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## **Essentially Amazigh: Urban Berbers and the Global Village**

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### **Introduction**

The last thirty years in North Africa have witnessed rapid urbanization, massive international migration, a global communications revolution, and the state-sponsored education of millions of people. These changes have fundamentally reshaped where and how Berber<sup>1</sup> speakers live, and thus how they generate and express the meaning of their lives. The two foci of this paper -- the Internet listserv Amazigh-net and Amazigh cultural associations in Morocco -- reflect these changes, and they differ significantly from the sorts of Berber social units investigated in the past. Both Amazigh-net and Amazigh cultural associations are fundamentally discursive: they revolve around practices of talking and writing. Unlike most "communities," they have an expressed purpose, which is the contemplation and promotion of Amazigh identity. The notions of identity produced in this context are intimately reflexive, in that the analysis and representation are done by the objects of analysis themselves. These forms of expression greatly expand our understanding of Berber life. Yet a sociological rendering of these communities is beset with theoretical difficulties that complicate efforts to secure the linguistic and cultural rights of Berbers within the political states of North Africa.

### **Imazighen Re-Imagined**

In the unstable political climate of early 1970's Morocco, scholars from many disciplines were concerned with the "Berber question": would the young nation's large, diverse Berber-speaking minority consolidate into a political force? The answer at that time was a resounding "no." Generalized Berber ethnicity was proclaimed to be virtually non-existent by what Charles Micaud called a "remarkable consensus" of scholars who found an "absence of a serious 'Berber problem.'"<sup>2</sup> Berbers were seen as isolated from one another in disconnected

rural areas, as sharing the same religion as the dominant Arabic-speakers, and as lacking a written language around which a nationalistic sort of identity might coalesce. Furthermore, scholars were informed by the failure of the colonial French strategy of emphasizing and institutionalizing Arab/Berber differences, a policy that was seen to fuel precisely the kind of unified Arab/Berber coalition that the French were attempting to prevent. In short, in the 1970's scholars saw Berber speakers as lacking the materials and conditions necessary to form an emotionally significant, and politically influential, community of Berbers *per se*. Moroccan nationalist and class-based notions of identity were seen as more likely to prove salient.<sup>3</sup> The mere fact of Berber linguistic distinctiveness was seen as an insufficient base for subjective identity formation, and therefore for social or cultural organization. As Ernest Gellner put it, "the Berber sees himself [sic] as a member of this or that tribe, within an Islamically-conceived and permeated world --and *not* as a member of a linguistically defined ethnic group."<sup>4</sup>

However accurate Gellner's statement may have been in the 1970's, in the 1990's a transformation is underway. Rather than referring to themselves as "Berbers," or as "Shleuh" or other Arabic words for them, or by tribe, some Berber speakers now term themselves "Amazigh" (pl. Imazighen) -- a Berber (or more precisely, Tamazight) word used to refer to all Berber speakers from all of the political states of North Africa, which some activists term Tamazgha. This change in terminology reflects other changes. In the summer of 1994 King Hassan II of Morocco promised instruction in Berber in public schools, although it remained unclear whether Berber would be the language of instruction or an instructed language. In August of 1997 the World Amazigh Congress convened for the first time in the Canary Islands, where 350 delegates from the Maghreb, Mali, Niger, Europe and the Americas met to work towards the goal of preserving Amazigh identity, language and culture. In 1996 the first "general book on the Berbers. . . available in English" was published.<sup>5</sup> Internationally accessible Web-sites and newsletters now carry information on Berber matters in several languages, and Internet discussion groups such as Amazigh-net are alive with debates about Amazigh consciousness and the place of Imazighen in Maghreb history and society. In Morocco, at least, writings in Berber have moved from academic studies to more popular booklets of poetry, proverbs and song. The business in music cassettes and videos in different Berber varieties is booming. And since the political openness of 1994, Amazigh cultural associations outside of Rabat, the capital, have proliferated. Clearly we are witnessing a change from the days of Gellner's "tribal" identity in an "Islamically permeated world." But what exactly is the nature of this change, and to whom does it apply?

On the one hand, this question seems easier to answer now than twenty-five years ago. Imazighen are themselves conducting an often passionate discussion

### *Essentially Amazigh*

of who Berbers are and how they fit into the nation-states of North Africa, the global economy, and a universal Islam. Much of this discussion is very sophisticated, and conceptions of the unique and specific nature of Berbers – or Imazighen as *a* group -- are infused with the rhetoric and sentiments of nationalism, indigenesness, human rights, resistance movements, subaltern and post-colonial studies, and other cultural self-determination movements. Indeed, many of the proponents of Amazigh identity are university educated, and speak a conceptual language readily accessible to intellectuals world-wide. Scholars interested in Berbers need only log on to the Internet or pick up the newspapers and newsletters of the Amazigh cultural associations to access literate Imazighen who tell us who they are in highly academic terminology, often in French or English. Conveniently for the anthropologist, sociologist, social geographer, literary critic or historian, Berber speakers have produced a flurry of powerful statements about who they are and why it matters. Imazighen are literally writing themselves into the histories they contend have ignored or misrepresented them.

