



**SPECIAL FOCUS ON AMAZIGH LITERATURE: CRITICAL AND CLOSE
READING APPROACHES**

To Be or Not to Be A Nomad: The Limits of Iconoclasm in Si Mohand U'Mhand's Poetry

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Abstract

The nineteenth-century Kabyle poet Si Mohand U'Mhand is often celebrated as an icon of freedom and unconventionality. Questioning this myth, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate that this bard was rather a liminal figure that oscillated between iconoclasm and conservatism. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, the article argues that despite Si Mohand's being a notorious wanderer, he was not a nomad in that his poetry betrays a longing for the "State." Indeed, the poet lamented his nomadic and unconventional lifestyle as the mark of a social and moral decline forced on him by the colonial intrusion, which stripped his family of their lands following his father's execution. In addition, the poet perpetuates the hierarchized and prejudiced traditional representations of his society's different social classes and racial components.

Keywords: Si Mohand; poetry; nomadism; freedom; conservatism; State

One of the best-known Amazigh poets, Si Mohand is often hailed as an icon of freedom who defied both the societal and aesthetic codes of his time. Born to a family of rich landowners, he turned into a wanderer who roamed the lands in Algeria and Tunisia, often on foot. After having attended a religious school and learnt the Qur'an, as a nomad, he indulged in smoking kef and drinking alcohol and improvised audacious poems that celebrated the female body and physical love. At a time when poets celebrated the values of their community and composed verse for a living, Si Mohand preferred a lyrical, self-centered poetry and abstained from seeking to profit off of his art, which he did not even try to write down. However, this article argues that Si Mohand was less of a "free spirit" than he seemed to be, and that he subscribed both to the religious/moral

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values of his time and to its traditional social hierarchy, looking askance at social mobility and contemptuously at those he saw as *parvenus*. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's analyses of nomadism and Mikhaïl Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, I will explain that, in spite of his meanderings, Si Mohand was not a nomad. First, his nomadism was not a choice but the result of historical and personal junctures; and second, his mobility was not accompanied by the rejection of the "State" and its thrust to regulate and hierarchize. Therefore, contrary to the popular portrayal of his life as that of an iconoclastic figure *libérée de tout et de tous* ("freed from everything and everyone"),¹ this article explains that Si Mohand occupies a liminal position between tradition and innovation; between conservatism and subversion.

Si Mohand Criticism

In 1951, the French archivist and writer Emile Dermenghem described Si Mohand U'Mhand as a *poète maudit* in the vein of Paul Verlaine and François Villon, whom he exceeded in primitivism but whose sincerity he shared.² More than half a century later – in 2007 – this qualification would be taken up by Amazighologist Paulette Galand-Pernet in writing that "il [Si Mohand] rejoint un héritage littéraire français, celui du poète solitaire, exilé dans son propre groupe social, que l'on dit aussi 'maudit'" – "[Si Mohand] joins a French literary legacy, that of the solitary poet, exiled in his own social group, who is also said to be 'cursed.'"³ Mouloud Mammeri, to whom we owe the most important collection of Si Mohand's poems,⁴ similarly described Si Mohand as at once cursed and God's elect:

Il a ainsi créé (il ne semble pas qu'il ait existé avant lui) le type du poète à la foi élu et damné, libéré des canons de conduite communs, et dont le rôle prestigieux – à la limite démoniaque – est justement d'apporter à une société enserrée jusqu'à l'étouffement dans les règles d'une tradition tyrannique l'exemple d'une anarchie compensatrice. L'œuvre et la vie de Si Mohand, intimement imbriquées l'une dans l'autre, ont été senties par tous comme un signe et un instrument de libération.⁵

He thus created (it does not seem to have existed before him) the type of the poet who is both elect and damned, liberated from the common canons of conduct, and whose prestigious – almost demonic – role is precisely to bring the example of compensatory anarchy to a society confined to the point of suffocation within the rules of a tyrannical tradition.

¹ Mouloud Mammeri, *Les Isefra: poèmes de Si Mohand-Ou-Mhand* (Algiers: Hibr, 2018), 15.

² Emile Dermenghem, "La Poésie kabyle: Si Mouh ou Mouhand et les Isefras," *Documents algériens* 57 (1951):1-6. http://alger-roi.fr/Alger/documents_algeriens/culturel/pages/57_poesie_kabyle.html.

