

Fall 2014

Challenging Tunisia's Homogenous Arabness: Post-Revolutionary Civil Society Activism for the 'Invisible' Tunisian Amazigh

Xavier A. Torres de Janon
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Torres de Janon, Xavier A., "Challenging Tunisia's Homogenous Arabness: Post-Revolutionary Civil Society Activism for the 'Invisible' Tunisian Amazigh" (2014). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 1939.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1939

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

**Challenging Tunisia's Homogenous Arabness:
Post-Revolutionary Civil Society Activism
for the 'Invisible' Tunisian Amazigh**

Xavier A. Torres de Janon

SIT Study Abroad

Tunisia: Emerging Identities in North Africa

Fall 2014

Acknowledgments:

This project would have been impossible without the help of my fearless supervisor Houda Mzdiouet and the guidance of my Academic Director, Mounir Khélifa. I also thank SIT Study Abroad; Sue Darlington, Michael S. Plenty and Hampshire College; the college's Office of the President and Office for Diversity and Multicultural Education; my multiple friends and supporters from Ecuador and the U.S.; and family. I couldn't have made it to Tunisia without their trust and financial assistance. Finally, I am forever grateful to my daring interviewees and their courage to speak up against injustice and marginalization. This paper is for their movement.

Abstract:

The 2010-11 Tunisian revolution brought to the forefront of the country an explosion of activism and organizing from civil society, including multiple voices urging for the defense, protection and/or recognition of Tunisian 'minorities.' An unprecedented Amazigh (pl. Imazighen, the indigenous population of North Africa) wave of activism from individuals and organizations appeared in the public sphere of the country, a population systematically denied and marginalized by the Tunisian dictatorships and society emboldened to stand up for their rights and challenge the status quo. In the post-revolutionary context of this pseudo-homogenous North African country, dominated by a strong Arab/Islamic ideology since independence, Amazigh citizens and allies have been mobilizing to bring up uncomfortable questions to their government and fellow civil society members. This paper seeks to explore this nascent movement through interviews with different actors involved in these contextually new and controversial discussions, with the objective of shedding light on this mostly overlooked subject and to

problematize common perceptions of the Tunisian Imazighen and the society's supposed Arab homogeneity.

Introduction:

The 2010-11 Tunisian revolution brought to the forefront of the country an explosion of activism and organizing from civil society, an excited population no longer clamped down by the all-powerful hand of an expired dictatorship. Loud organizations and individuals came forward with demands unheard of (or perhaps promptly silenced) in Tunisia's republican history, including voices urging for the defense, protection and/or recognition of Tunisian 'minorities.' Groups of Jewish, black and Amazigh populations began organizing and forming plights unprecedented in the public sphere of Tunisia, a country that has been regarded as officially homogenous since its independence, under a strong nationalism greatly informed by Arab/Islamic ideology (Pouessel 2012, *L'Année du Maghreb*). The Imazighen (pl. for Amazigh), North Africa's large and diverse indigenous population, have been present in the country's history since time immemorial, and now exist in small isolated and marginalized communities dispersed around the modern nation-state of Tunisia. The status and rights of the Tunisian Amazigh have remained painfully ambiguous, the autochthonous populations historically reduced to idyllic folklore and invisibility. Yet in the current continuing post-revolutionary democratic transition, organizations and individuals have been working to highlight the conditions and importance of the Imazighen in the country, active civil society members bringing up forgotten and uncomfortable questions to the mostly unaware Tunisian masses.

Through interviews with Tunisians actors involved in different sides of these contextually controversial topics, this project seeks to research and explore post-revolutionary pro-Amazigh activism in the country commonly regarded as the 'birth of the Arab Spring' and heading

towards the 'first *Arab* democracy.' Such an exploration intends to helpfill the gap in the academic coverage of the Tunisian Imazighen and their mobilizations, with the ambitious finalobjectives of helping to challenge the discourse of Tunisia's supposed Arab homogeneity as well as the status quo of invisibility and exclusion of the Amazigh in the country's mainstream public spheres. This aforementioned movement is quite new in the eyes of the Tunisian spectator, and, unlike in neighboring Morocco, Algeria, and Libya, the so-called 'Berber question' has never extensively occupied the government or its constituents' attention. With this difficult reality in mind, what is the state of Amazigh rights and identity in post-revolutionary Tunisia? What are the objectives of pro-Amazigh civil society actors in Tunisia? To what extent were these movements existent under the Tunisian dictatorships? And what have been the greatest challenges and general response to their work?

The paper will be divided into six sections, beginning with a description of the research project's methodology and limitations. This will be followed by a relatively brief (and inevitably partial) explanation of who the Imazighen are, the nature of their movement, and what their current status in Tunisia is, to contextualize post-revolutionary activism in the country. Then I will focus on the paper's topic through a narrative-based recount of my meetings with different actors involved in Tunisian Amazigh activism, and a continuing discussion of the responses and challenges this movement is facing in 'homogenous' Tunisia. Next, I will very briefly highlight the uncomfortable lack of female voices in my research, followed by a final concluding section summarizing my findings and recommendations. However, before continuing, a clarification of word choice is at hand. This paper has and will use the words Amazigh/Imazighen (lit. "free man" in Tamazight, the Amazigh dialect of the Atlas Mountains, now used as an umbrella term for all Amazigh language) to refer to the native North African populations, instead of the

commonly used denomination, 'Berber.' The latter should be deemed as a violently imposed and pejorative term, dating back to 7th century Islamic conquests, when Arab conquerors utilized the Arabic word *barbar* ("babble noisily") to refer to the Imazighen and their language; *barbaris* also closely related to *barbaroi* ("barbarians"), which was how Greek and Roman texts referred to these populations (Maddy-Weitzman 2011, p. 2). The term was later revived during the 19th century European colonization of Africa, when strategic, ill-intentioned interest on these populations surged (Brett and Fentress 1996, p. 188-90). Variations of 'Amazigh' has been historically used by North African natives to refer to themselves (Camps 2007, p. 98-9), with regional differences in pronunciation adjusted and standardized by the growing transnational movement of Amazigh activists around the world. Using the terminology of the Imazighen's multiple conquerors only perpetuates cycles of domination, denial and oppression.

