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# Who and What is Amazigh? Self-Assertion, Erasure, and Standardization

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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Who and What is Amazigh? Self-Assertion, Erasure, and  
Standardization

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**Abstract:** This research focuses on the identity of the indigenous peoples of Morocco, or the Amazigh. While this culture has endured different iterations of colonization, self-assertion and activism in favor of preserving culture and improving conditions for Amazigh can often be viewed as controversial to the elites of Morocco. This controversy, however, does not stop Moroccans from proclaiming their Amazigh background or portraying their culture. This paper aims to describe qualitative data taken from numerous interviews on the subject of self-identification of Amazigh and different hopes and expectations for the continuation of the language and culture of Amazigh among common peoples.

Keywords: Ancient Languages, Ethnicity, Political Science

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**Introduction:**

At the start of this project, I sought to uncover what exactly made a person “Amazigh.” In the United States, identity is a concept that can be adapted and change, but Morocco has a differing perspective. After the first two weeks of interviewing Moroccans on this subject, I realized that I would have to switch my focus. One isn’t “more” Amazigh for knowing the language or “less” Amazigh for living in a big city—you are born Amazigh or you are not. Upon asking, “What makes you Amazigh?” the answer was simply, “my parents are Amazigh.” It doesn’t seem to be more complicated than that. Thus, instead of, “what makes you Amazigh?” I began asking, “How do you view the Amazigh identity in Morocco?”

It was simple to conduct informal interviews; I would mention that I was researching the Amazigh identity and often the response would be, “oh! I’m Amazigh!” Thus, I was able to interview a multitude of different participants: cab drivers, bar tenders, professors, students, salesmen, and unemployed graduates. Covering both urban and rural settings, I was able to hear many different opinions on whether or not language should be taught in schools, how they see the government involved with preservation of their culture, and relations between Arabs and Amazigh.

The Amazigh (or Imazighen, the plural for Amazigh) are said to be the indigenous peoples of Morocco either having mythical origins or immigrating from Yemen, Syria/Lebanon, or Nigeria (Maddy-Weitzman, *Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States*, 2011). Their language, until present, was mostly oral, and a written history of the Amazigh is not readily available. Few collections of history told through the Amazigh lens exist (Wyrzten, *Relocating Arab*

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Nationalism, 2011), and the Amazigh have been characterized by their colonizers for centuries.

Morocco has a long history of colonization by the Romans, Arabs, Spanish, and French. Each group had methods to rule the Amazigh, but the French's "divide and conquer" technique continues to characterize perceptions and realities for the Amazigh today. The French saw the Amazigh as "noble savages" or having origins from Europe. The Amazigh's customary court system reflected upon the French as being similar to the Gaul's constitution (Gross, 1993). In order to separate Arab and Islamic influence and pacify the Amazigh populations, the 1914 and 1930 Berber Decrees left their customary courts in place rather than Islamic law (Shinar, 2006). The French imposed divisions were not the sole division between Arab and Amazigh. The Amazigh live in relative isolation in rural areas such as the Atlas Mountains and Souss Valley. It is theorized that their isolation from colonial powers was responsible for the preservation of their culture. The same isolation threatens the Amazigh identity today.

Rural areas of Morocco, like many other nations, are disproportionately impoverished. The primary inhabitants of these rural areas are the Amazigh, and urbanization and globalization threaten the tradition of Amazigh culture. Language contact has proven to be deadly for indigenous languages, and when using UNESCO standards, the Amazigh language qualifies as an endangered language (Bouskous, 2012). Many other factors apply toward the decline of the Amazigh culture, but a large focus to preserve it has been emphasized with language. The government organization IRCAM, or Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe au Maroc, was created by King Mohammad VI in 2004, and has overseen the standardization of Amazigh languages

and implementation of Tifinagh alphabet. IRCAM is proactively working to continue the language and culture of the Amazigh people, but are their efforts strong enough to overcome globalization?

While many have claimed the advances by IRCAM are symbolic rather than realized, the effort put forth by Morocco toward preservation can be seen in the Amazigh television channel, the addition of Tifinagh letters to official signage, and the addition of Amazigh language in universities. This research will look at how the Moroccan population views the Amazigh language and culture, and how they see its survival in the future. This paper will address the questions: how do modern Moroccans view the Amazigh identity, and what expectations do Moroccans have for the Amazigh language and culture?

