Modernity Becomes Imazighen

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Part 1: Alternative Modernities and a Portrait of the Perimeter

From the air Marrakech seems to throb in the haze of the brown Haouz Plain like an agitated neuron, thin asphalt tendrils winding out from it. Around the better western suburbs oddly shaped turquoise splotches dot the landscape: the swimming pools of the indigenous rich and the fortified tourist resorts hemmed in by palms, bougainvillea, and armed guards. Thin sheep graze outside the walls in dirt lots strewn with wisps of plastic bags. The streets are wide here, well-paved and mostly quiet but for the few hours a day when the commuters leave and return, or when busloads of tourists rumble past on the way to their compounds. Other suburbs are less elegant: block upon block of rickety concrete block apartments, with rows of stores on the ground floor.

Beyond these suburbs the medina, the old city center, remains the core of Marrakech, with imposing red walls erected a thousand years ago and the venerable Koutoubia minaret rising as a priapic reminder of spent imperial glory. In the poorer quarters of the medina laundry dries on every rooftop, stirring like Buddhist prayer flags when a breeze wends through the city. Below the jumble of roofs, in the raucous streets of the urban core, smoke-spewing busses jostle with bicycles and trucks, cars and horse-drawn cabs, donkey carts, pushcarts, pedestrians and swarms of whining, careening, soot-belching mopeds. At its core Marrakech is a city alive, one of the fastest growing in the country, popular with tourists from Crimea to Korea seeking heat, sun and exoticism. It is particularly popular with Europeans, and an international airport pipes great floods of them into the city for holidays; the streets are spangled with things to sell them, from carpets and brass trinkets, to pottery and tee shirts. Marrakech is perhaps less exotic than it used to be. Tourism is Big Business now and the stalls of the famous outdoor carnival at Djeema El- Fna have been numbered, electrified and aligned on a grid. The city's estimated 27,000 colonial-era prostitutes have been dispersed or driven underground and the medina is now half living city and half folklore-for-sale, a slick and almost sad parody of itself. Marrakech remains alluring even in her dotage, however: a busy hive of humanity on a vast, sweltering and mostly empty plain.

South of the city the massive Atlas Mountains stand silent against the sky. Snowcapped sometimes from November through July, the core of the massif is anchored by a cluster of peaks over 13,000 ft. high. Rivers of snowmelt plunge out of these steep valleys, dissipating on their way down until they flow thinly into to the plains. To the north these waters slake Marrakech. To the south what streams escape the mountains are captured in cement dams, or seep into rocky alluvial fans that lose themselves in the desert. Beyond the Atlas is the immense expanse of the Sahara, and beyond that the rest of Africa. From the perspective of Marrakech the Atlas Mountains stand as a solemn, unfriendly guardian between the civilized world anchored by the city and the great desert beyond. However, from the perspective of the people who live in these mountains the world looks very different. To them it is “home” with all the warm particularity
that such a word implies. If Marrakech hovers luminous and exotic on the periphery of the Western imagination, the Atlas is yet another world, a periphery even from the perspective of other Moroccans. It's a land of Berber (rather than Arabic) speaking farmers and herders, of insular mud-walled villages clinging to hillsides above the life sustaining water of the rivers.

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I first visited the village of Tadrar in 1995 and there was no running water, except for the river, no electricity, solar or otherwise, no toilets. Indeed there was no road. The only way into the upper Agoundis Valley, and to Tadrar, was a series of narrow paths chiseled into the hillsides. From the main path, looking down, you would see massive walnut trees crowding the boulders of the riverbed. Fields of maize (in the summer) and barley (in the winter) grow in steep, carefully built terraces above the spring flood level. Almonds are planted throughout the fields and even higher, on ledges the river water cannot reach. Rock and mud houses are terraced above these, clustered together in places that least frequently suffer rockslides. Grapes, pomegranates, figs, blackberries, squash, mint, potatoes and tomatoes grow where space can be found in the dizzying patchwork of fields, trails, mud dams, and irrigation ditches. Olives, carob trees and prickly pear are scattered around the lower elevations. On the highest hillsides there are a few juniper and oak trees that the women use for firewood, and clumps of overeaten grass for the herds. These resources are ever scarcer, however, and are protected by sporadically enforced government laws.

