



AMAZIGH ARTS
IN MOROCCO



Women Shaping
Berber Identity

CYNTHIA J. BECKER

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*To my parents, Kathleen and George Becker
And to Addi and the entire Ouadderrou family*

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A Note on Transcription and Transliteration

The Ait Atta, the focus of this book, speak an Amazigh language called Tamazight, found in the Middle Atlas Mountains and the southeastern region of Morocco. The term “Tamazight” is also used more generally by scholars to refer to a group of closely related Afro-Asiatic languages spoken throughout northwestern Africa. In this book the term “Tamazight” refers both to the specific Amazigh language spoken by the Ait Atta and to Amazigh languages as a whole.

The Amazigh songs and phrases in this book are from the Tamazight language specifically spoken by the Ait Atta. Addi Ouadderrou did the transcriptions, basing his work on the system created by Salem Chaker (1984). Addi Ouadderrou and I did the translations from Tamazight to English. The following is a guide to the system used by Addi Ouadderrou.

Letter	Tamazight Example	English Translation
a	<i>aʒul</i>	hello
e	<i>amellal</i>	white
i	<i>izli</i>	song
o	<i>orey</i>	gold
u	<i>afus</i>	hand
w	<i>aʒwu</i>	wind
y	<i>kuyan</i>	everyone
b	<i>aberkan</i>	black
c	<i>icwa</i>	sharp
d	<i>tudert</i>	life
f	<i>tiflut</i>	door
g	<i>agadir</i>	wall

h	<i>uhu</i>	no
j	<i>iledjigen</i>	flowers
k	<i>akal</i>	earth
l	<i>tamlalt</i>	antelope
m	<i>asmun</i>	companion
n	<i>alni</i>	brain
q	<i>aqrab</i>	bag used by men
r	<i>irifi</i>	thirst
s	<i>tislit</i>	bride
t	<i>itran</i>	stars
x	<i>axdil</i>	stomach
â	<i>aâerrim</i>	teenager
γ	<i>aybalu</i>	water source
ḍ	<i>aḍar</i>	foot
ḥ	<i>tihli</i>	beauty
ṣ	<i>ṣber</i>	patience
ṭ	<i>imeṭṭawen</i>	tears
z	<i>Izzay</i>	heavy

Doubled letters indicate stress during pronunciation.

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Kich from the Musée de Marrakech provided me with insight into contemporary art in Morocco. Salem Chaker from the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris, Rachid Ouzennou from the Abrid Association in Erfoud, and Mustapha Berhouchi shared their knowledge about contemporary Amazigh issues.

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in Morocco and spent numerous hours transcribing and translating cassette recordings and videotapes of Ait Khabbash songs from Tamazight to English. He happily accompanied me on my numerous jaunts to remote desert villages and to nomadic weddings, expertly navigating our Renault IV on desert roads, always ready for the next adventure.

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Introduction

When I first arrived in Morocco in 1993 with the intention of learning about Berber art, I soon discovered that women rather than men were the artists in Berber societies. Berber women wove brightly colored carpets. They decorated their faces with tattoos, dyed their hands and feet with henna, and painted their faces with saffron. They also embroidered brightly colored motifs on their indigo head coverings and wore elaborate silver and amber jewelry. Women both created the artistic symbols of Berber identity and wore them on their bodies, making the decorated female body a public symbol of Berber identity.

These connections and intersections of art, gender, and identity are the subject of this book. This study considers women and their participation in the process of identity construction by examining the centrality of the textiles, jewelry, and other art forms created by women to the social relations and ethnic identity of the Berbers of Morocco, the indigenous peoples of North Africa. Unlike Arab groups in North Africa, in Berber societies women rather than men are the primary producers of art, and women's arts identify the group as Berber. This examination, in addition to revealing a rich body of art, is meant to illuminate the complexity of women's roles in the Islamic societies of Africa and to demonstrate the role of women's agency in negotiating complex social and religious issues. Its central argument is that women's control over the visual symbols of Berber ethnic identity grants them power and prestige yet also restricts them to specific roles in that society.

