



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

## **The Proverb and its Function in Abdellah Mohia's Play “Menttif akka wala seddaw uzekka”**

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### **Abstract**

Until the nineteenth century, Kabyle literature was primarily oral, passed down through word of mouth and limited to various genres such as poetry, proverbs, riddles, tales, myths, and legends. The nineteenth century marked the beginning of the transition to writing in the Kabyle language through the transcription of oral literature. However, the true departure from orality occurred in the twentieth century with the emergence of an intellectual movement within the Kabyle community that started to write in Kabyle to develop it as a written language. These writers introduced new universal literary genres such as novels, short stories, and theater.

The transition to writing in a language long confined to orality was not without its challenges. Writers often drew upon the rich oral expressions of the Kabyle language to overcome the difficulties of expressing new ideas, which became a hallmark of the writing of that era. Mohia Abdellah (1950–2004), faced the particular challenge of promoting his language by translating and adapting universal theater texts. Nevertheless, his translations and adaptations found great success by leveraging the Kabyle language's rich lexicon, especially its proverbs, which contributed to elevating the status of the Kabyle language as a written medium. This article examines some of these Kabyle proverbs reinvested by the dramatist Mohia Abdellah in his play titled “Menttif akka wala seddaw uzekka” (literally, “better this than being in the grave”), an adaptation of the Russian playwright Nicolai Erdman's work “The Suicide.” Through an intertextual approach, the article highlights the significance of proverbial expressions in Kabyle writing due to their exceptional ability to convey complex ideas from another world. To achieve this, the article initially defines the traditional functions of Kabyle proverbs

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and subsequently compares them with their counterparts in the source text to better appreciate Mohia's efforts in translating and adapting foreign texts.

**Keywords:** Intertextuality; proverb; translation; function; theater

Kabyle literature was fundamentally oral up until 1980, a year that marked the decisive turning point in the break with orality as new literary genres (novels, short stories, plays) were published. In the field of drama, Mohia Abdellah, better known under the penname Mouhend Ou Yehya, took center stage. One of the predominate characteristics of this contemporary Kabyle literature is the large-scale reintroduction of the oral literary genres abundant in Algerian (Kabyle) society. In terms of Mohia's works, the ancestral Kabyle language, from which a large number of proverbs and other short formulas were previously gathered in a collection entitled *Akken Qqaren Medden*<sup>1</sup> (literally, As People Say), finds a place in his texts, though it is updated and recontextualized in order to adapt to new situations. This article employs an intertextual approach to focus on the "proverb" genre within Mohia's text "Menttif akka wala seddaw uzekka" (literally, "Better than being in the grave"), which is translated and adapted from Nikolai Erdman's comedy, "The Suicide." First, we will provide a definition for the traditional function of proverbs. Subsequently, we will compare them with the source text to gain a better understanding of Mohia's approach to translating and adapting foreign texts.

After 1980, Kabyle literature witnessed a significant resurgence of ancient Kabyle proverbs, embracing them as a vital oral literary tradition. These proverbs, referred to as "parémies," are concise expressions that encapsulate generations of accumulated wisdom and experiences. They serve as memorable linguistic and cultural norms, invoked in acts of speech and interactions for their perlocutionary value and authoritative function, as highlighted by Jean Claude Anscembre.<sup>2</sup> The work of Cécile Leguy<sup>3</sup> has classified them under the term "parémies," with parémiologists such as Alain Montandon<sup>4</sup> and André Jolles<sup>5</sup> studying these oral forms.

This revival of ancient Kabyle proverbs had a significant impact on Kabyle literature, particularly in the realm of theater. Kabyle theater gained prominence in the literary scene, starting in 1970 when Mohia, then a student at the University of Algiers, completed the translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's play, "Mort sans sépulture." This initial experience aimed to test the capacity of the Kabyle language, long confined to oral tradition, to express ideas from authors rooted in written literature, revealing the challenges of writing in Kabyle. Thus, Mohia embarked on the collection of proverbs to enrich his

<sup>1</sup> Muhend U Yehya, *Akken Qqaren Medden*, Groupe d'Etudes Berbères, Série Documents VIII (Publication de l'université Paris: Centre de Recherche, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Claude Anscembre, "Parole proverbiale et structure métrique," *Langages*, 136 (2000): 6-26.

