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Transhumant Mobility And Customary Resource Regulation In The Imghrane Communauty (Southeast Morocco)

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Abstract:

Transhumance is one of the main forms of mobility in Amazigh societies, where it plays a central role in economic, social, and territorial organization. In the Imghrane region, this ancestral practice relies on the careful management of agro-pastoral resources and seasonal movements that ensure complementarity between mountain areas and oases. Herd mobility is regulated by local institutions and customary knowledge passed down thru generations, allowing for continuous adaptation to climatic and environmental constraints. At the heart of this system, the Agdal emerges as a key institution, with ecological, social, and symbolic dimensions, ensuring both the preservation of pastures and fairness in access to resources. However, recent transformations—sedentarization, demographic pressures, rural exodus, and market integration—are undermining these balances and raising questions about the future of pastoral mobility. This article aims to analyze the forms of mobility in transhumance in the Imghrane oasis, highlighting traditional mechanisms of space management, the multiple roles of the Agdal, and the contemporary challenges of sustaining pastoral practices.

Keywords: Amazigh, Imghrane, Transhumance, Spatial mobility, Agro-pastoralism, Agdal.

Introduction

In the Amazigh societies of the High Atlas, pastoral mobility has always been a structuring element of social, economic, and territorial organization. Transhumance, in particular, represents much more than just a simple mode of livestock farming: it is an ancestral practice that shapes the occupation of space, regulates relations between communities, and ensures the sustainability of natural resource exploitation in an environment marked by scarcity and irregularity.

The Imghrane confederation, occupying a vast territory between the mountains and desert areas on the southern slope of the High Atlas, perfectly illustrates this model. Local communities have developed, over the centuries, seasonal mobility systems based on a detailed knowledge of routes, pastures, and water points. These pastoral practices are not solely technical or economic; they are accompanied by social and institutional rules, embodied by entities such as the *ljmaet* and the *amyar*, guarantors of respect for collective rights and conflict regulation.

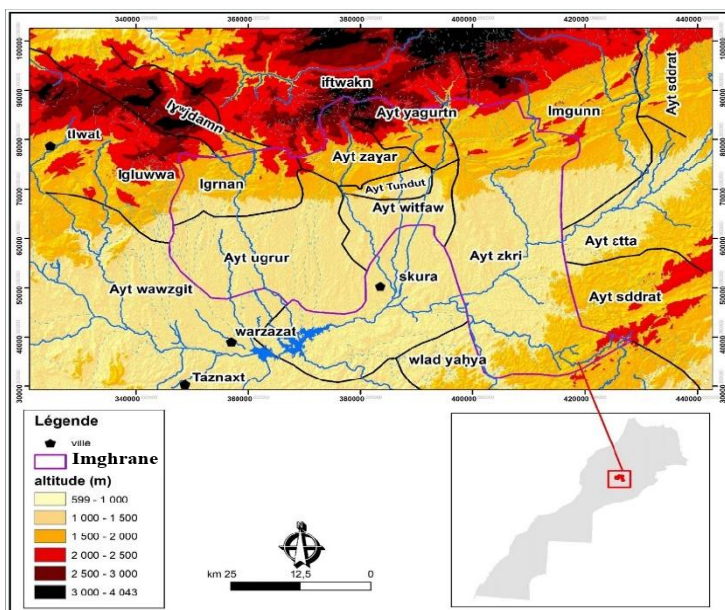
However, this ancestral system has undergone profound changes in recent decades. Demographic pressure, the gradual sedentarization of populations, the introduction of market agriculture, and the increasing openness to commercial and

tourist activities have contributed to weakening the logic of mobility and transforming the relationship with natural resources. Moreover, recurrent drought, migration, rural exodus, and the effects of climate change have increased the fragility of pastoral systems.

From then on, a central question arises: to what extent can pastoral transhumant mobility still play its role as a mechanism for adaptation and resilience in the face of current environmental and socio-economic changes? The analysis of this issue requires examining both the dynamics of transhumant practices, the local institutions that frame them, as well as the new forms of governance resulting from decentralization and sustainable development projects.

The objective of this article is therefore to highlight the evolution of transhumance in the Imghrane region, to identify its traditional and contemporary determinants, and to evaluate the conditions for its sustainability in a context of rapid changes.