### **Literature Review**

Research has been carried out on the Amazigh identity in many areas of study including: anthropology, linguistics, and history. Identity is naturally intersectional; therefore background materials were selected from various academic works. My research aspires to add qualitative data to the plethora of studies on language standardization and Amazigh culture in Morocco. Many studies lack the “human element,” or the contextual and emotional motivations for individuals that influence their decisions. Needless to say, the “human element” is relevant when discussing a subject like identity. Below is a summary of different works considered as background information on this subject.

### **History**

The Amazigh have lived throughout Northern Africa in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, the Canary Islands, and Mali for centuries. Morocco has the largest proportion of Amazigh in their population, but also has a history of suppressing this

identity since the 1930's. After the "Berber Dahir" or "Berber Decree," Nationalists seized the opportunity to characterize the separation of the Amazigh and Arab peoples in the eyes of the law as a separation of national unity. The Nationalists envisioned a state with a homogenous language, religion, and dynasty: Arabic, Islam, and the Sultan/King respectively. Through the cries to "save our Islamic Berber brothers," the nation rallied to support the King and reject French colonialism (Wyrzten, *Classification Struggles and Arabo-Islamic National Identity*, 2015). The ideology of the Nationalists took a toll on the Amazigh population.

The Nationalist's vision of a united Arabic Islamic nation led to the erasure of the Amazigh culture that continues to this day. Town's and geographical landmark's names were changed (Lhoussain, 2004). Speaking an Amazigh language in public spaces became shameful. Amazigh baby names were prohibited by local authorities. Historical Amazigh figures and battles were excluded from Moroccan education curriculums (Bennis, 2009). The Amazigh culture was characterized as backwards and archaic. These repressions significantly hurt the status and perpetuation of culture for the Amazigh.

All the while, the Amazigh did not have a cultural or linguistic political agenda against Arabic or Islam. Their political claims were primarily a defensive legitimacy, which subordinated them to the Nationalist Party (Gross, 1993). The Amazigh population potentially felt a collective identity as a Moroccan all along. By reviewing Amazigh poetry collected during the French colonial era, Jonathan Wyrzten asserts that language was not a barrier between the "Berber" and Arab populations. In fact, many Atlas elites were sending their children to Arabized schools and demanding Arabic and Islamic instruction in Amazigh schools in the 1940's as a means of

economic mobility. The Amazigh found solidarity with the Arabs through their shared religion of Islam which was voiced through their poetry collected in the 1930's-40's. Language was not a barrier between the populations like the French had predicted, the Amazigh and Arabs shared a collective identity through Islam (Wyrzten, Relocating Arab Nationalism, 2011).

### **Identity**

The Amazigh identity is not a homogenous language or culture. Language and traditions are determined by “tribes” which are widespread throughout Northern Africa. Not only are there vast differences between tribes in, for example, Algeria and Mali, Morocco has a plethora of diverse tribes with linguistic and cultural varieties. Among these distinct identities of Amazigh within Morocco, there are three tribes with large populations that are most commonly cited: the Tashelhit in the South, Tamazighe in central Morocco, and Tarifit in the North. Each tribe has a dialect of the Amazigh language and different cultural practices and traditions. While these dialects have different vocabularies and pronunciations, Rachid Lhoussain posits that they are not incomprehensible between one another. If one is able to speak and understand one dialect, they should be capable of speaking with those outside of their own (Lhoussain, 2004). There are many forms of traditional art expression in the Amazigh culture such as: bead and jewelry making, carpet making, poetry and storytelling, and many more crafts which tend to be regionally distributed. The Amazigh culture has existed alongside the Arabs for many years.

The Amazigh are said to have converted to Islam peacefully many years before colonization. While religion is not guaranteed to be a pacifier between different ethnic identities, in the case of Morocco, the religion of Islam seems to have successfully

created a bond between the Amazigh and Arab. Many articles indicate that the Islamization of the Amazigh was a shallow endeavor, leaving the Amazigh population superficially Muslim (Gross, 1993). While Amazigh poetry collected from this era alludes to a different reality, this idea alongside the differing languages between Amazigh and Arab appeared as significant divisions within the population to the French. With aspirations to pacify and convert the Amazigh to Christianity, the French sought to separate and distinguish the “Berber” identity (Shinar, 2006).