On the other hand, this sophisticated Amazigh discourse is as much a conceptual problem as it is a welcome revision of past “outside” notions of Berbers --whether advanced by Western scholars or Arabs. One reason for this is that the discussion, which is typically urban, highly educated and in some sense elite, may still be seen as lying “outside” of the regular socioeconomic reality of the mass of Berber speakers. While Internet discussions or newsletters are accessible sorts of cultural “texts” for the scholar, we still need to come to terms with the relation of text to daily life, and the process by which reality is represented. The indigenesness of Amazigh authors offers a fresh variety of perspectives, but the very diversity of views suggests we should not take any particular representation as synecdoche; we should not mistake any part of the contemporary Berber-speaking world for the whole. If, as Benedict Anderson argues, communities need to be evaluated “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined,”<sup>6</sup> then our question is how different Berber-speaking people imagine the communities relevant to them. Our question cannot be who is more authentically Berber than whom, but rather how different subjective experiences of being Berber fit together. Through what practices or conceptual apparatus do individual identities become associated with something participants call a community? How, in sociological terms, do we make sense of such a community? And how does this particularly Amazigh sense of communion fit with the many other ways community members see themselves as connected, whether by gender, age, class, occupation, nation, region, or educational experience? The challenge of social analysis is to untangle who is producing discourse about whom, unpack what they are saying, and figure out what this discourse has to do with ordinary lives and power relations.<sup>7</sup> This paper is primarily concerned with the first two parts of this project.

### International Amazigh-Net Community

The vocal international Berber community is perhaps the most striking contemporary counterpoint to Gellner's assertion of "tribal" identity. An array of list-servers, newsletters, radio broadcasts, academic programs, and international conferences now provides Berber speakers with the means to forge a sense of Amazigh consciousness across national borders. This community is multifaceted, and certainly riven with class, occupational, linguistic and other divisions. Here we comment only on Amazigh-net, an Internet discussion group for people interested in Amazigh issues.<sup>8</sup> This Internet community is far from being the whole of the international Amazigh movement, but it is an accessible window into the issues of concern for at least some people interested for whom being Amazigh has meaning. Of course, participation in this community presumes access to a computer, facility in English, French and/or Latinized Tamazight, and enough free time and inclination to keep up with the discussions.

Amazigh-net discussions include a wide variety of issues relating to the chartered goal to promote Amazigh culture and language.<sup>9</sup> Few posted comments pass without critical attention. Predictably, a primary concern is language – questions about regional lexical variation, inquiries about learning Tamazight, arguments over which script to use to write Tamazight, and postings of Tamazight-language stories and poetry. Amazigh-net also contains notices of Amazigh cultural events and get-togethers world wide. These range from small parties to celebrate events such as the mid-January Amazigh New Year, to film openings and academic talks and conferences. Differences of opinion that arise in the course of these events are discussed --sometimes heatedly, eloquently, and at great length -- offering the reader a view into the various rationales employed to make sense of who Imazighen are or should be, and what role Islam and state politics play in their lives. Many Amazigh community members are Algerian Kabyles, for example, and the brutal civil war in their homeland sometimes comes to dominate Amazigh-net discussions.

While there is much to discuss in terms of the content of Amazigh-net discussions, we are most concerned here with drawing attention to the style in which this community is imagined. Foremost, the transnational sense of Amazigh solidarity is formed through print and in relation to what is considered a common language, i.e. one either spoken by the members themselves or one they consider part of their heritage. This community is "imagined," in Anderson's sense, in two ways. First, as in national communities, many of the members will never meet one another, much less have the sort of daily interaction that characterizes more traditional objects of sociological and anthropological analysis. This does not in itself make Amazigh-net any less a "community," however, since what matters is the affective bond: *feeling*

### *Essentially Amazigh*

connected. On Amazigh-net this emotional association seems to arise through the practices of reading and writing about the experience of being Amazigh. While Amazigh-ness is expressed in the postings as something identifiable, something that existed prior to its expression, we might argue that the act of writing is itself deeply involved with, if not constitutive of, this sense of identity. The complex relationship between the affective *sense* of identity and the *expression* of that identity raises important questions about how people come to feel connected, how they act collectively, and how they essentialize conceptions of identity generally, whether ethnic, national or cultural. In this way, communities such as Amazigh-net require us to inquire into the nature of community itself. Is there in fact anything about what we are calling community that is not imagined?

