

# 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.

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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.'<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup> 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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