

National Identity in the Afro-Arab Periphery: Ethnicity, Indigeneity and (anti)Racism in Morocco (POMEPS Studies 40 – Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides)

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In the last decade, Morocco and Algeria have attempted a “pivot” to Africa. The “*infitah* to Africa,” as it’s called in the local press, is driven by multiple factors. The collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and subsequent conflict in Mali created a security dilemma in the Sahel. The European Union’s decline and reduced access to European markets has prompted both states to look southward for market opportunities. China’s expansion into Africa and the desire to be the Asian hegemon’s junior partner on the continent have also played a role in their turn to Africa. Less often discussed is how the pivot to Africa and the official embrace of pan-African discourse in Morocco and Algeria has created an opening for long-standing social movements that claim a non-Arab identity. I focus in this short essay on the rise of “indigenous” (Amazigh) and “Afro” (black) identity movements that contest Arabist ideology and, in particular, challenge the Arab nationalist character of the North African states.

I focus primarily on Morocco, which is undergoing a process of de-liberalization and increased repression, with a brief comparative look at Algeria and Sudan, which are attempting political transitions. I look at the attempts by Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria to expand conceptions of national identity and to alter language and educational policy. I also examine the rise of anti-racist campaigns that are trying to introduce a discourse on slavery, and new norms to define racism, while also pressing for a change in migration policy for “sub-Saharan” migrants.

The Amazigh Spring

The upheavals of 2011 had a discernible impact on Amazigh politics across the Maghreb, starting in Tunisia where the “Arab Spring” first began. In July 2011, the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture was established. It has since morphed into the Akal (Land) party, the only Amazigh political party in North Africa, calling for an amendment to the Tunisian constitution which, in the preamble, underscores Tunisia’s “Arab Muslim” identity; and the repeal of a civil status law that bans non-Arabic names for newborns. In 2012, Tuareg rebels in Mali proclaimed

the Berber state of Azawad (2012-2013) – the first Berber state since the equally short-lived and un-recognized Rif Republic (1923-26) of northeast Morocco. In July 2011, an Amazigh movement appeared in eastern Libya launching a radio station, makeshift schools, and is currently calling for constitutional recognition.

The advances made by Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria since 2011 have been especially impressive. In Algeria, protests led the Algerian government to recognize Tamazight as an official language in 2016. The blue, yellow and green pan-Amazigh flag has become in some ways the flag of the Algerian *hirak*, prompting the regime in July 2019 to ban the tri-couleur. Forty-one people were subsequently arrested for hoisting the flag; in November 2019, 21 protestors were sentenced to six months in prison, for “undermining national unity.”^[1]

In mid-June 2011, as Morocco’s streets heaved with protestors, King Mohammad VI gave a televised speech where he presented a revised constitution to the public. The “new constitution” outlined expanded rights for civic associations to introduce legislation to parliament, increased representation for opposition parties in government commissions, and made available more public funds for electoral campaigns. As critics noted, the king’s myriad powers remained uncurbed. A key aspect of the new constitution was the section on national identity, which constituted a radical departure from the 1962 constitution. Although that constitution adopted after independence did not describe Morocco as an Arab state, it did declare the official status of Arabic in the first line of the preamble. The preamble underscored Morocco’s position in the “great Arab Maghreb” and the kingdom’s commitment to “African unity.”

The preamble of Morocco’s 2011 constitution does not mention language at all. Article 5 specifies that “Arabic remains the official language of the state,” but adds that that Tamazight also “constitutes an official language of the state, as the common heritage of all Moroccans without exception.” The new constitution also established that Morocco’s “national identity, one and indivisible” is based on the “convergence” of Arab-Islamic, Amazigh and Saharan “components,” that is “nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebrew and Mediterranean influences.”^[2] Observers have disagreed on what is more remarkable – that the new Moroccan constitution now speaks of Amazigh identity, or that it was only in 2011, following an amendment, that Morocco became constitutionally an Arab state.

