Fall 2017

Weaving Identity: Stories and Manifestations of Amazigh Carpet Weavers in the Moroccan Village of Tarmilat

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Weaving Identity: Stories and Manifestations of Amazigh Carpet Weavers in the Moroccan Village of Tarmilat

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for MOR, SIT Abroad, Fall 2017
Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without the love and support of the following people:

Firstly—my amazing academic director, Dr. Taieb Belghazi. Taieb, I cannot possibly thank you enough for the countless hours you let me spend in your office and in your inbox this semester. You let me go on and on about concepts that both confused and fascinated me, among other things, and you always had something to say. Thank you for your kindness and spirit, and for always having something to say. I will miss you.

Next—I would like to thank my advisor on this project, the great Dr. El Maarouf Moulay Driss. Every time we met to discuss this project, I left feeling so much more capable and confident in myself. Thank you, Driss for your patience and ears. I hope to work beside you again in the future. Insha’allah.

I would also like to thank the staff at the Center for Cross-Cultural Learning in Rabat, especially my mother away from home, Nawal Chaib, and my Arabic teacher Ilham Haffoudii. Nawal, you accompanied me to hospital visits, organized every activity and project I was meant to do here, and took a thousand precautions to make sure I felt comfortable and safe. I don’t know what I’m going to do without you when I get back home to the States. I will forever pray for you and your growing family, and I will never forget you. And Ilham, my hilarious Arabic teacher, thank you, too for your patience and push. You never gave up on me and always had faith that I would do my absolute best. I hope that I will continue to make you proud in learning Arabic, and that one day soon, you will see me on Al Jazeera speaking fluently in Fus’ha and whatever dialect I decide to learn. Thank you, and expect a Skype call very soon!

Of course, I couldn’t have made it here to Morocco to study without the help of my family—my parents and my wonderful step-father, my sister and two brothers, my Tia Evie and her husband, my Tio Chad, and my grandparents, especially. My grandmother, María Guadalupe Aldana Siañez, was my biggest inspiration for this project. She has taught me so much about my ancestors and the importance of remembering them. Growing up in a family of paper flower makers, painters, carpenters, activists, and humble engineers, has made me one of the most grateful people—understanding so well now, as I have gotten older, the effort that goes into taking care of a family,
especially if that means crossing borders and leaving your true home behind in order to do so. I am so lucky and so blessed.

And to the friends I made here in Morocco—you helped make this transition and exploration so much more fun. We traveled across Morocco and Spain together and had the best time. I will keep these memories so close. Thank you, I love you—you know who you are. And of course, to my comrades at home in the States—both professors and colleagues—without you, your support, and our connections, I wouldn’t be reminded everyday of what and who I am fighting for.

Finally, I would like to send my utmost gratitude, love, and respect to the Amazigh women I have been able to connect with through carpets, books, and friendship during my stay here, both in Rabat and in Tarmilat. I have learned so much from you all and I cannot wait to go home and share your stories with my students and colleagues. I stand with you and I hope this project is one way that I can prove that. Thank you.

- A.
WEAVING IDENTITY

Abstract

It is in the small villages of Morocco, scattered across the North in the Rif, to the South in the Anti-Atlas Mountains, and in between, where the majority of Morocco’s celebrated and beloved Amazigh carpets are made. Their power and popularity can be attributed to the indigenous female artists who have been crafting these physical tokens of memory, protection, and Amazigh identity, for millenniums.

In an attempt to connect the trade of carpet weaving in Morocco back to these women and their families, this research project will explore their narratives, and the social and spatial implications of their craft, a space so commonly marked by patriarchy. In what ways can we interpret, from a more modern perspective, the identity of the Amazigh through their carpets? What can the symbols, weaved carefully into these carpets, tell us about their past? Their future? To answer these questions, I will examine traditional Islamic sources, specifically Surah 9 in the Qur’an, and hadith (the sayings and teachings of Prophet Muhammad) on protection and symbols of evil in Islam, including previous scholarship on the topic of Amazigh art. Through participant observations, and formal interviews conducted in the Amazigh village of Tarmilat, and a careful study of the other perspectives mentioned, it is my aim that through this project, I will not only be able to share some of the stories of the Amazigh weavers I have met, and those of their ancestors, but also the stories and manifestations of their carpets, as they travel through their own lifespans, across village borders and beyond, communicating, performing, and teaching.

Keywords: Design and decorative arts, Cultural anthropology, Gender studies, Language studies: General, Home economics, Regional studies: Africa
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Introduction

Amazigh carpets have become a desired textile of the region for those passing through, wishing to bring home with them a small piece of what they consider to be ‘traditional Morocco.’ This idea of ‘traditional Morocco’ and other ideas surrounding ruralism, tribalism, and what it means to be indigenous, often carry preconceived notions about a country and a people that many Westerners do not understand. In an effort to challenge these perspectives, I touch on concepts of womanhood, social capital, travel, and globalization, all surrounding the art and trade of Amazigh weaving.