Methodology and Limitations:

To achieve my research objectives and answer my guiding questions, I first delved into diverse physical and online literature on the Amazigh, particularly looking for academic articles, institutional reports, books and news pieces that focused on the Tunisian Imazighen. Given the topic and the relatively limited attention it has received, I heavily relied on sources written in French, which I have personally translated when directly quoted. I then proceeded to find, establish contact and meet with Tunisians interested or involved with pro-Amazigh activism through academic, professional and personal networks of SIT Tunisia, as well as through social media, emailing and communication with foreign Amazigh organizations. It was no easy task to reach and interview actual individuals in or near the capital given their small numbers, the concentration of the majority of Amazigh communities in the south of the country, and the

reality that this movement is quite new and reasonably suspicious of people external to it. Moreover, I pushed to meet with an official from the Tunisian Ministry of Culture and Patrimony through SIT Tunisia networks to learn about their standpoint, yet they refused to discuss these topics, an issue that will be further addressed later in this paper. All direct quotes and references related to this paper's interviewees are based on personal meetings with them between November and December 2014 in Tunis and SidiBou Said.

Indeed, the difficulties and limitations of my project could have been enough to discourage its execution, yet they can also be considered as further evidence of how invisible and isolated the Imazighen are in Tunisia. As mentioned, the fact that I was living and limited to Tunis (due to time constraint and logistical factors) and its surrounding areas bounded the reach of my research to Tunisians stationed or passing by the capital; my project automatically excludes the numerous organizations and individuals inhabiting and/or locally working in the actual Tunisian Amazigh communities. The small (and generally unaccounted for) number of Imazighen in the country multiplied the difficulties of my investigation, forcing me to spend more time finding individuals who could relate to my topic than actually interviewing them. When finishing my interviews, I insisted on receiving other contacts from my interviewees, yet all of them invariably kept leading me to men; this huge sex gap is addressed later in the paper. My language skills also posed an obstacle and weakness for my study, as my Modern Standard Arabic and Tunisian dialect were not strong enough to utilize in research, limiting my findings to French and English texts and discussions. An added problem to my studies was how the majority of Tunisians I met during my time in the capital possessed an almost absolute ignorance or denial of remaining Tunisian Amazigh populations and this civilization's tremendous role in the country's history, and although this perceived reality does add to the argument and value of my

project, researching my topic in this context was not an easy task. Finally, I had to conform to how Tunisian Amazigh populations, marginalization and activism are mostly ignored in mainstream Western academia; they are usually only acknowledged (or disregarded) with painfully over-generalizing statements referring to their apparently feeble number in Tunisia. It is my hope that this paper can help reduce this scholarly void.

Contextualizing the Imazighen in the Republic of Tunisia:

Before discussing my findings on post-revolutionary activism, it is necessary to have a grasp of who the Amazigh are and how their recent history has shaped the Tunisian reality, as well as in what wider background these movements are appearing. As stated above, Amazigh groups are (undeniably) North Africa's native population, and their culture has formed the basis of "the whole North African edifice" (Hart 1999). Yet throughout mainstream recorded history, the Imazighen have repeatedly encountered more powerful invading forces, with their responses ranging from "resistance and retreat to embracing and assimilating into the new order" (Maddy-Weitzman 2012, p. 112); such a context has perpetuated a historical narrative that exclusively retells the conquerors' acts, and portrays Amazigh populations as almost a-historic actors, their role as "protagonists in their own history" lost in the process (Brett and Fentress 1996, p. 7). A large aspect of modern Amazigh activism has consisted in pushing to shift this notion and re-affirm the unacceptably overlooked significance of their peoples to their countries, but due to the tremendous hegemony of Arabist ideology in North Africa's postcolonial sociopolitical spheres and traumatic episodes of violence between the state and these populations, these discussions have been tremendously sensitive, to the point of being perceived as unacceptably dangerous to national balances of power. Current Amazigh activism is further complicated by the fact that

during the recent European colonization of the region, French conquerors placed the Imazighen at a higher social category than Arab North Africans, utilizing the former to combat resistance and deal with the “untrustworthy Arabs of the plains and cities” (Brett and Fentress 1996, p. 190). In this hostile environment, and amidst ever-shifting tensions between the Imazighen and their respective North African dictatorships/monarchies/civil chaos, a transnational ethnocultural phenomenon (known as the Amazigh Culture Movement) has developed in the last decades, with Amazigh groups in extremely different settings embracing a common identity that transcends the

‘artificial national boundaries’ established throughout Tamazgha, the Tamazight term used for the land that spreads from Egypt’s Western Desert to the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean (Maddy-Weitzman 2011, p. 4-8) (see figure 1). Greatly helped by the rise of international human rights discourse and decentralized communication technologies, this amorphous global activist

movement has increasingly gained more shape and recognition, one of its many accomplishments being the eventual establishment of the World Amazigh Congress (*Congrès Mondial Amazigh*, CMA) after a 1994 Amazigh film festival in Douarnenez, France. An international NGO, the CMA has aimed to bring together, organize and stand up for Amazigh communities in Tamazgha and abroad, and although it has succeeded in its activities and expansion, a certain tension has multiplied between the internationalist Amazigh fond of the CMA (who, for better or worse, advocate for a united, partially homogeneous Amazigh identity)

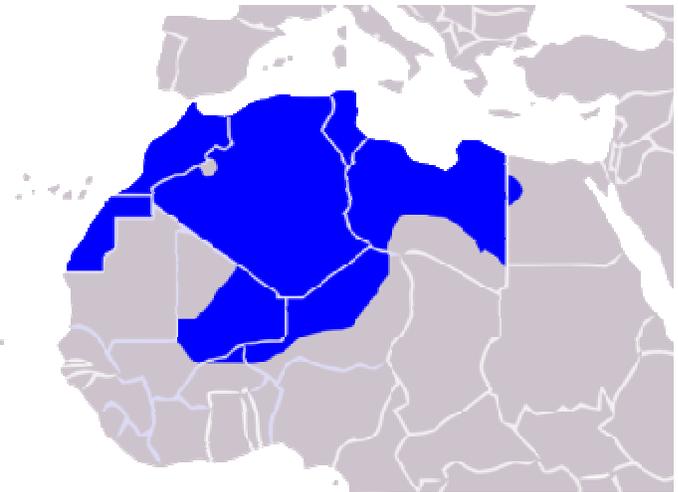


Figure 1: Tamazgha, considered to be the land of the Amazigh by Amazigh Culture Movement; in Tifinagh script: ⵜⴰⴳⴷⴰⵎⴰⵣⴻⵔⴰ (Amazigh_Man 2009)

and more local-oriented Amazigh leaders (who refuse the disconnected CMA's homogeneous discourse and argue for localized activism in the inherently heterogeneous Amazigh communities) (Pouessel 2010).

