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Rain ceremonies¹ at Imi n Tala (High Atlas, Morocco)

Summary:

The author presents two Tashelhiyt Berber texts from the collection of F. Corjon, the first one dealing with rain ceremonies in Imi n Tala, a village in the High Atlas (Morocco), the second one dealing, among others, with a rock drawing of a jackal in the same village. The author discusses briefly some "non-islamic" features in these texts and speculates about the possible relation of these features.

Zusammenfassung:

Der Autor präsentiert zwei Texte der Taschelhit-Berber aus der Sammlung von F. Corjon; der erste handelt von Bittzeremonien für Regen in Imi n Tala, einem Dorf im Hohen Atlas (Marokko), der zweite handelt u.a. von einem Felsbild eines Schakals im gleichen Ort. Der Verfasser diskutiert kurz einige "nicht-islamische" Elemente in diesen Texten und spekuliert über ihre möglichen Zusammenhänge.

Sumario:

El autor presenta dos textos bereberes (en šilha) de la colección de F. Corjon. El primero trata sobre las ceremonias de lluvia en el caserío de Imi n Tala (Marruecos). El segundo trata, entre otras cosas, sobre un grabado rupestre de un chacal situado en el mismo caserío. El autor discute en breve sobre unos elementos "no-islámicos" en estos textos y especula sobre posibles relaciones.

1) Introduction

The village of Imi n Tala is situated in the Anougoual valley (Tashelhiyt Berber: *Angg^{na}al*) approximately 20 km south of Amizmiz, a small town 65 km south of Marrakech. Before entering Imi n Tala village, one passes by a cistern, where the water from the Imi n Tala well is stored². At this point two steep mountain sides form a gorge that opens up into the Anougoual valley.

¹ Rain ceremonies in berberophone Morocco have been studied by some anthropologists. The best introductions to this topic are still Laoust 1920: 204-255 and Westermarck 1926 ii: 254-282.

² Three meters above this well one can find the name of an ancient French "chef de bureau", *M. Duffaug* in red paint and a date: 16-1-26.

The well is at the bottom of that gorge, giving its water to the Amizmiz river that flows through the Anougoual valley. The toponym Imi n Tala meaning "mouth, access to the valley" in Tashelhiyt Berber is well chosen indeed.

I visited Imi n Tala on the 7th of March 1996, primarily to see the well and to find a prehistoric rock drawing. Both well and drawing were mentioned in the papers of a certain F. Corjon, who collected Berber texts in the Moroccan colonial period, probably in the late thirties and early forties of the twentieth century. Corjon was appointed *officier des affaires indigènes* at Amizmiz. He collected Berber stories, poetry and ethnographical texts about the Amizmiz region in order to obtain a degree as a translator. I found his *mémoire* papers back in the archives of the well known berberologist Arsène Roux, who acted as Corjon's tutor³. I studied Corjon's materials, all in all some thirty Berber texts, in order to use them as a basis for a Tashelhiyt Berber text edition.

The purpose of this article is to discuss briefly some features in two Corjon texts concerning Imi n Tala, features that may be labelled "non-islamic". As I do not have any evidence about the time-depth of them, I refrain from calling them "pre-islamic" or "archaic". Yet they may be of interest to students of early history or prehistory.

When I discussed these features in the Corjon texts with the people of Amizmiz and Imi n Tala in March 1996, it became clear that all of them are still known today.

2) Two texts concerning Imi n Tala

I adapted the Tashelhiyt Berber texts of Corjon to modern linguistic and modern berberological standards. The texts are given in a transcription that basically follows the conventions adopted by Lionel Galand and Paulette Galand-Pernet.

Text 1

Iggi n ddšɣ Imi n Tala illa gis yan ujaɣif azgg^way, y ddaw ujaɣif ann illa yan lein mquɣɛn. Finn a y d iffuy wasif n Umzɛmiz. S waman ann a s a sswan timadayin d taleɣšin n tyzut. Iy tlla taɣart, ar qqrɛn ayt Imi n Tala i yan ubukir iɗlan y tama n lein. Ar srs skarn lmeruf, ar t ttfɣraqn i lmsakin, fad ay yili unzaɣ. Ar ttawint tmyarin yat tkurt, ar tt sgalnt y lein. Ar aɣunt f snat ɣɣbaye, ar srusnt takurt y tuzzumt. Ar kkatnt takurt lli s iɗarn. Yat ɣɣbiet ar tethay

³ After his death in 1973, Arsène Roux left his archives to the *Institut des recherches et études du monde arabe et musulman (IREMAM)* at Aix-en-Provence. I thank Madame Claude Brenier-Estrine for her warm interest in my research and her kind cooperation during my stays in the Roux archives.

takurt a stt inn tsitti zy lein, ima r̄rbiet yaḍnin ar tt id ttrra s lein, ar kiy nn gis tḍr. Ar ttbddadnt tm̄yarin y tama n lein, ar aṭtunt i iḥšmiyn tirufin d tumz̄in, ar ttinint:

Ya R̄bbi, fk ay anzar,
fk ay anzar bla izilliḍ,
fk ay anzar bla tamzawuyt.