I use the term "ethnic identity" in this book to refer to Berber attitudes regarding group membership. Ethnic categories, according to Nira Yuval-Davis (1998: 169), are based on constructs of collectivity, centering on the notion of a "common origin and/or destiny and engaging in constant processes of struggle and negotiation." As I demonstrate here, Berber groups, who typi-

cally trace their heritage to a common male ancestor, attempt to guard female sexuality and fertility to maintain the purity of their group's bloodline and by extension its ethnic purity. Therefore, the forms, colors, and designs of Berber women's arts are public identity symbols that are clearly linked to concepts of contained and controlled female fertility. Since ethnic identity is a process that is subject to historical, political, and social dynamics, this book illustrates that, as concepts of Berber ethnicity change, women's arts have been transformed from localized ethnic symbols to symbols that represent a transnational Berber identity.

To examine the complexity of identity construction and its relationship to gender and artistic production, this study introduces the reader to the art of the Ait Khabbash, who are part of the largest Berber group in southern Morocco — the Ait Atta. The Ait Khabbash are one of the many groups (but one of the only Berber groups) living in and around the Tafilalet oasis of southern Morocco. Various Arab groups, both sedentary and nomadic, have lived here with the Ait Khabbash Berbers since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This diversity has kept the Ait Khabbash Berbers conscious of their difference from others in the area.¹

Issues of ethnic identity are of crucial importance to Berbers, who consider themselves the indigenous inhabitants of northern Africa, a land they call Tamazgha. Berbers believe themselves to be ethnically, culturally, and linguistically distinct from Arabs, who arrived in North Africa in the seventh century CE after various groups such as the Phoenicians and the Romans had previously conquered portions of Tamazgha over the centuries. In contemporary North Africa, pockets of Berber settlements can be found from Egypt to Morocco, with approximately a million in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Libya and 140,000 in Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania. The largest Berber populations can be found in the westernmost regions of North Africa. It is estimated that 25–30 percent of Algeria's 30 million people are Berber; and Morocco has the largest Berber population, which accounts for 40–60 percent of the country's 31 million people (Chaker 1998: 14). It is this large Berber population that differentiates Morocco from other African countries.

The arrival of Arabs in Morocco in the seventh century resulted in the gradual conversion of some Berbers to Islam. It was not until the thirteenth century, however, with the arrival of large numbers of Arabs from the Middle East, that the majority of Berbers accepted Islam, learned the Arabic language, and were assimilated into the Arab culture. Yet many Berber groups living in inaccessible remote areas, such as the mountainous regions of Morocco or its desert

fringes, continued to speak their own languages and retained their political autonomy from the urban-based Arab dynasties that ruled Morocco over the centuries.

Berbers in contemporary Morocco can be found in three major geographical regions, each with its own Berber language: Tarifit in the Rif Mountains of northern Morocco, Tamazight in the Middle Atlas Mountains and southeastern desert oasis, and Tashelhit in the Sus Valley, High Atlas Mountains, and Anti-Atlas Mountains.² Although speakers of Tamazight and Tashelhit can communicate with each other, communication with speakers of Tarifit is difficult.³

Rather than calling themselves “Berbers,” a pejorative term derived from the Latin word *barbarus* or “barbarian,” they refer to themselves by the name of their particular group. Berbers also use the overarching term “Imazighen.” “Amazigh” is the adjectival form of the word. While the word “Imazighen” has become more common in the last fifty years, particularly among Amazigh political activists, who define it as “the free people,” several scholars have argued that the term is indeed an ancient one.⁴

When referring to their particular group, Imazighen commonly use a two-word name: “Ait,” meaning “people of,” and the name of their male ancestor. For example, the Ait Atta, who are the largest Amazigh group in southern Morocco, trace their ancestry to a man named Atta.⁵ According to the origin story of the Ait Atta collected by the anthropologist David Hart, Atta (who lived in the Jebel Saghro region of southern Morocco in the sixteenth century) had forty sons, who were all married in one communal marriage ceremony. During the wedding a man from a rival Amazigh group filled the barrels of the sons’ flintlock guns with water. The rival group, knowing that the marriage festivities would leave Atta’s sons distracted and vulnerable, attacked later that night. The sons left their new wives, rushed to their guns, and, finding them unusable, were all killed. But Atta and his daughters-in-law survived the attack. All of his sons had impregnated their new wives before they were killed, and nine months later thirty-nine sons and one daughter were born. Atta went to live on his own, leaving the women to take care of the children. The thirty-nine sons grew up and joined their grandfather, henceforth known as Dadda Atta (meaning “Grandfather Atta”), declaring unrestricted warfare on their fathers’ attackers and driving them out of the region (Hart 1981: 11). The forty sons founded all of the subgroups of the Ait Atta, who currently live in southern Morocco between the Valley of Dades in the west to the Tafilalet oasis and Boudnib in the east.

