


2023

Fathi Ben Maammar, Tinfas seg Jerba - Ḥikāyāt amāzīghiyya jarbiyya

Vermondo Brugnatelli
University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jas>

 Part of the [Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons](#), [Comparative and Historical Linguistics Commons](#), [Morphology Commons](#), and the [Phonetics and Phonology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

APA Citation: Brugnatelli, V. (2023). Fathi Ben Maammar, Tinfas seg Jerba - Ḥikāyāt amāzīghiyya jarbiyya. *Journal of Amazigh Studies*, 1(1). Available at <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jas/vol1/iss1/5>

MLA Citation: Brugnatelli, Vermondo. "Fathi Ben Maammar, Tinfas seg Jerba - Ḥikāyāt amāzīghiyya jarbiyya." 1, 1 (2023). <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jas/vol1/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Amazigh Studies by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.



Fathi Ben Maammar, *Tinfas seg Jerba - Hikāyāt amāzīghiyya jarbiyya* (Paris-Tunis, Ibadica & Dār minwāl lil-nashr, 2022), 155 pages, 15 DT/15 €.

Learning Berber could save your life. This is the lesson to be drawn from the first tale of Ben Maammar's collection of Jerbian traditional narratives *Tinfas seg Jerba* ('Tales from Jerba'). In fact, knowledge of the secret meaning of the Berber expression *tinelli tazuggayt*, literally "the red thread" but in slang "throat slit," helps the hero escape death. The Berber language of Jerba, long-neglected by linguists and researchers, is still alive on the Tunisian island, especially in Guellala (Iqellalen) and the surrounding hamlets though its survival is imperiled. The setting described by the story-teller matches the current linguistic situation in Jerba: "*g ussan-is udellen midden duggan g elħumt-is s elleywet muc d elleywet n id baħn-esen mayellaħ d elleywet n indin elli ħekmen ussan-din*" (at his time, people had begun to speak in their village a language that was not the language of their fathers, because it was the language of those who ruled at that time). Nevertheless, preserving the ancestral language might still be useful, as with the happy end of the tale: "*tezriħ mameħ tenfee-aney ayuh n elleywet n aydin n icelħiyen, elli neħfed-it emnin nedder yer-sen?*" (have you seen how useful this language of those Berbers has been for us, which we have learned when we lived among them?).

It is not by chance that this tale was placed at the book's opening. The author, Fathi Ben Maammar, was born in Fahmine (in Berber: *Ifammen*), south of Guellala (*Iqellalen*) on the Tunisian island of Jerba, and is one of the most active custodians of this endangered heritage, who has made contributions of great value for the preservation of the language, publishing important related works.

The earliest of the latter (Ben Maammar 2005) was also the first book written in *Jerbi* and was a translation of selections from *The Bible*. This work attests to his love for his own language, which posed challenges of translation and comparison of the basic concepts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (the subject of his M.A. and Ph.D. theses). Unlike many similar works, taken on by people wishing to spread the Gospel in foreign countries, who were zealous but lacking linguistic skills, this translation, free from missionary goals, is written in an easily understandable, plain language, devoid of technical European borrowings or clumsy neologisms.

This first essay was followed by other works, of which the more outstanding are a grammatical sketch in Arabic (Ben Maammar 2013) and the present collection of folktales. Besides these books, he also wrote articles containing transcriptions of Berber oral literature, traditional expressions, and other linguistic data in various magazines and miscellaneous books. Writing in his language, he makes use of the Arabic script, with some special diacritic marks for sounds typical of Berber that are lacking in Arabic (in the course of time, he made use of "ج" and "ق" for [g], "ك" and "خ" for [k], and "ب" for [b]). As the title tells us, this book brings together a number of *tinfas*, plural of *tanfust*, a word that is widespread in the Zanata regions of Berber (for instance, Mzab, Ouargla, Rif, Figuig) and references a variety of oral examples ranging from "(fairy) tales" to "riddles." This complexity prompted the author to choose this word also for the title of his grammatical sketch of 2013, *Tanfust n Elmiraz* ("the tale/riddle of Elmiraz"), as Elmiraz is a raised area near Fahmine where people used to gather for the feast of Ashurah or other special occasions. In the foreword, he recalled both meanings of *tanfust* and declared that his goal was that of "presenting the reader with a narrative (*qiṣṣa*) of his language and attempting the decipherment of its symbols (*fakk rumūzihā*)." Simply put, this work is important not only because it is rich and well done, but also it is one of the first Berber grammar written in Arabic and not in a European language. It reaches a wider readership in North-African countries.

