



**SPECIAL FOCUS ON AMAZIGH LITERATURE: CRITICAL AND CLOSE
READING APPROACHES**

The Amazigh Musical Style of Rouicha: Transcending Linguistic and Cultural Boundaries

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Abstract

Mohammed Rouicha is an Amazigh musical legend. Rouicha came to prominence in his teenage years in the mid-sixties in Morocco and continued to evolve and rise internationally until his death in 2012. An artist and a musician, he was ahead of his time in that he believed that people and communities should connect with one another through music, regardless of ethnicity or language. Rouicha appreciated art in all its shapes and forms and was fascinated by Amazigh, Arab, and Hindi Music. He sang in both Tamazight (the language of the Indigenous Amazigh) and Arabic, winning him accolades among listeners in both languages. In this article, I draw on Rouicha's biography and artistic repertoire in Tamazight to analyze his lyrical and musical style. Rouicha's songs revolved around three primary themes: love, struggle, and resistance, and he painted his lyrics with the beauty and imagery of Tamazgha (Amazigh lands), giving a voice to Moroccans' embodied experiences. His songs represent an imagined Morocco: a place where Amazigh identity is an integral part of the national identity. I argue that Rouicha represented the hope that an imagined linguistic and cross-cultural interconnectedness would unite all of Morocco within their differences.

Keywords: Mohamed Rouicha; Amazigh; Amazigh music; Tamazgha; Indigenous identity; cross-cultural boundaries

The Author's Positionality

I am an Amazigh woman who grew up in Meknes, Morocco. My parents are both Imazighen (plural of Amazigh) from the Amazigh community of Ait Belkacem, which is in the Khémisset Province, east of Rabat. However, I grew up in the city of Meknes, which is east of Khémisset. I belong to the Amazigh people, who are the Indigenous people of North Africa. Imazighen

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refer to their region as Tamazgha, a term coined by many Amazigh activists to describe the lands extending from the Canary Islands on the west to Siwa in Egypt on the east, and Mali and Niger on the south. I grew up speaking Tamazight with my parents at home, but Arabic and French outside of the house. During my childhood in the eighties, Tamazight was neither taught in schools nor recognized as an official language in Morocco, as it is today. My ethnic and linguistic identity as an Amazigh was mirrored only at home, and Rouicha was part of my universe.

I am not only writing this essay about Rouicha because he is merely a legend of Amazigh music, but also because he was the first Amazigh singer I heard as a child. My father used to play Rouicha on his stereo by means of mini cassettes. His music served as a reminder of my Amazigh identity even though I lived in the city where my mother tongue was not visible and audible. My father was so enamored by Rouicha's music that he would play some songs several times to understand their lyrical nuances and depth. Growing up in this context, I loved listening to Rouicha's music as well, and I was hoping to understand the lyrics one day and write about the legacy of this Amazigh singer. It is important to note that Amazigh inquiry is relational. Therefore, my father, Hamadi Mnouer, and my colleague Omar Oukahou assisted me in translating the lyrics from Tamazight to Arabic.

Amazigh Music and Tamazight

Tamazgha has experienced colonialism from the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, French, and Spanish.¹ Amazigh people resisted colonialism of all its sorts and shapes. The French Protectorate (1912–56) had a strategy of separating Moroccans to advance France's colonial agenda. The Berber Decree of 1930 was presumably passed to divide Morocco into Amazigh and Arab parts.² However, the classic divide-and-rule strategy failed, as Moroccans united and resisted French colonialism. Music was one of the tools of resistance used to counter colonial aspirations, and the Amazigh legendary singer, Hammū al-Yazīd, Mohamed Rouicha's mentor, was one of the Amazigh singers who lent their voice to this resistance.³

After Morocco's independence in 1956, Imazighen's contribution to their country's liberation was rewarded by Arabization. This government program adopted and declared Arabic as the official language of Morocco, and schools, hospitals, police stations, and other sectors of public life were all areas in which Moroccans had to use Arabic as an official language. Moreover, Amazigh achievements were dismissed by Arab nationalists after independence, as they were perceived as residue of French colonialism, and thus posing

¹ Moha Ennaji, "Multiculturalism, Gender and Political Participation in Morocco," *Diogenes* 57.1 (February 2010): 46–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110374247>.

