

# The Intellectual Economy of an Anthropology of Change

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## Abstract

This paper raises issues of change in both highland Morocco and within the practice of Anthropology itself. The first part of the paper argues that at least some of the shifting boundaries in the social sciences offer opportunities for younger anthropologists, and that disciplinary change is not necessarily something to fear. The paper then explores what an anthropology of change might involve and discusses a particular situation of change among highland Berber speakers in Morocco, for whom migration, state education and development are producing economic, social and linguistic shifts, all of which are re-shaping local lives.

## Changing Anthropology

This essay is mundanely anthropological in inspiration. It concerns an out-of-the-way place — highland Morocco — and the way that migration, state education and development are influencing linguistic consciousness there. It is based on long term fieldwork and participant observation and it employs the hackneyed theme of natives under threat. This is anything but unusual. But an earlier version of the essay was written for an area studies journal normally read by journalists, political scientists, activists and policy makers and it is unlikely that any anthropologist would ever have seen it. The journal that solicited the original piece is suspicious of anthropology. In editorial meetings and personal asides they heap scorn on our terminology, the seemingly esoteric nature of our aims and our generally apolitical presentation. They told me rather plainly they wanted something jargon-free, broadly relevant, and politically focused. I was thus required to write differently than I would have for an anthropological journal and this caused me to reflect on the state of my natal discipline and the practice of publication. In one sense the article below represents somewhat of a trend in anthropology: the tendency to look outside for inspiration, or at least an audience.

The nearby anthropological outside consists of many things, but notably today a constel-

lation of studies: gender studies, ethnic studies, environmental studies, global studies, development studies, area studies and so forth. The emergence of such upstarts has been much lamented, at least by some anthropologists who fear they will purloin our method and reduce us to apologizing for our colonialist ancestors. In times of financial belt-tightening there may be good reasons anthropologists fear a drain on our institutional resources. On the other hand, it seems to me that these new intellectual arenas also provide opportunities. Few disciplines followed by the word studies have been around long enough to become too rigid and thus remarks can often be made within their spheres from an anthropological perspective. Admittedly it's unclear what such perspective might be, but this only makes claiming to speak from one easier, and the opportunities for developing one wider. Such quasi-disciplines hovering on the edge of anthropology provide an important resource, especially for young anthropologists, because anthropology has a complex institutional history and so many practitioners and viewpoints that it can be daunting to find something to say that will be seen as interesting or novel. We have to contend with inertia, the weight of history. The exception to this is the novelty of writing about someplace nobody else has been, our oldest but ever more difficult trick, but

as the exotic becomes politically suspect even that ruse is becoming closed to us.

Publishing in the studies, however, is comparatively easy for anthropologists. If you happen to have been someplace non-anthropologists normally do not go, and if you have even a smattering of theoretical knowledge to make sense of what happened there, chances are you have something interesting to say. Due to the increasing specialization of all the social science disciplines, what may seem a routine observation within one circle might be useful to someone playing a different intellectual game. If you have been somewhere odd, especially somewhere very poor and perhaps illiterate, you have duty to pay back your research funding by making the concerns of that place known to the world. Surely anthropologists already know that brutally impoverished people well off the information superhighway still comprise the overwhelming majority of the planet's population and they may be tired of hearing about it. People outside of anthropology seem to forget this fact, however, and they deserve to be reminded. Moreover, and more cynically, publishing is critical to landing any type of academic job. Simple reporting from the vibrant human world outside of the etiolated mindset of academia is a useful way to build a publishing record without exposing yourself to the discouraging sighs of disciplinary Brahmins. Rather straightforward ethnographic reports used to comprise a great deal of what got published under the banner of anthropology. This is no longer true. It seems to me that one way anthropology must change to incorporate an anthropology *of* change is to get more voices heard more often, and in less pretentious language. This is partly possible by moving outside of the disciplinary boundaries.

#### **Anthropology of Change**

That said, there is the more vexing issue of what exactly an anthropology of change should be. I do not think I have provided a very good example below, which would seem to vitiate the claim that circumventing anthropology is the way to grapple with the issue. In the article I rely on the easy trope

of traditional natives battered by change from outside. I make some noises about the long-term dynamism of the society in question, but the overall impression is the confrontation of tradition and modernity. I might have emphasized the more durable processes involved, and the inherent dynamism and diversity within culture, but these are not easy to outline. I wanted to provoke my readers, at least some of whom may stand to influence the processes I describe. The division of outside and inside, like the division between tradition and modernity, can be a politically useful heuristic convention. It can also be a serious impediment to understanding.

As an anthropologist the things I think really matter to understanding people are nearly always dynamic. However we define culture and society they are things that have to be reproduced. In order to endure, all symbolic orders, productive relationships, and institutional arrangements must attend to the fact that the people who build and embody such phenomena eventually die. New people must replace these unfortunates and new people never come ready made. The mortality of bodies and minds is the motor that drives social process and requires the socialization of human beings. Understanding change means understanding how very intimate biological, social and cultural processes articulate and how tradition managed to be resurrected reliably enough that it seemed stable in the first place. It is an accident of methodology that anthropology has too often been freighted by an emphasis on stability and order or their short-term disruption. The temporal constraints of the anthropologist bear on the portrayal of the social order, rendering it static when compared, for instance, to the perspective of the historian. Biology might not be the only reason culture is dynamic, but it's a sufficient reason.