I. Study area and tribal system¹



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The Imghrane confederation² is a region on the southern slope of the High Atlas, located northeast of the city of Ouarzazate, composed of five major human groupings (*Khoms*³): the *Khoms* of the Ayt Yagurt (Ayt Effan and Ikanḍuln); the *Khoms* of the Ayt Zayar; the *Khoms* of the Ayt Witfaw; the *Khoms* of

the Ayt Tundut, Ayt Zkri, and Ayt Ugrur; and the *Khoms* of Igrnan, (Oujamaa, 1989: 771).

This region, focused on by research, has experienced quite a few socio-economic and cultural changes in recent decades. The confederation extends from the upper *Tassawt* in the north to the foothills of the *Sayro* in the south. Its territorial space is composed of the southern slope of the High Atlas and its foothills. It is formed by wide glacis (*luṭa*). It is bordered by the *Iftwaken* and *Iyujdamn* to the north, the Ayt Warzazat, Wlad Yahya, and Ahl Skura to the south, the *Imgun*, Ayt etṭa, and Ayt Sddrat to the southeast, and the Ayt Wawzgit and *Igluwwa* to the west.

II. Agro-pastoral resources and transhumance

Given the potential of the ecosystem, today the agropastoral areas on the southern slope of the High Atlas in general and those of the Imyran tribe in particular show significant degradation, a result of strong anthropogenic pressure. The Imyran tribe is not far from this situation. The excessive exploitation of pastures by local populations, particularly through the extraction of wood (firewood, livestock, or construction wood), leads to a decline in the potential for vegetation regeneration. Thus, soil compaction due to livestock trampling leads to the regression of vegetation cover and makes the ecological conditions of the ecosystem even more difficult. This unstable situation manifests ecological disturbances that are generated at the ecosystem level. Different types of fauna and flora species are thus facing extinction. Indeed, anthropogenic action destroys niches and animal habitats, resulting in a dysfunction in both animal and plant biodiversity.

In addition to this oppression that Imyran's spaces are experiencing, the mountainous nature of the terrain makes things even more complex: The soils are fragile, the water networks are steep, and the temperature is high in summer and low in winter. As a result, living resources are dwindling, and anthropogenic action on the ecosystem persists. It is in this situation that the role of customary rights established by ancestral populations comes into play. This institutional movement ensures the needs of biological life and the needs of human life.

Institutionalization primarily concerns practices adapted to arid spaces and oasis and mountain populations. The *agdal* and *lyurm*, among others, play a predominant role in maintaining

¹ The borders materialized in the maps are intended to be indicative

² We use the term confederation to refer to the tribal grouping formed by the tribe of Imghrane, founded after the dissolution of Haskoura's predecessors in the post-Merinde period. Before this date, we are talking about Imghrane of modest size.

³ The term *Khoms* is a word used to refer to the notion of "a fifth" in Arabic. It refers to a tax subdivision set up by the traditional Makhzen (before colonization) to distribute taxes and other charges among the tribes. This division is based on a fictional genealogical construction that aims to divide the tribe into five subgroups. (Pascon, 1983: 159)

agropastoral resources and contribute to the conservation of biodiversity. However, the loosening⁴ of traditional organizational structures after independence led to the dysfunction of established traditional practices. The *agdal* and *lyurm*⁵ represent two institutions that manage the prohibition of trespassing on collective and private properties.

For the peasants of Imyran, livestock represents a crucial resource that increases their assets. But this growth depends on the market situation and climatic conditions. Despite the crops they harvest, the peasants opt for acquiring provisions and moving livestock to ensure their living needs. Transhumance is practiced on vast, non-arable spaces. Their heavy exploitation requires the adoption of a collective management system to ensure the resurrection of the fauna and flora.

Nevertheless, the oasis population of Imyran adopts a different breeding system, that of the stable. Special attention is given to the heads of cattle and sheep, and sometimes to the heads of goats. This operation is not obvious. The women collect the lawns and grass from the meadows, take care of feeding the livestock and their well-being. While the men plow the fields and oversee the various cultivation and marketing operations.

In case the livestock fodder is insufficient, the family opts to organize outings in the vicinity of the douar. In the first case, she hires a private shepherd in exchange for compensation. In a second case, and based on community consent, a collective shepherd takes care of almost all the livestock of the douar from morning to evening. In the latter case, either compensation is given to the shepherd or a rotation (*tawala*) is carried out among the villagers for grazing⁶. However, despite the benefits this practice offers, both to the owners and the shepherds, it is currently declining or even disappearing. But the nomadic herders are trying to renovate it in another way. Among the *Ayt Effan* of *Tasawt*, for example, a collective shepherd takes care of the dozens of mules during the livestock's ascent to the *Tagnousti* agdal.