With this short, yet certainly complex, backdrop in mind, what are, then, the characteristics and conditions of the Imazighen in Tunisia? The controversy of referring to Amazigh groups in Tunisia begins with defining exactly who fits into the category of 'Tunisian Amazigh' and how many of them there are in the country. For the purpose of this paper, Amazigh communities should be generally conceived as those that preserve and/or affirm their indigenous language, culture or distinct identity, with the acknowledgment that a cultural identity is not solely composed by linguistic factors and can easily transcend them. Unfortunately, the official Tunisian censuses do not provide information regarding language usage or ethnicity, yet multiple estimates calculate that only 1% of Tunisians (~100,000) are Tamazight-speakers (Maddy-Weitzman 2011, p. 1), while more politically charged assessments argue that the number reaches up to 10% of the total population, that is, 1 million inhabitants (Congrès Mondial Amazigh 2011). Nevertheless, it is mostly recognized that Amazigh communities in the country are found in small villages in the south-center of Tunisia and in the island of Djerba (Maddy-Weitzman 2012, p. 132), usually in self-isolated spaces created to preserve themselves and their identity vis-à-vis their historically unwelcoming external environment. Throughout the republic's history, the Habib Bourghiba (1957-1987) and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1989-2011) dictatorships pushed forward an almost obsessive Arab-centered nationalist program, leading to a recurring denial of the Tunisian Imazighen, their contributions and cultural rights (see next page's Table 1). Indeed, the Tunisian nation-state, as a counter response to French colonialism, was constructed around a "unicist identity rhetoric around Arab culture and Islamic

religion,”¹ and with its low Amazigh presence, it developed a pervasive discourse of flawless homogeneity, an artificial idea commonly relayed by social sciences research (Pouessel 2012, *Frontières identitaires* sp. 3). According to Pouessel (2012, *L’Année du Maghreb*), in the 1970s, the “problem” of bilingual Arabic-Tamazight Tunisians bound schoolteachers to “de-Berberize” students, and the Arabophone pressure switched Amazighophones from a majority to minority status in villages of the south.

Tunisia is constituted as part of the “Arab family” and the Greater Arab Maghreb, with Arabic as its language and Islam its religion. Legal denial of Amazigh culture and civilization.	Tunisian Arab/Muslim identity is reaffirmed, and proclaims Arabization as a “pressing civilizational demand.” Brutal negation of Amazigh reality.	Advocates raising children with pride of Tunisian identity and a sense of civilizational belonging to the nation, the Maghreb, and the Arab/Muslim world. Amazigh identity not recognized.	Original Tunisian constitution is remodeled, with preamble reasserting that its language is Arabic and religion Islam. No mentioning of Amazigh heritage.
1959: First Constitution of Tunisian Republic	1988: National Pact of Tunisia	1995: Child Protection Code	2014: New Tunisian Constitution

Table 1: Instances of Amazigh exclusion in Tunisian law (adapted from Congrès Mondial Amazigh 2011 and Said 2014)

In Bourghibist Tunisia, ‘Berberity’ rhymed “with an outdated rurality” and began serving as bait for “tourism thirsty for exoticism, for primitivism.”² The unquestionable Amazigh origins of Tunisia and its people were transformed into an idea of a remote and folkloric past, an unimportant figment of the national identity overpowered by the stronger state-promoted Arabism: a study on official Tunisian educational textbooks by researcher Driss Abbassi (2008) relates how in schools, since independence, the country’s Amazigh roots have been continuously pushed aside for the supposed essential Arabness of North Africa, with only a short recognition of Tunisia’s Amazigheity in the post-Bourghiba, late 1980s textbooks (references to this Amazigheity, however, almost completely disappeared once again starting in the 1990s). More recently, contemporary scholarship has continued to play with the very political and misleading

myth of the Imazighen's Arab origins, with books such as *The Berber: Ancient Arabs* (Tunis: 2000) and *The Arabness of the Berber: The Hidden Truth* (Damascus: 1992) reaching Tunisian audiences and academia (Liebhaber 2012).

Nonetheless, when considering these problematic evidences of Amazigh marginalization, it is important to remind ourselves that, in the case of Tunisia, Amazigh communities have always represented a tremendously small population with little political voice. In comparative terms, Tunisian Amazigh activism in postcolonial times has been inexistent next to the large political role played by Amazigh groups in neighboring Morocco, Algeria, and Libya. That being said, the fact remains that these communities have and continue to exist in a state of exclusion and denial, with their numbers greatly decimated by strong policies enforced by the country's dictatorial regimes (more examples of this systematic marginalization will be provided throughout the rest of this paper). There is also the very real contextual explanation for the apparent inexistence of these movements before the 2010-11 revolution, as a minority-led, explicitly anti-establishment cause based in the south of the country would have been promptly silenced by Bourghiba and his successor. Indeed, almost immediately after the departure of Ben Ali, an unprecedented wave of pro-Amazigh organizing and movement-building appeared in the public sphere of Tunisia: in the context of the uprisings that shook North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, Willis (2012) recognizes that Tunisia's small Amazigh population "was emboldened (...) to demand greater rights for itself, arguing for official recognition in the [then] forthcoming constitution" (p. 228-9). The quick and spontaneous appearance of this activism in itself proves the artificial nature of Tunisia's imagined homogeneity, the injustice these communities have witnessed under their crushing governments, and their will to speak up.