I address my subject population as Amazigh, and not as “Berber,” for a multitude of reasons. The confusion and scholarship around what to call the Amazigh has led me to trust in what my participants call themselves. Because many scholars have claimed the Roman word, barbaros/barbarus to have inspired the term “Berber,” I do not use it here, regardless of what the scholarship on this issue does in fact tell us.¹

Beginning with my general assumptions of how my research project would progress over time, I then include the methods I used while conducting my research. Following this, I analyze my data, collected through literary analysis, observations, and interviews. To conclude, I present my further questions for continuing this research and revelations on my own capabilities as a researcher.

¹ Though I understand there hasn’t been an exact answer of ‘yes it does,’ or ‘no, it does not,’ yet.
Assumptions

Preface

What I understood to be true before coming to Morocco was that the way we talk about other cultures that are not our own, specifically ones that have been historically damaged by the processes of colonization and imperialism, including its siblings (as I have said before), namely Capitalism, Injustice, Racism, etc., can be and has been most damaging. I made it one of my biggest responsibilities while conducting my research in Tarmilat to be conscious of my position as an American student, and to also be aware of my overall goals for this project. I did not once have a research question in mind at any stage of this project. I wanted to base my research on discovery, hoping only to learn more about the Amazigh people and what’s important to them, through whatever information my participants were willing to share with me.

Data and Narrative Collecting

The assumptions I did have before beginning the data collection stage of my project revolved around the information I thought I would get from the questions I asked my participants. For some of my questions, mainly ones that had to do with the symbolism in certain aspects of the Amazigh carpet—colors, patterns, techniques—I assumed that my participants would have detailed answers (with a story attached and all), but this was not the case. Many of my participants mutually understood the importance of using certain colors in their weaving, but did not have the answers that I expected they would—that this certain color meant this to them, and this pattern is only used for this certain carpet, etc. What my participants made clear to me, though, was that the choice to use a certain combination of these elements, whether they be
material, color, pattern, or technique, for example, could be for the sole reason that they just look beautiful together. Before beginning my research, I did not think that for some Amazigh women, weaving could be so simple.

The Legacy of Amazigh Art

I assumed also that the women I would meet and interview for my project would be just as upset as I am about the fact that the production of Amazigh art is diminishing, thanks to the new generation and modernization as a whole. Some of my participants were upset about this fact, but others saw it as a natural process and seemed to shrug the thought of it away, understanding that for many of them, their daughters were studying instead, and this was more important. Many of the female weavers I spoke to though, hoped that the generations to come would somehow revive their practices of weaving.

Time and Scheduling

How I spent my time at my research location in Tarmilat, once I had conducted every interview possible for that day, was not the way I thought I would have. What I realized once I started meeting with my participants, after spending time with my host family and also playing with the neighborhood kids, was how tired I was at the end of the day. I expected to have enough energy that once I finished with my interviews for the day, I would be able to not only listen to my recorded interviews, but also type out my detailed observations of that day. Assuming that I would have more time in my day directly coincided with the time I lost, due to conflicts with my
translator. Kaoutar² had not only been compensated to translate for me, but she had also been compensates to translate for two other students that had traveled with me to Tarmilat. I assumed our translator would divide our time equally, and approach our projects with care and respect, respect for our time and for the money that we had all agreed to give her separately. I wanted Kaoutar’s help because I understood she was a trusted member of the community, having grown up in Tarmilat her whole life, while also helping manage a local NGO there. Our time together would affect my methods, the data I would collect from my participants, and my overall experience in Tarmilat. I will go more in depth about my experience with my translator below.

² For the purposes of this study, my translator’s name has been changed.
Methods

Types of Methodology & Space

The types of methodology I chose to use for this project were formal interviews and participant observations. I wanted to be able to create a relationship with my participants, and have them be comfortable in our environment together. Conducting formal interviews was a way I knew I could achieve that level of comfort and space. Prior to the start of each interview I conducted (with each of my five participants), I communicated through my translator that I would not take up too much of their time. After completing all of my interviews, I gathered that I did not go over more than 30 minutes per interview, from the moment I pressed start on my recorder, to when I took my photographs at the end.

