

Morocco's Invisible Imazighen

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This paper asserts that Morocco's Imazighen (Berbers) are often ignored in current academic literature. When they are not ignored Berbers tend to be presented in historical or apolitical terms. This situation is in striking contrast to the French colonial fascination with Berbers, which was often expressly political; it is also at odds with contemporary Amazigh (Berber) activist contentions about the relevance of Berber identity politics. This paper suggests that undervaluing and misrepresenting Morocco's linguistic diversity skews our scholarly conceptualisation of the nation as a whole. This in turn stands to undermine governmental and non-governmental policy, especially in terms of rural development and education.

In the spring 2000 issue of this journal David Hart wrote, '...I agree fully about the ongoing Berber search for self-identity, especially as it has in very recent years moved into a more active phase.'¹ At first glance there is nothing controversial about this. Indeed, it echoes Geertz's 1973 proclamation that differences 'between "Arab" and "Berber" [remain] an important, if elusive factor in Moroccan national life'.² If we consider that Geertz emphasised this important 'factor' one year after his arch interlocutor in Moroccan affairs, Ernest Gellner, co-edited the volume 'Arabs and Berbers,' it would appear that for the last three decades we have had a broad consensus among scholars that at some level the fact of Berber linguistic distinctiveness matters in Morocco. Gellner may have argued that Berber identity was segmentary and tribal and unlikely to coalesce into a unified political movement, but he certainly thought being Berber was important, at least to Berbers themselves. If Hart is right about the more recent 'active phase' in the process of Berber self-identification, then surely Berbers (or Imazighen) would constitute a 'hot' political topic and a magnet for scholars. Curiously, they do not. My contention in this essay is that Imazighen are strangely absent from much academic work in Morocco, and when they do appear it is typically in historical –rather than contemporary and especially political – treatises. I believe this skews our view of Moroccan society as a whole.

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Of course, arguing that something does not exist is a vexed project from the outset, and so I begin by sketching a few examples of the kind of invisibility I mean. This constitutes not total objective absence but the portrayal of Berbers as being beyond or outside the Moroccan nation, or as being significant only in a historical sense. Work on contemporary Moroccan society seems to suggest that being Berber precludes being Moroccan, and being Moroccan does not include space for being or speaking Berber. This is not the case 'on the ground', of course, as is evident to anyone who speaks with Imazighen in Morocco. The Moroccan political establishment certainly recognises this fact, as both the late Hassan II and the present king, Mohammed VI, have made explicit public references to the demands of the country's large Berber speaking minority. In October 2001 the King established the 'Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture' in a speech where he said, amongst other things, 'The promotion of the Amazigh is a national responsibility, for no national culture can renounce its historical roots.'³ Even the BBC has written of Amazigh (or Berber) activism and moves for cultural self-determination.

Scholars, however, have tended to shy away from contemporary Berber politics. Below I give three published examples of what I mean by this: the issue of JNAS cited above, a 1998 article by Wolfgang Kraus on Berber 'segmentary identities' published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, and a volume out of Harvard, *The Shadow of the Sultan*, edited by Rahma Bourqia and Susan Miller. These three items hardly constitute a survey of the literature, but they give a taste of the way Berbers are portrayed (and ignored) in contemporary scholarly work.

The academic portrayal I outline contrasts sharply with Amazigh activist accounts of their own self-identity and political interests, which is the concern of the second part of this essay. For activists the issue of Berberness (or Amazigh-ness) is central, even all-encompassing, rather than peripheral and unimportant. Amazigh rights to cultural and linguistic expression are seen as fundamental and are framed as basic human rights abrogated by the Moroccan government. The activist view is anything but apolitical. Historical visibility is part of their project, but activists are at least as concerned with bringing Amazigh history into the curriculum of the Moroccan educational system as with having it noted in obscure academic journals.