Amin Maalouf writes on the topic of religion and language in comparison to personal identity in his book titled On Identity. He reflects on the subject of identity in relation to the modern age of globalization. Maalouf (2000) writes, “The ever-increasing speed of globalization undoubtedly reinforces, by way of reaction, people’s need for identity (p. 78).” His reflections can be seen by the revitalization of the Amazigh identity since the 1990s. Different identity movements across Morocco have advocated on behalf of recognition of the indigenous identity of Morocco. While some of their demands have been met, such as recognition of the language within the constitution, the identity movement hopes to correct the many forms of erasure that the Amazigh have faced (Cornwell & Atia, 2012). One of the most visible efforts is seen in the creation of IRCAM, or the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe au Maroc, in 2004.

IRCAM employs many researchers who work to standardize and transition Amazigh into a written language. They also work to create a library of transcribed literature and translations of materials in Arabic and French. Although hard work has been put forward to protect Amazigh, language contact with Arabic, French, and English within urban environments threatens the survival of the language.

## **Language**

It is difficult to dispute the Amazigh influence on Moroccan society when looking at the effect of the Amazigh language on the Moroccan spoken dialect of Arabic or Darrija. Darrija is difficult for non-Moroccan Arabic speakers to understand even though, as Rachid Lhoussain suggests, Darrija contains the most standard Arabic vocabulary in comparison to other dialects. Lhoussain states that Darrija is compromised of Arabic vocabulary with the syntax of Amazigh (Lhoussain, 2004). The spoken languages of Morocco reflect the integral role the Amazigh people have played in the history of Moroccan society. Darrija has other linguistic influences such as Latin and French, which leads many to proclaim that Darrija is not real Arabic. Thus, Darrija is not an official language in Morocco.

Nationalists pushed to make Modern Standard Arabic the exclusive language of administration, but French and Darrija have a strong influence and remain integral languages to this day. While Arabic and Tamazight have been recognized as the official languages of Morocco since 2011 and are meant to be taught in public education, many favor French and English education for economic advancement in the era of globalization. Criticism for the integration of standardized Tamazight typically revolves around Moroccan elites sending their children to French schools and leaving the average citizen at a disadvantage in the job market (Bouskous, 2012). However, without active education and promotion, Tamazight, or Amazigh languages have a grim outlook.

Ahmed Bouskous discussed the “weight” of a language, or the cultural or political significance of a language. He determined that Amazigh has cultural weight but lacks with economic and social weight. Bouskous (2012) also claims that

“urbanization is a key determinant of linguistic change (p. 100).” He performed a study on urban and rural Amazigh children on language mastery. Urban localities in which Darrija is the common language produce transitional bilingualism. This means that when children learn two languages during childhood, the children typically do not master both languages equally. This leads to losing the lesser spoken language, which in this case is Amazigh. With 62.5% of the Moroccan population concentrated in urban areas with the increase of the estimated 2.14% annual rate of change for urbanization and English increasing in influence in Morocco, IRCAM has an uphill battle to ensure the survival of Amazigh (Factbook, 2018).

### **Assumptions**

Because this study takes place outside of my country of origin, I was aware that cultural differences would occur. I had an American perception of identity which is dynamic and quantitative. This assumption was incorrect in Morocco where identity is more or less inherited by birth.

I also assumed that speaking about stereotypes of different ethnicities would be more open. While some opened up on their perceptions of Arabs or Amazigh, people would often reply that they do not carry stereotypes for others. This may also be a cultural disconnect between Morocco and America.

I was also under the impression that it might be common to think critically` on one’s identity, however, when asking others questions like, “what makes you Amazigh?” The response tended to be confusion. I could not elicit a descriptive answer like I had envisioned. The conceptualization of identity is abstract, and whether language was the barrier or cultural difference, I had predicted a certain method of answering my questions. While this expectation was not ideal for this type

of research, I was incapable of eliciting a response that satisfied my assumptions. Research derived from manipulating a question to receive a certain answer is not accurate, and my incapability to do so may have improved my project.