Transhumance remains the crucial practice that allows the herd to fatten and reproduce. It is known by the seasonal

migration of livestock between winter and summer pastures (summer transhumance and winter transhumance). For the herders, it is a good way to better manage the scarcity of resources. It is primarily based on space management and the coexistence of herders in the same area.

III. Management of spatial mobility:

The terrain of Imyran features a rich vegetation cover. It is characterized by its mountainous peaks and its plains and plateaus. Indeed, access to pastures poses significant challenges for human groups and causes intertribal conflicts. Thus, in the majority of cases, stakeholders resort to institutions to get out of it like "*s lkhir, tađa*"⁷ ...

During each winter or summer migration, the transhumants take their families and herds with them. This operation requires the maintenance of a grazing area, the establishment of shelter⁸, and the determination of a water source. The defense of these interests leads to moments, even seasons, of coalition and rivalry. The stability that the Imyran tribe experiences is the result of several agreements made with its neighboring tribes.

Transhumance is governed by climatic conditions and the state of the pastures. The summer migration extends from May to September and takes place toward the mountain pastures to take advantage of the vegetation cover. Before the winter migration, the transhumants stock up on supplies and prepare to leave the mountainous areas.

The areas exploited by the transhumant people of Imaghran extend from *Imassine* on the *Dadès* to the *Tassaoute* basin. It is a space characterized by variety and dualism. This territory is partitioned into racial faction agdals in its northern part, while its exploitation remains proportionally open in the lower altitudes. These spaces are collectively exploited under the rules of agdal and alliance. But generally, these agdals are accessible, *s lkhir*, to everyone. However, the groups enclosed within a territory (cf. *Ichbbakkn* and *Ayt tumrt* of *Ayt zayar*) do not have access to it. We can mention the agdals: agdal of *Ayt Zkri*, agdal of *Ayt Zayar*, agdal of *Ayt Effan*, agdal of *Ayt ugrur*, agdal of *Ikanḍuln*...

⁴ This relaxation is due to the reform of the *ljmae t* (*jmae a*) under the *dahir* of 1 Choual 1370 (6 July 1951). Economic, legal and social provisions hinder the powers of traditional institutions.

⁵ Other vernacular designations are designated by the populations of the southern slopes of the High Atlas as: *azmz*, *linçaf*, but the terms in local use are *agdal* and *lyurm*. *Agdal* is pronounced by the Imyran *agwdal* with the 'g' labiovelar and by *awdal* or *agdal* with the 'g' abbreviated by the tribes of *Ayt sddrat* and *Ayt e tta*.

⁶ This practice is no longer used in the Luta fractions and the majority of those from the mountain. It depends on the conditions of its success:

availability of people, the number of heads of each owner, the growing spaces...

⁷ *tađa* comes from the Amazigh word *ittḍ* which means to breastfeed. This pact highlights the bonds of fraternity through milk, which commits the participants to respect each other, not to change women, to defend each other and to help each other.

⁸ The shelter expresses instability, it can take different forms: - *agrou* (*agrur* or *afraq*, stone enclosure in the form of a circle), - *tanghourte* (set of enclosures associated with tents) - *agitoun* (*takhamt*, tent implanted for the hearth) - *Izghi* (pl. *izghan*, low dry stone hut without window and door) - *ifri* (pl. *ifran*, cave) ...

As for the routes of the douars, the localities of Imyran have various grazing areas. For sedentary livestock, it is generally the spaces that intertwine with the habitats, which represent defense and control zones. While the localities that spill into enclosed and rugged spaces exploit specific agdals without any attachment to the ethnic fraction. In this case, it is the *ljmaet* of the douar that takes care of the management of these spaces. This is the case, for example, with the *Ichbbakn*, the *Ayt tumrt*, *Azdl*, and *Asymu* of the *Ayt zayar* fraction. Nevertheless, the management of the douar routes poses a problem if we encounter douars divided into sub-douars. Thus, generally, the organizational institutions of the agdals and common affairs fail to find harmony among the sub-douars. While the communities of these sub-localities intervene, and recently it is the youth communities that try to influence the decisions made. So, the organizational model differs according to tribal and topographical contexts.

IV. Agdal: an institution under various aspects

The Agdal is a rich concept that combines enclosure, defense, and the sacredness of spaces. It is not just a resource protection system, but a true social and ecological institution that structures community life among the Imyran. The transgression of the rules set by customary law, whether by an individual or a group, leads to consequences considered harmful, known as "*amuttl*." These undesirable effects can manifest at different levels, ranging from social and moral sanctions to direct disruptions in agro-pastoral production. At the same time, the Agdal defines the rights and obligations of various stakeholders in the exploitation of spatial resources. It establishes clear rules on access to fields, pastures, and forests, while organizing collective management and the preservation of the natural environment. Monitoring and regulation are entrusted to community bodies such as the *ljmaet*, which is responsible for ensuring fairness in the use of resources and sanctioning offenders.

