The Amazigh (Berber) peoples are the indigenous peoples of North Africa. The most recent census in Morocco (2006) estimated the number of Tamazight speakers to be 28% of the population. However, the Amazigh associations strongly challenge this and instead claim a rate of 65 to 70%. This means that the Amazigh-speaking population may well number around 20 million in Morocco, and around 30 million throughout North Africa and the Sahel as a whole.

The Amazigh people have founded an organisation called the “Amazigh Cultural Movement” (ACM) to advocate for their rights. It is a civil society movement based on universal values of human rights. There are now more than 800 Amazigh associations established throughout the whole of Morocco.

The administrative and legal system of Morocco has been highly Arabized, and the Amazigh culture and way of life is under constant pressure to assimilate. Morocco has for many years been a unitary state with a centralised authority, a single religion, a single language and systematic marginalisation of all aspects of the Amazigh identity. The Constitution of 2011 officially recognises the Amazigh identity and language. This could be a very positive and encouraging step forward for the Amazigh people of Morocco but unfortunately its official implementation is still pending enactment of the organic law that would establish rules as to how Tamazight is to be officially implemented, along with methods for incorporating it into teaching and into life generally as an official language. Work to harmonise the legal arsenal with the new Constitution has not, in fact, yet commenced and no steps have been taken to implement the Constitution.

Morocco has not ratified ILO Convention No. 169 and did not vote in favour of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
Implementing official recognition of Tamazight

The organic law establishing Tamazight’s official implementation has yet to see the light of day. In his speech to Parliament on 9 October 2015, King Mohamed VI called on the government to speed up its enactment of this law. Following this, the government established a committee to prepare a draft bill of law on the Council of Languages and Cultures. The procedure for creating this committee has been seriously challenged by the Amazigh Cultural Movement (ACM), which has issued several press releases denouncing the marginalisation of Amazigh regions from the formation of this committee.
It seems that this law is likely to be enacted before this government’s term in office concludes at the end of 2016. According to information from the ACM, however, if the draft bill contains none of the recommendations made by the Amazigh associations, the ACM will reject it.

**Amazigh language teaching, a botched project**

The Amazigh language (Tamazight) was introduced into Morocco’s education system in 2003 and a timetable for its expansion across primary schools established in 2011. This plan has not been implemented, however. Following the language’s official recognition in 2011, the ACM has noted a net decline in its teaching.

The Minister of Education has, in effect, stated his opposition to the teaching of Tamazight in the 2030 plan published by his cabinet just before the beginning of the school year 2015/2016, which makes no mention of the language.

In an interview with *Tamazgha*, a Tamazight magazine, Meryam Demnati, a researcher with the Royal Institute for Amazigh Language and Culture (IRCAM) confirmed: “The Ministry of Education’s indifference is causing the level of Tamazight teaching to plateau and decline, not to mention the 2030 plan produced by the same ministry, which is based on Arabic, with no mention of Tamazight. Instead of being rolled out, at the very least, in primary schools, there are scarcely half a million children being taught Tamazight, out of 4,141,000 pupils in primary and 815,000 pupils in secondary school”.

At the start of the 2015-2016 school year, the Ministry of Education required all Tamazight teachers to teach Arabic instead of Tamazight, which led to demonstrations and protests at a decision which the ACM has described as discriminatory.

According to the report submitted by Amazigh associations (TAMUNT NIFFUS, TAMAYNUT, AGHARAS LKHIR) to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) during its 56th session from 21 September to 9 October 2015 in Geneva, teaching of the Amazigh language is at a standstill: “Twelve years after the launch of Tamazight teaching in Morocco, the government has done nothing to improve the situation of this language in the education system. The rate of implementation is too slow. In reality, in 2014, Tamazight teaching
reached only 14% of primary school pupils, according to the leaders and researchers of the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture (IRCAM).²

Land, a problematic issue

Land remains a problematic issue in Morocco. A number of Amazigh tribes had their land expropriated by France during the Amazigh people’s resistance to colonisation. Following independence, these tribes never recovered that land, despite a number of demands and protests. The government now considers these lands to be State lands.

One flagrant example of this is Tadouart village in the region of Agadir Idaoutanan where more than 400 families risk being evicted from their ancestral lands. This problem led the Amazigh to take their case to the CESCR’s 56th session in 2015.

According to the NGO stakeholder report made during this session, 4,000 inhabitants living in 2,000 houses on 420 hectares of land 20 km to the south-east of Agadir are being forced to leave their property. This eviction forms part of a process of demarcating more than 12 million hectares of indigenous land in favour of the State. The families are consequently moving to the cities where, uprooted, they assimilate and lose their identity. This is threatening a large number of people and violating a whole set of rights that are guaranteed by international instruments.³

King Mohamed VI had, however, in his discourse dated 8 December 2014, given instructions to review the situation of lands known as “sulalya lands” (lands managed by tribes)⁴ and the tribes are waiting enthusiastically for solutions that can guarantee their rights.

Amazigh and the media

The main focus of the ACM is and always has been the media. There is an Amazight TV channel that broadcasts in Tamazight but the terms and conditions laid down by the Minister for Information do not respect the Amazigh quota. The seven Moroccan channels give no importance to Tamazight whatsoever.
A glimmer of hope

By way of conclusion, during COP21 in Paris, the Moroccan Minister for the Environment received representatives of Africa’s indigenous peoples in her office at the Moroccan pavilion and noted her admiration for their role in adaptation to climate change and biodiversity conservation. She also gave a similar speech to the representatives of the Global Caucus of Indigenous Peoples. This is a sign of recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights and it gives us hope that 2016 may be the year in which Morocco’s official recognition of the Amazigh language and identity is finally implemented.

Notes and references

1 Interview given to Tamazgha http://tamazgha.fr/L-Etat-marocain-est-anti-amazigh.html
3 Ibid.
4 http://www.terrescollectives.ma/Pages/ar/mot-ministre.cshtml

Dr. Mohamed Handaine is the President of the Confederation of Amazigh Associations of South Morocco (Tamunt n Iffus), Agadir, Morocco. He is a university graduate, historian and writer, and board member of the Coordination Autochtone Francophone (CAF). He is a founder member of the Amazigh World Congress and has published a number of works on Amazigh history and culture. He is also the IPACC North African Regional Representative as well as a member of the steering committee of the ICCA Consortium in Geneva.