Post-Revolutionary Tunisian Amazigh Activism:

On July 30, 2011, only six months following the fall of Tunisia’s dictatorship, the first ever Amazigh association was officially established in the capital, the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture (*L’Association Tunisienne de la Culture Amazighe*,), led by then-26-year old student Khadija Ben Saidane (Maddy-Weitzman 2012). Ben Saidane had previously announced the creation of this body on April 2011 through a press conference with an outline of its ambitious (and contentious) objectives: the recognition of the Tamazight language, guarantees of constitutional rights for the Imazighen, recognition of this civilization as an “essential component of Tunisian identity,” and preservation of customs and architecture of Amazigh villages (Al-Ayadi 2012). I had the opportunity to meet one of the founding members of the association, Anis Mokni (36), introduced to me by Tunisian academic



Figure 2: Amazigh flag, created in 1970s by French Berber Academy; adopted by CMA in 1998. The yaz (□) represents the Amazigh “free man” (Mysid 2006)

Houda Mzioudet, who in turn met him during the 2013 World Social Forum (hosted in Tunis).³ Proudly wearing a bracelet displaying the Amazigh flag (see Figure 2), Mokni recounted how self-labeled Amazigh activists like himself only knew each other before the revolution through online forums and Facebook, each of them contributing with their ideas and experiences to discover their shared Amazigh

“consciousness.” It wasn’t until February 2011 when these online actors decided to organize a physical meeting to “seek how to push the movement on the field, not only virtually.” According to Suárez Collado (2013), Tunisian Amazigh activism has been greatly empowered and facilitated

by online platforms, leading to a “renaissance of identity resistance” (p. 383) as well as quick and widespread successful calls to manifestations and action around the country.⁴This was precisely what allowed the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture to form in such a fast fashion, and with the excitement of the newly obtained post-revolutionary freedoms, Mokni and his partners thrust their movement forward and garnered more and more public attention. Yet they began facing challenges from the very beginning in their first February meeting, when they brainstormed to decide on their group’s name. According to Mokni, to avoid tensions with Tunisian society, the activists decided to insert the word ‘cultural’ in the name of their association so as to make it sound “softer:” “The word Amazigh is confusing for Tunisians. They ask us: You want our country to change religion? To change language? You want to separate us from our religion?” In the midst of these predictable reactionary responses, the association had to adapt to be able to exist and be permitted to operate in the fragile post-revolutionary context.

Anis Mokni, however, was not born in an Amazigh community nor has explicit familial evidence of his Amazigh origins, yet he refuses to pretend that Tunisia (and by extension himself) is homogeneously Arab: “It’s not logical to be Arab because of Arabic. We can speak Spanish in Mexico, but we’re not Spanish. There are more pieces that contribute to identity than only language.” For him, the supposed Arabness of Tunisia comes from a bombardment of Arabist ideology, backed by post-independence exclusionary policies taken by the government against Amazigh communities and Tunisia’s Amazigh origins. He offered me with three concrete examples of such actions, which he argued for based on existing documentation: 1) after independence and following new development models, Bourghiba decided to make new urban centers in the south, his bureaucracy instructed to force the Imazighen out of their villages and lifestyles into newly built cities, with the consequences of not only a loss of culture and identity,

but the pressure of making Tamazight speakers to learn and solely utilize Arabic to deal with Bourghiba's machinery and their new environment; 2) when Bourghiba began developing the new Tunisian state and enforcing border laws, he faced the nomadic Amazigh Touareg (who, according to Mokni, had multiple and historical transactions and movements throughout southern Tunisia) and told them that they could either stay in Tunisia and become sedentary, or leave and not be a part of the new state; and 3) during the 1970s, increasingly marginalized Tunisian Amazigh communities were starting to be strongly influenced and aroused by the rising Amazigh activism in Algeria, so Bourghiba warned them that if they wanted Amazigheity, they could go to Algeria. For Mokni, Tunisia is undeniably Amazigh, and its citizens can find it everywhere in their lives and surroundings; his activism is precisely about raising this Amazigh consciousness and incorporating it into the Tunisian identity, which he calls "vulnerable" due to its weak and artificial Arab base, centered around homogeneity and an incomplete historical memory.

Very soon after meeting Anis Mokni and learning about his provocative ideas, I unexpectedly received an email back from the Amazigh Collective in France (*Collectif des Amazighsen France*), which I had written to in my multiple attempts at finding active civil society members in the capital. They offered me the contact information of Ghaki Jalloul (only described to me in the message as a "militant Tunisian comrade"), who through a phone call at once agreed to meet me on my terms and availability. To my surprise and embarrassment, I eventually found out during our interview that he was the new president of the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture, as Khadija Ben Saidane had just recently moved to France.⁵ At 58 years old, Jalloul has been involved in Tunisian pro-Amazigh work for a long time, and, unlike Mokni, he is a Tamazight-speaker born and raised in an Amazigh community in the south of the country, described by him as one of the remaining "24 villages that still speak Tamazight."

He had been a political prisoner and labeled as a “terrorist” under the dictatorships due to his activism, his only crime being peaceful manifestations and seeking to preserve Tamazight through different methods: before the revolution, he and his peers were strictly forbidden to claim their rights as indigenous communities and use their language in official public events, yet they remained active in that context.

Ghaki Jalloul described to me how the Bourghiba/Ben Ali bureaucracies purposefully allowed the existence of only 3 local Amazigh associations in the entire country, their only permitted responsibility to organize an annual patrimony festival (which had to be in Arabic, follow governmental guidelines and last no more than 3 days). Mokni mentioned to me that the Algerian government did a similar thing by only giving official state recognition to the Kabyle region's Imazighen; this strategic act fragmented communities, weakened the identity, and reinforced the discourse that the country is not Amazigh in origin or essence by only giving this name to populations isolated from the mainstream postcolonial state. For Jalloul, his association's main objective is to constitutionalize the cultural rights of the Tunisian Amazigh in order to protect the disappearing patrimony, safeguard the language, and vindicate the identity. He describes his fight as the same as that of every other Amazigh activist in the country, the particularity of his work being that it aims at a national rather than local level. Utilizing the framework of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (which Tunisia ironically signed onto on November 28 2007), Jalloul strives for the improvement of the status of the Tunisian Imazighen.