Tinfas seg Jerba offers ten folktales gathered over the years from oral sources and written in Berber (Arabic script with vowels), with a translation into Arabic. Each tale is followed by a number of notes in Arabic that explain the literal meaning of some expressions and help the reader better understand the circumstances of the narratives and their sense within the traditional society of Jerba. Some notes are small lexicographic essays describing the nuances of the meaning of a word or the differences between vocables having similar meanings. For instance, a note (46) describes the different appellations of agricultural land: *temmurt* with the general meanings of "land" and "country, nation," but specifically "landed property, estate;" *amezday* "farm;" *ijenni* "orchard," *tafrawt* "plantation."

A very useful companion to the book is the audio recording of all the tales, read by the author himself, that can be heard on the Youtube channel of the publisher, Ibadica, thanks to a QR code printed on the cover flaps.¹

The titles of the stories are:

- 1) *Tinelli tazuggayt* “The red thread”
- 2) *Errbie n uccen* “The jackal’s grass”
- 3) *Ayyul ed talyemt* “The donkey and the she-camel”
- 4) *Talefsa* “The viper”
- 5) *Buzgin* “Half-pint”
- 6) *Yetwari* “It was written (in destiny)”
- 7) *Zagdud* (name of the hero)
- 8) *Emmar u Mesēud* “Omar son of Massoud”
- 9) *Am memmi am yelli almi ul we yelli* “My son and my daughter are equal until the heart is no longer there”
- 10) *Imeddukul* “Friends”

Besides traditional stories of various types, in some cases shared by other traditions from Northern Africa and elsewhere (tales of animals, fairy tales, etc.), two tales, the first two in the collection, deal with argotic idioms that represent a very ancient heritage and were in use elsewhere among Berber populations. The first tale parallels the expression *iy-as ifili azugg^way* (literally “he made him a red thread,” i.e., “he slaughtered him”), recorded in Morocco by Arsène Roux (1936: 1073). The second expression is the title of the second tale, *errbie n uccen*, literally, “the jackal’s grass,” a metaphoric inversion that references “sheep meat.” The same image was recorded in other Berber regions of Tunisia and Libya as with Tamazret *arrebīāe n wuššen* “meat” (Stumme 17) and El-Fogaha and Sokna (*alūm n uššén* “gazelle and mouflon meat” (Paradisi 103). Its ancient origin is found in an episode of the Ibādī sheikh Abū ‘Uthmān al-Mazātī al-Daġmī (3rd/9th Century) and was referenced by different historians, which include Darġinī, Šemmākhī and an anonymous pupil of al-Wisyānī, where a wolf, miraculously gifted with speech, justified his behavior towards the sheep, saying that sheep and not barley are his vital nourishment (*dālika ma ‘ tšat-ī* in Arabic, *ulli et_tameddurt-enney* in Berber).

From a linguistic point of view, it is worth noting that the language of Ben Maammer’s books is that of his village, Fahmine/Ifammen, which displays small differences as compared to the language of other parts Guellala. Concerning phonology, the use of *f* instead of *ṭ* in *uflay* ‘speak’ (Guellala center: *uṭlay*) and instead of *k* in the personal pronouns of 2nd person prefixed to the verb, like in *a f-d-asey* “I will come to you” (elsewhere *a k-d-asey*), *ta fen-uflayey* “I will speak to you” (elsewhere *ta ken-uṭlayey*), are notable. Moreover, the verb expressing “be” in the past, *isi* in Guellala, is *usi* in Ben Maamar’s works. From the morpho-syntax perspective, the use of the annexed state is sporadic and unpredictable, while it is more frequent and regular in other varieties.

The effort to preserve the traditional language leads the author to some lexical choices, preferring a “genuine” Berber word whenever it exists along with an Arabic borrowing, as with *amellaḳ* “because” which is used instead of the common *elaxater*, but this “puristic” tendency is not carried on so that all the texts are easily understandable by every ordinary speaker of Jerbi. A “didactic” concern for lexical enrichment is also evident in the notes and within the text itself, in those passages where a series of specific terms are used instead of a more general term that would be sufficient. For instance, speaking of a farmer who worked hard, his toil is described in detail, recalling the lexicon of husbandry: *dima ikerrez, ney yetmeyyel, ney imegġer, ney yeccacel, ney itebbi g uzemmur, ney yettayel gi tiyliwin, ney iqeddee g iziwayen n etyiwin ed izuggaren, ney iherrez gi tini* [at any moment he was plowing, or furrowing, or harvesting, or threshing, or picking olives, or pollinating palm trees, or cutting clusters of green and brown dates, or storing dates].