If the anthropology of change has to contend with the inherent dynamism of culture, it also has to deal with its inherent diversity and asymmetrical power relations. The interpretive turn has done much to render culture the final unit of analysis and the *sine qua non* of the discipline. We can't

blame Geertz for *geist*, obviously, but it's clear enough that selective and fawning readings of him have doomed many descriptions meant to be thick to end up merely inert. The introduction to Geertz's manifesto, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1973a), which deals with Berber, Jewish and French misunderstandings of a sheep heist has been ignored in favor of *The Balinese Cockfight* (Geertz 1973b). This elegant, transcendently meaningful rendering of a cockfight had the unfortunate side effect of inducing a generation of students to forget that at least half the people in Bali have no cocks, and that those who do have them had to get them from somewhere. Geertz himself is too smart to wholly ignore power or diversity. Still, much anthropology continues in the blithe acceptance that in each particular case something like a generic culture exists and is worthy of interpretation and description. This is a broader problem with hermeneutic approaches to cultural phenomena. If culture is viewed as text, this implies that it's already written, probably from a single pen. This makes grappling with change awkward, necessarily evoking metaphorical expressions of emendations, of forces and authors outside the traditional original document (William Roseberry, personal communication). It is probably not surprising that anthropologists, as writers plagued by publishers, took to this textual metaphor like the proverbial ducks to water.

Change, if we accept that it necessarily comes at least partially from within culture and society itself, is tied to the differences between people and to their ineluctable mortality. Not just anybody will do to fill a social vacancy. Bodies and minds have to be grown, disciplined and (re)classified as they grow and change in different situations. They must be the right sex or age to perform their social work, they must be associated with certain properties or born into a certain family or lineage or within a certain territory. We cannot develop an anthropology of change without attending to the inherent dynamism of, and diversity within, both society and culture.

### How Berber Matters in the Middle of Nowhere

In the rugged mountains south of Marrakech the lives of Berber-speaking farmers move in what seems a timeless rhythm. Men manipulate intricate stone canals, drawing water to small terraced plots of barley and maize. Women in bangles and bright scarves lash huge loads of wood to their backs and pick their way down precarious trails. Fires from family bread ovens send thin tendrils of smoke into the sky; cows low, hungry in their pens. Young boys throw rocks and lazily tend goats; girls sing as they gather water or fodder or wash clothes in the river, their younger siblings strapped to them. The people of the mountains seem to live in another Morocco entirely, one without the car exhaust and noise of urban life, or for that matter even electricity. The Arcadian surface of village life obscures much, however, both enduring facts like the brutality of physical labor and new developments, a veritable landslide of social, political and economic changes. These changes are related but not reducible to changes occurring elsewhere in Morocco and the world, processes of migration, formal education, and what is often called development. Bearing on these changes is another fact that is central to much of rural Morocco; the people here do not speak Arabic, the national language.

The linguistic distinctiveness of rural Berbers is not often thought to have much relevance in Morocco, and it's true that it may be overstated. But to assert that speaking Berber *somehow* and *sometimes* matters is not to say that Moroccan national politics and identity are insignificant, that class and gender are unimportant, that Islam is not central to people's lives, or that the monarchy is distant and meaningless. All of these things have their own significance in the everyday lives of mountain people. But in reacting against a colonial French fascination with the cultural distinctiveness of Berbers, nationalist and anti-colonialist scholars and writers have gone to the opposite extreme. They have ceased treating the distinctive language of the estimated 40% of Moroccans who are Berber speakers as

having any relevance at all. Urban Imazighen activists (Imazighen being the word for what English speakers know as Berbers) have been fighting against this, arguing that the Berber language (Tamazight) deserves a more prominent place in Moroccan history and some consideration in educational policy and practice. Occasionally activists overstate their case, making far-flung claims of Berber unity or lapsing back into colonial era rhetoric of a kind of cultural Berberstan wholly apart from the larger Arabic speaking society. Rarely does anyone have anything dispassionate or specific to say about how Tamazight language use matters in contemporary social and political processes.

Today it seems fair to assert that the significance of Berberness lies somewhere between the all-encompassing and the non-existent. Berber language — or in the instance I examine here, the variety of it known as Tashelhit — matters in some ways to most everybody who speaks it, and sometimes it matters in ways might be considered political. I would not claim the sort of importance I will outline here for Tashelhit-speakers in the Agoundis Valley for all Berber varieties at all times and places, but the Berber speaking regions of all of North Africa are experiencing many of the same changes as the Agoundis, and the associated relevance of language seems likely to bear comparison. The way that Berber language operates politically in the Agoundis may be idiosyncratic in some ways, but it cannot be entirely so. The Agoundis Valley is an out of the way nook of the world less than 100 km south of Marrakech. It sits at 5000 feet above sea level in a steep and forbidding canyon, but is well watered by snowmelt spilling off the great Ouanoukrim Massif around Jebel Toubkal, the highest mountain in North Africa. In the late 1990s there was no cultural activism or fundamentalist Islam. The people concerned themselves mostly with the complicated task of growing enough barley and maize to keep themselves alive, with tending goats and cows, and with harvesting the almonds and walnuts that remain their main source of income.

