Ethnography
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Dialogue on oral poetry

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ABSTRACT ■ In this dialogue held in the mid-1970s, Pierre Bourdieu and the Algerian ethnologist, writer, and poet Mouloud Mammeri (1917–1989) explore and explicate the social bases, uses, and meaning of oral poetry in Kabyle society and history, thus illuminating the peculiarity of oratory and the social conditions of symbolic efficacy. As the son of the next-to-last *amusnaw* (sage, bard) of his tribe, Mammeri is uniquely placed to situate this master of words who served the traditional function of mediator and carrier of knowledge, and stood as the living incarnation of *tamusni* (the practical philosophy of Berber excellence), in relation to the marabout, bearer of the sacred scriptures of the Koran, and to the peasants who composed his main audience. Becoming an *amusnaw* occurred by election and entailed a two-fold apprenticeship, first by osmosis in a milieu saturated by verbal commerce and contest (in the armourer's workshop, the village assembly, the markets and pilgrimages) and, later, through explicit training with a master-poet setting out a series of exercises and exams. It required not only commanding a set of verbal techniques and an oratorial canon but also imbibing and embodying wisdom. Playing on the multi-layeredness of language, adapting with flexibility and à propos to the specificities of each occasion and audience, the Kabyle bard was continually tested and his cultural skills endlessly refined, to the point where he would not only master the rules of the craft but also play with them, transgress them within the spirit of tradition in order to invent new rhetorical figures extracting the maximum 'yield' from language. *Tamusni* thus emerges not as a body of inert knowledge cut off from life and transmitted for its own sake but as a 'practical science' constantly revivified by and for practice. The poet is the spokesperson of the group who, through his cultural discernment and expert use of language, perfects the specific values of the group, separates things that are confused and, by shedding light on things obscure, mobilizes the people.

KEY WORDS ■ poetry, oratory, tradition, discourse, craft, apprenticeship, practical knowledge, Kabylia

> To give a purer meaning to the language of the tribe.
> (Mallarmé, *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*)

Pierre Bourdieu (P.B.): Oral poetry and more generally what is sometimes called by a strange alliance of words, 'oral literature', presents the researcher with an apparent paradox that is no doubt, to a large extent, produced by the categories of perception through which European thought, long dominated, even in its so-called 'popular' forms, by the city, writing, and the school, apprehends oral productions and the societies that produce them: how is poetry that is both oral and displaying learnedness, like that of the Kabyle bard or of the *aidos* of Homer, possible? The antinomy in which research on Homer has been trapped from the origin is well known: either Homeric poetry is learned and it cannot be oral; or it is oral and cannot be learned. For when one acknowledges that it is oral, as is the case with what is known as the Parry-Lord theory, the prejudices about the 'primitive' and the 'popular' prevent us from granting it the properties that are granted to written poetry (see Lord 2000 [1960]).[1] It cannot be conceived that *oral* and *popular* poems can be the product of learned invention, both in their form and in their contents. It cannot be accepted that such poems can be composed to be recited to an audience, and moreover an audience of ordinary people, and yet contain an esoteric meaning, and so be intended to be meditated and commented upon.

Needless to say, one typically rules out the possibility that the work could be the product of a conscious invention, using *at the second degree* the codified and objectified procedures that are most characteristic of oral improvisation, such as iteration. But perhaps we should start by situating your own relationship to *tamusni*, the Berber 'philosophy', and recall how you have 'learned' it, and especially how you took it took it up and took it in.

Mouloud Mammeri (M.M.): In the lineage of *tamusni*, I think that my father was the next-to-last one. He had a disciple who also died and after them something else started: this is recognized by the whole group, it is not a personal vision. People say: ‘There was so-and-so, and so-and-so’; they reel off the whole genealogy of the *imusnawen* [*amusnaw*, plural *imusnawen*, means sage, bard in Tamazight, the main Berber language], who transmit *tamusni* one to another. Then, when the last one died, who was called Sidi Louenas, that was the end of it. . . . After him, that form of *tamusni* was dead and there was something else. Even if, externally, some superficial forms of it were kept on, in reality everyone knows that that way of conceiving and saying things died with that man. Indeed, it was truly a collective drama: when he passed away, people knew that something had forever expired with him. So I am not the son of the last one but of the next-to-last *amusnaw*, and I think that it has helped me in inasmuch as it has made me very sensitive to that kind of thing. I could not myself be my father’s successor because I have not at all led the same kind of life: I went to the university, so I already had other reference points.[2]

But the fact remains that all of his life my father took care to initiate me as much as he could. I even wonder whether the taste for literature that I had from a very early age did not come from this atmosphere in which I bathed without even thinking about it, as a child. While he neglected to teach me the practical things of life that I would have greatly needed, every time he had visitors with whom he knew that there would be a non-trivial exchange, my father sent for me to come from wherever I was. I was still a child and he knew very well that three-quarters of what was said would remain incomprehensible to me. All the same, he bathed me in that atmosphere. When I was in my teens, I admit that I loved it passionately. Then it was no longer he who would send for me from the village; I was the one who was seeking to find out who would be with him. . . .

P.B.: So you combined the training of a ‘scholar’ with the systematic, invisible training of the *amusnaw*?

M.M.: I started to transcribe Kabyle poems at a very early age.

P.B.: And your father knew that?

M.M.: He must have suspected it. I found in his own papers (he had had a bit of education: he attended school as far as the primary certificate, he belonged to the very first generation of Algerians who attended the schools of the Third Republic) some transcribed poems that I had heard him recite orally. Besides, I had a great-uncle who himself compiled an anthology of Kabyle poems (he had been to the *lycée*). This being said, my father introduced me to many of his ‘peers’, not only within the Aït Yenni tribe to which I belong, but also outside of it, because these *imusnawen* visit each other between tribes. When I was still a child, he would systematically take me to the markets, because markets are privileged meeting places. My father’s market dealings would take one half-hour and then he spent the rest of the day meeting people and spending time with them; and they did the same. That was a kind of 'on-the-job' training, simultaneously conscious and diffuse.

Tikkelt-a add heğğiγ asefru
ar Llleh ad ilhu
ar-d inadi deg lwedyat

Win t-issnen ard a-t-yaru
Ur as iberru
w'illan d lfahem yezra-t . . .
(Si Muh-u-Mhend)

Aaniγ d bab i-y-idaan
iffγ felli lehdit llil

Ib bwd-ed yid madden akw ttsen
ger w'idlen d w'ur-endil

Aar nek imi d bu inezman

armi-d iy' âabban s-elmil
(Lhağ Lmexṭar At-Saïd)

This time, at last, I'm going to start on the poem
Perhaps it will be good
and will run over the plains

Whoever hears it will write it down
And never more forget it.
The wise mind will understand its meaning . . .
(Si Mohand-Ou-Mohand, second half of 19th century)

Is it the paternal curse
That condemned me to speak at night?
When night comes, all sleep,
Whether they have a blanket or have none.

Except me, who go, covered with scares,
And bending under the burden.
(Hadj Mokhtar Ait-Saïd, first half of 19th century)

Art for art's sake or an art of living?

M.M.: The learning was a learning by doing, not an abstract learning. One also had to act in accordance with a certain number of precepts, values, without which *tamusni* is nothing. A *tamusni* that is not taken upon oneself, that one does not live by, is only a code. *Tamusni* is an *art*, and an *art of living*, in other words a practice that is learned through practice and that has practical functions. The production that it makes possible, poems and maxims, are not art for art's sake, even if their *form*, which is sometimes very elaborate, very refined, may lead one to believe so.

P.B.: Maybe it would be good first to flesh out a little what made for the particularity of the Aït Yenni tribe and the particular position of your family within that tribe?

