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Anna Maria di Tolla

Relations between humans and non-humans in Amazigh North African oral literature

In this article, I examine the representation of environmental issues in Amazigh narratives. I focus on texts that address the relationships between humans, society, the environment, and colonial greed. Employing ecocritical theory, I offer an interpretation of Amazigh oral traditions and storytelling, highlighting the vital role that autochthonous peoples play in environmental stewardship and sustainable development through their traditional practices. The interdisciplinary approach I adopt to analyse the material draws on ecocriticism—a literary and ethical approach to the environment—as well as elements of cultural and folklore studies. After providing an overview of the environmental challenges faced by Western societies in the 19th century and the ways in which they were conceptualised, I introduce the perspectives found in selected examples of Amazigh oral literature that engage with environmental concerns arising from industrialisation, technicism, and colonialism. My analysis of Amazigh tales involving animals and natural elements is enriched by comparisons with animals in the broader Maghrebi tradition, as well as parallels with Dogon myths and narratives from Sahelian-Sudanese ethnic groups. These comparisons help to deepen our understanding of Amazigh cosmologies and verbal systems.

Keywords: African oral literature, Mediterranean oral literature, Amazigh oral literature, oral traditions, environment, animals.

Introduction

In this contribution, I concentrate on African oral literature and environment through the prism of Amazigh oral literature and the relationships between humans, society, and the environment. Amazigh people, sometimes known as Berbers (Chaker 562–8; Tilmatine 387–414), are the autochthonous peoples of North Africa west of the Mediterranean and Sahara who resulted in a composite population during Neolithic times (Brett and Fentress 12–3).

During the colonial era, several European historians who described African peoples and the autochthonous Amazigh of North Africa relied on the stereotype that Africans were generally defined as "living fossils", "noble savages", and the products of imperialistic 20th century anthropology (Said). Instead, traditional ways of life offer sophisticated understandings of how to live together, which appear vastly superior to westernised interpretations of responsibility for ecological wellbeing across species, especially the emerging global concern over ecological or environmental crises and environmental sustainability. According to Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise, and Karen Thornber: "Traditional place-based cultures ascribe a kind of wisdom and potency to feeling connected to particular locations that modernized people less likely feel, or at least less often articulate" (76).

The wisdom of the Amazigh is formed through the struggle between man and nature. The ecological wisdom embedded in Amazigh traditions represents centuries of improved adaptation to North Africa's arid landscapes. These sophisticated systems, like Morocco's *khettaras* and Algeria's *foggara* (ancient irrigation networks), emerged from the urgent need to sustain life in fragile ecosystems. Today, as the very regions that birthed these technologies (Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) rank among the world's most water-stressed nations (World Resources Institute), their relevance couldn't be more pressing.

Yet, in places like Morocco's Tafilalet region, we witness a paradox: while modern science increasingly validates these traditional systems' efficacy, many irrigation networks are falling into disuse (El Khoumsi *et al.*).

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The decline of the *khettaras* is not attributable to technological inadequacy; rather, it is a consequence of a series of external pressures, namely unregulated groundwater pumping, climate-induced droughts, and, crucially, the economic marginalisation of rural communities, which forces youth migration.

When state policies prioritise industrial agriculture and urban water needs, traditional maintenance systems become untenable for remaining populations. This creates the misleading impression of local "disinterest" when communities face structural barriers to maintaining ancestral practices. The tragedy is compounded by the fact that these abandoned systems often hold precisely the climate adaptation knowledge these regions now need (Lightfoot 272–3). Therefore, in this article, I posit that the oral repertories of African societies can provide insights into the local perspective of the environment around them. I propose to examine oral literary forms, such as fairy tales, in an environmental aesthetic peculiar to Amazigh culture.

I aim to investigate what values, knowledge, and beliefs of the environment are inscribed in the Amazigh oral tradition, with reference to the Ayt Khabbash in the South-East Morocco. This was the primary fieldwork site for a research project on a collection of oral texts I conducted between 2006 and 2009. I will include not only data collected in the field in the Moroccan region of Tafilalet but also data and analysis from various secondary sources. The aim is to draw implications for their cultural comparison and preservation.

Amazigh oral traditions convey a fundamental idea: the natural world is not just a setting for human stories but an active storyteller itself. When we listen to these age-old narratives, we discover a worldview in which mountains remember, rivers negotiate, and trees keep sacred accounts of human behaviour (Chiari). The ritual of asking for rain in the Amazigh regions of Morocco and other North African countries is an example. The women in the Tafilalet region of Morocco's songs to *Anzar*, the spirit of rain, are a form of dialogue with the sky. In these interviews that were conducted by the author, Amazigh women of the region confirm that their songs are not explicit requests for rain, but rather a reminder of the sky's promises. Water is seen as part of the sky, reflected in practices such as communal wells without padlocks.

The Amazigh have an intimate connection with the land, and this is expressed in their aesthetic and literary tradition. On the other hand, the vital role that autochthonous peoples play in environmental management and sustainable development due to their traditional practices was legally recognised by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and the 2022 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development. Autochthonous peoples have been able to teach researchers and policymakers the importance of leading sustainable lifestyles. This objective is pursued by means of collaborative endeavours and a sense of solidarity, underpinned by reciprocal relationships with nature and by transitioning away from profit-driven methodologies. These principles find striking embodiment in Amazigh traditions. For centuries, practices in regions like the High Atlas of Morocco, a vast mountain range and a cultural heartland of the Amazigh people, have been guided by these values. The *agdal* pastoral system is a prime example of this. It operates on the principles of sustainability and community and involves rotating grazing lands to allow for regeneration, enforcing collective decision-making through village councils *(jema'a*) and viewing pastures as sacred trusts to be managed for future generations rather than as commodities to be exploited.

