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***nəḥne kull-na yad wāḥda*: The Mobilization of Amazigh Libyans in Revolutionary Rap**

Introduction: social media and protest music during the Arab Spring

Recent years have witnessed an increased attention toward the expression of political dissent and mobilization in Arab youth culture, especially in the aftermath of the spectacular events that took place in 2010-2011 and were collectively labelled as the “Arab Spring”. In the aftermath of those events, special journal issues were devoted to Arab graffiti,¹ and forms of poetry performed during the uprising also received some attention.² But in addition to these more traditional ways of expressing dissent, the importance of the role played by social media in the events of 2011 was stressed to the point that the Arab spring was sometimes defined as a “Facebook Revolution”. The risk that an uncritical focus on the role of new media might replicate old orientalist stereotypes was felt by a number of concerned scholars in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring:

And it is here once more that the focus on “new media”, instead of helping break up orientalist bias, might provide them with a new nest, this time located right at the core of the latest discussions within the sociology of media and communication. This development is reflected in the idea itself of a “Facebook revolution” that has been coined and propagated to define the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt [...]³

Academia was torn between cyber-utopians, who insisted on the idea of a Facebook revolution, and cyber-skeptics, who denied the role of social media altogether.⁴ While the question, posed in such way, is probably of limited interest,

¹ *Romano-Arabica XV. Graffiti, Writing and Street Art in the Arab World*, Editura universității din bucurești, Bucharest, 2015.

² R. Bassiouney, *Language and Identity in Modern Egypt*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2015, 317-325.

³ A. Salvatore, New Media and Collective Action in the Middle East. Can Sociological Research Help Avoiding Orientalist Traps?, *Sociologica*, 3/5, 2011, 2.

⁴ *Idem*, 6.

the role of social media should be framed within a broader sociological perspective, which also takes into consideration the role of more traditional networks (mosques, universities, trade unions).⁵

In the years that immediately followed the events of 2010-2011, the theoretical framework in which the Arab Spring and the role of social media were analyzed and understood was further refined. Comunello and Anzera suggest a useful Decalogue that summarizes the knowledge we have gained from sociological research so far:

- 1) Social media cannot cause a revolution, but may become useful tools for recruitment and organization.
- 2) The actual role of social media depends on their accessibility to the population.
- 3) Inspiration to hit the streets and confront the repressive machine of the regime cannot come from the media.
- 4) The hierarchical nature of leadership cannot easily adapt to the horizontal architecture of social media networking.
- 5) Social media are a useful means to organize protest movements, but they are also employed by the regimes.
- 6) Shutting down internet services and cellphone coverage is usually a bad choice for authoritarian regimes.
- 7) While cyber-enthusiasm is probably scientifically groundless, it is important to continue researching the role of social media in political activism and the struggle against dictatorial regimes.
- 8) In the countries that went through political upheavals of 2011, the role of social media will probably be crucial in the coming years.
- 9) Social media are reshaping the public sphere.
- 10) When analyzing the role of social media in a revolutionary event, it would be wise to analyze their influence on the single components of the revolutionary arc.⁶

Compared to the attention given to social media, the role played by music in shaping the imaginary of the Arab Spring has been, for the most part, neglected,⁷ even though “studying the role of song and music in political struggles is crucial to

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ F. Comunello - G. Anzera, Will the revolution be tweeted? A conceptual framework for understanding the social media and the Arab Spring, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23/4, 2012, 465-466.

⁷ According to Valassopoulos and Mostafa, popular music, together with movies, poetry and theatre, contributed to shape the “word” and “image” of the Egyptian Revolution (A. Valassopoulos - D. S. Mostafa, Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, *Popular Music and Society*, 37/15, 2014, 642).

understand how the popular and political interact".⁸ This is even more surprising if we consider the fact that during the Egyptian Revolution, for instance, protestors started chanting the slogans of Tahrir Square almost immediately. In Egypt, the early months of 2011 witnessed a flourishing of new politically committed bands and a return to the stage of older artists (or of their patriotic songs), resulting in the emergence of the popular musician as a political actor.⁹

According to Valassopoulos and Mostafa, popular music in Egypt during the Arab Spring followed a two-way path: "the events on the ground impact[ed] the music and the music respond[ed] and articulat[ed] the story and progress of the revolution and its influence on people's lives".¹⁰ Egyptian protest music did not break with the past; on the contrary, the songs and slogans of the 1952 Revolution were successfully adapted to the new circumstances, as is made evident from the number of old patriotic songs that were rearranged and sung in Tahrir Square and throughout the country.¹¹ A similar phenomenon was not completely absent in Libya, where, for instance, the song *yā blād-ī* (*Oh country of mine*) by Fuad Gritly recalls the title of the Libyan national anthem.¹² The Libyan music scene during the 2011 Revolution presented, however, some original traits with respect to Egypt (the best-studied case), which will be the object of the present paper. Thus, the next section analyzes the case study of Ibn Thabit (*Ibn Tābit*) and his revolutionary rap. The following section provides an analysis of the structure and *topoi* of Ibn Thabit's songs, while the last section before the conclusions focuses on the way in which Libyan Amazigh are referred to and addressed in his songs, in an attempt to mobilize them for the revolutionary cause. As a partial disclaimer, it should be pointed out that the present paper deals with the way in which rap music was used to mobilize the Libyan Amazigh in the fight against Gaddafi. This implies the presentation of quite a binary contrast between a right and a wrong side, the latter being, of course, Gaddafi. In describing the different strategies used by the rapper to achieve this goal, his words will be reported and translated verbatim, even though they offer a simplified version of a much more complex reality, an analysis of which is beyond the aim of this paper.

⁸ J. Massad, *Liberating Songs: Palestine Put to Music*, in R. L. Stein - T. Swedenburg (eds.), *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2005, 177.

⁹ A. Valassopoulos - D. S. Mostafa, *op. cit.*, 650.

¹⁰ *Idem*, 650-651.

¹¹ *Idem*, 645.