Whether this Ait Atta origin story is historically accurate is unknown. The story's historical correctness is less important than what it reveals about Ait Atta identity construction. As Benedict Anderson (1991) has suggested, the way in which a community subjectively imagines itself should be the basis for our understanding of that community. This origin story not only demonstrates that the Ait Atta consider themselves a distinct ethnic group that shares a common bloodline but also reveals Amazigh attitudes concerning female fertility. It was women who survived the attack, giving birth to the next generation and teaching them what it means to be Ait Atta.⁶ Due to their ability to give birth, Ait Atta women ensured the group's continuation into the future.⁷

Blood is only one substance that unites people. Among Amazigh groups, women's breast milk also has the ability to forge kinship relations. When unrelated children are nourished by one woman's breast milk, the children become *awlad laban* or "milk children." This is a common occurrence among women, who typically breast-feed until a child is two to three, providing many opportunities to offer their breasts to other small children. Women may desire to create kinship bonds between themselves and others or simply to quiet a crying child, but milk bonds are taken as seriously as blood ties. Children sharing the breast milk of one woman are transformed into siblings, establishing a pact based on milk kinship known in Tamazight as *tafargant* or "prohibition" that prohibits marriage between the two children.⁸ The fact that breast milk, a woman's bodily substance, can create kinship bonds illustrates that women unite and bind the society together through their reproductive abilities.⁹

This book demonstrates that the generative power of women is metaphorically extended to the creation of the artistic symbols of ethnic identity. Amazigh women recognize that their individual status is reliant on their ability to give birth and incorporate symbols and colors referring to female fertility in their art. Women's arts not only laud female fertility but also serve as public symbols of ethnic identity.¹⁰ Identity depends on difference; and symbolic systems, such as arts, express difference and create a sense of belonging. Unlike Arab groups in Morocco, where men generally dominate artistic production, women are the artists in Amazigh societies: they create and wear the public visual symbols of Amazigh ethnic identity, such as woven textiles, tattoos, and particular styles of jewelry and dress. Women weave the wool cloaks and gowns once commonly worn by Amazigh men. Women tattoo their faces, hands, and ankles with symbols marking their ethnic identity; and women weave those same symbols into textiles and paint them on ceramics. Except for woven gar-

ments made by women, men do not wear clothing that distinguishes them as Imazighen. Amazigh men do not practice tattooing or wear silver jewelry.

This complex relationship of art, gender, and ethnic identity in Amazigh culture defies many stereotypes and generalizations about women's lives in the Muslim world that are commonly found in the literature. The most common interpretation is the notion that in Muslim societies women are associated with the inner, domestic world and men with the outer, public world; this has been used as a model for most of the Mediterranean and Islamic world, thus dividing Muslim cultures into binary categories (Antoun 1968; Bourdieu 1977; Dwyer 1978; Joseph 1980). This binary model is often used to suggest a hierarchical relationship in which women are subordinated to men. According to Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) and Guity Nashat and Judith Tucker (1999: 102–103), binary categories such as public and private do not acknowledge the complex and sometimes ambiguous gender overlapping and mixing that occur in North African societies. As Bernhard Venema and Jogien Bakker (2004: 52) state in their study of Amazigh women in the Middle Atlas of Morocco, "There is in fact no separate world between men and women and no strict hierarchical model of sex roles." In fact, women in North Africa and more specifically Amazigh women have always been active agents who influence both the domestic and the public sphere. They play an important role in their communities by providing commodities such as tents, clothing, rugs, sacks, and ceramic pots, in addition to acting as healers, marriage brokers, midwives, cooks, agriculturalists, and pastoralists (Clancy-Smith 1999: 27).

While women's artistic production is indeed crucial to the economic survival of their communities, this study shows that women's arts also serve as public symbols of Amazigh ethnic identity, although the relationship between gender and ethnicity can be a burden for women. Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens (1998: 2), for example, have argued that, when identity is based on ethnic ties determined by blood relationships, tight control over a woman's sexuality is necessary in order to define and maintain the boundaries of the group. This study reinforces their statement. Ultimately, it is through the control of female sexuality and fertility that ethnic purity can be maintained. The result is that women serve as potent symbols of ethnic identity with considerable power and prestige, but they are also restricted by specific societal constraints.

This book fills a void in the current literature concerning African and Islamic art and history. Previous books in English tend to provide descriptive