chelha/shelha

by Ramdane Touati

Abstract:

Celḥa/Acluḥ (Tamaziɣt)

Deg umagrad-a, ad d-meslyeɣ ɣef yiwen n wawal i yettwassexdamen i wsemmi n tutlayin, tantalwin, tiqbilin d iɣerfan, s tmaziɣt, taɛrabt d tefransist, ama di Lmaruk, di Lezzayer neɣ di Tunes. Yiwen-is, xas ulama tettbeddil talɣa-s seg tutlayt ɣer tayeḍ : celḥa s taɛrabt, tacelḥit/acluḥ s tmaziɣt. Ma nekkes anẓul n Lmaruk, awal-a qqaren-t s uɣenzu. Wid yettmeslayen taɛrabt ttɣunzun yis-s timnaḍin timaziɣin, Leqbayel d Aɛraben i wumi qqaren Iclaḥ. Ula di tefransist, s unamek-a n uɣunzu i t-id-wwin seg Lmaruk, qqaren-t i Walimaniyen. Wid iwumi ttɣunzun iles s wawal-a, zemren ula d nutni ad t-ssxedmen ma meslayen-d s tutlayt n wid i ten-iɣunzan, maca ur t-qqaren ara mi ara ilin ttmeslen s tutlayt yellan d ayla-nsen. Tutlayin ttwaḥqarent s yismawen i sent-ttaken wiyiḍ, am wawal-n n celḥa. Imawlan-nsent am akken qqeblen anect-a ma refden-t.

Chelha/Chleuh (Français)

*Cette notice a pour but de présenter un **mot** servant à désigner des **langues**, des **dialectes** et parfois des **groupes ethniques**, utilisé en **tamazight** (berbère), en arabe et en français, surtout au* **Maroc***, en **Algérie** et en **Tunisie**. Il présente des **variations morphologiques** selon la langue : **chelha** en arabe dialectal, **tachelhit** en tamazight, etc. **Ce mot**, sous ces différentes formes, est, sauf au sud du Maroc et dans la localité Tabelbala, dans le sud-ouest algérien, **désigne l'autre**, notamment **sa langue** et souvent dans un **sens péjoratif**. L'arabophone utilise cette dénomination pour nommer tamazight et d'autres langues. Certains groupes amazighophones l'emploient pour désigner des arabophones, tandis que d'autres l'utilisent pour nommer certaines autres amazighophones. Et c'est dans ce **sens péjoratif** et **indiquant l'altérité** qu'elle a été **introduite**, à partir de ces mêmes langues, **en français**. Des locuteurs de langues ainsi désignées l'emploient, en parlant dans la **langue** de ceux qui l'utilisent **contre eux**, alors qu'ils **s'auto-désignent différemment** dans **leur propre langue**. Il réfère souvent non à une langue, mais à une catégorie de langues. Chelha est synonyme de la langue subalterne, " la langue" qui n'en est pas une, au regard d'autrui. C'est un exonyme qui fait partie des mécanismes de subordination. Il indique l'intégration de la domination par les locuteurs quand eux-mêmes l'utilisent.*

Shelha/Shelh (English)

This article examines the term ***shelha*** used in **Tamazight** (Berber), Arabic, and French to refer to languages and ethnic groups. In most contexts, aside from southern Morocco, the term signifies **alterity**—particularly concerning language—and often carries a **pejorative connotation**. *Chelha* specifically refers to a **subaltern language** that lacks recognition and legitimacy from others.

Etymology:

Determining the etymology of the term is difficult. Its **root √šlḥ** ([ʃlħ]) appears in several languages of the Afroasiatic family. Within the **Tamazight (Berber) macro-language**, depending on the variety, derivatives of this root may mean “**to cut superficially**,” “**to scar,**” “**torn fabric**,” “**(old) burnous**,” “**camel-hair tent**,” “**nomadic Arab**,” or “**sedentary Amazigh of the Anti-Atlas**,” among others. The consonant *ḥ* is often an expressive derivational element, suggesting that the original root may be √šl, associated with meanings such as “**to wander**” or “**to roam**.” Other words formed from this root, with additional expressive consonants (f, ḍ[dˁ], b, x), convey meanings such as “**malformation**,” “**distortion**,” or “**something poorly made**.”

Within the same language family, in Ancient Egyptian, the lexical root √šlḥ refers **to fear** (“to frighten”). In Arabic, both classical and modern sources across different regions derive from this root various terms expressing meanings such as “**to rob**,” “**to rip off,**” or “**to strip**" (https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/875486, in: Thesaurus Linguae

Aegyptiae).

