

A Linguistic Liberation of Gaddafi's Libya: From Near-Extinction to an Imminent Revitalization of Amazigh

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ABSTRACT

Berbers, who also call themselves Amazigh or "Free Ones," inhabited north Africa for thousands of years before the Arabs brought Islam to the region in the 7th century. As the language of the Berbers, it is usually referred to as Imazighen (free men) and Amazigh (men of noble origin). Amazigh does not have a sizeable body of written literature although it had a script (the ancient Berber script, Tifinagh) rather used for religious purposes. But Amazigh in Libya has a different story altogether. Any expression or promotion of the Amazigh language, including publishing, was banned for four decades under Gaddafi. It remains to be seen how post-Gaddafi Libya will come to terms with the competing demands of groups who have found a voice in the rebellion. This research is a product of a 'high-risk' documentation-fieldwork carried out in Libya by the author during 2008-09. There are a number of ways in which this comparative wordlist in Amazigh can be immensely useful in fostering further etymological research relating to minority or threatened languages. This is likely to make them more conscious of their distinct linguistic possession and may serve as a tool in strengthening the grounds of a possible language-revival or revitalization, which looks more imminent post revolution in Libya.

Keywords: Amazigh, language revitalization, documentation, comparative wordlist.