The fields are watered year round by the ever-melting snow, which is captured by a series of temporary dams that feed seven main targas, or canals, and many hundreds of minor channels and ditches. Each of these has a particular name, as does each of the 1,411 fields, and so people are able to discuss space and movement through space at a level of detail sure to baffle any outsider. The targas are operated in rotation by the twenty-seven families of the village, and each has either a nine or ten-day cycle, with different households owning different sections of the days. Sometimes a wealthier household will own a whole day’s worth of irrigation water on a given canal, or even two days in a ten-day cycle. Poorer families can sometimes lay claim to no more than a few hours every ten days, and for them it is a long wait until they again have access to the precious water. The order of the rotations is decided by lottery at the beginning of the dry season, but the quantity of time is determined by the quantity of land owned.

The majority of the land in Tadrar is given over to grain, though some fields are too shady, especially those deep in the canyon beneath the walnut trees. These fields are used to grow tooga, fodder for the animals. The trails are too steep and narrow to drive the cows to the tooga, so the women bring the fodder to the cows. They cut it down near the riverbed, and when this runs out they harvest bushes and shrubs from the mountains above the village, and haul loads larger than themselves back to the lowing cows kept in dark pens under the houses. The songs of the young women and girls echo through the valley as they haul fodder and water, collect wood for the bread ovens, wash clothes, milk cows and lug babies around in slings on their backs. Men and boys work the irrigation system, plow, harvest and plant, and care for the sheep and goats in pastures both near and far. Younger boys mostly throw rocks at each other.

For the older boys and men there are more fertile, distant pastures, a day’s walk away up at 10,000 feet and higher along the Ouauoukrim Massif, a ridge of mountains at the center of what tourists know as the Jebel Toubkal National Park. These are comparatively lush, but still cold and wind-swept and can only be during a few months of summer. The shepherds bring the animals down to their winter grazing area just above the village in October, before the heavy
snows. Other less hardy animals, especially sheep, are kept in these local, "summer" pastures year round.

Partly because of the availability of these extensive pastures between villages, partly because of the availability of water combined with the absolute lack of flat land, this is one of the most densely populated areas of Morocco in terms of people per arable land unit. In other words, these Imazighen (Berbers) make more human bodies out of less dirt than almost anyone. This productivity gives Tadrar a Shangri-La feel: it's a dense thicket of green jammed into the crevasses of dry, impossibly rugged mountains. But it's a hard place, no paradise. There is little to sell, and thus no cash for doctors or dentists, books, paper, medicine or, sometimes, even shoes. "Ishqa," people said to me again and again, "toodert n'idrarn ishqa." Life in the mountains is hard.

In Tadrar radio reception is sketchy and there is no television. Neither is there television in Tazguart, Tagoundafine, Ighir, Agerda, Ait Moussa, Annamer, Zaouite or in any of the villages of the entire valley, at least once you leave the end of the older part of the dirt road down at the place called Maghzen. When I worked there nobody in Tadrar could really be called literate, and none could readily speak the national language, Arabic, with any degree of confidence. Some could write their names and the names of other families. All of the men could recite parts of the Qur'an, and most of the boys worked to memorize Qur'anic verses with the fiqih, the religious teacher in the mosque. A very few men could read parts of children's stories in standard Arabic, and a couple women could tell me Moroccan dialectical Arabic words for things. None of them could read their own language, Tashelhit, whether written in Arabic characters or modified Latin script.