Problematization:

Across these languages, periods, and regions, words derived from the **root √šlḥ** tend to carry **pejorative connotations**, often used **to denigrate languages, social groups**, or **ethnic communities**. However, to fully grasp the scope of this term, one must consider **who names whom**.

Endonyms [names for places or groups used within that place or group] and **endoglossonyms** [the name of a language given by its own speakers] are generally **ameliorative**, unlike **exonyms** [names for places or groups used outside that place or group] and **exoglossonyms** [the name of a language given by outsiders] —a pattern observed across many languages worldwide, as illustrated by the Greco-Latin *barbarian*, with equivalents in Tamazight (*agnaw*) and Arabic (*ʿajam:*عجم).



In this Youtube video by the group ***Beni Snous Imazighen***, one can hear **Othmane Aylesse** speaking with **Abdelkader Ayelesse**, who is introduced as the last proficient speaker of a **variety** of **Tamazight** from **western Algeria**, originating from the village of Ait Zidaz. Notably, he uses the glossonym ***tamazight*** when speaking in Tamazight, and the glossonym ***chelha*** when speaking in Arabic.

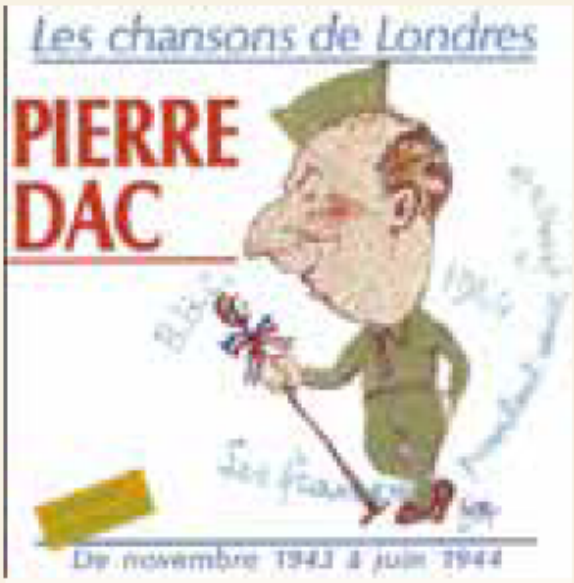
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ja2xYHQG71o

What, then, characterizes the exonyms and exoglossonyms derived from the root √šlḥ? Are they determined solely by **altering relations** that frame them **negatively,** in contrast to **endogenous**, ameliorative perspectives? The **reception** of such **exonyms** constitutes the second dimension of this entry. **Various configurations** may arise, including **oppositions** and structured glossonymic and ethnonymic fields. How are **these terms used**, and how do they **coexist** with **endonyms**, **endoglossonyms**, and other **existing**, **invented**, or **reinvented naming systems**?

Communication strategies:

European sources, especially Francophone literature on North Africa, frequently employ the **glossonym** and **ethnonym 'Chleuh'** (with **various orthographic iterations**) to denote **Amazigh populations** or macro-language, primarily in Morocco but occasionally in Algeria and Tunisia: Chleuh, Chelleuh, *Chelh(a), Chellu, Shelh(a)*, Shallah, Shilh(a), Shelluh, Shuluh), etc.

French borrowed the term in the **1930s** (*chleuh*, or its Germanized form *schleue*), using it to refer to Alsatian, Franc-Comtois, or German speakers. The term was brought back to France by soldiers who had fought in Morocco and later used it to label fellow French citizens whose language they did not understand. It was also introduced into modern Hebrew, where, as noted in the literature, it acquired a pejorative meaning, eventually becoming slang for a “simpleton” (*Cf.* Schroeter, 1997).



Paroles de la chanson de Pierre Dac :
« Si vous me voyez étreint d'une forte émotion,
C'est que je viens de prendre une grav' décision,
J'vais m'fair' chleuh !
N'croyez pas que je plaisant', c'est extrêm'ment sérieux
Et mes chansons, ce soir, sont des chansons d'adieu
Je vais m'faire chleuh !
Ce n'est pas d'gaieté de cœur que j'vais abandonner
Comm'ça, d'un jour à l'autr', ma nationalité
Pour me fair' chleuh !
Mais c'est tout ce qui reste à ma disposition
Pour exprimer dignement ma réprobation
Je vais m'fair' chleuh ! »
— Pierre Dac, J'vais m'fair' chleuh

Les Chansons de Londres (1943)
by Pierre Dac

The word '*chleuh*' was used by the **French** when they establish the **protectorate** of **Morocco** to designate the **Berber warriors** who resisted the French army.
In **1936**, the term was extended to designate a foreigner who **could not speak French**.
Before and **during World War II**, the term '**chleuh**' was also used to designate the **German soldiers** and **occupiers**, as in the song composed by the anti-nazi French comedian **Pierre Dac**.