The Amazigh people have a profound understanding of their natural environment, which is reflected in their language. They have a rich and precise vocabulary for describing the local flora and fauna, weather patterns, and traditional agricultural practices. It is not just a collection of words but a reflection of a deep cultural and spiritual bond with the land. Many of these terms are uniquely complex and often resist direct translation because they encapsulate entire philosophies about the sacredness of nature and our duty to manage it wisely. Some of these words are neologism, and some are common in different variants that are commonly encountered in everyday discourse, as well as in folklore, proverbs, and songs. At the heart of this worldview is the concept of *agama*: the natural world itself. This concept is intrinsically linked to *awnaḍ*: a deep-seated respect for the environment. This respect is not passive, but rather a fundamental principle that actively guides how people interact with nature.

This duty of care is expressed through a nuanced vocabulary of action. Terms like *awqqr n uwnaḍ*, *aḥttu n uwnaḍ*, and *amzrag n uwnaḍ* all centre on the concept of protection, each perhaps offering a slightly different nuance, much as English uses "guard," "defend," and "shield" interchangeably yet distinctly. Similarly, the term *timḥḍit n uwnaḍ* conveys the specific idea of conservation: the sustainable and wise use of resources to ensure their survival for future generations. All these concepts are powered by a set of verbs that form the backbone of this ethical system: to respect (*zrg*), to preserve (*ari* and *frg*), and to safeguard (*ḥḍu*) (Agnaou 242, 276, 294, 299, 303; Ameur 165, 247, 321, 750; Douchaina-Ouammou 79, 135, 161).

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Given that the environment also deeply concerns animals and their symbolic roles, it is no surprise that interest in tales that feature animals has found expression in important studies and collections of the 20th century that include transcribed, translated, and sometimes annotated Amazigh stories. Numerous Amazigh texts and tales are also appended to the many linguistic and didactic works of important authors, like Henri Basset, Émile Laoust, Arsène Roux, Hans Stumme, and other authors, who have dedicated their studies to the Amazigh domain.

It is not possible, within the framework of this paper, to analyse this issue in its entirety; hence, I will give a brief introduction to the Amazigh people's relationship with nature. I will then focus on three intersections: first, issues related to the relationships between humans and non-humans with the environmental practices of various Amazigh communities, highlighting the ethical and political issues linked to the consideration of non-humans in the arts of Amazigh speech; second, the role of animals as mediators between ecological and spiritual realms across Maghrebin traditions; and finally, some suggestive parallels with Dogon and Sahelo-Sudanese cosmologies that may illuminate shared North African environmental epistemologies.

This is, of course, only an overview aimed at focusing attention on the complexity of the relationships between man, society, and the environment in the Amazigh oral tradition in North Africa, since many other examples could also be considered.

Interactions between humans and animals: Environment and Amazigh traditional practices

The Amazigh people's relationship with nature is always a cultural relationship, mediated by technical knowledge, economic modes of production, political systems of allegiance and control, types of beliefs, and actions managed by religion.

I address the subject of animals and reciprocity in this study. It is evident that animals, most notably camels and goats, serve a dual purpose in human societies. They function as a means of sustenance and as true companions in life. Within the context of nomadic communities, the relationship with these animals is characterised by the principles of reciprocity and respect, as exemplified by the ritual of thanksgiving, observed after the milking or slaughtering of animals (Goodman 136, 138, 140). Rivers and springs are considered places of spiritual purification, and in Amazigh communities, water is not only a vital resource but a sacred element, often associated with fertility and healing rituals (Crawford). This ethos of intergenerational solidarity and anti-extractive economics, where water sources become kin (*ighs*) to be protected rather than resources to be exploited, demonstrates how autochthonous knowledge anticipated modern sustainability paradigms by centuries.

The relationships between humans and non-humans reflect a complex cosmology in which nature is not dominated but rather lived with in symbiosis. This approach has important implications for environmental sustainability, as it promotes the respectful use of natural resources and a deep ecological awareness. Through the analysis of these practices and beliefs, a picture emerges in which Amazigh culture offers a model of harmonious coexistence between humans and non-humans, based on respect, reciprocity, and spirituality. This vision can be a source of inspiration to address contemporary environmental challenges, reaffirming the value of traditional knowledge in an increasingly globalised world. Moreover, there are patterns of reciprocity and coexistence in these traditions that resist commodification, especially in the relationship between humans and animals. Amazigh pastoral practices demonstrate that animals are active participants in a shared world, thereby supporting a fundamental ecological philosophy that endures to the present day.

The Amazigh people preserve the environment for a multitude of reasons, many of which are deeply rooted in their spiritual and cultural worldview. For instance, within Amazigh society, trees hold particular significance, possessing spiritual connections as sites for sacred initiation rites and other ceremonies. This intertwining of the natural and spiritual realms is vividly reflected in their oral traditions, where elements like trees and rivers take on magical agency; they can halt a fugitive or allow heroes to pass while stopping the ogress who insults them.

