

## Berber Versus the World: An Analysis of Moroccan History and Cultural Identity

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*In studying the Berber people of Morocco, this article will analyze events throughout Algerian history from the Arab colonization occurring in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to the French Protectorate that was established in 1912. These historical events have led to the lack of a Berber national identity and the break-down of Berber cultural identity. Investigating these historical events leads us to an understanding of the generational repercussions that affect the Berber people to this day. Examining the political structure of the Moroccan government reveals the constraint put on the Berber national voice, the fragmentation of the original Tamazight language and the hybridity of different cultural lifestyles beginning with the colonization by the Arabs.*

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Last summer I backpacked through Morocco and while exploring the country it became apparent to me that there is a sense of disunity between the indigenous people (the Berber) and the other ethnicities that populated the country, notably the Arabs. I wondered why these groups of people sharing the same country felt this great distrust toward one another. After speaking with the people who lived in the Berber villages along the Atlas Mountains, I discovered that many ethnic Berbers held a tremendous feeling of resentment aimed at the Arabs as well as the French. The destruction of the Berber national identity through the process of acculturation perpetrated by the French and the Arabs coupled with policies that promoted disintegration of the Berber language resulted in cultural identity fragmentation for the Berber people. I will be highlighting the concept of “Orientalism,” as defined by Edward Said in postcolonial studies, as well as the term “cultural hybridity,” coined by Robert Dale Parker, to further illustrate the degradation of Berber culture. This article will include the topics of: Berber acculturation into Arab traditions, Morocco as a French protectorate, religious hybridity, ethnic strife and language loss.

The Berber people are indigenous to the geographical region in North Africa that now comprises the country of Morocco, or “El Maghrib.” The Arab population first arrived in Morocco in the fifth century A.D. Since then Arab culture and religion dominate the land. Because of the influx of a massive population of Arab migrants, the Berber people were pushed to the fringes of the Atlas Mountains while the Arabs occupied the central areas of Morocco in cities such as Casablanca, Marrakech and other urban areas. The two cultures would interact over the coming centuries, whether the Berbers were willing participants in the exchange or not. As a consequence, Berber people adopted many aspects of the Arab lifestyle. However, the acculturation the Berber people experienced was not seamless. It resulted in “racial tensions [that] continue(s) to present major obstacles to the territorial integration of both pre and post-colonial Morocco.”<sup>1</sup> Mingling of these separate cultures and traditions hybridized the Berber and Arab lifestyles. The term cultural hybridity can be defined as “the way that colonized people and colonizers have taken on many of each other’s ways of living and thinking.”<sup>2</sup> During the process of Arab acculturation, Islam became the official religion of Morocco and Arabic the language spoken by the majority. Parker states that: “people sustain and change the cultures they bring with them, they sustain and change the cultures where they live, so that supposedly separate cultures are no longer separate.”<sup>3</sup> Cultural hybridity is inevitable when multiple distinct ethnic groups occupy a single area. While travelling through Morocco, an individual will find that the majority of citizens living in cities like Marrakech and Casablanca have both Berber and Arab ethnic origins, yet most speak Arabic. The hybridity of a culture and language that was predominantly Arab resulted in an identity that can never be singular Berber or Arab. This contributed to the break-down of the traditional Berber cultural identity.

The struggle for Moroccan independence from the French was especially challenging for the Berber People because the very existence of a Berber nationality was questioned by both the French and the Arabs. The French protectorate of Morocco, which existed “from the 1912 Treaty of Fes to independence in 1956,”<sup>4</sup> allowed for “clandestine slave trad[ing] along with domestic slavery”<sup>5</sup> until 1956. It was a common practice in which “light-skinned Berber females were preferred in the slave trade.”<sup>6</sup> The existence of a slave trade that favoured certain members of the Berber population over others allowed for feelings of alienation and division

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<sup>1</sup>Anita Vukovic. “On the Move in Morocco: Historical Geographies of Race, Space, and Mobility, 1300s – Present.” *UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. (2018): 29.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Dale Parker. “How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory For Literary And Cultural Studies.” (New York: *Oxford University Press* 2014), 288.

<sup>3</sup>Parker, 297.

<sup>4</sup>David R. Goodman. “Expediency, Ambivalence, and Inaction: The French Protectorate and Domestic Slavery in Morocco, 1912–1956”. *Journal of Social History*. vol. 47 no. 1 (2013): 101–131.

<sup>5</sup>Goodman, 101.