<sup>3</sup> Cécile Leguy "En quête de proverbes," *Cahiers de littérature orale*, 63-64 (2008): 59-81, <http://clo.revues.org/97>, accessed, 08/04/2021.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Montandon, *Les formes brèves* (Paris: Hachettes, 1972), 176.

<sup>5</sup> André Jolles, *Formes simples* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 212.

Kabyle expression, putting into practice the teachings of parémiologists like Montandon, Jolles, and Leguy.

Mohia's remarkable journey continued as he translated and adapted around twenty universal plays from 1970 to 2002, including works by Bertolt Brecht, Lou-Sin, Ligui Pirandelo, Alfred Jarry, Samuel Beckett, Molière, Slavomir Mrozek, Jules Romain, Nicolai Erdman, and many others. Within Mohia's theater texts, proverbs play a central role, and among them, the one translated and adapted from Erdman's "Le suicidé" (the suicide) been selected for showcasing, as it has never been published before. This initiative underscores the profound influence of these ancient expressions on Mohia's literary creations, marking a significant milestone in the enrichment of contemporary Kabyle literature. According to Mohia, translating the works of foreign authors represents the fastest way to foster the flourishing and advancement of Kabyle literature, facilitating the renewal of its themes and aligning its language with universality.

Proverbs, as the products of popular wisdom, distinguish themselves from other literary forms by summarizing the meanings of human experiences in short, aphoristic sentences. Research on proverbs, known as paremiology, is gaining increasing interest among researchers in various disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics, and literary studies."

Before analyzing these proverbs, this paper provides a general overview of the play "The Suicide." Since the Kabyle version of the text is not yet published, a summary of it is offered here. In this way, the reader can appreciate how the translation is largely faithful to the source. "*Menttif akka wala seddaw uzekka*" is a comedy that condemns the oppressive conditions in a society where only the dead can speak out and voice their indignations. When we meet the protagonist Amar Younit, whose wife addresses him by the nickname "Htatache," he has been unemployed and looking for a job for two years. He wakes up in the middle of the night feeling hungry and wants to eat some couscous. He awakens his wife and an argument breaks out between them. Harried, he takes refuge in a dark corner of the house and ignores his wife Fafa's and mother-in-law Nna Hboubouche's calls for him. The two women panic and suspect that he wants to end his life, which has given him nothing. Htatache takes pleasure in the scenario and fuels his wife's suspicions by shutting himself up in a death-like silence. He immediately feels that this threat of suicide gives him a sense of worth and that he has suddenly become important. The rumor of his suicide spreads very rapidly, bringing individuals from all categories corners of society to implore him not to settle for a cheap and pointless death. He then discovers that this act can elevate him to the rank of hero if he is to sacrifice himself for a popular cause and denounce his country leaders. He finally finds that his life has meaning and dying becomes his purpose. Although he suddenly becomes useful, ultimately, he refuses to die because another martyr who looked to him as an example takes his own life.

Mohia's text contains about twenty proverbs. In the interest of limiting the corpus, the analysis will focus on ten of them.

## The Traditional Functions of Kabyle Proverbs

Usually, Kabyle proverbs express basic social principles, which are grouped here into two interdependent categories: namely, the moralizing and pedagogical functions.