This deep-seated belief in the sacredness of the landscape was further evidenced during field research conducted in the Tafilalet region between 2006 and 2009. While gathering a corpus of oral texts, numerous informants recounted practices tied to stories about local saints. A prime example is the tomb of Sidi Abd Sadak, located in a cave near Tauz, which remains famous for its miracles. Women who cannot have children visit the cave and tomb, or sleep there for a night or two. In another very widespread practice, the belt from the dress of the person seeking a vote or miracle is left on a tree. Following this, a small amount of sand is collected from the location, mixed with water, and the resulting mixture is distributed to families in the neighbourhood to ensure the favour of benign forces. In the Merzouga region, near the dunes of Erg Chebbi, women gather at specific times

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of the day to watch for the emergence of the grave of the marabout Lalla Ɛlia from the dunes. Only those who see it will receive its *baraka* (divine blessing or spiritual grace) and have their requests granted. Women's prayers are uttered to obtain fertility or to keep children and family members in good health.

Nature in the broadest sense of the term is not an empty impersonal object but gives life, even where natural objects and phenomena have no life. Signs of a good relationship with nature are health, fertility, longevity, and prosperity. Attitudes towards nature are, therefore, above all, a function of symbolic value systems concerning spaces, plants, and animals. More generally and more globally, these attitudes depend on a vision of the world, a structure of thought, and an anthropomorphic model (Rivière 365–78).

The *jinûn*, a specific type of spirit entity within Amazigh and Islamic belief, are thought of as the managers of the world, under God's higher authority. Multiple souls define and underlie different aspects of life in society. Eventually, the difficulties of daily existence are explained as manifestations of the opposition between saints and spirits, as in the Kabyle tradition studied by Jean Servier (35–6). Every significant place such as a house, a spring, a cave, a tree, a stone, an animal, a tomb, or the market, or events like a wedding, rain, and illness, are protected by the so-called *iɛessasen* (guardians) (Abrous and Chaker 4086). The *iɛessasen* are intermediaries between the saints and the *jinûn*, or rather the guardians (Dallet 4). Everything we have belongs to God, and we belong to God; this is the main concept of the worldview. Man is a pilgrim, a traveller who owns nothing, not even himself. Even one's house is only rented and does not belong to man but is instead guarded by *jinûn* (Dallet 4).

The tales generally illustrate family affections and passions. The animal disguised as a human being symbolises the virtues or vices of humanity. It is a common trope of old universal wisdom from popular sources. On the other hand, the Amazigh people themselves share their space with wild and domestic animals, conditioned by the natural rhythm of the seasons, life, and death. The presence of animals that perform human actions reflects the hierarchical structure of the world, as it is conceived of in the Amazigh approach.

In the Moroccan repertoire, a large quantity of tales relates the metamorphosis of men into animals. The imagination of the Amazigh oral tradition around the relationship between humans and animals is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, humans and animals live in close intimacy and share existence in the world to a certain extent. On the other hand, the metamorphosis of men into animals, caused by human decline, leaves indelible marks on the world. This contradictory aspect is one of the foundations of mythical elaboration (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 291–9).

The necessity of precise code selection constitutes a fundamental aspect of the Amazigh language. In daily life, it is traditionally taboo to say certain words, such as the name of non-domestic animals (fox, jackal, hedgehog, toad, snakes); the names of supernatural beings (*jinûn*); the name of fire (*afa*); the name of death (*lmut*); etc.[1] It appears that, based on my field research in Rissani in 2010, storytelling can be a very diverse activity. This encompasses the articulation of names that are conventionally regarded as taboo, including those denoting certain animals such as the jackal or the hedgehog (Camps-Fabrer and Peyron 3445–51).

These tales serve not only as entertainment, but also as instruction and an anthropological record. Animal tales present a realistic and illusion-free view of life. To a certain extent, they are not the other side of a wondrous tale; they are the antidote. The Amazigh particularism underlying these tales is, however, not always decisive, due to the very nature of the tale. Tales often travel across wide regions, making it difficult to firmly associate a tradition with a specific culture or location. What truly matters, however, is how these tales are integrated into and function within local social activities.

In some tales, the animal characters are very diverse. They belong to the reality of the Amazigh world: the camel, the jackal, the hedgehog, the cat, the wild boar, the lion, the panther, the dog, the lark, the donkey, the sheep, the snake, the hyena, and many others. It should be noted that all these animals, and others, also have their place in popular Amazigh festivals where they appear during carnival-like ceremonies.

These oral histories are continually shaped by traditional narrative practices common among other Amazigh groups in North Africa. This cultural context is rooted in a distinct social and political identity. The Tuareg, for example, represent themselves as a social body which, before the establishment of colonial rule at the beginning of the 19th century, was made up of four large political poles with complex links between them: the Ajjer in the north-east, the Ahaggar in the north-west, the Aïr in the south-east, and the Tademekkat in the south-west, to which was added a fifth group—still at a formative stage at that time, the Azawagh, also called the Tagaraygarayt (which means the middle, or the intermediary in a political rather than a geographic sense) (Claudot-Hawad, 3).