³ Paulette Galand-Pernet, "Mohand, héritier créateur. Éditions, auteur, sens de l'œuvre," *Études et documents berbères* 25-26 (2007): 91. Translations from French are mine throughout.

⁴ It is from this collection, *Les Isefra de Si Mohand*, that all the poems quoted here have been taken.

⁵ Mouloud Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 9.

Intimately intertwined, Si Mohand's work and life have been felt by all as an instrument of liberation.

With Si Mohand's predicament as a damned poet, Mammeri associates anarchy and freedom – a word significantly repeated twice in the above quotation. Si Mohand, according to this depiction, acts as a liberator, as one who urges his community to rid itself of the chains of “a tyrannical tradition.” It is this very idea that underpins the phrase chosen by the Algerian scholar Mohamed Lakhdar Maougal as a title for one of his articles: “Si Mohand, le souffle prométhéen.” The evocation of Prometheus represents the Kabyle poet as a rebel against tyranny – and not only that of God(s): Si Mohand's *révolution modernitaire* defies the sacred character of religious language, mixing it with irreverence.⁶ “Sa mission iconoclaste de sédition [. . .] dit [. . .] sa révolte et son rejet du nouvel ordre né de l'occupation coloniale [His iconoclast mission of sedition speaks of his revolt and his rejection of the new order, born of the colonial occupation].”⁷

The representation of Si Mohand as a rebel culminates in Abdelhak Lahlou's piece “Réflexions sur le neuvain.” For Lahlou, Si Mohand was “ce rebelle à tout ordre, ce réfractaire à toute contrainte” [that rebel who opposed any order and constraint]; “cet ennemi acharné de toutes les règles imposées” [that bitter enemy of all imposed rules].⁸ Unlike the *afsihs* and the *meddahs*⁹ who composed poetry for a living, Si Mohand improvised unapologetically lyrical poems that he conferred to a happy few listeners.¹⁰ His compositions introduced both the theme of exile and the *neuvain* structure.¹¹ Both innovations were, Lahlou contends, made possible by the failure of the 1871 uprising. That event precipitated the end of the traditional lifestyle and social structures, condemning many Kabyles to leave their home places.¹² The neat structure of the *neuvain* was precisely an aesthetic attempt to reconstruct the ancestral order that had been undone by French colonialism.¹³

Only one critic seems to have been alert to the conservative impulse in Si Mohand's poetry. In her article “L'Onomastique et la poétique de l'errance dans la poésie mohandienne,” Ouerdia Yermeche underscores the Kabyle poet's religious education, his constant evocation of God in his poems, his self-

⁶ Mohamed Lakhdar Maougal, “Si Mohand Ou Mhand, le souffle prométhéen,” *Etudes et documents berbères* 25-26 (2007): 126.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁸ Abdelhak Lahlou, “Réflexion sur le neuvain de Si Mohand UMhand,” *Awal: cahiers d'études berbères* 40-41 (2009-2010): 73.

⁹ *Afsih*, derived from the Arabic word *fasaha*, means “the master of eloquence,” while *ameddah* literally means “he who praises.” Both the *afsih* and the *ameddah* sang their poetry in public places. See Lahlou, “Réflexion sur le neuvain,” 77.

¹⁰ Lahlou “Réflexion sur le neuvain,” 77 and 80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79-85.

¹² In March 1871, Cheikh El Mokrani and Cheikh Haddad, two Kabyle dignitaries, led one of the most important revolts against the French occupation in Algeria. The insurrection was met with a violent repression and, after its failure, with a series of reprisals entailing mass arrests, deportations, and displacements.

¹³ Lahlou, “Réflexion sur le neuvain,” 85.

perception as a moral guide, and the unchosen nature of his nomadic lifestyle. Simultaneously, however, this critic observes that blasphemy was not rare in Si Mohand's poems and that while he was profoundly religious, he was no less strongly attached to earthly pleasures.¹⁴ Yermeche concludes that Si Mohand's originality lies in his ability to bring opposites together – a moral outlook based on religious teachings, on the one hand, and revealed preferences that disrespect these teachings, on the other – without shocking his audience.¹⁵

It is precisely this Mohandian ability to reconcile opposites that I seek to illustrate. While Yermeche's study focuses on onomastics and Si Mohand's ambivalent relation to religion, I would like to go beyond her arguments to show that ambivalence marks not only Si Mohand's relationship with God, which oscillates between submission and rebellion, but also his attitude toward nomadism. His itinerancy may have been forced upon him, and something he laments as decadent, but he does occasionally identify with vagabonds. The road, as he experienced it, is no less "undecidable." Although it allowed him to mix with people from different races, religions, and social stations, I will show that his representation of these differences is strongly hierarchized, reproducing his community's bias against blacks, Jews, and *nouveaux riches*. As a man who descended from wealth to poverty, he looked disapprovingly at the sudden empowerment of these social categories, seeing in it a sign of social chaos.