While seeking additional ways into the Tunisian Amazigh activist networks, I spoke with Carima Jerad (55), a self-identified Amazigh by origin who works as an English teacher for tourism students in the Institute of Advanced Tourism Studies of Sidi Dhrif (*Institut des*

hautes études touristiques de Sidi Dhrif).⁶ She described herself as a “moderate” Amazigh, and has not been involved in this nascent movement due to time constraints and an ultimate disagreement with anything that would separate Tunisian society. This last view is an idea shared by many Tunisians I encountered during my time in the country, and it has been a major discursive obstacle for the Amazigh movement (this will be further elaborated in the following section). Nevertheless, Jerad expressed that she would be “very happy to see Tunisia see itself” as Amazigh, since the Imazighen are the people that actually belong to this country and they represent the real identity of Tunisia. While speaking with her and learning about her views, she kept referring to the new Amazigh association of the country, which I assumed to be the one founded by Ben Saidane, Mokni, Jalloul and their partners.

However, when Jerad eventually offered to introduce me to the “association’s president,” she directed me to Khaled Khemira, the middle-aged secretary general of the Twiza Association for Patrimony, Solidarity and Development (*Association Twiza pour le patrimoine, la solidarité et le développement*).⁷ Working separately from the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture, Twiza was created on April 2011 and gained an official status on October 31 of the same year. Like its name indicates, it seeks to work on three strategic areas: the safeguard of the material and immaterial Amazigh patrimony of Tunisia; solidarity with all Amazigh ancestors, relatives and successors; and development of the historically marginalized regions where Amazigh communities are concentrated. I asked Khemira what made his group different from that of Jalloul, and he simply stated that it was a matter of priorities: according to him, the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture has been focusing in politics and the political recognition of the Imazighen and their role in the Tunisian identity, while Twiza has aimed to work on the recovery of the Amazigh patrimony and cultural vitality (which, once achieved, can secure a place in the

political sphere afterwards). His group wants Tunisia to see itself as a “pluricultural” society and to replace the “rejection spirit” that has dominated the country since independence with the “acceptance spirit” that has characterized Amazigh culture and society throughout history. In the context of my research, Khemira strongly highlighted that this post-revolutionary movement, its actors and its ideas are not new at all, but rather just now being heard and seen thanks to the departure of the country’s repressive regimes. In the 1980s, he started to become involved in these questions and petitioned to create an Amazigh-centered association exactly like Twiza, but got immediately rejected. His group decided to change ‘Amazigh’ for ‘Berber’ in its name so as to appease the government, yet received the same negative response and saw his idea transfigured by the official bureaucracy into a “protection of the environment” association. Similarly, he worked to launch an Amazigh music festival, which he saw rejected; he changed the name to “Berber Music Festival,” and received approval only if he changed it once again to “Mountain Music Festival.” Now, Khemira and his allies have been able to operate with more freedom, yet he sees no genuine interest or support from the government in his work.

From the perspective of Khaled Khemira, it is incorrect to refer to his activism as part of a ‘minority movement,’ which is how mainstream coverage of these questions has generally called it. Indeed, there is a big language minority when it comes to Tamazight-speakers in Tunisia, and Tunisians that self-identify as Amazigh or embrace their Amazigheity represent a minority as well, but, for Khemira (similar to what Mokni argues for), the discourse should switch to see Tunisia as an Amazigh society, as a country built on Amazigh foundations. Khemira mentioned to me that it has been proven that at least 60% of Tunisians are ethnically Imazighen and that 80% of modern Tunisian culture is Amazigh in essence; with these facts in mind, to call Tunisia’s Amazigheity as a ‘minority issue’ is illogical and perpetuates

themisleading ideas of Arab/Islamic ideology. Khemira considers the shift of the dominantdiscourse to be urgent due to the reality of globalization: if Tunisia keeps holding onto the weak and artificial homogenous Arab identity created and supported by its dictatorial regimes, it will find itself lost in the face of the world, as its citizens will not have their own real particularities to refer back to. And if Tunisian society does not realize the undeniable importance of their Amazigh roots, it would unjustly allow remaining Amazigh communities to disappear, letting go of these groups' irrecoverable knowledge, unwritten history and complex patrimony.

The new awakening of Tunisian Amazigh activism after the revolution led to empowered manifestations, the celebration of Amazigh cinema at the Maghreb film festival, the first-ever hosting of the World Amazigh Congress in Tunisia (in Djerba, September 30 to October 2 2011), and a gathering of researchers atCEMAT (*Centre d'EtudesMaghrébines à Tunis*)on March 6 2012 for Amazigh language, culture, and society (Maddy-Weitzman 2012). This last event was a milestone for the movement, "the first ever Amazigh (Berber) Symposium since Tunisian independence in 1956" (Mzioudet 2012).The 2012 CEMAT symposium featured presentations from then-president of the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture Khadija Ben Saidane, Middlebury College professor Sam Liebhaber, and Walid Ben Omrane, a researcher in Amazigh culture from Djerba. I decided to reach out through Facebook to Ben Omrane, who I quickly discovered now serves as the director of the Executive Bureau ofCongrès pour la République (CPR), which is the political party of MoncefMarzouki, one of the two presidential candidates to face off in the December 28 2014 second round of national elections. To my surprise, just like all my other interviewees, Ben Omrane accepted to meet me with no hesitation, finding an hour of space in his tremendously busy schedule for me.⁸

In his late 20s, Ben Omrane’s particular political role automatically placed him in a very different position than the rest of my interviewees: although involved in nominally pro-Amazigh work before gaining his current job, I knew that his involvement in CPR would perhaps inform his perspective. However, throughout our meeting, he fortunately based his approach to this topic off his personal experiences and academic studies. A friend of Ben Saidane, Walid Ben Omrane was asked by her to be part of the 2012 CEMAT symposium due to his master’s thesis in sociolinguistics on the Amazigh languages of Tunisia in the University of Paris VIII. He told me how his studies showed him the ways aggressive Arabization programs affected Tamazight-speakers, and how fragments of Amazigh culture were nevertheless preserved by communities integrating Tunisian Tamazight into the Tunisian Arabic dialect. According to him, under the choking Tunisian dictatorships there was an absolute denial of the Imazighen and any other perceived ‘minority’ that could pose a threat to the Arab-centered status quo: he argues that people were totally “unaware of culture,” a natural effect of iron-fisted authoritarian regimes. However, although he understands and supports the basic ideas behind the Tunisia’s rising Amazigh movement, he has been “prudent” towards it because of the risk that it could become overly political, a stance shared by Khemira against the association founded by Ben Saidane. This fragmentation represents one of the many challenges to Tunisian Amazigh activism, the focus of this paper’s next section.

