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“ARGAN” AS A SUBSTRATUM WORD

by

Lameen Souag

1. INTRODUCTION

The argan tree, famous for its nutritious oil, is endemic to a limited region centred on the Souss Valley of southern Morocco. Its Tashlhiyt name – *argan*, construct state *w-argan* – has been derived from the verb *rg* ‘crush, grind’ (Stroomer 2008), used primarily in reference to argan nuts. This derivation appears plausible and appealing, even in the absence of independent evidence for a noun forming suffix *-an* within Tashlhiyt. Unfortunately, at first glance, *rg* appears just as isolated within Berber as *argan* itself. Closer examination suggests that both words can indeed be derived from proto-Berber – but only on the assumption of family-internal contact.

2. INTERNAL RECONSTRUCTION

The imperfective form of the verb *rg* is *rrag* (Stroomer 2008; El Mountassir 2003: 146; Sabir 2010: 379) or *trrag/ttrrag* (Stroomer 2008: 104; Horiuchi 2000: 163). This puts it squarely into the small but well-conserved biconsonantal verb conjugation that Prasse (1972) labels I.A.5. In an extensive dictionary of Tashlhiyt verbs, El Mountassir (2003) only lists eleven other members of this conjugation, including several high-frequency basic items: *dl* ‘cover’, *ḍi* (< **ḍy*) ‘chase out’, *ḍr* ‘fall’, *fl* ‘leave’, *gl* ‘bring along; run dry’, *g^wn* ‘sleep, lie down’, *γ^wi* (< **γ^wy*) ‘take’, *yz* ‘dig’, *ml* ‘show’, *sy* ‘buy’, *zd* ‘grind’. With slight irregularities, one might also add *ut* ‘hit’, impf. *kkat*, and *su* ‘drink’, impf. *ssa*. Most of these verbs have widespread cognates across Berber, typically belonging to the same conjugation; but searching for a root RG yields no plausible cognates even in closely related Tamazight varieties of the Middle Atlas (Taïfi 1991) or Ayt Atta (Amaniss 2009), much less further afield in Kabyle (Dallet 1982), Tamahaq (Foucauld 1951), or Tamasheq (Heath 2006).

Deverbal forms, however, suggest that *rg* has lost an initial third radical, explaining the failure to identify cognates. I.A.5 BC verbs are attested with a variety of verbal noun schemas (Destaing 1920). The most frequent ones are purely biconsonantal: *taBuCi* (*taḍuri* ‘falling’, *taguni* ‘lying down’, cp. *tayyti* ‘hitting’), *iBiC* (*izid* ‘grinding’), *aBBaC* (*addal* ‘covering’). A few make use of the nominalising prefix *m-*, more usually associated with agent nouns: *(t)amBaC(t)* (*amy^way* ‘taking’, *tamsayt* ‘buying’). For *rg*, however, we find a form matching none of these schemas: *awrag* (c.s. *w-awrag*). There is no morphological motivation for adding a *w-* in this form; the only nouns of the form *awBaC* attested in the dictionaries of Sabir (2010) and Horiuchi (2000) are *awlal* ‘ganglion’, *awray* ‘yellow’, *awsay* ‘young banana leaf’, and the only one of these with a clearly related verb, *iwriy* ‘be/become yellow’, has an unambiguously trilateral root. This *awrag* instead recalls the widespread and reconstructible *a-BCaD* schema used rather productively to form the verbal nouns of triradical verbs belonging to Prasse’s I.A.1 (cf. Laoust 1918: 204 for Ntifa); cp. *srm* > *asram* ‘trim (wood)’, *fsr* > *afsar* ‘spread out’, etc. El Mountassir (2003) records no inherited

verbs of the form *uBC/wBC* in Tashlhiyt, so nothing stands in the way of supposing that verbs of this form lost their initial semivowel at some point.

A similar argument applies to the collective noun *argan* ‘argan trees, argan oil’ itself. Its construct state is *w-argan*, not **u-rgan*. In nouns with a constant “prefix” vowel, the initial vowel is best analysed as part of the stem itself, usually following the loss of an original stem-initial consonant (Prasse 1974: 31, 70). As expected on this hypothesis, the vowel is also constant in the plural: *targant* ‘argan tree’ > *targinin*. The original consonant in such cases is often the consonant reflected in many Tuareg varieties as *h* but regularly lost in Tashlhiyt and Northern Berber more generally (Prasse 2011): cp. Tamasheq *a-hāya* (c.s. *ā-hāya*) pl. *i-hāyaw-ān* ‘grandchild’, with a regularly varying prefix vowel, vs. Tashelhiyt *ayaw* pl. *ayaw-n*, with a constant “prefix” vowel. Berber loanwords into Arabic sometimes appear to preserve traces of such a consonant (Kossmann 2013: 198): compare, for instance, Middle Atlas Tamazight *arks*, c.s. *w-arks / u-rks* ‘(kind of) shoe’ (Taïfi 1991) to Moroccan Arabic *harkus* ‘old shoe’. In this case, the earliest written attestation of the tree’s name – in Arabic – seems to be in the geographical work of al-Bakrī (d. 1094), who calls it *harḡān / halḡān*, with the initial consonant as expected on this hypothesis (Meouak 2016: 80). The loss of the *h* within Berber, however, must already have been well under way; by 1154, al-Idrīsī gives the form *arqān*, with no *h*.

