

Morocco

Chapter 2: Through the Eyes of a Young Amazigh

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For my first words in this book, I would like to take the opportunity to recall the great action initially taken by Haudenosaunee Chief Deskaheh, who was the first Indigenous leader to put the issue of Indigenous Peoples on the international intergovernmental stage; this has subsequently helped the voices of different Indigenous Peoples throughout the world to be heard and has raised awareness of their neglected conditions.

I would also like to thank the United Nations, especially the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, for giving me the opportunity to participate for the first time in the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in May 2018, and to further strengthen my identity as an Amazigh.

And finally, a last thank you belongs to the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus and Columbia University for giving me the chance to share my little story through this book and to share the life of a 27 year-old Amazigh.

Through my story, I wanted to share both my personal experiences and those of other young

Amazigh people around me who also want to provide their visions and share their conditions. Their stories have been shared with me through meetings, sometimes-animated discussions, and provided testimonies of youth still living in Morocco, who have a more in-depth vision of the Amazigh situation. That vision is, of course, a subjective point of view conditioned by different life experiences which could be different from one person to another.

Before getting to the thick of the subject, and as this book is aimed at an international audience, it is important to first introduce who the Amazigh are by explaining our origins and our history.

The “Imazighen,” “Amazighs” or “Berbers” (which means “free man” in Amazigh language) are the ethnic inhabitants of North Africa, spread over an area that spans the Atlantic Ocean to the Oasis of Siwa in Egypt, and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Benue River in Niger.

The origin of the Amazighs is a question that has been raised throughout the history of North Africa. It has generated much debate and countless theories, contributed by historical figures such as Herodotus, Ibn Khaldun, Thomas Shaw, and Guiseppe Sergi. Today, most historians and archaeologists believe we are the descendants of an Indigenous population of North Africa, a paleolithic

Ibéromaurusienne culture, which then became Mesolithic Caspian.¹

Paintings and various forms of art, including scripts written in Tifinagh (which is the Amazigh written alphabet), have been discovered in the region and they indicate that the Maghreb region was inhabited by Amazighs since at least 10,000 BC. One of the most important event of the Amazigh history is that relating to the Kingdom of Numidia. King Massinissa was the first man to form a state, which was called Numidia, by unifying several provinces bounded on the west by the kingdom of Mauretania, on the east by the territory of Carthage, on the north by the Mediterranean Sea, and to the south by the Sahara Desert.²

The Amazigh people then faced several invasions, mainly religious in nature. The Christian invasion of the Roman era and the Muslim invasion at the beginning of the Middle Ages both faced remarkable resistance from the Amazigh, most notable among them from the great Kahena, also known as Dihya in Berber.³ But it was the Muslim

¹ Serge Lancel, *L'Algérie antique - De Massinissa à saint Augustin* (Place des Victoires, February 2014).

² "Numidia," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1911), 868-869.

³ Dihya is a Berber warrior queen who fought the Umayyads during the Muslim conquest of the Maghreb

conquest that deeply transformed the Amazighs because today, Islam is the dominant religion of the “free men” that we are, and Arabic is the main language spoken. This is mainly due to intermarriage and state assimilation programs.

Today, the majority of Berbers still live in North Africa; we find them in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Egypt, but also in the Canary Islands. Abroad, large diasporas live in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Canada.

Amazigh identity is more than just language and ethnicity and includes the entire history and geography of North Africa. We are not an entirely homogenous ethnic group, and we cover a range of societies and ancestries.

In Morocco, although Arabic is mainly spoken, Amazigh is still an active language. It is estimated by the government that the number of Amazigh speakers is 45% of the population; the Amazigh associations claim that the rate of Amazigh speakers in the region is closer to 65% or 70%.⁴ This means that we may be around 20 million

in the seventh century. She died in battle in the Aurès mountains in the year 703.

⁴ International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, “Indigenous peoples in Morocco,” *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*, September 12, 2011, <https://www.iwgia.org/en/news-alerts/archive/167->

Berbers in Morocco and around 30 million throughout North Africa and the Sahel.

The Amazigh founded several organizations over the last few decades, among them the Amazigh Cultural Movement (ACM) and Tamunt N Iffus, to defend our rights. Tamunt N Iffus is a civil society movement based on the universal values of human rights. There are more than 800 Amazigh associations established throughout Morocco nowadays, and we actively participate in collaboration with government, non-governmental organizations and the United Nations to succeed in implementing our objectives.

Personally, I was able to participate in the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) for the 2018 session through the Indigenous People of Africa Co-ordinating Committee (IPACC), which links 150 Indigenous organizations representing six regions of Africa. Through this organization, I delivered several recommendations for the development and improvement of the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Africa, including the Amazigh Peoples, on behalf of the IPACC, and these are intended to be taken into account by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) following the Permanent Forum procedure of decision-making.⁵

[english/regions/regions-africa/morocco/718-indigenous-peoples-in-morocco](https://www.un.org/en/regions/regions-africa/morocco/718-indigenous-peoples-in-morocco).

⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Permanent Forum,” *United Nations*

Several successes and achievements in the field of Indigenous Peoples' rights have been obtained in North Africa, including the creation of the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) in Morocco. The mission of this Institute is to advise King Mohamed VI on different measures to save and promote the Amazigh language and culture. In collaboration with the governmental authorities and other concerned institutions, IRCAM contributes to the implementation of the policies adopted by His Majesty to allow the introduction of Amazigh into the educational system and ensure its influence in the social and cultural spheres, as well as in national, regional and local media.

This is an encouraging response to the demands of Indigenous youth during recent decades. However, like many Indigenous Peoples around the world, Amazigh youth have faced and still face many challenges, especially in an era ruled by rapid and powerful upheavals. Through my experience as Moroccan-Amazigh, I have realized that we confront many socio-cultural difficulties.

First of all, language constitutes a major hindrance for Berber integration in a country where the Arabic language in the Moroccan dialect is official and predominant in almost all public and

Department of Economic and Social Affairs,
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeople/s/unpfii-sessions-2.html>.

private institutions: schools, hospitals, banks, etc. At the same time, the different Amazigh languages have been neglected or even outright despised for a long time. There are three main Amazigh languages in Morocco:

- The Chleuh, spoken by nearly 8 million people, mainly in the High Atlas, the Anti-Atlas, the Souss and the North of the Sahara, as well as in big cities like Casablanca, Marrakech and Rabat; it is the primary dialect of the Amazigh;
- Tamazight (or Tamazight of central Morocco, formerly Beraber), spoken by 4 to 5 million people, mainly in the High and Middle Atlas; and
- Rifain, spoken by nearly 3 million people, mainly in the Rif Mountains.

Other varieties of Amazigh languages also exist in Morocco, such as the Sanhadji of the Srayr (about 40,000 speakers in the Riff Mountains), the Ghomari (about 10,000 speakers in the Rif Mountains) and the Berber of Figuig (about 30,000 speakers in the area of Figuig).⁶

⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), “UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger,” *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation*, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap/language-id-2215.html>.

This “linguistic wall” has led to the repression of young Amazighs who cannot find or create their place in society and often have to regroup within communities of other Indigenous youth in order to socialize. This same obstacle is the cause of many academic and educational gaps, because Arabic is the only language taught at school and language transition for young Amazighs—from Indigenous languages to Arabic—is by no means assured. Several times, I have witnessed discrimination and mockery towards young people, myself included, even when we are trying to speak the Moroccan dialect with an accent—and we silently suffered it. This type of infantile malice greatly contributes to the creation of an inferiority complex among young Amazighs, which strongly affects their childhoods and later their ability to evolve within Moroccan society. It ends with the continuation of a vicious cycle since, later, the lack of success in the education system leads to unemployment or involvement in crime.

Another distressing aspect of this discrimination is the outright loss of Amazigh culture due to a lack of self-confidence. In the Sahel region, the transmission of Indigenous culture to young people via Tamachekt, the Amazigh dialect of the Tuareg people, is endangered by:

- The marginalization, insecurity and oppression experienced by the Tuareg people;

- The inadequacy of education systems that reflect their way of life; and
- The lack of national media using the Tamachekt language.

These issues have been known in Moroccan society for many years, and some improvements and changes have been made in favor of the promotion of all the different Amazigh languages. Some of these actions have subsequently born fruit, including the nationalization of the Tamazight television channel.

On the professional level, Amazigh people face severe unemployment, especially in the Rif region.⁷ Many employers, especially those from private companies, prefer Arabic speakers rather than Amazigh speakers, even if language skills are not required for the job. This discrimination is largely present in major urban centers such as Casablanca or Rabat. Some Amazighs feel they ought to deny their Berber origins to find a job. That constitutes a loss of Amazigh culture among young people, as they look to further their employment opportunities.

Morocco was absent from the UN General Assembly during the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

⁷ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, “Amazigh: Protests Arise in Morocco after Death of Fish Vendor,” *Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization*, November 3, 2016, <https://unpo.org/article/19610?id=19610>.

(UNDRIP), and has not ratified the ILO (International Labor Organization) Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Unfortunately, this does not help to counter the scourge of discrimination against Indigenous Peoples in Morocco. I encourage the Moroccan government to ratify ILO Convention No. 169 and to adopt the UNDRIP for greater recognition of the Amazigh condition and the rights of the Amazigh people.

Many Amazighs are still part of the rural population of Morocco. These rural areas experience great poverty and lack of access to education or health facilities.⁸ Single-parent households, youth and farmers are the people most affected by rural poverty. The Moroccan government must do more to remedy their living situations.

