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The Berbers: Defending North Africa's Cultural Heritage

Photo: Dressed in traditional finery, a Berber man awaits his wedding.

Robert van der Hilst/Corbis

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Sports fans in France and Africa welcomed the appointment last week of French soccer superstar Zinedine Zidane as a United Nations goodwill ambassador in the war against poverty. For many Berbers, the selection of the Marseilles-born midfielder is not only a source of pride but also a major public relations victory, for Zidane -- commonly described as "Arab" or "North African" by the international press -- is of Berber background, his parents hailing from Algeria's aggrieved Kabyle region. Zidane, a high-profile player, has consistently celebrated his origins at a time when North Africa's indigenous people are threatened with assimilation and Arabization.

"It's great that Zinedine Zidane is UN ambassador," says Touria Khannous, a Moroccan doctoral candidate in African literature at Brown University. "I hope he will promote the cultural identity of the Berbers. I really believe that Morocco, and North Africa in general, needs to emphasize its Berber and African heritage."

In 1999 *National Geographic* magazine ran an article titled "Vanishing Cultures," which listed indigenous cultures worldwide that may be threatened with extinction. The survey included the Dinka and Fulani of West Africa, the Tigre of East Africa, and North Africa's Berber cultures and

dialects (Kabyle, Shluh, Tuareg, Mozabite).

To most Americans, the term "Berber" conjures images of the swashbuckling Barbary pirates marauding American ships off the Barbary Coast of Morocco. Beginning in the 1500s, the Barbary states of North Africa -- Algiers, Tunisia, Rabat and Tetouan - served as bases for Moorish bands who attacked European vessels off the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. After the American Revolution, Barbary pirates began targeting American ships, leading to a full-fledged war against the Tripolitania and Algerian ports in the early 19th century.

On a Saturday in January, though, a few hundred Berbers -- from Algeria, Morocco and Niger -- gathered in New York to celebrate Yennayer, a Berber holiday. (Many Berbers prefer the term "Amazigh," since the word "Berber" derives from "Barbara," the Latin term for barbarian, later adopted by Arabs.) The Yennayer celebration, held in a chapel off Times Square, included lectures, screenings of Berber films and live Berber music.

"Growing up [in Morocco] we used to celebrate Yennayer regularly in mid-January - as kids we were given walnuts, dried fruits and so on," says Mokhtar Ghambou, a professor of literature at Yale University. "Yennayer is a reaction to the dangers of assimilation, to a system which denies the specificity of Berber culture. We are trying to show the rich culture of North Africa -- to show the unity through diversity."

But unity with whom? One issue of increasing interest to Berber people, wherever they live, is to the extent to which they identify as Africans.

"African Americans should be interested in Berber culture. Berber associations throughout North Africa emphasize their African identity," Ghambou says. "The philosophy of 'Negritude,' which emerged in the 1930s, speaks of Africa's contribution to world civilization and acknowledges the legacy of Berbers. Leopold Senghor paid tribute to St. Augustine, who was a Berber. Shakespeare's Othello -- referred to as 'The Moor' -- was Berber. Moors are Arabic-speaking Berbers. And the Tuareg -- the 'Blue Men' of the desert -- are definitely African."

So just who are the Berbers? The Berbers today are scattered across Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya - and to a lesser extent, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Egypt. Scholars estimate that Berbers make up some 40 percent of the Moroccan population, and some 25 and 35 percent of the populations of Algeria and Tunisia, respectively. "Berber languages are concentrated in the mountainous areas which have best resisted Arabization, except in the case of the deep Sahara," write Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress in *The Berbers* (1996), a book tracing the Berbers' history from antiquity to the present. "There is little doubt that the whole of North Africa spoke Berber languages at one time, while in the Middle Ages they occupied much of Spain and Sicily as well. But just as the dialects are often mutually incomprehensible [though remarkably similar], so the people themselves are extremely heterogeneous."

Berber languages are of the Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) family, along with Cushitic, Chadic and Egyptian Coptic. Little is known of ancient Libyan Berber, also called Numidian, despite the presence of inscriptions dating back to the Roman era. Some linguists say that Guanchos, the now-extinct language of the Canary Islands, also belonged to the Berber family.