¹² Gritly's song is not, however, a protest song, but it was composed as part of the theme of the Libyan TV show *Dragunov* (2014) (see L. D'Anna, *Dialectal Variation and Identity in Post-Revolutionary Libyan Media. The Case of Dragunov* (2014), in R. Bassiouney, *Identity and Dialect Performance. A study of Communities and Dialects*, Routledge, London-New York, 2018, 321-340). The Libyan national anthem we refer to is the pre-Gaddafi one, which was readopted by the country after the fall of the regime.

“The revolution will be live”: the case of Ibn Thabit (Libya)

Ibn Thabit represents an interesting case study of a talented rapper who was also active on social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) during the Libyan Revolution. Not many personal details are known about him. Ibn Thabit describes himself as an ordinary Libyan, not as a leader of the Revolution, who simply puts into music what his fellow citizens are afraid or not allowed to say.¹³ The massive employment of social media by the protagonists of the political and musical scene in 2011 allows us to retrieve the original feelings that moved their actions by just scrolling down their public profiles. Ibn Thabit, in an interview published by *The Guardian*, said: “I put out my first revolutionary song one week after Ben Ali fled Tunisia; it asked whether the revolution would spread to Libya. My answer in the song, and the answer from Libyans on the ground, was yes, the revolution was coming”.¹⁴ On his Facebook page, his first song is dated January 27th, 2011, and is accompanied by this brief comment, written in Libyan Arabic:

سنلني واحد كانهم الليبيين ما يقبلوهاش على معمر قلت فكره اندير منها أغنيه

Someone asked me whether the Libyans will revolt against Muṣammar [i.e. Gaddafi], I said this is an idea for a song¹⁵

The song he speaks of above is *as-suʔāl* (*The Question*), in which Ibn Thabit voices the question asked by an anonymous interlocutor and then rewords it beautifully, asking whether his fellow citizens will show the same courage shown by their ancestors in their struggle against the Italian invaders and by Tunisians and Egyptians in the recent revolutionary events. Thus, from the very beginning, there is, an important difference between Libyan protest music and its Egyptian counterpart. While the Egyptian songs were born out of the protests in Tahrir Square, Ibn Thabit released his first song three weeks before the outbreak of demonstrations in Libya. In doing so, he openly defies the repressive machine of Gaddafi’s regime and actually tries to directly influence the events himself. He places the upcoming Libyan revolution in a natural sequence with the Tunisian and Egyptian ones, the echoes of which are particularly evident in his first song. In the following verses, for instance, the memory of Libya’s past resistance against the Italian aggression is blended with the revolutionary struggle then was happening in Tunisia:

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/01/rapping-against-gaddafi-hip-hop-libya>, last accessed on April, 7th 2018. Ibn Thabit had allegedly released an anti-Gaddafi song, *The Coward*, in 2008, but in this case the date on the YouTube video does not confirm his claim (the song, however, might just have been deleted and uploaded again).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Translations from Arabic are not always literal, due to the difficulty of rendering some concepts and constructions in English.

*hal sa-iqāwmū l-aʿdā zeyy-mā qāwmū ʿzdūd-na?
hal sa-yuḍḥū zeyy-mā ḍḥū fī ġarb ʿḥdūd-na?*

Will they resist the enemies as our ancestors did?
Will they sacrifice, as they did at our Western borders (i.e. in Tunisia)?

*awwəl ḥāʿza igūl-l-ək əḥməd ʿrabb-ī kān-ək ḥayy
əḥməd ʿrabb-ī, law mūs li-n-naft əl-blād mā-ft-hā šey
u-yumkən ḥikkī xēr bās yəgallbū-hā ʿalā ʿās-hā
zeyy-mā dārū fī tūnəs, taḥiyya ḥādi xāšša!*

First they tell you thank God that you're alive
Thank God, if it weren't for oil there would be nothing in this country
Maybe it would've been better if there hadn't, we would've rebelled sooner
As they did in Tunis, special hail to them!

*ʿa-l-aqall ʿand-nā l-xubza u-l-xubza rxīša
šūm! damm əš-šahīd mā-təgdər-š tḡīs-a
šīnu ʿuḍr-ək, təstanna fī sayyəd-nā ʿīsa
u-d-dawla əllī ʿānb-nā lazzət raʿīsa?¹⁶*

At least we have bread, and bread is cheap
Fast! The martyrs' blood has no price
What's your excuse, are you waiting for our Lord Jesus
While the nation next to us ousted its president?

After his first appearance on YouTube, Ibn Thabit released a second song on February 14th 2011, three days before the outbreak of the Revolution. The song, *Nidāʿ li-šabāb Lībyā* (*Calling the Libyan youth*), explicitly calls upon Libyans to hit the streets and start a revolution (the structure of Ibn Thabit's song will be analyzed in next section). In this case also, the Egyptian and Tunisian examples are clearly referred to by the rapper, who ironically capsizes one of the catchphrases that could be heard in the Libyan streets in the days preceding February 17th, namely "Libya is not like Egypt and Tunisia":

*gāl-ək Lībyā mūs zeyy Mašr u Tūnəs
ēh lā š-šuhadā əllī mātū sābiqan aḵtər min Māšr u Tūnəs
nisbət əl-baḩāla aḵtər min Mašr u Tūnəs
nisbət ʿadad əl-fuqarā fī Lībyā aḵtər min Mašr u Tūnəs¹⁷*

¹⁶ The three excerpts are from Ibn Thabit, *as-Suʿāl* (*The question*),

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_9pBiwS2II, last accessed on April, 8th 2018.

¹⁷ Ibn Thābit, *Nidāʿ li-šabāb Lībyā* (*Calling the Libyan youth*),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aojjN96r2dk&t=33s>, last accessed on April 8th, 2018.