Si Mohand and Nomadism

In his introduction to *Les Isefra*, Mouloud Mammeri notes that Si Mohand identifies himself with the "pauvres hères frustrés du présent" [wretches that are unsatisfied with the present].¹⁶ Mammeri gives the examples of *Terrzem a Wlad-babelleh*, which he translates as "Vous êtes brisés, enfants de la bohème" [You are broken, bohemian children],¹⁷ and *Tura d nnuaba igellilen* ("C'est maintenant le tour des pauvres" [it's now the turn of the poor]).¹⁸ But such instances, in addition to being rare, are resigned rather than unapologetic. Even when he includes himself in the category of the oppressed, poor *enfants de bohème*, the poet abstains from using the pronoun "we" to mark his belonging to the said category. It is often to third persons that he ascribes the belief that he is a marginal, while he himself distances himself from that conception. When he states that people call him "the lost one" (*Semmam [sic] i medden a lmetluf*), he objects that he has learnt the Qur'an and was once respectable.¹⁹ Similarly, when people call him "a pleasure-seeker" (*nnan as*

¹⁴ Ouerdia Yermeche, "L'Onomastique et la poétique de l'errance dans la poésie mohandienne," *Écrire en temps de détresse : le roman maghrébin francophone* 76 (2010): 21.

¹⁵ Yermeche, "L'Onomastique et la poétique," 24.

¹⁶ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

wa d aḥcayci)²⁰ the tone of the poem indicates that he is complaining of this fact, as when he blames destiny for his lot, or others' betrayal.

While he does, reluctantly, refer to himself as marginal, Si Mohand never explicitly calls himself a nomad; his uprooted and itinerant lifestyle is always termed as exile (*lyerba*). It is tempting to explain this tendency by the fact that "nomadism" does not have a widely used equivalent in Kabyle, but there certainly are words very close to it, such as aimless itinerancy (*anemḍar*, or *acali*) or travel (*inig*). Si Mohand never employs these terms,²¹ nor draws *lyerba* as a synonym with them.

In poem 32, the poet represents his "exile" as a choice; as a mark of his refusal to submit to the new power – the French:²²

Gulley seg Tizi-wezzu
armi d Akfadu
ur ḥkimen deg' akken llan

Anerrez wala anaknu
axir daâssu
anda tqewwiden ccifan

Lywerba tura g-wqerru
wellah ard annenfu
wala laâquba yer ilfan.²³

[I swear that, from Tizi-Ouzou
To Akfadou,
None of them will command me

I'd rather break than bend
Better be damned
In a country where the chieftains are procurers

I was predestined to exile
[And] by God, I'd rather be exiled
Than submit to the hogs' laws.]

In this instance, the poet's itinerant lifestyle is presented as a mark of rebellion against *ilfan*, which the Amazigh word for "hogs," meaning the colonizers in

²⁰ Ibid., 188.

²¹ Si Mohand does, however, use the word *ssfer* on a few occasions. Borrowed from Arabic, this word means "travel" or "journey."

²² Following the failure of the 1871 revolt, the French exiled or executed most of Si Mohand's family members and expropriated their possessions. See Mammeri, *Les Isefras*, 21.

²³ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 126. Translations into English are mine throughout; Mammeri's French translations have been very useful in this process. The transcription used here is that used in Mouloud Mammeri's *Les Isefra: Poèmes de Si Mohand-ou-Mhand* (Algiers: Hibr, 2018).

this context. His insurgency against *ilfan's* diktat, and his departure is a choice that enables him to escape their rules and institutions.

In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop the concept of a “war machine,” defining it as an anarchic, uncoded resistance to the (colonial) State, i.e., a power apparatus with its own systems of codification and domination. The “war machine” is the source of all creation, metamorphosis, and deterritorialization.²⁴ Because Si Mohand incarnates these three features, he is arguably an exemplary “war machine.”

