



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

## **A “Church of/for Poetry”: Revue *Aguedal* and The Friends of Amazigh Literature**

Aomar Boum

University of California, Los Angeles

Email: [aboum@anthro.ucla.edu](mailto:aboum@anthro.ucla.edu)

### **Abstract**

This article examines the literary and spiritual initiatives undertaken by Henri Bosco and his collaborators, notably Captain Léopold Justinard, in interwar colonial Morocco. Focusing on the *Revue Aguedal*, inaugurated by Bosco in Rabat in 1935, I highlight the revue’s primary role as a cultural conduit between French and indigenous Amazigh and Arab intellectuals. Bosco’s concept of a “poetic church,” championed by contributors such as René Guénon and Ahmed Sefriou, sought to document, safeguard, and translate Amazigh and North African literature. Although the *Aguedal* literary project experienced interruptions during World War II, it accentuated indigenous perspectives through sections like “Propos du Chleuh,” overseen by Justinard. I also underscore Bosco’s simultaneous advocacy for French culture, challenging stereotypical colonial narratives while amplifying Amazigh voices within them. Despite financial challenges leading to the revue’s demise after the war, the literary circle fostered enduring literary relationships and left an indelible mark on the nexus of colonial scholarship, literature, and spirituality.

**Keywords:** *Revue Aguedal*; Amazigh; Ahmed Sefriou; Léopold Justinard; Henri Bosco; Colonial Morocco

In the autumn of 2022, during a research trip in Morocco tracing the ethnographic work of Léopold-Victor Justinard (1878–1959) on the Chleuh of Tiznit, I embarked on an ethnographic mission with a primary goal: to uncover the fate of a colonial house located at number 14 on rue Marrakesh in Rabat. After successfully locating the street and the house, I encountered a challenge as I attempted to find its current owner. For several days, my knocks on the door went unanswered. To my astonishment, or perhaps relief, the house, standing in the shadow of the current building of the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appeared to be in perfect condition. The flowery oleander tree still draped its walled enclosure [Figure 1], just as Henri Bosco (1888–1976), its colonial owner,





Aomar Boum, October 2022.

**Figure 1.** Revue Aguedal Address at 14 Rue Marrakesh, Rabat.

had described in one of his letters to a friend.<sup>1</sup> In 1958, Bosco reluctantly sold the house to a French buyer after he and his wife relocated to Nice, France, in 1955.

<sup>1</sup> L'Amitié Henri Bosco, *Cahiers Henri Bosco 25 numéro spécial Les amitiés du Maroc* (Aix-en-Provence: Diffusion Édisud, 1985).

Situated just a few meters away from the historical seat of the French Administrative General-Residency in Morocco, the house is now owned by the Amzalag, a Moroccan Jewish family. In 1935, a few years after Henri Bosco settled in Morocco with his wife, he launched the Société des Amis des Lettres et des Arts at 14 rue Marrakesh in Rabat. The association aimed to engage with the daily life of Moroccans through literary circles and publications. In this context, Bosco and Christian Funck-Brentano (1894–1966) launched the *Revue Aguedal* at his own residence at number 14 in Rabat, which had regular contributors and representatives in Algiers and Tunis and was distributed throughout North Africa. Published bi-monthly, *Aguedal*, which derives its name from the Amazigh word meaning “guard and protect,” is, as Léopold Justinard suggested, a tribute to the culture of the Maghreb, including its Amazigh poetry.

In the 1930s, Henri Bosco initiated a literary circle known as “conversations under the fig tree” in the garden of the villa on 14 rue Marrakesh. This literary circle was born out of a desire to engage with local oral Arab and Amazigh traditions, especially through French translations of indigenous texts. Over the years, literary figures and scholars from France, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco gathered to share intellectual conversations beneath the fig (*tazart*) tree in the garden of number 14 rue Marrakesh. The presence of a fig tree, generously donated by a farmer from Tiznit to Bosco through Léopold-Victor Justinard (1878–1959), carries profound significance, especially within the Chleuh and Rifian Imazighen communities. In Amazigh culture, the ripening (*tisamtit*) of the fig symbolizes the transition from summer (*awil*) to the fall (*amiwan*) season, signifying life and its unceasing continuity. Bosco firmly believed that engaging in literary discussions beneath a fig tree from Sous embodies the essence of Jmaa, where daily tribal matters are passionately debated and resolved.