Tinfas n Jerba is an excellent work, useful to linguists, with a rich and representative corpus of texts in *Jerbi*, as well as for general readers in Tunisia and elsewhere in North Africa, who can enjoy these traditional tales

¹ Click below to listen to [The Berber Stories of Djerba] (Histoires berbères de Djerba).
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXmLxSPj0tdo-Hkf4H_c7CGOQxM-zT6FR>.

written in the original Berber language. Maybe this reading will not save human lives, as in the opening tale, but it is a significant contribution toward the survival of the ancestral language of the Berbers of Jerba.

Vermondo Brugnatelli
University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy

NB: Click [here](#) to listen to the folktales.

Works Cited

- Anonymous [F. Ben Maammar] – *Ellektab amezwar: Elleqṣayeḍ en Dawud - Iffey n Aṭ Israyel seg Miṣr - Elqiṣṣeṭ n Yunes - Ellebcareṭ mamek yuy-ett-ed Matta - Elxedmeṭ n Imersal* [The First Book: David's Psalms - The departure of the Israelites from Egypt - The book of Jonas - The Gospel according to Matthew - Acts of the Apostles], n.p., SYR & MFS, 2005.
- Ben Maammar, Fathi. *Tanfust n Elmiraz. Muqaddimāt li dirāsāt al-amāzīgiyya at-tūnisiyya al-mu'āṣira* [The tale of Elmiraz. An introduction to the study of contemporary Tunisian Amazigh language], Maktabat Tūnis, 2013.
- . *Azezlef / حرقان* [Heartburn], Maktabat Tūnis, 2015.
- . « Al-qiyam al-amāzīgiyya fī Tūnis min al-ḥudūr ilā aḍ-ḍumūr ilā at-taḥawwul. Jazīrat Jirba namūḍajan » [The Amazigh values in Tunisia from presence to regression and to change: the example of the Island of Jerba], in : L. Bouyaākoubi (ed.), *Amazighité, valeurs sociétales et le vivre ensemble. Actes du colloque international organisé par l'Université d'Été dans sa 13ème session du 4 au 8 juillet 2017 à Agadir*, Souss Impression Édition, 2018a, pp. 57-78.
- . « Jirbat al-ḥulm al-laḍīd bayna siḥr al-muḥaf aṭ-ṭabi'ī wa ṭarā' at-turāt al-lāmādī » [Djerba is the sweet dream between the incantation of its nature's gifts and the wealth of its immaterial heritage], in *Patrimoine et créativité* n° 10 (Dossier spécial Djerba), 2018b, pp. 10-13.
- . « 'Aškāl al-ta'bīr al-amāzīgī bi-jazīrat Jirba wa dawru-hā fī l-muḥāfīza 'alā l-luḡa wa t-taqāfa wa l-qiyam » [Forms of the Amazigh expression in the Island of Jerba and their role in the preservation of language, culture and values], in : Conseil supérieur de la langue arabe, *Al-'adab al-amāzīgī fī l-janūb al-jazā'iriyyi - 'A'māl al-multaqā - 'A'lāmu-hu wa qaḍāyā-hu al-fanniyya wa l-mawḍū'iyya*, al-Jazā'ir : Mansūrāt al-majlis, vol. II, 2018c, pp. 343-370.
- . *Tinfas seg Jerba - Hikāyāt amāzīghiyya jarbiyya*. Ibadica & Dār minwāl lil-nashr, 2020.
- Paradisi, Umberto. “Il linguaggio berbero di El-Fogaha (Fezzan)”, *AION* 13, 1963, pp. 93-126.
- Roux, Arsène. “Quelques argots arabes et berbères du Maroc”, in *Revue Africaine* 79, 1936, pp. 1067-1088.
- Stumme, Hans. *Über die deutsche Gaunersprache und andere Geheimsprachen*. Seele, 1903.
- Vermondo Brugnatelli, Vermondo. “Su alcune voci gergali nel berbero di Cheninni (Tunisia)”, in: R. Bombi & F. Costantini (eds.), *Percorsi linguistici e interlinguistici. Studi in onore di Vincenzo Orioles*, Forum, 2018, pp. 105-117.