Iy iwin waman takurt y yan ḍḍur, ar ttin mddn: Ira ay yili unzar, ard ingi wasif. Imil, iy tt sḍw̄wrnt tm̄jwiw̄šin y lein ar kiy tmaṭl tkurt, ar ttinint: Ira ay yili yir imikk n uršiš.

Iy ur illi unzar ar skarn kremuš. Ar ttawint tm̄yarin d tezriyin yan izikr igan l̄jdid zy zzawit n Ayt Tasaft. Ar aṭtunt f snat r̄rbaye, kaygat s̄šff n tm̄yarin ar ittamz̄ ix̄f n izikr. Ar l̄ddint, ard bbint izikr. Ar t̄tarnt tm̄yarin. Ti nna ḍrnin ḥšsmnt, ašku ur darsnt ssrawl. Ima irgazn lli ḥaḍrnin, ar ḍḥḥan. Iy ur ibbi izikr, ar ttinint: Ira a imaṭl unzar nyd ur ra yili. Wayni ar nn ttuxxarn iḥšmiyn s trksa, ar t̄tbbin izikr s l̄mus i kullu tm̄yarin, ar nn t̄tarnt s ty^wṛdin. Mn baed ar ttawint izikr s tnuṭfi n ššrfa, grnt t inn gis. Ar t̄tḥwašnt y tama n tnuṭfi. Lliḡ ikmml uḥwaš, ar sfathant, ar ttinint:

Ad d yawi R̄bbi anzar,
ad d yall R̄bbi asgg^was,
a ikmml R̄bbi f ifllahn.

Iy d ingi wasif, yawi timadayin, ar ttawi yat tezriyt kraḍ iznzar n tasaft s tmzlaw, ar tn tgr y lein n l̄mi n Tala, fad a nn ibbi unzar, ard iqsr wasif.

Γ Umz̄mi, iy iggut unzar, ar akk^w isxsr l̄yllt, yat t̄gigilt tyli f iggi n fiḥina, tqllb l̄mri s ignwan, tass l̄qṭib f wazzar nns, tgr iyḍ n tbnayut s waḍu n unzar.

Translation

Above the village of Imi n Tala there is a red coloured rock, at the bottom of which there is a big well. It is from there that the Amizmiz river rises. With it's water people irrigate their plots on the riverbank and the vegetable gardens of the valley. When there is a drought, the villagers of Imi n Tala slaughter a black billy-goat beside the well. With the meat of it they arrange a meal (*l̄m̄eruf*) and distribute its meat among the poor, in order to get rain. Women bring a ball (made of rags of clothes) and throw it into the well. They divide themselves in two groups, they place the ball in the middle. They hit this ball with their feet: one group pushes the ball removing it from the well, the other group strives to get the ball towards the well until it falls in. Then women, standing near to the well, start to distribute maize grains and roasted barley to children saying:

O God, give us rain,
give us rain but no tornados
give us rain but no gales.

If the water carries the ball away at once, people say: there will be rain and the river bed will be flooded. However, if small whirlpools make the ball turn in the well so that it is slow (i.e. it is not taken away by the current immediately) people say: there will be only a drizzle rain.

If it does not rain at all, they practice a ceremony called *keramush*. Women and girls bring a newly made rope from the zawiya of Ayt Tasaft. They divide themselves in two groups, each row of women taking an end of the rope. They start to pull, until they actually break the rope. Then the women fall down (backwards). Those who fall down, feel shame, because they don't wear trousers. As for the men in their presence, they laugh. If the rope does not break, they say: There will be rain very late or no rain at all. But (usually) boys come near, acting innocently, and cut the rope with a knife for the women, who will fall backwards. After this, they take a rope to the water reservoir of the sharifs and throw it into the water. After a ritual *aḥwaš* dance they pray, hands raised, saying:

May God bring rain,
and a prosperous year,
may God accomplish (the works of) the farmers.