Léopold-Victor Justinard, a prominent colonial intellectual specializing in the *Tachelhit* language and the history and culture of the Imazighen of Sous, emphasized the importance and possibility of documenting the history of Sous and other Amazigh communities through Amazigh poetry.<sup>2</sup> This belief was the culmination of Justinard’s decades of scholarly, military, and political involvement with Amazigh languages, cultures, and communities. In the 1920s, a group of French and European intellectuals sought refuge in Morocco, establishing literary and intellectual circles. Henri Bosco emerged as a leading figure in this colonial movement in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. In 1935, he founded the Société des Amis des Lettres et des Arts with the aim of engaging with the daily life of Moroccans. Within this context, he launched the *Revue Aguedal* in Rabat, featuring regular contributors from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia and distributing it across North Africa. As a bi-monthly publication, *Aguedal*, whose name means “guard and protect” in Amazigh, was seen by

<sup>2</sup> Rachid Agrour, *Léopold Justinard, missionnaire de la tachelhit, 1914-1954: Quarante ans d'études berbères* (Paris: Éditions Bouchène, 2007); Léopold-Victor Justinard, *Un grand chef berbère, le Caïd Goundaifi* (Casablanca: Éditions Atlantides, 1951).

Léopold-Victor Justinard as a guardian of Maghreb culture, including its Amazigh poetry.<sup>3</sup>

With the support and contributions of painters, artists, and writers such as René Guénon,<sup>4</sup> Pierre Georges, François Bonjean,<sup>5</sup> Joseph Peyré, Pierre Benoît, Jean Amrouche (alias Jean El Mouhoub),<sup>6</sup> Louis Riou, Joseph-Charles Mardrus, Georges Duhamel, Jules Romains, André Maurois, Jean Grenier, Armand Guibert, Henri Pourrat, Noël Vesper, and Gabriel Audisio, Bosco established a “poetic church.” This community of literary worshippers believed in the significance of recording, preserving, and translating Amazigh and North African literature for a broader Mediterranean audience. While *Aguedal* was abruptly interrupted during World War II due to the loss of many friends and contributors following the Nazi occupation of France, Bosco’s short-lived literary revue underscores a distinct intellectual movement within his network of French and indigenous intellectuals, including Jean Amrouche (1906–1962) and Ahmed Sefrioui (1915–2004),<sup>7</sup> aimed at creating a North African intellectual circle focusing on Amazigh, Islamic, and Arab studies. These authors, despite their French and European colonial backgrounds, strived to prioritize native and indigenous voices, languages, and texts. The choice of *Aguedal* as a platform served as a direct message of recognition of Amazigh culture, rituals, and system of beliefs.

In contrast to Orientalist authors and painters of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Henri Bosco arrived in Rabat and was promptly assigned to teach at Lycée Gouraud in 1931. Before his marriage to his future wife, Madeleine, Bosco taught French, Latin, and Greek in Algeria in 1913. After World War I he settled in Naples where he taught French and started writing his novels including his first novel *Pierre Lampédouze*, published in 1924. Between 1930 and 1955, the Boscos lived in Rabat, immersing themselves in Moroccan culture by surrounding themselves with native Amazigh, Arab, and Islamic objects, including jewelry, paintings, rugs, and musical instruments. During his time in Morocco, Henri Bosco initiated and maintained friendships with artists and authors from Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. He formed what was referred to as the “quatre mousquetaires” (Four Musketeers), “compagnons d’âme”<sup>8</sup> (Soul Companions), and sometimes “la bande des quatre” (Gang of Four) with François Bonjean, Ahmed Sefrioui, and Gabriel Germain.

<sup>3</sup> Léopold-Victor Justinard, “Propos du Chleuh Aguedal, sagesse et poésie,” *Aguedal* 1.1 (1936): 1–4.

<sup>4</sup> René Guénon, *Autorité spirituelle et pouvoir temporel* (Paris: Vrin, 1929); idem, *Orient et Occident* (Paris: Payot, 1924); René Guénon, *Le Théosophisme, histoire d’une pseudo-religion* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1921).

<sup>5</sup> François Bonjean, *L’histoire de Mansour, enfant du pays d’Égypte* (Paris: Rieder, 1924); François Bonjean, *contes de Lalla Touria, oiseau Jaune et oiseau vert* (Casablanca: Atlantides, 1952).