They tell you Libya is not like Egypt and Tunisia
 Yeah no, the martyrs more martyrs died than in Egypt and Tunisia
 The unemployment rate is higher than in Egypt and Tunisia
 The poverty rate is higher than in Egypt and Tunisia

The song ends with the call

gēr maṭlūb yā xū-y ənn-ak ʾtdīr əllī ʕalē-k
 [...] *hādī hīya l-furṣa əllī tmannēt bi-tzīk*
bāš tʕīš ʕalā rižlē-k u mūš ʕalā rkābī-k

It is required, my brother, that you do what you have to do
 [...] This is the chance you hoped would come to you
 To live standing on your feet, and not on your knees.

These songs, especially since they were released before the outbreak of the demonstrations, showing considerable courage, consecrated Ibn Thabit as the rapper of the Revolution. It is at this point that, as anticipated in the title of this paragraph, the Revolution goes live in Ibn Thabit's rap, which sometimes comments upon the events, sometimes tries to anticipate them. As he admitted in the interview mentioned above, the artist was in close contact with the revolutionaries fighting against Gaddafi's regular army, who even told him which of his songs they would play before each battle. The timing of Ibn Thabit's musical production, thus, is of great interest: his songs either provide support for the ongoing battles or try to pave the ground for the upcoming ones, as in the case of *al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī* (*The Western Mountain*), which will be analyzed later.

Analyzing the different levels of artistic expression in Middle Eastern and North African popular culture, El Hamamsy and Soliman make the following distinctions:

1) artistic street engagement, 2) artistic street assimilation, and 3) artistic street mobilization... In the first category, art is produced by the people and for the people, spontaneously and reflexively, to address a certain need as it arises. In the second category, the street is deployed by an artist-agent in an attempt to engage with the people, empower them, and document the moment... In the third category, art is taken to a higher level of consciousness-raising, mobilization, and social criticism, and the goal here is to ensure the continuation of the revolution, constantly reminding the masses that what was achieved is considerable but not yet complete.¹⁸

¹⁸ W. El Hamamsy - M. Soliman (eds.), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, Routledge, New York-London, 2013, 252.

There is, of course, a clear difference between the Egyptian and Libyan case. In Egypt, the artists were part of the street movement that ousted the regime. In Libya, the demonstrations soon degenerated into civil war, so that the artist, while being (by his own admission) an ordinary Libyan, producing music that engaged with the people, met their needs and documented the Revolution, did not actually take part in the events (until July, when he was deployed on the Ġabal Nafūsa).¹⁹ El Hamamsy and Soliman's third category, that of social criticism aimed at ensuring the continuation of the revolutionary process, is only sketched in Ibn Thabit's production. The song *Lā šakk (No doubt)*, released with the Benghazi rapper MC SWAT on September 28th 2011 (when Tripoli had already been conquered by the revolutionary forces but Gaddafi was still continuing the fight from Sirt), warns Libyans against those who want "to steal the revolution". Soon after Gaddafi's death, however, Ibn Thabit announced his withdrawal from the scene. Not a professional singer, he motivated his decision by saying that his goal had been met and his part in the fight fulfilled, although he continued to be active on his official Twitter profile.²⁰ It was the Benghazi rapper MC SWAT who continued to describe the painful contradictions of post-2011 Libya. The song *Istiglāl (Exploitation)*, released on April 17th 2017, painted a disenchanting image of a country moved by self-interest and torn apart by infighting.²¹ Following the release of the video for the song, the artist received a number of death threats, forcing him to leave the country as an undocumented migrant. Ironically, it was Ibn Thabit, from his Twitter profile, who divulged the news, posting a picture of MC SWAT on the boat that would get him to Italy, on August 5th 2018.

Following this concise and partial description of the Libyan rap scene during and immediately after the 2011 Revolution, the next section analyzes in more detail the typical structure of Ibn Thabit's songs.

Notes on the structure of Ibn Thabit's rap

As explained above, after having been consecrated as the rapper of the Revolution, Ibn Thabit continued to provide support for the revolutionary cause through his music, released on different platforms, but mainly on YouTube, where everyone could listen to it and download it for free. His songs, at this point, began echoing the main developments on the battlefield. The sequence of the three songs *Benghazi II* (April 7th 2011), *Misrata* (April 18th 2011) and *al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī (The*

¹⁹ Ibn Thabit, however, did not actually take part in the armed fight against Gaddafi's regime. His role in the military effort to bring down Gaddafi's regime is not clear from the sources at our disposal, yet it appears that he did not limit himself to songwriting.

²⁰ <http://revolutionaryarabrap.blogspot.com/2011/12/ibn-thabit-libyas-leading-rapper.html>, last accessed on April 12th, 2018.

²¹ MC SWAT, *Istiglāl*, last accessed on April 9th, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apKxg1moN-U>

Western Mountains, May 2nd 2011), for instance, loosely follows the slow progression of the revolutionaries from Eastern Libya to Tripolitania.

United by a common purpose, most of Ibn Thabit's songs also share many similarities in their inner structure, with a series of recurring themes:

- 1) An initial statement, in which the addressee (whom the song intends to support) is mentioned and praised. The addressee is usually either a town (Benghazi, Misrata, Tripoli) or a section of Libyan society (e.g. Libyan women, the Libyan youth).
- 2) Mention of the crimes or vexations committed by Gaddafi against the addressees.
- 3) Praise of the addressees, with a mention of their qualities and the contributions they made to the Libyan society.
- 4) (Call to action).
- 5) Videos containing graphic content, as the songs were released after the outbreak of the Revolution, when footage from the battlefields and the resisting towns began to be available.

Let us compare, for instance, the incipits from three songs, namely *Benghazi II*, *Misrata* and *Ānisat at-Tuwwār* (translated into English as *Mrs. Revolution*).