Beyond written sources, in everyday oral usage outside academic classifications, the glossonym *Shelha/Tashelhit* has been widespread across North Africa, though often loosely defined. Its use appears to be **structured** by the **opposition** between **endogenous** and **exogenous perspectives**. In dialectal Arabic, it primarily designates varieties of Tamazight, but not uniformly across all Amazigh-speaking groups. While dominant in Morocco, it is not used in Algeria for major groups such as Kabyle, Chaoui, Tuareg, or Mozabite. Instead, it applies to smaller or more isolated groups, particularly in the Sahara and western Algeria.

This appears to be a **long-standing phenomenon**, as noted by De Colombo (1860) regarding a region in southern

Algeria. Here, one variety of Tamazight is elevated to the status of a 'language', while another is relegated to that of a 'patois':

"In Tidikelt, many men speak the Tuareg language, while some stammer a few idioms from the Sudan. Furthermore, wherever Shelha is spoken, **Arabic is used simultaneously**; it is noteworthy that the latter serves as the **official** and **refined tongue**, whereas **Shelha** is merely a **patois** of the **common people**" [my translation. The original quote goes: «*A Tidikelt on trouve beaucoup d'hommes qui parlent la langue des Touareg, et quelques-uns qui ânonnent quelques, idiomes du Soudan. Partout, du reste, où l'on parle la chelha, on se sert en même temps de l'arabe, et il est à remarquer même que c'est la langue officielle et élégante ; la chelha n'est qu'un patois du peuple*» (de Colomb,1860, p. 29)].

Even these "idioms of the Sudan" (as the author termed them at the time) may be referred to as *Shelha*. I have observed this regarding **Koria** and Kwarandzyey (**Korandje**). The former is now extinct, having previously been spoken by **Black populations** across various **North African regions**—communities largely of sub-Saharan origin via the trans-Saharan slave trade. Today, it survives within the **liturgical chants** of the **Oulad Diwan** in Algeria (equivalent to the Gnawa in Morocco) and was identified to us as 'Shelha' in the city of Saida. Regarding the latter, spoken in the Tabelbala region, although its endoglossonym is Korandje (Kwarandzyey) and it **coexists** with a **small Amazigh-speaking group** who refer to **their language** as **Tashelhit**, both varieties are uniformly designated in Arabic as 'Shelha'.

This glossonym is applicable to all **ethnolinguistic groups** characterized by **low numerical density** and a **near-total absence of language revitalization movements.** Its application may further exhibit **intra-regional variation**; my empirical evidence suggests that its **use** is **restricted** to the **most sociolinguistically vulnerable areas**.

The use of this glossonym—specifically in its Amazigh form, *Tashelhit*—is restricted to the **southern regions of Morocco** and the aforementioned border locality. Even there, its diffusion may be explained by **hierarchical relations between groups.** For instance, among the Aït Atta, *Shleuh* designates sedentary **Anti-Atlas populations viewed as socially inferior**. As reported by R. Agrour (2012, p. 778), this may explain its diffusion:

"Thus, for the Aït Atta (Berber-speaking nomads of the "median group"), Shleuh refers to the Berber-speaking populations of the Anti-Atlas valleys (sedentary populations of the "southern group") from whom they regularly levied tribute in exchange for **protection**. This resulted in a certain **condescension** toward these **sedentary groups**, perceived as **weak** and, moreover, as **speaking** of what the **Aït Atta** considered an **incorrect form of Berber**" [« *Ainsi, pour les Aït Atta (nomades berbérophones du «groupe médian»), Chleuh désigne les populations berbérophones des vallées de l'Anti-Atlas (sédentaires du groupe du Sud) sur lesquelles ils prélèvent régulièrement des tributs en échange de leur protection. D'où une certaine condescendance pour ces faibles sédentaires qui, en outre, parlent un berbère incorrect à leurs yeux*» (Agrour, 2012, p. 778).