Responses and Challenges to Amazigh Movements in ‘Homogeneous’ Tunisia:

While researching about Khaled Khemira’s Twiza Association for Patrimony, Solidarity and Development, I ran into a new, youth-led cultural space with the same name, TWIZA, which states in its Facebook page that it chose the name after “a berber word [sic] describing a life-style

based on sharing and collective participation”(<https://www.facebook.com/twizaworkinprogress>). After reaching out to the group’s Facebook, I met one of the group’s leaders, Simona, seeking to learn more about the contextually controversial decision to choose a Tamazight word for their cultural center.⁹ She took me to its space, located in the medina and bearing a red sign reading TWIZA in Tifinagh script (ⵜⵉⴰⵣⵉⴳⵜ), and quickly admitted that the name came out of pure coincidence and ingenuity, from the interest of one of the group’s founding member in Amazigh culture and language. Acknowledging that “Amazigh culture has been lost in Tunisia,” she apologized for not being able to provide much help in my research. However, before leaving, I asked her about the sign outside of the space, and she told me that it has caused a stir among medina neighbors and passing strangers: she has received numerous complaints about it, with weary Tunisian men asking about its origins, demanding her to take the non-Arabic script down, and declaring that TWIZA is, like other Amazigh groups, working to separate Tunisia. These are precisely the common responses received by Amazigh activists operating in the country, with suspicious Tunisians afraid and uncomfortable about this no longer silenced topic.

Ghaki Jalloul recounted to me how during his work and activism, he’s received violent calls from Tunisians calling him a “separatist” (as if he is working to make the Imazighen secede from the republic), “atheist” (given his commitment to push Tamazight forward and the link between Arabic and Islam), and even “Israeli” (because of completely ludicrous theories that connect many Tunisian Imazighen’s Judaism and non-Arabic language preference to Israel). Indeed, while looking for this project’s interviewees and discussing its themes with other Tunisians, I received reactions ranging from absolute ignorance and indifference to the subject, to words of advice discouraging me to follow pointless and decontextualized research, to declarations that this could be an American-financed plot to fragment and confuse the only

succeeding Arab Spring country. As mentioned, Carima Jerad expressed to me that many of her reservations with Amazigh activism come from the fact that these discussions could split the Tunisian nation (and, because Amazigh communities are in the south of Tunisia, lead to further empowerment of Islamist groups that could use social fragmentation for their purposes). Twiza's Khaled Khemira explains these responses as misunderstandings of the movement's cultural goals and as natural replies to the political language and methods utilized by groups like the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture. Indeed, according to Anis Mokni, whenever he speaks with Tunisians about questions regarding their national identity and Amazigh consciousness, he usually receives very positive responses and agreement about Tunisia's Amazigheity; Khemira echoed this sentiment, declaring that almost everyone he's spoken with about these topics ends on his side (if he remains apolitical and open). For CPR's Walid Ben Omrane, the common "separationist fears" of many Tunisians when approached with the Amazigh question stems from the experience of Tunisia's "big sister" Algeria and the civil chaos brought by Amazigh activism in the 'Berber Spring' of the 1980s. He, too, only supports the movement culturally and in fact warned me of referring to it as such when speaking with Tunisians: "You should be careful with the words you use. I would call it an Amazigh 'expression,' not an Amazigh movement."

Beyond the misguided public response to active Amazigh actors, there is an accompanying resistance of the new and evolving Tunisian government in getting involved with the subject of Amazigh rights and cultural recognition. In 2011, Ghaki Jalloul helped to organize and execute a large protest in Tunis to demand that the Imazighen and their language be included in the new Tunisian constitution. As part of their demonstrations, the Amazigh activists remained from 9AM to 3PM in front of where the National Constituent Assembly met to peacefully confront politicians willing to discuss these topics. He remembers receiving an

implicit yet strong “unanimous negation” from the government, with only 1 of the 217 member of the Assembly coming out to have a conversation the entire day. Similarly, through the networks of an SIT Tunisia staff member, I made an attempt to contact and meet with a representative of the Tunisian Ministry of Culture and Patrimony to discuss the topic of the Tunisian Imazighen and their status. I expected a level of resistance, and even a reasonable refusal to meet due to the busy elections season we were in, yet the eventual response was worse: I learned through a text message that, on an official level, the Ministry of Culture doesn't “work on these issues because it is sensitive and the country is not ready to launch the minorities debate.” For Khaled Khemira, this almost absolute lack of support from the Tunisian government is a major obstacle in the survival of the movement, especially considering the financial limitations this position poses. Yet Walid Ben Omrane provides insight into the government's indifference: he expressed to me how it is currently more important for the Tunisian constitution and state to recognize and protect basic liberties over particular identities and ethnicities. He drew a contrast with Morocco, where the new constitution recognizes the Imazighen yet limits human freedoms, which are indeed safeguarded by the new Tunisian constitution over specific identities. On this topic, I pushed him to consider how Tunisia's origins lie in Amazigheity (which he recognized in his studies), yet the new constitution calls the republic Arab and Muslim, but he showed indifference by declaring that this is simply a reflection of the perceived reality in the “collective imaginary of the Maghreb.” Perhaps there is validity to the idea that it might be too early in the post-revolutionary context for the government to bring up the controversial and uncomfortable ‘minority questions,’ yet to this Khemira responds that, throughout his life's activism, he has been perpetually told by the Tunisian governments that “it's not the time yet” to address Amazigh questions, and he believes that it will be too late very soon.