In the third part of the article I argue that to ignore the impact of linguistic diversity in Morocco is not merely an academic mistake. Millions of Moroccans are subject to governmental and international interventions of various sorts, especially efforts at 'development'. Few of these projects take linguistic differences seriously. This is not to say that the Amazigh activist vision of the significance of being Berber necessarily equates to that of the masses of mostly rural and often illiterate Berber speakers, but clearly there

must be some salience to speaking a language that is not officially recognised in courts, schools or political life. I do not explore the political identity of rural Berbers very deeply here, but suggest some conclusions from work I have done in a High Atlas village. I contend that a balanced understanding of how Berber language, culture and politics operate in both rural and urban Morocco is a crucial part of understanding the contemporary reality of the nation.

Scholarly Portrayals of Imazighen/Berbers

The spring 2000 issue of JNAS seems an odd place to begin discussing a lack of attention to Berbers. The issue contains two articles specifically on Berber-speaking people, and one on the protectorate era 'Native Policy Council' that involves Berbers substantially. In the first article, the example I cited at the outset, David Hart discusses the persistence and change in Berber tribal names from Ibn Khaldun's time to our own. He makes his comment about the 'active phase' of Berber self-identity rather off the cuff, his main interest being the complex ways that names are derived, claimed, mistranslated and maintained over the *longue durée*. This is one of the less ethnographic productions in Hart's astonishingly prolific work on Berbers. Next Michael Peyron discusses Amazigh poetry of the protectorate period, what he calls 'late-Heroic Age Berber poetry'.⁴ This Tamazight poetry captures the distress of Middle Atlas Imazighen at their military defeat by the French. Peyron asserts the usefulness of these transcribed poems to historians, arguing that they provide a 'vivid, authentic insight into the hearts and minds' of Central High Atlas Imazighen.⁵ Finally, William A. Hoisington, Jr provides an engaging and detailed account of the debates and policies of the French 'Native Policy Council' between 1921 and 1925.⁶ From the way the Council sought to deal with urban/tribal relations around Fes to the various Berber policies that led to the ill fated 1930 Berber *dahir*, again Imazighen figure prominently. All this in a single journal issue would seem a bounty to please any Berberist. These authors all attest to the enduring significance of Morocco's Imazighen, a population that occupied a place in Moroccan political discussions well into this century.

In the same issue, however, Mark Tessler reports on 'Morocco's Next Political Generation,' a generation that seems to lack any Berber component.⁷ This article begins with a discussion of the relative youth of the current political generation, and its increasingly urban location. It notes the increase in education, especially among urban young people, and the acute problem of the educated unemployed. There is a revealing summary of the political events of the 1970s and 1980s – the time period likely to have influenced the politics of the generation in question – including references

to a growing women's movement and the role Islamists played in political disturbances of the period. Tessler quite sensibly concludes that 'there is a significant measure of opposition to the prevailing political and economic order among ordinary Moroccans',⁸ and he notes that structural adjustment policies have disproportionately hurt the poorest members of society.

The article then turns to public opinion research in 1995/96 where 1,000 people living in the capital of Rabat were asked a series of questions. These included inquiries into Arabic and French newspaper readership, interest in foreign television programmes, affinity for Western music, likelihood of regular prayer and visiting marabouts, views on women working outside the home, notions of the ideal age of marriage, participation in civic associations, views on democracy and the value of Western governments. It is interesting and promising research. One assumes, however, that the questions were asked in Moroccan Arabic to people who considered themselves Arabs. They were asked in a city that – unlike Agadir or Marrakech – lacks a large Berber speaking population, and they were certainly not asked of the nearly half of all Moroccans who live in the countryside. Perhaps this makes no difference to national trends. My own research is limited to a small village in the High Atlas, and so I tend to view urban Morocco as a strange and alien place. But the absence of any acknowledgement of Berber-speaking Moroccans in the new political generation would seem a development worthy of comment. I have noted elsewhere that in the countryside speaking Berber matters in some ways to some people in certain contexts.⁹ It would be interesting to know if this is the case in urban areas also. Less than half a century ago the French were obsessed with urban/rural and Arab/Berber differences, and Berber politics were understood as vital to national politics. If the French concerns have evaporated, when and how this happened would seem important questions to entertain.