*Benghazi II*²²

(Speaking)

*xēr yā Bengāzī? l-ḡunyā l-axīra mūš sād-d-nā, ndīrū wāhda ždīda nšīlu mən əl-klām əl-awwəl*²³

Benghazi part two (in English)

(Rapping)

Bengāzī yā Bengāzī ənti ḡāfda ša-lsān-i, tawwa əd-dənyā kull-hā tašraf əl-maqāšid wa-l-mašānī

What's up Benghazi? The first song was not enough, let's make another one, quoting our first words

Benghazi part two

Benghazi oh Benghazi you are still on my tongue, now the entire world knows the goals and the meanings (of the Revolution)

²² Ibn Thabit, *Benghazi II*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFdTYSdAr_A, last accessed on April 10th 2018.

²³ The reference is here to a previous rap song by Ibn Thabit, called *Benghazi*, released in 2009. The music of the new song is the same, and the lyrics often refer to the old ones.

*Misrata*²⁴

(Speaking)

yā ʕbād Lībyā, nəbbī nəḥkī-l-kum ʕalā mdīna yā rāžəl ḥəlwə zeyy əs-sukkər zeyy l-ʕsəl zeyy š-šəklāta ʕa-l-galb

yā Muṣammar əḥlaʕ mən Miṣrāta yā kalb!

əllī təbbī-h təlgā-h fī Miṣrāta: tāriḫ-ha maʕrūfa, ʕulamā-ha maʕrūfīn, abraz təžāra l-əl-blād, ašhar mužāhidīn, aḥlā tanḏīm, kull-a təlgā-h fī Miṣrāta.

(Rapping)

ḥādī əllī nəbbī nətkalləm ʕalē-ha fī galb-ī ḥāḥḥ-hā

glūb əs-šaʕb əl-lībī kull-hā tawwa fī Miṣrāta

Libyans, I want to talk to you about a town, oh man, sweet to the heart like sugar, like honey, like chocolate

Muṣammar leave Misrata, you dog!

Whatever you want, you can find it in Misrata: its history is known, its ʕulamāʕ are known, the most prominent commerce in the country, the best organization, all of it you find in Misrata.

This (city) of which I want to talk, I have placed it in my heart

All the hearts of the Libyan people are now in Misrata.

*Ānisat at-Tuwwār*²⁵

(Speaking)

wāḥda li-l-marʔa l-lībiyya, bāš əl-ʕālam kull-a yaʕrəf gīmət-hā, u-šinu gaddmət li-t-tawra

lā mā-nṣənā-kum-š, Rabb-ī yəʕəzz-kum u-yaḥfaḍ-kum u-igawwīkum, Allāh ibārək fī-kum

(Rapping)

xallī nabdā bi-taḥiyya kbīra li-ummahāt aš-šuhadā əlli damm-hum kān daxīra li-l-ḥurriyya [...]

One for the Libyan woman, so that the entire world may know her worth, and what she brought to the Revolution.

No we haven't forgotten you, God exalt you and protect you and strengthen you, God bless you

Let's start with a warm greeting to the mothers of the martyrs, whose blood was the ammunition of freedom.

As is made evident from the brief excerpts quoted and translated above, the songs share a very similar structure, which is not usually limited to the incipit. Going back

²⁴ Ibn Thabit, *Misrata*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkUcGhoy6RI&t=6s>, last accessed on April 10th 2018.

²⁵ Ibn Thabit, *Anisat at-tuwwār (Ms. Revolution)*,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1rZ0JzjQr8&t=67s>, last accessed on April 11th 2018.

to one of Ibn Thabit's most famous songs, *Nidā? li-šabāb Lībyā* (*Calling the Libyan youth*), its opening lines describe in detail the situation of Libya, while the final call invites young Libyans to hit the streets. In the middle of the song we can find the other typical elements of Ibn Thabit's songs. Gaddafi's crimes against his own people, for instance, are vividly portrayed in the following lines:

*əl-klām əlli txarrəf fi-h u l-āyāt əlli tharrəf fi-həm
bi-mawādd ət-taʿlīm ət-talāmīd txarrəb fi-həm
fulūs əš-šaʿb tharrəb fi-həm hādī sultat əš-šaʿb?
muḥāḍarāt l-əṣ-ṣbāyā, tšawwəh fī sumʿət əš-šaʿb!*

The words you make up, the verses (of the Quran) you twist,
With didactic materials you ruin (our) students
You steal the people's money, is this the power of the people?
Conferences for girls? You ruin the people's reputation!

From this perspective, the memory of the Abū Salim massacre is evoked in most of Ibn Thabit's songs and it is, for the artist, the chief among all of the crimes committed by Gaddafi.²⁶ The final call to action reported above, thus, starts with these powerful words:

*əlli nāwī išūf nihāyət-a fī ḥyāt-a
lā budda ikūn mustaʿidd an yudḥī ʿḥyāt-a
yudḥi damm-a bāš yətxalləs mən hamm-a
zey š-šahīd əlli fī Bū Slīm əlli šinu danb-a?
əlli māt fī l-fādī, əlli māt yā nār-ī
ʿala mmālī-h tī-lā šuhādā yā ḡālī!*

He who wants to see his [Gaddafi's] end in his lifetime
must be willing to sacrifice his life,
to sacrifice his blood to rid himself of his torment,
like the martyr in Abū Salim. What was his sin?
He who died in vain, he who died - how awful for his parents!
No, they are martyrs, my dear!

²⁶ Abū Salīm is a maximum-security prison in Tripoli, which mostly housed political prisoners during Gaddafi's regime. After repeated human rights violations, approximately 1.270 political prisoners were killed there in 1996, and their bodies were never returned to the families. The families of the victims created a number of associations. In 2011, shortly after the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, a human rights lawyer who was negotiating with the government, Fathi Terbil, was arrested in Benghazi and charged of plotting against the regime. The demonstrations that followed his arrest started what would then become the 17th February Revolution.