M.M.: We are craftspeople, and have been for many centuries: armourers, occasionally jewellers, but mainly armourers. That is an occupation that lends itself very well to *tamusni* because the craftsman has leisure time, freedom, working conditions that are infinitely more favourable than those of a peasant. The peasant, when he is out in his fields, is alone with his beasts, with the earth. In an armourer's workshop, many men drop by; not only people who need a rifle mended, but also people who come to talk: it is a meeting place, especially in winter when it is cold and you are much more comfortable in an armourer's workshop than in the place of the assembly. Loads of people passed through my father's shop. My grandfather made a point of passing on to my father everything he knew of *tamusni*: it was a conscious move, because he was the last of his generation to possess it. It was a kind of heritage that my grandfather received who passed it on to my father, and my father bequeathed it to a marabout in our village. And it was like that not only in our family but in many others, undoubtedly because of the density of craftsmanship within our tribe. The Kabyle tribes in general are peasant tribes; ours comprised peasants, of course, but there were many more craftsmen than elsewhere. People would come from far and wide to get the things they needed: weapons, jewellery, and iron tools.

P.B.: You know that in Homer's *Odyssey* the poet is referred somewhere as the *dêmioergos*, that is to say, *demoiurgos*, which is translated as 'craftsman' but should no doubt be translated as 'initiate'. And there are a number of indications that he is a specialist, sometimes foreign. Moreover, in his chapter on religious communities, Max Weber evokes the particular status of the craftsman, indicating that he is 'deeply immersed in magical encumbrances', because all art with an extraordinary, esoteric character is regarded as a gift, a magical charisma, a personal and generally hereditary talent that separates him from the common run of men, that is to say, from peasants.[3] Isn't the *amusnaw* a *sophos*, the master of a very practical technique as opposed to an abstract, gratuitous wisdom?

M.M.: *Tamusni* is simply the noun corresponding to the action verb *issin*, to know, but knowing with an essentially practical, technical knowledge. So the *amusnaw* is precisely the original *sophos*.

P.B.: Isn't the *amusnaw* sometimes expected to have practical knowledge and know-how, in medicine, for example?

M.M.: That can happen, but if he does not supply remedies or treatment, he still remains an *amusnaw*.

P.B.: Does he not apply his expertise in delimiting fields, setting the farming calendar and so on?

M.M.: Absolutely. He was supposed to know all that better than other people. He knew how farm work was distributed through the 12 months of the year, what came before and what came after, how grafting was done, etc. The last of them was renowned for his knowledge of a host of medical remedies: that such a plant cures such a disease . . .

The special status of the craftsman

P.B.: Would just anyone come into the workshop? Could other specialists come, and what happened when they did?

M.M.: The people who came were of a different social status. They came because they knew that it was a privileged place for that kind of exchange. Sometimes people also came who were capable of dispensing that *tamusni* and, in such cases, there would be an exchange on an equal footing.

P.B.: A contest?

M.M.: Not exactly. There is a common expression that says, ‘Everyone learns in the other’s workshop’ (*Wa iħeffed γef-fa*). There was an exchange of proverbs, of parables that the *imusnawen* would fire off at each other, each striving to distinguish himself. Others would be there as spectators – apprentices in a way. They were there in search of wisdom. Otherwise it was not strictly speaking a place of pleasure, at most entertainment, but a choice entertainment, an entertainment of quality. The advantage was that this can go on all year round because the craftsman works all the time, all through the day and all through the year, without interruption, whereas the peasant is constrained by the seasons and the state of the fields, and he works on his own.

P.B.: Another property of these groups of craftsmen is that they moved around, either to sell or to buy. They had more contact than others with the towns, with the external world.

M.M.: Absolutely, and we have some precise examples of this. In general, in the ethnological literature, it is said that before the French conquest, the Kabyle tribes were cut off from one another, that their only relations among themselves were of hostility, that one needed *anaya* [protection] to go from one to another. There is some truth to that but, in fact, there was a great deal of mobility, through peddlers, poets, women, *imusnawen*, marabouts, and ordinary people. There was a code of friendship that bound you to friends outside the tribe; you would go there in all simplicity.

In my own family, one of my armourer ancestors, who lived in the second half of the 18th century, would regularly go and sell his wares on the Kabyle coast. When you think of the conditions under which people travelled then – there were no roads, there was likely even some risk of robbery – this is remarkable, for he had to pass through I don't know how many groups, tribes, and villages. On the other hand, family tradition has it that he sheltered a Turk who had had to flee Algiers because he had killed someone and was being sought by the authorities. If the Turk came that far, it is that he must have known that he would be sheltered. . . . So the isolation is entirely relative and the craftsmen were certainly more open to the outside world than a peasant who typically spent his entire life inside his village could be.

P.B.: The *imusnawen* were predisposed to fulfil the function of ambassadors, mediators, go-betweens . . .

M.M: I wouldn't quite say ambassadors . . .

P.B.: Bearers of news, of ideas . . .

M.M.: Certainly. They were by vocation the men of speech, the bearers of news. In any case, they had an interest in being the men of speech. The one I was just talking about was famous for that. There is a host of stories told about him on this: how he pulled himself out of a predicament precisely by his use of language, because language was truly a weapon in his hands.

P.B.: Did they go and sell their wares themselves?

M.M.: Generally the customers came and bought them.

P.B.: That was another opportunity for contact with the outside world.

M.M.: Certainly. When people come from everywhere looking for you, you are obligated to have a certain number of relationships across villages and across tribes.

Informal apprenticeship and initiation

P.B.: To go back a moment, there was an informal apprenticeship, similar to the one you yourself received. But were there not also more explicit, more specific forms of apprenticeship?

M.M.: I think that there were two things. First there was that informal apprenticeship. The village assembly had an important role in that, which met at regular intervals – for example, every other Thursday – to resolve all the past and forthcoming business of the village. These assemblies were veritable schools of *tamusni* since those who took part in them were naturally the most eloquent people, the masters of language. But anyone could attend, even children. I personally attended a great number of village assemblies from childhood on and I remember very clearly how they proceeded. So there was for a start this kind of regular 'schooling'. But there were also the markets and the pilgrimages, which are especially important occasions because they lead to considerable gatherings in terms of the number of people and the diversity of places they come from.

Now, outside of that kind of apprenticeship that happens almost automatically, there is the initiation as such, which is conscious, wanted by a master, and addressed to only two kinds of men: the poet and the *amusnaw*, the former even more clearly than the latter since the latter has at least the opportunity also to learn *tamusni* informally (although, after a certain level of initiation, he has to resort to contact with the 'initiates' who preceded him, and this in a deliberate manner). But for the poet it is almost a necessity.

P.B.: In other words, the *imusnawen* select themselves to some extent by going and devoting themselves to a master, who, on his side, chooses them. It is a little like the mutual election of two charismas.

M.M.: Yes, the candidates ask to be initiated and the master judges which of those who frequent him are gifted and deserve to go further.

The function of the poet

P.B.: Could you clarify the distinction you make between the *amusnaw* and the poet?

M.M.: First, an *amusnaw* may in extreme cases not even compose verses, he may not be gifted for poetry, while being gifted for speech, for prose discourse. That is a first distinction. Among the poets, there were those who provided mechanical transmission, who recited poems they had not composed.

P.B.: They were professionals. Was a special name given to these kinds of 'reciters' who went from village to village, to counterpose them to the genuine 'creators' – something like the opposition between the *rhapsode* who recites and the *aoidos* who composes, or between the *joglar* – the performer – and the *trobador* – the author?

M.M.: In reality there were two terms used by the initiates: *ameddah* and *afsih*. The *afsih* is the one who is capable not only of reciting but also of creating, and who is an *amusnaw* almost by definition.

P.B.: Whereas the *ameddah* is only a reciter. . . .

M.M.: The *ameddah* may well know thousands of lines and recite them, without being otherwise personally gifted for that; he has a memory. He nonetheless fulfils a vital function in the milieu of oral literature.

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P.B.: He functioned rather like a living library, a conservatory: he knew things that everyone knew to some extent but he knew more than other people.

M.M.: He knew them better and he knew a greater number. In general, other people knew scraps and fragments.

P.B.: Was he able to make a living from that skill?

M.M.: Absolutely. He was a professional and that was the only thing he did. He went from village to village and from market to market, especially at the time of harvests, whether of oil, figs or grain, and practically all year long.

P.B.: And at festival times?

M.M.: No, not so much at festivals. At feasts, everyone can recite.

