

## Navigating the Berber Culture/Islamic Feminism Intersection

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*This essay is an autobiographical journey through my intellectual career. It is a reflection on how my mother tongue Berber<sup>1</sup> and my identity as a woman have impacted my career to the extent that they are interlocked in my research agenda. My Berber identity inspired my graduate theses and subsequent linguistics work, and my identity as a woman inspired my endeavors to help create the first Studies and Research on Women Center and the first graduate Gender Studies Program in my university. These two academic structures spearheaded the creation of similar centers and programs in Morocco and North Africa. The combination of my two identities is behind my introduction of the Language and Gender discipline in Morocco and North Africa and made of me a Berber feminist linguist.*

Key words: Berber; Amazigh; Linguistics; Islamic Feminism; Studies and Research on Women Center; Gender Studies Program; Language and Gender Unit

Berber<sup>2</sup> language and culture and Islamic feminism constitute a fundamental mix in my intellectual journey, as well as in my life. Thinking back, climbing the academic ladder and becoming a woman author in languages that are not my mother tongues (English, French, and Standard [written] Arabic) in a space-based patriarchy shaped the feminist linguist I have become.

I originate from Imshihn, a Berber village of the Ayt Hssan tribe (High Atlas Mountains, northwest of Marrakesh). Being the eldest of nine children (five females and four males) with an illiterate mother and a father who learnt the alphabet of Arabic and memorized the Qur'an at the Qur'anic village "msid," I am the first girl in my extended family to go to school. I accessed school because my father was in the military and we had to live in an urban area. During my childhood and adolescence, we had to change location every now and then. I did my primary school in Nador, a Berber Rifian town in the northeastern region of Morocco, my junior secondary school in Taourirt (eastern Morocco), my senior high school in Oujda (eastern Morocco), and my undergraduate studies in Rabat (the capital). After teaching English in high school in Casablanca for two years, I realized I could not go on teaching elementary English and travelled to Great Britain to do my MA and Ph.D. Along these years I picked up Moroccan Arabic from my peer group, Standard Arabic and French from school, and I chose English for my graduate studies. I gradually developed an intellectual sensitivity to language and gender identities.

My intellectual sensitivity to language was triggered by my very first lesson at school. In primary school, we were to read and memorize a text in Standard Arabic which started with the sentence "sukkan al-maghrib al-awwalun hum al-amazigh –abnaa-u Mazigh (The first inhabitants of Morocco were Amazigh—sons of Mazigh). The rest of the text, and indeed the rest of the year's syllabus and beyond was about the coming of Islam and the glory of the Moroccan ruling dynasties in entrenching the Arab-Islamic civilization in Morocco, Africa, and Iberia. It was only decades later that I learnt (outside school) that some of these dynasties, the strongest in fact, were Berber. That first sentence stuck in my mind like glue. I did not know what to do with it: it filled me with both awe and deep frustration! Coming from a Berber family that

migrated from a rural Berber village to the “urban world,” I secretly prided myself on speaking Berber at home and Moroccan Arabic outside home and was excited at the prospect of learning Standard Arabic, the language of the Qur’an and French, the language of modernity! I thought I was “privileged.” My father, in particular, took visible pride in being Berber; his own father, who would come to live with us for a month or so every year used to fill my imagination and that of my siblings with heroic stories of the Berbers in the village I come from. He used to serve as a “Moqaddam” (representative of authority in the village) at the end of the nineteenth century and also as “a’llam” (professional horseman). This last function is still a symbol of Berber chivalry and even today the fantasias are part and parcel of (national) public festivities in Morocco. For us, his grandchildren, my grandfather personified the great and courageous Berber horseman. He took immense pride in showing us his horses when we visited him in the village. He was approaching ninety years of age, but he would always insist on us taking a picture of him on the back of a horse. He would always keep a beautiful dark horse in his house to honor his youth and adulthood as a horseman, known not only in the village and the tribe, but also in the adjacent tribes. I still remember him speaking to his horse while feeding him before he himself ate. I loved those moments, and I still keep a picture of me with my grandfather on a magnificent horse. He used to call me “ut Hssan” (belonging to the Ayt Hssan tribe), and for me that was some kind of “honor.”

And now this one “dangling” sentence in the textbook about an ancestry which my childhood’s imagination registered as glorious and immense. Surely there was more to say that was not said in the history text we memorized. And Si Hassan, our teacher, who addressed us in Rifian Berber, how come he read that sentence quickly and dwelt on the rest of the text with growing enthusiasm?! I felt my first lesson at school was an unfinished story, frustratingly so. I was intrigued by the “dangling” nature of that sentence. It appeared to me as an “orphan” sentence, so brutally detached from the rest of the text and yet so strong. I tried to convince myself that at least the sentence recognized that the Berbers were the first inhabitants of Morocco, as if that would justify the silence that followed the sentence. I was confused. This first history lesson remained a “truncated” lesson that stayed with me.