For Deleuze and Guattari, the war machine is an invention of nomadism,²⁵ a concept which includes, but is not limited to, mobility. According to these two philosophers, nomads lead a life “that is forever mobilizing them” and which, as such, opposes them to “exiles.”²⁶ While both move between one point and another, these points do not matter for the nomad; unlike the migrant, what matters for him/her is the trajectory in and of itself. More importantly, the migrant, forced to leave because a given environment has become “amorphous or hostile,” reterritorializes him/herself elsewhere. The nomad, on the other hand, does not reterritorialize, since what matters above everything is the trajectory itself: “the nomad can be called the Deterritorialized par excellence.”²⁷

In light of this theorization, one wonders the extent to which Si Mohand is indeed a nomad. Notwithstanding his assertion, in the aforementioned poem, that his exile was chosen, critics and biographers, seeing in Si Mohand's life and poetry *un miroir de la tragédie coloniale*²⁸ [a mirror of colonial tragedy], seem to agree that his departure from Icheraiouen, where he lived, was the inevitable outcome of the colonial intrusion in Kabylia.²⁹ To be more specific, his departure was the result of the 1871 debacle, which put an end to his earlier way of existence. Indeed, the poet spent a carefree childhood in a well-off family whose father was a usurer and landowner.³⁰ This social status allowed him to attend the *zaouia*, thus receiving a religious education which bestowed on him the honorary prefix “Si.”³¹ The failure of the 1871 uprising and the French authorities' reprisals put an end to this domestic happiness: having executed Si Mohand's father and exiled his uncle to New Caledonia, they stripped the family of its lands and possessions. Si Mohand's own life was spared only thanks to the intervention of a French officer.³² It is this tragedy that pushed

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). See in particular, 24, 230, 354, 417, and 422.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24, 417, and 422.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 380-81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 381.

²⁸ Mohand Akli Salhi, “L'esprit du poète. Si Mohand Ou Mhand et la poésie kabyle d'aujourd'hui,” *Etudes et documents berbères* 25-26 (2007): 281.

²⁹ See also Galant-Pernet, “Mohand, héritier créateur,” 101, and Maougat “Si Mohand Ou Mhand, le souffle prométhéen,” 133.

³⁰ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 14 and Ouahmi Ould-Braham, “Une Biographie de Si Mohand est-elle possible? Un poète kabyle du XIXe siècle revisité,” *Etudes et documents berbères* 19-20 (2001-2002): 19.

³¹ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 14 and Ould-Braham, “Une Biographie de Si Mohand,” 8.

³² Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 14 and Ould-Braham, “Une Biographie de Si Mohand,” 16.

him to leave. Although he wandered for a while in Kabylia, Algiers, and Bône,³³ he hoped more than once to settle in Tunisia, where his brother, who had taken hold of most of the family's remaining property, had settled. The hope for sibling assistance – or, at least, a fair share of the family estate – ended in disappointment as his brother refused to provide any.³⁴

This biographical outline demonstrates that Si Mohand had not envisaged the nomadic lifestyle that befell him after the downfall of his family. As Ouerdia Yemerche writes, “il n'était aucunement destiné à cette vocation de poète errant, avant les événements douloureux de l'Histoire (l'insurrection de 1871 et sa répression violente)” [he was by no means destined to be a wandering poet, before the painful events of history (the 1871 insurrection and its violent repression)].³⁵ To take up Deleuze's theme again, his environment had become “hostile” with the advent of the new rulers of the land, and he therefore sought to reterritorialize himself elsewhere. After the failed attempt to settle in Tunis, he tried his luck in Annaba, where did several menial jobs, including that of doughnut-maker.³⁶ This brief experience was another failure: having let drops of tobacco (or perhaps kef) fall from his pipe into the dough, he caused several customers to be intoxicated.³⁷

As such, Si Mohand was less a nomad – in its Deleuzian definition at least – than a failed migrant. His “exile” was forced and was supposed to lead him to a more welcoming place than his native place. The poet himself admits to the following lines:

D gm' ay d ssebba n ccwal
Akk' a-gella lhal
Kul adewwar beddegh fellas.³⁸

[My brother is the cause of my troubles
Truly, he is
It is because of him that I've visited every hamlet.]