P.B.: And the *afsih* is not at all the same thing?

M.M.: No, he does not perform in this manner. He is the one who chooses his moments. When he comes, it is an event. He does not drop by just because the oil harvest has been good.

P.B.: And, likewise, there can be no question of 'paying' him directly, openly . . .

M.M.: Of course not. The man who was our national poet, so to speak, in the 18th century, by the name of Yusef u Kaci, was truly a very great poet in the old style. One gave him oil, but lots of it, and not because he had come: it was a kind of tribute. They would say, 'On such and such a day, we must collect oil for Yusef u Kaci'. All the people would come with the amount they wanted to give, and it would be taken right to his home.

P.B.: And he did not work.

M.M.: No, he did not work. It was his function. Besides, he did not even belong to our tribe, but to a tribe faraway from ours, the At Djenad, who lived by the sea. It was a kind of election that just happened. I could never quite work out how, coming from At Djenad, he became our poet, to the extent that now we know all his verses whereas in At Djenad they do not know them very well, although people there also regard him as a great man. They were on the border between the independent Kabyle lands, those not subject to the Dey, and the lands directly under the Dey. That situation led to clashes, to wars with the troops of the Dey, and he was always the one who was sent to negotiate with the Kalhifat.

P.B.: So there he fulfilled the role of an ambassador.

M.M.: Yes, there he really acted as an ambassador, in a political role, he took decisions. For example, in the course of a deal between the Turks and the At Djenad, he asked the At Djenad, 'What shall I say to the Turkish Caïd?' The people told him, 'Say what you will, we are behind you.' So he was invested with a kind of authority. It was truly a political role.

Esoteric language and exoteric language

P.B.: That fits in the logic of what you were saying earlier, when you indicated that your father's poetic speech always had a practical, ethical function. In other words, whatever uses were made of that competence, they were always practical.

M.M.: In all cases, it is always a practical competence, connected with real life, without being utilitarian. I will not say that among themselves the *imusnawen* did not go in for the kind of gratuitous exercises that suggest pure poetry. They did, but it was among themselves: 'Now that we are among connoisseurs, let's indulge ourselves.'

P.B.: And in these cases, they would make more esoteric utterances?

M.M.: Yes, utterances for the initiates, as it were. They understood each other very well among themselves. There were even stages, themes, a ritualization of exchanges. I remember very well that, towards the end of his life, when my father would meet up with his disciple – then, it was even a bit dramatic, since they were shrunken, isolated . . . it was the end of something, and they knew it. What fireworks! It was very beautiful, but I had the impression that it was over. No one could follow, and they would not have allowed themselves such an exercise in virtuosity in front of others because they knew it would not go. So they kept it for themselves. There was a special language (I could not interrupt them and say, 'Yes, but what does that mean?'). But they understood each other.

P.B.: That kind of esoteric culture was elaborated precisely in these encounters between 'initiates' through the work of the poet.

M.M.: I can not be sure but I think it developed like that. I have the impression that everyone had their baggage.

P.B.: Was there not at every moment a hierarchy among the virtuosi themselves, just as there was the hierarchy you have established between poets and simple reciters?

M.M.: Yes, I think it was a hierarchy based on value – if not universal value, then value as recognized by others. People would say, 'So-and-so is at such-and-such level in *tamusni*: he's at the top of the scale; that other one comes close but he's not quite there . . . another is still learning . . .' As there were opportunities for meeting and performance, the *amusnaw* was put to the test practically throughout his life, and all the time: one could not be deceived.

P.B.: It was a judgement of the people but also of the initiates.

M.M.: Yes, but one shaded into the other. The judgement of the initiates might not coincide exactly with that of the people, inasmuch as false appearances can work better with lay persons than with professionals (Mammeri, 1985). Among the 'initiates', you cannot look each other in the eyes without laughing; if someone is bluffing, the others know it. In front of the people, you can bluff for a while, but not for long.

Excellence

P.B.: If I understand you correctly, then, *tamusni* was a kind of wisdom that could not be expressed in words unless it was also expressed in practice.

M.M.: People admitted transgressions but only on certain conditions. They said, ‘If that *amusnaw* does such a thing, he can get away with it but I cannot. Transgressing *taqbaylit*, the code of honour, is not something I can permit myself; I can only conform to it. He can transgress it; he is beyond that. If I transgress, it is because of my insufficiency, I do not measure up to the sacrifices that the *taqbaylit* demands. If he does it, when he could excel, it is because he sees further.’ They also knew that a man is a man and that an *amusnaw* may slip into some errors because he is a man. The group allows him some failings.

P.B.: They are beyond the rules, but they implement them while being beyond them, standing as the supreme realization of Kabyle excellence.

M.M.: I think that is it. People say, ‘It is very well. He’s breaking the rule, but in the right direction,’ that is to say upwards, not downwards.

P.B.: He is the one who brings out the truth of the game by playing with the rule of the game instead of simply playing by the rules.

M.M.: The Kabyles understand that: ‘He played well, he posed the problem in terms that enable him to act that way, whereas I must conform strictly to the rule; the rule is for ordinary people, he is beyond that.’ *Tamusni*, in the strictest sense, is knowledge of a body of recipes, values, etc. But there is something beyond that. One day a poet responded by a poem that begins thus: ‘Understanding of things is superior to *tamusni*’ (‘*Lefhem yeγleb tamusni*’ – Si Mohand). This is not a contradiction.[4] In effect, it means that if you treat *tamusni* as a simple mechanical sum of precepts, then you can learn it, you only need to go to an *amusnaw* who will pass on all the recipes. But if you want to become a true *amusnaw*, then there is something beyond the rules that transgresses or, better, transcends them.

The initiatory pathway

P.B.: Extending what you were saying about the training of the professionals, one can suppose that as soon as there are degrees of initiation, there is likely to be a kind of initiatory pathway, a succession of tests?

M.M.: I think there is a kind of two-stage apprenticeship. The first takes place in the same way as for *tamusni*: a first apprenticeship in poetry is done by attending all the ordinary meetings where poetry is constantly invoked, to illustrate a statement, clarify a concrete situation (the ordinary Berber language lacks a certain number of abstract terms; but these abstract notions can be rendered even in everyday language, and the devices for rendering these abstractions were either poetry or parables). That is why in Kabyle society everyone can be a poet at some point or another in his life, because he has felt an emotion that is more intense than usual. The professional is the one of whom this is expected all the time. If someone else hits upon a verbal find in relation to some event, it may be integrated into the corpus. The difference with the professional is that he can do this all the time.

To reach this kind of mastery, one must go through the second stage of apprenticeship, which is much more formalized and institutionalized. You follow a poet for a long time and he teaches you the different procedures. There even used to be a kind of examination, in which the teacher gave the authorization (*issaden*), the licence. It consisted in creating a poem oneself, with a set number of lines, a hundred lines. A hundred lines is a lot for an oral production. People would say, 'He composed up to (*issefra-t* . . .) . . .', and give the number, generally one hundred.

An example: the poet who was in a sense the teacher of all the others, Mohammed Said Amlikec, had a good many disciples; it was he who gave the investiture. To one of his disciples, El Hadj Rabah, he said one day, 'If you want me to give you leave to be a poet, compose a poem of a hundred lines.' The candidate said, 'A hundred lines, that's nothing.' He composed a hundred and fifty, much more than expected, and it is said that at one point he could not find the word that would rhyme with the previous line. He said, 'Here, I apologize, I'm lost for a rhyme' ('*dagí ur as ufiγ ara lemğaz is*') and carried on. But the master said to him, 'That's very fine, you went far beyond the hundred lines,' and he gave him leave to make verses. But thereafter whenever the 'licentiate' performed, he was obliged to start with a prayer in verse composed by his master. He would begin, 'As my master Mohammed Said said . . .' ('*akken i-s inna wemγar Si Muhend Ssaâid* . . .'). It was a manner of homage, a citation: 'As my master said' did not mean that he was incapable of composing a few verses of prayer himself. It was just the tribute to the poetry master. This held until the day when, taken by presumptuousness, El Hadj Rabah decided that he was now as competent as his master, perhaps even more so. He went somewhere to perform and started: 'As the child El Hadj Rabah put it . . .' ('*akken i-s inna weq-cic Lhağ Rabeh*') – and he recited his prayer, which was beautiful, as beautiful as that of his master. But the people were outraged: 'What? He dares to perform his own prayer? He's a usurper! It's a sacrilege!' And, so the legend goes, from that moment his inspiration dried up, because he had transgressed the rule of the game. He had, as it were, betrayed; he had broken the chain. He continued to compose verses but nobody listened to him, his charisma had vanished.