1. *Awal am terçast, mi yeffey d ayen ur d-yettuyal ara* – “Spoken words are like bullets, once they’re uttered, they can’t be brought back.” This proverb compares spoken words to fired bullets, which never return once they leave their casing. In the same way, a spoken word cannot be taken back. Overall, this proverb calls to exercise restraint and to honor a word that has been given, and cautions against the destructive power of words.
2. *Ayen yuran ur yettwexir; lkuraj ay axir* – “Whatever we’re predestined for will happen; we might as well face it courageously.” This proverb serves to awaken faith, with the moral being not to give up in spite of a challenging fate. It teaches endurance and the need to face life’s difficulties with perseverance and bravery so as not to fall into fatalism.
3. *Uccen yeggan gar wulli* – “The wolf sleeps among the sheep.” This proverb is the equivalent of the French expression *faire rentrer le loup dans la bergerie* (“bringing the wolf into the sheep pen”). It comes from an old oral popular tale.<sup>6</sup> The image of sheep peacefully coexisting with a wolf draws attention to the deviation of the instincts from what is considered natural and calls for caution. Villains will stop at nothing to achieve their ends. They can keep a low profile, lull others into a false sense of security, and penetrate into a peaceful society as if they were harmless. In another sense, the proverb offers a concrete image of protagonists designated by the image of wolf/ewe who are quick to come together out of personal interest.
4. *Yexdem leeğeb, yerna yehjeb* – “He causes a scandal and hides.” This is the equivalent of the saying *se méfier de l’eau qui dort* (“beware of still waters”). It expresses shamelessness. Indeed, some audacious individuals perpetrate insanity, then keep a low profile so as to pass themselves off as innocent. This is a way of “further deceiving” others.
5. *Ur d-yettefey ara usalas deg umagraman* – “Beams are not built of elecampane.” This proverb is uttered when somebody wants to achieve a given

<sup>6</sup> The tale: “In ancient times, the dog and the jackal were brothers, born of the same womb. They ate from the same plate and slept in the same place, between the goats and the sheep. They would go out together very early in the morning to shepherd their master’s flock and did not return until nightfall. [¶] One day as the animals were grazing, an ewe fell into a ravine and was injured. The dog wasn’t there, so the jackal rushed towards her. But, instead of rescuing the ewe, he devoured her. He was then removed from the flock because of his wrongdoing and chased away, and he set out to live in the forest. However, he really missed the good old days and though he was forever banished, he remained nostalgic. One time he saw the dog from afar and called him from a safe distance: ‘Dog, how lucky you are to sleep in peace and safety among the sheep!’ But since he remained a traitor he attempted, in an effort to relive the good old days, to join stables in places outside the village where he committed his irreparable crime. However, he was quickly unmasked and his bad history caught up with him, hence the proverb.”

result with the inappropriate means. Indeed, it is not possible to obtain a solid beam from a fragile herbaceous plant such as the elecampane. By extension, the proverb expresses the idea that children are always reflections of their parents. Indeed, parents who bring up their children in a way contrary to traditional Kabyle society cannot transmit its values to their offspring and, as a result, traditional society may excommunicate them. The semantic equivalent of this proverb is “like father, like son.”

6. *Tayaziṭ n At belqasem, yiwen webrid ay tessen* – “Ait Belkacem’s hen knows just one way.” This expression condemns conformism and the force of habit that becomes second nature to the point of denying and challenging any efforts toward innovation and progress.
7. *Anefreq tamellalt i yat Bgayet* – “We will share an egg for the inhabitants of Bejaia.” This proverb expresses generosity even with the most destitute or rudimentary of means. It refers to the moment of pleasure that can be brought about even in the worst times of scarcity. Indeed, how to satisfy all the people of Bejaia simply by sharing an egg? It’s a matter of doing everything one can to enjoy what one has.
8. *Tewwet lehwa tessared-as; Iwwet ubruri issa-yas; Irna-d udfel iæennec fell-as* – “Rain cleaned the ground, hail carpeted it, then snow settled on top.” The proverb has pedagogical value: the stages of precipitation (rain, hail, snow) signal an excellent winter season to come. The conjunction of these three elements in the same season augers great success for people, nature, and agricultural harvest. By extension, the expression supports the idea of an absolute, unflinching gain contained in the other short expression *tasekkurt timellalin* (“The partridge and its brood”). This proverb signifies abundance, when more is given than what is required or expected and someone goes above and beyond, e.g., when people receive more than they have anticipated.
9. *Tewweḍ tgersa s aḥdid* – “The plowshare has reached its limit.” This proverb reminds us that patience has its limits and that someone backed into a corner may act out wildly or unpredictably. It expresses the limit of what is tolerable. *Tebbweḍ tfidi s iyes* (“The ache has reached the bone”) is another proverb along the same lines.
10. *Zzeg-it id ur turiw* – “Milk the cow even though she hasn’t given birth.” This proverb condemns relentlessness and haste. It is the equivalent of à l’impossible, nul n’est tenu (“nobody is compelled to do the impossible”), referring to the act of demanding something impossible. How can you milk a cow that has never given birth?

