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ARTICLE TITLE

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Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA)

Abdenour Bouich, 'Translated Poems of the Berber Kabylean Poet Si Mohand ou-Mhand (1845–1906)', *Xanthos: A Journal of Foreign Literatures and Languages*, 1 (2019), 47-54
<<http://xanthosjournal.com/issues-issue1-07-bouich>>

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Chicago Manual of Style

Abdenour Bouich, "Translated Poems of the Berber Kabylean Poet Si Mohand ou-Mhand (1845–1906)," *Xanthos: A Journal of Foreign Literatures and Languages* 1 (2019): 47-54, <<http://xanthosjournal.com/issues-issue1-07-bouich>>



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ABDENOUR BOUICH

Translated Poems of the Berber Kabylean Poet Si Mohand ou-Mhand (1845–1906)

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This paper proposes an English translation of selected poems written by one of the most important Kabyle Berber poets of the 19th century, Si Mohand ou-Mhand. Since this poet is largely unknown to the English-speaking world, the translations are preceded by a historical and cultural context of the poems' composition, an etymological investigation of the words 'Berber' and 'Kabyle', and a brief biography of Si Mohand ou-Mhand, who lived under French colonialism.

Berbers or Imazighen (ⵉⵎⴰⵣⵉⵎⵉⵏ, pronounced 'Imaziyen') make up the native population of Northern Africa stretching from Siwa Oasis in Egypt in the east to the Canary Islands in the west, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Niger River in the south. They form groups and tribes all across this region. However, they are not to be homogenized since, despite their shared mother language, cultural and linguistic similarities and differences can be found among these various groups. Important Berber groups living in this region include the Riffians (*Irifiyen*) in Morocco; the Kabyleans (*Iqvayliyen*), and the Chaoui (*Ishawiyen*) in Algeria; the Berbers of Djerba in Tunisia; the Infusion in Libya; and the Berbers of the Siwa Oasis in Egypt. In antiquity, Berbers were known as 'Libyans', or (during the Punic Wars) as 'Numidians'. After the Arab conquests of Northern Africa beginning from 647 AD, many Berber tribes were assimilated into Arabic language and culture, while others accepted Islam as their religion but refused Arabic assimilation and maintained their language.

Si Mohand ou-Mhand was a Berber Kabylean poet from Northern Algeria, belonging to one of the Berber tribes that fought the Arab invasion and preserved their own language and identity. He is thought to have been born in 1845 in Icheraïouen, one of the villages of the tribal confederation of Aït-Iraten, situated today in the Algerian city of Tizi-Wezzu. His father was Mohend Amezyan N'Ath Hmadouch and his mother was Fatima N'Ath Ssaid. The Ath Hmadouch family was one of the noble families in the village, so Si Mohand ou-Mhand was educated at the esteemed Koranic school of Sidi Abderrahman. Thus, he had the opportunity to learn the Quran and the Arabic language, which he sometimes used alongside Berber in his poetry. With the French invasion of the Berber region of Algeria in 1857, the poet's family was disposed from their lands and went to live in the village of Sidi Khelifa that is situated in Larbaa N'Ait Iraten in the city of Tizi-Wezzu. The family took part in the Kabyle insurrection against French colonialism in 1871 in which Si Mohand ou-Mhand's father was killed before his son's eyes. Mouloud Mammeri writes: 'Mohand lui-même ne

doit la vie sauve qu'à l'intervention d'un officier qui avait jugé sa mort inutile.¹ After the failure of the Berber insurrection, the family was separated: Ou-Mhand's uncle was exiled to New Caledonia; his mother fled to their original village of Icheraiouen; his brother, Arezki, to Tunisia. Si Mohand ou-Mhand led the life of a wandering poet and storyteller, travelling between Tizi-Wezzu, Annaba, and Tunis. After a long struggle with tuberculosis, he died in 1906 in the Sœurs Blanches hospital situated in Michelet, a village in the city of Tizi-Wezzu.