Based on this evidence, we may internally reconstruct the verb for early Tashlhiyt as **wrg*, and the noun as **a-hrgan*, with the *h* maintained as late as the 11th century. The difference in the initial consonants appears curious at first sight. Armed with this information, however, it becomes possible to find cognates elsewhere after all, and to explain the consonant alternation.

3. COMPARATIVE RECONSTRUCTION

The *h* of Tuareg seems to derive ultimately from a voiced labial consonant, probably **β*. This consonant regularly became *b* in the last common ancestor of most varieties, including Tashlhiyt, when directly followed by a consonant (Kossmann 1999: 116), devoicing to *f* if the consonant was voiceless. Its shift to *h*, and ultimate loss, therefore did not occur in preconsonantal position. The resulting alternations between preconsonantal *b* and prevocalic *∅* remain productive in Tashlhiyt itself (Kossmann 1999: 120–122), e.g. *bzg* ‘swell up’ (< **ābzāḡ* < ***āβzāḡ*), impf. *azzg* (< **βāzzāḡ*).

A proto-Berber verb **āβrāḡ* (as suggested by the noun *argan* < **a-hrgan*) should therefore have yielded **brg* in Tashlhiyt, not *rg*. No Tashlhiyt verb *brg* is attested; but El Mountassir does record *bri* (impf. *brri*, pfv. *-bri*) ‘grind (grain, legumes)’. Unlike *rg*, *bri* has clear cognates across a wide range of Berber varieties (Kossmann 1999: 115–116), notably Middle Atlas *bry*, Tarifit *bray*, Kabyle *bri*, and Ghadames *āβrāḡ*. All these forms match *rg* closely in meaning; the Ghadames form matches it in the final two consonants as well. The Ghadames form is irregular only in the voicing of the final consonant; verbs ending in *y* (> *i*) elsewhere in Berber typically end in *k* in Ghadames (Kossmann 1999: 186–190), likely reflecting **k* (Kossmann 1999: 204). However, this voicing matches the obviously related Awjila noun *aβarg* ‘pestle (for crushing dates)’ (van Putten 2013; Paradisi 1960). This suggests a proto-Berber form **āβrāḡ* ‘grind’, retained as such in peripheral varieties but irregularly devoiced to **āβrāk* in the common ancestor of most northern varieties including Tashlhiyt. This devoiced form **āβrāk* regularly explains Tashlhiyt *bri*, but neither form yet accounts for the form of *rg* – **āβrāḡ* should have yielded **brg*.

To its south, Tashlhiyt today borders only on Hassaniya Arabic. Before the expansion of the latter, however, Berber varieties would have been spoken all the way down the Atlantic coast as far as the edge of the Senegal valley. The last remnant of these western Saharan Berber varieties is

Zenaga, currently spoken only in southwestern Mauritania but certainly more widespread in earlier centuries. This highly divergent variety has two characteristics of interest for this etymology:

1. Preconsonantal *β is reflected not as *b* but as *w* (Kossmann 1999: 114): thus e.g. *äwdäd* ‘stand’ (Tashlhiyt *bdd*), *äwših* ‘disentangle’ (Tashlhiyt *fsi*). Since prevocalic *β is reflected as vowel length, this alternates as in Tashlhiyt: ‘stand’ (impf.) is *āddäd*.
2. Final-*k verbs regularly end not in *y* but in *g* (Kossmann 2018): thus e.g. *äffug* ‘pour’ (Tashlhiyt *ffi*), *anḍug* ‘taste’ (Tashlhiyt *mḍi*). Final-*g verbs, which preserve *g* in Tashlhiyt, likewise end in *g*: *azzig* ‘milk’ (Tashlhiyt *zzg*).