Things are changing rapidly, however. Between my initial trip in 1995 and the period of my Ph.D. research in 1998-99 the people of the Agoundis Valley had built themselves a road. One migrant who had made his fortune in the construction business in Marrakech donated a jackhammer, a generator to run it, and enough dynamite to blast out a ledge on the hillside on which rocks could be stacked and filled with earth. The villagers themselves contributed the labor, as they do to repair the road every winter when the rains wash parts away. This dirt road now allows trucks up into the valley at least once a week. People are proud to tell you the government contributed nothing; they did it all themselves without cement or steel, without anything but rock, dirt, a few logs, teamwork and sweat. The arrival of trucks means that crops can now be taken to market and by the time I finished my work the villagers were beginning to experiment by planting apples, cherries, plums and other fruit trees in their fields. As these farmers begin to grow crops for sale rather than personal consumption their relationship with markets (and the rest of the society) will certainly change, as will the older rhythms and social connections of the local subsistence economy.

These changes are occurring throughout the Agoundis Valley, but the village of Tadrar in particular is changing. The Peace Corps sent a volunteer to live there and he helped install pipe to bring water from a spring above the village. Eight taps now deliver clean water to the village, saving the women and girls a lot of walking and sparing everyone the nastier microbes living in the drinking water they used to use. The mosque now has a solar power panel and lights that I bought in exchange for the villagers helping with my research. Lights in the mosque make it easier for men to do their pre-dawn prayers and the girls and boys who study there are better able to see the Qur'anic verses that they write on wooden boards, especially in the dark winter months. At the time I left the village Moroccan agencies were investigating the possibility of
installing a turbine to produce electricity from the river and the World Bank was suggesting they might fund other projects, such as providing cement to seal up some of the leaky mud and rock canals.

Perhaps even more dramatic, the Moroccan government built a school in the summer of 1998. Though it is painted the color of Pepto-Bismol, the villagers were thrilled to have it. The children continue to study in the mosque in the morning and at night, but now in the daytime they attend a “modern” state school. Here they sit at wooden desks instead of on reed mats, they study from books rather than from wooden boards, and they finally have a chance to learn the national language, to read and write, and gain some sense of Moroccan history and geography. When the government school opened, it was the first time many of the children had sat in a chair or held a pencil. Their teacher, unfortunately, spoke only Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, and a bit of French --no Tashelhit-- and this was her first job. Learning was difficult for the monolingual children and the teacher too was often frustrated by her inability to communicate. Moreover, being a sophisticated woman from sophisticated Casablanca, she found life in the hard, dirty, remote mountains nearly intolerable. The teacher requested a transfer after one year, which is common in the countryside. A new schoolteacher was assigned the next year, and the year after that since few urban teachers want to settle in a hard place like Tadrar.

The villagers are undeterred. Parents know the importance of this kind of education even though they had none themselves. They know that there will not be enough land for all their children to remain in the mountains. To survive in the city the ability to speak or at least understand colloquial Arabic is very important, and that can only be learned in school or by staying with relatives in the city. Not every family has such relatives who can afford to take in the children from the home village, so school is the best, or even the only, hope for many people.

Even with all these changes it is difficult for the people of the mountains to feel entirely part of the world of the plains. So far the pink school seems a curiosity more than a functional part of life. The road remains little more than a glorified path, and some of the trucks still have to unload their passengers to ascend the steepest sections. Looking down from the peaks at the chains of lights leading to Marrakech, to its Hilton hotel, Pizza Hut and international airport, the separation of the mountains and the rest of the country seems striking. The busy, rich world of the flatlands --especially the new suburbs-- doesn’t seem connected to the jumble of village life. The long straight roads of the plains look nothing like the tangled pathways of the mountains. In some ways the two worlds are very connected, of course. It is a mistake to imagine that mountain people (or any people) live in isolation from the broad changes brought on by what is often termed “modernization” or “globalization,” and it is a mistake to imagine that Moroccan Berbers are not part of the larger community of Moroccans and the even larger community of Muslims.

A question of considerable contemporary interest is the nature of the relationship between such out of the way localities and the global forces so voluminously theorized by academics. It seems clear that understanding such relationships is the key to understanding both local life and what we think of as the larger, global reality.