This profound connection to social structure and territory is reflected in their environmental wisdom. For example, the source of Tuareg philosophy contains teachings to create harmony between humanity and nature, including the obligation that the welfare of the world depends on people who have a sense of sharpness. This is encapsulated in the proverb "*AmaDal amadal*" (the land is what protects, what preserves, what mothers).[2] Furthermore, the Tuareg system of representation has key categories that demarcate the contours of what is self and what is other. One of these central categories is that of *tamurt* (Abrous 87–8). This category delimits, in Tuareg culture, large areas of kinship. The resources are essentially the grazing lands; the natural and man-made waterholes (springs, pools, drainage basins, lakes, wells); game; food; and wood. In the Tuareg system, these goods belong to the community and:

> [...] cannot be appropriated by a single person. Control over them is established at different levels of the community, represented in the past by chief-arbiters who took on the responsibility of managing the territory between the neighboring groups and wider authorities. Within this system of nested territorial spaces, each space, no matter how small, plays its part in the larger picture, as one element of the whole". [3] (Claudot-Hawad 11)

Tuareg oral literature is a result of the orally inherited culture in which some of its parts contain a reflection on the natural system and are based on environmental wisdom. This reflects that there is a close link between man, nature, local knowledge, and oral literature, as underlined in tales and poetry.

The mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms provide a comprehensive explanation of the structures of the world as they have existed since time immemorial. The narrative of "The brigand transformed into a man of stone", as recorded by Émile Laoust (*Contes berbères du Maroc* 280) from the Beni Mguild of Morocco, is an example of the transformation of living beings into minerals. Conversely, the reverse phenomenon is not observed. The narrative recounts how a character was subjected to this metamorphosis through a grave transgression committed in the name of a saint and by defilement of the honour of a respected family through the utterance of sacrilegious falsehoods. This transgression incited divine retribution, prompting the father of the family to fervently pray for divine intervention. In response, God transformed the rogue into a stone statue. Whilst the notion of divine intervention may appear somewhat magical, it is, above all, representative of the immediate punishment delivered to the culprit. This text, which is unique in its genre, appears to be specific to the region. This tale is replete with moral and religious implications. The intervention of the divine hand is deemed essential in metamorphosing the animate into the inanimate, a transformation that assumes a particularly harrowing aspect in this context, given the profound respect that the Berber cultures of Morocco hold for all facets of life within their environment.

Nature, ritual, and production: A symbolic ecology

In Amazigh culture, relationships between humans and non-humans are based on a holistic vision that recognises the sacredness and interdependence of all natural elements (Bourdieu 127, 133).

The Amazigh conception of 'nature' deviates from contemporary scientific understanding, which is the result of a historical process of disenchantment. Instead, it is conceptualised as a field of living and sacred forces, where every human gesture is imbued with ritual significance (Bourdieu 166). This logic is manifest in the *agdal*, a traditional system of collective pasture management in the High Atlas region of Morocco. In this context, pasture management is not merely an economic calculation, but rather a ceremonial act. The temporal suspension of grazing, as previously outlined, reproduces the balance between community and natural forces in a mimetic form (Auclair 28).

The *agdal* is hypothesised to be a practice of considerable antiquity and is widespread throughout all Berber-speaking regions of the Maghreb and the Sahara, extending from the Moroccan Atlas region to the Siwa Oasis in Egypt. In Algeria, the term *agdal ougdel* is particularly associated with enclosed spaces that are appropriated and cultivated temporarily in the steppe environment. In Tuareg country, according to Claudot-Hawad, the verb *egadal* simultaneously means to prohibit, prevent, refuse, protect, and patronize. The verb conveys dual meanings: it is both forbidden and sacred. For a territory thus designated, the local term is "*amadal itiwagdalent*" (land being forbidden) (Auclair 34).

An additional illustration of this phenomenon takes place during the rites of the *lakhrif* (harvest festival) in Kabylia, as reported by Pierre Bourdieu (166). The collective enthusiasm exhibited in the practice of these rites synchronise the Amazigh group's consciousness with the rhythms of the environment and of the natural world. Human intervention, particularly during critical phases such as sowing or harvesting, is perceived as a hazardous

undertaking, representing a nexus between cosmic opposites (cold/heat, sterility/fertility). This structure reflects the dialectic of separation, as evidenced by the "Old Woman's Days" (Bourdieu 167), which represent periods of transition during which the land is taboo.[4] In Amazigh communities, human intervention at crucial moments in the agricultural cycle, such as sowing or harvesting, is a rite of passage between opposing cosmic forces. Those days of transition, called "Old Woman's Days", represent ecological knowledge codified in mythical form. The Mediterranean legend of the "Old Woman" and the "Borrowed Days", in which the "Old Woman" violates natural rhythms and an offended month unleashes storms to punish human arrogance, finds a surprising parallel in Amazigh taboos that suspend work in the fields during the lunar phase. In Morocco and other countries in North Africa, local versions of this legend justify bans on sowing during certain periods, allowing the soil to regenerate (Galand-Pernet, "La Vieille et la légende des jours d'emprunt au Maroc" 29–94). That "old woman" is the incarnation of an ecological principle: nature negotiates with those who respect it and punishes those who challenge it.

The synthesis, metaphorically assimilated to a sexual union and known by the concept of *tislit n unzar* (the bride of the rain), functions as a rite of passage that serves to bring opposites together, facilitating the reconciliation of antithetical forces like plowing. According to Bourdieu (133), the fertilised field becomes a cosmic womb upon being protected by thorn hedges (*zerb*). This metaphorical conception serves to illustrate the invisible work of the land in reproducing the struggle between sterile winter and spring forces, akin to the process of cooking wheat or human gestation (Bourdieu 133).