The majority of my interviews took place in the homes of my participants, with the exception of one, which took place at a woman’s store in Oulmes. This woman sold a range of what my translator would call, “traditional Amazigh items,” including carpets, pillowcases, sequined headpieces and belts, among other things, with the help of a local co-operative that she ran in the small town. I had made it clear to my translator that I wanted to collect in a space that was most comfortable to the women I was meeting with. This would allow for fluid conversation and a more relaxed atmosphere for them. Because one of my main focuses for this project was being able to observe the spaces in which these particular women weave—and many of them did weave in their homes—being able to interview them and conduct participant observations as a guest in their preferred spaces, was so crucial I believe, in collecting the information I was able to.
Preparation for Interviews

After finalizing the focus of my Independent Study Project, I contacted Nawal Chaib, the Program Assistant at our host institution, for advice on how I should approach gathering participants in the village. Nawal had organized all of the other excursions scheduled for our program, so I knew she would be the best person to ask for help. Our class had previously visited the village for a week-long stay during the week of October 15th till the 21st, and it was during my initial stay there that I would meet my soon-to-be translator, though in passing. When I contacted Nawal, she gave me my translator’s email address and phone number and through our correspondence, she made it clear that Kaoutar was not only willing to be my translator, but she would also help me navigate myself around the village by contacting potential participants, setting up interviews, and also accompanying me to the sites in which these interviews would take place. In the beginning stages of my project, when I was preparing for my interviews and organizing my travel plans to Tarmilat, I was thankful to Kaoutar for agreeing to help me in the ways she had. Though I was appreciative, I approached my interviews and my time in Tarmilat with much hesitation, nervous that my translator would not be able to follow through in the ways she had promised, knowing she had also promised the same services to the two other students I mentioned before.

Because of the urgency of our projects and how much time we were given to complete them, myself and the two other students who were also doing their research in Tarmilat, decided to stay in the area only from the 16th of November to the 18th of November. This meant that in the short three or so days I had in the village, Kaoutar would have to introduce me to my participants, travel with me to the locations of my interviews, translate those interviews, and
make time so that I could take photographs of the women and their carpets, including their work spaces, at a time when the women were available. Kaoutar wouldn’t only have to do all of these tasks for me, but she would also, as she promised, have to do them all for the two other students.

Structure of Interviews

Our everyday schedule comprised of us starting late (from around noon to 1PM), as we had to wait for our translator to wake up and figure out our schedules for the day. Myself and the two other students were under the impression that Kaoutar would have had our schedules figured out prior to us leaving her home to meet with our participants. On multiple occasions when the four of us (myself, Kaoutar, and the two other students) arrived at one of the participant’s houses, we found the participant to be very confused as to why we were there and after some time, we realized this was because our translator hadn’t spoken to our participant beforehand like she promised. Many of our participants at first were unwilling to talk and seemed uncomfortable by our presence and this, I’m sure affected the type of questions they were willing to answer and the information they were willing to give.

The questions I had prepared for my participants were not controversial in any way and I made sure of it. Like I’ve mentioned here already, I wanted to make sure my participants were comfortable by my presence and purpose in their home. Without much detail or variation, these certain participants answered my questions, and after reflecting on these particular instances, I decided to address my translator about her nonchalant attitude, and the minimum amount of effort she was giving to myself and the rest of the group. As time went on during our stay, I found myself addressing my translator about other issues, too. There were multiple instances
where, after traveling out to the larger town of Oulmes (where many of our interviews were to take place), our translator had disappeared and left us with friends of hers, strangers to us. We would eventually find out that she had continuously left us because she wanted to see her boyfriend, a man not welcomed in her family home. For many hours, myself and the two other (female) students, were stranded in Oulmes, unsure how to get back to the village and unsure if we were even allowed to leave. I didn’t want to upset Kaoutar by leaving because I knew that would only further affect negatively the progression of my project there. Myself and the two other girls couldn’t communicate well enough to find a way home, and so we waited for her to be finished, knowing that in the time we waited, we could’ve been doing something productive that related to our projects and the overall reason why we came to the village in the first place.

For the most part, the interviews I was able to conduct did go smoothly. After taking into account the atmosphere in the room, and gaining oral consent from my participants—both to record them and to take photographs of their pieces—I asked my participants a series of the questions I had prepared prior to the interview. The last thing I asked of my participants was if I could again, take pictures of their carpets, pillows, or any items they had to show me. Fortunately, all of my participants agreed to this request and some of them even posed with their pieces, while another let me watch them weave a carpet they were in the process of making. I couldn’t express enough to these women how thankful I was to them for allowing me to hear their stories and to take photos of their work, an art form that I so deeply admired.
Reflections on Method Choice

Benefits:

Collecting my data using interviews was helpful in many ways. Through my interviews, I was able to take photographs of these women and their art, and connect with them in a way that I wouldn’t have conducting a survey, for example. Through talking to these women about my project, they were better able to tell what my overall purpose was, both in their village and in their country. If I would’ve approached the spaces of my participants without sitting down and talking to them first, using that opportunity to only take my photographs and leave, they probably would’ve been (justifiably) upset. I was unsure before starting this project if I would be able to take photos of my participants and their work. I wanted to be able to match my photographs with their words, their collective message, and their physical expressions of that message, and I think I was able to achieve that, thanks to their consent.

