

# Undoing Hierarchies of Knowledge

## Radouan Mriziga on indigenous teachings

Interview: Gurur Ertem

*In 2019 Moroccan choreographer Radouan Mriziga started working on a trilogy of performances inspired by the culture and history of the Imazighen\*, the indigenous people of North Africa. He will be bringing the second part of the trilogy "Ayur" to Tanz im August. Gurur Ertem converses with him about the trilogy and his personal ties to the Imazighen people.*

**Gurur Ertem:** Radouan, what are the departure points for your creations?

**Radouan Mriziga:** All my work deals with the knowledge that the body and dance can hold. Our societies are built around specific ways of perceiving knowledge. I start with the question of how dance can be at the centre and not at the periphery of knowledge. In my earlier pieces I was creating spaces using my body and relating dance and choreography to architecture. Now I am delving into what I call Amazigh studies, and linking my previous enquiries to another kind of knowledge; not only in space, but in time-space. I am Amazigh myself.

**GE:** What does it mean to be an Amazigh for you, and when and how did you find out you were one?

**RM:** I did not find out. I was always an Amazigh.

**GE:** So you grew up in that cultural community.

**RM:** We grew up as a people who know they are Amazigh because our parents are Amazigh. I spent my childhood in the countryside in Morocco, and my grandparents only speak the Amazigh language. Some of us, like my grandmother, don't even speak Arabic. But in Morocco, it's very complex. We cannot project Europe's situation on to Morocco. There is no

such a thing as each community onto itself, and there is no separation of origin.

**GE:** Is the Amazigh language a recognised language?

**RM:** Yes, now it's recognised as an official language. In my case, I don't even question that I am an Amazigh. I never had to either claim it or refuse it.

**GE:** I was asking this question because I was seeking a comparison with Turkey, where I'm from. It too is very complex. People have been adopting or have been forced to adopt the language of the sovereign. Because what's a Turk anyway? It's neither an ethnic group nor a race. It's more of a language group. People adopt the official language, just as they adopt a passport and the nation-state. So I was curious about how the Amazigh communities were not forced to assimilate into a particular nation-state or adopt an official language.

*I take the Amazigh perspective as a way to look at how these indigenous people survived throughout history.*

**RM:** Well, in a way, they were not actively but passively forced to assimilate into Arabic culture. For a long time the official language was Arabic, and Amazigh

history was completely absent from the history books. You could not give your children an Amazigh name ... But conversely you also find Amazigh people in positions of political power. It's interesting; they can keep their identity and speak their language, they're committed to their cities, but at the same time they collaborate with the general status quo. With my work I seek to not only focus on the story of North Africa but also to question something universal: how certain groups of indigenous people and a specific kind of knowledge is denied or pushed away. It's a global problem, and it's a question of knowledge in general. Here, in my trilogy, I take the Amazigh perspective as a way of looking at how these indigenous people survived throughout history. They kept their identity and they hold their knowledge in non-traditional mediums. It's not like academic knowledge; they are not writing about their history. Rather, they keep their stories in their bodies, in their art, in their crafts and performances, and in their storytelling. For me it's more about taking them as an example of survival rather than an example of victimhood.

**GE:** So it's an excellent example of the non-perishability and resilience of non-academic, immaterial knowledge. It gives hope about how non-material knowledge, like movements and gestures, can survive





and how they reappear and resurface over time. Also I would imagine that what we think as the culture of a people, their ethos, is not confined to a particular region and always intermingles with others. The Mediterranean basin is so complex, and there has always been cross-cultural mingling and appropriation. People are still taught about cultures as though they have evolved as separate, self-contained, bounded entities. In mainstream discourses on culture and even in arts programmes we see a lot of flattening and homogenising of entire heterogeneous regions. But people have always moved and migrated and intermingled, and cultures coexisted even in prehistoric times.

*I wanted to start from a trilogy of female goddesses, epistemology and knowledge from this matriarchal perspective.*

**RM:** Exactly. And I think it has to do with archiving, and how this becomes the structure of our general knowledge. We begin to learn about certain people as contemporary and others as not ... It's related to capitalizing on knowledge and determining what's important to know and what not and what you have to learn to become a historian. As early as the 14th century this has to do with placing science above all else and putting it at the service of slavery, for instance, and realising that knowledge is power and capital. This is why the question of time and knowledge is essential. But of course I look at it with different tools. Art and dance is a different way of looking at space and history. It's not about basic timelines. The reality of things is not only about what we see or what is concrete. There is also the complex, emotional dimension. So I think knowledge needs these other mediums. That's why I believe that dance and choreography can allow this nonlinearity to emerge. It's not to give certainty or confirmation about what is good or bad, what's real or not, but to enable this space of our past and future to exist; part of it imagined and part of it real, parts of it subjectively ex-

perienced in different places ... I like the example of the performer in dance, for instance. When you look somewhere as a dancer, the audience also looks there. For me this is an image of what we can do.

**GE:** Usually, when an artist has a non-European cultural background, they feel pressured to perform an identity in Europe, having to respond to questions of identity or represent a culture or a political community or some kind of victimhood. But research in the humanities and social sciences could be not about collecting 'data' but about allowing an encounter, a way of relationship-building that offers mutual knowledge, exchange and transformation ...

**RM:** With the Imazighen people it's the women who transmit cultural knowledge, and they are much more radical in keeping their identity and giving it to their children. They also keep their costumes and crafts as a source of pride. It constructs for us kids the way we see things. Now I live in Europe, in Brussels, but I wanted to do something that makes the talks between my mother and myself travel to other spaces. She doesn't have to say it every day, but she lives it. For me, in my work, there is something that comes in direct contact with this knowledge. So I wanted to start from a trilogy of female goddesses, epistemology and knowledge from this matriarchal perspective. But of course, it's also a matter of how not to be a "native informant". I don't want to create this emotional thing about my people, bring my questions, and then sell them in Europe. That's not something that interests me as a form of art-making. With this trilogy I was also questioning how not to be a 'native informant' and fall into the trap of representing an ideology or a political message.

**GE:** I'd like to know your thoughts on what additional resonances performing the piece in Berlin at the St Elizabeth Church might add?

**RM:** I sincerely like the space and its architecture and what it can allow people to see and how it might construct their relations to the work. Of course, it's a

charged space, but I think my work can always take from spaces and give them additional meanings ...

**GE:** How do you choose the people you work with? I noticed that the women solo performers in the trilogy are also powerful artists.

**RM:** Sincerely, I work with intuition. I don't do auditions. I just meet people, each one with a unique story, of course, and we start the working process. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. Even though my work might look very precise, in the end, it is grounded in intuition ... It's again related to the question of knowledge and how we can build this knowledge together.

**GE:** Dorothee Munyaneza, who wrote the songs for "Tafukt", the first part of the trilogy, became the performer in "Akal", the third part. I like the interweaving of elements from one part to another.

**RM:** Exactly. They are weaving. I am just creating the space for us to do what we like to do. With this trilogy I've been feeling like a composer, a choreographer, and sometimes a curator. In the end it's my job to compose the material, although much of the process is collaborative and non-hierarchical due to the immense amount of knowledge the three of them bring, that in turn influences my decisions and how I see the work. 📌

\* The self-designation Imazighen varies grammatically depending on the region. Common is: Amazigh as masculine singular, Tamazight as feminine singular, Imazighen as plural and Mazighish as adjective. In this conversation different forms are used alternately.

**Radouan Mriziga  
Ayur**

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