The *agdal* pastures, ancient argan groves, and seasonal rituals of the Amazigh communities show us something important: here, nature is not just something to be used up; it is a living network where rivers, trees, and grasslands are all connected. These are the foundations of sustainable systems that have resisted the effects of colonial disruption and modernisation.

When European powers divided up North Africa, they forced a brutal logic of extraction on the land: forests became timber quotas, pastures turned into monoculture fields, and water sources were reduced to irrigation lines. French historians like Ageron have carefully recorded how this system of dispossession worked. The Senatus-Consulte law of 1863 established the legality of the expropriation of land, the forcible removal of ancestral territories from their original owners, and the subsequent famine that resulted from the conversion of fertile valleys into export crops (Ageron; Julien; Nouschi). In Libya, Mussolini's colonial ideas led to the creation of agricultural villages that used up aquifers and broke up animal farming areas. Later, Gaddafi's big projects used water access as a way of rewarding people for their political support (Biasillo 181–98).

Likewise, the political process in the Sahara allows us to understand the victims'point of view. The comments on industrial pollution and the exhaustion of forest and fossil resources, which we find in many Tuareg tales and poetry, also reveal the concerns of an era.

But even so, the old ways persisted. As is the case with the Illig community in Algeria and the Tuareg people in general, the Tuareg date harvest is invariably accompanied by religious rituals. These rituals encompass prayers and the practice of (*sadaka* (charity), wherein a portion of the harvest is allocated to the most impoverished members of the community. These practices are of paramount importance in ensuring favourable rainfall. The rains of the hot season are erratic, sudden, and sometimes destructive, yet they also fill wells and *wadis* (water sources in dry areas), thereby ensuring access to drinking water until the onset of the cold and rainy season. Rainfall is of great importance to the pastoral practice of the Tuareg (Miara *et al*. 1). In South Morocco, Amazigh farmers still say hello to each other before harvesting argan trees, showing that their bonds are older than borders. These traditions are radical in the sense that they show us a different way of thinking about land and animals. In this way of thinking, land is like family and animals are companions, not things you can buy and sell. These traditions also tell us that you cannot separate culture from nature without destroying both.

Animal characters in Amazigh tales

In Amazigh societies, wild and domestic animals have been characters in oral literature since antiquity, and they occupy an important place in oral literature. The genre is universal and is found throughout the Mediterranean, as well as to the east in India, and south of the Sahara in West and Central Africa. References to animals are also made in stories told by Amazigh groups across North Africa especially Tuareg nomads, and they share similarities with Dogon stories in Mali and among other Sahelo-Sudanese ethnic groups with which the Amazigh have historically intertwined.

In the repertoire of African fables, what Denise Paulme calls the "African Deceiver" varies depending on the cultural area. For the regions of the Sahel, Sahara, and Central Africa, this character is attributed to the hare in Sudan and South Africa; to the jackal or squirrel in the Nigerien Sahel and among the Hausas; to the turtle in Cameroon; the dwarf antelope in central Africa; and the fox among the Dogon of Mali (Calame-Griaule 52–3; Paulme 569).

In popular imagination, to avoid a world in which the cunning of the weak inevitably wins over strength, the jackal is often punished. Tuareg tales of this type give the hare the role played by the jackal (as in Sudanese tales), but the meaning and function remain the same as elsewhere (Calame-Griaule 52–3).

Le Roman du Chacal, a collection of tales collected in Kabylia by Brahim Zellal, was published in 1999. It constitutes a cycle reminiscent of that of *Roman de Renart*, of which Zellal takes up the title, emphasising the analogies between the characters of Jackal and Renart. Indeed, the method of using animal metaphors to describe society, found in authors from Aesop to La Fontaine via the Persian ibn El-Mouqafa, is analysed by Yacine Tassadit from an anthropological point of view. She emphasizes that the jackal cycle belongs to Kabyle culture and reflects the state of this society.

According to the author, the animals, and the jackal in particular, are a representation, a projection, and re-projection of Berber society, with its different power relations, sometimes presented openly, sometimes less so. Nonetheless, they are shown to be necessary for a well-functioning society (Tassadit 49–56).

The jackal and the hedgehog are among the most important figurations that still appear in the Ayt Khabbash's oral tales (Camps-Fabrer and Peyron 3445–51). This group (that is part of the Ayt Atta confederation) occupies the southeastern fringe of Morocco. They were historically nomads who practiced trans-Saharan trade. Today, they are mostly settled and based in a Saharan enclave. The Ayt Khabbash are socioculturally interesting because this pastoral group has historically had such flexibility that it has adapted to the most difficult of circumstances, both political and environmental. This is beneficial because the southeast is currently suffering from drought and desertification.

The lack of vegetation to absorb groundwater means that devastating flash floods occur when it rains (Karmaoui). Thus, the population lives in severe and unfavourable climatic conditions (Ayt Boughrous 20). At the same time, the Ayt Khabbash, like most Amazigh, are able to adapt to environmental changes. In this study, I consider how oral histories teach sustainable land and water management, indicating that this is first and foremost an issue of collective responsibility (Beraaouz *et al*. 6–24).