Alongside these negative public and governmental responses, the Tunisian Amazigh cause has been further hindered by other internal challenges, mainly significant movement fragmentation and little to no financial capabilities. The political-cultural difference of the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture and the Twiza Association for Patrimony, Solidarity and Development is one example of the marked split among Tunisian Amazigh activists. Anis Mokni actually left Jalloul's association very soon after its official establishment because he sensed that the group was being co-opted by political interests of many of its members; with much frustration, he said that many self-appointed representatives of this nascent movement are terrible voices of its actual goals and ideology. As hinted, Khemira is also very critical of making his activism too political in name or nature, both because of the reactionary response this generates, and because it is simply not what this cultural movement requires at this point. According to Mokni, another aspect of activist fragmentation comes from the division between Tamazight-speaking activists (who were born in Amazigh communities and can claim to be factually 'ethnically Amazigh') and active Tunisians claiming the Amazigheity of their country and themselves: the former believe that the movement and its members must learn the language to be a part of it, even opposing or rejecting the non-Tamazight-speaking/non-ethnically-Amazigh individuals who focus on the consciousness aspect of their ideology. This split also relates to the aforementioned division between activists who want to work on the transnational level of Amazigh pride (preferring organizations like CMA) and those that want focus on their local communities and their survival: Pouessel (2012, *L'Année du Maghreb*) states that Tunisian Amazigh mobilization, despite its young age, is already fragmented because of this reason.

In terms of financial limitations, because of the general resistance of the Tunisian government and public, activism has had to come from the resources and means of those wanting change to occur: Ghaki Jalloul made a point on this unfortunate fact (especially since he is

constantly faced by paranoid Tunisians claiming he's serving ulterior motives) and how his association meets in its members' houses, which also serve as improvised office and storage spaces. Likewise, Khaled Khemira expressed that, without a doubt, the biggest challenge to his association and work has been their finances. This issue is further problematized by how, in the perspective of Anis Mokni, funds from external sources and foundations almost inevitably comewith political or ideological strings attached (he sees this as a problem in the CMA).

Addressing the Movement's Apparent Lack of Female Voices:

When meeting Ghaki Jalloul, he constantly emphasized how his association refuses Tunisia's patriarchal status quo: the decision to choose Khadija Ben Saidane as its first president was informed by these ideas, and it there has been an equal representation of the sexes in its executive bureau since its foundation. For him, the importance of women in Amazigh culture reinforces these acts: they are the preservers of culture and identity. Walid Ben Omrane, who studied these topics as part of his master's thesis, stated to me that Amazigh women are the ones that teach Tamazight to their children and are usually not allowed to marry outside of the community because of their tremendous cultural role. And yet, as I continued seeking for more voices to include in my research, I quickly noticed that I kept being referred to more men, even when I insisted that I greatly needed female actors as well. I decided to bring up this subject to Khaled Khemira, yet he disregarded it as unimportant and distracting for the movement, arguing that Tunisia's women have counted with protection and equality almost since the republic's independence. This last point might be true to a certain extent, but the fact remains that this paper's scope has been extremely limited to the male voice of this nascent movement, replicating the same patriarchal models nominally rejected by Jalloul and leaving the portrayal of this

growing movement in an uncomfortable position. If my research's subject were to be revisited and/or expanded, this immense limitation should be avoided, interrogated and addressed.

The Unclear Future of Post-Revolutionary Amazigh Activism:

As it has been shown, Amazigh activism after the revolution has exploded, the movement freed from the systematically marginalizing grip of the country's postcolonial dictatorial regimes. Contrary to Tunisia's dominant Arab-centered homogenous discourse, these activists and their ideas did exist and flourish under the Bourghiba and Ben Ali eras, yet because of these governments' repressive policies and absolute denial of Amazigheity, they had to remain under the shadows, or ultimately give in to their unescapable context. Currently, the new constitution and government of Tunisia unfortunately do not address the problems brought forward by post-revolutionary Amazigh activism, the ever-changing new democratic system of the state silently perpetuating the indifference and exclusion of its preceding dictatorships. This reality is worsened by the misplaced suspicion average Tunisians have against discussions of Amazigheity and the protection of remaining Amazigh communities. In the face of these and other internal challenges, pro-Amazigh civil society actors have embraced different strategies to rewrite the discourse of Tunisia's culture and identity, including manifestations and rallies, hosting of international Amazigh events, online awareness-raising, and an amalgamation of festivals and cultural events. It is important to note that unlike how the majority of academic and professional coverage of this topic refers to the Amazigh movement in Tunisia as a 'minority issue,' truncating the conversation with statements related to the genuinely small number of Amazigh communities in the country, the activism, ideology and objectives of the individuals involved in these questions seek to not only protect the Imazighen's language and rights, but to challenge their society's wider perception of their roots and culture. These are undoubtedly extremely hard

and ambitious tasks that can only take time, patience and calculation, but because of Tunisian politics' current obsession with its democratic transition and the ominous fragmentation of Amazigh activists, the future of this movement is significantly unclear. As a perhaps way of measuring the prospects of this activism, it will be interesting to witness the upcoming celebrations for the Amazigh New Year in Tunisia, which I learned while interviewing Khaled Khemira coincidentally fall on January 14 2015, the same day that marks the fourth year of the successful 2011 Tunisian Revolution.