Among the Imyran, the Agdal manifests in different types, each serving a specific purpose.

- Agdal n igran (fields)

Also called *lghorm* (derived from the Arabic *lyurm*: غرامة), this type of agdal constitutes a customary institution that clearly illustrates the function of regulation and preservation of agricultural resources in mountainous societies. Through *ljmaet*, the inhabitants set up a collective control system aimed at protecting agricultural products (almonds, nuts, vegetables, herbs, figs, etc.) against theft and damage.

This system does not apply permanently, but seasonally, depending on the agricultural cycle and the degree of

maturation of the products. Thus, picking and access to the fields are strictly prohibited during certain periods. The prohibition does not only concern foreigners or marginalized individuals, but applies to all members of the community, without distinction of gender, age, or social status. In some cases, community agreements even include the fields of people suspected of theft, in order to prevent any attempt at transgression.

The sanctions provided for in case of violation are generally of a pecuniary nature, set according to the articles of agreements legalized by *ljmaet*. These penalties (thanks to the notion of *lyurm*) function both as a deterrent and as an instrument of redistributive justice for the benefit of the community. However, special flexibility is granted to foreign passengers: they can consume some products on-site, a gesture that reflects the dimension of hospitality and openness inherent in the local culture.

To ensure the enforcement of the rules, one or more people, called *bu-ugdal* or *bu-lywrm*, are designated by the community to monitor the fields. These guardians, invested with legitimate authority, have the right to intervene and directly sanction offenders. Their role goes beyond mere surveillance: they embody the continuity of a customary management system where collective responsibility is articulated with an individual delegation of power. This institutional model is all the more remarkable as it enjoys the support of local authorities, who recognize its effectiveness in preserving social order and regulating agricultural resources. The *agdal n igran* thus stands out as an exemplary form of traditional governance, where community control, customary norms, and complementarity with modern authority come together.

Beyond its immediate function of protecting crops, this system reflects a comprehensive approach to spatial management: it ensures food security, regulates social interactions, values traditional knowledge, and strengthens community solidarity around a common good.

- Agdal n uzddam (wood gathering)

The *agdal n uzddam* refers to the customary organization of the collection and management of firewood, a vital resource in mountainous rural societies. The supply of wood was a major concern for the inhabitants, as it constituted the main source of domestic energy, particularly for cooking and heating. This constant need led mainly women and their daughters to collect wood daily, often green, which they piled up in large heaps around the douars to ensure sufficient reserves.

However, this practice, although rooted in necessity, had profound ecological consequences. The systematic harvesting of green wood prevented the natural regeneration of the vegetation cover. Moreover, the repeated uprooting of grasses for fire or to feed livestock exacerbated the degradation of pastures, contributing to soil depletion and ecosystem fragility. Over time, the wood storage areas were transformed into available land for construction, which further reduced the vegetated areas and increased the pressure on resources. This intensive exploitation of the environment also took place in a context of demographic expansion. The rapid increase in human needs exacerbated tensions between different local actors, particularly between sedentary and transhumant groups, who competed for access to already limited resources. These rivalries reflect a structural imbalance between traditional uses and the environment's regenerative capacities.

Faced with this situation, *Ijmaet* intervened to regulate and limit excessive harvesting. In collaboration with its partners – local authorities, village associations, beekeepers, and other community stakeholders – it attempted to establish collective management rules and raise awareness among the population about the risks of overexploitation. This shared governance illustrates the resilience of traditional institutions in the face of social and environmental changes.

Today, this practice is in sharp decline thanks to the introduction and widespread use of new energy sources, such as gas, which have gradually replaced wood for cooking and heating. This energy transition has reduced the pressure on forests and rangelands, thus providing an opportunity for ecological restoration. However, the regeneration of the vegetation cover remains dependent on concerted and sustainable management, which combines the traditional knowledge of *Ijmaet* with modern environmental protection measures.

Thus, the *agdal n uzddam* appears as a revealing example of the tensions between the necessity for survival, customary exploitation, and the challenges of ecological sustainability. It highlights the importance of a balance between human needs and ecosystem preservation, a balance that can only be achieved thru collective governance and complementarity between traditional and modern institutions.