But for the small girl I was, that class experience also came with a hint of shame. In retrospect, I see it as my very first painful realization that Berber was not “welcome” outside home, that Standard Arabic and French were “much better.” This feeling grew when I started to realize that to be a “good Muslim,” you needed to read and understand the Qur’an, and that to be “modern” and “sound educated” you needed to speak French; I also bitterly realized that I needed to hide my mother tongue lest I would sound “backward”.

Although the first recorded language in North Africa, Berber, and the culture it conveys, had been first used by the French colonizers (1912–1956) to divide Morocco into “Arab” and “Berber” zones, it was then marginalized during postcolonization (1960s–1990s) as a language of discord. This marginalization led to a robust Berber social movement which has gone through three phases. The first wave was born during a difficult era of Morocco’s modern history: the years of lead, which span over the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and which were characterized by the late King Hassan II’s authoritarian regime based on state violence against dissidents and democracy activists. One of the taboos in this period was the Berber issue: Berber claims were deemed divisive to nation-building and Berber was forbidden in education and the public media. This state of affairs was exacerbated by the fact that the nationalist movement and the struggle for independence were presented as more urban than rural in the formal narratives of resistance. The Berber identities of the majority of the generals involved in the two military coups that tried to topple the regime in the early 1970s only further consolidated the ban on Berber.

It was therefore in a hostile context that the first wave of the Berber movement materialized. In its inception and thereafter, the Berber movement was largely conceived as a cultural revivalist social movement. It was initially instigated by a paradoxical situation whereby a historically legitimate language and culture that promoted Islam and Arabic, resisted colonial instrumentalization/assimilation by denouncing French colonial

efforts<sup>3</sup> to divide Morocco along ethnic lines, and buttressed the struggle for independence, was not recognized in the first 1962 Moroccan constitution. This first constitution did not include any mention of Berber as a language or as part of the identity of Morocco, did not make any provisions for interactions between the millions of monolingual Berbers and the state, and did not mention individuals' rights to use their native language in the courts of law or when visiting doctors or lawyers. More than that, the newly independent state adopted Arabic-French bilingualism in the key domains of education and media in complete disregard of Berber. As a result, Berber language and culture were marginalized in postcolonial Morocco and were read as tokens of anything "traditional," "rural," "backward," as well as tokens of discord after independence. This strategy of the state had drastic economic effects on the rural areas, mainly inhabited by Berber-speaking populations. In other words, the Berber regions, mainly rural or semi-urban, remained without infrastructure and education, which fostered chronic illiteracy (especially amongst women), poverty, and unemployment. These were exacerbated by successive droughts that hit Morocco. The only option left for unemployed and sometimes employed rural youth was migration to the cities and towns. Indeed, migration was the only means of social mobility for the poor rural Berbers.

On the other hand, by promoting Standard Arabic as the sole official language, as the only antidote to the West, the first constitution officially sealed Arabization as state policy, defined Morocco as monolingual (and monocultural), and did not grant the Berber language and culture any form of protection, failing thus to reflect the millennial multicultural history and reality of the country. In sum, the inception of the Berber social movement was a reaction to marginalization and lack of gratitude. This also explains the fact that in the Berber issue, economic and social factors have always been closely linked to identity.

The Berber movement was spearheaded by a combination of academics and activists who sometimes worked in tandem and sometimes independently of each other, but who consistently focused on the study/promotion of the Berber language and culture. As far as academic research is concerned, linguists willingly engaged in promoting Berber studies using French and English. Many friends and colleagues are associated with this phase in addition to my husband, Moha Ennaji, and myself. I would like to mention Mohammed Chafik, Jilali Saib, Ahmed Boukous, Mohamed Chami, Kaddour Cadi, Elhoussaine El Moujahid, and Fatima Boukhris. The works of these, and corresponding works in literature and poetry in Arabic and French, such as those of Khair Eddine, Amarir, and Azaykou developed a distinct discourse that was primarily intended to promote Berber, one that sought to make it visible at the level of academia, and which in fact largely contributed to the emergence of the language in the public sphere. Indeed, for the first time in the modern history of Morocco, a distinct scientific discourse on Berber started to use terms like "multilingualism," "multiculturalism," "human rights," "secularization," "diversity," "modernity," and "universal values" within a political climate that was very hostile to such concepts. Most of these studies were carried out by linguists as part of their graduate theses that they defended in the US or Europe.

Academics, like myself, focused mainly on the linguistic study of Berber as a language, but also supported activists in calling for the official recognition of a distinct Berber identity. The Berber movement quickly started to gain in popularity especially among the Berber urban elite who realized that they were being marginalized just because they were Berber. The movement placed supreme value on the Berber language and considered it the repository of Berber culture and history. The state met these demands with an iron hand. Indeed, the 1970s and 1980s were particularly difficult for Berber activism. Anyone who dared speak of or write about Berber was explicitly or implicitly accused of "reactivating the Berber Decree," hence stirring social discord.