### The Intertextual Relationship Between the Kabyle Proverb and the Source Text

The main function of the Kabyle proverbs Mohia reintroduces into his play is to translate certain ideas in the source text as faithfully as possible. The Kabyle language sometimes lacks the appropriate expressions to depict certain situations. Also, it is generally through proverbs that Mohia manages to express

common ideas just as well as they are expressed in other languages. Regarding the potential for using Kabyle proverbs, Mohia writes: “The significance of these proverbs comes from the fact that they apply to a myriad of situations. With unexpected finesse and mastery, they successfully translate a large number of concepts for which the corresponding nouns are temporarily lacking.”<sup>7</sup> The translation can then be made by way of a loan word, calque, equivalence, amplification, collocation, modulation, or literal translation. Since Mohia focuses on translating the idea and message conveyed by the words in the source text, his favorite method is translating through equivalences when translating/adapting a foreign text.

Catford clarifies that “textual equivalence in translation is thus any form of the target language (text or portion of text) observed to be equivalent to a given form of the source language.”<sup>8</sup> It should be noted here that proverbs in the target text are not necessarily equivalents of expressions of the same generic register in the source text, but clauses that provide the best possible renderings of the characters’ lines. This is accepted in translation. Catford distinguishes between textual equivalence and formal correspondence: “a formal correspondence is any category in the target language that is likely to occupy the ‘same’ place in the general economy of the target language as the corresponding category occupies in the source language.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Catford favors translation by equivalence with consideration not for the limited meaning but its ability to function in other situations: “Texts or elements of the source language and those of the target language are translational equivalents when they are interchangeable in a given situation.”<sup>10</sup>

The expressions translated in the source text are provided below in reference to the corresponding Kabyle proverbs listed above.

1. Igor: **“A word isn’t a baby chick; if you drop it, you won’t catch it.** But because of it, you’ll get caught and won’t be let go.”<sup>11</sup> Like the Kabyle proverb (1), the expression clearly emphasizes the danger of spoken words, which can’t be taken back once they have been uttered, just as it’s not possible to grab hold of a baby chick that has escaped.
2. Elpidi: **“Weep! Weep! Widow Podsekalnikov! Hold your children in your arms and as you are sobbing, cry out: ‘What’s happened to your daddy? There’s no more daddy! There’s no more Death!’”**<sup>12</sup> This character’s line encourages Marie to deal with the news of her husband’s suicide realistically. She can cry and hug her children to comfort them and give them the courage they need to accept their father’s death. In a few words, the Kabyle proverb (2) express this overall picture

<sup>7</sup> A. Mohia, interview, “Mohia, Esquisse d’un portrait” in *Tifin* (2011): 30.

<sup>8</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *Introduction à la traductologie: Penser la traduction hier, aujourd’hui, demain* (France: De Boeck, 2008), 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Michel Vinaver, “Le Suicidé,” in *Revue bimestrielle* 749 (May 1984): 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

- of a tragic destiny filled with sadness and heart-break that must be faced with courage and bravery.
3. Victor: **“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”**<sup>13</sup> This is a famous and now proverbial expression from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that is uttered by Victor, who suspects deception and a setup in Simon’s suicide. The Kabyle proverb (3) is in the same semantic register, which calls for caution and warns against corruption and treachery.
  4. Raissa to her friend Kalabushkin: **“Why are you trying to drown the fish,** Comrade Kalabushkin? You tricked me with your Podsekalnikov. Why did I give you fifteen rubles? So that he’d kill himself for that tramp? What did you promise me? That he would do it for me, and I see that Cleopatra Maximonrna is the one who benefits.”<sup>14</sup> The expression “to drown the fish” emphasizes the idea of shamelessness, a desire to deceive the other, which is captured by the Kabyle proverb (4).
  5. Raissa: **“To the death!”**<sup>15</sup> After realizing that Simon has decided not to commit suicide, Raissa flies into a rage and joins the group that had been asking for his head. Kabyle proverb (5) does not explicitly address the idea of death, though it does contain it implicitly. Indeed, speech is an essential foundation in traditional Kabyle society and can be the source of severe stigmatization; the latter can have very negative consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable people in society. Given its importance, proverb (1) equates it with a bullet that has been fired and can cause death. However, proverb (5) implies that the words of the individual who commits suicide do not mean anything because he is just like his parent. An individual whose words are meaningless is marginalized and excluded from traditional Kabyle society, an oppressive situation akin to a slow death.
  6. Simon to his mother-in-law: **“Ms. Serafine, when will you stop interrupting what’s been planned?** Instead of arguing, keep quiet and listen.”<sup>16</sup> With this line, Simon puts an end to the intervention of his mother-in-law, who is trying to thwart his plan to improve his diet by introducing eggs. The cost of this product is far beyond the means of his wife Marie, who is already struggling to provide for the family. Proverb (6) that Mohia provides to translate Simon’s reply to his mother-in-law challenges conformity in general and, in in the text, the eating habits of Ms.Serafine, who becomes Nna Hboubouche in the Kabyle text.
  7. Raissa: **“One death for all of us is not much”**<sup>17</sup> The rumor of Simon’s suicide spreads very rapidly, bringing individuals from all sectors of society who offer him gifts and beg him to agree to die for their cause and to bring it to the highest level of the state. They very quickly