That Si Mohand's peregrinations were far from voluntary is further evidenced by the fact that he often scorns his new life and yearns for the “happy days.” An example is this poem, written on the day of the Eid:

Albâaḍ icedha seksu
Ad yeč ad iṛwu
Ad imyafaṛ d iḥbiben

³³ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 15. Bône was the name given at that time to Annaba, a coastal city located in the East of Algeria.

³⁴ Ould-Braham, “Une Biographie de Si Mohand,” 16.

³⁵ Yemerche, “L'Onomastique et la poétique,” 13.

³⁶ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 15.

³⁷ Ould-Braham, “Une Biographie de Si Mohand,” 17.

³⁸ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 252.

Mači am bu daâussu
Di lgherba yeṭru
Îâagedden ger iberṣmilen

Ay atma widak nettu
nemmekti d neṭru
D ddeny' ay gesneḥwijen

Kul taswaât nekwni ndaâu
Yer tmurt annerzu
D aâssas ay d isawlen.³⁹

[Some miss the taste of couscous
And dream of eating their fill
And exchanging with their friends kisses of forgiveness

Not so with the cursed one
Who, weeping in his exile
Spends the Eid in the company of barrels [of wine]

O, my long-forgotten brothers
I'm crying as I remember you
It is life that compelled me to leave you

Every hour of the day, I pray
That I return to my homeland
Its saints are calling me back.]

In another poem, Si Mohand imagines renouncing his ways and becoming a farmer:

Daut a-d-hubben leryaḥ
annexdem afellaḥ
naaya deg-wnadi n tmura.⁴⁰

[Pray for a turn of the tide
That I may work the land
I'm tired of roaming the world.]

These two poems show that their author longed for a sedentary life. While the nomad, according to Deleuze's definition, is much less interested in starting and final points than in his/her (perpetual) journey itself, Si Mohand, the migrant/exile, dreams of a final resting place. Hence, scholarly and biographical renderings of this poet as a nomad are not plausible when assessed in the

³⁹ Ibid., 174.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 310.

light of the Deleuzian definition of nomadism. For them to be convincing, other, less romantic definitions of this concept should be used.⁴¹

Si Mohand and the Road as a Striated Space

A central dichotomy in the Deleuzian opposition between the Nomad and the State is that of striated-versus-smooth-space, the former being associated with the State and the latter with the nomads: “The primary determination of nomads is to occupy and hold a smooth space: it is this aspect that determines them as nomad (essence).”⁴² Unlike the striated, sedentary space, which is homogenous and codified, the nomadic space is without frontiers and marked by multiplicity. A typical example of this space, in Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis, is the patchwork, which takes initially separate (and therefore striated) spaces and makes them into a continuous space.

Although Deleuze’s and Guattari’s discussion is focused on spatial patterns as such, contrasting, for example, the continuous fluidity of the desert and the sea with the “verticality” of the forest and trees, I extend their conceptualizations to the homogeneity/heterogeneity and the verticality/rhizomatic nature of the spaces’ inhabitants: a striated space would thus be one whose inhabitants are separated by “walls” – rules and hierarchies – whereas a smooth space is one where walls and hierarchizing barriers are erased and people mix freely. Such a definition is akin to the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque spirit is the impulse to abolish artificial boundaries and bring together “[a]ll things that were once-self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnavalesque, hierarchical world views,”⁴³ thus resulting in an unusual joyful mixing of contraries: in the midst of resounding laughter, carnivalesque spaces unite kings with beggars, noble and ignoble men, saints with hetaera, demolishing all markers of separation across gender, class, authority, and ethnicity. Albeit carnivalesque manifestations (carnivals being the most typical examples) are often short-lived, they are subversive in that they disrupt the traditional order, its prohibitions, and its social stratifications.

One typically carnivalesque space is the road, where people of different ages, races, gender categories, and social position are brought into contact. As Bakhtin puts it:

The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road [. . .] the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people –

⁴¹ Authors like Rachel Bouvet do provide a less romanticized definition of nomadism, in which they see a regulated movement dictated by pastoral or commercial imperatives. See Rachel Bouvet, “Du Parcours nomade à l’errance: une figure de l’entre-deux,” *Nomades, voyageurs, explorateurs, déambulateurs*, eds. Rachel Bouvet, André Carpentier, and Daniel Chartier (Paris : L’Harmattan, 2006), 39. However, this vision of nomadism also fails to account for the nature of Si Mohand’s mobility, which seems to oscillate between the two definitions (Deleuze’s and Bouvet’s) in that, although unregulated, it was dictated by necessity.

⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 410.

⁴³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.

representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up; the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another in distinctive ways, even as they become more complex and more concrete by the collapse of social distances.⁴⁴

The road roamed by Si Mohand is (seemingly) not different; during his meanderings in Algeria and Tunisia, the poet encountered Kabyles like himself, Arabic-speaking fellow countrymen, Jews, Blacks, French people, rich men and women, and social outcasts. All these social and racial categories are present in many of his poems, which are thus given the multiplicity and heterogeneity assigned by Deleuze to smooth space. Whether Si Mohand's road is a smooth space or a carnivalesque one is, nevertheless, less certain; this is so because the cohabitation of the different races and classes in his poems is not a happy one. The different categories of people he describes do not all stand on an equal footing. While occasionally vilifying the French, referring to them as “*ilfan*” (hogs), it is often the former subaltern that he denigrates, lamenting their social ascension.

The following poem demonstrates some of Si Mohand's prejudices:

A Sidi Hënd-u-Malek
âannay n yurek
taâwent i di kra m-medden

Tarbaât l-ħağ Mbarek
ittu ay-gecrek
ay n ikka deg-Cerřiden

Tura mi dzziđ a lfelk
iqqwel d mul lmelk
inneħsab seg-Cerřâiwen.⁴⁵

[Saint Hënd U Malek
I beseech thee
To assist me when dealing with a certain category of men

The likes of El Hadj Mebarek
Who forgets he used to be a meek shepherd⁴⁶
In Icheriden⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 243.

⁴⁵ Mammeri, *Les Iseřra*, 128.

⁴⁶ This translation relies on Mammeri's, which renders this line as “*ou il se louait comme berger*.” Si Mohand's phrase, however, can be understood as referring to any subaltern employee, not only to a shepherd.

⁴⁷ Icheriden and Icheraiouen are two Kabyle villages located in Larbaa Nath Iraten.

Now that the tide has turned
 He has property of his own
 And is regarded a citizen of Icheraiouen.]

These lines reveal a conservative stance that advocates social *status quo* and rebukes social mobility: a shepherd should remain a shepherd. While it is possible to explain away his scorn for the *parvenus* as a result of their allegiance with the French, the poem demonstrates his contempt for El Hadj Mebarek pre-dates this man's friendship with the he French: it is his former lowly social status itself that is despised.

In another poem, it is against butchers that his directs his sarcasm:

La tamen ddenya la tdum
 d mefruyt njjum
 ikerri tluqb it tayat

D lbaz izeggwiren i lqum
 yeffey d ameybun
 yat tura seddu tesdat

Aklan issiriden aksum
 s zzbil hacakum
 ffyen d s llebsa n lqat.⁴⁸

[Don't trust this ephemeral world
 It may belie your stars
 Hasn't a ram been insulted by a she-goat?

The falcon, which used to be on the lead
 Is now sorrowing
 Butchers are now empowered

Those hands which used to butcher meat
 And drown in offal
 Now don wealthy robes.]

As an *aristocrate déchu* [fallen aristocrat],⁴⁹ Si Mohand is clearly on the side of the rams and the falcons, these two animals being strong and/or noble. With bitterness thus adding itself to a static and therefore anti-nomadic vision of history (nomadism being associated with mobility), the decline of those who used to be powerful and respected is seen as more than a sad state of things; it is an aberration.

The word "butcher" in Si Mohand's poetry has racial connotations. He actually uses *akli*, which could also be translated as "black man." In

⁴⁸ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 128.

⁴⁹ Lahlou, "Réflexion sur le neuvain," 85.

traditional Kabylia, the butcher's profession was considered *déclassé*; as a result, it was almost exclusively practiced by former black slaves and criminals (a Kabyle who has committed a crime can break the revenge cycle by renouncing his former status, becoming a butcher, and joining the *aklan*⁵⁰ community⁵¹). Thus, the derogatory image provided in this poem shows that Si Mohand was trapped in the racial as social prejudices of his time.