In the tales collected from the Ayt Khabbash group during my fieldwork, the two types of animals that emerge, the jackal and the hedgehog, appear under the names of 'Ali and Mḥmed, respectively (in the Chleuh tales, the names are switched). These names are names of people. This recalls the context of Islam traditions, both Shiite and Sunni. We can notice, on the one hand, the contrast of Shiite traditions and, on the other hand, those of Sunni orthodox traditions. In Kabyle tales, the jackal is called Mḥend or M'hand.

The jackal, written *uššen* (plural *uššanen*) in the Berber dialects of the North and in Tachelhit, *abbegi* (plural *ibbeggân*) in Tamahaq, and *dib* (plural *diab*) in Arabic, is often characterised by unscrupulous deceit. The jackal of Amazigh tales is an extremely rich and complex character. He is found in various professions: hunter, shepherd, schoolmaster, but, above all, he is known for being a thief. He is a rather sympathetic character, whose tricks, pranks, and even lies provoke joy and laughter, like in this tale that I collected in Rissani (in the Tafilalet region) during a fieldwork expedition in 2009:

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> Once upon a time, there was a shepherd who wanted to start displacing his goats again. He put the goats on the donkey and said: "Go, get to the distant region". Along the way, the donkey found a jackal who begged him: "Take me with you because I stubbed my toe". The donkey replied: "Alright, mount up". Slowly, the jackal ate the goats (on the back of the donkey). One of the goats said, in a low voice, to the donkey: "You see he is eating all the goats". Then, the donkey, who had not heard, said to the jackal: "What did the goat say?" The jackal replied: "That you must lower your ears (to go faster); hurry, because the region is far away". Then the donkey said: "But what fell (to the ground)?" The jackal replied: "Blood has fallen from the big toe of my foot". Meanwhile, he had eaten all the goats, except one. The jackal said to the donkey: "Your ears are too soft!" He got down and left. The goat then said to the donkey: "All the goats are dead. Lead me to the jackal!"
>
> The jackal's name was Ali, and his wife Tuda. When they arrived at the jackal's house, the donkey fell asleep on the doorstep, pretending to be dead. Meanwhile, the jackal had cut down the bushes in front of the house. His wife Tuda, on the threshold of the house, shouted to the jackal: "Ali, I dreamed of a large animal here at the entrance! How are we going to get him into the house?" The jackal approached, Tuda took the donkey's tail and tied it to that of the jackal. The donkey got up and ran, dragging Ali. He said to Tuda: "Behold, I have left, Tuda!" His wife said to him: "Hold on to the bushes!" Here, the jackal was dragged without being able to cling to the bushes, risking injury as in a nightmare. When he got close to the only remaining goat, it got up and ran away until it reached the donkey's house.
>
> The jackal, dragged to the donkey's house, was freed after being skinned. He tossed and turned in the dust of the ground. Tuda saw him and said: "Is Ali the one in the red kaftan?" Ali replied: "Where do you see me wearing it, Tuda? I have nothing left […] That's how life is.". Tuda shouted to the wild animals: "Help! Let's get together so we can prepare a burnous for Ali!" Other animals came and each gave their hair, and she wove a burnous for the jackal. (Boulaouane qtd in Di Tolla) [5]

Numerous variants of the same story have been collected in Morocco. Ahmed Skounti carried out an interesting study and analysis of this tale, which he collected from the Ayt Merghad, because nomads and sedentary members of the community each have their specific version.[6] The first focuses on the solidarity shown by all animals when the jackal's wife calls. They each bring a hair to save a skinned fellow threatened by death. The second concentrates on weaving, an activity which only humans are capable of, and which allows her to make a brand-new fleece for the jackal. In both cases, there is obviously a projection of the human world (form of organisation, solidarity, activity [weaving]) onto the animal world. Even the crafted object is borrowed from the human world, in this case the burnous, and the sexual division of labour has been respected: the jackal's wife weaves for the jackal just as the woman does for her husband (Skounti 156–8).

However, the storytellers end their tales with curses almost always addressed to the jackal, because he is the evillest of animals. These formulas are intended to protect them from bad influences due to the act of telling the tale itself: "The Jackal, God curse him! Us, may God have mercy on us! The Jackal goes into the forest; we are going on the road" (Basset 74).

A whole series of tales confront the tricks of the two friends, the jackal and the hedgehog, according to the classic pattern of a let-down between the two animals. The mythical story of the thieving jackal is known among the Matmata of Tunisia (in the Gabès region). Another fable is a direct allusion to the very essence of the jackal, to the fact that he is a thief. It is said that one day, the vulture, having seen the jackal look thin and puny, flew him up to the sky, where he took a piece of the moon. The vulture then dropped the jackal who landed in the middle of a pond (Pâques 414).

The heroes in these stories highlight a system of values and delineate the virtues that lead to social success or the flaws that lead to their downfall. Stories about animals often portray traditional life, and, among the qualities of character, deception and lying in one form or another are the essential means of defending oneself against brutal forces and evil. The jackal counters force and brutality through being cunning, often without scruples, seeking to deceive others to obtain what he wants. He is also described as vain and boastful, bragging about his exploits and prowess. In some tales, the jackal is presented as a cowardly and miserly character who seeks to avoid conflict and accumulate wealth (Trécolle and Camps 1857–9).

The hedgehog, instead, is often presented as a wise and cautious character who seeks to avoid conflict and tries to find peaceful solutions to the problems he encounters. Stories featuring this character often illustrate the modesty and wisdom of the hedgehog, and how they protect him against the evil eye and jealousy. The thoughtful hedgehog is well aware of how to protect himself from dangers and bad influences. He is considered a very intelligent and perceptive animal that knows how to avoid traps and dangers.