Ou-Mhand's poetry is a confluence between his knowledge of Berber traditions and the Arabic language and grammar that he learned during his education at the Quranic school. More importantly, his poems demonstrate his knowledge of 'Kabyle poems that constitute the heritage of his country.'² Indeed, ou-Mhand produced his poetry in Berber, sometimes borrowing words from Arabic and Islamic traditions, especially in works touching on religious themes. As for the structure of his poetry, ou-Mhand adopts the Berber traditional form of *asefru*, originating in the Berber verb *sefru*, which means 'to reflect' or 'to meditate'. The *asefru* takes the form of a short sonnet composed of three verses, themselves composed of three lines. The length of each stanza is 7, 5, and 7 syllables, respectively, following the rhythmic pattern AAB AAB AAB. This is not new to the audience. As Brugnatelli states, much of Berber epic poetry follows the same metre.³ Adolphe Hanoteau's compilation of Berber poems, for example, contains many instances of poetry which follow this metre.⁴ *Asefru* are brief yet brimming with meaning strengthened through many complex figures of speech, particularly metaphors. This richness adds to ou-Mhand's thematic abundance, which is characterized by a tormented life, his adventures as a vagabond wandering around Algeria and Tunisia, and the experience of a colonized subject. Ouerdia Yermèche encapsulates the poet's early experiences: 'Victime des exactions coloniales, impuissant devant le sort qui lui est réservé – l'anéantissement de sa famille et la confiscation des terres ancestrales –, il est jeté sur les chemins d'un l'exil à la fois spatial et social.'⁵ However, despite his social exile, ou-Mhand played the role not only of a literary figure but also a cultural agent. His poetry paints a vivid portrayal of the degrading socio-political and economic conditions that Algerians were subjected to under French colonialism. As Ouerdia Yermèche observes, 'Dans son immense exil intérieur et son errance spatiale, il reste ombilicalement lié à sa communauté, et les tribulations qu'elle vit sont les siennes.'⁶ Ou-Mhand's poetry also engages with subjects regarded as taboo, such as eroticism, courtship, drugs, and alcohol, in a society where everyday life and social relations are regulated by conservative, religious, and social mores.

¹ 'Mohand owes his life only to the intervention of an officer who considered his death useless.' Si Mohand Ou-Mhand, *Les Isefra, poèmes de Si Mohand-ou-Mhand*, ed. and trans. by Mouloud Mammeri (Paris: Maspero, 1969), p. 18. All translations my own, unless otherwise stated.

² Vermondo Brugnatelli, 'L'Œuvre de Si Mohand ou-Mhend dans la littérature amazighe', in *La Culture amazighe et le développement humain : Actes du colloque organisé au Palais des Congrès, Fès, les 6-7-8-9 juillet 2006*, ed. by Moha Ennaji (Fes: Revue L & L, 2007), pp. 57-65 (p. 59).

³ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴ See El-Hadj-Ameur-Ou-El-Hadj, 'Prise d'Alger', in *Poésies populaires de la Kabylie du Jurjura : Texte kabyle et traduction*, ed. and trans. by Adolphe Hanoteau (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1867), pp. 1-19 <http://numelyo.bm-lyon.fr/f_view/BML:BML_00G000100137001102825176/IMG00000025> [accessed 26 March 2019].

⁵ 'A victim of colonial abuses, and powerless before his fate — the annihilation of his family and the confiscation of ancestral lands — he is thrown in an exile that is both spatial and social.' Translation my own. Ouerdia Yermèche, 'L'Onomastique et la poétique de l'errance dans la poésie mohandienne', *Recherches et travaux*, 76 (2010), 13-25 (p. 13).

⁶ In his immense inner exile and his spatial wandering, he remains umbilically linked to his community, and its tragedies are also his own.' Ibid., p. 24.

Sources for ou-Mhand's poetry

This paper presents an English translation of selected poems by Si Mohand ou-Mhand. The vast majority of translations of ou-Mhand's poetry have been made into French, leaving his work relatively unknown in the English-speaking world.⁷ I consulted these translations in the course of my work, and each helped facilitate my own translation method. Nevertheless, in recent years isolated attempts have been made to redress this imbalance, and ou-Mhand's work has begun to appear in English: Fadhila Sidi-Said Boutouchent has offered her own partial rendering into English of the first work that I translate below, while Pierre Joris presents a complete rendering in a recent edited collection.⁸ Other poems by ou-Mhand are also starting to appear, with the ongoing project by Lynda Chouiten (University of Boumeres), 'The Nomadic Bard Reaches Britain', aiming to translate ou-Mhand's work while retaining both its beauty and its rhyme-patterns.⁹ Thus far, however, it is the French editions that have engaged most directly with the question of how to represent the distinct nature of Kabyle poetry, one concisely articulated by Mammeri in his editorial apparatus: since Ou-Mhand worked within an oral tradition, it is difficult to attribute a work to him with any certainty, and any work that is attributed to him may itself exist in any number of variants.¹⁰ The earliest collection of ou-Mhand's poetry, produced during the final years of his life by Boulifa, presents itself as the product of personal acquaintance with the poet; even this collection, however, does not include all of the works that have since been attributed to him.¹¹ Here, I offer an English version of ou-Mhand's poetry informed by my own interpretations, explaining my choice of words where I could not find the equivalents in English. I have chosen to organise the works into three themes: colonization, courtship, and the sacred.