There are now Amazigh NGOs and civic associations such as “La Femme Amazigh” and “Africa Morocco” – which advocate respectively for Amazigh women and black Amazighs. There are Tamazight television channels. Algeria has declared Yennayer, the Amazigh New Year, a national holiday. Tifinagh script is visible in government buildings and highways in Morocco. Saad Eddin Othmani the Moroccan prime minister – member of the Islamist PJD party – addressed parliament in Tamazight in 2013, and in 2017, in Tunis, reminded Arab diplomats that they should speak of “the great Maghreb” (“*al-maghreb al-kabir*”) instead of “the Arab Maghreb.” In Morocco, history textbooks which had long taught that Moroccans – of both Amazigh and Arab origin – had migrated to Morocco from Yemen (reflecting the ruling Alaoui dynasty’s myth of origin) have been reformed. The Amazigh are now described as the “original” people of North Africa. Recent textbooks no longer highlight the “contact moment” when Phoenicians arrived, and skim over the Arab invasions. Textbooks also evade the question of origins – “where did our ancestors come from.”[3]

Constraints:

The question of Amazigh numbers remains deeply contentious. How many Amazigh and Arabs are there – and, even more problematic, how should legal systems define an Arab or Amazigh? When, in 2014, the Moroccan High Commissioner for Planning announced the results of the national census, stating that 27% of the population was Tamazight-speaking, Amazigh NGOs roundly rejected the results saying the questionnaire misjudged a person as Amazigh or not, depending on whether they could read Tifinagh or whether Tamazight was their “maternal language.” This approach was viewed as cynical and designed to depress the numbers, since the Tamzigh Tifinagh script was only introduced into primary schools in the mid-2000s, and “maternal” is unclear in a country that for decades had banned Tamazight from public schools. Mainstream Moroccan Amazigh activists claim the figure is closer to 35-40 percent in Morocco,[4] and want to define Amazigh along more cultural and ethnic grounds. More hardline activists advocate DNA testing as a way to settle the question, to showing that the “pulverizing majority” of Maghrebians are of Amazigh descent, and to demonstrate that the Hilalian invasions — so central to the pan-Arab narrative – had minimal genetic/demographic impact. The frontpage of *Le Monde Amazigh (Amadal Amazagh)* in August 2019 proclaimed: “Genetic anthropology says: “We are all Amazigh!”[5]

Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria also face varying degrees of repression. In Morocco, the *hirak* movement in the northeast Rif region began in October 2016 and peaked in June 2017, when a crackdown led to checkpoints, curfews, military deployments in Al Hoceima and Nador and the arrests of hundreds of youths, including the movement's leaders who were given twenty years in prison. The other Amazigh protest movement is southern-based and revolves around veteran politician Ahmed Dghirni – a recovering pan-Arabist, who is president of the Amazigh Moroccan Democratic Party (founded in 2005) and banned in 2008 for being an “ethnic” party – though not dissolved.^[6]

While the northern *hirak* movement explicitly harkens back to the Rif Republic launched by Abdelkrim Al Khatabi, and leaders often reference historic Berber figures like Jugurtha and Massanina, the movement does not present itself as an Amazigh movement, speaking more generally of corruption, economic justice and democracy. The *hirak*'s discourse is infused with religious references and calls for returning to Islamic values. Unlike the southern Amazigh movement, the Rif *hirak* do not claim secularism, and are Arab-friendly, proclaiming their solidarity with the Palestinians – even comparing the Rif to Gaza – and reminding followers that Abdelkrim found refuge in Egypt in the 1930s and that it was Nasser who supported the Moroccan Liberation Army.

The activists of the Amazigh Moroccan Democratic Party seem to have a different audience in mind – secularists, hardline Berber nationalists, the United Nations and the West. This camp calls for normalizing relations with Israel, opposes BDS and speaks of the “Arab occupation” of North Africa. Activists in this camp steer clear of Arab politics claiming that a) Arabs have rarely expressed support for the Amazigh cause and b) involvement in Arab political causes would Arabize them in the eyes of the West.^[7] But they stand in solidarity with Kurds, Tuaregs and Darfuris – and are keenly following the debates in Sudan about normalization, withdrawal from the Arab League and the revival of Nubian culture. This movement is explicit in its rejection of Arabism and political Islam, but has not been repressed like the Rif *hirak*, perhaps because of the latter's wider appeal. These movements work off each other strategically, have succeeded in mainstreaming the Amazigh cause, and are pressing civil society and state officials to define Arab and Amazigh. What is Arabness (*'uruba*) – is it a linguistic identity, lineage, phenotype, membership in the Arab League? What is an “Arab state”? If Arabness is political

solidarity, they argue – then speaking Arabic, as John Garang once said, should not make one Arab, any more than speaking French would make a North African a Frenchman.[8]