Drawbacks:

The only drawbacks I faced while using interviews as one of my methods was during my correspondence with my translator, while she was helping me translate back my questions to my participants. My intention was to keep my interviews as formal as possible, hoping that only myself, my participant, and my translator would be present for each one. My interviews did not happen this way at all. Instead, they were highly disruptive, as many people of the community were invited to join in on the interviews (by my translator), proceeding to talk over my participant when her voice was the only one I truly cared about in that moment. There were multiple occasions as well when my translator would answer my questions herself before
translating them to my contributors, essentially answering for them. When I objected to this, and reminded her of her position, she proceeded in her translations. Despite the small difficulties I had working with my translator, I was grateful of her position in the community. With the help that her position brought, I was able to meet many different types of women—weavers, women with Amazigh tattoos, mothers, etc.—and being able to meet so many women during my short stay there was such a treat. I realize now that if I would’ve just been more adamant and strict about how I wanted my formal interviews to be conducted, they surely would’ve panned out in a way I would’ve preferred more.
Analysis of Data

Analysis of Interviews: Overall Themes

In this section, I will go in depth about the responses I received to a various set of questions I posed to my contributors in the village. Some important details I should make clear here are that all participants answered only the questions that they understood and were comfortable with answering. I realize now that through translation, information did get lost or mixed up, which of course affected how I received their feedback. I did not ask every contributor the same set of questions, as I’ve mentioned before, but the ones I am about to report on here, are their answers to the most common questions I did ask amongst the group.

I began my interviews by asking my contributors basic information that will not be documented neither in this section, nor in any section of this project. These questions included information like their name, their age, where they were born, and what languages they speak. For the purposes of addressing my contributors by their name during our interviews, and also getting a sense of how and where they grew up, once they shared more information about that, I decided it was important enough to collect this information. I will now consider the questions that followed this portion as the start of the interview.

The first question I asked my contributors was, “What can you tell me about your daily life or routine?” and as I had expected, there was a trend in their responses. All contributors answered that they spend most of their days taking care of their house, caring for their children, preparing lunch, and weaving.

Question two, which I’ve decided to call my catalyst question, was about whether or not my participants weaved for their homes or to sell. Depending on how my contributor answered
this question, I would include more questions later on about the trade of Amazigh carpets. Contributor 1, 4, and 5 all answered that they only weave for their house, but Contributor 4 added that she would like to sell some of her carpets, but she was unsure who she would sell them to. Contributor 2 answered that though she does weave for her house sometimes, she mainly sells most of her pieces at the local souk in Oulmes. What Contributor 3 added to this project and question was a perspective that the other women could not give, solely because Contributor 3 is a store-owner in the larger town of Oulmes. Contributor 3’s answer to this question was that, because she is the head of a weaving group there, the women under her weave in their homes to sell only at her store.

In Question 3, I asked the women how many hours a day or how many times a week do they spend weaving, and they all answered in unison. All of my contributors answered that each day, they spend around one to two hours weaving, with Contributor 1 and 4 both adding that weaving begins only after everything in the house is taken care of.

For Question 4, I asked my contributors why they weave, and why they think it’s so important to them. Both Contributor 1 and 4 responded separately that weaving is something that’s very important to them and it’s something that’s good for their house. As my translator related back to me that, because Contributor 1 and 2 “don’t have the money to buy these things, [they] prefer to do it by [themselves].” Contributor 2 answered that the reason why she weaves is because she simply likes doing it. Similar to the answers of Contributor 1 and 4, Contributor 5 answered that she does it, “just for her house.” Contributor 3 was not asked this question for the reason that she does not currently weave, neither for her store nor her home, as I learned at the beginning of our interview.
My follow up question to Question 4, was “does weaving mean anything special specifically to the Amazigh culture?” and all five participants answered similarly that weaving was the most famous thing in the Amazigh culture, with Contributor 1 adding that, “if some of the women [in] Amazigh don’t know how to weave, she is not an Amazigh woman.” It seemed that for a few of my contributors, this question seemed confusing and I regret not pushing it further. Contributor 4 did admit that, though she doesn’t know in what ways weaving is special to the Amazigh culture, she does know that it is important regardless.

Question 6 revolved around how these women feel once they finish a carpet. Though I understand how similar these responses are, I’d like to share them all individually. Contributor 1 replied that when she finishes a carpet, she feels “really rested” and now, she can add something new to her house. Contributor 2 said that she feels happy. Contributor 4 said that she feels rested and happy, and that that night after she finishes, she can sleep well. My translator explained back to me that when Contributor 4 finishes a carpet, it’s like a weight has been lifted off from her. Contributor 5 would’ve agreed I’m sure with Contributor 4’s response, explaining in her own way that when she finishes a carpet, “it’s the same feeling when you succeed or when you graduate.”