**Methodology:**

The goal of this research is to speak to average Moroccans on the subject of the Amazigh identity. Carried out over four weeks, I was able to interview twelve participants both Arab and Amazigh. To find a diverse group of individuals, I traveled to large urban areas like Casablanca and Rabat, small villages such as Tazenakt and Assaka, and mid-sized towns like Essaouria and Ouarzazette. The method of finding participants was typically through an informal process such as being introduced by a mutual friend or starting a conversation with a stranger. I also arranged more professional meetings for interviews with a professor and a researcher at IRCAM. Language acquisition in Morocco exceeds that in the United States, and many Moroccans are able to speak two or three languages, for example: Darrija, standard Arabic, Amazigh, French, and English. Because I have limited capability with Arabic and French, many of my interviews were preformed in English or translated to English by a friend. I did, however, perform two interviews in French and two in Arabic. Most interviews were short and conversational, with a loose structure based around these eight questions:

1. Are you Amazigh?
2. Can you speak Amazigh?
3. Can you read Tifinagh?
4. Do you believe that it is important to learn Amazigh in school?

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5. What do you think of Arabs? (Or, if not Amazigh, what do you think of Amazigh?)
6. Do you think there are problems between Arabs and Amazigh?
7. Do you think expression of the Amazigh identity hurts national unity in Morocco?
8. Do you believe the efforts to preserve Amazigh language and identity will work in the future?

There are many issues within my research that could negatively affect the results. The first issue relates to the short amount of time in which this research took place. Unfortunately, the entirety of the background research was not completed until the second week of this research period. Therefore, interviews in Essaouria and Casablanca were less focused than later interviews. The content of each interview greatly differed depending on what each participant preferred to speak about or what each participant felt more qualified to discuss. Thus, the data collected is not uniform between all participants. Also, due to the short time, I am including every participant that I was able to make a connection with. Due to language barriers, the variety of education levels is not as diverse as desired. While I interviewed a few Moroccans who did not speak English or French with the help of a translator, these individuals were related to the translator and may not have been a good subject to represent those who were not educated in French or English.

Also, with the variety of locations I was hoping to interview different identities within the Amazigh community, however, all of my participants with one exception were Talshelhit. Most of my Amazigh connections were made in Ouarzazette, thus it was predictable that more of my participants would be Tashelhit, but I did not meet anyone who classified themselves as Tarifit or Tamazigh in Rabat or Casablanca. The

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Amazigh from the North, or the Tarifit, currently have an active movement, or the Hirak al-Rif Movement. While Hirak al-Rif is not solely an identity movement, many of their claims are based on institutional discrimination (Maddy-Weitzman, A turning point? The Arab Spring and the Amazigh Movement, 2015). If I had interviewed any members of a movement or someone from the North, I might have received answers with stronger convictions. While interviewing a majority of Moroccans involved in an identity movement may not be ideal for my research either, it is important to note that my results may be more passive than the overall view of Amazigh identity in Morocco.

Finally, as a foreigner, people I met may not have been fully honest with me about their opinion. In one interview, a participant paused before he answered one of my questions to look at my friend who had introduced us and asked (in Arabic rather than English), “Should I tell her the truth?” This leads me to believe that my participants may have concealed the full truth of their beliefs. This will be further discussed in the analysis.

## **Analysis**

### **Urban/Rural Divide**

The tendency for language loss or low obtainment of Amazigh in urban settings was supported by my interviews in Casablanca. Both participants were born in Casablanca but had elder generations of their family raised in rural settings. They were never taught Amazigh as children, and therefore, will not teach their children the language. One exception to this urban/rural divide was my host mother in Rabat. She, however, was not born in Rabat but migrated at a young age. The only participants that I found who spoke Amazigh were in smaller cities and towns. Within areas in

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which Amazigh is the primary language, the Amazigh are able to speak the language. However, while speaking is concentrated in rural areas, reading and writing in Tifinagh is not common.

Every participant that was interviewed could not read Tifinagh. One participant, Jmiaa from Assuka, claimed that she had one year of formal instruction and could read a little but mostly forgot what she had learned. Another participant, Fatima from Tazenakt, claimed that she had one friend who was able to read Tifinagh from Agadir. Many claimed that it was possible to learn how to read in school, but none expressed an interest in taking a class for themselves. Reading and writing Amazigh appears to be in the single jurisdiction of those who have gone to a university and specialized in an area of study pertaining to Amazigh. The introduction of Tifinagh is relatively recent, and there may be an increase in literacy in Amazigh in younger generations. While speaking, reading, and writing the language are large aspects of the Amazigh culture, geography also plays a large role in connectedness with the identity.