P.B.: That tends to confirm that, as Weber said, the art of the poet is conceived as a magical charisma, whose acquisition and conservation are magically warranted. But is it just that? There is also a whole technical side to it, rules of composition, rhetorical devices, and so on.

M.M.: There were very precise rules. It was on the basis of those rules that one could determine how accomplished a poet was. The poet I mentioned to you earlier, Yusef u Kaci, the greatest poet before the French occupation, composed according to a certain number of canons.[5] I remember an anecdote: one day, a man from the Aït Yenni came looking for him. He came from afar to ask the master to help him perfect his art of making verses. He arrived, saw the poet, and addressed him in verse:

> *A dadda Yusef ay ungal*
> *ay ixf l-lehl is*
> *Tecbiv îîaleb l-lersal*
> *iγ di wedris*
> *Ul-iw fellak d amaâlal*
> *awi-k isaân d ccix is*
> (Muh At-Lemsaaud)
>
> Dada Youssef, my big brother,
> master of all your peers,
> you are like the great taleb
> who recites the sacred texts
> at the school of Wedris,
> my heart pines for you,
> it would have wished you for its master.

It rhymes on ‘*is*’ and ‘*al*’. Yusef u Kaci immediately responded in the same form, using the same rhymes:

> *Cebbaγ w'ur nekkat uzzal*
> *icmet wagus is*
> *Am-min irefen uffal*
> *d win i d leslaê is*
> *Naγ af_sih deg lmital*
> *ur nessefruy seg-gixf is.*
> (Yusf-u-Qasi)
>
> I say of one who is not courageous
> that ugly are his weapons
> He is like one that brandishes a splint
> And makes of it a weapon
> Such is the poet who does not draw
> His verses from himself.

This means: ‘There are things that I can teach you, but what can be taught, anyone can teach it to you. There is no point in coming to see me.’ Whatever the master might say, there was a technique, there were canons; but there was in addition a wisdom. That is what the master meant by his answering verses: ‘You want technique? Very well, I will answer you with the same rhythm, the same rhymes, but also with a teaching, a wisdom.’

‘To give a purer sense to the language of the tribe’

P.B.: That is why Berber poetry is not a ‘pure’ art, in the tradition of art for art’s sake: it provides means for expressing and making sense of difficult situations and experiences.

M.M.: That is precisely the function of the metaphor or the parable: to condense an ultimate teaching into a small number of words that are contrasting and striking, and therefore easy to memorize. And, from that point of view, verse is wonderful: first, it sticks in the mind and, second, when the poet is gifted, he manages, through a certain number of analogies and stylistic procedures, to say things that ordinary prose cannot say.

P.B.: And then there is the licence to do violence to language that poetry grants.

M.M.: Yes, that is one of the resources: contrast, making a word mean something rather different from what it intends in ordinary language, a slight shift that allows it to say something it could not have said normally.

P.B.: This intensive use of ordinary language extracts the maximum 'yield' from language, it 'gives a purer sense to the language of the tribe'.

M.M.: Yes, and this is easier done in verse than in prose. In prose, there are the limits of intelligibility. It took me years to understand some verses that I had known for a long time. One day I said, 'But of course, that's true.' Something clicked inside of me.

P.B.: That retrospective illumination justifies the old precept of most traditional teachings, based on memorizing: 'First learn, then understand.' There is, as it were, the idea that this condensed, intensified meaning will take a long time to express itself, to manifest itself, and will require meditation and resist deciphering.

M.M.: In any case, in poetry, the deeper meaning may be invisible at first sight. In prose, on the contrary, the interlocutor has to understand straight away.

The degradation of meaning

P.B.: The pursuit of this intensification of language implies a progress towards obscurity: the search for assonance, alliteration, displacement of the meaning of words, all this causes the language to become obscure.

M.M.: That is certain, but there is a kind of reverse side to what you are saying now. For example, I transcribed a poem that my father used to recite. Much later, I was given the text of the same poem by a marabout who is dead now. I had asked him if he had any manuscripts; he brought me a few pages. I saw some lines that did not go all the way to the margin. I thought that it might be verse; and it was verse indeed, transcribed into Arabic characters. It was the poem that my father used to recite, but it was longer and even in the part that was common to the two versions, the language was more difficult, and some words had been substituted.

P.B.: Substitution is not operated randomly: was it in the direction of the everyday meaning?

M.M.: Yes, toward the everyday meaning. There is a loss of meaning and not at all an enrichment. Here is the oral version of the poem in question. In reality there were two of them. You can note a visible symmetry between the two poems (though it was introduced retroactively): classical six-line stanzas with alternating rhymes made up of three distichs, the last of which (as always in such case) has two heptasyllabic lines, while the others vary. Both poems have rhymes with ‘i’ as the supporting vowel in the odd-numbered lines and a different vowel in the even lines. Moreover, the first verse has the same form in the two poems, with a simple, subtle variation of the day (Tuesday, Thursday) and more importantly of the time of day (the evening of defeat, the morning of victory).

1st poem: oral version

Win ur nehdir ass-n- ețțlata tameddit
mi-d tčuddu

Kul asniq la-d iîîeggir kul tiγilt
la-d tfurru

I tin u ribγi Rebbi
âaddik m’atnegêev azru.

Ah! Would I had been there, Tuesday evening
in the battle!

Every alley spewed forth [warriors]
Every hillside swarmed with them

But, if God does not will it,
can you shake the rock?

2nd poem: oral version

Win ur nehdir ass l-lexmis tasebhit
mi tembweîîaj

Ibda lbarud l-lexzin
la yeîîenîaj

xemsa-u-sebâin ay geγlin
γas γef Tewrirt l-lheğğağ

Ah! Would I had been there, Thursday morning
in the blazing [storm]!

The old powder
crackled

Seventy-five [warriors] fell
Just for Taourirt-El hadjadj
[the village the two sides were fighting over]

The written poem is much longer. I do not have it with me but I can try to remember it. I can call to mind twelve or so verses (if I recall right, there are thirty-five altogether). After all, it is just the same as what must have happened through the centuries to the bearers of the oral tradition. So here are the verses best as I can remember:

A ttir yufgen iäalla
ifer huzz-it

*Hebsen le***g***wad la âavla*
h*ed ma nze***rr***-it*

Tlatin hesbeγ kamla
ssarden semmvditt

ay geγlin deg twila
γef teqbaylit

Kra bbwi iêuz êhed lγila
ičča ten ttrad msakit!

γer tâassast ggaren aâwin
kulyum d asrağ

Ulac tifrat, yiwen ddin
γas ma texla neγ? Atteggağ

Ass l-lexmis may sen zzin
ikker waâjaj

ibda Ibarud l-lexzir n
la yeţtenîaj

Xemsa-u-sebâin ay geγlin
γas γef Tewrirt l-lheğğağ

Bird flying towards the heights
Let your wings glide

The noble [warriors] truceless enclosed themselves
none could any more be seen.

Thirty I saw, all told,
who, washed and chilled

Fell with their long rifles
for Kabyle honour.

All those whom the critical moment seized,
war ate them up, poor wretches!

Shining blue bird
in the air go

Toward those who take supplies to go stand watch
every day saddling [their mounts]
For there is no truce, only one outcome:
annihilation, or exile!