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

realize that one death cannot be enough for his numerous causes, and this is the meaning behind Raissa's retort. Initially, proverb (7) expresses generosity even with the most destitute or rudimentary of means. In Mohia's text, it is instead in accordance with the first meaning and denounces an irrational mind.

8. Simon to his mother-in-law, who claims that her daughter is the one who supports the household with her salary: "Ah, it's no big deal? So we were living on Marie's salary, in your opinion? That means it's none of my doing, Ms. Serafine. **Only you may not have realized that everything is in place for her to make money.** But who purchased these cups? I'm the one who bought them."<sup>18</sup> Simon, who is currently unemployed and living on his wife Marie's salary, tries to minimize her efforts by declaring that he's the one who bears the expenses for the household while his wife is the one who is glorified. Proverb (8) expresses the notion of this absolute gain through a winter season with excellent rainfall.
9. Aristarch: "**The intelligentsia no longer has the strength to wait.**"<sup>19</sup> Aristarchus, who represents the intelligentsia, responds to Simon's reluctance to go through with his suicide by coming to hurry him along, informing him of how impatient his group is to see him fulfill their dream of his dying for their cause. The proverb (9) also expresses this feeling of impatience, but with the risk of violent spillage through the image of a plowshare that reaches its limit and therefore, for lack of space, can no longer pull back.
10. Cleopatra: "**In our country, even a lady with means does not have possibilities.**"<sup>20</sup> With this line, Cleopatra replicates to her friend in Paris who tells her about the availability of products, especially clothing of all kinds. She informs him that in Russia during the Soviet era, this choice did not even exist for the bourgeois class. The line goes hand-in-hand with the sense that it's impossible to purchase chic clothing during this period. To translate this line, Mohia uses proverb (10) to express the idea of the unattainable and the impossible. Mohia, who is engaged in the recovery of the Kabyle lexicon, offers this proverb to compensate for the borrowing from the Arabic-language "*lmouhal*," which is very common among the Kabyle.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to compare the Kabyle proverbs that Mohia reintroduces into *Menttif akka wala seddaw uzekka* with the corresponding expressions in Nikolai Erdman's text "The Suicide" in order to grasp the essence of Mohia's work of translation.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>21</sup> Lionel Galand, "Vers un berbère moderne: Le cas de Mohia," *Tifin* 2 (2011): 53.



While the Kabyle proverb traditionally has a moralizing and pedagogical function and essentially aims to vouchsafe the established social order, it is reintroduced into written texts with the aim of promoting writing in the Amazigh language, compensating for abusive borrowing, and efficiently and subtly translating ideas expressed in other places in other tongues. Mohia's translation involves equivalence between the translation and the source, not only in terms of meaning but also the situations in which this equivalence can work. By conserving these proverbs along with all the cultural background, they contain and giving them a new life, translating with equivalences, adapting, and adhering to the principle of expediency, Mohia has so firmly anchored his dramatic work in Kabyle society that it is possible to forget that they involve the translation/adaptation of a foreign text.

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