The Amazigh world is populated by an incredible wealth and diversity of birds, and each one has its own characteristics and particular stories. The universe of birds represents a microcosm of its own, populated by "those from above", "the people of the sky" (*ayt-ignwan*) (Mazabraud 155).

In Amazigh oral tradition, the stork is considered a noble animal that is linked to the cycles of the seasons and the arrival of spring, as various stories testify (Roux 72). The lark is instead associated with newborn babies or with the foetus, as in the Ntifa tales, and is metaphorically responsible for the transition between the dead season and the new year. He also intervenes to save the young of other endangered species. In this tale, a mother lark is helped by her 'uncle stork' to save her young offspring from the threat of the jackal (Nzah qtd in Di Tolla 191; Roux 102–3):

> Once a lark lived at the top of a tree branch with her young. One day the jackal arrived and passed by her. She trembled with fear seeing that the jackal was looking at her young in the nest. He said to her: "What are you doing there Kheira?" "Nothing, just I'm with my little ones". After a few moments, the jackal replied, saying: "Choose! I will go up to your house and eat you, or you will throw one of your little ones to me". And so she was forced to throw one of her little ones at him. The jackal devoured it and left. A while later, he came back and told her: "Throw me another baby bird, or I will come up and eat you!" The lark threw him another baby bird. After devouring it, the jackal went for a walk, until he felt starved and once again returned to the lark. He said to her: "Throw me one more of your little ones, or else I will come up and eat you". And she threw him another one. She was left with only one baby bird and cried many tears.
>
> A stork who was passing by saw her cry and asked her: "What is the matter with you, O Kheira, crying so much?" The lark told him about the wickedness of the jackal who ate her young. The stork asked the lark: "How is it that he was able to eat your little ones? How did he reach you if you are on such a high tree branch?" She said to him: "He passed by here and he said to me—Throw the little ones at me or I'll climb up and eat you". When I fell into the trap, I gave him these baby birds". The stork said to the lark: "How greedy! What else will he find at your place to take (you only have your one and last baby bird left)?" She said to him: "So let's go!" When he comes back and tells you: Throw the little ones at me or I will climb up and eat you, you will answer him: "Come up here to eat it. And tell him, it was Uncle Stork who said this to me". Then the stork left.
>
> The jackal returned to the lark and said to her: "Throw me another little one or I'll go upstairs". She said to him: "Then come up if you can and there won't be just one baby bird left". Then the jackal said to her: "Who told you these words?" She replied: "Uncle stork did" and now she denounces him.
>
> So the jackal went to look for the stork until he found him. The jackal said to the stork: "What have I done to you? So that you denounce me with the lark by saying to him—This is what you must say to the jackal? So what do I do to you now?" The stork replied: "What do you want? The stork is so thin that there are only bones to eat. I can take you to a place and show you sheep that you will eat and be satisfied". The jackal said to him: "Then carry me".
>
> The stork got up, took the jackal in his grip, and flew him to the river. There, the jackal saw the image of a white sheep in the water: "Listen, Ali, I'm warning you, don't eat me because I'm very sickly". The jackal told the stork: "Release me". So the stork released him and the jackal fell into the river (to follow the image of the sheep in the water) and died.

The stork tries to protect the lark by advising her not to hand her young to the jackal and let him eat them. When the jackal learns from the lark that the stork has advised her to protect herself from him, he feels betrayed and does not understand his fault of having eaten the lark's young. The physical differences of the two animals—the jackal and the lark—are a way of symbolising the moral or social divergences of human beings. It is possible that this story also contains a political metaphor that evokes the betrayed alliance of two neighbouring tribes that are jealous of their specificities and incapable of accepting those of the other, even in the name of the common good. In other stories, the stork and the jackal are friends, and their relationship changes through the course of the story.[7]

Amazigh cultural practices and the environment

In Morocco, holy figures are often identified with the jinn (*jinûn*), a specific type of spirit entity within Islamic cosmology. One of the characteristics of the *lila* (night) ritual, a commemorative ceremony which brings together followers of the *Aïssawa* (a religious brotherhood in Morocco founded by Sidi Mohammed ben 'Aisa, who died on an unknown date in Meknes between 1465 and 1466; Pâques and Lahlou 370–81), is the evocation of animal characters (lions, panthers, tigers, dogs, jackals, hyenas, camels, etc.), tutelary entities supposed to embody virtues attributed to the saints' disciples. In fact, certain saints appear disguised as jackals, representing the characters of the thief, the disorder, the confidant of women.

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These same conceptions are expressed for the character of the fox among the Dogon in Mali. In this regard, Boncourt sees an aspect of the Pale Fox, who "by the very disorders he causes, [is] a necessary agent for the development of life on earth" (Boncourt 31–61).

On the other hand, a vast cultural background common to all North and West Africa is well known. Relations between Morocco, in particular, the Sahara, and Western Sudan, whose origins date back to the most ancient times, have marked the popular culture of these regions to the point of leaving imprints that are still largely visible today. In the tales of oral tradition, numerous elements attest to this Sudanese influence.