A question just as important to this project as Question 6, was Question 7. For Question 7, I asked my participants how long had they been weaving for and who taught them. All of my participants answered to the first part of this question that they started weaving from the ages of 10-14. For some of my participants, they struggled trying to think back on exactly how old they

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3 Again, this question was not asked to Contributor 3 for the same reason I gave above.
were, but all agreed that they were very young. The group also agreed that all of their mothers taught them.

Another large part of my exploration for this project was trying to figure out the cultural significance not just in weaving as an art form, but in the carpets themselves. “What are the different types of carpets that can be made?” and “Can you tell me about the symbols and colors that you use in your carpets?” were the two ways I posed this question. Contributor 1 answered that for her, it’s firstly about the color. Once Contributor 1 picks her first color, she can add a flower or a design to make it more beautiful. For Contributor 2, she answered that there are “many many different types” of carpets. If Contributor 2 feels like adding any type of flower or any other symbol, she can add it in easily. She also said that red, yellow, and green are the principle colors of weaving, which is why she likes to use them. Contributor 3, the store keeper, said that because she wants the carpets to sell in her store, she tells the women who work for her co-operative what to weave and what designs to use. When I rephrased my question to her, reiterating on the meanings of the certain symbols and colors she wanted her weavers to use, she replied by saying that a design is just a design, and that there are no meanings to them. Contributor 4 and 5 both agreed that they just make the types of carpets that they feel like making.

The next question I asked, Question 9, was “What does your family think of you weaving?” What I would collect from this question would only add to what I already knew about Amazigh traditions and history, especially when it came to weaving and what weaving means in the family sphere. Contributor 1 answered this question by saying that her family are the people who encourage her to keep weaving. Both Contributor 2 and 4 both told me separately
how proud their families are of them, that they can do something like weaving all by themselves. Similar to Contributor 2 and 4, Contributor 5 said that to her family, weaving is honorable and that because she weaves, they view her as a good person.

On the topic of weaving and the family sphere, I asked my contributors in Question 10, if they had taught their children how to weave or if they will in the future when their children are grown. Contributor 1 told me that she only has grown boys, so they don’t know how to weave. Contributor 2 answered that she doesn’t have any children. Contributor 3, the store keeper, answered that though she did teach her daughter how to weave, her daughter now only works with sewing machines. Contributor 4’s daughters were both too young to learn how to weave just yet, but she said that when they are older, she will teach them. Contributor 5 explained to me that she tried to teach her first daughter how to weave, and she learned for a short time, but then stopped. She said that because her daughters chose to continue going to school, she didn’t want to make them busy outside of their studies. The wife of her son, Contributor 5 said, didn’t go to school though, and now, “she is a really good weaver.”

For Question 11, and the last question I will report on here, I asked my participants how much money goes into making a carpet, considering different sizes and materials. Without taking into account the second part of my question, all of my contributors answered that making carpets is expensive, very expensive.

When reflecting on the information I was able to collect during my interviews, I have come to realize many discrepancies in my data that I would like to touch on here. Whether it was the way I decided to phrase my questions, or my translator’s ability to translate their answers back to me in English, it seemed that for many of my questions, I did not receive the answers I
thought I would’ve. Specifically when it came to my questions on signs of Amazigh identity in their carpets, my participants responded in a way that made the symbols so often used in their art, sound meaningless. I will go more in depth about my sources (and these discrepancies) below. I hope that somehow through my readings, and through the completion of this project, I can find a bridge between what I have found to be two sides, not just on this front but on many others.

*Analysis of Literature & Observation*

Preface

Before I began trying to find sources to both challenge and relate to the ideas of this project and the data I would collect, I sought out digital perspectives of Amazigh women first, knowing I would soon be taking photos of my participants. As I’ve mentioned already, I wanted to make sure I captured my participants, all of whom requested to remain anonymous, in the most sensitive and respectful way, a way that would not somehow encourage the stereotypes Westerners specifically have put on them, as indigenous women, as rural women, as Amazigh women, and even as third-world women. The photographs taken by Margaret Courtney-Clarke and Alan Keohane in the following collections, *Imazighen: The Vanishing Traditions of Berber Women* and *The Berbers of Morocco*, prepared me in taking the photographs I was able to take, with the consent of my participants, for this project.

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4 I use the word “third-world” in the same context as professor and postcolonial theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.”