² Moha Ennaji, "Migration, Development, and Gender in Morocco," (2002). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/09p4k433>

³ 'Abd al-Mālik Ḥamzāwī, *Kunūz Al-Aṭlas Al-Mutawassīṭ: Wa-ṣīm Ḥammū Ūlyazīd: Mu'āṣīrūh Wa-Ḥāmilū Al-Mish'al Min Ba'dih*, (Rabat: Maktabat Al Ma'arif Al Jadida), 82.

a threat to the Arab-Islamic state, further marginalizing Imazighen.⁴ Although Arabization was officially declared as targeting the French language, it also oppressed the language of Indigenous people, Tamazight. Nevertheless, Arabization did not manage to penetrate every aspect of Moroccan life. Music, for example, was one of the areas in which Tamazight was a vehicle where economic and linguistic issues were raised despite the ongoing policy of Arabization.

Amazigh music was viewed as a folkloric genre until the 1970s. However, it has evolved to become an important form of expression and communication.⁵ Amazigh music recognizes the nuances of Amazigh poetry, lyrics, and themes that discuss issues associated with colonialism such as *Uḍeed Ikleed* and *Taxi Yayeen* by Hammū al-Yazīd.⁶ I could not unfortunately find recordings of these songs. Themes also revolve around love, including the works of a nineteenth-century Amazigh Kabyle poet whose words are still sung today.⁷ For example, Hammū al-Yazīd in his song *Tiwald* describes the love of his daughter who just got married: *Tiwald ayllinu awa tiwald*, (“You got married, my beloved daughter”), *Tiwald awnna tmoun iharra ulinu*, (“You got married, my beloved and you left a bitterness and soreness in my heart”).⁸ People would hear Amazigh music on the radio, the television, and in different events such as weddings and such. Mohamed Rouicha was a pioneer singer and composer who took tradition and mixed it with modernity to create his own mark in the history of Amazigh music, especially in the Middle Atlas, where he is originally from, in central Morocco.

Mohamed Rouicha: The Legend

Rouicha was born in 1955 and passed away in 2012. His musical legacy encompasses both Arabic and Tamazight, and his songs serve as classics of Amazigh music. Although he worked with different poets who furnished him with poems in Arabic and Tamazight, Rouicha did not reveal their names. However, before committing to the words and composing the music, he would discuss the meaning of the poems and lyrics with colleagues and close friends, such as Azzedine, Aziz, and Professor Bibi.⁹ Reflecting his rigor, creativity, and discipline, his songs in Tamazight reflect a typical poetic genre prevalent in the Middle Atlas. The songs are short and contain several

⁴ Brahim El Guabli, “Where is Amazigh Studies?” *The Journal of North African Studies* (2022): 1–8.

⁵ Ennaji Moha, “Recognizing the Berber Language in Morocco,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 15.2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 93–99.

⁶ Muhammad Bāyshīt, *Al-Fann al-Amāzīghī al-asīl: Hammū al-Yazīd/al-Fann al-Amāzīghī al-aṣīl: Ḥammū al-Yazīd / Bāyshīt, Muhammad*, (Tangier: Litughrāf, 2013), 63.

⁷ Brahim El Guabli, “Literature and Indigeneity: Amazigh Activists’ Construction of an Emerging Literary Field,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 28, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/literature-and-indigeneity-amazigh-activists-construction-of-an-emerging-literary-field/>.

⁸ Morocco tv ino, “Tiwald Ayli a Tiwald اغنية اروع اليازيد حمو اليازيد للفنان”, November 13, 2017, 10:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5004sYiTHEY>.

⁹ Ḥamzāwī, “Muḥammad Rū’ishah: Al-Insān Wa-Al-Dhākīrah, 41.

verses of usually two hemistiches separated by a refrain.¹⁰ This poetic genre combined with Rouicha's mastery of *luṭār* gave his music a distinctive identity throughout Morocco.

Rouicha attributes the appearance of *luṭār* (Amazigh musical instrument) in the Middle Atlas to a seventeenth-century musician named Oberha, who was a member of the Amazigh tribe called Ichquiren.¹¹ *Luṭār* is a three-cord instrument. However, Rouicha added a fourth string at the end of the twentieth century, so that he could play all the musical *maqāmāt*. *Maqāmāt* are generally understood as melody types.¹² Although some purists critiqued Rouicha for losing his authenticity by tailoring to other musical styles and singing in other languages, it could be argued that the addition was a response to his need to expand the potential of Amazigh music while remaining faithful to the instrument's indigeneity. Thus, adding the fourth string while still giving centrality to his Amazigh instrument is both an act of genius creativity and Indigenous pride. In this sense, Rouicha indigenized other musical genres by making them playable on *luṭār*. Moreover, for Rouicha, whether he was intentional or not about making his songs accessible to people, the impact of the addition of the fourth string meant that his songs were undeniably present in all Morocco and beyond.