I visited the Agoundis Valley as a tourist in 1994 and was impressed mostly with the hospitality of the people and the verdant, seemly sustainable agricultural system. It was a drought year and most of the country was scorched to a dusty, dun colored haze. The cities were filling with farmers driven off the land. Tangiers was rationing water that could only be delivered by tanker, and the air conditioners of Rabat were working overtime. The Agoundis, however, was green and cool with the shade of massive walnut trees and flowering pomegranates. It seemed the very model of a contemporary, poor but vital subsistence economy.

In 1998 I returned to the valley to do research in a particular village, Tagharghist. It did not take me too long to realize life was not percolating along in the state of homeostasis I had imagined. In the short time since my previous visit the people of the Agoundis had built themselves a road that allowed trucks to access the valley, at least on market day. The village had garnered itself a Peace Corps worker, the first one in the area. With his help the villagers were busily constructing a potable water system. Also, after the men of the village chiseled a flat spot out of the mountainside with sledgehammers and iron bars, the Moroccan government came in and began the process of building a school, the first ever.

Thus after only a four-year absence I found that while men still followed mules back and forth through ancient fields, trucks now carried other men to and from jobs outside the valley. Boys still herded goats and girls hauled fodder and firewood, but their younger siblings could be heard counting in Arabic in the bright pink schoolhouse. Women still baked *tanoort* and men made tea for any visitor willing to sit long enough for water to boil, but national and international agencies had representatives swarming through the valley, asking questions and making promises. The people of these mountains have long interacted with the Arabic speakers of the plains, but now the outside seemed to be arriving more suddenly with more force than ever before. Through processes of migration, education and development the plain, often invisible

fact of speaking Berber was coming to matter in new ways.

### Migration

Migration is perhaps the most salient social and political force in North Africa today. Much has been written about the *bidonvilles* of Casablanca, the agricultural labor force in Spain, the Arab quarters of Paris. What has been less often discussed is the effect migration has on the places that send the migrants, the homes that these traveling workers are so often working to support. The village of Tagharghist has been involved in these kinds of movements for nearly eight hundred years, and maybe many more. Of the three main families in the village, two are said to have originally been Berber-speaking groups from south and east of the mountains. The third family is thought to have descended from Arabic speakers originating in the region between Marrakech and Casablanca. All three families claim to have come to these mountains in the twelfth century. At this time these mountains were not the periphery they seem to be today, but were very nearly the political heart of all North Africa. Given this history there is nothing particularly new about travel and Berbers in this region, and not even anything particularly new about Berbers coming to speak Arabic or Arabs coming to speak Berber. What has changed recently is the scale and form of migration, and thus the way language plays into the process.

For instance, the road built by the villagers allows men to come and go more easily in motorized transportation and the cash economy gives them a reason to do so. Landless men can now maintain households in the village and commute for a few weeks or a few months to jobs in mines nearby or to commercial agricultural areas further away in the plains. Because they are landless, normally these men would not figure prominently in village politics, but now that some of them now have money they can buy influence in local affairs. The traditional system of dividing rights and responsibilities by lineage and land-owning households has to be adjusted for the more diverse economic base. If in the past subsections of the

village had to provide labor for communal projects, now some men can pay fines to be exempt from these responsibilities. As such, they can remain inside the village social and political system precisely because they have paying work outside of it. For men who send their sons and daughters to work outside the village, the road makes it far easier to insure that remittances make it all the way back to the mountains. Boys working in dairy farms as far away as the Middle Atlas and girls working as nannies in Marrakech can expect their fathers to arrive on payday to collect the wages, leave a small allowance, and return to the village. Improvements in infrastructure accelerate the pace and range of movement; the globalization of the Moroccan economy generates increasing work for those willing to do it cheapest. Together these changes bring the poor people of the mountains into wider contact with the languages and cultural practices of different parts of the country.

All this movement inevitably affects the way language is used and the way different languages are understood to matter. People who have spent any time in the city know well enough that *tafransist* (French) is the language of the educated, at least in its Arabized Moroccan form. Migrants also come to see that there are several equally Arab alternatives to *Derija*, the colloquial Arabic of the Moroccan cities, including the Egyptian version so often seen on television and the Modern Standard Arabic of news broadcasts and formal speeches. Migrants who encounter Berber speakers from other regions come to see their Tashelhit as but one variety of Tamazight (Berber) and are far more likely to say that they can understand other dialects. For example, Agoundis villagers who have not traveled tend to define *Tarifit* (the dialect spoken in the northern Rif Mountains) as the language of the north and feel it bears no relation to Tashelhit. People with more experience moving around Morocco more correctly see *Tarifit* and Tashelhit as varieties of Tamazight, the broadly conceived indigenous language of the country before the Arab invasions.