- Agdal n tuga (lawns)

The *agdal n tuga* is one of the most widespread customary practices among the Imyran. It mainly concerns the lawns and

pastures located at high altitudes, which represent an essential resource for transhumant herders during the summer season. This institution is based on the temporary closure of collective grazing areas to ensure the preservation and regeneration of vegetation cover before its exploitation.

As a general rule, the *agdal n tuga* corresponds to summer grazing, access to which is strictly prohibited during a specific period of the Julian calendar, mainly the months of April (*ibril*) and May (*mayyu*).

Beyond its ecological dimension, the *Agdal n tuga* plays a social and collective role. It strengthens cohesion among the different tribal factions by imposing a shared and supportive management of the resource. Moreover, it serves as an instrument for regulating tensions between sedentary and transhumant populations by establishing clear rules for access to pastures.

Today, despite the economic and social changes that affect traditional lifestyles, the *Agdal n tuga* remains a tool for the sustainable management of pastoral resources. Its ecological efficiency, combined with its social legitimacy, makes it a model of local governance that could inspire modern mechanisms for preserving mountain ecosystems.

In addition to the previously mentioned *agdals*, Imyran contains other collective pastures such as *Azayar n yigr*, *Tagnusti*, *Talkddidit*, *Tigitin*, *Azrif*...etc.

nevertheless, their access is subject to specific regulations. The right to use them is acquired either thru belonging to the same community or thru the alliance of the operators. In the latter case, an operator exerts forced submission by protecting the original operator against their adversaries (*Ayt zkri* who helped the *Wlad Yahya* of Draa against the *Bani maeqil*). The foreigners gain access to the pastures after mutually obtaining the right to "*s-lxir*" or (*bilkhir* in Arabic). In other cases, the *tađa* alliance pacts guarantied the exchange of interests, including the use of pastures. This is the case between the *Ayt effan* and the *Ayt ugrur*, the *Ikanđuln* and the *Ayt zkri*. Another method is known as "*s-nnfe*": This is the case where a herder temporarily transfers their livestock, or just a few heads, to a colleague who belongs to a distant group in exchange for material⁹ or moral compensation.

The institution of *Ijmaet* takes care of the opening and closing of the *agdals* according to the climatic conditions of the high-altitude pastures. An announcement is made in the weekly souks and mosques. An *amghar* (*amyar*) is appointed to guard the pastures and ensure compliance with the decisions of

⁹ Material compensation is generally a sum of money, newborns from the heads of the livestock under conditions and sometimes some

ljmaet. As for the sanctions for violators, a feast¹⁰ is organized in favor of the members of *ljmaet*. At the opening, the pastors organize meetings to share ideas and celebrations of fleece, circumcision, and marriage...etc.

Conclusion

Transhumant mobility in the Imghrane region is set within a context marked by the collective exploitation of grazing lands and by extreme climatic conditions that exacerbate the fragility of the ecosystem. Transhumant livestock farming, combined with subsistence agriculture, remains at the heart of the local economy and explains the emergence of a complex institutional system designed to regulate seasonal movements, manage agro-pastoral resources, and maintain balance among the different communities. Customary institutions, such as the *ljmaet* or the Agdal, assumed the responsibility of setting mobility rules, ensuring equitable access to pastures, and contributing to the regeneration of vegetation cover.

However, the arrival of modern institutions has profoundly disrupted these balances. By prioritizing administrative control and economic logics, they have often weakened traditional mechanisms for preserving and managing routes. The progressive marginalization of customary practices has led to a loss of reference points, even tho these practices contained proven adaptation mechanisms in the face of the constraints of mountainous and oasis spaces.

Nevertheless, the active participation of local communities remains a determining factor for the sustainability of projects related to pastoral mobility. The lack of coordination between modern and traditional institutions still constitutes a major obstacle, but seeking complementarity between the two systems appears to be a necessary path. In this sense, the *ljmaet* retains its legitimacy as a representative body of the populations, while the Agdal embodies an institution capable of integrating both ecological, social, and symbolic dimensions in the regulation of transhumance routes.

Thus, only a coherent articulation between customary knowledge and modern governance mechanisms will ensure the sustainability of transhumant mobility. It is thru concerted regulation, recognition of traditional practices, and enhancement of local institutions that we can ensure the sustainability of resources and the continuity of a way of life that constitutes an essential intangible heritage of the Imghrane region.

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¹⁰ For this feast, a strong head of the violator's cattle named 'tamgdalt' is selected by *ljmaet*.

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