In contrast with the particular issue of JNAS, Kraus's more anthropological work among rural Berbers in the Middle Atlas offers a different set of problems.¹⁰ Here Berbers are not left out of Moroccan affairs, but the nation state is left out of the affairs of rural Berbers. Kraus's project is to extend the work of Ernest Gellner,¹¹ to argue that while the Ait Hdiddu of the Central High Atlas do not actually exhibit the segmentary politics Gellner ascribed to them, they do have 'segmentary identities'. This is to say that these Berbers imagine themselves as connected to one another in something like the ramifying, isomorphic groups Gellner outlined in his classic study. Gellner's point about segmentarity was that Berber groups resemble other groups of the same size, but also that the structure of larger, amalgamated groups mirrors that of their constituent parts, or segments. This is an extension of Émile Durkheim's notion of mechanical, as opposed to organic, solidarity.¹²

What Kraus sets out to do is to show that while these maximal level tribal groups do not actually materialise for any significant political purpose, this does not diminish the importance of Gellner's model. Indeed, as Combs-Schilling noted long ago, segmentarity as a conceptual model is something different than segmentarity as a political system.¹³ (This is hardly confined to segmentarity. After the last US presidential election we may more clearly see that 'democracy' as a cultural ideal is something different from democracy as a real political system.)

What Kraus also does, much like Gellner, is ignore the fact that the Ait Hdiddu live in Morocco, a nation in Benedict Anderson's conceptual sense, but also a powerful state. Kraus avers that landholding, for instance, is essentially the same as in the pre-colonial period.¹⁴ He does not mention the effects of migration, protectorate policies that sought to codify land rights for pastoralists, contemporary tax policies, state education, the impact of television and radio, and so forth. Segmentary identities seem to operate outside the contemporary Moroccan social, cultural and political world. If this is not the case, it would be interesting to see how the 'tribal' identities outlined by Kraus and Gellner have accommodated the modern world. It would be even more interesting to see how they fit within Morocco's 'next political generation'.

It is perhaps significant that Kraus published his piece in an anthropological as opposed to an area-studies journal. Most academic work in Morocco today makes no mention at all of tribes and is notable for an emphasis on the state, religion, and national character, the primacy of politics over economics, and the operations of royal charismatic leadership in a modern national culture. Most research is concerned with Arabic speakers and at least implicitly with 'Moroccanness' as expressed in urban areas or at least medium sized towns. Main themes include the relationship between discursive forms and state power, ritual and religious legitimacy, post-colonialism and national identity, gender, and the enduring potency of Alaoui royal power within these domains. Exemplifying these trends is an important book published in 1999 under the aegis of the Harvard Maghribi Studies Program, *In the Shadow of the Sultan*.¹⁵ The subtitle, 'Culture, Power and Politics in Morocco' is reminiscent of Gellner's *Culture, Identity, and Politics*,¹⁶ but the similarity in labels masks a radical difference in approach.

The introduction of the Harvard volume asks that we appreciate the 'ethnographic detail' of Robert Montagne's studies of High Atlas Berbers but 'remain alert' to his colonialist project.¹⁷ It notes, 'recent scholarly studies touch on some of the most sensitive areas of social and political concern, such as slavery, gender relations, ethnic and minority relations...'.¹⁸ Given these concerns, what is striking is that there is only one

indexed reference to 'Berbers' in 12 chapters and no reference at all to the terms Amazigh or Imazighen. Two full chapters, two-thirds of the section of the book entitled 'Peripheries', focus on Moroccan Jews, who would seem to comprise the 'sensitive... ethnic and minority relations' referred to. The general word for Berber language, Tamazight, fails to appear anywhere in the volume, though Tashelhit (the southern variety of Tamazight) is included on the one page that specifically refers to Berbers. Tashelhit is also included in the glossary. Even the largely Berber-speaking regions of the Rif and Atlas Mountains are absent from the index, as is any article exploring the importance of rural areas in general. Perhaps most revealing, the reference to an entry in the index labelled, 'power – role of language in', *does not mention any language other than Arabic being spoken in Morocco*. Abdellah Hammoudi, whose contribution is in part based on fieldwork among Berbers, clearly considers Berber language incidental to his argument. We only find out well on in the description that Hammoudi is working with Imazighen when he writes, 'The sacrifice of the two victims was the climax of the feast, called *tfaska* in Berber, which was the language of my hosts.'¹⁹ Perhaps this is why 'Berber' appears in at least four places in the book but 'Berbers' only once in the index: the existence of Imazighen is not significant to any point made by any of the authors in the collection. Ernest Gellner, who had a massive influence in Middle Eastern Studies and social theory generally, but who tended to ignore all Moroccans but Berbers, warrants two citations in the index, one fewer than Theodor Adorno.²⁰