In Casablanca, one interviewee, Badii, was passionate about his Amazigh identity. While he could not speak Tashelhit and could not teach his children the language, he asserted that it was important to learn Amazigh in school because of its influence on Moroccan culture. His answers vastly differed from Ali, also from Casablanca, who believed that children should not learn Amazigh in school because they wouldn't use it. One difference between Badii and Ali that could explain their differing connectedness with their identity is that Badii visited his parent's and his wife's parent's villages every summer. He returned to his geographical roots for

holidays like Eid and other special occasions. This is similar to my host mother, Fatima from Rabat, who also would go to her home village for Eid.

The Amazigh are especially characterized by the land they come from. The opening statements of many of my participants in my interviews were the differences between the Tarifit, Tashelhit, and Tazenaghte and their geographical layout. The Amazigh seem to be especially connected with their land. In Tazenakt Khalid, a carpet salesman, informed me that different crafts and patterns belong to different regions. He distinguished one carpet design from another by the region its creator was from. He claimed that some carpets were more valuable than others due to their designs intricacies and aesthetic, and that some women preferred to create the more difficult designs for a higher potential economic outcome. He stated that the designs from the High Atlas region tended to be the most desired by foreigners. I asked whether or not women from other regions learned how to make the designs from the High Atlas region for economic gains, and he assured me that they did not. He stated that each woman creates her tribe's patterns. This appears to be a loyalty to identity or region but could have other explanations. In the regions in which the crafting of Amazigh cultural artifacts still takes place, there is an apparent deeper connectedness with the identity than in urban settings.

These generalizations do not apply to the population at large. In fact, in an interview with Abdullah from Tezenakt, he claimed that organizations meet on a weekly basis in cities like Casablanca to discuss and preserve the Amazigh culture. However, my interviews have supported Bouskous's argument that urbanization leads to language loss and by extension cultural identity loss. Some would argue that the mixture and blurring of distinct lines between cultures could be beneficial for society.

Conflicts driven by ethnic differences have existed in Morocco for many years, and some believe that asserting a separate Amazigh identity could be damaging to the outlook of peace in Morocco. This belief has historically damaged the expression of Amazigh identity.

### **Perceptions of Amazigh/Arab**

The guiding ideology of the Nationalist Party worked toward the erasure of Amazigh culture. Therefore, questions in my interviews looked to address current relations between Arabs and Amazigh.

Khalid Ansar, researcher in the language planning sector at IRCAM, claims that relations between Arabs and Amazigh have improved. On the changes of this dynamic, he claims,

“There have been some changes but I wouldn’t say these changes have been radical... Moroccans still have this feeling of inferiority because they are Amazigh, or they are made to feel so. But that is something that is changing on a gradual basis and I think that is for the better because now we see the Moroccan situation with the Amazigh people. Many Arabs, for example, will say ‘my aunt, my uncle, my cousin is Amazigh in origin. So I have this Amazigh component and it’s [the Amazigh identity] ok for me.’ Which was not the situation before. Even if they don’t say it, there was a sense of discrimination, even if it isn’t always expressed.”

I found that most interviewees were reluctant to claim that any discrimination existed in Morocco, and if it did, it was not the majority of Moroccans who held these views. In one of my first interviews with Khalid Ajou from Essaouria, I asked whether or not

any stereotypes of existed for the Amazigh people. He chose not to answer my question, but to instead claim that he does not judge people for characteristics outside of their control. He made it clear that he did not know any beliefs that Arabs held for Amazigh because he did not subscribe to that type of thinking. Asking about the relations between Arabs and Amazigh would often lead to the answer of, ‘Are you speaking of racism? Because we do not have a problem with racism here.’ Many participants also expressed that racial issues were not a problem ‘here’ as opposed to other, unspecified, locations. These answers strongly reflect the ideology of post-racialism that is heavily discussed in the United States.

