



CONGRES MONDIAL AMAZIGH

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Some aspects of Amazigh life in the context of covid-19

Amazighs living in the various Tamazgha countries (North Africa and the Sahara) consider the national public media (especially TV) to be unreliable. Therefore, when they need information, they generally get it from foreign television stations broadcast by satellite and Internet networks. Word of mouth and the "Amazigh telephone", i.e. the informal flow of information in the Amazigh language, also work very well. Amazighs are also in constant contact with their diaspora abroad, which provides them with news that may be useful to them. All this has meant that the Amazighs were warned very early on about the spread of the coronavirus around the world and planned for its arrival in their countries. The Amazigh populations, who could thus see the pandemic coming from afar, reacted early to protect themselves, without waiting for directives from the States. And very quickly, that is to say as early as February in some regions, Amazigh communities, particularly in rural and mountain areas, set up "vigilance committees" which decided and applied strict measures to prevent the introduction and spread of the coronavirus within their territories.

This community reflex is of cultural origin but is also linked to the context of the country. It is cultural because the Amazigh communities have a tradition of being autonomous and rely first and foremost on their ability to show solidarity, particularly in order to manage exceptional events or to deal with serious danger. In Kabylia, for example, practically all villages have a village committee, inspired by the Tajmaat, ancient village assemblies, true institutions recognized and respected by the inhabitants, who administered their territories as independent republics. This need to rely first and foremost on oneself is reinforced by the feeling and the fact that state public services are absent or very deficient. It is therefore because they are aware of the shortcomings of public health services and the dilapidated state health structures that the Amazighs have done everything, on their own initiative and with their own means, to preserve themselves from covid-19.



Control at the entrance of a village in Kabylia (Algeria) organized by the village committee

In concrete terms, wherever they could organize themselves autonomously, the Amazighs closed their territories to non-essential foreign visitors and set up entry and exit controls, advocated confinement for the inhabitants and organized supplies of food, medicines and other basic necessities. People in contact with the outside world systematically wear locally manufactured

masks and the vehicles that provide supplies and public spaces are regularly disinfected. The village committees have also ensured that the most needy and vulnerable people are not left out. The whole organization is based on solidarity and mutual aid, the key words during this health crisis.



Disinfection operation of public spaces in a village of Kabylia

The result of this self-organisation and collective responsibility in the war against the coronavirus has been extremely positive, as the number of infected people in these territories has remained very low. According to some testimonies, in order to cope with the coronavirus, Amazighs in some regions have also revived their knowledge and know-how in pharmacopoeia and traditional medicine to treat themselves. In fact, the deaths that have occurred in recent months in the Amazigh regions, are mostly due to causes other than covid-19.

The great lesson to be learned from the management of this ordeal is that when Amazighs regain their autonomy, when they become free to organize themselves again, they instinctively return to the values and tangible and intangible resources of their ancestral culture to invent solutions adapted to their concerns and needs.



Preparation of batches of foodstuffs for distribution

And paradoxically, the state authorities do not appreciate these traditional Amazigh community institutions and their autonomous management. Hyper-centralized states do not accept that decisions, even the most routine ones, can be taken and implemented outside their control. They refuse to recognize the existence of indigenous peoples and to grant them the slightest decision-making power, the slightest space for freedom. Therefore, State authorities try by all means to hinder the functioning of these community structures and adopt a suspicious attitude towards their leaders. In Kabylia, for example, State representatives at the local level (heads of local administrations, police and gendarmerie authorities) monitor, summon and attempt to intimidate members of village committees by threatening to prosecute them for illegal activities and even for "undermining State authority and national unity". During this health crisis, the gendarmes dismantled several checkpoints set up by the village committees, carried out acts of violence against people and even tried to interfere in operations to distribute food to the inhabitants. And we observe that very often, the representatives of the State at the local level, those who are in direct contact with the populations, are not civil authorities but gendarmes equipped with guns of war, as if they were an army of occupation. And these gendarmes are generally Arabic-speaking people who do not understand and do not speak Tamazight, which does not facilitate exchanges, nor the serenity of relations with the population. This often results in incidents, sometimes serious, in which the victims are always the indigenous people.

In Algeria, on 20 April 2020, in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic, the government passed Law No. 20-06, which severely punishes "anyone who receives money, a gift or an advantage from a state, institution, or public or private body, or from any natural or legal person, inside or outside the country, with the aim of undertaking acts that could harm state security and the stability of its institutions, or national unity and territorial integrity". For Amazigh World Congress and other NGOs, this law, with its very vague content, simply aims to prohibit aid provided by the Amazigh diaspora to their communities of origin, and to hinder intra- and inter-community solidarity. This is very dangerous for the life and way of life of these communities. The same law also punishes the dissemination of "false information", which is only one way of undermining the freedom of expression.

The Moroccan government also adopted Bill 22-20 in April 2020, which heavily punishes "the dissemination of false news" on the internet. This law aims to restrict freedom of expression and in particular to prevent criticism of the government.



Algerian Gendarmes in Kabylia

The Amazighs have never been consulted by governments on the health measures adopted, nor on how they are being implemented to deal with the coronavirus. For example, the dates and times of containment and deconfinement were decided unilaterally, without consultation with indigenous representatives. In most Amazigh territories, the authorities have not distributed coronavirus protection equipment (masks, hydro-alcoholic gel, etc.) or adequately disseminated information in the Amazigh language.

In conclusion, it is essential for States to radically change their relations with the Amazighs and their methods of intervention in Amazigh territories towards a more peaceful approach based on recognition, respect, reparation and reconciliation.

Recommendations

- recognize and respect the local Amazighs institutions,
- recognize and respect the collective rights of Amazighs in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,
- respect the principle of free, prior and informed consent of Amazighs on all matters that concern them,
- withdraw the gendarmerie from Amazigh territories and set up local security services under the authority of local representative institutions,
- implement the UN recommendations concerning indigenous peoples in the context of covid-19.

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The Board of CMA.