

Maghrebians (or Mauri) speak Magharibi, not Arabic

Abdou Elimam

Pr. Emeritus
Université de Rouen Mont Saint Aignan - France

E-Mail: elimab34@gmail.com

Received on: 11 February 2023

Accepted on: 21 February 2023

Published on: 20 March 2023

ABSTRACT

After defeating and pushing aside the Carthaginians, the Romans named the territory of North Africa *Mauretania* and its population *Mauri*. Later on, historians have had to reflect on the origin of the term *mauri* to designate the population or *Mauretania* to name the territory in addition to the signification of the Latin/Greek word « *mauri* » which means « black ». It is admitted, as well, that the word *Mauri* is a transcription, into Latin alphabet, of a Punic word meaning « the west » or « the westerners ». If the latter's meaning is 2000 years old, the other approbation is relatively modern and suspected of ideological biases. The word *maġaribis*, transcribed *mauri/ma'ari/mahauri*, really makes sense since it means the west in Punic - the 15 century-long North African *lingua franca*.

Keywords: Arabic, Magharibi, Maghreb, Mauri, Punic.

1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to languages in North Africa, it is often mentioned that Berber language native speakers lost their mother tongue to shift in favor of Arabic, essentially after the invasion of Hilalian tribes in the 12th century. As such, it is one of the fastest language shifts in human history. One may wonder how all these Berber speaking communities became « Arabic » native speakers in less than a century, not through education and teaching, but following the alleged destruction of the country by Arabic-speaking Hilalian tribes. Beside such a narrative, one may consider that the existence of another socially wide spread language was overlooked because this language was spoken by the *Mauri* population - as the Romans used to call them. In contemporary North Africa, native speakers instinctively acquire the Magharibi language (more than 80%) and Berber languages (the remaining 20%), but not Arabic (Elimam 2015). Bearing in mind that the Arabic language started to be introduced in the 8th century, one is objectively facing a sociolinguistic dilemma as the local native tongues seem to differentiate themselves from Arabic. How to account for this? North Africa entered into history almost a millennium before the present era. More precisely, it is with the arrival of the first Phoenician marine explorers

that traces of the populations who lived there and their languages became identifiable (around 900 BC). In addition to Libyan, there are traces of Hebrew, Syriac, Persian, and many other languages. After having been Carthaginian, Roman, and Byzantine, this region came under Arab control as soon as the 7th/8th centuries. It is known that the Romans had designated it under the name of *Mauretania* and that the Arabs, a few centuries later, named it the *Maghreb* territory. When in the 20th century, the three countries of the central Maghreb wrested their respective national sovereignty, they called this region the *Arab Maghreb* - whereas French colonization used the term *North Africa*. That being said, there is little information as to the naming of this shore of the Mediterranean by the Carthaginians. It is known that the city-state of Carthage (near present-day Tunis) propagated a civilization that long rivaled that of Rome. Its language, Punic, was the hegemonic *lingua franca* of this region of the world, for almost a millennium. How was the population living east of Carthage named? Why did the Romans designate the territory as *Mauretania* and the populations that lived there as the *Mauri* (Moors)?

What does the comparison of the Punic or the Arabic *معرب* or *معرم* (*ma'arib* or *ma'arim*), meaning « the west » or « the westerners », with the term *Mauri* tell

us? Would not the Semitic nature of the schema in [M + Ė/Ĝ + R/Ĝ + M/B] (its existence in different languages of the family being widely attested) also explain the appellation of Magharib (مغارِب) by the Arabs; or the Semitic schema: [M + Ĝ + R + B]?

2. SOME HISTORICAL LANDMARKS

From the beginning of the millennium before the present era, the north of Africa was the object of many desires; sometimes hegemonic.

- First and foremost, the Phoenicians who created "permanent stations" and who ended up founding Carthage, as a City-State, that emerged in the 8th century BC. The cultural and linguistic hegemony of the Carthaginians is integrated to such an extent that, throughout the entire territory, it is supported by cooperative indigenous populations at all levels.
- Then came the Romans who dislodged the Carthaginians to impose their *Pax Romana* for almost five centuries. In addition to the violence through which it took place, this *pax romana* was illustrated by a clever division of space into autonomous territories, in order to weaken any potential revolt. Thus emerged a *Mauretania* divided into three Roman provinces, from west to east: *Mauretania Tingitane* (Tangier), *Mauretania Cesarea* (Cherchell), and *Mauretania Setifia* (Sétif). To the east of the latter are located: the province of *Numidia* (Berber Kingdom having had *Cirta* (Constantine) for its capital and having enjoyed autonomy for nearly 140 years) and that of *Africa Proconsularis* (present day Tunisia).
- By the Vandals who, after a few decades, were driven back by the Byzantines.
- By the Byzantines who, for nearly four centuries, managed to keep the country in a relative harmony.
- By the Arabs, around the 8th century, who introduced the Arab-Muslim civilization before a four-century Ottoman domination.
- Finally, the French, in the 19th century, colonized the territory for nearly a century and a half.