<sup>6</sup>Goodman, 115.

to foster within the already deeply oppressed Berbers. The “French Protectorate enabled a defining institution of social inequality to endure and adapt,”<sup>7</sup> which put the Arab and Berber populations under the thumb of the French elite. The French protectorate also manifested an attitude of normalization towards slavery and slave-trading practices in which “domestic slavery was a basic feature of everyday elite Moroccan household life.”<sup>8</sup> The Moroccan people (both Arab and Berber alike) were persecuted in the domains of “human geography(,) and contemporary social organization, [and] their numbers and conditions were deemed officially invisible by the Protectorate.”<sup>9</sup> An effect of this subjugation was “popular nationalist movements in France’s three North African Maghreb territories in the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>10</sup> Slave-trading practices were the norm amongst North Africans for decades and persisted until the 1950’s. Throughout the period of the French protectorate “international forums continued to widen and reframe their attention to slavery.”<sup>11</sup> International organizations such as the United Nations began investigations into the practice of slavery in Morocco. Eventually this led to the confrontation of slave culture in Morocco that was compounded by the Moroccan nationalist movements. “In 1955, one year before Moroccan independence, the Director of Cherifienne Affairs extensively edited Lapanne-Joinville’s report for the International Convention for the Abolition of Slavery in 1956.”<sup>12</sup> Because of the systematic economic exploitation under the French protectorate, the Moroccan economy was left in pieces. This economic climate stoked the flames of resentment that already burned amongst all Berber and Arab people living under the French. These forces led to the fall of the French protectorate in 1956. It should be noted that “slavery in Morocco did not end during the French Protectorate period, but continued to transform and decline until it ultimately ended as a social institution in the decades following independence.”<sup>13</sup> The annexation of Morocco at the hands of the French intensified the injustices against Berber people because of the normalization of the enslavement of Berber women since they were considered more desirable.

The national movements that gained strength during the protectorate years were initially confined to “communist parties in the three Maghreb territories,”<sup>14</sup> though they rapidly expanded and gained popularity throughout the entire country. The movement was underpinned by the belief that the only solution to overthrowing European power was the establishment of a pan-Moroccan identity. These

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<sup>7</sup>Goodman, 101.

<sup>8</sup>Goodman, 102.

<sup>9</sup>Goodman, 115.

<sup>10</sup>Martin Thomas. “France’s North African Crisis, 1945–1955: Cold War and Colonial Imperatives.” *University of Exeter*, 92. No. 2(306) (2007): 207-234.

<sup>11</sup>Goodman, 121.

<sup>12</sup>Goodman, 115.

<sup>13</sup>Goodman, 122.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas, 214.

communist-led movements were driven by an Arab majority in their parties. This was not the best position for the Berber population because their needs came second to the Arab's needs. One of the parties in the movement was the Istiqlal party, led by Allal Al-Fasi. When the "French pressured Sultan Mohammed Ben Youssef to comply with French demands [it] was counterproductive. In January 1951 the Sultan ignored Juin's threat of deposition and endorsed the Istiqlal as the legitimate voice of the Moroccan people."<sup>15</sup> Allal Al-Fasi led an Arab majority conservative party. From Allal's perspective "rural populations and subaltern classes had only cameo roles"<sup>16</sup> in the story for Moroccan independence. As mentioned earlier, the Berber people were forced to migrate towards the Atlas Mountains, which was largely rural territory. The Berber's role in the freedom movement has historically been overlooked and considered insignificant when compared to Arab contributions. During the protectorate there was increased national cohesion because the Moroccan people, both Arab and Berber, decided to work toward a national identity with the goal of independence from France. In 1946 "the three Maghreb territories reversed their previous position and openly identified with the cause of national independence."<sup>17</sup> The movement gave a voice to the Arabs to claim an identity for themselves. However, the national movement was not beneficial for the Berber people because their voice to claim identity was essentially shut down after the French recognized Morocco as an Arab country. The nationalist movement was an Arab-led movement. Because it was led by Allal Al-Fasi, a staunch Arab nationalist, the Moroccan government was dominated by Arab influence since inception, which resulted in the underrepresentation of Berbers, further heightening inequality between Arab and Berber peoples.

From the Moroccan perspective, it is believed that the Moroccan national movement is an integral part of their history because it was their independence movement. However, the French view it as an insignificant footnote in the long history of France. "French historians see Algeria's history as occurring off-stage, rather than as an inalterable part of the history of France."<sup>18</sup> This is closely linked with the concept of "Orientalism." The term "Orientalism" refers to an imaginative Western notion of the East having "Oriental" qualities which carry largely negative connotations. Edward Said, the eminent scholar of post-colonial studies, states that the East was "constructed as sensual, lazy, exotic, irrational, cruel... and oriental discourse also constructed a West that was everything the East was not."<sup>19</sup> The West in turn viewed itself as having features of "masculinity, superiority and often associated themselves with being brave and intelligent."<sup>20</sup> The East was the mirror

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<sup>15</sup>Thomas, 230.