Part 2: The Global Order from the Edge of the Grid

It used to be assumed that “modern” was desirable, that people existed on a continuum of primitive to modern and that there was a tendency for societies to progress from the former to the latter. Still today in many ways these notions of modernity and progress infuse our assumptions
about how the world works. “Science” is a prime, and oft cited example. In some sense justifiably, science is seen to move through a “rational” sequence of improvement. Successful paradigms in science are “better” not merely “different” than the ones that came before them because they better explain the phenomena under consideration. “Scientific progress” is thus seen to be marked by an ever more accurate understanding of the way reality “really” operates, and the progress of science is a march towards to real and away from the superstitious, the magical, the unsupportable, the wrong. This “wrong” takes on moral and not just ontological status.

But science is hardly the only area where these sorts of assumptions exist, and in fact we may see it as but one part of a larger ideological field, a field suffused with assumptions that shape the way we understand reality -- and the way we understand our understanding of that reality. Many people from the United States, for instance, view their history as progressing like science. Their present state is the culmination of past successes, a series of improvements that have yielded the Panglossian “best of all possible worlds.” In this sense Americans see modernity as a singular thing -- the modernity they know -- and this is conceptually contrasted with the multiple streams of tradition that flow into it. Primitives, savages, indigenous, aboriginal and traditional people become migrants -- workers and consumers. Their lifeways give way to the inexorable march of progress. In this view, everyone sooner or later becomes “modern.” Modernity might incorporate different traditions -- Scottish plaids find their way on to high fashion runways, blues riffs show up in rap songs, the Mona Lisa smiles back from tee shirts-- but in the end the pursuit of profit sucks everything into the creative destruction of capitalist “growth.” The logic of profit drives the system to digest all that is traditional and reconstitute it as something to sell, one form of product or another. Modernity is a preordained result.

Such visions have not gone unchallenged. The idea of a unitary modernity, with its teleological assumptions and the notion of progress that goes along with this, are attacked in ways that can be traced all the way back to the counter-Enlightenment. The notion that an economic system -- any economic system -- necessarily produces a particular kind of culture has also been contested. And the ethnocentric valuation of “our” system has come under withering attack from everyone from feminists to rap artists, indigenous rights groups to religious fundamentalists.

Still, it is surely true that Europe spawned an economic system that harnesses energy at a scale hitherto unimaginable. “Our” system of production is so outrageously fecund that it puts hugely complicated and expensive products like televisions in every home and a car in most every garage. Western society, and in particular the US, is driven by the economy (“the business of America is business,” after all) and the economy generates “things” like no other ever invented or perhaps even conceived. The question is why this is necessarily “progress?” It can be argued that it is only better because we have decided it’s better -- and because we ignore the many people in “our” society who do not have any stake in the rewards. We in the West, like most people in most times and places, think that our way of life is superior, and in our case we tend to imagine that our material wealth indicates rational improvement over other people’s ways of life, or perhaps even divine favor. But if we shift our perspective, as anthropologists in particular are always trying to get us to, things look much different.

To take but one obvious, and non-anthropocentric example, in terms of the natural environment our “progress” has been an unmitigated disaster. If we were to view modernity from the perspective of a frog or a sequoia, “progress” means unremitting destruction, the eradication of all that is good and useful rather than the eruction of a vibrant world of freedom, possibility
and choice. We are not amphibians or trees, of course, and as a species we humans are entitled to our opinion. But do we see things as a species? Is this sort of rationality a species universal? Many have suggested that for the majority of the people on the planet “freedom” has a whole different register of meaning, the modern “choice” is not between a Toyota or a Ford but between one miserable, low-paying job and another. No matter how distracting middle class Americans find the information superhighway or the international fashion of Benetton, a new Pearl Jam release or a Jackie Chan movie, somebody must still plant the food, must still care for it, and must pick it. Somebody still has to gather up the trash and wash the dishes; somebody has to gut the chickens that show in our stores so tidily wrapped in plastic.

Whatever else society does, an army of people must labor to keep it going, invisibly, usually for very little reward, often in unsafe or unhealthy conditions. They labor in fields and restaurant kitchens, factories and informal workshops: the places where the “stuff” that is the shining symbol of modernity is produced. Machines have not replaced this sort of labor, only reconfigured it. In the US, the “somebodies” who do such work are often not considered “Americans” at all. A class of politically and often socially excluded people for whom “modernity” means something quite different than “consumption” labors to support “our” modern, Western society. For this class of people modernity might mean something like social disconnection, hard physical work, and constant reminders of what you do not have, how you do not look, and what you cannot be. This observation requires us to ask where the boundaries of “our” society are and how “modernity” happens outside of the visible arena of upbeat sounds and images so familiar to anybody who owns a television.