Colonization

The following poem is the most famous of ou-Mhand's works and expresses the poet's indignation at French colonization.

1. *I swear that from Tizi-Wezzu*¹²

⁷ The earliest edition of ou-Mhand's works accompanied by a translations is *Recueil de poésies kabyles*, ed. and trans. by Si Amar u-Said Boulifa (Algiers: A. Jourdan, 1904; repr. Paris: Awal, 1990, ed. by Tassadit Yacine). More recent French translations include Mammeri (ed.), *Les Isefra* (1969); *Les poèmes de Si Mohand : Édition bilingue*, ed. by Mouloud Feraoun (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1960); and Younes Adli, *Si Mohand ou Mhand : Errance et révolte* (Algiers: Paris-Méditerranée, 2001). I am very grateful to Dominic Newman for his assistance in sourcing material from Adli's collection, which (at the time of writing) is available in the United Kingdom only at the British Library.

⁸ Fadhila Sidi-Said Boutouchent, 'Walt Whitman and Si Mohand ou M'hand: Free-Folk Voices', *Majallat al-Mumssarāt al-Lughawīyah*, 30 (2014), 1-22 (pp. 18-19) <<https://www.doi.org/10.12816/0011353>>. For a complete translation, see 'Si Mohand', in *Poems for the Millennium, Volume Four: The University of California Book of North African Literature*, ed. by Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 241-44 (p. 241), trans. by Pierre Joris. Notably, however, Joris' translations take as their source not the Kabyle originals, but Mouloud Mammeri's French renderings.

⁹ Private communication, May 2019.

¹⁰ 'L'établissement d'un recueil de poèmes de Si Mohand bute sur deux obstacles inhérents à tout essai de fixation de la tradition orale : la difficulté d'attribution et l'abondance des variantes.' Mammeri (ed.), *Les Isefra* (1969), p. 90.

¹¹ For a partial overview of works attributed to ou-Mhand, see Mammeri (ed.), *Les Isefra* (1969), pp. 90-99, 469-77.

¹² Tizi-Wezzu: a Berber city in Northern Algeria.

to the village of Akfadu¹³
no-one will subjugate me

Rather break and die than bend,
rather be cursed
in a country where rulers are but go-betweeners

My brow marked out for exile,
I swear that exile is better
than living under the rule of swine.

Salem Chaker purports that ou Mhand's poetry 'oscille entre la prostration et l'impuissance', reflecting the position of the Berbers after the French invasion.¹⁴ The poem begins with two geographical references: Tizi-Wezzu and Akfadou. Both locations are significant Berber regions in Kabylia, and were involved in the Berber insurrection of 1871 against the French. However, as suggested by Paulette Galand-Pernet, spatiality is used 'très anciennement', and is 'commun aux différentes littératures berbères'.¹⁵ Berber culture often endows places with mystical significance and presence. Yermèche's analysis goes further, arguing that 'les toponymes cités dans ses vers illustrent la marche incessante et ininterrompue du poète déraciné, à la recherche perpétuelle d'un havre de paix, et marquent de manière implicite son opposition à la domination coloniale.'¹⁶

Ou-Mhand makes frequent use of animal metaphors, as we will see in other poems. In this work, he uses one in the final verse to express his disgust with colonialism. Berber culture, deeply influenced by Islam, forbids the consumption of pigs, and the animal itself is regarded as unclean. The pig is also used as a derogatory reference to the French or Christians. I was unable to find an exact equivalent for the verb *ttqewiden*. In Berber, this is a very serious insult. It comes close to the word 'sycophants' or more colloquially 'ass-kissers.' Here, ou-Mhand is mocking 'les « collaborateurs », les parvenus et opportunistes de tout poil qui s'empresent de gagner les bonnes grâces des Français'.¹⁷ This mockery is even more explicit in the following poem:

2. *The flag is crumpled up by kinglets*
who came ranting
and burrowing in our nights

The goldcrest wore trousers
and became a master
claiming to bring justice

¹³ Akfadu: a Berber village in the city of Bejaia (Northern Algeria).

