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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

