective is in fact to protect threatened languages: the languages of foreign States, like (classical) Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish, Polish or Vietnamese are clearly not in this category, and there are not facing any risk of disappearance. Even if they are well-represented in France, the French State doesn’t have a duty or a responsibility to protect them, and these languages which are clearly in the category of foreign languages, are already taught as such by the French national education system.

After this series of expert reviews, B. Cerquiglini, in the list of the languages of France he established at the request of the government, includes next to the regional languages, Berber, (Maghribi) dialectal Arabic, Yiddish, Rromani, and Occidental Armenian.

From a purely legal point of view, the process and the argumentation seem solid. For, since the French Constitution absolutely excludes the recognition of rights of particular linguistic or cultural communities, it seems difficult to distinguish the case of Breton from that of Kabyle (spoken by several hundreds of thousands of French citizens²³ and which is not the official language of any foreign State). The only possible distinction would be of course of a historical nature, but that would be a categorization not very well based in law, and which would certainly be anti-constitutional since it is discriminatory: a Berber speaking French citizen is not less French than a Breton speaking French citizen! The French citizens of Berber languages could rightly ask the French or European courts

²² See his report on “The Languages of France”, La Documentation Française, April 1999.

²³

with solid arguments that their language benefits from the provisions of the Charter, should it be ratified by France.

Beyond the legal arguments, this new approach therefore at last recognizes the socio-cultural realities of the country: certain languages of population of foreign origins such as Berber are spoken in France by a large number of people. These languages have been implanted in France for a long time, and their speakers are largely integrated from the legal (the majority of these speakers have French citizenship, often for several generations), social and cultural points of view²⁴. Berber is therefore objectively and durably a “language of France”.

Fragility and grandeur of a process: the constitutional censure

The Constitutional Council contacted on May 20, 1999 by the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, has estimated the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages to be contrary to the French Constitution²⁵. The Charter being incompatible with the Constitution, France has therefore not been able to ratify it: a revision of the Constitution that would have made the two texts compatible would have been (and will be) necessary. But proceeding with of a constitutional reform to resolve the contradiction appears highly unlikely in the near future, both for political and legal reasons.

In spite of this deadlock, the issue will certainly evolve in the coming years because France appears truly as an exception in the European context: the French constitutional closure will certainly not resist very long, while, to use a nearby example, the Catalan linguistic law²⁶ states that Catalan is Catalonia’s own language and enjoys co-official status with Castilian. And even with the exception of the limit cases of Spain and Belgium, all the States of the European Union that have linguistic minorities on their territory clearly recognize the linguistic rights of these communities (Italy, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Great Britain, etc.).

The European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages won’t therefore be ratified by France in the near future, but the debate has had the merit of opening for the first time the discussion on the status of the languages of foreign origins and of having confronted, based on legal reasoning and socio-linguistic reality, the classic opposition between “territorial languages” (i.e. regional languages), and “non-territorial languages” (languages of foreign origin). And the French authorities have, for the first time, admitted that in both cases, these are indeed “languages of France”.

For almost a century of Berber presence on its territory, France has almost ignored the Berber language as an internal sociological reality. The debate on the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages in 1998/1999 has been an important turning point, and Berber now belongs to the “languages of France”. But this “recognition”

²⁴ The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the speakers of Armenian, Arabic, Yiddish, etc.

²⁵ Decision no. 99-112 DC of June 15, 1999

²⁶ Law of linguistic policy of Catalonia 1/1998, of January 7, 1998, article 2/1: “*El català és la llengua pròpia de Catalunya y la singularitza com a poble.*”

remains for the moment very symbolic and has not been followed by any concrete measure²⁷.

What will the evolution of the official status of the Berber language be in the near future? One can only answer cautiously, because the forces acting in this matter are contradictory and highly political, and therefore volatile.

For a whole set of historical, cultural, social and political reasons, both internal and external, one could hypothesize that France will (slowly) evolve towards a form of addressing the Berber language. For, beyond any ethical or legal consideration, there is no doubt that this is in the well-understood interest of France.

This appears first as a “good government” requirement and an internal French necessity, since a considerable proportion of the population of Maghribi origin living in France speaks Berber and refers to the language of its origins. Promoting the teaching of this “language of France” would be a way to seize an opportunity with multiple benefits: the valorization of this linguistic and cultural patrimony can be an important factor for a more harmonious integration of the corresponding populations in French society.

On a more political plane, measures in favor of Berber (and of Maghribi Arabic) would be an efficient mean to stem the Islamist pressure that can be sensed in the suburbs of the large metropolitan areas. Valuing Berber (and Maghribi Arabic) can help break the hegemony that the Islamist ideology exerts on the most disenfranchised strata of the populations of Maghribi origins.

Finally, even on a geo-strategic level, it is not at all certain that the long term interest of France lies in continuing to neglect the Berber issue and to bet almost exclusively on the Arab card, and more precisely on the card of the “Arab States”. In North Africa in the throws of a threatening Islamism, Fascist trending Arabism, quasi-structural authoritarianism and deep socio-economical crisis, the Berber parameter could rapidly become an essential element of the political play and significantly change the balance in the Western Mediterranean region. To strengthen the position of Berber (and of Maghribi Arabic) in France could well also be a way of playing the pluralism and democracy and to increase the weight of France and of the French language in North Africa.

But it is obvious that such a hypothesis on the evolution of the French official position with respect to Berber (i.e. an effective and determined consideration) assumes both a lucid and long-term approach of the interests of France. However, in that country as elsewhere, it is not at all certain that political actions and decisions are based on such foundations.

²⁷ Not even any teaching of the languages in high school to prepare for the Berber exam at the “Baccalauréat”, a very modest initiative which would at least remove an obvious contradiction: Berber, a “language of France”, is the topic of an optional written test in an national French examination, but is not taught anywhere in the French public school system!

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