On Thursday, when they laid the siege
in the dust,
the old powder started
to crackle

Seventy-five [warriors] fell
Just for Taourirt-El hadjadj

(Yusef u Kaci, second half of 18th century)

Here is the complete text of the poem as given in the manuscript:*

Belleh a ttir ma d w'iserrun
dd deg llyağ
At Yanni laaz n tudrin
sellem at wagus meê**r**ağ
Ass l-lèxmis mi yasen zzin
ikker waâjaj

Ibda lbarud l-lexzin
la yettentaj
Xemsa-u-sebâin ay g-geγlin
γas γef Tewrirt l-lheğğağ
Ar i**d**a mazal-ten din
i tembwettag

γer taâssast ggaren aâwin
kulyum d asrağ
Ulac tifrat yiwen ddin
γas ma texla neγ atteggağ

A ttir yufgen iâalla
ifer huzz-it
Hebsen leğwad lemvilla
hed ma nzerr-it
Assen ur irbiê sslam
mi myugen tîrad n-etwaγitn

Tlatin êesbeγ kamla
ssarden semmdit
ay-d iqqimen deg îwila
γef teqbaylit
Kra bbwi yeîet hed lγila
ičča-ten tt**r**ad msakit

Ttreγ-k a waêed lewêid
a Lleh ur neîîis
dâaγ-k s-e**ss**haba laâyan
Aali d irfiqn-is
Tegd aγdeg lğennet amkan
jmâa akka-d neţêessis

Here is a translation of the new verses:

3–6: Among the Aït-Yenni, honour of the villages:
bear my greeting to the men whose belts are garnished with powder.
When they laid the siege on Thursday
the dust rose.

11–12: They are still there tonight
amid the gunfire.

21–22: It was a fateful day
when they waged a deadly war.

29–end: Only, unrivalled one, I beseech Thee, Unaccessible and Unsleeping God
Thee I invoke through the glorious Companions of the prophet
Through Ali and his peers
In Paradise make a place for us
All, so long as we are here to listen.

All in all, the differences are not great: the last stanza of six lines (29–34) is the obligatory 'envoi' to this kind of poem. It is an all-purpose stereotype (it can be adapted to any poem: one sign of this is the change of rhyme). In reality, I suspect that a distich is missing from the first part *of the poem (1–16), since the whole is classically composed of a series of six-line stanzas (one for the last part, two for the second and normally three for the first). This would mean that even before the first transcription a first loss had occurred.*

*** Letter from M. Mammeri to P. Bourdieu, 22 April 1978**

P.B.: Do you know of other similar cases of the reduction of extraordinary language to ordinary language?

M.M.: Certainly, but this case is a fairly significant one. The poems are about a battle between two tribes. It entailed in fact two attacks; the first one, conducted on a Tuesday, failed and the second one, two days later, succeeded. The first poem (six lines) was improvised on the spot: the warriors were returning but had not taken the village, they had been beaten. . . . The next day, it is decided to attack again on the Thursday. The poet composes another poem, and the oral tradition says: again six verses. It says simply that this time the attack has succeeded, that the village has been taken, etc.

The written version of the second poem is longer and quite different in form. Now, there exists on the same subject another poem of six lines that my father recited to me, which was reworked on the model of the first six-line poem. What happened? Six lines are easy to remember. The second poem was reduced to the form of the first by completely reshaping it to make it the counterpart of the first. There is an attack that first fails and then succeeds. So there is a whole work of restructuring, at the expense not only of the length but of the meaning and the scope of the poem: the written version is denser and more human. The original poem which I rediscovered in written form was very hard for me to decipher. I am not even sure, in two passages at least, that I have fully understood it, whereas the other one, the one that was dictated to me, is comprehensible and very well-balanced compared to the first. It is not quite in everyday language but it is easily comprehensible. So it is likely that this evolution, when it takes place, is in the direction of ‘popularization’. My father recited some poems to me that I transcribed and of which I later received watered-down versions from other people. Watered down [*affadies*] in the sense that there were things that escaped them and that they preferred to say in everyday language.

P.B.: Yes, what no doubt disappears first are the games played with ordinary meaning, the displacements of meaning, the archaisms, the extra-ordinary forms of vocabulary and even of syntax. But do people not also engage in a work of exegesis similar to what you had to do yourself in order to discover the meaning of the old poems? Is there not a struggle over the meaning of words, through which they seek to appropriate the authority

contained in a saying, a proverb or a verse that has become a proverb? Isn't one aspect of the *licence* granted to the poet precisely that he can play with the words of the tribe?

M.M.: I think so. There is a kind of everyday consumption of poetry but there are also higher degrees of initiation at which people analyse the deeper meaning. And then, when the 'wise men' are among themselves, they do not set the same value on the same examples (Mammeri, 1985).

P.B.: Out of the ordinary meaning they produce an esoteric meaning that the apparent exoteric banality hides from lay people. Does it not follow that, even before a lay audience, they can utter a double-layered language with two purposes, two meanings? Are there not necessarily several *levels of interpretation* just as there are several *levels of expression*?

M.M.: That reminds me of something I once witnessed. In a village at one time there were two *imusnawen*, who were the spokesmen for the two opposing *soffs* ('parties', 'leagues'). They had grown up together as teenagers and they had learned *tamusni* together. And then the ups and downs of village politics divided them. They remained apart for years, each at the head of one of the two *soffs*. I attended the reunification of the village. The first one, who had more 'scope', spoke. The other responded. I then witnessed an extraordinary duet. The people listened, they thought they understood very well what was being said, but that was not the case. What they received was the obvious meaning, the apparent meaning of this discourse, but all the rest went over their heads. The two masters were clearly having a grand time of it. At last to be able to speak to someone who understands you and who can respond to you in the same terms! It became almost an exchange between specialists.

P.B.: One of the specific capacities of these 'initiates' must have been knowledge of the references, the capacity to say 'as so-and-so said . . .'

M.M.: Absolutely. There was a corps and a corpus of *tamusni*. There, it was conscious: one would say, 'I'm going to learn from so-and-so.' There were schools, which had their parables, their verses, their procedures, and above all a whole set of values and references that you had to know, to possess. And the more you possessed them, the further advanced you were in *tamusni*. This apprenticeship was something that the *imusnawen* undertook consciously: they would go from one tribe to another. They would go and visit such-and-such a figure, spend the whole night with him, in order to learn from him.

P.B.: Weren't the great trans-tribal *imusnawen* the ones who cumulated the contents of the various corpora?

The 'feel' for the situation

M.M.: There was one who was exceptional in that respect. People went to him to resolve all kinds of problems, difficult situations, critical cases. He had a certain authority. . . . He knew how to adapt what he said according to the tribe, the place where he went. 'Those people there need to be told this or that, you have to behave in this or that way towards them.' He had a 'feel' for his audience. It is not opportunism. But you do not say just anything to anyone. If you want your *tamusni* to be effective in a particular case, you must adapt it to your audience.

P.B.: No doubt one of the most important properties of oral discourse is that it has to adapt to a situation, an audience, an occasion. The true science of oral discourse is also a science of the opportune moment, the *kairos*. For the Sophists, *kairos* is the right moment, the one that must be seized in order to speak to the point and to give one's speech its full efficacy. But, as Jean Bollack (1975) has shown, the word originally meant the bull's-eye, and the man who has a feel for the *kairos* is the one who hits the target right on.

M.M.: I think it is no accident that the Greek and Kabyle expressions join up. In the language of *tamusni*, when people in a meeting are seeking the solution to a problem, they say 'The right decision is like the target, no one knows *who* will hit it . . . (*rray am lγerd, ur tezrid w'aat iêazen*).' This is said to encourage those who hesitate to speak in the assembly, to emphasize how every performance is necessarily relative. To illustrate this 'feel' for the situation, the same *amusnaw* told me the story of two villages of another tribe that were in conflict. He was called in to settle the matter. When he arrived in one of the villages, he did not seek out the protagonists of the dispute but the village marabouts. And he said to them: 'You will come with me. I come to ask you to intercede with your own people and to tell them such-and-such, but it is for you to tell them, in your own way.' The marabouts agreed because they knew that they were dealing with a remarkable *amusnaw*. They talked until midnight. When he spoke after them, he did not stop until three in the morning: he had them all dazzled. He would have proceeded differently elsewhere, knowing that the values he was going to defend were the same, but that each time he has to adapt the form to the public.