Again, in Tadrar there are no televisions. That does not mean that they are not modern, however, and this is an important point. There is a tendency to portray people like those in Tadrar, who continue to live through simple technology and human and animal labor, as being simple, or, similarly, being simply. This is untrue. The villagers with whom I worked did not have unproblematic “traditional” lives just because they farm rather than work in a factory, because they haul things around using their own two legs rather than using a car. In fact, the relative lack of technological sophistication makes their lives far more complicated in other ways because the most basic aspects of life, like producing food, require enormous amounts of cooperation. Cooperation between people is never very easy. It takes work, often of an onerous and unpleasant kind.

The people of Tadrar do not march through life oblivious to how difficult their lives are from yours or mine, or how different their lives might be. We should not romanticize subsistence farming or “traditional” ways of living, or imagine that lack of television means ignorance of the wider world. The villages I know are not trying to avoid the products and gizmos we identify with modernity, but they want them on their own terms, in their own way. We should not assume that to be modern is to give up being Berber or Muslim. Muslim and Berber modernity is merely a version of contemporary reality we don’t see very often. But we don’t see it only because we are not looking, not because it isn’t there, or because it’s any less important or because it’s some sort of derivative of “us.” The fact that “they” know more about “us” than “we” do about “them” does not mean “we’re” more important —only less informed. Our blindness is most shocking when it comes to recognizing the possibilities for different ways we might divide the world into “us and them.”

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The people of Tadrar have been connected to the larger world for a very long time. In the 12th century, when this area of Morocco was the seat of an empire that stretched from Spain to
Mali and the Canary Islands and through to modern Libya, the Agoundis was very nearly a suburb of the imperial capital. It may be on the perimeter of the political world now, but it has not always been, and it was in this time of imperial conquest that the present families of the village claim to have come to the mountains. Two of these families came from Berber speaking groups south of the mountains and another from an Arabic speaking area between present day Marrakech and Casablanca. Their ancestors all became Berber speakers and Muslims in a particular political and economic context. Today, of course, the political and economic context is changing rapidly, but such things are always changing. The school I discussed above is beginning to make villagers understand themselves as Berber speaking Moroccans in ways they hadn’t before an Arabic speaking schoolteacher lived among them. The development workers scurrying about in expensive boots are causing villagers to understand their comparative material poverty in ways they might not have noticed before. The road changes the crops people grow and the reasons they grow them. It will allow migrants to come and go much more easily, exposing more “locals” to “non-local” ways of doing things, and indeed collapsing notions of “local” altogether, eliminating our simple ideas of what being a “villager” means. (Villagers of course never thought things were so simple to begin with!) All together this has not produced a convergence into a larger Moroccan identity, much less some sort of generic, “modern” world identity. Indeed, in the long run it seems far more likely to focus people’s minds on their particularity. In other words, one is not likely to recognize oneself as a Berber until one speaks to somebody who isn’t. One is not conscious of one’s distinctiveness as a Moroccan or a Muslim until one deals with people who are not. Consciousness of cultural particularity is not swallowed up by modernity; on the contrary, modernity itself generates exactly such particular forms of consciousness.

This is what I found in my time in Tadrar: culture and identity are related—but not reducible—to politics and the economics. Notions of “us and them” involve real tussles over things that matter, like property and power, but the forms of the tussles are drawn from historically formed cultural repertoires. If the new ways people are coming to see themselves are now inchoate, this is because the most dramatic social and economic transformations to hit this area in several hundred years are only now taking hold. The road has just gone in. The school has just opened. While very famous scholars have emphasized the importance of narrow “tribal” forms of identity for Berber groups, and while urban activists and some Berber or Amazigh scholars emphasize a very broad “ethnic” or “cultural” identity for all Berbers everywhere, I found neither of these visions to be particularly compelling in the area where I worked. Tribes do not exist in the Agoundis in any political sense, and thus have no importance at all for how people see themselves. The people of Tadrar do have some local political forms, but these are mostly constrained to the village level as the state handles everything above that. Most political power is held by officials appointed by the central government, and by officials elected from political parties resonant of those we know in the States, but they don’t work the same.