¹⁴ 'oscillates between prostration and impotence'. Salem Chaker, 'Une tradition de résistance et de lutte : la poésie berbère kabyle, un parcours poétique', *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 51 (1989), 11-31 (p. 18).

¹⁵ 'very old, common to different Berber literatures.' Paulette Galand-Pernet, 'Mohand, héritier créateur', *Etudes et documents berbères*, 25-26 (2007), 77-104 (p. 94).

¹⁶ 'The toponyms mentioned in his verses illustrate the incessant and uninterrupted movement of the uprooted poet, in the perpetual search for a haven of peace, and implicitly mark his opposition to colonial domination.' Yermèche, p. 19.

¹⁷ 'the collaborators, the upstarts and the opportunists of all kinds who hastened to win the good graces of the French.' Chaker, p. 19.

*The rabbit became a policeman
with a gun in his shoulder strap
allowing himself to punish*

*The eagle's wings have been bound
and he has been condemned to exile
Oh dear God, what a misery!*

This work belongs to the tradition of *leâlamat*, which consists of oral poems that have as an incipit the word *leâlam*, meaning ‘banner’ or ‘flag’. This tradition has existed for a long time in Berber culture, and was familiar to ou-Mhand’s audience. *Leâlam* has a connotative meaning, and refers to honour, authority, and freedom. When ou-Mhand writes that ‘the flag is tied up’ he means blemished honour. The term ‘kinglets’ refers to the *champêtres* – local agents or mediators appointed by French authorities to interact with Berbers, particularly in remote villages. The poet mocks them by applying animal metaphors such as ‘goldcrests’ in line 4. For Berbers, the goldcrest symbolizes weakness and pettiness. Ou-Mhand writes ‘the goldcrest wore trousers,’ which suggests empowerment since trousers are associated with masculinity and chivalry in Berber culture. The poem’s use of rabbits – weak animals that become police officers – satirizes French colonizers.

Brugnatelli highlights a parallel between line 1 and line 11 that resides in the fact that both the flag and the eagle are tied up.¹⁸ Here, we find another animal metaphor: Berbers associate the eagle with a strong warrior who has been condemned to exile. The theme of exile is recurrent in ou Mhand’s work and calls back to Berber leaders such as El Mokrani and Cheikh El Haddad, who led the Berber insurrection against French colonization. After the failure of the insurrection, many leaders, including the poet’s uncle, were deported to New Caledonia.

Courtship

Women are very present in ou-Mhand’s poetry. Yermeche writes: ‘Dans son mode de vie marginal, il ne délaisse pas pour autant les plaisirs de la vie. Son rapport au temps réel s’effectue par la référence aux hommes en général et à la gent féminine en particulier [...]’.¹⁹ In fact, the poet never misses a chance to express his emotions whenever he is smitten by a woman during his numerous adventures of wandering between Algeria and Tunisia. The following two works are examples of ou-Mhand’s love poetry:

3. *Tell this green-eyed girl
with well-drawn eyebrows
this caged partridge*

*That she sentenced me to torment
with her dark eyelashes
and gun-like breasts*

¹⁸ Brugnatelli, p. 59.

¹⁹ In his marginal way of life, he does not abandon the pleasures of life. His relation to real time is made by reference to men in general and to women in particular.’ Yermeche, p. 21.

*I dream of a coffee
with her, in intimacy
in this cup below her belt*

In this poem, the poet does not reveal the identity of the woman he is courting, but rather refers to her through some features of her body which constitute the standards of female beauty in Berber culture. As for the unknown identity of the woman, it is essential to keep in mind that in the Berber and Algerian society of the late nineteenth century, 'la simple évocation de la femme était taboue'.²⁰ Therefore, ou-Mhand uses an animal metaphor to refer to the woman as a 'partridge'. Berber culture often uses the partridge as a reference to the beauty, softness, and fragility of women, but also to indicate inaccessible and unapproachable women. The poet expresses his desire for intimacy in the three last lines, subtly channeling it into a dream of having coffee. Ou Mhand was known for his addiction to coffee and hashish, both of which he used as a fuel for poetic inspiration.²¹ The following work also belongs to ou Mhand's love poetry:

4. *I looked to the west
scrutinizing the skyline
Suddenly, my sweetheart appeared*