Some of his other poems bear obvious signs of racism not only toward blacks but also toward Jews. These two poems contain ample evidence of these biases:

A Ṛebbi lemḥibba bbwakli
yas baād iṭ felli
mi d mlaleḍ yides attessethid

Asmi yella zikenni
yeṭnuz am-ḥuli
aniwer i k yehw' ar-t-awiḍ

Tura d ssaād is yuli
af medden irkwelli
zzher is yugar wiyid.⁵²

[O God, keep me away
From a slave's friendship
One is ashamed even of meeting him

In the old days,
One sold him as one would sell sheep
And took him wherever one wanted

And now he prospers
More than anybody else
Noone exceeds him in luck.]

The voiced nostalgia for the days when blacks were sold like “sheep” reproduces age-old racial animalization, whereas the poem below takes up, albeit in a veiled manner, the association of Jews with greed and prostitution:⁵³

⁵⁰ *Aklan*: plural of *akli*.

⁵¹ S. Chaker and M. Gast, “Akli,” *Encyclopédie berbère* 3 (1986): 423-425. <https://journals.openedition.org/encyclopedieberbere/2401>.

⁵² Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 158.

⁵³ The allusion to prostitution is obvious in the statement that Si Mohand was the benefactor of Mredxa's sisters.

Ufiy Uday di Lḥamma
 isem is Mredxa
 ittaw' anza di ṣṣifa s

Ami yeznuzu ttelwa
 d nek ay-gufa
 am netta ma [sic] yessetma s

Tura mi-gebna ssraya
 idda d nnsara
 ittu i-gaâddan fellas.⁵⁴)

[I met a Jew in Lhamma
 His name is Mredxa
 You'd know him from his very face

When he used to sell coffee dregs
 I was his benefactor –
 His and his sisters

Now that he's built himself a palace
 And sided with the Christians
 He's forgotten all he endured.]

Interestingly, while implicitly condemning colonization, which allowed the rise of such “good-for-nothings,” Si Mohand rarely attacks the colonizers themselves. If this is a sign of prudence on his part, then it certainly undermines the image of the free-tongued rebel usually assigned to him.

Thus, Mohand may be less of an iconoclast than he is often taken to be. Ouahmi Ould-Braham mitigates even the legend regarding the unconventionality of his life:

Il buvait, fumait, passait beaucoup de temps dans les cafés, mais jamais jusqu'à l'excès. Il savait rester modéré et avait toujours, en toute circonstance, un comportement respectueux de la loi, allant jusqu'à exhorter les ouvriers à la mesure et la haine des dérèglements, ce qui lui donna une réputation de sagesse fort appréciée.⁵⁵

[He used to drink, smoke, and spend a lot of time in cafés, but never to excess. He knew how to remain moderate and always had, in all circumstances, a law-abiding behavior, going as far as advising workers to measure and to hate irregularities, which gave him a much-appreciated reputation for wisdom.]

⁵⁴ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 162.

⁵⁵ Ould-Braham, “Une Biographie de Si Mohand,” 17.

Ouerdia Yermèche makes a similar statement about his poetry: “il s’érige en réveilleur des consciences et en moralisateur” [he sets himself up as a conscience-awakener and a moralizer].⁵⁶ Morality is, in effect, at the center of Si Mohand’s life and art, both of which oscillate (again) between a veneration of conventional morality and transgression. On the one hand, he led a “sinful” life, indulging in drinking and kef, and celebrating the female body and physical love;⁵⁷ his poetry, far from prudish, teems with sexual allusions and references to “fornication,” “pimps,” and “whores.” It also sometimes veers on blasphemy:

Txilek a Rebb’ ar k nʔid
d ad’ iyi tefkid
di rrezq ik ard netqennaa

I zzehr iw anda terriḍ
aani day t-nʔid
ney s igenni i-getterfaa.⁵⁸

[I beseech you God, can’t you feel pity for me?
What did you give me
That can make me satisfied?

Where have you put my share of good luck;
Have you killed it?
Or taken it to heaven?]

Yet even as he departed from the conventional morality of his time – a morality which was tightly intertwined with religion – Si Mohand remained strongly attached to it. As Yermèche notes, “quelles que soient ses ‘dérives comportementales,’ il reste fondamentalement pétri des règles morales et religieuses, à l’opposé de ses concitoyens qui, selon lui, se sont éloignés des valeurs fondatrices de la société kabyle.” [Whatever his “behavioral deviations,” he remains fundamentally steeped in moral and religious rules, unlike his fellow citizens who, according to him, have departed from the founding values of the Kabyle society].⁵⁹ In the following lines, he relays what he sees as the moral decline of his time:

rbeḥ w illan d amâac
la iheddeḥ ssetṭac
d laṣel yeyba yisem is

⁵⁶ Yermèche, “L’Onomastique et la poétique,” 23.