This leads to the second problem with using a national model of imagined community in the Amazigh-net case. People imagine their nations to have a particular sort of objective reality, that is, a bounded territory that is temporally and in some sense culturally homogeneous. Virtually no one is calling for a North Africa-wide revolution to forge a Tamazgha state. This leaves "the" language as the point of commonality, the locus of community. However, as is typical of largely non-literary language forms, Berber varies to such an extent that many native speakers claim they cannot understand native speakers from other regions, even within a single country like Morocco. Many Amazigh activists and linguists assert that this alleged mutual incomprehensibility either does not exist or is exaggerated. They point to linguistic evidence that the different forms of spoken Tamazight are clearly related and can be mutually understood. But for non-activists and non-academics, at least in Southern Morocco where both of this paper's authors conduct research, a unified Tamazight is not generally seen as a viable communicative medium. What matters to non-activists is often the local variety they speak, and the way speaking it separates them from Arabic speakers *and* speakers of other varieties of Berber.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the difference a Tashelhit speaker might feel in the presence of Arabic speakers does not necessarily lead him or her to feel solidarity with Riffis, Kabyles or Tuaregs. Thus, in imagining a broad community of Imazighen on an international level, we are faced with several difficulties. First, there is the problem of trying to rally around a language that is only now becoming "a" language. Second, many of those who feel deeply connected to what this emerging language (Tamazight) represents do not use this or other varieties of Berber in their daily lives. Third, those who do operate exclusively in varieties of Berber tend to consider the way they speak a marker of local identity, rather than a link to a broader, general Berberness.

This is not to say that Berber, or Tamazight, is not a single language in several linguistic respects; nor should we downplay the strides that have been made to highlight the similarities between varieties of Berber popularly

understood to be distinct. Attempts to standardize the Berber vernaculars are underway, which involves smoothing over regional variations and selecting a means to represent speech graphically. To do this, grammatical, lexical, syntactic and semantic regularities first must be identified, and the first theses focusing on these matters written by North Africans were written only twenty-five years ago, on Algerian Kabyle, and Moroccan Tashelhit and Tamazight.<sup>11</sup> Political constraints in Morocco initially restricted steps toward Tamazight standardization there to an academic audience. Wider public awareness is only now, decades later, beginning to seem possible, primarily because of radio and television diffusion. By 1998 the linguistic question had more clearly become which "language" should be standardized -- a hybrid, international Tamazight; a separate national Tamazight for each country concerned; or versions of each regional variety of Berber within each country concerned. Politically active Imazighen within the Maghreb, and the Amazigh-net community, are trying to overcome these difficulties in order to secure a legal and practical place for Berber language in schools and government. But the difficulty of realizing the linguistic rights of Imazighen is compounded by the difficulty of imagining a unified Amazigh community.

#### **Amazigh Cultural Associations in Morocco**

Like the international Amazigh-net discussions, Amazigh cultural associations in Morocco propose that Imazighen look to "their own" for creative inspiration, cultural articulation, and even alternative models of morality. But who are "their own"? Different Moroccan cultural organizations imagine their communities differently, and this is reflected in the sorts of activities they undertake.<sup>12</sup> All support the linguistic and cultural rights of Imazighen in contemporary Moroccan society and politics, and push for instruction in Berber language in state schools. They also lobby for the increased use of local vernaculars in public institutions such as hospitals and local administrations with Berber-speaking clientele. Association members in Rabat, Casablanca, Fes, Agadir, and Errachidia, and increasingly in smaller towns such as Al Hoceima and Igherm, meet periodically to discuss relevant issues, to organize exhibits, poetry readings and concerts, and to engage in promotional activities such as letter-writing campaigns about government policies. They also produce newsletters and journals.

Associations in larger cities tend to have a headquarters, or meet at the provincial Dar Shebab (Youth House), whereas groups in smaller towns may meet in living rooms or in cafes. Cultural associations must obtain permission from local government authorities in order to assemble. Permission requires that each group write a charter stating their goals, their anticipated activities, and the names of a governing board. The refusal of permission for some cultural

### *Essentially Amazigh*

associations to assemble or to sponsor particular conferences or demonstrations reminds Amazigh activists that they are carefully monitored by local and state authorities.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Amazigh cultural associations are emerging in smaller Moroccan towns with Berber-speaking populations, which suggests a political will at the state level to permit citizens to engage in association activities to an extent not evident in the movement's first decades.