Part 3: Modernity Becomes Imazighen

Today Berber activists who live in the city are coming to call all Berber speaking people “Imazighen” (sing. Amazigh), a Berber or more correctly Tamazight word meaning “free people.” These activists do not like the fact that the term “Berber” is not itself Berber, that it comes from the Latin word from which we get “barbarian,” which is how the ancient Romans thought of these fierce, recalcitrant people on the edge of their empire. Contemporary Imazighen
(sing. Amazigh) do not, of course, see themselves as barbarians, but as the proud inheritors of a rich and extensive cultural history, one that has been around far longer than the Arabo-Islamic society in which they are immersed and from which they've drawn so much. Imazighen point out that they had developed great civilizations of their own long before Europeans had even learned to bathe. These activists are coming to imagine themselves in new ways in the new urban, political economic context in which they live.

Mountain Imazighen too are coming to see the world differently. However, since they live in different conditions their vision is not the same as their urban cousins. All Imazighen -- like all people-- are building their own version of modernity and as such they are not “becoming modern” so much as modernity is becoming Amazigh.

To reiterate the specific case, the people of the Agoundis are not hooked in to state maintained roads, to water lines or sewer lines, electricity or phone lines. They have no house numbers, no phone numbers, no zip code, no passports, no credit cards, no bank accounts, and no secret code for the ATM. In fact they have few numbers at all. Once a year the police hike through and update the villagers’ residency cards and extort what money they can. These cards are then quietly put away in a bag or under a rug until the next year. While the new king, Mohammed VI, is revered and his picture hangs in most homes, “politics” as such are strictly local. Nobody further than the next river down has ever heard of the politicians that really matter up here, and vice versa. What we call “the state” has much more particular names in the mountains: the names of the particular agents of the National Park Service and the Water and Forest Agency, the names behind the faces and the hands that actually deal with the villagers and who relieve them all too often of their money and resources.

The difference between the rhythm of village life and the grid of city is perhaps most easily seen in August, vacation season. This is the time of year when you see urban Moroccans dressed like French tourists --with shorts, Ray Ban glasses and Diesel brand shoes-- sweating their way up the dusty road. They have big radios, hip sneakers and chic haircuts. Some have forgotten how to speak Tashelhit, or remember but flaunt their French and Arabic in front of sometimes dazzled, sometimes disgusted villagers. Some young men want to ahouash every night, party country style, beat drums, find their roots. They are visiting a culture park the way Americans visit Main Street at Disneyland. They sleep late in the mornings and don’t hear the singing of the girls in the fields, the ululations cascading down the valley as they carry their loads of wood down paths even mules can’t navigate. It is too bad the city boys don’t listen better… sometimes their names are in the songs.

All this does not mean that these villagers are our contemporary ancestors, that they are folklore come alive in a real-time diorama. When an Arab visitor to a wedding said to me, in French, “c’est un autre monde, non?” all I could do was turn and say, “Non.” The world of the Agoundis is our world in a fundamental sense.

This is my central point: the people of Tadrar are contemporaries of every English-speaking person reading these lines; they live their lives at the same historical moment, albeit in strikingly different circumstances. While these Imazighen live off the edge of the grid, they still live in some relation to it. Conceptually it matters when villagers say things to me like, “we’re poor here, we don’t have telephones or cars,” or when they install water taps in their houses that are fed by buckets in the next room that must be hand filled. It matters that they describe their reality in terms of what it lacks. What it lacks is stuff, meaningful stuff, things they know other people have. The grid means something. The global economy connects the ethereal substance of Arab, African and Western civilization, the circulating water, vehicles, electrons, ideas, sewage,
information—and the capital that never quite seems to circulate far enough up into the hills. There is meaning to these things, but it is not imported wholesale, in chunks, from the great purveyors of crap in New York, Los Angeles, Paris and Casablanca. Rather, meaning is always homemade, or re-made. Local meaning is, amongst other things, a multifaceted response to the compound strategies of states, and the multinational corporations they serve.