Growing up in Khenifra, known as the queen of the Middle Atlas, in the post-colonial period, Rouicha belonged to a generation for whom music brought joy.¹³ Rouicha started recording songs in 1979 in Tamazight and in Dārija (Moroccan spoken dialect). As a lead singer and instrument player, Rouicha sang while playing *luṭār* and was accompanied by a group of male and female singers who repeated after him either by taking turns or in unison. This means that the female singers would sing the chorus, and the male singers would repeat the chorus and vice versa. *Bandīr* (tambourine) players were essential as they both played their instruments and sang the tunes. His recording was phenomenal, and his repertoire grew by sixteen recordings a year in addition to his recordings for television and radio channels.¹⁴

Rouicha's musical genealogy harks back to the works of his master Hammū al-Yazīd. Hammū was born in 1927 in Ayn Luh (a small town in the Ifrane province in Morocco) where he grew up and become a cobbler, then later a nurse.

¹⁰ Jeannine Drouin, "Un cycle oral hagiographique dans le Moyen-Atlas marocain," *Publications de la Sorbonne/Série Sorbonne* (1975).

¹¹ 'Abd al-Mālik Ḥamzāwī, *Muḥammad Rū'ishah: Al-Insān Wa-Al-Dhākīrah*, al-Ṭab'ah al-ūlā (Casablanca: maktabat Al Oumma Linnachr wa Attawzee, 2013), 57.

¹² Dalia Carmi-Cohen, "An investigation into the tonal structure of the maqamat," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 16 (1964): 102–06.

¹³ The two most popular instruments played in that region were the *luṭār* and the traditional *Bandīr*. The traditional *Bandīr* measures approximately 40 centimeters in diameter and 12 centimeters deep; its manufacturing is artisanal, and it consists of four important elements: a circular frame in walnut or hackberry wood, a goatskin, a cord, or stamp, and fastening straps. (Information stated by Srhane Mohamed, a co-founder and a member of an Ahidou group, as cited in Hammou Belghazi, 2020, translated from French to English by the author.)

¹⁴ Ḥamzāwī, "Muḥammad Rū'ishah: Al-Insān Wa-Al-Dhākīrah," 47–48.

There, he and many friends of the region shared the love of Amazigh music and the playing of *lutār*.¹⁵ Al-Yazīd was known as the chancellor of Amazigh music, for he was the one that set the stage for Amazigh music and was a great composer and well respected and loved by his community.¹⁶ Rouicha was one of the *lutār*-learning students of Hammū al-Yazīd and he was one of his band members and travelled with him to different locations for musical concerts.¹⁷ In addition to learning *lutār* from his mentor, Rouicha also re-sang and re-interpreted some of Hammū al-Yazīd's songs,¹⁸ including *Awa Yaymanu* ("oh, my mother"), which he sang with artists Ali Wada and Chrifa.¹⁹

Rouicha, was also influenced by the climate in which he lived. His songs spoke of love and economic and migration struggles. His composition was so carefully executed that one felt like the protagonist in his songs. His stage name, "Roui-cha" means "mix something," and is the phrase Rouicha's mother used to call him when she wanted to listen to his art. He indeed was the king of innovation in that his music transcended geographical boundaries and played in rural and urban Morocco, Europe, and Japan (see, e.g., *Abibyu Sghuy* ("Oh love"), *Mūn dizm* ("Befriend the lion"), *Sal sal* ("Ask about me"), *Awra smlu u khlij* ("Come to the shade"), and *Inās Inās* ("Tell him"). Rouicha continued to evolve and rise internationally until his death in 2012. The aforementioned songs will be analyzed in detail in the next section.