⁵⁷ Whether Si Mohand did indulge in physical love as his poems seem to suggest is not certain, however. According to some sources, this was rendered impossible but the poet’s impotence (see Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 40 and Ould-Braham, “Une Biographie de Si Mohand,” 16).

⁵⁸ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 210.

⁵⁹ Yermèche, “L’Onomastique et la poétique,” 15.

Qwlen yer zzna bbwarrac
 ikfa dдин ulac
 cban tidma s tteriyis.⁶⁰

[The good-for-nothing are prospering
 They raise their voice
 While the nobles sink into anonymity]

They now indulge in pederasty
 There's no religion left
 They go accoutered like girls.]

What he views as the people's saddening forgetfulness of religious instructions is also evoked in the next poem:

Tekcem laibad teḥraymit
 teḥken tazallit
 aarqen iberdan n ccraa⁶¹

[Evil has invaded souls
 Prayers are forgotten
 And the paths of righteousness are lost]

In this condemnation of “moral dissolution” – particularly of homosexuality – Si Mohand seems to argue that lack of nobility, lack of piety, and lack of virility are, together, the plagues of modern times.

Si Mohand is aware that he, too, has deviated from the “right path.” Lamenting this, he remembers the days when he recited the Qu’ran and abided by God’s injunctions:

Zikenni d zzheḥ iṣeggem d
 lhaḥ d uḡewwed
 kul lḥeḥf s lâibaḥa s

Tura imi nettaxed
 leḥram nâammed
 ssney abrid xḍiy as.⁶²

[When my luck was still awake
 I spent my time reciting the Qur’an
 And knew the meaning of every single verse]

⁶⁰ Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 114.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 104.

But now that I am lost
 I commit sins knowingly:
 I knew the right path and yet I went astray.]

The “sinner” that he is has not, however, lost hope of re-becoming the pious man he used to be:

Ḍelbey di lwaldin ssmah
 aṭas ay njah
 ad ildi Lleh tibbura⁶³

[I ask my parents’ forgiveness
 I’ve erred for too long
 But God will show me the way]

As with his wanderings, his moral decline is seen as an ordeal, a cause for suffering, which, he hopes, will come to an end thanks to divine intervention and leave place for a new life of repentance.

Conclusion

By demonstrating that Si Mohand’s life and poetry departed from the Deleuzian notions of nomadism and smooth space, this article has sought to question the common representation of this bard as an iconoclast and a free spirit. Drawing on his poetry and life story, it has underscored the conservative aspect of his verse and the limits of his freedom and transgressive originality. In spite of turning his back on sedentariness and explicitly transgressing moral and societal codes of his time, I have shown that Si Mohand’s unconventional-ity was less a choice than the result of historical and personal circumstances. These historical conditions forced him into “nomadism,” which he, significantly, terms “exile” – a term highlighting the involuntary nature of his condition. The application of Bakhtin’s theorization of the road as a carnivalesque space has also demonstrated the limits of Si Mohand’s inclusiveness and acceptance of others. While mixing with various social and racial categories of people, his sympathy went only to the noble-born (like himself) while he reserved his scathing ridicule for those who rose up recently from their subaltern status. Similarly, the poet who, in moments of anger and despair, resorts to blasphemy, never disavows the moral instructions dictated by religion.

Si Mohand’s conservative mindset, which subscribed to the codes and hierarchizations of his time, does not, of course, belittle his legacy as an innovative poet. Si Mohand introduced both new themes (exile and lyrical poetry) and new aesthetics (the *neuvain*). But his greatest innovation lies precisely in the blurring of dichotomies which I have detailed in my analysis. Si Mohand was simultaneously an aristocrat and an impoverished marginal, a non-conformist

⁶³ Ibid., 310.

and a conventional thinker, a sinner and a devout believer.⁶⁴ Because the State – and its traditional systems of thought – are built on clear-cut binaries,⁶⁵ it is occupying this interstitial space that makes him a towering figure of oral Amazigh literature and an influential model for several generations of poets and singers in Tamazight.

⁶⁴ Indeed, in spite of all his moral erring, he came to be seen as a saint, both in his lifetime and after his death (Mammeri, *Les Isefra*, 67).

⁶⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 352.

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