5 I will add here again that because my participants asked to remain anonymous in this project, parts of their faces were blurred out, in an effort to conceal their identities.
Symbolism and the Politics of the Body

Though I did not have a central focus or research question for this project, choosing to simply learn what I could from my participants through the interviews I conducted, I found that there was still a large gap in the information I thought I would collect. An important topic that I was not able to explore enough through my interviews (for various reasons), was the relationship between the politics of the body and the symbols used in weaving.

Symbols that I saw so often during my time in Tarmilat, as I observed many of the carpets made by my contributors and their families, were manifestations of a spider and a bird. Author and Swiss scholar Bruno Barbatti explains in his book, *Berber Carpets of Morocco*, a book dedicated almost solely to his interpretations of Amazigh identity in their carpets, that when studying these symbols, he found there to be “two approaches [that] prove to be unsuitable” for this kind of research (p.18). The first, explains in detail how one might go about asking a weaver what these symbols mean, and what issues they might face when doing so. Barbatti illustrates exactly my experience in trying to gather this information by saying, the “interrogation of a woman weaver or knitter, as to the meaning of the symbols she applies, in practice is vain. She is surprised at such questions and perhaps a little embarrassed, and as a rule simply points out that her mother and grandmother used the same ones” (p.18). Why this might be is still unknown to me, but it is something that I’ve had to consider could be the potential gap between the information I was able to collect during my interviews, and the information I was not.

The second approach that Barbatti warns us about has to do with the names of these symbols and how they are personified in their stories, whether in the circles of weavers, or in a
lucky conversation you may have with one. These names, as Barbatti puts it, “merely facilitate communication,” and may not have any actually basis, in other words, these names might be misleading to the researcher (p.18). In my own experience, after realizing that every spider-like symbol I saw in the carpets of my participants and in the ones I saw in Rabat (where I lived for the majority of my stay in Morocco), I figured that it wasn’t a coincidence that I kept seeing this symbol over and over. This revelation finalized itself in my mind when a participant of my colleague, who was doing research on Amazigh tattoos, met with a woman who had a similar spider-like symbol on her forehead, in between her eyes. My colleague asked this participant what her tattoo meant, and the woman told her confidently that it was a spider. Later in their interview would I find my next revelation, that the spider was somehow connected to Islam.

In Surah 9, verse 40 of the Qur’an, a story is shared about the Prophet Muhammad (SAW)⁶ and his companion, Abu Bakr (RA)⁷. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and Abu Bakr (RA) were trying to run away from the Quraysh, fleeing persecution to Medina. What happens in this story is most magical. In the scripture, the verse (Qur’an, Surah At-Tawbah [9:40]) is told as follows:

“If you do not aid the Prophet--Allah has already aided him when those who disbelieved had driven him out [of Mecca] as one of two, when they were in the cave and he said to his companion [Abu Bakr], ‘Do not grieve; indeed Allah is with us.’ And Allah sent down his tranquility upon him and supported him with angels you did not see and made the word of those

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⁶ SAW, the abbreviation for ‘alayhi as’salam (English: “peace be upon him”), used when naming any of the Islamic prophets. Can be used when talking about the Prophet Muhammad.
⁷ RA, the abbreviation for radiyallahu ‘anhu (English: “may Allah be pleased with him”), used when naming any of the companions of Prophet Muhammad.
who disbelieved the lowest, while the word of Allah—this is the highest. And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise.”

Here, we see that what protected the Prophet (SAW) and his companion, was an angel that Allah had sent down while they were hiding in the cave. This is what the scripture tells us—that it was an angel—but other interpretations that I heard of this story during my time in Tarmilat, involves the spider and its web, or a dove, and sometimes even a combination of the two. Allah had asked the spider to spin a web so large and so intricate—one that could’ve taken days to complete—so that when the Quraysh came close to the cave, they would have thought it to be impossible that the Prophet (SAW) and Abu Bakr (RA) could’ve passed through the spider’s web without ruining it. Another interpretation is that along with the spider’s web, there sat a dove in front of the cave, as tranquil as ever protecting its eggs. The Prophet (SAW) and Abu Bakr (RA) would’ve scared the bird away, too if they would’ve passed through the web, or so they thought.

When my colleague asked her participant why she tattooed a spider on her forehead, the room of women around us replied that it was for protection, to protect her in the same way that the spider had protected the Prophet (SAW) and Abu Bakr (RA). As Barbatti pointed out earlier in his second “approach [that] prove[d] to be unsuitable,” that the associations that have been made with many of the symbols used in Amazigh carpets, and carpets of different peoples as well, he argues, can differ from person to person (p.18). Taking this into consideration, the spider and the dove were two symbols I saw often during the data collection stage of my project and below, are some examples of these symbols, manifested into art, including the spider tattooed on the participant of my colleague.
Left: Contributor 2 poses with a pillow she weaved. Woven into the pillow is a dove, surrounded by *khamsas* (or hands of protection), in every corner.