Cultural association members tend to be university students, educators, intellectuals, lawyers and other literate individuals who consider their roots Berber. While students do head some organizations, activist lawyers and politically-engaged intellectuals generally provide symbolic or practical guidance for the groups.<sup>14</sup> The organization membership is predominantly male, becoming entirely male outside the larger cities.<sup>15</sup> Meetings are usually held in the evenings when many unmarried women are expected to be home. Women are also discouraged from attending meetings because the relatively recent phenomenon of associative life in Moroccan civil society lends a subversive tinge to participation in special interest organizations.

The emergence of political and social critique in the Berber cultural associations is inextricably linked to the academy and to literary expression. This can be attributed to the politico-social conditions under which the critique first arose. While the sociologist/historian Ibn Khaldun documented a "Berber group feeling" in North Africa as early as the 14th c.,<sup>16</sup> it was the Moroccan state Arabization efforts after independence from the French that mobilized the modern Amazigh movement.<sup>17</sup> Arabic language and culture had been a rallying point for nationalist efforts against the French during the French Protectorate, which ended in 1954. In the Independence period, Moroccan nationalist rhetoric called for Arabic language, Arab culture and Islam to counter the colonial presence of French language and culture. The spread of education, Arabized in halting stages, was intended to create literate citizens appropriate for a modern country. Education reached Berber speakers as well, although in smaller proportions, since Berber populations remained predominately rural in the first decades after Independence. Some of the first-generation of state-educated Berber speakers developed Berberist ideology and founded Amazigh cultural associations. Their argument was straightforward – amidst Arabist talk of returning Morocco to its roots, these Berbers poked a hole in the case that Arabic language and culture represent the entirety or even majority of Morocco's cultural heritage.

The first task this group faced in arguing for the legitimacy of a Berber identity based in linguistic and cultural difference was to prove that Berber is indeed a language. Applying the scientific, analytic skills they had learned in state schools to their personally-informed experience, the linguists among them documented regularities in Berber grammar.<sup>18</sup> Berber speakers who found themselves living in cities compiled repertoires of poetry, song, and fables culled

from elders as well as their own childhood memories. These salvage efforts aimed to record what many literate Imazighen feared was a dying language and culture, increasingly replaced by the urban Arabism that schools and the emerging communications media introduced into rural communities. Non-academics joined the ranks of students and teachers in the cultural associations as urban Berber-speaking populations became more socio-economically variegated.

In contrast to the Amazigh-net community, contemporary Amazigh cultural associations in Morocco conceptualize “their own” more locally. They tend to be informed first by their members’ familiarity with a regional identity (Soussi or Riffi, for example), then with a Moroccan Amazigh community, and finally by extension with a trans-national community of Imazighen. Association activities are most significantly informed by the particulars of cultural, linguistic, political, social, and aesthetic hierarchies specific to Morocco. That is, although politically diverse, Moroccan associations agree amongst themselves that “Arab” language and culture are disproportionately present in Morocco to the detriment of “indigenous” Moroccan Berber communities. Association rhetoric employs terms such as “Arabo-Islamic hegemony,” but the cultural associations with the largest membership do not reject Arabic altogether, and certainly not Islam. Instead, they argue against what they see as the tendency in public discourse to link three elements: the Arabic language (both standard and Moroccan varieties), Islam, and Moroccan nationhood. In lectures, workshops, and journal articles, activists contend that suppression of Berber in favor of Arabic, whether explicitly in the educational system or implicitly in social interactions, denies Berber speakers basic constitutional rights such as access to education and health care.<sup>19</sup> On a more symbolic level, cultural associations promote artistic and literary expression in local varieties of Berber and encourage the wider Moroccan public to appreciate the contributions of Berber culture to a heterogeneous Moroccan national culture. They deplore the linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic influence of Eastern Arabic films and music, and the state-controlled media’s focus on the Arab-Islamic East. Cultural associations argue that the combination of these forces encourages Moroccans to measure themselves against the yardstick of a Mashreq-defined Arabness.

Within the framework of these shared beliefs, associations constitute “Amazigh” differently, according to their locations and the demographic profiles of their intended audience. In contrast to the international Amazigh-net community, associations share strong ties to specific rural Berber-speaking places and social groups. For instance, the Igherm branch of the Organisation pour les Echanges Culturelles sponsored a performance by the activist and singer Raissa Tabamrant on the night of the local saint’s festival in March 1996. The event drew the same rural, largely-uneducated crowd of mountain dwellers who would have attended a local saint’s festival. Through urban means – a