Meanwhile, the natives, who evolved in a territory fragmented by national borders more or less inherited from the Ottoman period, integrated the values of nationalism—which has been prevalent since the eve of the First World War—and ended up wresting their respective independences in the second half of the 20th century.

2.1 The controversial origin of the term *Mauri*

As aforementioned, the Romans fragmented the territory inherited from the Punic period into a vast Mauretania to which are added the provinces of Numidia (ex-Berber Kingdom) and Proconsular Africa. Historians have had to reflect on the origin of the term *mauri* to designate the populations of Mauretania to name the territory.

For Paul Atgier (1903), who broached this topic in 1903, one has to go right back to the Greek name of this region, *Maurusia*. This led him to note the similarity of the radical [*maur*] both in Latin and in Greek to designate, he said, the "black populations of North Africa". But such a position placed him at odds with the dominant colonial narrative which presented the Berbers as the actual natives. How to reconcile the fact that "the Berbers were blond" with these "black" local populations? The author will not disappoint his audience (the illustrious members of the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*) by specifying that "the Berbers inherited the name of Moors from the blacks they had invaded ... they who had previously been the conquerors of the Blacks or Mori specifically speaking". Suddenly the Berbers are no longer the natives, but the invaders of black natives called Mori! This thesis is supported by the Greco-Latin semantics of *mauri* which refers to the concept of *negritude*, *blackness*, and, by metaphorical effect, to the notions of *horror*, *perfidy*, *villainy*, etc.

Fairly widely-shared by anthropologists of French colonization, this point of view made some people hesitate, like M. Coltelloni-Trannoy (2010), author of the entry *Mauretania*, in the *Berber Encyclopaedia*, in 2010. He notes, indeed, that this term could have a local origin if one is to believe Strabo (a Greek geographer and historian born 60 BC. and died around 20 AD. J.-C.) who, according to M. Coltelloni-Trannoy, said:

"The Moors, whose name (*Mauri*) is undoubtedly of local origin".

For the sake of fairness, P. Atgier (1903) curiously made a point of adding a note specifying: "Word itself appearing to be of Phoenician origin", which, presumably means that he had no linguistic knowledge of the Punic language.

This Phoenician origin (or Punic, more precisely) seems to bother many researchers, and not always those of the colonial era, it must be specified¹. However, this etymological route is far from prosaic. Thus, Yves

¹ We have in mind those North Africans who only rely on sources inspired exclusively by the French colonists.

Modéran (2003), a historian specializing in this period, finds it natural to specify:

"Mahurim" means "westerners" in Punic for the populations living west of Carthage. Mahurim could have given birth to the Latin Mauri" He adds: "We also derive the word Moor from the Arabic word Maghreb which means West."

That being said, if Yves Modéran said so in 2003, there are authors who stated it out long before. This is the case with Adolph Bloch (1903), for whom

"According to Bochart, the Moors - אַחור -, or rather Mauharin, were so called because they happened to be the furthest to the west, that is to say, the most western of the word (Occident)²".

He adds, a little further on:

"Vivien de St-Martin adds to this effect that the merchants of Tyret de Carthage (...) referred to as Maouharia, the Westerners, the people of the sunset, the aborigines of the Atlas. ... Here Strabo's opinion must also be mentioned, as he said that the peoples of the western region of Africa were called Mauri by the Romans and by the natives".

This latest revelation comes mainly from Vivien de St-Martin (1863), i.e. from an author who, almost 50 years earlier, clearly affirmed that not only this is what the Romans called this region but that, moreover, this is what the very native populations called themselves.

2.2 When the term *Mauri* became a Latin transcription of a Punic word

It is most important to note, at this stage, the inconsistency of the transcription in Latin characters of the Semitic scheme [M + ε + R + M/B] by the combination: [M + H + R + M/B]. Elsewhere, the Semitic consonant [ε] is rendered with the vowel, [A] in this instance. Which gives us: [M + A + R + M], *ma'arim*. With regard to these transcription problems/errors, it is important to underline that the authors do not indicate the transcription in the source language; which would help to avoid ambiguities. That being said, ascertaining the meaning in the source language is, in itself, a valuable indication.

This reading of the term as a word of Punic origin is also taken up by the *First Encyclopedia of Islam*³ published by Brill in the United States - in 1936. Thus one can read:

² One would have expected the transcription: מערב which means "west". A.E.

³ E.J. Brill's *First Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1913-1936.

"The word, presumably of Phoenician origin, corresponds to the ancient local name of the natives of Barbary reproduced by the Romans as Μαῦρο, Mauri and by the Greeks as Maurusii" (Strabo vii, 825).

These 20th century readings echo that of Bochart, quoted above by A. Bloch. Note that Samuel Bochart (1599-1667) is a 16th century French scholar. These readings also refer to the observation of the aforementioned historian/geographer Strabo. This brings one back to the beginning of the present era. Indeed, Strabo (1932) actually said:

"Mauri" was a name used by the natives of Mauritania as well as the Romans."

