

Conceptualizing the Moroccan Amazigh

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Abstract : The free people, Amazigh (plural Imazighen), often known by the more popular exonym, Berber, are spread across several North African countries with the highest population in Morocco have been substantially misunderstood and differentially showcased by entities from western-school educated scholars to human, health and women's rights organizations, to the State to the international community. This paper is an examination of the various conceptualization of the Imazighen. With the popularity of the Arab Spring movement to oust monarchical and dictatorial rulers across the Middle East and North Africa in Morocco, the Moroccan monarchy introduced various reform programs to win public favor. These included social, economic and educational reforms to incorporate marginalized groups such as the Imazighen. The monarchy has ushered Amazigh representation in public offices and landscape through Amazigh script, even though theirs has been an oral culture. After the Arab Spring, the Justice and Development party, an Islamist party took over in Morocco due to its accessibility to the masses, In Sept. 2021, unlike the case of Egypt and Tunisia where military and constitutional means were sought, Morocco successfully removed it from power through the ballot, resulting in a real victory for the neutral monarchy and its representation as a moderate, secular and liberal force for the nation. As a result, supporting the perpetuation of Amazigh linguistic identity also became synonymous to making a secular statement as a Muslim. It has led to the telling of Amazigh identity at state museums as one representing the indigenous, pure, diverse, culturally-rich and united Morocco. Reform efforts have also prioritized an amiable look towards the economic and familial links of Moroccan Jews with the few thousand families still left in the country and a showcasing through museums and cultural centers of the Jewish identity as Moroccan first. In that endeavor, it is interesting to note the coverage of Jews as the indigenous of Morocco through the embracing of their "folk" cultural and religious practices, those that are not continued outside Morocco. In this epistemology, the concept of the Moroccan Jew becomes similar to the indigenous Amazigh, both cherished as the oldest peoples of Morocco and symbols of its unity and resilience. In the urban discourse, Amazigh identity is a concept that continues to be part of the deliberations of elites and scholars graduating from French schools on the incorporation of rural and illiterate Morocco in economic and educational advancement. Yet, with the constant influx of migrants from Western Sahara into cities like Fez and Marrakesh, Amazigh has often been described as the umbrella term of those of "mixed" ethnic ancestry who constitute the country's free population. In sum, Amazigh identity highlights the changing discourse on marginalized communities, human rights, representation, Moroccan nationhood, and regional and transnational politics. The aim of this paper is to analyze perceptions of Amazigh identity in Morocco post-2021 ousting of the Islamist party using data from state-sponsored museum displays and cultural centers collected in Summer 2022 and scholarly analyses of Amazigh identity, representation and rights in Morocco.

Keywords : Amazigh identity, Morocco, representation, state politics

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