The last missing element, i.e. the praise for the addressee, is also exemplified in *Nidā? li-šabāb Lībyā*. In this case, the addressee is the Libyan youth and, by extension, the entire Libyan people:

aš-šašb əl-lībī šərīf, əš-šašb əl-lībī nḏīf
aš-šašb əl-lībī lammā yəšannəž iwəllī rdīf
iwəllī mahbūl. əš-šašb əl-lībī dū ušūl
aš-šašb əl-lībī iṣallī u-isalləm ṣala r-rasūl

The Libyan people are noble, the Libyan people are clean
 the Libyan people, when they get angry, become terrible,
 become crazy. The Libyan people have roots
 the Libyan people pray and send peace to the Prophet.

Nidā? li-šabāb Lībyā thus perfectly exemplifies the format of Ibn Thabit's songs. The rapper, despite his attention to the artistic form of his message, aims primarily to move his audience and involve them in the ongoing struggle, which explains his meticulous attention to details, especially when enumerating the injustices suffered at the hands of Gaddafi.

Calling the Amazigh

Having analyzed in detail the structure of Ibn Thabit's songs, in this paragraph we will now focus on a particular case study that of a specific song addressed to the Libyan Amazigh. In doing so, we are not going to investigate the Amazigh's own perception of the ongoing conflict, but rather the way in which Libyan Arabs (exemplified through a popular rapper, Ibn Thabit) described Amazigh. The Amazigh perspective, here, is seen through the eyes of the Arab other, with all the implied risks of misrepresentation and cultural assimilation. The context in which the song was composed and released must also be taken into account, since it undoubtedly influenced its genesis and overall tone. The song, *al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī* (*The Western Mountain*), was released on May 2nd 2011. The reference in the title is, of course, to Ġabal Nafūsa, in Tripolitania, where the most Libyan Amazigh (excluding the Tuareg) are concentrated. The genesis of the song can be placed at a particularly delicate stage during the Libyan military conflict that followed the demonstrations in February 2011:

By April, a stalemate had developed, and there was concern that rather than a democratic revolution, the civil war might yield a Libya that was permanently divided and in an ongoing conflict, much like Korea. The stalemate was broken by the entrance of a new group into the anti-Gaddafi coalition: the Berbers of southwest Libya, who in early June began a rebel offensive in the Nafusa Mountains. By mid-June, these rebels had taken several key towns in the mountains, and were advancing on Tripoli from the west, with the support of NATO. A month later, the rebels were only 50 miles from Tripoli, and by

the end of July, after intensifying their attacks, the western rebel forces had taken every one of Gaddafi's outposts and strongholds in the western mountains.²⁷

Ibn Thabit thus addresses the Libyan Amazigh in a historically delicate moment, in which their contribution is deemed necessary to win a war that risked otherwise to be perceived as a conflict between Eastern and Western Libya. All these elements need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the lyrics of the song, reported and translated below:²⁸

*mā sand-ī wa-lā farg bēn əš-šarg wa-l-ğarb
allī idāfəʕ ʕala arđ-a sand-a l-ħagg fi-l-ħarb
swā ənn-a kān mən Nālūt, mən al-Gəʕsa mə-z-Zəntān
al-Amāzīgī fi Yefrən aw l-ʕarbī fi-r-Rəzbān.*

*ər-riyānī əlli lagb-a əš-šībānī kull-ha nafs əl-klām
lammā iṭayrū quwwāt əl-gəddāfi nafs əl-aʕlām
ħattā gəddām əš-šāša dīma nafs əl-aʕlām*

*nehne kull-nā yad wāhda gədd-mā iħāwəl ifattən fi-nā
wagfa wāhda ʕalsa wāhda əš-šəʕb əl-lībi Allāh iʕīn-a
u əlli iħārəb fi-nā u-yəštəm fi-nā Allāh ihīn-a
u əlli igül-l-ək hədī fitna gül-l-a: šīn daxl-ək fi-nā?*

*mā yəsəmʕu fi-ž-žbəl li-lə-ršāš u-š-šyāħ
u-ənta mgaʕməz fi-l-marbūsa mədd rižlə-k u murtāħ
mūš bʕīd b-nəktesfū-h
barṛā ənta tzagzəg li-muʔammar tawwa nžū-k*

*Yefrən w-Allāh, mūš gāyəb ʕalē-hum al-gatəl
āxər həža əlfēn u-tmānya əllī yəbbī idawwər əl-maṭəl
lammā inūdu inūdu marra wāhda yā āna l-ʕyūn-ī
mā-tatwaqqəʕ-š aqall mən hīkkī mən aħfād əl-Bārūnī.
bi-n-nisba l-hum nafs əl-ħāza əd-dəbbāba wa-d-daww
mā-yagdərū izaʕzʕū ħattā šāʕra fi Kābāw
nafs əl-qəšša fi-r-Rəzbān, nafs əl-qəšša fi-z-Zəntān,
nafs əl-qəšša žīb-l-i žəbəl Nəfūsa fi ayyin kān*

*arāđī-ha səmħa tuzraʕ fi-hā l-kərmūs
u tuzraʕ fi-hā t-trīs əlli ħərbū zey lə-wħūš*

²⁷ J. A. Goldstone, Cross-class Coalitions and the Making of the Arab Revolts of 2011, *Swiss Political Science Review*, 17, 2011, 460.

²⁸ The song also contains some brief parts in Tamazight, the text of which has not been possible to establish and which are not reported here.