If abundant rains makes the river overflow, carrying away the small fields rounded by little walls of stones, a virgin will take three burning branches of oak wood and throw them into the well of Imi n Tala in order to stop the rain and the flooding.

When, in Amizmiz, continuous rains threaten to destroy the harvest, an orphan girl climbs up to the terrace, she reflects the sun in a mirror, wearing a shawl attached to her hair; she throws some of the ashes, left over from the Achoura bonfire, in the direction of the west.

Text 2

Ar ttinin mddn, tamazirt n Ungg^{wal} zzman zdyn gis Iṛumiyn. Bnan ddšur mqqurnin s ifirirn srmnin. Yan zy ifirirn ann, mraw n isrdan ur zḍarn at t asin. Ar ttinin, Iṛumiyn a iẓzan taqqayin y tlatin n udrar, wahli ur ta ilul nmbi. Tasga n Imi n Tala iqama gis lhdm n yan ddšr bnan t Iṛumiyn. Llan gis izṛan mqqurnin y lmakan ann, kraygat yan y izṛan ann ittyanjar. Ar ttinin yan lknz intl gis, wayni gabln t ljnun, iga llun nnsn zund lefiyt. Wuy lli zrinin y yiḍ, ar ttinin is llant tmzliwin y ngr ifirirn; iy llant tillas, ar ttḥwašn ljnun n Imi n Tala.

Γ iggi n yan ujarif tlla yat ttšwira n wuššn, šwwrn t Iṛumiyn, uran ddawas

lħruf, wayni ħtta yan ur tn issn. Llant amaka n tirra zund ytinn y tmazirt n lksawn y udrar illan iggi n Lalla Σziza.

Ufan ibudrarn amaka n tmdlin y Imi n Tala, y Ungg^wal, y Tgidar n Ayt Hmd, tama n Inmuyas. Timdlin ann yzzifnt, drant f ti n imuslmn. Ismdal ann ttwidalnt s ifirn useanin, ur ssq^wblnt zund ti n imuslmn. Ufan gisnt dgg n wanas d ššruf, ur gin zund wi n yila.

Translation

They say that once the Anougoual region was inhabited by *irumiyn*. They built big villages out of enormous cut rocks. Ten donkeys could not move one of these stones. They think that the *irumiyn* planted nut trees in the valleys of the mountain a long time ago, long before the birth of the prophet (Muhammad). Beside Imi n Tala one still finds the ruins of one of these villages of which the construction is attributed to the *irumiyn*. At this place there are big stones, each of them has been quarried (lit.: cut). People say that there is a hidden treasure there, but that it is guarded by fire-coloured djinns. Those who pass (this place) during the night say that there are flames between the stones and that the djinns of Imi n Tala dance the *aħwaš* in the dark.

On one rock there is a drawing of a jackal, made by the *irumiyn* and above it they wrote some characters that nobody knows. There is a considerable number of similar inscriptions in the Seksawa region in the mountains above the sanctuary of Lalla Aziza.

The Berber mountain dwellers found many graves at Imi n Tala, at Anougoual and at Tiguidar of the Ait Hamd, near Inmoughas. These graves are longer and deeper than those of Muslims. They are covered by large slabs of stone, their orientation is not according to Muslim prescriptions. Jewels and bronze money have been found there; these jewels and money are unlike those of today.

3) Non-islamic features in these texts

Let us have a closer look to these texts and discuss briefly some of their non-islamic features. As for text 1:

- a) The slaughtering of a black billy goat takes place next to the Imi n Tala well, a crucial water supply for the gardens and fields of this region. The slaughtering itself seems to be an expiation, a sacrifice to please some atmospherical being, a god, a djinn, responsible for rain and perhaps thought to be living in this well. Distribution of food among the poor is well known in the anthropological literature and corroborates the idea of the sacrifice being an expiatory activity.

- b) Augury by means of a rag ball (cf. Laoust 1920: 242) may point also to the fact that the people place their destiny in the hands of the god in the well, the rain god, the water god. His/her will or decision is expressed by the current of the water in the well.
- c) Distribution of delicacies by women to children can be interpreted in a way similar to distribution of food to the poor.
- d) Rope-pulling (*jbbad lħbal*) in the case of extreme drought⁴ is a ceremony given by Laoust (1920: 242, 244) and Westermarck (1926 ii: 2). Amahan gives a recent account of it (Amahan 1983: 91). The element of combat of old versus young women may reflect the atmospherical battle between the decayed and the fresh, between stand-still and growth, between barrenness and fertility.