More and more, the social movements of the Amazigh people are active in protecting the land and irrigation rights of rural collectivities. In many cases, the Moroccan state has encouraged the privatization of tribal grazing lands in order to promote the development of the tourism, agricultural, and mining sectors; or, they have

⁸ Yousra Amrani, “Neuf enfants sur 10 en milieu rural souffrent de pauvreté multidimensionnelle,” *Le Matin*, May 16, 2017, <https://lematin.ma/journal/2017/neuf-enfants-sur-10-en-milieu-rural-souffrent-de-pauvrete-multidimensionnelle/272058.html>.

commandeered large tracts of land in order to create nature reserves or develop infrastructure such as roads and telecommunication lines. In a number of instances, these land expropriations caused local controversy by impeding rural communities from water and firewood collection, or by alienating territory traditionally held for collective use. Activists have founded federations demanding fiscal and territorial self-determination in the northern Rif Mountains, the southeastern pre-Saharan oasis, and the southwestern Souss Valley.

It is becoming clear today that the future of the Amazigh peoples will be in the hands of the younger generations. The most difficult years have been a relentless fight by our elders, who have achieved much with great bravery. The changes and improvements regarding the rights of Amazighs, which a few years earlier appeared utopian, are now indeed real. The torch will have to be taken by us, the youth, to perpetuate what our ancestors have always wanted for our people.

Today, we face another phenomenon as omnipresent as the dominions that the Amazigh people have experienced in the past. This phenomenon is even more terrifying because it is impossible to identify clearly.

Globalization marks the hegemony of a single model in all its aspects; the most prominent model is the American one. It is a theory, a way of life made for a “merchant society, transparent, mobile,

without roots, without borders, where money is king and the state far away,” if I borrow the words of the journalist Jean Sévillia.⁹ These convergent evolutions tend towards a dominant world ideology marked by the concepts of free trade and political democracy, which are spoken of as the sources of this freedom, implying interdependence between the two.

Globalization is accompanied by the domination of an “Anglo-American language,” which is most evident on the internet. This domination could be qualified as linguistic imperialism, and the Indigenous languages are most threatened. The dominance of English is also strongly manifested through American sociocultural influence. The United States of America has a very strong influence in the economic, financial, scientific and technological fields, as well as in entertainment such as through music and film. This influence tends to spread to the Indigenous Peoples and Amazigh people especially, which leads to neglect of the potential evolution of the Amazigh languages. Eventually, this would certainly lead to a “dead language” unable to exist in the present era while all these new technologies abound. The Amazigh language is already suffering from this.

According to UNESCO, of the 6,000 languages spoken worldwide, 3,000 are currently at risk. At the dawn of the twenty-first century,

⁹ Jean Sévillia, *Le Terrorisme Intellectuel* (Paris: Perrin, 2004).

linguistic diversity is increasingly under threat.¹⁰ Through various projects, such as the promotion of multilingual fair communication, certain actors are trying to fight against this linguistic domination.

The Amazigh people, like many other Indigenous Peoples, are therefore subject to the monoculturalism of globalization. Many young people, myself included, have a hard time perpetuating our culture and traditions, language being the first to suffer. This is why many organizations are developing media projects such as movies and television shows to entertain the Amazigh population, and many historians are engaged in continuously improving the state of Amazigh literature and updating it for our new era.

In this context, I have several final recommendations to governments, Indigenous Peoples, and the United Nations:

For Governments:

1. Implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and have it translated into Indigenous languages so that Indigenous youth are aware of their rights enshrined in the Declaration.

¹⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), “UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger: Statistics,” *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation*, <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/en/statistics.html>.

2. Constitutionally recognize the Indigenous languages of the Peoples who inhabit your state, to make Indigenous youth proud of their identity and to ensure continuity of these languages.
3. Introduce the teaching of Indigenous languages in the education system from kindergarten to university, providing training on Indigenous languages to professionals.
4. Support the use of Indigenous languages in the media so that young people can connect to their traditions, and combat globalization and mono-culturalism.

For Indigenous Peoples:

1. Consolidate local Indigenous networks to exchange experiences and promote Indigenous successes and improvements.
2. Increase awareness among Indigenous women to maintain their languages at home and teach them to their children.
3. Support and encourage Indigenous youth to study their own culture and history.

For the United Nations:

1. After the proclamation of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, the UN system should take active and sustained measures to support actions for the strengthening of Indigenous languages.
2. The General Assembly should proclaim the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

3. Reserve a Global Fund to promote Indigenous languages.
4. Establish an international United Nations prize for states that have revitalized Indigenous languages in the context of “equality of languages.”
5. Establish a UNESCO prize for Indigenous organizations that have worked for the promotion of Indigenous Peoples’ languages.