Post-racialism is the theory that activism has led to a positive change in ethnic and racial tensions (often in the context of African Americans in the United States), and racism has become an artifact of the past. Post-racialism is often characterized by the concept of “color-blind” and pointing to powerful minoritized figures, like Barack Obama in the United States, as evidence of racial progress. Many Post-racialism thinkers also claim that while racism may not be eradicated, it is not as big of an issue as it was in the past and only occurs in isolated geographic locations (Taylor, 2014). My interviews never addressed the theory of Post-racialism, and I am not aware of Moroccan education curricula and whether or not these philosophical theories are taught in school. Therefore, I am not aware of any Post-racialist dialogue in Morocco, however, the situation between Arabs and Amazigh strongly reflect this ideology.

Khalid Ajou could not express any racial characterizations because he did not believe that they were good for people to perpetuate. While his stance is agreeable, his concealment of a reality in which racial tensions may continue to exist leads to the halt of any further progress. In an interview with Khalid the carpet salesman, he expressed

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that racism did not exist between Amazigh and Arabs in Tazenakt. He continued to express the love for the land that the Amazigh possessed, with the addition of a comparison to the Arabs. He claimed, “Unlike the Arab girls who leave to bigger cities, most Amazigh girls stay and continue making carpets. Only 2% of Amazigh girls will leave for bigger cities.” While his comments were not an assault to the Arab people, his statement contains one of his perceptions of Arabs—that they are not connected to the land in the same way as the Amazigh. Whether or not this perception is a negative perception depends on how he views the importance of connectedness to one’s origins. His treatment of racial relations perfectly reflects Post-racialism discourse; in his first sentence he refutes the ongoing racial dynamic, but in his next he inserts a small comment that expresses a difference between the two ethnic groups. Activism in favor for protecting the Amazigh identity was popularized in the 1990s, and it cannot be concluded whether this expression of ideology is a reaction to the activism that revived Amazigh identity. While this ideology was observed regularly, not every participant shared the belief that there were no racial tensions between Arabs and Amazigh.

The Amazigh Identity Movement has been criticized for being racist. This belief stems from different alliances the movement has claimed (like with Israel or the Kurds) and their emphasis on ethnic upheaval (Bennis, 2009). This claim, not in relation toward the movement, was made on multiple occasions in my interviews with Arabs. I found it interesting to hear that, rather than Imazighen claiming that they experience racism from Arabs, Arabs claim that the Amazigh are either racist or “closed off.” In my first interview with Anes from Essaouria, I asked if there were any differences between Arabs and Amazigh. He claimed that the Amazigh were “a little racist.” When I asked him to elaborate, he said that if he wanted to marry an Amazigh

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girl, her father would never agree to it. He also mentioned a time when he wanted to join a soccer game with a group of Imazighen, and they told him they were full, only to allow Amazigh boys who arrived later to join. The term “racist” was not always used, and some claimed that the Amazigh made it difficult to join and communicate with them if you did not speak their language. Badii from Casablanca claimed that the Amazigh language was a “key to the Amazigh people.” He explained that the Amazigh were a hospitable people unless you did not speak their language. Also, Fatiha from Rabat, who is half Amazigh from her father and half Arab from her mother, claimed that the Amazigh side of her family was closed off to her Arab side. These claims hint at some bias that the Amazigh may hold, or it may point to a group solidarity forged from cultural awareness or as a result of discrimination.

One answer to the question, “Do you believe that expressing the Amazigh identity hurts national unity in Morocco?” stood out as especially passionate. Abdeel from Tazenakt exclaimed,

“How can the identity of Amazigh hurt national unity? ...Imazighen fought the Colonialist. Unfortunately, after independence Amazigh language and culture were banned in almost everything like media and school, while they imposed Arabic as the sole official language and gave it support. So if Morocco is to remain united, it is because of the patience of the Amazigh people and their waiver, in most cases, of their rights. Imazighen accept coexistence regardless of religion or ethnicity of others. History shows us that we have lived for years with Jews without any problems. All of the faiths have passed through North Africa, before Islam we were Jews and we were Christians.”

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Abdeel credits the peace and unity to the Amazigh and their willingness toward coexistence. He characterizes the Amazigh people as willing to change and adapt to the demands of those who would subjugate them. His wording and tone imply a feeling of intrinsic good possessed by the Amazigh unlike their colonizers. This pride in the Amazigh identity was shared by many of my participants.