In fairness to Professor Hammoudi there is perhaps nothing characteristically Berber or Amazigh about the feast and the masquerade he describes.²¹ In the Agoundis Valley, near where Hammoudi worked, I noted that this yearly event happens very differently from his version, a fact which would seem to undermine any essentially Berber quality one might posit for the ritual and masquerade. There is in my view nothing specifically wrong with respect to any of the work by the eminent scholars in *Shadow of the Sultan*. My point is that as a whole the book well illustrates the pre-eminence of the national frame of reference in Moroccanist scholarship, and the predominant view of Moroccan society as lacking certain dimensions of linguistic diversity or a significant rural dimension. This book reflects a trend in Moroccan scholarship generally: the fact that 40 per cent of the population speak Berber as their first or only language is seen to be irrelevant to the 'culture, power and politics' of the country. The fact that 50 per cent of the population is rural does not seem to matter much either. This academic perspective is of special concern in political economic terms because so many Berber speakers live in rural areas, and rural areas have the worst socio-economic conditions in Morocco.

Activist Portrayals of Imazighen/Berbers

Amazigh activists present a very different picture from that of scholars. Activists work against the various forms of oppression they claim Imazighen suffer, though their concerns focus overwhelmingly on issues related to language. In my own work I found that while villagers might agree on the existence of many of the problems noted by activists, they do not commonly associate their experience of those problems with being Amazigh. Activists are concerned with a spatial scale (all of North Africa) and a temporal frame (long-term history) that is significantly different from the spatio-temporal co-ordinates most villagers engage. This does not make activist accounts of Amazigh identity 'wrong', of course, only bound to their own contexts. As Terry Eagleton has remarked, 'As an idea, culture begins to matter at four points of historical crisis: when it becomes the only apparent alternative to a degraded society; when it seems that without deep-seated social change, culture in the sense of the arts and fine living will no longer even be possible; when it provides the terms in which a group or people seeks its political emancipation; and when an imperialist power is forced to come to terms with the way of life of those it subjugates.'²²

This is the difference between culture in the lived sense and culture as a potentially politicised idea. Put another way, it is the difference between nineteenth century German and later American notions of cultures – plural, unconscious, with a small 'c' – and cultural projects. The Amazigh rights movement is just that: a movement, a cultural project. It is arguably born of all the 'points of historical crisis' Eagleton outlines, except perhaps for the second one about 'arts and fine living'. The people of the village where I worked simply do not (yet) exist in conditions where Amazigh identity – as activists express it – seems most relevant: an urban, literate world dominated by Arabic, French, Spanish and/or English speakers. Villagers may some day come to see themselves broadly and significantly as Imazighen, especially given the preponderance of Arabic speakers in positions of power and the increasing incursions of these Arabic speakers into the high valleys. For now what Berberness we might attribute to villagers is mostly a lived and unconscious experience rather than a notable basis of political identity. This does not seem to be the case among the city-based activists.

The Amazigh movement has specific goals and presents these to the state and international organisations, and they have had some success gaining an audience. The basic complaint is that in reacting to the French vision of Berbers as France's 'good savages',²³ and the infamous Berber *dahir* that formalised 'customary law' for Berbers in contrast to Arabs, Moroccan nationalists became bent on removing Imazighen from Moroccan history, if not Moroccan society. The activist Zighen Aym puts the matter bluntly for all of North Africa:

When will the North Africa governments stop their repression of the Amazigh people by denying them the most basic human rights, which are the expression of their culture and the practice of their mother tongue? When will they admit that Islam was not spread peacefully in North Africa and that many Imazighen were murdered, their houses burned, and their women taken captives as war bounty to the caliphs in the Middle East? When will they stop their Arabisation program and let North Africans speak, write, and sing in Tamazight? When will they admit their mistreatments of and their failed attempts to uproot Imazighen? When will the governments provide financial resources (i.e. taxes paid by Amazigh people) so that an Amazigh does not have to learn a second language to live fully and freely in his/her land?²⁴