The power of words

P.B.: In fact, the very foundation of the authority he wields resides in his exceptional mastery of language.

M.M.: Yes. The fact that the *imusnawen* almost have an esoteric language of their own, or at least a particular, deeper use of language, can be understood in this logic. A striking example comes to mind: it was before the French occupation, at a time when the *imusnawen* intervened in a real, effective way, when they had a real power. It is an altogether common story.

A man had married a woman from a neighbouring tribe and then – something which was rare at that time – he had been obliged to leave his own tribe. No one knew where he had gone; he was not heard of any more. He had been away for almost seven years when, one day, the wife's parents came to see the husband's parents to tell them: 'Our daughter has waited long enough, nearly seven years. You will admit yourself that this situation has gone on long enough. Now, either you are sure that this man will soon return, and his wife stays; or, if he gives no sign of life, we take back our daughter.' The man's parents replied that he was perhaps alive somewhere. . . . There were many meetings. Because the wife was from another tribe, the matter could not be resolved in a simple way. At one of the meetings, a representative of the wife's tribe, who was very eloquent – he was a great *amusnaw* – overpowered the other side with a series of apparently irrefutable arguments. He said at the end, 'If you agree, let's conclude. This woman will come back with us.' But someone on the other side, who knew that one of their most noteworthy spokesmen was absent, replied that there was no hurry, that they would meet once more a week later to recite the *fatiha* (prayer). So the two sides parted. Then one week later they reassembled, and this time the other *amusnaw* was present. No sooner had the woman's group arrived than its spokesman said, 'Since this matter is settled, let us recite the prayer and say: May God keep the curse from following us (*Awer nawi daâussu*).' The other answered: 'We shall recite the prayer, but I suggest that we pray rather that we may not stray from the path of God (*Awer necced deg-gwebrid r-Rebbi*).' The first amusnaw then said, 'Get up. Nothing is concluded, we are leaving.' Upon their return, his people asked him, 'What does that mean?' and he explained to them: 'When I said, "May God keep the curse from following us," that meant that a man who abandons his wife for such a long time is cursed if he does not return to her. When the other replied to me, "May God keep us from straying from the path of God," from the rule, the law of God, that meant: God's law is seven years, and the seven years have not yet passed. When he uttered that sentence, I knew very well what he meant: you do not have the right to take this woman back until the seven years have elapsed.' Even if that is an extreme case, it is interesting inasmuch as this exchange over a minor incident could also have happened over more important events.

The ultimate antinomies of existence

P.B.: The story you have related represents the supreme form of relationships that also obtained between ordinary men, on the occasion of matrimonial negotiations for example, which, at a lower level of refinement, gave rise to similar contests.

M.M.: No doubt. But I believe that there is a difference almost in nature and not just in degree.

P.B.: The one who wins is the one who has the culture 'on his side', the one who masters better than the other the rules that everyone agrees upon . . .

M.M.: Yes, but the word is inseparable from the thing, the way of saying something from what is being said. In the case of marriage that you

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mention, people 'speak' the culture in terms such that it is intelligible for both sides. In the other case, there is a shift in the level of interpretation: it is Antigone versus Creon. The first *amusnaw* could have invoked the human right of the abandoned wife, against the letter of the law, but on condition that he finds the appropriate expression, the linguistically exemplary one. The issue between them was an ultimate one, whereas in the other case it was simple oratorical jousting. Through the confrontation of two formulae, the *imusnawen* had pointed to a problem that is a human problem: which is primordial, written law or 'human' law? I am sure that, without having read Sophocles or the philosophers, from that simple anecdote they would have brought out the question of the ultimate antinomies of human existence.

P.B.: And it is because of the intuition people had of their capacity to situate themselves at this ultimate level that they granted the *inusmawen* to right to stand beyond the rules of ordinary morality and language.

M.M.: I think it was for that reason that they were given the right to transgress the code externally at least.

I remember a very old story, predating the conquest, about a well-known *amusnaw*. His tribe was at war with another tribe, that appealed to a third, the Aït Yenni, to help it against the first. According to the rule of *nif* (the point of honour), there is no need to know whether the askers are right or wrong. They have requested assistance; it would be a grave breach of honour not to grant it to them.[6] Someone went to the *amusnaw* of the first group and said to him, ‘You see, we have not only the neighbouring tribe against us. The Aït Yenni are coming to their rescue. So we must divide our forces in two and send half of our men against the Aït Yenni.’ The *amusnaw* replied, ‘No, ignore the Aït Yenni. If they come with the others, we shall have to fight them; but above all don’t attack them!’ His people replied, ‘What? We shall be taken for cowards!’ The *amusnaw* explained: ‘If you feel that you are in a situation of inferiority, *nif* does not require you to rush to your destruction.’ And his verses have become proverbial:

Treγ at tezmert meqqwret
d ssalêin Igawawen
Uêeq Jeddi Mangellat
lawleyya widen i-s innden
Imi d Amejuv nsaâ-t
ur-d nerni lhem iden.

For pity’s sake, great sacred powers
Of the Zouaoua (confederation)
I swear by Jeddi Manguellet (saint)
And the saints who surround him
Since we have Tamejout (the enemy)
We shall not draw more trouble upon ourselves
(Laarbi At Bjaaud, 18th century)

Coming from anyone else, this suggestion would have been seen as scandalous, in accordance with the principle: ‘You will perhaps be defeated, but you must fight.’ A well-known proverb says: ‘When you fall, shame falls (*Mi teγlid iγli lâar*).’ But he, as an *amusnaw*, enjoyed a kind of outspokenness that was denied to others.

The poet, the scholar, and the peasant

P.B.: But the story you were relating a moment ago, about the *amusnaw* who goes to fetch the marabouts, dictates to them what they have to do, and imposes the solution by making use of their authority, raises the question of the relationship between *tamusni* and the Koranic tradition, endowed with the authority of writing and the sacred. How are we to describe this kind of triangle formed by the *amusnaw*, the exemplary bearer of Kabyle excellence (*taqbaylit*), the marabout, a scholar invested with religious authority, and the ordinary peasant, who recognizes both of them, no doubt in different ways and for different reasons? How is the competition between them organized? One might imagine that it has effects both on the content of *tamusni* and on the content of the Koranic message, as it is actually transmitted by the marabouts. How do these two 'powers', based on very different principles, manage to harmonize? Isn't competition ultimately inevitable and inexpressible, unthinkable, and therefore always masked and repressed by common agreement?

M.M.: Even knowing that kind of regret is vain, all the same I have often regretted that the development of Berber *tamusni* could not take the form, as happened in Greece, of an autonomous and progressive evolution, without trauma, without the imposition of an external authority (Mammeri, 1950). I have often wished that the *imusnawen* had been able to carry though the transition to the written form without having to reckon with a kind of competition or domination that comes from outside. Islamic culture, with all its qualities, is very fundamentalist; it does not accept variants; it is based on the authority of God, it has been revealed; it is in the text of the Koran. It is complete: there is nothing left to do but comment on it.

P.B.: In several of the examples you have given, we see the secular figure, the *amusnaw*, invoking the word of God, the religious norm. From the standpoint of the priesthood, that is something of an usurpation. How is the problem concretely posed of the relationship between the profane wisdom, *tamusni*, the deep expression of the national culture, of specific values, and the religious culture, which aspires to be universal, which is revealed and endowed with the authority of the written word?

M.M.: I think that the relationship has, throughout the centuries, always been experienced as ambiguous, even if no one said so because that would have been scandalous, unthinkable. People wanted to think at all costs that they were the same thing. The will of God and the text of divine law cannot be contrary to *tamusni* and, conversely, *tamusni* cannot but be completely in line with revealed truth. The fact nonetheless remains that, in practice, there were instances of effective competition, even if it was not sought, and still less acknowledged. I think that people accepted the primacy of religious truth: the Koran is the Koran, no one can question the word of God. *Tamusni* secularizes the truth of the Koran, or rather extends it into practice, into reality, into everyday life. But there could still be contradictions between the two. Most of the time, they were ignored: the marabouts, the only ones to be educated in Koranic law, were forced by their very situation into a certain number of compromises; they trimmed, they could only say of the Koran what was compatible with the norms of the society, failing which they condemned themselves. They had a formula: they would say that the law supports custom, which I think is not always the case – when the Kabyles disinherited their wives, they went against religious law. So there were real contradictions. The *amusnaw* was the one who experienced them most intensely and who suffered the most from them because he was in frequent contact with the marabouts, who could see in books things to which he could not have access.