Most of my interviewees proclaimed the importance of Amazigh identity in Moroccan society. Many found it important to explain how Darija borrowed many words from Amazigh. Most of my participants, whether introduced to me or found randomly, had pride for their heritage. People were so passionate about their cultural heritage that I found it difficult to believe that anyone felt shame associated with being Amazigh or that some hid their true identity. I only had one participant who I did not find to be expressly proud of his Amazigh heritage. This participant was Ali from Casablanca, and when I told him that I was researching the Amazigh identity, he said, “Yes I know this, I am Amazigh.” Thus, I met and interviewed him, and when I asked my first question, “Are you Amazigh?” his answer was interesting. He said, “Yes, but my mother and father are dead.” I did not understand what significance his mother and father having passed contributed to his identity. Unfortunately, his interview was one of the interviews performed in Arabic, and it was difficult to have him further explain his answer. Speculating Ali’s meaning behind disclosing his parents deaths alongside his identity, I believe that the Amazigh identity, in his life, was strongly tied to his parents. He was thirty-five years old, making his upbringing in the same period as the identity movement gaining momentum. He might have been put in a situation in which he was forced to choose a side, thus dividing the identity of his parents from his own. There is also the possibility that he simply felt that it was necessary to mention that his parents, who gave him his Amazigh identity, had passed away. None of my other

participants mentioned the well-being of their parents, making Ali's response distinct. It is difficult, however, to fully determine what he was implying with his answer. His language leads me to assume that there are others who possess a complicated relationship with their indigenous status.

While literature and professionals will claim that the Amazigh face discrimination, a common perception amongst my participants reflected that of a post-racialist society. Many claimed that racism, or discrimination between Arabs and Amazigh, was not a problem or was only a problem in certain areas like universities in Agadir and Marrakesh. Post-racialism is commonly perceived as a negative ideology because it can easily lead to a halt in further progress toward equality. As globalization and urbanization threaten the Amazigh language and culture, these beliefs may contribute to the continuation of the suppression of the Amazigh identity.

### **Continuing the Identity**

A large project to protect and distinguish the Amazigh identity has been the standardization of the language and its conversion to a written language with a new alphabet. This effort has largely been undertaken by IRCAM, and many choices made by the organization have been criticized for either being disconnected with the true desires of the Amazigh or having made little real change in Moroccan society. One of the largest criticisms is attributed to the selection of Tifinagh as the official alphabet of the standardized Amazigh language.

During the debates over which alphabet to select to represent Amazigh, the Latin and Arabic alphabets were put under serious consideration alongside Tifinagh. The Latin alphabet was already seamlessly integrated into technology and many Moroccans were already transliterating their language into Latin characters. The

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Arabic alphabet is the alphabet of Islam and carries cultural significance in Morocco. Intellectuals decided on Tifinagh to preserve the indigenous quality and African identity of Amazigh (Cornwell & Atia, 2012). Two of my participants had formally studied Tifinagh, but neither claimed to be proficient in reading or writing. Fatiha from Rabat thought that the standardization process was not being executed well. She believed that the selection of Tifinagh as the official alphabet made teaching and learning Amazigh too difficult. Her exact words were, “choosing it [Tifinagh] was a big mistake.” The alphabet alone is not the only issue effecting the perpetuation of the language.

On whether or not it is important to learn the language in school, the answers were mixed. Many Amazigh found it important to learn to make a cultural link to their ethnic heritage. Jmiaa from Assaka claimed, “In America, what language do you learn in school? You learn English all through school until high school, but I don’t. I don’t have the right to study my own language.” Others were less passionate and believed that it was only important to learn the language if the individual has the desire to make that cultural connection. Arabs were less likely to find it important to learn the language. Of the Arabs I spoke to, none said that they wanted to learn the language, and they believed learning Amazigh was important but only for Amazigh people. Finding both Amazigh and Arab individuals who were interested in learning the language was rare even though many seemed grateful that the language has been implemented into the education system. The expectation may be for their children to take the classes and learn to read, write, and speak the language in school and for the next generation to oversee the Amazigh cultural revival. This lack of interest in the current population is telling when considering the continuation of the Amazigh culture in the future.