What is striking about this is the scope of the concerns: from women being taken captive in the eighth century to tax and educational reform at the beginning of the twenty-first. This quote is perhaps atypical in its critique of the spread of Islam and the association of Islam with 'caliphs in the Middle East'. It is absolutely typical in its leading charge of 'repression' and 'basic human rights'. Expressing concerns in this idiom catches the attention of foreign activists, where in any case the slight to Islam is not likely to make many enemies. For instance, on 10–14 January 2001 the International Federation of Human Rights (IFHR) held its 34th Congress in Casablanca, called 'Globalization and Exclusion'. The following resolution was taken at that conference and posted online at www.mondeberbere.com/

The State-Nation, a model invented in Europe, was exported around the world. It contributed to the marginalisation and even the exclusion of the languages and the cultures that could not acquire an official or national status in the states. The linguistic and cultural discrimination is in the heart of the modern state system. Today, the globalization contributes to the cultural homogenisation. However, there are languages and cultures that resisted this process of uniformity. Today, these languages and cultures are entitled to be respected and to exist in reciprocal equality.

We, defenders of the human rights, believe that it is our duty to save these languages and cultures. While Morocco is hosting the 34th Congress of the IFHR, we decided symbolically to devote this message to the Amazigh culture, totally marginalized by the recent education reform, considering that this is one – among so many others – of the threatened cultures in our globalised world. Hence, we request the recognition and constitutional protection of the Amazigh language in Morocco and in the countries of North Africa, in order to guarantee its integration in the public schools, the communication, the administration and the justice.

There is nothing here about Islamist leaders held under house arrest for years by the Moroccan government, and it is apparent to most observers that the Islamic movement is more widespread, and arguably far more repressed, than the Amazigh movement. But the Imazighen, wisely, speak the language of international cultural activism. If the discourse of 'saving threatened cultures' is widespread, the association of Morocco's Imazighen with this discourse almost certainly comes from members of the Amazigh movement, who in fact maintain the website where it is posted.²⁵ The 'requests' at the end refer to demands made by Amazigh activists. These include Tamazight instruction in public schools, as the late King Hassan II indicated was possible in an August 1994 speech and as Mohammed VI recently echoed. They also want to increase the number of radio and television stations in the different Tamazight varieties, the provision of Tamazight/Arabic translators in courts and other administrative domains, and the legalisation of Amazigh names. All of these are specific demands of at least factions of the Amazigh camp and are included in the manifesto posted on the same site where the above resolution was found.²⁶

To give a more mainstream example of Amazigh public relations success, the BBC published an article online on 2 January 2001 entitled 'Moroccan Berbers press for rights'.²⁷ In this piece we find that 'More than 60 per cent of Moroccans claim to be Berbers – the original inhabitants of North Africa',²⁸ a statistic that would seem somewhat dubious given the difficulty of undertaking studies of language identity in Morocco and the sheer impossibility of saying who is 'original' to any part of Africa. (Presumably, anthropologically, we're all 'originally' African.) Berber scholars such as Fatima Sadiqi put the number of Berber speakers in Morocco at something less than 45 per cent,²⁹ while the activist and scholar Salem Chaker believes it to be about 40 per cent.³⁰ Perhaps more people 'claim to be Berbers' than can actually speak the language, but given the mildly negative associations many Moroccans have of Imazighen this seems unlikely.³¹ Clearly such numbers are a political issue, which is why academics are so careful with their estimates. There is no citation for the '60 per cent' statistic in the BBC article, but the photos accompanying it are labelled 'Berbers are struggling against Arabisation' and are provided by the World Amazigh Congress.

The Pelham article goes on to cite 'Berber intellectuals like Hassan Ouzzat' who 'argue that Moroccans are facing a new Arab conquest'. Mr Ouzzat is quoted as saying-

Little did they realise that the pan-Arabism based in the Middle East would expand in such fury to North Africa and result in this pan-Arab hysteria, trying to obliterate anything that is native to North Africa and especially its language. This Middle Eastern movement generated