The Theme of Love

The theme of love pervaded Rouicha's music in the songs he sang in both Tamazight and Arabic. For Rouicha, love is a noble thing that is very hard to obtain. In his very first recorded song, *Abibyu Sghuy*, he sings in Tamazight:

Aymanu awa nikhak anmun ur thrīd
Aymounu a aawdkhach anmun ur thrīd
Aymanu adasikh ulinou adasikh dra^c
Wnnan imzwura ksn tammnt i lwaha abibiyu sghuy
W tin ingoura hjiyndj nna yzwana abibiyu sghuy

For the love of my mother, I asked you to be united, and you refused
 O mother, I crushed my heart and tried
 Those before us removed honey from love
 Those that came after found the honeycomb empty

What is love without honey and its sweetness? Rouicha emphasizes the word *anmun* ("for us to unite"). Love for Rouicha should bring unification; striving

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Mālik Ḥamzāwī, *Kunūz Al-Aṭlas Al-Mutawassīṭ: Wa'sīm Ḥammū Ūlyazīd: Mu'ašīrūh Wa-Ḥāmilū Al-Mish'al Min Ba'dih. al-Ṭab'ah 1* (Rabat: Maktabat Al Ma'arif Al Jadida, 2013), 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁷ Ḥamzāwī, "Muḥammad Rū'ishah, 78.

¹⁸ Ḥamzāwī, *Kunūz Al-Aṭlas Al-Mutawassīṭ*, 189.

¹⁹ Ḥamzāwī, *Muḥammad Rū'ishah*, 57.

for unity is noble. Although translation, no matter how accurate, cannot do justice to the beauty of the original song, Rouicha's Amazigh singing allows us to want to find this love that encourages unity. Given its recording in 1967, only a decade after Morocco's independence, the song's message of love and unification is salient, and the warning of *Abibyu Sghuy* could be directed toward those in Morocco pushing for separation – in language (Arabic vs. Tamazight), and geography (urban vs. rural), and political identity. The Moroccan Association for Cultural Exchange (AMREC) was created in 1967 to defend the linguistic and cultural rights of the Amazigh. The birth of this non-governmental association marked the start of activism in Morocco to elevate Amazigh culture and language. Therefore, Rouicha's song playing on the radio in the late sixties in Tamazight, even though some people did not understand its meaning, transmitted a message of rebirth for Amazigh culture and Tamazight language. It embodied a call for a national unity that was respectful of ethnic diversity, hidden behind an individual love story in *Abibyu Sghuy*.

Rouicha was not prevented by success from continuing to evolve. One of his major innovations was the introduction of *Tamawayt* ("the female companion") with a full accompaniment of music. *Tamawayt* originated in the Middle Atlas mountains and it is a poem that consists of two verses generally, sung with a high-pitched melody to express love and agony.²⁰ In the song entitled, *Sāl Sāl* ("ask about, ask about"), Rouicha sings the *tamawayt* verses using his *luṭār* instrument, accompanied by tambourine, after the female singer enunciates the *tamawayt* first. Rouicha responds to her expressions by *luṭār* before he starts singing *tamawayt*. Then, he adds new verses to *tamawayt*. The lyrics of *Sāl Sāl* are as follows:

Tamawayt with the initial singing of the female companion:

Imanu sāl ghifi sāl
Islli dikān askār
Mād isday taghul adigafi asawn
Aya dadtfi n dunit amurid lmut
Alhar likhrra urdadi t'yad wna tiwīt

For the love of my mother, ask about me, ask
 The rock that fell from the top of the mountain
 How can it return to its place?
 Oh, sweetness of life, were it not for death
 I feel a sharp pain, as there is no return of the lover after death takes him

Rouicha's singing:

Sāl, sāl. islli dikān aksār,
Sāl sāl makh izday taghul adikafi asawn
Sāl, sāl amari nun awa yinhubba nu usar iffigh ul
Sāl, sāl, al yakh yddr washal hllikh nk isulan

²⁰ Ali Khadaoui, *Tamawayt: Poèmes 2008* (Paris: Edilivre, 2017), 3.

Ask about me, ask

The rock that fell from the top of the mountain

How can it return to its place?

Ask about me, that who I love, for you are firmly rooted in the heart

Ask for me, I'm here till death do us part.