*ət-tyūs yəbbū yarkbu əz-žbəl u mā-gədrū-š
u rā-h taḥsəbū-ha sahla šarfīn-kum mā-taʿrfū-š?*

*škūn qbīlat əb-Bxābxa, škūn əl-Grādiyyīn,
škūn ət-Tāgma u lə-Mʿāni, škūn əm-Mšušiyīn?
mūs bšāra lammā igūlū-l-ək nantašir aw namūt
gūl-ī-l-a l-əlli ša-l-burkān žāy mən žəbəl taʿ Nālūt?*

*[...] bi-tamsaḥ bī-nā?
gūl əlli bi-tgūl-a [...] wa-l-mayya rā-hu hne r-ružūla
bi-n-nisba li-klāb muṣammār šinu mā-zāl bi-tžū-na?
tawwa iṣīr fī-ku zeyy mā-šār fī-maʿrakət ət-tāḥūna*

*bi-llāhi nibbī wēn-kum yā Tarhūna u Ġaryān
əllī imūtū hādū xūt-kum kēf tgūlu žərdān?*

*əlli yəbbi yəfham-a fətna xallī nwaḍḍəḥ əš-šūra
əl-fatwā žət mən Ġaryānī amā šādəq fī Tāžūra²⁹
mmāla šīnu tgūlū šalā l-xaṭəf u-l-igtišāb
bālki mā-təndrū-š gēr ifūt əḍ-ḍabāb
mā-fī-š əllā l-Ġərdāfi³⁰ əlli nibbū nantaqmū mənn-a
əlli tādʿī-l-nā bi-n-našər hādī akīd yā ḥənnā
aṣəl šīn mā-zāl mən sənn-a
mūs bʿīd tawwa iṭīḥ
yā-rēt izībū-h ḥəyy u nəžəldū-h mlīḥ
ənhākmū u-nəšənnəgū-h u-nḥuṭṭū rāš-a fī šūniyya
yugʿud gēr rās zeyy Wādi r-Rūmiyya.³¹*

I make no difference between East and West (of Libya),
Whoever defends his land has the right to wage war.
Whether he is from Nalut, from al-Gelʿa, from Zintan,
The Amazigh in Yefren, or the Arab in al-Rejban.
The same goes for ər-Riyānī, whose last name is əš-Šībānī,
When they chase Gaddafi's forces [they share] the same flags,
In front of the screen, the flags are also the same.

²⁹ The reference is here to the famous *fatwa* by al-Šādiq al-Ġaryānī in which he declared that fighting Gaddafi was a duty for Libyans (February 28th 2011).

<http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2011/2/28/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B0%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A8>, last accessed on April 15th 2018.

³⁰ The name Gaddafi was often distorted in *Ġərdāfi* (*gərd* “monkey”) by the revolutionaries.

³¹ Ibn Thabit, *Western Mountains (of Libya)*,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfeixCk2XLo&t=123s> last accessed on April 12th 2018.

We are all one hand, no matter how he [Gaddafi] tries to divide us,
 One stand, one fight, God help the Libyan people,
 and humiliate whoever fights us and insult us,
 and to those who say this is *fitna*, say, what do you have to do with us?
 The sound of bullets and cries they hear on the Mountain,
 While you are stretching your legs in your sitting room, relaxed,
 We will discover it soon
 Skip over to Muṣammar, we are coming for you!

Yefren, I swear, they are not strangers to death,
 The last time was in 2008, for those seeking examples,
 When they rise, they rise once, oh what I have seen,
 Don't expect less than that from the descendants of al-Bārūnī.
 For them, the tank and the *Dāyū*³² are the same,
 They (i.e. Gaddafi's forces) couldn't unsettle even a hair in Kābāw,
 Same story in al-Rejban, same story in Zintan,
 Same story in – give me any place on Ġabal Nafūsa.

Their land is beautiful, and the fig tree is grown there,
 And men are raised there also, who fight like wild beasts.
 Fools wanted to climb the mountains and they couldn't,
 Do you think it's easy, we know you don't know.

Who is the tribe of the Bxābxa, who the Grādiyyīn,
 who the Tāgma and the Mṣāni, who the Mšuṣiyyīn?
 It's no joke when they tell you we either win or die³³
 Tell it to those who are riding the explosion down the Mountain of Nalut!

Do you really think you will wipe us out?
 Say what you have to say [...] and water, we have courage.
 As far as Muṣammar's dogs are concerned, are you still coming at us?
 Now you will be faced with the same fate as in the battle of Ṭāhūna.

By God, I want you, Tarhuna and Gharyan,
 Those who are dying are your brothers, how can you call them rats?³⁴
 For those who want to understand this as *fitna*, let me explain the picture,
 the *fatwa* came from al-Gharyani, the trustworthy, in Tajura.
 So, what do you say of kidnappings, of rapes,
 maybe you don't know, let the fog clear away.

³² The reference is here to cheap Daewoo cars still used in Libya (the Korean company closed in 2000 due to bankruptcy).

³³ This is the famous motto of Omar al-Mukhtar (1861-1931), hero of the Libyan Resistance against the Italian invaders.

³⁴ The term *žerdān* "rats" was often employed by Gaddafi to designate the revolutionaries.

It's only Gaddafi from whom we seek revenge,
 to those who pray for our victory we say, it is certain, grandma,
 how long can still be left of his age,
 he will fall soon,
 I wish they would bring him alive and so we could whip him good,
 So that we could judge him and hang him and put his head on a plate,
 And so that he remains headless, like the statues of Wadi Rumiyya.

The opening lines of the song allow us to situate it, as mentioned above, in a particularly delicate context, in which the author perceives the risk of the emergence of a divided Libya as one that must be avoided at all costs. Thus Ibn Thabit opens his song by saying that he makes no difference between East and West, advocating for a united Libya.³⁵ From there, the discourse of unity transcends the traditional division between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and embraces the two main ethnic groups of the country, Arabs and Amazigh. The “sameness” of the Libyan Arabs and Amazigh, then, constitutes the main theme of the first part of the song. From this perspective, the idea that the Revolution might constitute a *fitna* “trial, temptation”³⁶ is repeatedly rejected, not only in this song. In a previous (and less famous) song, *Lībyā hiya* (*Libya is*), in fact, the same call to unity and rejection of the idea that the Revolution is a *fitna* is spelled out in different words:

Lībyā fī-hā šuṣūb u-qabāʾil lākān rāfīn nafs al-aʿlām
kān ʿa-l-Gaddāfī rā-h ʿayyām-a maʿdūdāt
alli yabbī ifattān fī-nā rā-h mā-fī-š imkāniyyāt
lā žihawīyya lā ʿunṣuriyya lā qabaliyya
āh nwaqḍāḥ-hā l-ək bi-l-luġa l-amāziġiyya...