The breaking of the rope seems to be the key moment in this ceremony, the moment everyone is waiting for. It can be seen as a symbol of a turning point in an atmospherical situation.

- e) One of the most intriguing features of this text is its statement about the exposure of female pudenda after the rope was broken. Laoust says: "La manière dont le rite est rapporté semblerait indiquer que l'exposition des organes génitaux constitue, dans ce cas, l'élément essentiel de la cérémonie, à cause d'une association d'idées plus aisée à deviner qu'à traduire" (Laoust 1920: 244). Westermarck reports in similar phrases: "The manner in which this procedure was described almost made it appear to me as if the exposure of the urinary organs of the women formed an essential feature of the rite, owing to an association of ideas already familiar to us." (Westermarck 1926ii: 271, 272). Innocent boys (in other reports: men, Westermarck 1926ii: 271) help to break the rope provoking the exposition of the female pudenda. Both Laoust and Westermarck describe a variant situation in the case of the Middle Atlas tribe Ayt Warayn, where two or four naked women, in a place, hidden from the sight of men, play a kind of hockey (Laoust 1920: 243; Westermarck 1926 ii: 270). The feature of rope pulling followed by the showing of pudenda may refer to fertility, to capacity of reproduction. The act of showing itself may also be interpreted as an invitation to copulation.
- f) Bying the rope at a zawiya, implies that it contains a blessing (*baraka*) of the founder of the zawiya. Throwing the rope back into the cistern of the zawiya can be seen as a final gesture of honour to its founder. These elements were probably introduced to make the rites acceptable for Muslims.

⁴ Note that the text does not mention the *taly^wnja* ceremonies, well known and wide spread in North Africa. It is basically a ceremony around a dressed laddle that is taken outside the village in order to provoke rain (Laoust 1920: 204 ff; Westermarck 1926 ii: 266).

- g) For rites against too much rain see Laoust 1920: 247 and Westermarck 1926ii: 274-279. One fights water with its opposite: fire. The fire is symbolized by burning oak branches, ashes of the Achoura bonfire (the latter also implying a *baraka* from the Achoura). A mirror, like other shiny objects such as a brass pestle or a looking-glass, can be seen as charms to stop the rain (see also Westermarck 1926 ii: 275).

As for text 2:

- a) Note that the word *aṛumiy*, pl. *iṛumiyn*, derived from *rûm* "Rome", means "Westerners, Europeans, French, Christians". Here it seems to mean "non-Berbers, unknown outsiders".
- b) The *aḥwaš* dance performed by the djinns (*Ijnun*) is still known by the Imi n Tala village people. Westermarck reports Imi n Tala being haunted by djinns (Westermarck 1926 i: 291).
- c) The report of the rockdrawing of a jackal is important. Villagers have guided me to this drawing in a cave, only to be seen from a very small ridge on a steep mountain side. One arrives at this ridge after a jump of 2.5 meters over a deep chasm. The inscription reported in this text, undoubtedly of the kind found elsewhere in the High Atlas, was not visible to me. According to Corjon the neolithic traces abound in the Ougdemt and Erdouz area and other high valleys of the Oued Amizmiz and the Asif n Lmal. On High Atlas rock drawings, cf. Rodrigue 1997 et 1999.

4) A connection between the well and the jackal drawing ?

What is perhaps important too - I realize it is my interpretation and perhaps I push it too far - is the fact that the jackal drawing is only some 200 meters from the well, which made me speculate about a possible link between the ceremonies around the well and the jackal drawing:

- a) Is it possible that the being, the god at the well was in fact the jackal drawn in this cave?
- b) Was the jackal *once* a god responsible for rain and water supplies?
- c) Is the exposure of female pudenda at the well an invitation to the god in the well, to the jackal god, to copulate in order to obtain fertility?
- d) Do the Tachelhiyt Berber expressions for "rainbow", describing an atmospheric situation after rain, constitute linguistics evidence for these speculations?

tislit n unẓar (lit.: the bride of rain),

tislit n waman (lit.: the bride of the water),

tamyra n wuššn (lit.: the marriage of the jackal)

- e) Are the women who expose their pudenda in the *keramush* ceremony the ritual brides of the jackal, the god of rain and fertility?

5) A final remark

Text features such as the ones discussed above *may* constitute parts of an interpretive context for scholars in prehistoric sciences. Of course the highly speculative nature of this discussion should be kept in mind. On the other hand, it is quite understandable that elements in rain ceremonies may be old and survive in a region where drought threatens humans and crops constantly.

6) Bibliography

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