In the song above, the theme of love is still prominent in Rouicha's music. This time, Rouicha insists on a pure and everlasting love in which only death parts the lovers. If broken, it cannot be mended: *Mād isday taghul adi-gafi asawn* ("the rock that cannot return to its original place once it falls"). Rouicha's style of imagery is very present when it comes to love. His songs are categorized by repetition to present a sense of urgency to the matter. *Sāl, sāl* ("ask about me, ask about me"), this repetition suggests urgency to tell the story of how one has loved. It is important to note that, though Rouicha talks about pure love, he is still expressing disappointment and sorrow, which is also very distinctive of the *tamawayt* theme. Rouicha is centered around the embodied experience of how the one who is in love is also in agony. In *Abibiyu Sghuy*, he depicts this imagery as well when he says *Wnnan imzwura ksn tammnt i lwaha abibiyu sghuy* ("those before us came and took sweetness from the honey"). Rouicha's theme of love in his Amazigh songs is both sweet and bitter. Easy and hard. Pure but betrayed. This duality in his lyrics can represent love for the Amazigh language and culture.

The Theme of Struggle

Rouicha depicts the feeling of struggle in other songs he sang in Tamazight, particularly ones about Morocco's economic hardships, foreign debt, and unemployment. We can see this in the lyrics of *Inās Inās* ("tell him, tell him"), probably the most popular song in this repertoire. This song did not come to prominence until shortly before his death, and later the Egyptian singer Hamza Namira remade it in a YouTube video, which garnered over 13.5 million views.²¹ Rouicha sings:

Inās Inās

Mayrikh, Mayrikh

Adasikh i zman, adasikh i zman

Wnna wr yufin maghasich unna dtmun

Wra yisnaqqas i atsart ghas jib ikhwan

Adunit ur itrit ula tawdit a l mut

A nk a rbbi aytujit inyar urengi du qraf

²¹ Alaraby 2. "Remix with Hamza Namira Enas Enas (In Tamazight) - Moroccan Mohamed Rouicha," April 15, 2016, SOLAR Music Rights Management, and 3 Music Rights Societies, 4:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o71my009gfg>.

*Ayaytma, nk akstahlakh aditrukh
Es nga leqnaz eb'ad ubrid usmun*

Tell him, Tell him,
How would you want me to deal with these tough times?

Who did not find, what to offer to the beloved?
And nothing detracts from a person's pride, but an empty pocket

Life has abandoned me, and death did not come for me
How would you want me to deal with these tough times?
O brothers, it's me who deserves to cry

The Amazigh lyrics of *Inās Inās* are sung by many people, Amazighophones and non-alike. Rouicha refers to the social condition of all Moroccans. The song communicates the embodied experiences many Moroccans went through during the economic crises of the eighties and the nineties. When he sings *Wra yisnaqqas i atsart ghas jīb Ikhwan* ("And nothing detracts from a person's pride, but an empty pocket"), he describes the struggle during these tough economic conditions. Similarly, when he sings *Inās Inās. Mayrikh, Mayrikh, Adasikh i zman* ("Tell him, tell him, how would you want me to deal with these tough times"), he expresses the struggle in the face of difficult economic conditions, and I argue that he is asking the government to intervene. "Tell him" could be directed to the parliament. Rouicha is asking the state officials to act, and he is asking them how they expect people to continue with such harsh conditions.

Inās Inās touched many Moroccans around the globe. Singing it in Tamazight and having millions of people interact with his tunes and sing the lyrics, Rouicha did what Morocco could not do prior to 2011 (when Tamazight was integrated officially in the Moroccan constitution); he drew attention not only to the language and culture through singing in Tamazight, but also to the struggle of Amazigh people within Morocco. This theme of struggle continues to evolve in his songs, but this time the struggle refers to mobility and migration. Rouicha's message for unity here is a call for all Moroccans to recognize the plight of migrants whether this migration is from rural to urban contexts or to Europe. His song, *Awra* ("come") exemplifies this struggle:

*Awra, Awra, Awra, Awra yawa
Awra smlu u khlij nghach irifi
Qqim chi awa, qim chi awa,
Qim chi atsmalut azzal nk atawikh shili*

*Aday walf cha (3x), Yuk umazir yarul immuti
Makh iz daygan id nagasi tmmut tisi*

*Dan wussn nag tirwahakh kuyass
Ahyud awa (3x), la dem'ad adas yali ghr l 'ali*

Come to the shade. Hey! come,
 or you will die of thirst
 Protect yourself, the noon sun will burn you,
 It is too late for me, it hit me already

When we must leave a place, in which we got accustomed to living
 How can we sleep when we change our home bed?