A final point on the “ethnic” question in the Maghreb: Morocco’s return to the African Union in 2016 and attempts to join ECOWAS, have given the Amazigh cause a boost, as the kingdom’s Amazigh heritage has become a diplomatic asset in the Sahel. Much has been made of Morocco’s religious statecraft in West Africa – the establishment of the Rabat-based Institute for the Training of Imams from West Africa, and the more recent Mohammed VI Foundation for West African Ulema to ensure “the protection of the Muslim faith and spiritual unity of the African people against all violent trends.”[9] But alongside Sufism, Amazigh culture is now a source of soft power. The key figure at the center of the Sufi and Amazigh diplomacy is Ahmed Taoufiq, the Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. Toufiq is one of Morocco’s most distinguished historians and Africanists – he was head of the Institute of African Studies in Rabat from 1989 to 1995, before doing a stint at Harvard – and is managing negotiations with Touareg groups in Mali and Niger.[10] Thus, when regime officials speak of African unity and “investing in Africa,” opposition activists will tweet “And the Rif is not Africa”?

“Racial Vocabularies”

Another effect of the Arab Spring and the pivot to Africa is the emerging discourse on slavery and racism in the Maghreb. Local activism combined with increased migration from “sub-Saharan” Africa have sparked a conversation about racism. In October 2018, Tunisia passed a law calling for the “Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,” and defending the rights of the purported 10 percent of Tunisians who identify as black. In Morocco, magazine covers recall the history of slavery and ask “Are We Racist?” In response to EU pressure and a desire for better relations with ECOWAS states, Morocco is trying to liberalize migration law, launching regularization campaigns in 2014 and 2017, whereby undocumented migrants gained residency cards. Algeria, in July 2017, began a similar regularization effort.

The discourse on racism in Maghreb tends to oscillate between loud denialism (e.g., claims that slavery in North Africa was “absorptive,” and that Islam is colorblind) and wild exaggeration (claims that historically there were no abolitionist voices in North Africa, or that current authoritarian rule is a legacy of slavery).[11] As in Latin America where political liberalization

in the 1980s gave rise to “indigenous” and “Afro-Latin” movements, the opening of 2011 gave rise to similar movements in the Maghreb. Since the early 1970s, Amazigh intellectuals from Algeria have compared their predicament to that of AmerIndians in Latin America and used the term “indigenous” to distinguish the Amazigh from the Arab “settler.” In 1993, when the United Nations declared the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People, Amazigh activists across North Africa began deploying the discourse of indigeneity and invoking the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.^[12] The term “indigenous” (*asli*) is hotly contested by Amazigh activists with many observing that casting “Arabs” as “settlers” or “migrants” is dangerous, yet the term is used across the political spectrum, especially as land-grabbing by the Moroccan regime and Gulf states has escalated in the Berber hinterland. “Indigeneity” is both a discourse and a norm. Arab nationalists in turn reject the concepts of “race” and “indigeneity” as colonial constructs, as exemplified by the Algerian historian Ramzi Rouighi’s recent book *Inventing the Berbers: History and Ideology in the Maghrib* (Penn 2019).

Anti-racism activists and scholars at CODESRIA, Makerere and various Maghrebi institutions are engaging with European and American academic writing on critical race theory, racism and slavery, and debating whether works that deploy the language of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and essentially map the Atlantic onto the Sahara, can be of use locally. Recent social science literature has also relied on New World categories. Buehler and Hang’s recent surveys of “divergent opposition” to sub-Saharan African and Arab migrants in Morocco concludes that hostility from less educated Moroccans towards sub-Saharans has more to do with pocketbook issues than racial prejudice.^[13] The survey has been praised for asking respondents whether they support “pan-Arab” or “pan-African” ideologies – thus taking into account recent developments – but the survey claims most Moroccans are “mixed” and follow “Arab cultural traditions” (disregarding Berber customs and traditions) and defines “Black Moroccans” as people of “sub-Saharan origin.” This is a common assumption –that darker-hued North Africans (Nubians, *haratin*) are a “diaspora,” and necessarily descendants of slaves and identify as such. In early 2020, partly in response to this wave of writing, the black Moroccan artist M’Barek Bouhchichi stated: “The issue that we encounter is that any black in Morocco is told to have come from sub-Saharan Africa. And this is where they are wrong. I am from here. I am here.”^[14]