Similarly, it has been noted:

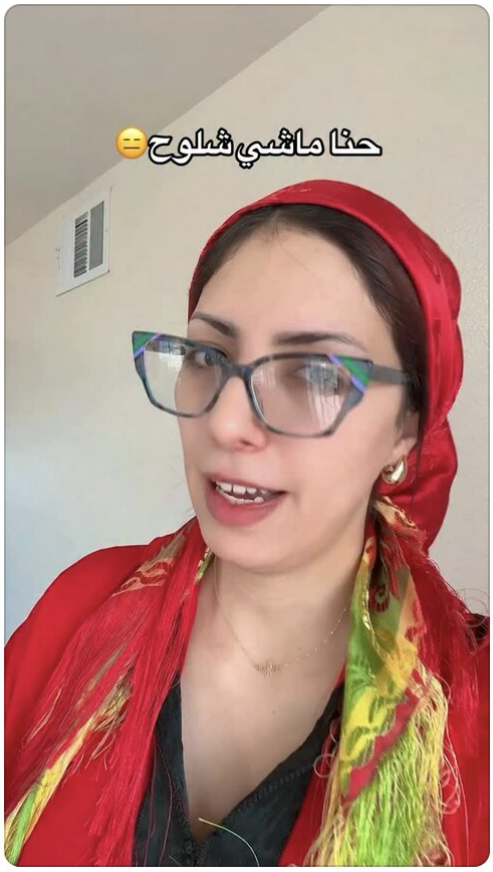
"**They** [the Aït Atta] **consider themselves** a **superior caste**, an aristocracy. They **despise** the **Berbers** of the **mountains**, whom they nickname Shleuh because of—as they put it—their way of speaking" [«*Ils -les Aït Atta- se considèrent comme une caste supérieure, une aristocratie. Ils méprisent les Berbères de la montagne, auxquels ils donnent le surnom de chleuh, parce que, disent-ils, leur façon de parler » (*de Segonzac 1910, p. 492)].

Even in such cases, where *Shelha* is adopted by a group, the term remains close in meaning to 'patois'. When speakers seek to valorize their language, endoglossonyms such as *tamazight* re-emerge.

Morphological shifts (of the word) and the **adoption** of ***Tashelhit*** as an **endoglossonym** serve only to **mitigate** the **pejorative connotations** and **subaltern status** associated with its **exoglossonymic equivalent**, ***Shelha***. Mindful of the **stigma** embedded in the initial exonymic form, the ***Tashelhit* speaker** reappropriates the **ancient endoglossonym *tamazight*** to **divest themselves** of the **inferior position** imposed by an **external gaze**. Consequently, **revitalization movements** in *Shleuh* regions **increasingly reclaim *tamazight***, the name also prioritized during its promotion in education and the media.

On the **social media**, there are several examples of videos that **contest** the use of ***chelha***, ***chleuh***. In Mororoccan dialectal Arabic, the influencer Mertmilitaire مرت العسكري (the soldier's wife) vindicates that "**we are amazighs**, and **not *chleuh***" – which means 'bandits'.

This **stigmatizing exoglossonymy** is not confined to the language itself but belongs to a **broader discourse targeting** the **entire ethnic group**. As Boukous notes:
*"**Shelh** is presented as a **crude** and **wild being**; his idiom is denied the status of a language.' Furthermore, Arabic **proverbs** and **expressions** of this nature regarding the *Amazigh* (and vice-versa) are abundant, such as the one recorded in Morocco by the same author: '*leᶜsid'a ma hiya tˁam u shshelḥa ma hya klam*' ('Just as porridge is a poor pittance, *Shelha* is a poor language'), (Boukous, 1999, pp 20- 21).



https://www.threads.com/@mert_l3eskri3/post/DTdPJlkDY6X?xmt=AQF0ljaAt-Ta-iowBiohPcp1k1uZOnJw9li3J-2ygscecw

In **common usage,** particularly in Morocco, where it is most widespread, **s*helha*** functions as a **synonym** for the word '**Berber**'—as pronounced in Arabic, 'البربر' and 'barbarian' are morphologically and semantically identical. While not as generalized in Algeria, certain expressions like those mentioned above are nonetheless attested. I personally observed, in the depths of the Algerian Sahara, a version **comparing s*helha*** to a **food product** of **very poor quality.** This was formulated by an **elderly speaker** of a *Tamazight* variety who used this **comparison** to evaluate his own **language** while **speaking in Arabic**. Yet, when prompted to speak in his own *tamazight* variety, he exhibited markedly positive attitudes. Like many other speakers of endangered *Amazigh* varieties in Algeria, this *tamazight* speaker from Tidikelt consistently uses the **local endoglossonym** *tagshurt*, or sometimes the more global *tamazight*, but **never s*helha*** when speaking his **native tongue**. This discourse, which may be characterized as ***auto-odi*** (self-hatred), is **internalized** in many instances; however, it remains most audible when the speaker employs the **language** of the '**Other**' who inculcated it.