Below: A close friend of Contributor 1 holds up a carpet given to her as a gift by her mother. Throughout the carpet, we see different variations of the spider, and of its web.
Below: In between the eyes of one of my colleagues’ participants, lays what she considers to be a spider.

Questions that arise out of using the symbol of the spider as a marker—both as a cultural sign in Amazigh carpets and also as sign to ward off evil on the physical body—revolve around our interpretations of our own signs, the general politics of the body in circles of gender, socioeconomic differences, and indigenous circles, and the conversations that are inspired through these symbols. What does the manifestation of the spider and its use in the Amazigh culture tell us about the Amazigh women who bear it? Are these symbols codes for their movement, the movement they currently lead with the coming generations? If the spider, for example, is a symbol of protection, then what are these women who use it and wear it, protecting themselves against? Resisting against?
The Performance of Identity

For the Amazigh woman, weaving carpets is just one of the ways she can express and perform her identity. This performance specifically occurs in a space, known well by the generations of women who celebrate it. All of the weavers I spoke to in Tarmilat, made clear that how they learned how to weave was from their mothers, and how their mothers learned how to weave was from their mothers, and so on. From the moment a new Amazigh daughter learns how to weave her first carpet, she has been welcomed into a space that supports pure growth, power, and creative energy. This almost coming-of-age process, where the new weaver learns of the responsibilities of the Amazigh woman—upholding the identity of the movement and reinforcing their values, not just through weaving, but so much more—allows her to enter the next phase of womanhood.

This space where weaving manifests itself in, sees everything. In the performance of weaving, the family of this new weaver experiences her growth with her, watching as she learns new techniques, thanks to her talents, and the new skills that have just been passed down by her mother. This space will also experience her engagement and wedding, where blue carpets are made as gifts for her. This space will see her first child, and soon, will experience the coming-of-age act of the mother once more, teaching her daughter (if she so happens to bear a girl), how to weave.
Above: In the photograph above, and those that follow it, a close friend of Contributor 1 shares with pride a carpet that was gifted to her mother in 1976, when her mother became pregnant with her. The last photograph in this group is of a carpet gifted to the friend of Contributor 1, when she got married. This blue, gold, and white carpet is traditionally made for new brides.
The Lifeline of the Carpet

This performance of identity directly coincides with the metaphor that the carpet itself has its own identity, and thus its own lifeline. The carpet moves as it’s crafter does, birthing itself as an idea from the mind of the crafter, to the beginning stages of its physical form. The carpet, as I have witnessed, starts off as an idea. My first participant shared with me the process of how she creates a carpet, saying that first, “it’s about the color.” Once Contributor 1 figures out the first color she will use, she can then decide if she wants to add a flower or another design, and where. Before she can decide this, though she has to gather her materials.
Above: A friend of Contributor 1 shows what the animal wool that is used in many Amazigh carpets looks like before it is washed. In this step of the carpet’s life, the carpet does not only make contact with the spiritual power of human hands, but also that of the animal.

Once the animal wool is washed and brushed, and “the wool is dry, [the Amazigh woman],” according to journalist Geraldine Brooks, “divides it into long, strong fibers to be spun into thread for the warp, and shorter, curlier fibers for the weft” (p.40).
Right: A friend of Contributor 1 shows what the wool looks like compared, once it is washed.

Below: Contributor 1 (right) and her friend (left) help each other in brushing out the animal wool.
Right: Contributor 4 shows how she prepares the wool. Once it is thin enough (after much pulling and spinning), she winds it away for later use.
After the wool is spun thin, it is eventually time for the loom to be built and propped up. Brooks continues to share with us the story and personal weaving process of Fatima Khella, a weaver in the village of Alamghou in the High Atlas Mountains, by saying, “She begins by driving four pegs into the earth floor of her kitchen or courtyard with a rock, then lays two sticks behind them for warp beam and breast beam. Taking the warp wool, she runs it back and forth between the two beams. A rod, balanced on stoned placed either side of the warp, is laced to the lower warp threads to form a heddle. Raising the heddle raises every other warp thread, creating a space through which the weft thread can be passed by hand” (p.40). Below, is what a weaving loom will look like once it is built. Contributor 1 is seen kneeling down and standing next to her loom, picking pieces of ripped cloth out of the numerous bags sitting on her floor. These pieces of cloth will soon be added to her current carpet-in-progress.
My time in the home and studio of Contributor 1 was so special. I suddenly felt like I was apart of a secret club, one where I now understood an art form that I, just a few minutes before, hadn’t. Myself, and two friends of Contributor 1, crowded around her, watching as she worked on her carpet, her friends mainly watching me, in awe. In this space, the carpet experiences the evolution of its life, as the women who are in it, feeding it spiritually through their hands, grow, too. “...Most Berber women,” according to Brooks, “say the hours at the loom are their most pleasant: seated indoors, often in a kitchen warmed by cooking fires, and with the company of other women who drop by to lend a hand or share the latest news” (p.40). It was in this space, where us four women, and a friend of mine shared company and laughter, subconsciously celebrating our femininity through the activity we were paying such close attention to.
When Contributor 1 finishes this carpet, she will not sell it, but it will be in a similar space, some other day, that one of her Amazigh sisters will decide to sell one of hers. In making this decision, the Amazigh woman who crafted it—firstly from her mind, and from her hands and the body of her animal—will travel outside the borders of her small village, and larger town, and even country, through her carpet. The carpet will leave the female-centered bubble that it was born and raised in, in the village of its creator, inspiring female economy and social capital. For the legacy of her culture, or for the livelihood of her family, or even for her simple enjoyment, the Amazigh woman have given care and patience to this craft for 1-2 hours a day, every day since she began weaving. This commitment and sense of love, I believe, travels with the art that she puts out into the world, spreading messages, and having conversations about womanhood, about resistance, and about responsibility. I am lucky to have witnessed this process and this conversation firsthand.

