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The Amazigh word for fire¹

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*Dans cet article, les termes amazighes les plus répandus pour le terme 'feu' sont étudiés. Il s'avère que deux racines ont une répartition dialectale très générale, *(?)FW et *MS. Il semble probable que ces deux termes doivent être reconstitués pour le stade proto-amazighe, sans doute avec un sémantisme différent. Nous proposons que l'un d'entre eux *(?)FW avait à faire avec le feu "sauvage" (comme le feu de brousse), tandis que *MS était lié au feu domestique.*

Cross-linguistically, 'fire' is among the most stable words in diachrony. It is part of the major lists of basic vocabulary, and even occupies the first place in the *Leipzig-Jakarta list of basic vocabulary*, a weighted list of basic vocabulary in the world's languages (Tadmor 2009:69), based on the results of the Loanword Typology Project (Haspelmath & Tadmor 2009).

In quite a number of Amazigh languages, the concept of 'fire' is expressed by means of a loanword from Arabic, no doubt to avoid of associations with Hellfire. The same avoidance strategy is found in Maghribian Arabic, where the word *ʿafya*, lit. 'well-being', is used rather than the original Arabic noun *nar* 'fire' (see Behnstedt & Woidich 2011: 433–434). Amazigh languages typically take over the Arabic euphemism, e.g. Tashelhiyt *leafit* (Destaing 1920: 127), Ghomara *leafya* (Mourigh 2016: 383), Figuig *leafayt* (Benamara 2013: 302), cf. Kossmann (2013:116).

When studying Amazigh vocabulary, one finds two widely attested roots used in expressions for 'fire', (?)FW and MS. In the following, the Amazigh varieties will be presented in a half-geographical, half-genetic ordering, largely following Kossmann (1999). This is not meant as a genetic classification, but just as a way to arrange the data in a more or less accessible way.

¹It is a great honor to dedicate this article to Prof. Ahmed Boukous. In the article, various sources have been used. In order to keep the argumentation clear, transcriptions have been normalized by means of the (rather unremarkable) transcription system used in Kossmann (2013).

1. (?FW)

This term is well-attested (Naït-Zerrad 2002: 506, 675, *sub* F3 and FW1; Laoust 1920: 182):

Tuareg: Mali *efew* (Heath 2006: 139) ; similar or identical forms elsewhere (Ritter 2009:II/222).

Western: Tetserrét *efi*, pl. *afabbən* (Lux 2013: 528), not in Zenaga.

Eastern: Awjila *afiw* (van Putten 2014: 246).
Ghadames *ofa* (Lanfry 1973: 86).
Nefusa *tfawt* (Beguinot 1942: 234).
Not attested in Siwa, Sokna, Elfogaha.

Zenatic: Mzab *tfawt* (Delheure 1984: 56); not attested in the meaning 'fire' in Ouargla, Figuig, Rif.

Morocco: Ait Hdidou (eastern High Atlas) *afa*, *afa* (EA *wa-*) 'fire, Hell' (Azdoud 2011: 29).
Ayt Wirra (southern Middle Atlas) *afa* (EA *wa-*) 'fire, Hell' (Oussikoum 2013: 181).²

Naït-Zerrad (2002: 506) also mentions the term for Tashelhiyt, but I have not been able to establish his source.

The noun is clearly related to expressions referring to light and brightness; thus the direct cognate of Mzab and Nefusa *tfawt* in Figuig (*tfawt*) means 'light', while in Tuareg and in Middle Atlas varieties *tifawt* means 'sunrise'; the same term lies behind Zenaga *tuffäkt* ~ *tuffägt* (**təffägt*) 'light, end of the night' (Taine-Cheikh 2008: 150). There is undoubtedly a relation to the noun *tafukt* (and variants, see Kossmann 1999: 194) 'sun', even though the correspondences are not entirely clear. A verb of the form *ifaw* ~ *ffəw* 'to become light, to be in the morning' is in many Amazigh varieties.

The historical reconstruction of the root of this noun is not without caveats. Zenaga has both *tuffägt* 'light', *äffäg* 'to rise (sun)' and *toʔ(f)fugt* ~ *täwfukt* 'sun'; the first form suggests a stem FW, while the second form suggests ?FW or ?FK (cf. Taine-Cheikh 2004; Kossmann 2001). The *o* in Ghadames *ofa* corresponds regularly to stressed **ä*? (Kossmann 2001), and thus would best fit a reconstruction ?FW. The other variants do not provide much evidence or counter-evidence for one or the other reconstruction; one notes that the *voyelle constante* of Middle Atlas *afa* would be well in line with an earlier glottal stop-initial form.

A further problem is posed by the absence of /w/ in Ghadames *ofa*, Middle Atlas *afa*. There is no doubt that the root the word belongs to has *w, as shown by verbs

²For further attestations in central Morocco, see Laoust (1920: 182).

such as *ifaw*. In Amazigh languages, final *w* is commonly absent in masculine forms ending in *-aw* (sometimes in variation), while it reappears in feminine forms, e.g. Kabyle *azəgza* ~ *azəgzaw* 'green (M)' vs. *tazəgzawt* 'green (F)'. Assuming that there was a more or less regular dropping of **w* after *a* in word-final position, this would explain most of the attested forms: Ghadames *ofa* and Middle Atlas *afa* would represent the apocopated form, while feminine forms such as *tfawt* would have preserved the *w*, as it was not in word-final position. The Tuareg forms would have preserved *w* because the apocope only occurs after **a*, not after **e*.