For 2000 years, authors have been recalling the linguistic origin as well as the meaning of the word *Mauri*: A Punic word that means *the west*. In response to this linguistic argument, verifiable by all, many voices have regularly been raised to say that this argument is implausible. They prefer another equally linguistic argument. Indeed, the opposite thesis is that *mauri* is a Greco-Latin loanword meaning "black". This is not wrong, of course. But in order to apply such a meaning to a whole population, they argue that the population of North Africa is black-skinned and this is the main reason for the choice of *Mauri* by the Romans.

2.3 *Mauri*: Both a Latin word and a Punic loanword

However, starting from Strabo's information that the population designated itself by this appellation, why would it attribute to itself the label of "Blacks"? In reality, the researcher is dealing with two homonymous terms *mauri*. 1. is a transcription of Punic; *mauri*. 2. is a Greco-Latin loanword. In a situation of homonymy such as this, ideological interpretations will serve to weaken neutral interpretations, which are solely linguistic. Defenders of the racial thesis rely on the argument that these populations are black; if not swarthy ... and the Berbers, in this case, are white people who after having conquered the territory, mingled with the natives until global interbreeding. This thesis presented by Paul Atgier, quoted above, has become the *doxa* of the anthropologists claiming to belong to the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris and by many researchers relying on the racial thesis.

These historical verifications (much more than methodological) have the merit of pointing to a divergence intertwined with ideology. It is clear that if the vision of "black" were to prevail, it would have been based on careful studies of the ethnolinguistic compositions of the human communities that populated

Roman Mauretania. Instead, we have suffered a doxa (Bret and Fentress 1996) that embellished the colonial narrative of a country (Berberia) with an ethnic group (Berbers) and a language (Berber). To date, this belief marks the work of North African researchers who refer to it as an axiom. Yet history teaches us that this region of the world was inhabited by several tribes: The Moors, the Numidians, the Gétules, the Musulamis, the Africans, etc. For example, the distinction between the Numidians and the Moors is clearly established. Moreover, on the arrival of the Arabs, J.R. Martindale et al. recounts the following:

In 647, Patrice Grégoire became independent but had to face the Muslim invaders at Sufetula. It mobilizes many Maurusian tribes from the southwest of Byzacène and perhaps from southern Numidia. After the defeat of Gregory and the Maurusian tribes supporting him, the Exarchate of Carthage resisted the Arab-Muslims until 698, and the indigenous resistance of the Mauri continued for another 50 years. In the 8th century, the Chronicle of 754 still mentions the Latin term Mauri, as an endonym while the Arabs are referred to as Saracens (Latin: Saraceni). In this text, the Mauri, now Islamized, are described as participating in the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, and the Umayyad campaigns in France, and their name will increasingly be used to designate all the inhabitants of North Africa without distinction, or all Muslims.

REFERENCES

- Atgier, Paul. 1903. "Les Maures d'Afrique". In: *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, 5(4) 4: 619-623; https://www.persee.fr/doc/bmsap_0037-8984_1903_num_4_1_7670.
- Bloch, Adolph. 1903. « Étymologie et définitions diverses du nom de Maure [archive] », *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, 4(1): 624-625.
- Bret Michael & Elizabeth Fentress. 1996. *The Berbers*, Blackwell Publishing.
- Brill, Evert Jan. 1936. *First Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1913-1936. 2010. Vol. 5, edited by M. T. Houtsma.
- Coltelloni-Trannoy, Michèle. 2020. « Maurétanie (Royaumes) », *Encyclopédie berbère [En ligne]*, 31 | <http://journals.openedition.org/encyclopedieberbere/521>.
- de St-Martin, Vivien. 1863. *Le nord de l'Afrique dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine*. Paris.
- Elimam, Abdou. 2015. *Le maghribi, alias ed-darija, langue consensuelle du Maghreb*. Réédition, Éditions F. Fanon.
- Martindale, John Robert, Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, and John Morris. 1971. *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Volume I.
- Modéran, Yves. 2003. *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine (Ive-VIe siècle)*, Rome.
- Strabo 1932. *The Geography of Strabo*. Published in Vol. VII of the Loeb Classical Library edition, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/strabo/16a*.html.

Moreover, R. Rouighi (2019), relies on supporting textual sources to argue that the «invention» of «the Berbers» to designate the maġaribis, first appeared in Arabic texts - including those of Ibn Khaldûn - before giving way to Maghribi or maġaribi.

3. CONCLUSION

From all this, it must be admitted that the designation of the populations of North Africa has always been - as far as history can remember - that of *maġaribis*. This name, originally Punic, has been transcribed in various forms, depending on the languages or alphabets used. This is how the scheme [M + ε/Ġ + R/Ġ + M/B] is found, in particular, in the forms: *ma'ari /ma'arim*; *mahari/maharim*; *ma'aghiv / ma'aghim*; *magharib*.

It is still surprising that this historical reality has been repressed to imply that the population of North Africa is only Berber and that the majority of the population speaks Arabic. Berber languages and the Magharibi language co-exist with Arabic, indeed, but Magharibi was there a millennium before the Arabs came. How could a language so widely spread become the «dialect» of a language that entered this geographic space after such a very long period?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank M. McNally and A. Chokri for their valuable help in proofreading.