Berbers (Amazigh)

BRUCE MADDY-WEITZMAN
Tel Aviv University, Israel

"Berbers" is the generally accepted term for the indigenous peoples of the Maghrib (in North Africa west of the Nile Valley), going back to the beginning of recorded history. Ethnically, linguistically, and culturally, Berbers form the basis of "the whole North African edifice" (Hart 1999: 26). The term, derived from the Greek *bárbaros* (barbarian), was embraced by the Arab Islamic conquerors of North Africa in the seventh century and revived by French colonialism in the nineteenth century. It is viewed as pejorative by the modern Berber identity movement and hence is increasingly being supplanted by "Amazigh" (free man). Berbers speak in a variety of dialects of what is generally accepted to be a common language, Tamazight, which belongs to the family of Afro-Asiatic languages. Until recent decades, it has been an almost exclusively oral language, but efforts to standardize and develop it as a written language are well underway.

CONTEMPORARY PROFILE

Centuries of population movements into North Africa thorough Islamization, partial but significant Arabization, and accelerated state centralization and economic integration policies resulted in significant language loss, rendering Berber speakers a minority within the region. Nonetheless, there are still approximately twenty million Berbers within their historic core territories, and another two million outside them, mostly in Europe. Speakers of Berber dialects are commonly said to constitute approximately 40 percent of the population in Morocco, and are subdivided into three main ethnolinguistic groups, rooted in three distinct regions: Ichelhin, speakers of Tachelhit, constituting roughly eight million persons in the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas mountains and valleys and southeast pre-desert area; Imazighen, speakers of Tamazight (the same term used to denote Berbers as a whole), numbering three million persons centered in the Middle Atlas region; and Rifian, speakers of Tarifit, also numbering approximately three million persons, in the Rif mountains of the north.

Algerian Berbers, numbering approximately 20–25 percent of the country's total population, are divided into two primary groups and four smaller ones: Kabyles, speakers of Taqbaylit, numbering five million persons and residing in the mountainous Kabylie region between Algiers and Constantine; Chaouis, numbering two million, from the Aures region southeast of Kabylie; Mzabis, speakers of Tamzabit, numbering two hundred thousand Ibadi Muslims (most Berbers are Sunnis) of the Mzab valley in the south around Ghardaia; the one hundred and fifty thousand speakers of the Znati dialect in the Touat-Gourara area in the country's southwest; the one hundred thousand speakers of Tachenouit, in the Chenoua and Zaccar mountains west of Algiers; and the approximately one hundred thousand traditionally nomadic Touareg speakers of Tamasheq, in the far south. Berber speakers in Libya, 6–9 percent of the total Libyan population of approximately six million persons, hail from the Jabal Nafusa highlands of Tripolitania and desert localities such as the Cyrenaican

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town of Awjila. Tunisian Berber speakers number no more than 1–2 percent of the country's ten million people, and live in a number of villages in the country's south-central highlands and on the island of Djerba. Approximately twenty thousand Berbers inhabit Egypt's western desert Siwa oasis. An estimated one million Touareg Berbers inhabit the Sahel–Sahara region, primarily in Mali and Niger. The aboriginal population of the Canary Islands spoke a Berber dialect until the Spanish conquest in the fifteenth century, and the islands are thus included in the geographical space of Tamazgha, the named homeland of the Amazigh identity movement.

ORIGINS

The Berbers' geographical and anthropological origins are multiple, emanating from the Mediterranean, the Nile Valley, and the Sahara, resulting in a composite population during Neolithic times (Brett and Fentress 1996). North Africa's urban areas, beginning with Carthage in the eighth century BCE and the subsequent Roman conquests, served as social, economic, and cultural entrepôts, bringing about partial fusions of native Berber populations with newcomers, along with varying degrees of military and cultural resistance (Mattingly 1996). The myriad results included Hellenized Numidian kingdoms (third to first centuries BCE); political and cultural luminaries during the heyday of Roman North Africa (first and second centuries CE); religious syncretism, including Christian and Judaic praxis; and continued tribal–pastoral autonomy.

Berber interactions with Arab Islamic conquerors, beginning in the mid-seventh century, produced similarly wide-ranging results: resistance and resulting subjugation, but also willing participation in the conquests of North Africa and Iberia; Islamization, religio-political revolts, religious heresies, and adoption of Sufi practices; the establishment of Berber Islamic empires (eleventh to fourteenth centuries); and eventual marginalization, with the Berbers forced into the periphery in rugged mountainous regions and pre-desert oases in the centuries preceding European colonialism.

Drawing on the fourteenth-century writings of Ibn Khaldun, French colonialism, beginning in Algeria, revived "Berbers" as a specific category of people who were deemed more "ripe," racially, religiously, and culturally, for the French colonization and *mission civilisatrice* project than the region's Arabs. Following their subjugation, the Kabyles were thus targeted and acquired the French language and a modicum of modern education earlier than the rest of Algerian Muslim society, but this did not insulate them from the independence movement, in which they played an active role. In Morocco, after a decades-long process of military subjugation of recalcitrant Berber tribes, France played the Berber card against the urban Arabophone elites to strengthen its rule, but there too Berbers would eventually participate in the independence movement.

INDEPENDENCE ERA

Ruling elites in the new Algerian and Moroccan states had a similar vision for their Berber populations: subsuming them under a homogenized, arabized Sunni Muslim national identity and relegating Berber culture to folklore status. Accordingly, the number of Berber speakers declined in the decades after independence (1956 for Morocco; 1962 for Algeria). But, ironically, both countries also witnessed a gradual increase in self-conscious manifestations of Berber culture and accompanying demands of Berber groups. Kabyles were in the vanguard in the 1970s and 1980s in developing a modern

ethnocultural self-consciousness in opposition to the monochromatic official vision of the Algerian state. Moroccan Berber activists would follow. The Amazigh identity movement has now extracted hard-won recognition from state authorities: most significantly, the 2011 Moroccan Constitution acknowledged the Amazigh as an integral component of Morocco's national identity and declared Tamazight an official language, alongside Arabic. That same year, newly assertive Libyan Amazigh helped to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi and are seeking a similar constitutionalization of their status. More recently, Touareg in Mali have sought to establish a breakaway state of their own, Azawad.

SEE ALSO: Colonialism and Neocolonialism; France; Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406); Indigenous Peoples; Islam; Middle East and North Africa

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