Throughout the Maghreb and the Sahara, both among Arabic speakers and among Berber speakers, an expression is used to designate the rainbow: "it's the marriage of the Jackal, *tameɣra bbuššen*" (Pâques 416). According to Laoust (*Mots et choses: notes de linguistique et d'ethnographie* 189), by using this expression, the Berbers designate a set of meteorological phenomena, the formation of the clouds, and the fall of fine rain in a sunny sky. At the time, when these phenomena occur, it is said that a jackal is getting married somewhere, and the sky is celebrating in honour of this marriage. Speaking of the rogations among the Matmata in Tunisia, Pâques notes that the union between the jackal and the genie is linked to these rogations, during which the children sing: "When the sun is at its zenith, it rains without a cloud. O my aunt the rain, falls, falls, because my hair is drenched in olive oil; It's the marriage of the Jackal" (Pâques 416).

The rainbow, for example, is a phenomenon characterised by the conjunction of the two elements of sun and water. It is also seen as a link between sky and earth. An identical association exists among the Dogon: "The stripes of Ogo's body and face are associated with the colours of the arc-en-ciel, symbol of the bond uniting Heaven and Earth" (Griaule and Dieterlen 178; Boncourt 6).

The Dogon cosmogony is based on the myth of Ogo, who is the supreme divinity and will be transformed into the Pale Fox. In this system, there are traits common to the North African Jackal and the Pale Fox (Servier 36, 106, 170, 180).

In Morocco, many ceremonies are celebrated at Achoura or Ennaïr for *asifeḍ n wuššen* (the Expulsion of the Jackal). The jackal here personifies hunger, scarcity, and misery since, through the devastation this animal can bring, he deprives man of the product of his herds and of his crops. By expelling a jackal to the detriment of a neighbour, or by destroying the image of a jackal, we imagine ourselves removing or annihilating certain evils that we do not want to endure for ourselves, the most feared of which, famine, can sometimes cause so many victims (Laoust, "Noms et cérémonies des feux de joie chez les Berbères du Haut et de l'Anti-Atlas" 307–16).

Even more significant is the fate reserved for the jackal in certain popular customs, particularly those concerning the fires of the *ašura* (the tenth—referring to the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram). The jackal represents sterility and drought, and its expulsion, in an antithetical relationship, favours agriculture. This is why it is placed outside the limits of the territory: the neighbouring territory is here equivalent to uncleared land, the bush, which is the jackal's proper domain (Laoust, "Noms" 294).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Amazigh oral literature and cultural practices demonstrate a rich, interconnected worldview in which humans, animals, and the environment exist in a dynamic and meaningful relationship. The Amazigh perspective is characterised by a blending of the human and non-human realms, as depicted through tales, rituals, and traditional knowledge. This perspective does not perceive animals as mere passive entities, but as active participants in a shared ecological and symbolic order. These narratives and practices underline a profound respect for nature, wherein survival, spirituality, and production are intricately intertwined. In an era characterised by a growing disconnection from its natural roots, the re-examination of these traditions can offer valuable insights into more sustainable and reciprocal ways of coexisting with the non-human world. The Amazigh paradigm serves to reinforce the notion that cultural heritage is not merely a repository of the past; rather, it constitutes a repository of living wisdom with the capacity to serve as a direction, guiding humanity towards a future that is characterised by greater balance.

Notes

1. During the narration, however, anything is possible, even pronouncing names normally considered taboo. In any case, I often find the use of euphemisms and antiphrasis (Destaing 177–276; Marçais 425–38).
2. Claudot-Hawad (3) writes: "The Tuareg represent themselves as a social body which, before the establishment of colonial rule at the beginning of the 19th century, was made up of four large political poles with complex links between them: the Ajjer in the north-east, the Ahaggar in the north-West, the Aïr in the South-east and the Tademekkat in the South-West, to which was added a fifth group, still at a formative stage at that time, the Azawagh, also called the Tagaraygarayt, which means the 'middle,' or the 'intermediary' in a political rather than a geographic sense".
3. Claudot-Hawad (11) argues that: "The reconfiguration of identities in the Sahara, implemented first in the colonial and then the post-colonial organization of nation-states, has led to several different and sometimes contradictory perceptions, that oppose each other and superpose themselves on previous modes and norms, without dispelling them completely".
4. Since the end of the 19th century, the legend known as "The Days of Borrowing" or "The Days of the Old Woman" has been popular in all the countries bordering the Mediterranean to the north. The story is about an old woman (*al-Aajouza*) who owns a flock of goats. She is happy because the harsh winter is over and goes out to graze her goats to make fun of January. *Yennayer* (January in Tamazight) is livid. He demands that *Furar* (February) grant him one more day to punish the woman and overwhelms the old woman and her flock with her gusts. *Yennayer* turns *al-Aajouza* into a stone statue and takes her goat with him. The Amazigh have always celebrated the first day of the Julian New Year (*Yennayer*) as a gesture of gratitude to Mother Earth (Galand-Pernet,"La Vieille" 29–94; Gast and Delheur).
5. For further information on the oral narrative of the Ayt Khabbash of the Tafilalet region, see Di Tolla.
6. There are two groups of Ayt Merghad of the Ghéris valley of the eastern Moroccan High Atlas region, one nomadic, the other sedentary (Skounti 133).
7. A very similar story involving the jackal, the sheep, and the stork is told by Laoust, but there is no explicit denunciation of the lark/goat (Laoust, *Contes berbères* 26–7).

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