Gone are those days when I used to cherish the cool breeze
 Hey silly (3x), How is it you want to climb the mountain and endure its
 adversity?

In this moving lyrical song,²² Rouicha embodies the inner struggle of people away from their home. The listener enters in conversation with the singer. Rouicha describes the hardship that comes with one's absence from their homeland, the strangeness of a new place. He repeats the first line of each musical verse three times, signaling a call to an important issue. Such as, *awra, awra, awra* ("come, come, come") and *Aday walf cha* ("When I get accustomed to"). This technique leaves suspense over what is going to come next and puts emphasis on the issue. Rouicha is telling people to rethink leaving their land, that the journey will not be easy: "save yourself, as it is too late for me." "Me" could symbolize those who left and are far from their Indigenous lands.

This lyrical style of conversation allows the listener to see themselves as heroes in the story. Even though Rouicha has been abroad, singing with different people in different cultures, he always remained faithful to his native land, Khenifra, whenever he returned. It is not difficult to imagine how the homeland is constantly missed by the immigrant who agrees with Rouicha: *lla dem'ad adas yali ghr l 'ali* ("why did you want to climb the mountain and endure its adversity?"). It is important to note that in the late nineties, Morocco witnessed an increase in urban population because of rural exodus, especially to the city of Casablanca. Therefore, it was only natural to discuss the migration phenomenon. Tamazight was not spoken in big cities, and Amazigh people migrating to the city had to learn a new dialect and function mainly in Arabic, then French. This forced suppression of the Tamazight language was, and is still, a continuous struggle that many Amazigh face in urban areas.

The Theme of Resistance

Rouicha's song themes not only highlight the plight of Amazigh migrants from rural to urban areas, but also abroad. Rouicha in *Awra* and *Inās Inās* depicts resistance. He is asking migrants to resist the assimilation that can result from being far from one's Indigenous land. Morocco witnessed the highest flow migrants of North Africans to Europe, which prompted the European

²² Loutar Zik. "أورا أورا - محمد رويشة (كلمات مترجمة)" | *Awra awra* - Mohamed ROUICHA (Paroles & traduction)," May 20, 2020, 10:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=th3ObV9qbx8>.

Union to create policies to regulate immigration to Europe.²³ Many migrants found themselves facing assimilation in their new environments. For example, in the case of first- and second-generation migrants who traveled to Europe, the former colonial empire, they succeeded in achieving upward social mobility, while assimilating into their migrant contexts in terms of language and culture.²⁴ In this way they are viewed as “the good immigrants.” Therefore, Rouicha is telling them in *Awra*: “save yourself, as it is too late for me.” He is asking migrants not to assimilate and bury their culture like the ones before them did to survive in their new migrant environments. Every immigrant or anyone displaced from their native language or land undergoes an inner struggle and can feel that it is their own story. Rouicha, an artist that communicates the realities of the people, is warning people who want to migrate by asking them to reconsider their choice, as migration will change their ties to the land and family. He is preparing migrants for the struggle they are facing ahead of their migrant journeys.

Awra is in conversation with *Inās Inās*. Both songs speak to each other through the unifying theme of hardship, which is manifested in social and economic adversities. In an era where not only migration of Amazigh people from rural to urban areas was common, but where Morocco was also witnessing censorship and suppression of intellectual freedom, Rouicha’s music represented not only a refuge for suppressed people, but also an act of resistance and a sense of protection. Rouicha is not asking us to surrender; he is asking us to protect ourselves, as we resist censorship and inequity of all sorts. Rouicha, in *Awra*, reminds us of the comfort of the shade in Tamazgha: *Awra yawa Awara smlu u khlij* (“Come to the shade. Hey! Come”), as we resist assimilation and inequity.²⁵ He also continues to be inspired by the beauty of his region and takes on other symbols that are important to many Amazigh people. In his song, *Mūn Dizen* (“Befriend the Lion”), the lion is a symbol of loyalty and strength for the Amazigh.²⁶

Mūn dizen yufach, ddu kufiyat i l’wari
Amma bnadm dachighddr adur atamen walu

²³ Hassène Kassar, Diaa Marzouk, Wagida A. Anwar, Chérifa Lakhoua, Kari Hemminki, and Meriem Khyatti, “Emigration flows from North Africa to Europe,” *The European Journal of Public Health* 24.1 (2014): 2–5.