To answer the question, “Do you believe the efforts to preserve Amazigh language and identity will make progress in the future?” Khalid Ansar from IRCAM replied,

“I wouldn’t say I’m pessimistic although there are many problems that we have been facing over the past few years. Starting from 2011 the Amazigh language was recognized as an official language along with the Arabic language but we have many problems, to tell you the truth. Even if the government was engaged into the promotion of the Amazigh language and culture in general, it seems as if the government was a bit forced by international organizations like UNESCO and ESSCO for example and by Amazigh organizations in Morocco. It’s as if they were forced to give rights to those who deserve it”

His reluctance to optimism was not shared by each participant. To some, this was a difficult question, but to others (mainly the Amazigh from rural areas) the Amazigh culture was not under real threat. The language and culture are still alive in Moroccan society after different iterations of colonialism and attempts of erasure. This may signal that the Amazigh culture will indefinitely continue so long as the rural regions remain as essentially Amazigh enclaves. To others, like Khalid and Fatiha, education of the Amazigh language is a priority. Fatiha believed that a solution to make instruction easier for students to learn the language must be found. She believed that in its current state, learning Amazigh is too difficult for the common person. For Khalid, he believes that there are many issues within education of Amazigh that must have more attention and support from the government. Unfortunately, there is no clear and simple answer to ensure the survival of the Amazigh identity.

While it was common to find Amazigh people and artifacts, this culture and language face challenges for their survival. While urbanization is the largest threat, further development of rural areas could threaten the identity if it attracts more Arabs and changes the common spoken language to Darrija over Amazigh. If education of the language can find solutions to the structural challenges it faces, Amazigh may stand a chance at the revitalization that activists hope for. Or, perhaps the language will be a casualty of the status quo, remaining strong in certain areas and dying out in others.

### **Conclusion**

The Amazigh or Imazighen are the indigenous peoples of Morocco. Like many groups of native peoples, they have faced discrimination and erasure from the settler populations on their land. Unlike many other dying indigenous cultures, the Amazigh have gained international and governmental support for the continuation of their culture and language.

The Moroccan government declared Amazigh as the second official language of Morocco in 2011, and the process of standardization of Amazigh has been overseen by IRCAM to preserve the language and culture. There are many obstacles that must be surpassed to efficiently implement the language into education, and some of these obstacles are urbanization, post-racialism tendencies within the population, and low support from the population.

Ahmed Bouscous claims that urbanization and bilingualism leads to a weaker capability in the less powerful language. This research supports Bouscous's theory because those from urban settings, with one or two exceptions, could not speak the language. Unlike in areas like Ouarzazette and Tazenakt where the language is spoken

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in public, Amazigh who live in areas that are primarily Arabized do not speak their language enough to be proficient in it. Thus, as more Amazigh move to large cities, the language persists to be threatened. Urbanization might exist as a larger threat because of prejudices between Arabs and Amazigh.

To characterize the modern ethnic tensions between Arabs and Amazigh, the ideology of post-racialism appears to be present in the attitudes of Moroccans. While most will claim that “there is no problem with racism here,” they often continue to allude to biases held by the other later in the same conversation. While some Arabs claim that the Amazigh are “racist” or “exclusive,” the Amazigh may hold beliefs that Arabs do not possess similar values of connection or loyalty. The issue with post-racialism is that the idea of progress clouds any systemic or societal issues that still need to be overcome. This obstacle does not have a simplistic solution because the image of a world without racism is appealing, and promising societal changes have occurred that are observable. This issue may contribute to the lack of support the Amazigh language has seen both by the administration and the people.

When asking about the future of the Amazigh language, many claimed that to be optimistic, additional governmental support was necessary to improve the implementation of education. After asking participants on whether or not they thought it was important to learn Amazigh in school, the current public support for implementing the language into schools appears to be low. While many believe that the addition of Amazigh language courses is beneficial to Moroccan society, none have expressed interest in taking these classes for themselves. This lack of interest likely leads to a lack of pressure put on the government for reforming education. Without pressure, most governments fail to act. With the future outlook relying on

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further adjustments to the system of education in Morocco, many find it difficult to be optimistic for the next generation of Amazigh.

The Amazigh are seen as the indigenous population of Morocco, but the importance and relevance of their culture and language are still a subject of further debate and discussion. Overall, it appears as though the identity has regained some aspects of significance but must be taken more seriously by the population at large if it is to thrive in the modern era. The future of the Amazigh identity rests in the hands of every Moroccan, and though advocacy has brought it a long way, there is still more work to be done on its behalf.

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