<sup>16</sup>Burke, Edmund. "Theorizing the histories of colonialism and nationalism in the Arab Maghrib." *Arab Studies Quarterly (ASQ)* 20, no 2 (1998): 5-19.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas, 214.

<sup>18</sup>Edmund.

<sup>19</sup>Parker, 294.

<sup>20</sup>Parker, 295.

image; “inferior, feminine”<sup>21</sup> and small minded. Orientalism defined and perpetuated European colonial attitudes toward the East and created a racial division leading to racial discrimination. The French were emboldened to invade and colonize Morocco because of Orientalist thinking. To this day the legitimacy of Moroccan history is being undermined; “books on North Africa go mostly unreviewed.”<sup>22</sup> The implication being that Western history is more important than North African history, and more specifically, Berber history. This inevitably ignores the legitimacy of African history and, from a post-colonial perspective, underlines the idea of Orientalism in such a way where we prioritize Western history over others. The Europeans forced their own traditions and language upon the Moroccans, while also neglecting the importance of their distinct history. The end result was the loss of Berber agency and expression of cultural identity.

The spread of Islam was a cornerstone of the initial Arab conquest and later acculturation of Morocco. Many Berbers converted to the newly arrived faith. However, in 813 B.C. the first wave of Jewish people arrived in Morocco by migrating along a network of trade routes spanning the Mediterranean to Africa. In 586 B.C., “the first temple of Jerusalem was destroyed.”<sup>23</sup> After that, a second wave of Jewish people fled to Morocco for safety. Inevitably there was a mixture of different religions and ethnic identities that occurred and “local Berber tribes adopted Judaism.”<sup>24</sup> The Berber tribes further incorporated Jewish customs which reinforced cultural hybridity. “Muslims and Jews lived together but had little contact until the French protectorate, when the French came, they saw that the Jews were receptive to French culture.”<sup>25</sup> According to Gunther, a new identity of “Jews living in a French society and French colony”<sup>26</sup> emerged. Two thousand and eight hundred years of Jewish residency in Morocco ended with a dispersion of Jewish people. “In the 1940’s there were 400,000 Jews and now 6500 remain.”<sup>27</sup> Mixing of native Berber practices with Judaism as well as the contact of Islam and Judaism resulted in new traditions that dominated over original Berber traditions. The ethnic and religious mixing enabled a cultural hybridity that contributed to the fragmentation of Berber traditions and identity which continued through the generations.

The original language of the Berber people, called Tamazight or Amazigh, no longer exists in its original form after centuries of cultural integration. “According to the census 2004, 89.8% of the population use Moroccan Arabic, 28% are native

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<sup>21</sup>Parker, 294.

<sup>22</sup>Edmund.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Gunther. “Morocco’s Last Jews”. *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*. 46, no 4 (1997): 489-491.

<sup>24</sup>Gunther, 489.

<sup>25</sup>Gunther, 489.

<sup>26</sup>Gunther, 489.

<sup>27</sup>Gunther, 490.

speakers of the Berber languages, [and] 33% of the population speak French.”<sup>28</sup> The language Tamazight relied on an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation. Because Tamazight was not a written language, “Berber-speaking families (are) predominantly oral.”<sup>29</sup> The cultural hybridity of different ethnic groups migrating to Morocco impacted the Berber language significantly. Waves of immigration and overlapping languages resulted with the “spreading of European languages and the Amazigh language that was enriched by many borrowing from Arabic in the distant past and from French to new time.”<sup>30</sup> Tamazight is now an endangered language that is no longer singularly Berber and this loss of a distinct language contributes significantly to the loss of cultural identity for the Berber tribes.

During the French protectorate, the European administration designed school systems that only taught French and Arabic. Furthermore, the French declared that the official languages of the country were French and Arabic rather than Tamazight. This was deliberate oppression of Berber people because the large population of Tamazight speakers were being neglected, thus they felt subordinate to the Arabs. The Arabs and French did not like the idea of language reclamation because it “can become a form of resistance to the hegemonic forces of dominant languages and cultures.”<sup>31</sup> Morocco’s post-colonial journey is ongoing to this day. Street signs, government facilities and documents are still written in French. Schools in Morocco still require their students to learn French as their second language.

