



Katherine E. Hoffman, Susan Gilson Miller, eds. *Berbers and Others: Beyond Tribe and Nation in the Maghrib*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. 225 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35480-8; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22200-8.

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Published on H-Africa (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Brett L. Shadle

Exploring Berbers

The place in Western scholarship of North Africa's original indigenous population, known collectively as the Berbers, has long been paradoxical. On the one hand, they have provided a rich field for inquiry by leading social scientists: luminaries such as Pierre Bourdieu, Ernest Gellner, and Clifford Geertz, following in the footsteps of the great medieval historian Ibn Khaldun, drew on their research of specific Berber communities to formulate broad intellectual constructs. On the other hand, the dialectics of colonialism and nationalism, followed by a generation of postcolonial state-building and nation-building efforts, led scholars to studiously downplay Berber specificity, apart from its residual tribal and folkloric features. Whether implicitly or explicitly, Western scholars seemed to adopt the view of North Africa's ruling elites, namely that their Berber-speaking populations would, and even should be assimilated into a larger nation-state milieu which synthesized Arabism, Islam, and modernity. This view was succinctly articulated by Mehdi Ben Barka, Morocco's leading left-wing figure until his abduction and murder in 1965: a Berber, he declared, was "simply someone who hadn't gone to school." [1] Ironically, this approach mirrored the analyses of early generations of French colonial practitioners and scholars who identified the Berbers' alleged "assimilability" to French culture.

Nearly four decades have passed since the publication of *Arabs and Berbers: From Tribe to Nation in North Africa* (1973), an enormously rich and still indispensable volume edited by Gellner and Charles Micaud. In the interim, the complex processes of state consolidation and national integration in North African states had proven to be seriously deficient: Algeria was torn asunder during the 1990s by a violent conflict between a retrograde Islamist insurgency and a no less noxious authoritarian regime. Morocco, for its part, avoided the Algerian

trauma but suffered from deep poverty, inequality, and arbitrary rule. By the turn of the new century, North African states were deemed to be in serious trouble by most scholars, in desperate need for what I. William Zartman called a "re-contracting" between state and society. [2]

This process is now well underway throughout the region, although its ultimate outcome remains to be seen. In any case, North Africa's Berber populations are now more explicitly acknowledged by the Moroccan and Algerian regimes as being a legitimate part of the national fabric, and an Amazigh (lit., free men) identity movement has emerged to articulate a set of ethno-cultural demands on the state which, if adopted, would transform the self-view of North African societies.

Parallel to these developments has been the emergence of a new willingness to engage in research on Berber ethnicity. *Berbers and Others*, edited by Katherine E. Hoffman and Susan Gilson Miller, brings together some of the very best of the new generation of scholars working on Berber issues from a variety of perspectives—history, anthropology, political science, education, literary studies, and art history. Old issues are revisited and new questions are posed, resulting in a uniformly high-quality collection of essays (too often a rarity in edited volumes). The book holds much value, both for North African specialists and for those with broader interests in matters dealing with ethnicity, social and political change, and public culture.

As the editors note in their introduction, the contributors view ethnicity "as a constantly changing orientation, shaped and reshaped by forces both within and outside the group" and "document this unfolding in a variety of contexts both past and present.... They reject the frozen, embrace the contingent, and situate categories and representations within their specific historical mi-

lieus" (p. 4). Indeed, this approach underpins each of the chapters. James McDougal's opening essay in the "Sources and Methods" section elucidates the multiple meanings of "Arab" and "Berber" throughout history. He cogently argues that these labels were usually adopted in the context of community and state formation, but that, since the seventh century, it was Islam which gave them meaning. Whereas salvation through Islam had always been the method used by all political movements, Berber as well as Arab, from the mid-1950s, nationalist discourse (building, ironically, on colonial knowledge) had placed the two groups on opposite ends, with "Arab" meaning salvation, and "Berber" meaning heresy. In response, contemporary Amazigh activists have basically turned that equation on its head.

Katherine Hoffman follows with a nuanced discussion of the very wide intermediate zones in rural and peri-urban Morocco where Berber and Arabic speakers interpenetrate in varying proportions. The process of cultural and linguistic assimilation, she notes, has been almost exclusively one way, from Berber to Arab, and rarely the other. Given the twin processes of linguistic assimilation and a new valorization of Amazigh identity by the state and within the community, she wonders whether "Berber" may even eventually become a badge of identity but no longer a communicative code (p. 54).