Historical texts show that St. Augustine was a Berber, as were the 7th century princess/warrior Kahina, the explorer Ibn Battutah, and Tarik Ibn

Ziyad, who led Muslim forces across the Mediterranean and eventually gave his name to Gibraltar (from "Jabal Tarek" -- the Rock of Tarek). The ancient Numidians, who were first allies of Carthage and then clients of the Roman Empire, were Berbers. Another Berber community, the Tuareg, known as "the People of the Veil," have been romanticized in Western films and novels as a hard, warrior people, ever since they smashed a French expedition in 1881.

But despite this long, vast history, Berbers today face extinction of a different kind: assimilation into an increasingly Arabized North Africa. "Direct cultural repression was a phenomenon that started as early as the mid-1960s, when the transmissions of the one Berber radio station became limited to four hours a day, and it became illegal to give children Berber names," write Brett and Fentress. "Systematic repression of festivals, of musical groups, and the abolition of ... Berber [language courses] at the University of Algiers were all aimed at establishing the linguistic and cultural unity of the country, and preventing the growth of Berberism into a political force."

Upon gaining independence in 1962, the Algerian government adopted Arabic as the national language. Despite this, in many regions French and Berber continued to dominate, however, with Arabic as a third language. Facing fears of secession, the government of Algeria for years suppressed the expression of Berber language and culture. In the early 1990s, however, Algerian television began airing news in Berber dialects. And in 1995, in an effort to gain the support of Berber parties, then-president Liamine Zeroual set up an agency to introduce the teaching of Berber.

Such progress, slowly won, was not to last. When a law came into effect in Algeria making Arabic the only language in public life in July 1998, riots erupted in Kabyle, a center of Berber identity. Crowds carrying banners stating "We are not Arabs" chanted anti-government slogans in Berber and French. Anger had been simmering in this area since the murder of popular Berber singer Lounes Matoub in May. Matoub, a champion of secularism and critic of the state's Arabization policy and Islamic fundamentalism, had extolled Berber culture and referred to Arabic as an "uninteresting" language, one "unsuitable for knowledge and science." After Matoub's death, a group called Armed Berber Movement (ABM) emerged, threatening to kill anyone who tried to implement Arabization laws.

Even in Morocco -- where many activists claim that Berbers constitute a 60 percent majority - protests are emerging against the government's Arabization policy. According to the BBC, four years ago the government passed laws outlawing Berber names, such as Messina and Jurgurtha, and coercing citizens to give their newborns Arabic names.

Berber activists and intellectuals are calling the Arabization policy "a new Arab conquest." Berber activist Hassan Ouzaat told the BBC, "[Pan-Arabism] generated a movement of culturally genocidal proportions. It is actually trying to subdue local identity in order to augment the numbers of so-called Arabs... Little did they realize that the pan-Arabism based in the Middle East would expand in such a 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."

In response, a movement of Berber consciousness and pride emerged in Algeria and Morocco in the early 1990s. The Berber Cultural Movement states as its basic principle "Berber exists, and is entitled to participate fully in the life of the nation," and celebrates the Berbers' 4000 years of history,

warning of "la braise berbère" - "the smoldering of Berber consciousness against the time when it would burst into flame."

Organizations have also been formed to explore pan-Berber identity among indigenous cultures throughout North Africa, including the Amazigh World Congress (CWA), which was founded in France in 1995 and demands recognition of Berber identity and languages from North African national governments. In the Canary Islands in August 1998, the CWA and other groups participated in the first-ever international conference to celebrate the cultures of the Berber peoples, an occasion described by CWA chairman Mebrouk Febral as "a great day in Berber history."

The work of organizations like the CWA, and the public pronouncements of self-identified Berbers like Zinedine Zidane have helped to raise the profile of Berber history and identity, but earning recognition as an indigenous African culture threatened by Arabization is an ongoing struggle for the Berber community.

"Most North Africans tend to identify themselves as Arabs, thus ignoring our countries' cultural ties to Africa, and the role of Berber heritage in Morocco's precolonial history," says Touria Khannous. "This tendency to homogenize North Africa along the lines of Arab nationalism is dangerous... Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians who claim they are not African mis-recognize the obvious: their countries' geographical location within Africa."

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