²⁴ Ramon Grosfoguel, Laura Oso, and Anastasia Christou, “‘Racism,’ intersectionality and migration studies: framing some theoretical reflections,” *Identities* 22.6 (2015): 635–52.

²⁵ As an Amazigh who lives abroad, *awra* represents a sense of belonging to me. The image of the shade reminds me of my native land in Ait Belkacem. But I am also reminded of the adversity it brings from climbing a mountain, which symbolizes for me the hardship of being far away from my homeland. Even though this song was in a past time, it is still relevant to Amazigh migrants, immigrants, and those in the diaspora in the present times, especially when the COVID-19 pandemic made mobility even more complex and complicated. Mohamed Rouicha’s imagery in this im/migration theme reminds us to connect and reconnect with our lands, ancestry, culture, and language.

²⁶ Izlan n Zman, “Mohammed rouicha - moun d izm (paroles et traduction) محمد رويشة - مون ديزم (كلمات و ترجمة),” May 15, 2021, 12:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHBEbNi1Gk8&t=15s>.

*Ā dha ywalf cha yun w mazeer yaghul ymmouti
Makh is thaygan iz nnagas tmmouti tisi
Rbbi wri rzīq ssbr ydda yismun i'ffayi
Matta l hiltinna ghasikh idda w riri mulana*

*Mūn dizem yufach, ddu kufiyat i l'wari
Amma bnadm dachighddr adur atamen walu*

Wnna chmid idizan a tawuujilt a thar lwali

*Mūn dizem yufach, ddu kufiyat i l'wari
Amma bnadm dachighddr adur atamen walu*

Awa ydihzzan allahd a dawen qiiskh thiou

*Mūn dizem yufach, ddu kufiyat i l'wari
Amma bnadm dachighddr adur atamen walu*

Take a lion as a friend, and the mountain as a refuge
As for the human, treachery is one his traits, he is not to be trusted

How can one sleep when his home place is changed?
I did not have patience when my beloved hated me
Whatever it is, my faith is in God's hands

Take a lion as a friend, and the mountain as a refuge
As for the human, treachery is one his traits, he is not to be trusted

Those who despise you... and you are an orphan

Take a lion as a friend, and the mountain as a refuge
As for the human, treachery is one his traits, he is not to be trusted

You who dig my grave, let me tell you my story

Take a lion as a friend, and the mountain as a refuge
As for the human, treachery is one of his traits, he is not to be trusted

The geography of the Middle Atlas Mountains is diverse, as it encompasses plains, plateaus, cedars, hilltops, and different mountain ranges. In this sense, Rouicha was inspired by the beauty of the Atlas Mountains. As a native of Khenifra, he asks fellow Amazigh people to take mountains as a refuge, and a lion as a friend; the lion and the mountain represent symbols of Amazigh power and resistance against foreign threats, as they relate to the sense of place that encompasses a relationship to nature. The lions were symbolic animals in the Middle Atlas. The sighting of lions in the Middle and High Atlas

Mountains was still present in the twentieth century.²⁷ Rouicha in this song is honoring the long-standing relationship of the Amazigh to their natural world, which is symbolized through the reverence of the lion. However, in the next verse, Rouicha says more: *Ā dha ywalf cha yun w mazeer yaghul ymmouti* (“how could one sleep when his homeplace is changed?”). The sense of place in this verse could be related to leaving one’s home to seek upward mobility in the city. It is important to realize that Tamazight language and culture had not been integrated in Morocco’s parliament until 2011, well after Rouicha sang this song. When he says *Amma bnadm dachighddr adur atamen walu* (“As for the human, treachery is one of his traits, he is not to be trusted”), there is a theme of resistance. The human who shall not be trusted could be symbolized as a national Moroccan identity, which did not reconcile with the Amazigh identity. The human here could also refer to the urban context that forces the Amazigh to change different aspects of their identity to fit in the new social and linguistic context.

Rouicha carries on and sings: *Wnna chmid idizan a tawuwjilt a thar lwali* (“Those who despise you... and you are an orphan”). This lyric continues the theme of resistance in that Tamazight and Amazigh culture is not fought for by the parliament. It does not have its defenders in the parliament. The language and the people, especially in rural areas, have been less privileged and even marginalized because Tamazight (the orphan) does not have the constitution fighting for it. The image he uses here is that Tamazight is deceived by those that despise it, like an orphan waiting for protection and safety. Therefore, he is asking Amazighen to seek refuge in their lands and be strong and resilient just like a lion in the Atlas who fights foreign threats that come its way.