*We descended into gambling
surely for our leisure
hence we played some Ronda²²*

*She took three cards of ten
though I dispossessed her from the eleven
she shamelessly defeated me*

The poem begins with a reference to space and reminds the audience of ou-Mhand's life as a wanderer. It seems that the poet is dreaming of a romantic encounter in a society where intimacy with women outside marriage is rare, if not impossible. What is striking in this poem is ou Mhand's use of a Spanish card game to describe a moment of intimacy, as the details of the game provide a suggestive portrayal of his sexual experience. In Berber culture, gambling is forbidden and people who indulge in it are seen as immoral, and the term 'to gamble' has progressively acquired a euphemistic sexual sense when used specifically with reference to a woman.

The tradition of the sacred

Although very secular in most of his work, ou-Mhand also wrote religious verses. Yet his religious poetry is as ambivalent as the poet's personality. Indeed, in some of his poems ou-Mhand appears to be thankful to God, while in others he appears to complain about Him and blame Him for his misery. As Brugnattelli explains, 'C'est en vertu de sa familiarité

²⁰ 'the mere mention of women was taboo'. Ibid., p. 21.

²¹ Brugnattelli, p. 60.

²² Ronda: A Spanish card game.

avec Dieu que Si Mohand se permet très souvent de lui reprocher son injustice dans la distribution des destins.²³ The following poem is a prayer of praise and gratitude to God.

5. *Compassionate, You are the most merciful
Glory to You the Almighty
Master of countless crowds*

*You provide for those who have no money
Your power is unmatched
You keep watch over us*

*Since even those who do nothing live
without debts or worries
I swear to you, hunger, I do not fear you any more*

This work reflects the poet's mastery of the Arabic language and his knowledge of Islam. The majority of the words are borrowed from Arabic. Not only does ou-Mhand use Arabic in his poetry, he also makes references to what Brugnattelli terms 'la terminologie savante dans les domaines de la grammaire et de la religion.'²⁴ The following poem takes a different approach. Here, ou Mhand complains about his poverty, not directly addressing God, but an angel believed to distribute wealth to people:

6. *Distributor, come down and talk to us
May God convince you
to have pity on us, the helpless.*

*For some, you have given the zest of life,
far from the miseries,
in cosy beds.*

*For me, you have given endless nights in the barn
Sleeping beside junkyards
Braving cold, sickness, and stench*

In his poetry, Si Mohand ou-Mhand was able to combine various approaches that are often paradoxical. The first approach is one characterised by moral concerns, inspired by Islamic principles and cultural wisdom, and often takes the form of moral precepts and regret for the degradation of manners during the French invasion. The second approach is can described as hedonistic, evidenced in his provocative poems about women, alcohol, and hashish. The third approach is mystical, expressing the poet's repentance and his hope for redemption. Indeed, the poet tries to make his readers feel a deep mystical ecstasy and an intense awareness of the spiritual life. He never ceases to solicit the grace of God, to praise His merits, to call upon His mercy, eventually exhorting the readers to give up the pleasures of this world and to turn to the salvation of the Hereafter.

²³ 'It is precisely his familiarity with God that allows (ou-Mhand) to blame Him for his injustice concerning the distribution of fortunes.' Brugnattelli, p. 60.

²⁴ 'scholarly terminology related to the fields of grammar and religion.' Brugnattelli, p. 57.

Appendix: Sources for Kabyle (Berber) Texts

The table below indicates where each of the poems translated above has appeared across the four collections of ou-Mhand's work, along with their incipits in Kabyle. Unfortunately, copyright restrictions have prevented the reproduction of the original Kabyle texts.

No.	Incipit	<i>Boulifa (1990)</i>	<i>Feraoun (1960)</i>	<i>Mammeri (1969)</i>	<i>Adli (2001)</i>
1	Ggulley seg Tizi-Wuzzu	no. 30 (p. 84)	no. 16 (p. 74)	no. 32 (p. 153)	
2	Leâlam cudden iqelaql				no. 85 (p. 183)
3	Inn'as i mm tiț zerqaqen				no. 20 (p. 100)
4	Grey tiț-iw s azelmađ				no. 29 (p. 109)
5	A lħanin kečč d rřaħim	no. 83 (p. 102)	no. 22 (p. 80)	no. 210 (p. 368)	
6	A qessam res-ed a k-naħku				no. 60 (p. 152)

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