<sup>6</sup> Jean Amrouche, *Chants berbères de Kabylie: Poésie et théâtre* (Algiers: Charlot, 1947).

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Sefrioui, *Le chapelet d’ambre* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1949); Ahmed Sefrioui, *La boîte à merveilles* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1954).

<sup>8</sup> François Bonjean, *L’âme marocaine vue à travers les croyances et la politesse* (Casablanca: Afrique-Orient, 2015), 161–63.

Through daily interactions with intellectuals in Rabat and native indigenous people in urban and rural communities such as Fez, Marrakesh, Azrou, the Middle Atlas, Amizmiz, and the High Atlas, Bosco established deep connections with various locations and populations throughout Morocco.

These connections and relationships were nurtured through spiritual discussions and practices of Islamic Sufism and Indian mysticism. With the guidance of Gabriel Germain, François Bonjean, and René Guénon's work on Islam, Sufi traditions, and esoteric teachings,<sup>9</sup> Bosco transitioned from the shari'a and its exoteric foundation to the spiritual path (*tariqa*) in pursuit of his own spiritual goal (*haqiqa*). By adopting an Islamic and local spiritual path, Bosco gained personal insights that allowed him to become intimately familiar with his Moroccan surroundings. It comes as no surprise that Bosco, in his preface to the "Bijoux berbères du Maroc" exhibition curated by his friend and collector Jean Besancenot at the Orfèvrerie Christofle Gallery, eloquently emphasized the spiritual allure of the country and its rich cultural diversity and complexity. While Besancenot captured the intricate Amazigh culture of the southern communities through photography, sketches, and paintings of local jewelry and clothing, Bosco and his indigenous literary circle celebrated its African, North African, and Amazigh culture through poetry, novels, and oral traditions.

In the context of French colonial Morocco during the interwar period and the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe, the founders of *Revue Aguedal* [Figure 2] conceived it as a literary platform that would foster connections between various Moroccan cities and the countryside, creating a literary pasture for friendly exchanges. As a result, a section of the revue was dedicated to letters from readers who were encouraged to share their thoughts on plays they had seen, books they had read, or exhibitions they had attended. The revue featured several regular sections, including literary commentaries, essays on deceased authors, and discussions on architecture, music, and art. While the contributions varied from one issue to another, a few remained consistent since the revue's first publication in 1936. Among these, the most significant was Captain Léopold-Victor Justinard's "Propos du Chleuh."

After years of direct involvement in the military occupation of Morocco, beginning with Marshal Lyautey, Justinard developed a unique and personal relationship with his ethnographic subjects, who were primarily Chleuh from Tiznit and the Sous region. This connection was exceptionally intimate, to the extent that it earned Justinard the title of "Qobtan Chleuh" or "Captain of Chleuh." From an ethnographic perspective, this relationship demonstrates that Justinard was able to earn the trust of his Amazigh soldiers as both a military officer and later as an author. By speaking their dialect fluently and prioritizing their voices, Justinard cultivated the friendship of the Chleuh, both in Morocco and in France. He became a contributor to *Aguedal* after

<sup>9</sup> François Bonjean, "Quelques causes d'incompréhension entre l'Islam et l'Occident," in "L'Islam et l'Occident," *Les Cahiers du Sud* MCMXLVII (1947), 33–51; René Guénon, "Sayful-Islam," in "L'Islam et l'Occident," *Les Cahiers du Sud* MCMXLVII (1947), 59–64.



Aomar Boum, personal collection.

**Figure 2.** Revue Aguedal, Issue 2, 1943.

retiring in Salé. In his first contribution, Justinard made sure to explain the core essence and purpose of “Propos du Chleuh,” noting:

It is proposed to provide a page in each issue of this magazine under the title “Propos du Chleuh.” You will not find any commentary of the customs of the time under the guise of a Chleuh, but rather extracts from the folklore of the Chleuh, who are Berbers from southwestern Morocco. Many will be surprised to learn that here lies a reservoir of the spiritual, an “aguedal” of poetry and wisdom. There is much to say about the current value of this contribution, but “where there is much to say, one says nothing.” This was the familiar remark of an old lord,

and it was, in his mouth, an expression of contempt through silence. But just as music takes each person where they want to go, everyone can provide their interpretation to these “Propos du Chleuh.”<sup>10</sup>

The decision to refrain from providing commentary on the translated texts that Justinard had collected over the years from Chleuhs across different regions highlights not only his approach to emphasize the value of the indigenous Amazigh voice and content without foreign interpretation but also positions himself as a “French” storyteller of Chleuh poetry and fables. His role is limited to presenting these texts through translation.