Mohammed El Mansour's chapter takes a step back into Moroccan history, examining the paths for integration of Berbers/Imazighen into the country's elite. While some achieved this through Islamic scholarship, Sufism, business partnerships, or military service, others, including one Abu al-Qasim al-Zayani, bridged their Berber background and wider society through service in the state bureaucracy (*makhzan*). While the "ethnic" and "tribal" aspects of his identity remained salient, the *makhzanian* dimension superseded all others.

Paul Silverstein's innovative chapter links the modern-day transnational, meta-Berberist ideology and movement to a troubling local dimension, namely the racial tensions in southeastern Morocco between the formerly dominant "white" Berbers and newly empowered "black" ones, known as *haratin*, or *Iqbilyin*. Formerly feudal-type relations between the two groups have been transformed by the latter's acquisition of capital from working in Moroccan cities or abroad, and using it to buy up land in their villages. The *Iqbilyin*'s non-involvement in the Amazigh culture movement adds a further layer to the tensions between the two groups.

Jane Goodman's chapter examines the trial of Imazighen activists in Algeria in 1985. In a rare moment

of transparency, the authorities opened the trial to the foreign press, which enabled the defendants to turn the proceedings into an indictment against the state by draping their demands for recognition of Berber identity in the mantle of universal human rights. Large cracks had been exposed in the façade of the Algerian polity, helping prepare the ground for the upheaval at the end of the decade, which included the flourishing of Berber culture associations. Given the centrality of the Kabyle Berbers in the forging of a modern ethno-cultural Amazigh identity, it is unfortunate that this is the only chapter that focuses specifically on the modern Algerian scene.

David Crawford's chapter may be considered the most provocative of the book. While acknowledging that the widespread phenomenon of child labor in Morocco is too often marked by rampant exploitation, he rejects the common notion among educated Moroccans that the dispatch of young illiterate rural girls to work as maids in urban households marks the breakdown of social solidarity among rural Berber communities. Rather, he argues persuasively that it is a continuing testimony to their resilience, particularly their households, as it forms an indispensable source of family income, and is understood as such by the girls themselves.

In the book's third and final section, "Varieties of Representation," Mokhtar Ghambou criticizes the Amazigh movement's use of ancient Greek and Roman texts to recover their history, pointing to their pernicious intent (conquest), and the similar use made of them by colonial historians. Celebrating "Numidia" (the Greek- and Roman-era term denoting portions of modern-day Algeria and Tunisia), he says, perpetuates the accompanying negative stereotype of ancient Berbers as "nomads," from which the term allegedly derives. (Curiously, he ignores the view of Gabriel Camps that the word actually has a Berber origin, with a different meaning than the Greek word for nomads.[3])

Lisa Bernasek casts a critical eye on the representation of what are now termed Berber "first arts" (*arts premières*) in France's Musée du quai Branly. In her view, it "has largely reproduced colonial-era categories and assumptions," rendering Berber culture as supposedly timeless. Doing so, she says, both de-emphasizes the centrality of orthodox Islam in North African life and ignores contemporary manifestations of Berber culture.

The book concludes with Cynthia Becker's deconstruction of the history of Berber arts. Contemporary Amazigh artists, she shows, are keen to foreground the region's pre-Islamic past, and thus often borrow from colonial interpretations of Berber art in order to counter

Arabo-Islamic national narratives. At the same time, even as they strive to preserve their Amazigh heritage, they are, she says, “engaged in the creation of a new aesthetic form that exemplifies dynamism, inventiveness and resilience” (p. 213).

Whether or not the Berber identity movement will achieve a truly critical mass in the coming years and have a decisive impact on state-society relations in North Africa remains to be seen. But Becker’s concluding words regarding Berber artists may be applicable to other spheres of Berber life as well. In any case, both North Africanists and all those interested in the nexus between

ethnicity, culture, politics, and history, will drive much benefit and pleasure from this elegant and informed volume.

Notes

[1]. Jeanne and Simonne Lacouture, *Le Maroc, a l’épreuve* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1958), 83.

[2]. I. William Zartman, “Introduction: Re-Writing the Future in the Maghrib,” in *Economic Crisis and Political Change in North Africa*, ed. Azzedine Layachi (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1998), 1-5

[3]. Gabriel Camps, *Les Berbères, Mémoire et Identité* (Arles: Babel, 2007), 99-101.

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Citation: Bruce A. Maddy-Weitzman. Review of Hoffman, Katherine E.; Miller, Susan Gilson, eds., *Berbers and Others: Beyond Tribe and Nation in the Maghrib*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

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