Rouicha’s embodiment of native land and the comfort it provides is also seen in his song, *Awra* (“come”) where he sings: *Protect yourself, the noon sun will burn you*. When Arabic was declared as an official language, the status of Tamazight was not integrated in public life with, e.g., interpreters in courts, hospitals, and other institutions.²⁸ Moreover, even though many people in Morocco speak Tamazight, Arabic and French are considered prestige languages, spoken by the privileged.²⁹ Rouicha invokes the mountain and the lion – *Mun dizem yufach, ddu kufiyat I l’wari* (“Take the lion and the mountain as a refuge”) – and shade – *Qqim chi awa, qim chi awa, Qim chi atsmalut azzal nk atawikh shili* (“Protect yourself, the noon sun will burn you, it is too late for me, it hit me already”) – as metaphors in asking the Amazigh to not forget their roots. The use of the different symbols of nature (strength and resilience of mountains and lions, the refuge of the shade) makes the listener appreciate the versatility with which Rouicha remains truthful to his Amazigh centrality.

²⁷ Fabrice Cuzin, “Les grands mammifères du Maroc méridional (Haut Atlas, Anti Atlas et Sahara): Distribution, écologie et conservation” (PhD diss., Montpellier 2, 2003).

²⁸ Abderrahman El Aissati, “A Socio-Historical (Berber) Perspective on the Amazigh Cultural Movement in North Africa,” *Afrika focus: tijdschrift van de AVRUG* 18.1–2 (2005): web.

²⁹ Fatima Sadiqi, “The place of Berber in Morocco,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 123 (1997): 7–22.

Rouicha was not afraid of using Arabic in his lyrics such as *Rbbi* (“my god”) and *Ṣabr* (“patience”). In *Sāl Sāl*, the title is derived from the Arabic *isʿal* (“ask”). Rouicha had Arabic and Tamazight intertwined and interconnected in his music to communicate a sort of plurality in Morocco, and he wanted Morocco to be that way. He wanted to pluralize, not to polarize. He had a vision that music would connect people together in a cross-cultural, multilingualistic, multiethnic Morocco where different languages and cultures are celebrated and valued. However, for that to happen, Amazigh music and cultures need to be integrated. Making Tamazight an official language in 2011 and starting the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture in Rabat in 2001 was still not enough. Nevertheless, Rouicha’s music and lyrical style were marked by love and hope underneath the suffering he sang through his vibrant *luṭār*. He imagined a Morocco where different languages and cultures are united while always showing pride in his Indigenous heritage. In an interview with reporter Atiq Benchigher, Rouicha stated that he is an artist, but also a psychologist in that he always wants to transmit, through his music, the suffering and embodied experiences of the people.³⁰

Conclusion

Mohamed Rouicha’s songs represent how an imagined Morocco could be: a place where Amazigh identity is an integral part of the national identity. A poet, an artist, and a musician, he was ahead of his time in that he believed that people and communities should connect with one another through music, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. Rouicha was an activist of Amazigh music with no competitor. His song themes involve love, struggle, and resistance in terms of linguistic and economic issues, inspired by the beauty and imagery of Tamazgha and giving a voice to the underrepresented. Mohamed Rouicha made sure that the Tamazight language is present, never to be forgotten, and he greatly contributed artistically, creatively, and actively to honor Amazigh language and culture within Morocco. Before his death, Mohamed Rouicha in an interview stated that he hopes that Morocco has *Layali Zayan* (“the nights of Zayan”). Zayan is the Indigenous tribe of Khenifra that Rouicha belonged to. His dream was to have musical nights and festivals where Amazigh music would be powerfully and is undeniably present in Morocco’s cultural and musical heritage, and a place where people from across Morocco would visit and celebrate. Mohammed Rouicha was breathing music into life, and he put Tamazight music on a global map. His dream of music festivals of *Layali Zayan* in Tamazgha will hopefully one day come to pass.

³⁰ Ait Bouhaddou, “Feu ROUICHA - حلقة نادرة - رويشة، ويستضيف الراحل رويشة، حلقه نادرة - وشيقة,” July 13, 2021, 21:33.

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