The regular reflex of either *ǎβrək or *ǎβrəg in Zenaga, or in some extinct Berber variety sharing these sound changes with modern Zenaga, would therefore have been (unattested) *äwrəg, impf. *ārräg < **härräg. Borrowed into early Tashlhiyt, this would have yielded *wrg, impf. *arrg. The high degree of unpredictability in verbal nouns within Tashlhiyt would have encouraged the retention of the *w* in that context; for the template of the verbal noun, cp. Ayt Atta and Kabyle *a-bray*. The verb itself, however, would have been highly irregular within Tashlhiyt, which has no inherited *uBC* trilateral verbs, and where impf. *arrg would be expected to correspond to aorist *brg, not *wrg. This double irregularity would have put the verb under pressure to shift to a more productive conjugation. Its semantic specialisation to argan nut grinding would have encouraged a form as close to the name of the tree – *argan* – as possible; this could most economically be achieved by dropping the first radical. The name of the tree itself is more easily explained based on a variant *ǎβrəg rather than *ǎβrək, although the *g* could be taken as analogical; in either case, the shift of the *β to *h*, and its subsequent loss, are both regular in this presumably prevocalic position (*a-βärgan?)

4. WIDER CONNECTIONS

The verb *rg* < *ǎβrəg shows a distribution no less limited than that of the argan tree itself. There is, however, some evidence suggesting that *g*-final reflexes of *ǎβrəg were originally somewhat more widely attested in Morocco, not just in Libya. Not only in Tashlhiyt but also in the Middle Atlas and among the Ayt Atta, the word for ‘mill’ is *azrg*, pl. *izrg*(^w)*an*. Reflexes of this word are found as far north as Ghomara *azru* pl. *izurgan* (Mourigh 2016). In Tarifiyt, on the other hand, *azərg* (*azzāg*) has the unrelated meaning of ‘alley’ (Abarrou 2023). Further west, exact matches appear to be absent; recall, however, Awjila *aβərg* ‘pestle (for crushing dates)’, discussed above.

In light of the previous discussion, this uniquely Moroccan form *azrg*, shared across the Atlas subgroup, may perhaps be explained as an instrument noun *a-s-ǎβrəg ‘tool for grinding’. (For the instrument noun pattern, see Prasse 1974: 110). Loss of short vowels, usual in Tashlhiyt and Tamazight, would have yielded *asβrg; voicing assimilation then yields *azβrg. The extremely limited evidence available on the fate of postconsonantal *β before ə (Kossmann 1999: 84–86) would tend to suggest **azurg as the regular outcome of such a form, but simple dropping of *β is attested postconsonantally word-finally (Kossmann 1999: 81–83), and would appear natural if the *β had later become *h. If this etymology is accepted, it implies that *ǎβrəg was in use throughout Morocco as well as in Libya before the spread of *ǎβrək.

5. CONCLUSION

As an economically very useful species found only in a rather limited area, the argan tree is a natural anchor for the preservation of older strata of vocabulary in a context of language shift. The evidence marshalled above suggests that both its name, *argan*, and the associated action *rg* ‘grind, crush (esp. argan nuts)’ reflect a layer of Berber that had not undergone an irregular sound shift otherwise shared by Tashlhiyt with the rest of northern Berber (*ǎβrəg > *ǎβrək), and that had

undergone a regular sound shift (shared with Zenaga) different from the regular outcome attested in the basic vocabulary of Tashlhiyt and the rest of northern Berber ($*\beta > w / _C$, rather than $*\beta > b / _C$.) Indeed, *rg* appears to be a doublet of the widespread northern Berber word regularly reflected in Tashlhiyt as *bri*. This is best explained by supposing that both terms are substratal retentions from the earliest Berber varieties spoken in the Sous Valley, and that those varieties shared more traits with Zenaga than modern Tashlhiyt. In this scenario, forms showing the more usual outcome of this sound change in modern Tashlhiyt basic vocabulary – *bdd* ‘stop’, *bdr* ‘mention’, *bdu* ‘divide’, *bks* ‘put on a belt’, etc. – must be taken to reflect subsequent leveling influence from more widely spoken Berber varieties (Souag 2017). Their prevalence, in turn, suggests that modern Tashlhiyt owes more to this leveling period than it does to whatever Berber varieties were spoken in the Sous before leveling.

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Summary: The argan tree grows almost exclusively in Tashlhiyt-speaking regions of Morocco, where it has historically played an important economic role. Internal reconstruction based on Tashlhiyt data and historical records indicate that both the name of the argan tree and the related verb *rg* for grinding its nuts reflect an original triliteral root whose first consonant has been lost. Comparison with other Berber varieties suggests that *rg* is etymologically a doublet of the nearly synonymous verb *bri*, and has undergone at least one sound change irregular for Tashlhiyt but regular for Zenaga, the Berber language of Mauritania. This suggests that the earliest Berber varieties to be spoken in the Sous Valley were closer to Zenaga and more divergent from the rest of Northern Berber than present-day Tashlhiyt would suggest.

Keywords: argan, Tashlhiyt, Shilha, substratum, contact