Before I conclude this section, I would like to share here some of the pieces made by my contributors that I was able to photograph for this project. These women and their talents, beauty, and power, inspire me.
Contributor 2:
Contributor 3: Her store in Oulmes
Contributor 5:
Conclusions

Before coming to Morocco, I knew I wanted to do my Independent Study on the Amazigh—and of course then, I called them Berbers—but I didn’t know how, or in what context. How this project grew was unexpected, and I can’t decide if I am satisfied with its completion or not. What I know for sure, though, is that with the time I have spent talking to the Amazigh women I have, reading about their ancestors, and writing about all the things I have learned, opportunities for future study and discovery have made themselves available to me, and I couldn’t be more excited and determined to accept this and see where it goes.

A story that is so often told about the Amazigh is that they are struggling—an ancient, nomadic people—living off the land as their ancestors did, and doing it successfully, but with that, there is always somehow a lingering notion hinting towards their potential expiration date. If anything, I wanted to renounce this and prove, despite the commentaries and preconceived notions that so many Westerners have put on the Amazigh, that they are—from what I have been able to see and experience with my own eyes and heart—thriving, living their fullest lives through their family and their art. Through their art, the Amazigh are immortal; choosing to not throw away a carpet because it is dirty or worn, they instead pull it apart, shredding it to pieces only to use them in the creation of another. And this is just one way the Amazigh give constant life and value to the things they deem important.

Connecting the trade of carpet weaving here in Morocco back to some of the women I met was so important to me, and I believe I was able to express these connections well enough. I understand also, though that my findings did not reach any exact end to my own personal exploration of the Amazigh, and I don’t believe there is one. The Amazigh people, despite
keeping traditions and values so close, are an ever-evolving group of people, contrary to what many believe to be true about them. Topics and questions that I will consider further in this exploration are, as always, how can we get another person, specifically a Western person, to care about another, especially if they are halfway across the world? How do we talk about vulnerable issues, or even a vulnerable population? This next project and how I will answer these questions will be for another conversation.

I will forever be thankful to the women I met while doing my research in Tarmilat, for they made me realize so much about myself as a spiritual person, and also as a young student who will soon enter what my parents like to call “the real world.” These women inspired me to try my best at being stronger and more confident in my stance as a young woman, a young woman with goals and opinions and potential. Giving a voice to a group of people so historically marginalized is a heavy responsibility to take on, one that comes with many uncomfortable implications. I did not want to give a voice to the Amazigh women I met because they already had one, one that they developed long before I arrived at their doorstep. All I wanted to do was ask them if I could listen, only so I could take back what I learned and share it with my community.

By looking at me, one could question my efforts and motives here in this region and in a small village like Tarmilat. As a white-passing Latinx woman from the Gateway Cities of Los Angeles, I understand now more than ever, how important language and dialogue are when attempting to show solidarity and understanding to a group I might not identify with. These women accepted me with open arms, despite language barriers and all, and I made it a point to ask my translator whenever I remembered, to tell them how important this project was to me, and
how grateful I was to them for allowing me to just be around. From the position of a journalist, a writer, and a photographer, I faced many difficulties when trying to take the right photographs and when trying to explain myself in the most correct ways. It is a process that I won’t ever have to stop doing, which may be emotionally difficult at times—to be one hundred percent honest with yourself and who you are—but, it is the most important conversation I can have with myself and others. It has been a long time coming and I understand that this journey is not over. I look forward to many more little discoveries, more long conversations, more feelings of safety in a room full of strangers, and more of my own personal strides towards pluralism all together.
Bibliography