One of the most noteworthy features of the revue is the editors’ and contributors’ willingness to propose a new model of exchange. By creating spaces for indigenous voices through translations and contributions by authors of Amazigh descent like Ahmed Sefrioui and Jean Amrouche, Bosco argued for different religious encounters between the Orient and the Occident. In “Le Mas Théotisme,” he called for a “religion of love,” inspired by Andalusian poets and Sufi mystics. In 1941, Bosco defined his concept of “poetic communities” around a single church of different believers rather than isolated small chapels.<sup>11</sup> This faithful literary community also advocated for the establishment of a broader African literary movement that includes Amazigh texts and literary traditions.

Inspired by Amazigh symbols and cultural meanings, the *Revue Aguedal* was primarily about producing a new colonial discourse with the primary objective of fostering cultural hybridity beyond civilizational and religious conflicts. While Bosco championed the inclusion of local voices in this literary project, he simultaneously worked to promote French culture as the President of the Alliance Française in Morocco. In Bosco’s view, the simultaneous rejection of exotic colonial narratives about Amazigh subjects and the promotion of Alliance Française cultural committees and centers in Morocco were not contradictory. It was about empowering the Amazigh culture within the framework of French culture. In this spirit, native indigenous scholars like Ahmed Sefrioui were welcomed, included, and supported.

Ahmed Sefrioui, the curator of al-Batha Museum, a novelist, and a journalist of Amazigh background, was a key figure in the Boscoian literary church. Sefrioui emerged as literary figure in Morocco largely because of his groundbreaking novel *Le chapelet d’ambre*, which presented a series of short stories depicting daily life in Fez from a local perspective. Unlike Justinard, Sefrioui used the French language to portray Moroccan society and its traditional values. However, for both Sefrioui and Justinard, the French language did not diminish the Amazigh essence of the texts they presented to their readers. Like Bosco, Sefrioui offered a new image of the Orient through narratives of ordinary life in Fez, devoid of exoticism. Mentored by François Bonjean, who introduced him to Henri Bosco, Sefrioui regularly participated in the literary circles of *Aguedal* at number 14 rue de Marrakesh. These meetings provided

<sup>10</sup> Léopold Justinard, “Propos du Chleuh Aguedal, sagesse et poésie,” *Aguedal* 1.1 (1936): 2.

<sup>11</sup> L’Amitié Henri Bosco, *Cahiers Henri Bosco* 37/38 (Aix-en-Provence: Diffusion Édisud, 1997-98), 13.

him with opportunities to engage with Jean Amrouche, Jules Roy, and others. Sefrioui also benefited from Bosco's mentorship until Moroccan independence. Following Bosco's suggestion, Sefrioui served as the representative of the French Alliance in Fez and later headed it throughout Morocco in 1952.

Although *Revue Aguedal* did not survive beyond World War II, largely due to financial reasons, its creators and contributors established a network of friendships that included Louis Massignon, Taha Hussain, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Muhammad Husayn Haykal,<sup>12</sup> Émile Dermenghem, René Guénon, and many others. However, within this circle of French and Arabic voices, Bosco and others ensured that Tamazight had a place in the pages of their publications, especially *Aguedal*, where Amazigh tales, stories, poems, fables, and proverbs took center stage. In presenting this colonial revue, my objective is to highlight that within colonial scholarly and military institutions, individuals like Léopold-Victor Justinard and Henri Bosco led literary and spiritual projects that transcended the Orientalist and primitive stereotypes imposed on the colonized, attempting to humanize it by presenting its worldview through its own language and mindset. It is one of the stories of the encounter with colonialism. It is a story that reflects the internal debate within colonial institutions about indigenous languages, peoples, and voices.

---

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Hussayn Haykal, "Les causes d'incompréhension entre l'Europe et les Musulmans et les moyens d'y remédier," in "L'Islam et l'Occident," *Les Cahiers du Sud* MCMXLVII (1947).

**Cite this article:** Boum A (2023). A "Church of / for Poetry": *Revue Aguedal* and The Friends of Amazigh Literature. *Review of Middle East Studies* 56, 374–381. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2023.26>