There are two vocalizations of the term: *(?)*few* (or the like) and *(?)*fa(w)*. *(?)*few* is only found with certainty in Tuareg, while *(?)*fa(w)* is found in Ghadames, Nefusa, Mzab and some Moroccan varieties. The historical background of Tetserrét vowels is too uncertain to use them for any purposes. Awjila *i* can correspond both to *e* and to *a* in other Amazigh varieties (van Putten 2013), and thus does not help us with the reconstruction either.

2. *MS

Attestations of this term are also wide-spread (cf. Laoust 1920: 50):

Tuareg: Mali: *tāmse* ~ *temse* (Heath 2006: 438); *temse* (Ayer); *timəs* (Ahaggar); *šiməss* (Iwellemeden); *temsi* (Ayer, Iwellemeden) (Ritter 2009/II: 222).
cf. Mali *temässe* 'hell' (Heath 2006: 438).

Eastern: Siwa *təmsi* 'fire, hell' (Naumann ms.: 31).
Elfoqaha *temsi* (Paradisi 1963: 110).
Sokna *timsi* (Sarnelli 1924–1925: 18).

Kabyle: *timəs(s)* ~ *timəssi* ~ *timsi* 'fire, Hell' (Dallet 1982: 520).

Zenatic: Ouargla *timsi* 'fire, Hell' (Delheure 1987: 197).
Mzab *timsi* 'fire, esp. Hell' (Delheure 1984: 123).
Figuig *timsi* 'fire, fever, Hell' (Benamara 2013: 438).
Rif *timəssi* (Serhoual 2002: 319).
Ayt Seghrouchen *timəssi* (Taïfi 1991: 436).

Zenaga has a different term for 'fire', derived from a verb for 'to warm oneself',³ but uses *təmsih* (**/təmšə/*) in the sense of 'Hell' (Taine-Cheikh 2008: 368); this is no doubt the older term that was ousted for euphemistic reasons.

There are only few other words with the consonants *MS that have a relationship to fire. The most important among these is the word for 'silex, fire stone': Zenaga

³ *oʔzuzən* ~ *uʔzuzən* 'fire' (Taine-Cheikh 2008: 647), cf. *z(z)uzən* 'to warm oneself at a fire'; Mali Tuareg *tāzuzemt* ~ *tazuzemt* ~ *tazuzent* 'ember' (Heath 2006: 838); Kabyle *zzizən* 'to warm oneself at a fire, in the sun' (Dallet 1992: 949).

tiʔməššāh (*təʔməšša/ 'fire stone' (Taine-Cheikh 2008: 369); Mزاب *tmisit* 'silex, firestone' (Delheure 1984: 123); Figuig *tmisi* 'silex' (Benamara 2013: 448). It is not clear if and how Kabyle *tanišša* 'silex' (Dallet 1982: 539) is related to these terms. Another related word is no doubt Figuig *iləmsi* 'hearth' (Benamara 2013: 260);⁴ Middle Atlas *alməssi* (EA *wa-*) 'hearth, fire, family' (Taïfi 1991: 379), cf. Laoust (1920: 50). Taïfi (l.c.) plausibly suggests that this is a compound of an otherwise unattested element *al* 'location' and the root *MS 'fire'.

Like with the previous term, the Zenaga evidence is ambiguous as to the presence of an initial glottal stop: while *təmsih* suggests there was no such a glottal stop, the probably related term *tiʔməššāh* 'fire stone' shows one.

One also remarks differences in the shape of the noun. Three major shapes appear in the different languages: *mse, *mässe and *məss. There is no immediate answer to why these shapes are all found, especially as many of them appear side by side in the same varieties.

3. Analysis

All in all, two major terms for 'fire' are found in the Amazigh languages. Both are well-attested all over the Amazigh-speaking territory, and there is little doubt that both terms were already present in proto-Amazigh. Therefore, one expects that their original meanings were different. One of these terms, *(?)FW is clearly related to terms indicating sundawn, light, and sun. The other term, *MS is only related to one widely attested term, the word for 'silex' or 'firestone'. This difference in etymological embedding may well indicate the original difference between the two terms. One can imagine that *(?)FW originally indicated a large natural fire, like a bushfire, which would be visible from far away and, from there, have similar appearance as sundawn. On the other hand, *MS could have indicated a man-made fire, contained, and much less luminous than *(?)FW. As this difference is not attested in any modern language in this way, such a reconstruction is conjectural, and other reconstructions remain possible, for example that *FW indicated the light produced by a fire, while *MS referred to the flame and the heat of the fire.

⁴Note also Ouargla *iləmsi* 'part of the house where water is kept' (Delheure 1987: 169). This term may be rather related to Ouargla (and other varieties) *aləmsu* 'goat or sheep hide in which dates are conserved', in the sense that maybe at an earlier stage this could also refer to goat hides in which water is kept.

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