SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE FIRST AMAZIGH WORLD CONGRESS (AUGUST 27–30, 1997, TAFIRA, CANARY ISLANDS)

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All too often, Berber language and culture are relegated to the museum or to folklore. The first Amazigh World Congress from August 27–30, 1997, showed that Berbers, North Africa’s indigenous population who call themselves Imazighen, represent an important part of the present sociocultural reality of Maghreb nation-states and that their language and culture are not at all mere relics from ancient times.

More than three hundred delegates of “Berberistic” associates

1 Imazighen (Berber language/Tamazight, plural of Amazigh = free man). More and more Amazigh discourse rejects the foreign term “Berber” because of its negative associations. The Romans used the term barbarus to designate “the uncivilized brute living outside the Roman Empire and ignoring its civilization” (cf. Neumann 1983:10). In Greek barbaros means stammering and mumbling, i.e., speaking an incomprehensible language. And even the Arab term barbara (to speak, to murmur, to chatter, all at the same time, much and noisily) bears a negative connotation. In the following text, however, the terms Berber and Amazigh are used as synonyms. Mutual influences are characteristics of nearly all aspects of Arab and Amazigh life and thus make it impossible to discern crucial objective and “racial” criteria for the identification/differentiation of Arabs and Imazighen. The distinctive criteria instead are language, paternal or maternal descendancy from a Tamazight-speaking family or from a family having the sentiment of belonging to Amazigh culture, and subjective identification as Amazigh. Cf. Faath (1989:382). The share of the Tamazight-speaking population is 18–25 percent in Algeria (Länderbericht Algerien 1989:9), and about 40 percent in Morocco (Länderbericht Marokko 1994:34; depending on the sources, the Moroccan percentage varies between 40 and 80 percent, cf. Donnet, Renaissance berbère au Maroc, in Le Monde diplomatique, 01/15/1995, p. 18); in Tunisia, it is about 1 percent (Lacoste 1991:276). There are no statistics for Libya, Egypt, Mauritania, and the Sahara. In Libya, Tamazight-speaking areas still exist in the Djebel Nefousa region, in Zourara, Sokna, and Aoudjila, and the Siwa Oasis of Egypt. Tamasheq, the Touareg language, also belongs to the Tamazight group (Servier 1990:22–31).

2 The notion of “Berberistic” is used in accordance with Chaker (1989 a.o.) for persons standing for the spread and acknowledgement of the Amazigh lan-
ations, intellectuals and artists from Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Burkina-Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and the diaspora (America, France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, England, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway), defending the preservation and official acknowledgement of Amazigh language and culture in their countries, met on the Canary Islands, in Tafira. Never before had an Imazighen meeting of these dimensions taken place.

The idea of creating an international and organizational framework for pan-Amazigh efforts and thus for coordinating the work of Amazigh groups in every country had already been born at the 17th movie festival in August 1994 in Douarnenez, Brittany, which was dedicated to the Peuple Amazigh. The Declaration of Douarnenez, which was signed by numerous international Amazigh associations, states as follows:

En outre, ces associations décident d’être partie prenante du projet de création d’un congrès amazigh international. Cette organisation se donnera pour tâche de défendre, de développer et de diffuser la culture, la langue et l’identité amazighes. Elle s’inscrit dans le cadre du combat démocratique et se donnera tous les moyens pacifiques pour faire aboutir ses revendications.

The intention was put into practice with the founding of the Congrès Mondial Amazigh (CMA/AWC), an international non-governmental organization, at the pre-congress, which was held in Saint-Rome de Dolan September 1–3, 1995. The AWC, whose headquarters are in Paris, considers itself as the caisse de résonance internationale, un prolongement du travail qui se fait en Afrique du Nord. The main objective is to unify the Amazigh people, “regrouper le peuple amazigh”, as declared by Mabrouk Ferkal, then chairman of the AWC.3

After two years of intensive preparations the Imazighen finally came together to hold their congress, which was celebrated as a milestone in Amazigh history. Symbolism was very much empha-

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3 Interview with Mabrouk Ferkal in Le Matin (Algeria), 07/21/1997, pp. 1 and 3. At this congress, Antonio Felix Martin Hormiga, citizen of the Canary Islands, was elected chairman of the AWC, and the AWC headquarters (buro mondial) were moved from Paris to Las Palmas.