This is not just true of culture and concepts, the flitting holograms of purified meaning that characterize many scholarly studies. The movement of people, physical bodies, sacks of blood, bone and brains, the actual people who toil in mines and restaurants, farms and factories: these are palpable examples of solidly material differences in contemporary modernity. Bodies exist differently in different parts of the global economy and they exist dynamically with that economy. Mountain people are not moving a direction, seeking progress; they don’t flow into the cities like water down a hill. People move on to the grid, certainly, but they move back off too. Indivisible bodies negotiate divided social disciplines.

People who still consider themselves villagers spend time in schools and hospitals, in stores and offices and factories of the flat land below. They acquire numbers. They come to see magic as normal, to expect their feces to disappear with the touch of a button, rooms to fill with light with the flick of a finger. The miraculous is normalized, rationalized, and in the process minds and bodies themselves become gridded. The heart becomes a pump, wealth a divisible number printed by a computer rather than an assemblage of inalienable, richly specific, and necessarily complementary resources. But many Berbers, many Imazighen, come back up to the mountains, back up to the thinner air. Their social circuits only intersect the rationalized cartography of the flatlands; they have not been sucked wholly into it. Those whom these back-and-forth travelers love, those who love them, those whom they will marry—these folks live in houses of artfully stacked rocks, balanced on cliff edges, smeared with mud against the freezing winter.

In these types of houses only humans circulate. There are no wires, no pipes, no tubes of water or hot and cold air. Humans dwell here with the animals that sustain them. A cow downstairs. Chickens maybe. Cats. Flies. A sheep tethered for the ‘Aid al-Adha, the celebration of the sacrifice of Abraham, the most important day of the year. There is no glass in these human dwellings, little to hold out the cold. No screens keep the insects from the house or the bats from swooping in after the insects. Those who the migrants end up marrying often come from these families huddled together in mud and rock houses, families grounded by their name to certain small, arduously maintained patches of earth, to fields and canals they build and rebuild, to particular orchards and forests, and most of all to other families. Families reproduce themselves here on the carpets they eat on, were born on, make love on, and stay warm under in the long dark months of snow and cold. In Marrakech such carpets are sold to tourists, who hang them on walls to remember their vacation, but in the mountains such things have different meanings.

The human circuits of the High Atlas spread their tendrils down to the flatlands, into the cities, to feed off the grid. The grid then feeds on them, taking bodies, rationalizing minds, building humans appropriate to the international corporate discipline of monotonous wage labor. But these are only the missionaries, the emissaries, the lambs sent to the urban wilderness, a sacrifice that might, God willing, return some of the nectar flowing through the cities of the plain back up to the bony highlands of the Atlas. The people of the mountains are not lining up to march into modernity, nor are they living in “resistance” to it. The people of these mountains are modern, in the historical sense. They live now, like everyone else living now. Their relation to
the things we Westerners have decided define modernity is different than ours, however. We have been eaten by the grid, digested, reordered in its image. Global capitalism, wildfire consumerism, reactionary religious movements, and a world of discrete nation states with personalities: these exist for the people of the mountains too. But they exist differently: different than Marrakech and the plains around it, and certainly different than Paris or New York, Kansas or Los Angeles. This begs understanding of differences in meaning --but meaning itself has at least two distinct meanings. There is the meaning of words like book or cat or red. And there is the visceral, preliterate, non-translatable meaning of love, of family, of life. The latter category requires empathetic rather than intellectual comprehension, inter-human rather than merely intercultural understanding. It’s as difficult with your neighbor as it is with a Berber farmer, and it’s a matter of the body as much as the mind. Perhaps this is where we, as writers on difference, so often fail to explain. Perhaps this is how such divergent meanings of modernity insinuate themselves in our consciousness.

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