P.B.: The clearest proof of this is the abundance of texts of Berber poems that you have found in the homes of marabouts.

M.M.: Yes, it is likely that the scholar had this purely instrumental value as the bearer of a technique of conservation. But, in addition, the *amusnaw* knew that there was in books another wisdom that he did not possess. The *imusnawen* had a lot of contact with the marabouts but, at the same time, they lived with everybody. Thus they were, as it were, at the point of intersection of the two things. As the marabouts were too but in a different way: the marabout is also at the point of intersection of the two worlds, but on the side of religious law, whereas the *amusnaw* is on the secular side. He is first and foremost a representative of *taqbaylit* taken to the higher degree, which is *tamusni*.

P.B.: The *amusnaw* is a specialist in the refinement of the specific values. He is a kind of expert in *taqbaylit*, 'Kabylity'.

M.M.: An expert in Kabylity, but in all aspects of life: social, moral and psychological. As for the marabout, he is firstly the interpreter of the Koran and of commentaries on the Koran, Koranic law. The marabout is a marabout by birth; the *amusnaw* is an amusnaw by election: he is required to take up a certain number of values and techniques to become an *amusnaw*. The marabout has no choice: he is his father's son, he must simply state the law. He may combine both: there are many cases of marabouts who are *imusnawen*. It is rare for an *amusnaw* to have studied in Arabic; it is not the same logic and it just was not done.

The censorship of the dominant discourse

M.M.: So it is clear that there is a problem and I would say that the consequences are rather troublesome for *tamusni*. No doubt *tamusni* benefits from a certain number of things that are in books, borrowings, which it secularizes. But I think that, more generally, the evolution accomplished in the case of Greek society would never have happened for Kabyle society. This is because, when it had to say certain things, when it had to move into a different register (that of cosmology, for example), it came up against a cultural system that already existed and which therefore exerted an effect of *censorship*, by preventing the Kabyles from drawing answers from their

own resources, from their *tamusni* itself. One of the great differences between Greek civilization and Kabyle civilization no doubt lies in the fact that Berber *tamusni* developed in an unfavourable environment: it is a constrained culture. Islam enjoys a kind of symbolic privilege, which the other culture acknowledges. Owing to the mere existence of that dominant culture, *tamusni* immediately encounters its own limits. Ibn Khaldun says that the Berbers recited so many poems that, if one had to write them all down, they would fill libraries. One is thus led to believe that there was a prosperous period when that oral culture was much more developed – before the invasion of Kabylia, from the 16th century on, by the marabouts, that is to say by men who brought in a sacred, international, urban, scriptural culture, linked to the state.

P.B.: The existence of a learned, written culture means that for some cultural forms the place is already taken.

M.M.: This confrontation between a learned culture and a popular culture is a very ancient feature of Berber culture.

P.B.: But that is the whole of the problem of Berber culture . . .[7]

M.M.: Yes, and it has been experienced unceasingly, especially in the domain of the law, because there contradiction and competition are obvious. I think that in the text of 1748 that disinherits women, there is a preamble or a conclusion – I do not recall which – that says 'The marabouts and the *imusnawen*, having met together and judged that the situation was such and such, have decided . . . and God will punish whomever goes against this decision.' People were not idiots; they knew that it was against religious law, and yet they took this decision, which is anticlerical, if I dare say, while invoking not only the approval but the help of God. This is fully spelled out in the text.

The inside and the outside

P.B.: In ordinary experience, the peasant has a very ambiguous relationship with the marabout, who is both recognized and rejected (I am thinking of proverbs about the marabouts, who, like the rivers, grow when there is a storm, in case of a conflict). If the marabout were not this kind of power that is both transcendent and external – and not a truly deep expression of the culture – *tamusni* would not have enjoyed the kind of frankness that it is allowed as a secular wisdom, esoteric but secular. I mean that, if the relationship with the marabout had been a simple, less ambivalent one, *tamusni* would have been unsustainable.

M.M.: I think that this is correct. The marabout is not an *amusnaw*. He is partly external to the society.

P.B.: The marabouts marry among themselves, they do not work with their hands, they do not have to practise Kabyle values: they are exempted from them.

M.M.: The marabout is external, which makes it possible to reject him, and it is this externality that makes him useful: he serves as a mediator.

P.B.: All the same, there is still a need for someone who, being inside the group, can reconcile it with itself, not just with other groups.

M.M.: And the one who is inside is the *amusnaw*.

P.B.: That is probably why there are cases where the two have to meet, as in the story that you mentioned a moment ago, when they are obliged to make common cause, as it were. But most of the time, their spheres of action were independent.

M.M.: The essential thing is that there is a certain independence. Interferences could not be eliminated, of course, and they even occurred frequently. But I think that in reality they worked in two different realms. Different things were asked of them. An *amusnaw* could perfectly well serve as an intermediary. But that function did not fall to him by delegation, by divine election, as a descendant of the Prophet, as is the case with the marabout even when he is intellectually very average. The *amusnaw*, on the other hand, must prove himself and put himself on the line.

P.B.: The role of *amusnaw* has something prophetic about it. It rests on popular election, whereas the marabout has not been chosen.

M.M.: Within the religious group too there can be prophetic individuals: I am thinking of Sheikh Mohand, for example, who broke away from the Great Sheik to whom he was the second after reproaching him for applying the rules too literally and indulging in pure ritualism, without leading a truly spiritual life (Mammeri, 1989). So the priest-prophet opposition already exists within the marabout group. The fact nonetheless remains that there is something of the prophet in the *amusnaw*: he has a prophetic style.

P.B.: He is the man of situations of crisis, crucial situations, the one who is capable of speaking and saying what is to be said when everyone else is reduced to silence.

Renewing tradition in order to conserve it

M.M.: The *amusnaw* possesses the faculty of invention, whether in a crisis or in normal times. He is the one who can take a step forward, a step to the side, to the right or to the left, make a progression or a deviation. He not only says what is the case; he says also what he invents from experience or from his own reflection. *Tamusni* is not a body of knowledge cut off from life and transmitted 'for the pleasure of it', but a practical science, an 'art' that practice constantly revivifies, to which existence constantly throws up challenges. This explains that the heritage lives on only by constantly changing; transmission continuously reshapes it by bringing it up to date. The role of the *amusnaw* is to make the tradition intelligible in terms of the present situation, the only one really lived through, and to make present situations intelligible in terms of the tradition, to inject the tradition into the praxis of the group. There are the ordinary responses of codified routine, the breviary of ways and customs, of accepted values, that constitutes a kind of inert knowledge. Above it is the level of invention, which is the domain of the *amusnaw*, who is capable not only of putting the accepted code into practice but of adapting it, modifying it, even 'revolutionizing' it (as the two Mohands did). He can break tradition, break with it, and this break still remains within the spirit of ancestral *tamusni*, because to betray the apparent display of *tamusni* is to be the most profoundly faithful to it. This does not always go without risk and sometimes torment. A well-known proverb says: '*Tamusni* is anxiety' (*tamusni d aγilif*).

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P.B.: So *tamusni* is the capacity to tell the group what it is according to the tradition that it has created for itself, through a kind of definition by concept construction that tells it both what it is and what it has to be in order to be truly itself – and to do so immediately, on the spot, at the very moment when it is needed, after a defeat or before a battle, and at every moment, which means that the *amusnaw* is always being tested, always personally on the line. *Tamusni* is thus also the art of improvising, in contact with the situation or with an audience. How are these exposures to the audience, its responses, its approval, manifested in the poetry itself? Are there not cases where everything is at the mercy of an unfortunate word, and when the poet must take care to say the right word, the right thing? Is there not also a theatricalization designed to give his words their full force by accentuating the extraordinary character of the utterance and of the person who profers it?