Libya has different peoples and tribes but when they fly the same flag
 Gaddafi's days are numbered,
 Those who want to divide us have no chances
 No regionalism, no racism, no tribalism
 I'll explain it to you in Tamazight...³⁷

³⁵ It is worth reminding the reader that the geographical area we call Libya was politically unified by the Ottomans only at the beginning of the 20th century. D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 21.

³⁶ The term gradually acquired the sense of a seduction or enticement that brings division in the community of believers (see D. B. Cook, *Fitna in early Islamic history*, in K. Fleet - G. Krämer - D. Matringe - J. Nawas - E. Rowson (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*. Last accessed on April 12th 2018 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27151).

³⁷ This sentence is followed by lines in Tamazight (Ibn Thabit, *Lībyā hiya* (*Libya is*), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Axcbkzx2kIA>, last accessed on April 13th 2018).

From this theme, Ibn Thabit switches to another *topos* of the narration concerning the Amazigh Resistance, i.e. their military prowess. The rapper, who was deployed in a non-combat position on the Ġabal Nafūsa two months after the release of this song, vividly depicts the courage and military strength of the Libyan Amazigh. Ibn Thabit then skillfully links their bravery to the heritage of Sulaymān al-Bārūnī (1870-1940), hero of the early resistance against the Italian invasion. Though Al-Bārūnī, an Amazigh born in Ġabal Nafūsa and belonging to an Ibadi family,³⁸ the heritage of his deeds is nonetheless considered to be shared between Libyan Arabs and Amazigh. Mentioning him thus serves to strengthen the idea of unity between the two ethnic groups, especially in confronting a common enemy. The establishment of a connection between past and present, moreover, is a defining trait of protest music. Valassopoulos and Mostafa, commenting on this phenomenon in the Egyptian musical scene, write that “It is precisely at the crossroads where music both articulates and memorializes the connection between past and present injustices that it becomes dangerous and revolutionary”.³⁹ Ibn Thabit makes great use of this rhetorical device in his songs, starting from the first one (*as-Suʔāl - The question*), in which he asks *hal sa-iqāwmū l-aʕdā zeyy-mā qāwmū ʒdūd-na?* “Will they resist the enemies as our ancestors did?”. And trying to stimulate the pride of the Libyan people, in his second song (*Nidāʔ li-ṣabāb Lībyā - Calling the Libyan youth*) he tells his addressees not to call themselves descendants of *muğāhidīn* if they do not join the fight against Gaddafi (*mā-tgūl-š aḥfād əl-muğāhidīn* “Don’t say (we are) grandsons of the *muğāhidīn*”).

The song *al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī (The Western Mountain)* revolves around the two themes of unity and of the military prowess of the Libyan Amazigh. In *Lībyā hiya*, an additional element is sketched, namely the fact that the Amazigh people have been in Libya for centuries (even though Ibn Thabit does not venture to say that their presence precedes the Arab one), as proved by the very existence of their language:

*hne aškāl u alwān lākən kull-nā lībiyyīn
əllī ihīn min-nā wāḥəd rāh ihīn əl-malāyīn
yəbbi igūl mā-ft-š amāzīg hādū lī-hum snīn
suʔāl ʕa-s-sarīʕ hādī l-kalimāt mənīn?⁴⁰*

We have different looks and different colors but we are all Libyans
and whoever insults one among us insults millions.

³⁸ A. Baldinetti, Italian Colonial Rule and Muslim Elites in Libya: a Relationship of Antagonism and Collaboration, in M. Hatina (ed.), *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: ‘Ulama’ in the Middle East*, Brill, Leiden / Boston, 2009, 96.

³⁹ A. Valassopoulos - D. S. Mostafa, *op. cit.*, 647.

⁴⁰ This verse is then followed by lines in Tamazight.

He says there are no Amazigh when they have lived here for years.
A quick question: where are these words from then?

After presenting the two songs in which the Libyan Amazigh are directly (*al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī*) or indirectly (*Lībyā hiya*) addressed, it is possible to evaluate the perspective from which Ibn Thabit creates his perception of them and on which he builds his discourse. In order to do so, however, it is useful first to remind the reader of the situation of the Libyan Amazigh under Gaddafi's regime. The regime portrayed Libya as an ethnically homogeneous country,⁴¹ where the discussion of minority issues was not allowed in public. According to the official discourse of Gaddafi's regime, the contemporary "Berbers" were an Arab tribe who had reached Northern Africa a long time ago and whose Arabic language had been particularly corrupted through the centuries. According to Gaddafi, the authentic Amazigh tribes had long ceased to exist, while the contemporary Berbers were Arab tribes arrived over land (*barr barr*, whence the name "Berber") from Yemen.⁴² The existence of the Amazigh / Berber ethnic group, thus, was an invention of Western colonialism, the aim of which was to divide Libya (and other North African countries).⁴³ Even representatives of the Libyan Academy of the Arabic Language (*Maġmaʿ al-luġa al-ṣarabiyya al-lībiyya*), with whom I was able to discuss the question of Tamazight, upheld (or were forced to uphold) the same version. The denial of the very existence of an ethnically distinct group in Libya (apart from the Tebu in the southern part of the country) translated into extremely restrictive measures against the employment of Tamazight in public. The infamous Law 24 forbade the Libyan Amazigh from using their language in public and giving their children Amazigh names for a quarter of a century, until it was lifted in 2007 under the influence of Gaddafi's son, Sayf al-Islām.⁴⁴ From that moment and until the outbreak of the February 17th Revolution, Gaddafi's attitude toward the Libyan Amazigh was fickle to say the least, alternating harsh attacks (which described Amazigh activists as traitors) and shy attempts at reconciliation.