The term “diaspora” is as contested as “indigenous” and “ethnic.” The media increasingly speaks of ethnicities in Morocco (*al-ethniyat*), yet activists avoid the term; as Adhghrini observed, “ethnic” is what state officials labeled the AMDP before banning it.^[15] There are television shows and radio programs trying to sensitize people to racism, but the public conversation remains limited to personal/attitudinal racism and not structural racism. There is little discussion of police violence, media representation, or black political representation. Moroccan activists note that out of 515 members of parliament (395 in the House of Representatives, and 120 House of Counselors), only 7 are black (5 in the former, and 2 in the latter.) And yet efforts to introduce a Tunisian-inspired anti-racism bill were roundly rejected in parliament. Anti-racist organizations – like GADEM, National Council for Human Rights, Tadamun – are massively disadvantaged, faced with a discourse of Islamic color-blindness, and French color-blindness, which sees “race” as an insidious construct and an American imposition. There are regular workshops training activists on how to talk about racism without organizing people into “races”: How to refer to black Moroccans – Afro-Arab? Afro-Berber? What is “Afro”? Another controversy has revolved around how to refer to sub-Saharan migrants? The preferred term among NGO activists seems to be “sub-Saharan,” as “African” would imply North Africa is not part of the continent. Also, how to teach the history of slavery in Morocco without incurring the ruling dynasty’s wrath – and should slavery be taught in a North African/Middle Eastern context, or reflecting the recent pivot, in a broader pan-African context? “Trans-Saharan” or “trans-African” slaveries?

Until the last decade, public discussions about the Maghrebian states’ place in Africa and African politics tended to be about Sufi networks, investment opportunities, inter-state alliances and how the African Union (then OAU) could be used to advance the national interest. Today the conversation about “notre continent” has taken a distinct identitarian turn and is affecting domestic politics, as Amazigh movements and anti-racist campaigns in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco take advantage of the “pivot to Africa” to connect with other Amazigh communities, to talk about racism and slavery, and to contest the tenets of Arab nationalism.

[1] <http://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20191113-flag-confusion-algerian-courts-condemns-or-acquits-same-charge>

[2] Fadma Aït Mous , “Les enjeux de l’amazighité au Maroc,” *Revue Confluences Méditerranée* 2011/3 (N° 78) pp.121-131; Mohammed Boudahan, “min ajli stratijiat jadidat li istirdad al-hawiat al-amazighiyat li al-dawlat al-maghribiya,” *al-hiwar al-mutamadin* (May 12 2014) <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=444572&r=0>

[3] Aly Mouryf, “National identity through historical knowledge in schools” (“al-hawiya al-watania min khilal al-marifa al-tarikhiya al-madrasia” *Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture* (IRCAM, Rabat 2014)

[4] The Amazigh-speaking in northern Africa population is estimated to be about 20 million, scattered between Morocco (where an estimated 35 percent is Amazigh-speaking), Algeria (20 percent), Libya (10 percent) and smaller communities in Tunisia and the Siwa oasis in western Egypt. There are also an estimated 1 million Tuareg Amazighs in Mali and Niger.

[5] Alondra Nelson, *al hayat al ijtimaiyat li al-humd al-nawawii: al-araq wa al-tawidat wa al-taswiyat ba’da al-jinum* (*The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome*) (Beacon Press 2016)

[6] Abdallah Bouchart, *Amazighité and the Party (al-amazighiya wa al-hizb)* (Rabat 2019)

[7] Zakia Salime and Paul Silverstein, “Morocco’s Palestinian Politics,” MERIP Issue # 282 (Spring 2017). “Maroc: le Coran ne passe plus entre Amazighs et islamistes,” <http://www.slateafrique.com/210635/maroc-lutte-farouche-berberes-islamistes> On Sunday, February 10 2020, a march for Palestine took place in Rabat – a rejection of the Trump peace plan – and the southern Amazigh activists were conspicuously absent.

[8] Francis M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Brookings Institution Press 2011) p.450

[9] Dahir # 1-15-75 Ramadan 1436 (June 24 2015)

[10] “Ahmed Toufiq réagi à la provocation de Zefzafi,” <https://leseco.ma/ahmed-taoufiq-reag/>

[11] Mohammed Ennaji, *Serving the Master* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 1999) Fatima Harrak, “Review: Captivity and Slavery in the Maghrib,” *The Journal of African History* Vol. 41, No. 2 (2000), pp. 304-306;

[12] “We realize the term is negative, and indigene was used by French colonialists,” says Rachid Raha, editor of *Le Monde Amazigh* and chair of the World Amazigh Congress, “but in the early 1990s, the United Nations was the only door we had.”

[13] Matt Buehler and Kyung Joon Hang, “Divergent opposition to sub-Saharan African and Arab migrants in Morocco’s Casablanca Region: prejudice from the pocketbook?” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (August 2019)

[14] M’barek Bouhchichi, “The Invisibility of Black Moroccans” *The Metric* (January 22 2020)

[15] Interview with author, Rabat (February 5 2020)