The universal in the singular

M.M.: In the case of the poet, the relationship with the audience is immediate and unmediated: the audience is there, and so is the poet, in flesh and blood; they are face to face. So there is immediate production and immediate consumption. I think that that helps to prevent creation for creation's sake, an autonomous and purely formal search for effects.

P.B.: That means that the appearances which might make one think that there is such a search for formal effects, the obscurities and archaisms that remind one of the most elaborate forms of poetry, are deceptive? It would be as mistaken to read this poetry as if it were Mallarmé's as it would to see it as only a 'primitive' form of poetic expression.[8]

M.M.: We can go back to the example I gave you earlier, that of the apprentice poet who goes to the master to ask him to be initiated. The six-line poem that the master immediately addresses to him by way of an answer is linked to the purely fortuitous occasion from which it springs. The poet's task is to give an exemplary response, that is to say a universal response with regard to a particular case – to lift a particular problem, arising from a particular situation, to a universal level. But the fact that this universal response has been produced à propos of a very specific event is precisely what confers it reality, distinguishes it from a mere intellectual preoccupation, internal to a milieu.

P.B.: The poet is the one who is able to universalize the particular and particularize the universal. He knows how to respond to a particular situation and a particular public, and so ensure the symbolic efficacy of his message. You evoked a moment ago the advance knowledge that the poet needs to have of his audience so that his utterance 'takes', so that it is *effective*.

M.M.: The audience–poet relationship is such that a poetic performance can really be a kind of duet between the poet and his listeners. The poet is not alone to create. I think that he is driven by his audience, by a kind of appeal from his audience, to which he responds.

An example: one day, a poet, the one I mentioned earlier, Yusef u Kaci, arrived in a tribe, and praised the three villages of the tribe – the latter did indeed consist of three villages but it had just conquered three others in war. As he was completing his eulogy, his listeners sensed that the poem was nearing its conclusion. One of them stepped forward from the circle around him, drew near him and said, ‘Dadda Yusef, that is very fine but I believe you are about to finish: take care – we are not alone now, there are the others.’ The poet was on a mat, he held in his hands a triangular tambourine which he simply tapped lightly; he walked around the mat and continued, improvising a eulogy of the other three villages. The listeners were full of admiration. In this case, one can say that half of Yusef’s poem was dictated to him by his audience.

Another time, another poet went to a village and, while reciting, noticed that his audience was not paying attention, they were whispering among themselves. He stopped and told them a poem *ad hoc*, the end of which has become a proverb: ‘I sing and the river carries away’ (*kkateγ iteddem wassif)* (Aali Aamruc, first half of 19th century). There too, from a minor incident, the poet drew something universal.

The enigma of the world

P.B.: Even when he does not entirely invent as in the cases you have mentioned, the *amusnaw* always performs the work of invention necessary to adapt the poem to the situation. In fact, because creation is a unique engagement of traditional, common, generative schemata, each production is both traditional (at the generative level) and unique (at the level of performance). Ultimately, so long as there is no text, no set script fixed once and for all, there are as many variants as there are different situations of production and therefore adjustments to the situation and to the audience.

M.M.: As regards adjustment to the audience, I transcribed a long poem that dates from the beginning of the French occupation, around the years 1856–7, just before the French entered Kabylia. The Kabyles had launched a first attack but it had not been sufficiently well prepared and it ended indecisively, near Drâa-el Mizan. Addressing the warriors who had just returned from battle, a poet (the one about whom I spoke earlier, who was regarded as the master of the poets) improvised a short poem that was well received and that he subsequently developed. It mentioned the names of the tribes, the villages and the men who had especially distinguished themselves in the fighting. This was of interest to the tribes who had actually taken part in the fight. But the poet went around and performed in various places. And so I found three versions of the same poem, in which the names of tribes, villages or characters had been changed (Mammeri, 2001).

P.B.: You collected them orally?

M.M.: I collected one in writing and two orally. The version I gathered in written form was in the notebook of a schoolteacher who had heard it recited and transcribed it. The adaptations were only in the detail: for example, one village had not wanted to take part in the war, which it considered lost from the start. It was difficult to transpose such a particularity, but the poet had found a way to handle it.

P.B.: But is it the poet himself who invented these variants or the people who had themselves done the work to appropriate the poem?

M.M.: I am incapable of saying which. But I think that it is the poet, or perhaps both together. But he must have effected at least two alterations: I know that one variant was collected from the mouth of the poet himself. The other must be a re-creation of the local people who found the verses beautiful and who arranged them so that they would apply to them.

P.B.: But these adaptations and adjustments are aided by the *polysemy* of the poem, which explains that the same discourse with two (or three) levels of meaning can be heard in different ways by different listeners. We saw an example of this earlier when the two *imusnawen* were, as it were, talking over the heads of their audience.

M.M.: One of the names of poetry in Kabyle (it is somewhat different in the other Berber dialects) is *asefru* (plural: *isefra*), which comes from *fru*, to elucidate, to shed light on something obscure. That, I think, is a very ancient meaning. In Latin, the poem is *carmen*, which meant the spell, the effective formula, that which opens doors. That is the very meaning of *asefru*, and perhaps this congruence is no accident, among these Mediterraneans for whom the word is firstly an instrument of elucidation, that which opens up things to our reason.

P.B.: *Fru* is also to sort grain. And so the poet would be the one who is able to distinguish and make distinct, who, through his *discernment*, effects a *diacrisis*, separates things that are normally confused?

M.M.: The man who sheds light on things obscure. A poem by Yusef u Kaci begins like this:

Bismilleh annebdau lhasun
a lêadeq ṭhessis
kkateγlmaani s-errzun
sakwayeγ lgis
(Yusf-u-Qasi)

In the name of God, I am going to start,
Wise men, listen to me.
I sing the parables, with art,
I awaken the people.

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The poet says: I give the examples and I clarify them; I utter a speech that contains a lesson and I awaken the people. One might say: I mobilize the people (*djis* is the army, the people who fight). The poet is the one who mobilizes the people; he is the one who makes things clear.

Ad awen-d berrzeγ lemur
am-midrimen di sselfa,

said the most prestigious of them:

'I shall make things as distinct for you
As coins in a purse.'

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Notes

1 In this foundational work for the study of oral literatures (which Bourdieu draws on in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* to explicate the practical dialectic of traditional apprenticeship and cultural invention), Lord compares the composition and technique of oral poetry collected through 20th-century fieldwork in the Balkans with the Homeric poems and other medieval European works with similar traits. The book relies on and extends the theory of Lord’s teacher, Milman Parry, a classicist and Assistant Professor at Harvard University who discovered the similarities in the repertoire of formulae or tags between the Yugoslav bards and the Iliad. Parry died prematurely in 1935, leaving behind a seven-page draft of his projected synthesis on oral formulaic composition, which Lord took up and developed (Parry, 1971).

2 For a compact presentation of Mammeri’s life and intellectual trajectory in the space of possible paths open to Algerian intellectuals during the postwar and post-independence decades, see Yacine (2001), and the editorial preface to Bourdieu’s ‘The Odyssey of Reappropriation’ (in this issue pp. 617–8).

3 ‘The artisan is deeply immersed in magical encumbrances in the early stages of occupational differentiation. Every specialized “art” that is uncommon and not widely disseminated is regarded as a magical charisma, either personal or, more generally, hereditary, the acquisition and maintenance of which is guaranteed by magical means’ (Weber, 1978 [1918–20]: 483).

4 For further illustrations, see the poems collected and commented upon in Mammeri (1989).

5 See Mammeri (2001) for an extended treatment of those canons and their evolution.

6 For an explication of the social bases and cultural logic of *nif* in Kabyle society, see Bourdieu (1966 and 1977: 10–16).

7 This point is elaborated in Bourdieu (1962: chapters 1 and 4).

8 For an analysis of the poetic mode of reading required by the learned tradition of Western poetry to decipher its ‘abstracted’ meanings following the autonomization of the field of cultural production, see Bourdieu

(1995a, 1995b, and 1997: 274–83), on Baudelaire, Apollinaire, and Mallarmé, respectively.

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