This brief introduction is interesting because it helps us to put Ibn Thabit's words in perspective. The aim of this analysis is not to question the genuine good intentions of the rapper, who later joined the Amazigh themselves on the *Ġabal Nafūsa* in their fight against the regime. The discourse of homogeneity offered by *Lībyā hiya* and *al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī*, on the contrary, specifies that Libya is indeed one, but it includes different *šufūb wa qabāʾil* "peoples and tribes". In *al-Ġabal al-*

⁴¹ B. Maddy-Weitzman, *The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2011, 140.

⁴² *Idem*, 141.

⁴³ <http://mediterraneanaffairs.com/ethnic-minorities-the-main-challenge-for-the-libyan-stabilization>, last accessed on April 14th 2018.

⁴⁴ B. Maddy-Weitzman, *op. cit.*, 141.

Ġarbī, moreover, he says that everyone has the right to fight the regime, *əl-Amāzīgī fī Yefrən aw l-Ġarbī fī-r-Rəžbān* “the Amazigh in Yefren or the Arab in al-Rejban”. These points were amongst the greatest points of controversy between Gaddafi and the activists of the CMA (*Congrès Mondial Amazigh*). In a letter addressed to the Libyan dictator by the CMA leader Lounès, the Libyan Amazigh are said to have been let down precisely by the fact that Gaddafi imagined a “Libya for Libyans”, but the only identity he was willing to include in this “Libyanness” was the Arab one.⁴⁵

Where Ibn Thabit’s discourse falls short is in recognizing the injustices suffered by the Libyan Amazigh at the hands of the regime and their general marginalization within the Libyan society. In a politically charged rap that aims to stir the conscience of its listeners, thus, a recognition of the Amazigh presence in Libya is little more than a long overdue act. The act itself, however, does not stem from the recognition of the specific kind of repression and persecution suffered by the Libyan Amazigh within their own country. This is especially true if we compare the two songs quoted above with the rest of Ibn Thabit’s production, which is usually extremely detailed in listing the crimes committed by Gaddafi against the addressees of his songs. A discourse of unity and homogeneity that does not seek reconciliation through the acknowledgement of past injustices, thus, risks to be an involuntary attempt at cultural assimilation.

Conclusion

This paper provided an analysis of one of the most prominent rappers that animated the Libyan scene throughout the February 17th Revolution, with a particular focus on his approach to the issue of Amazigh in Libya. As evident from the moment in which Ibn Thabit’s *al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī* (*The Western Mountain*) was released, his dealing with the Amazigh question in Libya is, at the very least, partially instrumental to bringing about their auspicated role in the then ongoing conflict. In other words, Ibn Thabit composes this song and releases it at a moment in which the help of the Amazigh was desperately needed to win the war, but he includes them in his vision of a culturally diverse post-Gaddafi Libya, although he does so with all of the shortcomings highlighted at the end of the previous section.

One of the limitations of the present paper consists in the fact that it only offers one point of view, namely that of Ibn Thabit. It would be extremely interesting to investigate how the Libyan Amazigh received his message. During the conference at which this paper was originally presented, for instance, the discussion that followed my presentation was extremely interesting. Some of the Libyan Amazigh in attendance, in fact, showed a certain disappointment, stating that their help was requested and promises were made during the war, yet the Arab ethnic majority

⁴⁵ *Idem*, 142.

tried to marginalize them again soon after Gaddafi's fall. The inclusive discourse of a common "Libyanness", thus, was accused of opportunism, even though statistical surveys would be needed to ascertain whether these opinions are really representative of the feelings of the Libyan Amazigh in post-Gaddafi Libya.

At the same time, politically connoted rap and hip-hop music in the MENA region and its contribution to the Arab Spring also deserves the attention of researchers, in order to understand an important aspect of the multifaceted social background from which the events of 2011 developed.

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 Ibn Thabit feat. MC SWAT, *lā šakk* (*No doubt*);
 Ibn Thabit, *Lībyā hiya* (*Libya is*);
 Ibn Thabit, *Misrata*;
 Ibn Thabit, *Nidāʾ li-šabāb Lībyā* (*Calling the Libyan youth*);
 Ibn Thabit, *as-Suʾāl* (*The question*);
 MC SWAT, *Istiġlāl* (*Exploitation*).

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates one of the lesser-known expressions of political dissent and revolutionary thinking during the Arab Spring, rap music. It focuses on the Libyan musical scene and its most famous revolutionary rapper, Ibn Thabit, whose songs were the soundtrack of the February 17th Revolution. Composed and sung in Libyan dialect, Ibn Thabit's rap is a call to action addressed to all Libyans, including the Amazigh ethnic minority. The second part of the paper focuses on the way in which the Libyan Amazigh, who were subjected to violent repression under Gaddafi's rule, were portrayed and addressed by an ethnically and linguistically Arab singer, in an attempt to involve them in the struggle against the regime.

LAMEEN SOUAG

Linguistic Unity and Diversity in Libyan Berber (Amazigh)

Introduction

This article is intended as a non-technical introduction to internal variation in Libyan Berber¹ and its broader implications. Like Arab identity, Amazigh identity tends to be closely bound up with language. However, like Arabic, Berber is far from homogeneous, and mutual comprehensibility across different regions can be very limited. Understanding this cross-regional linguistic variation is important in order to predict, or plan, the future of Berber in Libya in a context of increasing institutionalisation and urbanisation.

¹ A terminological note may be necessary here. “Berber” is the most widely used term in Western academic literature both for the language and for the ethnic grouping. In Arabic, the term (*barbar*) has acquired negative connotations, including a perceived (and perhaps etymologically correct) link with “barbarian”, and is generally considered unacceptable in modern contexts; in English, it does not have the same connotations. “Amazigh” or “Mazigh” is the ethnonym traditionally used by many but not all Berber-speaking groups, and promoted by activists; it is increasingly accepted even in areas where it had not been used in the pre-colonial period, and will be used here consistently to refer to ethnic identity or political activity and its results. “Tamazight”, the feminine of “Amazigh”, is often used to refer to the language as a whole, or specifically to the varieties of central Morocco; however, most Libyan varieties put language names in the masculine, so this term will be used here only in reference to other countries.