Throughout Algerian history, the Moroccan Berber nation has been deprived of their own national identity through the oppression of their language, “the first years of Algerian independence; the Algerian legal system denied and ignored the Kabyle and Berber language in the name of Arabization of Algeria.”<sup>32</sup> It was only recently that Tamazight received recognition in the constitution according to Laidani: “On March 6th, 2016, Tamazight (Berber) languages were recognized by Article 4 of the Algerian Constitution as “official languages.”<sup>33</sup> The legal system has ignored Berber rights through not respecting the legitimacy of their language. Language and culture are homologous. Without language, a culture is difficult to maintain, understand, and practice. For that reason “legal reform cannot repair the fact that in Algeria the Tamazight languages remained ignored for a long time by the legal

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<sup>28</sup>J, Baghana. D.V, Tupeyko. “The Language Context in Modern Morocco.” *Russian Journal of Linguistics*. No 2 (2015): 9-15.

<sup>29</sup>Baghana, Tupeyko, 11.

<sup>30</sup>Baghana, Tupeyko, 11.

<sup>31</sup>Kristen Tcherneshoff, Daniel Bögre Udell. “Clearing space: Language reclamation, decolonization and the Internet.” *Book 2.0*. 9. No 1, 2 (2019): 105-119.

<sup>32</sup>Amar Laidani. “The Recognition of the Tamazight Languages in the Algerian Law.” *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai*. No 3 (2019): 28-57.

<sup>33</sup>Laidani, 28.

system.”<sup>34</sup> Although Tamazight is now officially recognized as a national language in Morocco, there has not been a meaningful resurgence of Berber agency because of strong post-colonial French and Arab influences. Without meaningful recognition, Berber cultural identity will be unable to progress therefore contributing to the break-down of identity.

Through the 19th century into the modern era of the 21st, the Berber people have faced many challenges regarding their own identity and post-colonial influences from the French and the Arabs. In recent years, following the recognition of Tamazight as a national language, there has been more movements for Berber national recognition. Despite that, according to Edmund, “Maghribis have long been regarded by U.S. Arabists as “not quite real Arabs.”<sup>35</sup> As I mentioned earlier, most works that have been written on post-colonial Morocco have gone unreviewed, and especially works on Berber culture and history. Another reason is that due to all the cultural hybridity Morocco has been through, it is no longer a singular Arab or Berber society. “Serious historians of colonialism in the Maghrib have worked mostly in the shadows, and histories of the colonial Middle East take the British experience as normative, while largely ignoring French, Spanish and Italian colonialism,”<sup>36</sup> meaning that there is even less coverage on Maghrib’s postcolonial situation. Contemporary Morocco is a complex puzzle of many different cultures and religions, resulting in less traditional ways of living and a modern society, “Modern, in the sense that it is the result of a complex layering of heterogeneous cultural practices, strongly influenced by the European Enlightenment.”<sup>37</sup> Berber cultural identity cannot be singular in the near future for the reason that there are French and Arab cultural practices along with other religions and ethnic cultures amalgamated into the Berber lifestyle. This is the main obstacle for Berber national and cultural identity reclamation today, and because of ignorance of Berber history by the Western world and media, the Berber’s find it extremely difficult to achieve this goal: “rights of Imazighen (Berber) in Algeria as in all the Maghreb countries is part of the complex problem of national minorities in African countries, resulting from a process of decolonization.”<sup>38</sup>

21st century Morocco is still facing major internal problems regarding distrust and resentment against the other’s ethnicity, especially the Berber’s attitude towards their Arab counterparts. According to Vukovic, “to ask a Moroccan about race is to arouse a certain visible anxiety and response of denial that, when taken at face value, can prove surprising to an American traveler.”<sup>39</sup> The identity fragmentation

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<sup>34</sup>Laidani, 30.

<sup>35</sup>Edmund.

<sup>36</sup>Edmund.

<sup>37</sup>Edmund.

<sup>38</sup>Laidani, 56.

<sup>39</sup>Vukovic, 29.

of the Berbers was not a singular event but a series of events spanning centuries, beginning with the acculturation and colonization by the Arabs who created cultural hybridity within the land. The French protectorate of 1912 enslaved Moroccans and implemented French influenced institutions and French laws. The consequence of the protectorate was the oppression of Tamazight and Berber national identity. During the Moroccan independence movement, there was no meaningful resurgence of Berber agency because the French declared Morocco to be an Arab country. The Western world and media saw Morocco as an Arab country rather than acknowledging the indigenous Berber nations that were there first. The extinction of the original Berber language, Tamazight, was also a major factor contributing to the breakdown of cultural identity, due to the reason that culture and language are homologous. All these events that occurred during the centuries of Arab acculturation and French colonialism resulted in the oppression of Berber lifestyle and language, the consequence is cultural and national identity fragmentation. The topic of Berber history is important to analyze and question in our society today because there are many negative effects of colonialism alive in our modern world. We must be aware of the history of colonialism and understand the mistakes taken place in order to collectively advance our society and decrease human suffering.



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