In southern Morocco, during the diffusion of the exoglossonym while the endoglossonym had not yet disappeared, a stratification emerged. This same stratification was also noted in the Gourara (north of Tidikelt, in Algeria) by Deporter:

"They refer to the **dialect** they speak as **Shelha**, and when they wish to express themselves with **greater refinement**, they designate it as **Tamazirt** [Tamazight]. This term is grammatically feminine; its masculine form, Amazir, denotes a **noble person**, a free man" [«*Ils donnent au dialecte qu'ils parlent le nom de Chelha, et lorsqu'ils s'expriment avec élégance ils le désignent par le nom de Tamazirt: ce mot est du genre féminin, la forme masculine Amazir, signifie noble, homme libre.*»], (Deporter, 1891, p.16).

Subversion:

The **meaning** and **usage** of the term **depend** on whether it is framed from an **external** or **internal perspective**. Apparent inconsistencies in its use across scholarly descriptions of North African linguistic landscapes often stem from neglecting this distinction, particularly the **speakers' perspective**.

Many authors rely primarily on exonyms, either **disregarding the speaker's viewpoint** or conducting research in languages other than those described. Field observations show that speakers may refer to their language as *tamazight* when speaking it, but as s*helha* when speaking Arabic—thus adopting **an external perspective** even about their **own language**.

Such practices risk **reproducing orientalist biases** (Said, 1978), whereby the the purpose of this entry is to investigate how a **language** is **redefined** through **external frameworks**. A **language described** through the perspective of **another language** ultimately **reflects** more about the **latter** than the **former**, as it reveals which **historical** and **political factors** have construed (and still construe) **hierarchical systems between languages**.



Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0-LY5wVdyc
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0-LY5wVdyc

This is an excerpt by the rapper **Ninho +971** where he associates ferocity, violence, and chleuh
(...)
"J'ai caché le hasch' là-haut (là-haut)
J'compte, j'fais le chleuh, j'suis comme Fresh (comme Fresh)
Dans le gang, il n'y a pas d'djaos (nan)
J'suis plus dans la zone, j'ai déjà mis tempête (tempête)
Appelle-moi sur le plus (appelle-moi sur le plus)
Neuf-cent soixante-et-onze, reuf (reuf)"
(...)

The **glossonym *shelha*** and its variants do not designate a specific language but rather a **category of languages**. On the one hand, they consistently refer to **vernacular**, **minoritized**, and **non-standardized languages**. On the other hand, as exonyms, they **ignore speakers' self-designations** and position these languages within a **hierarchy of subordination.**

This form of **naming** can be understood as an act of **domination**. Conversely, the term tends to disappear when the language gains recognition, institutional support, or prestige.

The **external**, often **negative perspective** serves to assign the **named object** a **specific position**. It constitutes a form of linguistic—and more broadly political—intervention. The process begins with the attribution of a denigrating exonym by **centers of power** and may culminate in its **internalization** by **subordinated groups**.

Indeed, **domination** is most effective when **subordinated groups internalize external perspectives** and adopt the associated vocabulary.

By adopting this **exoglossonym**, the group—in a sense—accepts the **status associated** with it. Resistance, then, is expressed through **its rejection** and the **reclamation** of the ancestral **autoglossonym**, ***Tamazight***.

Shelha is comparable to several other designations that have attained similar prominence in North Africa, including the glossonyms "**Berber**" (etymologically related to "barbarian"), "**Kabyle**" (particularly prevalent in northern Algeria; القبائل, "tribes"), and "Rif" (الريف), from which "**Riffians**" is derived, referring in Arabic to "**the periphery**" or "**the countryside.**" Like *Shelha*, **these terms** are employed in **certain local contexts** to denote linguistic varieties, including forms of spoken Arabic in North Africa (*cf.* Agrour, 2012 & Desparmet, 1931), and thus **participate** in broader **systems** of **naming** and **power relations**. However, once such varieties and languages undergo processes of standardization and institutionalization, they tend to escape these labels, no longer being categorized as *Shelha*,

'Berber' or 'patois'.

Discussion:

- Which are the forms of domination that construe vernacular, minoritized and non-standardized language as such?
- Shelha is regarded as a vernacular, minoritized and non-standardized language. Are there similar hyerarchic statuses of languages in your country, from which historical and political factors were they produced, and on the grounds of which elements do they still (re)produce Otheness?
- Are there denigrating exonyms and exoglossonyms in your country? Who uses them in reagards to whom?
- Which is the position that the speakers of a vernacular, minoritized and non-standardized language are assigned, and which is the position they vindicate (or not) for themselves – e.g., are there the same phenomena of an internalized 'self-hatred' as discussed above for 'Chelha/Shelha'?

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