Although admittedly quite limited in methods and scope, this paper can hopefully be considered as a step in filling the unjustly large academic gap in the study of Tunisian Imazighen, their historical marginalization, and this no longer deniable growing cultural/political movement. If not a dynamic analysis of the post-revolutionary activism for the 'invisible' Tunisian Amazigh, this project can at least be regarded as an imperfect documentation of the status of the Imazighen in Tunisia and the current work of pro-Amazigh actors in the country, as well as an explicit challenge to the perception of Tunisia's flawless Arab homogeneity. For future studies, I'd recommend exploring local associations working in actual Tunisian Amazigh communities; looking into pro-Amazigh actors' involvement in mainstream Tunisian politics; assessing the opinions of disengaged and politicized Tunisians towards this topic; insisting on the official stance of the ruling government towards these questions; and following up with the fragmentation of the movement and the ensuing paradoxical multiplication of Amazigh-oriented associations and groups. As a clarification, the author of this paper acknowledges the validity of the Arab/Muslim identity of Tunisia, which grew out of centuries of influence and an anti-colonialist project of self-empowerment and nation-building. Yet the irrefutable roots of the country and its original inhabitants must be remembered, respected and recognized, particularly

in the current complex setting of democratic openness and globalization: Tunisians may irreversibly lose themselves if they do not have a stable sense of self and identity to look back to.

Notes:

1. “En prélude, il est nécessaire de s’arrêter sur quelques éléments du contexte tunisien voir maghrébin des «fragmentations post-coloniales»: l’édification des Etats-nation post-coloniaux ont, à l’instar de tout nationalisme, produit une rhétorique identitaire uniciste autour de la culture arabe et de la religion islamique construite notamment en contre-réponse à la présence coloniale française (...) Comptant une très faible présence de berbérophones, la Tunisie est sous le joug d’un discours d’une homogénéité sans faille le laissant apparaître comme «le pays du Maghreb le plus homogène», relayé par la recherche en sciences sociales notamment française”(Pouessel 2012, *Frontières identitaires* p. 3)
2. “Dans les années 1970, le « problème » du bilinguisme arabe-berbère se posait encore dans les villages du Sud-tunisien, de Douiret et Chenini (Louis, 1975), contraignant les instituteurs à « dé-berbériser » les élèves. La « pression de l’arabophonie » a ensuite fait « basculer » l’importance numérique des berbérophones d’une majorité à une minorité (Souriau, 1980). Au sein de la Tunisie bourguibiste, la berbèrité, bien qu’intégrée dans l’historicité de l’identité nationale affichée, rime avec une ruralité dépassée. Elle fera tout de même figure d’appât à un tourisme en soif d’exotisme, de primitivité” (Pouessel 2012, *L’Année du Maghreb*)
3. Interviewed in café in Tunis medina Nov. 22, 2014. Meeting in English.
4. “Dans les deux cas, la Toile a joué un rôle important permettant de pallier l’absence (Tunisie) ou la faiblesse (Libye) des structures revendicatives et des espaces réels, ce qui favoriserait le débat sur ces questions, en contribuant à la renaissance d’une résistance identitaire dans ces pays” (Suárez Collado2013, p. 383)
5. Interviewed in café in Ave. Habib Bourhiba, Tunis Nov. 23, 2014. Meeting in French.
6. Interviewed in café in SidiBou Said and in Tunis medina on Nov. 20- 21, 2014. Meeting in English.
7. Interviewed in café in Tunis medina on Dec. 5, 2014. Meeting in French.

8. Interviewed in CPR headquarters in Tunis on Nov. 28, 2014. Meeting in French.

9. Interviewed in TWIZA (located in Tunis medina) on Nov. 25, 2014. Meeting in English.

Images:

Amazigh_Man, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Berber_World.png. Wikimedia Commons, 2009. Public domain. Accessed 1 Dec. 2014.

Mysid, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Berber_flag.svg. Wikimedia Commons, 2006. Public domain. Accessed 5 Dec. 2014.

Works Cited:

Abbassi, Driss. "Le Maghreb dans la construction identitaire de la Tunisie postcoloniale." *Critique internationale* 40.3 (2008): 115–137. www.cairn.info. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.

Al-Ayadi, Hassan. "Berber Bounces Back." *Correspondents.org* 28 Sept. 2012. Web. 5 Dec. 2014.

Brett, Michael, and Elizabeth Fentress. *The Berbers*. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1996. Print.

Camps, Gabriel. *Les Berbères: mémoires et identité*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2007. Print.

Congrès Mondial Amazigh. *Les Amazighs (Berbères) de Tunisie: Marginalisation, négation, occultation*. Geneva: Congrès Mondial Amazigh, 2011. Web. 25 Nov. 2014. Conseil des Droits de l'Homme des Nations Unies.

Hart, David M. "Scratch a Moroccan, Find a Berber." *Journal of North African Studies* 4.2 (1999): 23–26. Print.

Liebhaber, Sam. "South Arabia and the Berber Imaginary." *Tasbir*. N.p., 10 Mar. 2012. Web. 4 Dec. 2014.

Maddy-Weitzman, Bruce. "Arabization and Its Discontents: The Rise of the Amazigh Movement in North Africa." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3.2 (2012): 109–135. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.

Ibid. *The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. Print.

Mzioudet, Houda. "Tunisian Amazighs Push to Institutionalize Language and Culture in Tunisia." *Tunisialive* 8 Mar. 2012. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

Pouessel, Stéphanie. "Les marges renaissantes □: Amazigh, Juif, Noir. Ce que la révolution a changé dans ce «□petit pays homogène par excellence□» qu'est la Tunisie." *L'Année du Maghreb VIII* (2012): 143–160. *anneemaghreb.revues.org*. Web. 22 Nov. 2014.

Ibid. "Une culture méditerranéenne fragmentée: La revendication amazighe entre local(ité) et transnational(ité)." *Esprit critique* 13.1 (2010): 1–21. Print.

Ibid. "'Un ministre noir tunisien, yes we can □? No we don't want □!' Questionnement identitaire en Tunisie post-révolutionnaire." *Frontières identitaires et Représentations de l'altérité*, 2012. 1–7. *halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr*. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.

Suárez Collado, Ángela. "À la recherche d'une place dans le «□Printemps arabe□» □: les TIC et la contestation amazighe pendant les émeutes en Afrique du Nord." *Les réseaux sociaux sur Internet à l'heure des transitions démocratiques*. Ed. Sihem Najjar. Tunis □: Paris: IRMC □; Karthala, 2013. 379–398. Print. *Hommes et sociétés*.

Willis, Michael J. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2012. Print.