This context increased my perplexity and rendered my intellectual curiosity about Berber "existential." This has roots in my undergraduate studies. During my third year at the university, I started to search for anything written on Berber in articles and books written in Arabic, French or English. During this period, I once heard two of my classmates arguing about whether Berber was or was not a language. Of this

exchange of opinions, one sentence caught my attention and stuck in my mind: “Berber is not a language because it has neither a grammar nor a dictionary!” This statement triggered more curiosity in me. It made me choose linguistics over literature for the last two years of my university studies: I wanted to study Berber; I wanted to search for the grammar of Berber. I found the first leading thread during a linguistics course where our professor, Mohamed Abu-Talib, stated that for Noam Chomsky a language is by definition a grammatical system, that the grammar of a mother tongue is internalized in the minds of its native speakers, and that the task of a grammarian is to “hook out” this grammar. These ideas fascinated me on the spot. I became strongly attracted to Chomsky’s generative grammar and ended up becoming a generative grammarian myself. Using the Chomskyan model, I wrote my MA thesis on the Berber verb and my Ph.D thesis on the complex sentence in Berber. I finally managed to write a grammar of Berber in French in 1997 and in English in 2004. The writing of Berber grammar was a source of joy and happiness for me: Berber was indeed a language, and a great one at that!

Back in Morocco and equipped with my degrees, I started to teach at the University of Fez in the Fall of 1982. My first aim then was to introduce studies on the Berber language. I was fortunate to be married to a Berber linguist, Moha Ennaji, who was also interested in promoting linguistic studies on Berber. We both joined the first Research Group on Moroccan languages in the country, Groupe de Recherches et d’Etudes sur la Linguistique (GREL), at the university. All my presentations in this group were on Berber. Many of these presentations were later published in national, regional, and international journals. I started publishing scholarly writing in 1986, and my first book, *Studies in Berber Syntax* (Germany: Königshausen and Neumann), which was based on my Ph.D dissertation, was an attempt to uncover the syntax of Berber. This book is now recognized as the first published doctoral dissertation on Berber syntax by a native speaker of the language. I also published my first international article, “Raising in Berber” (*Studies in African Linguistics*, a refereed American journal), in the same year. In 1992, I co-authored a textbook for university students with my husband Moha Ennaji. The book, called *Introduction to Modern Linguistics*, was the first book to introduce examples in Berber. We did not know at the time that this book was to become a classic textbook not only in Morocco but in the entire region of the Middle East and North Africa. It was reedited several times and is still very popular among university students.

This intellectual curiosity was also behind my authoring the afore-mentioned *Grammaire du Berbère* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), a book I chose to write in French and publish with L’Harmattan, a prestigious French publisher. My aim in doing so was to broaden the book’s scientific reach to a wide Francophone audience. This book is the first grammar of Berber written by a native speaker and has been followed by several other grammatical studies of the language.

With the inception of the twenty-first century, the fate of the Berber language started to improve. Towards the end of the first decade, the state gradually started to loosen its grip on Berber in a context of accelerated democratization, easier access to information through globalization and the new social media, and growing Islamism. These new developments led to the second wave of the Berber movement, which may be qualified as “reformist.” The 1990s witnessed a relative and gradual “softening” of the Moroccan state with regard to the Berber issue. Signs of this softening were put to test by increasing calls for the official recognition of Berber identity and linguistic rights by the Berber movement. I went through this period with great enthusiasm. In my euphoria, I co-authored with my husband the first manual for teaching Berber in 2004. A historical moment.

This moment was followed by the third wave of the Berber movement, which witnessed the fruit of the movement through more and substantial and ground-breaking reforms that culminated in making Berber an official language of Morocco in 2011. It all started with two historic royal speeches: the June 30, 2001 one and the October 17, 2001 one. In the first speech, which coincided with the second anniversary of the new king’s enthronement, King Mohamed VI reiterated the necessity of teaching Berber in Moroccan schools, and

in the second speech, delivered symbolically in the little Berber town of Ajdir, the king announced the creation of the Royal Institute for Amazigh (Berber) Culture—Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe (IRCAM)—with the official mandate to carry out three major tasks: research on Berber, the elaboration of school manuals, and the management of issues related to Berber. In this second speech, the king stated that “the promotion of the Berber language and culture is a national responsibility.” Four years later, I was appointed by the king of Morocco as one of eight women who constituted part of the Administrative Board of IRCAM.

Before I took an early retirement leave from my Fez university in June 2005 with the view of focusing more on my research and writing, I was fascinated by the students’ graffiti on the university lavatory walls. It all started when one of my students mentioned the importance of students’ graffiti in their political debates (the Fez campus is one of the most ideologically-charged campuses in Morocco). During one of our class discussions, which happened to be on discourse analysis, the above-mentioned student asserted that the contours of the students’ public political debates (that usually took place in the open court of the faculty) were first set as graffiti on the walls of the university lavatories, especially the men’s! The student added that one could wake up one day to find the façade of the university lavatories covered with phrases and images drawing attention to an issue, expressing an idea, or refuting another one. He ended by saying that lavatory graffiti in our university was the best means to check the political “pulse” of students! Interesting, I thought, and smart! Reflecting more on the student’s statements, I realized that indeed as a language of rebellion, graffiti was a proper way for students to express themselves. What I knew then was that theoretically, graffiti was rarely intended to slander or insult, and it often brought youth and public authority together. It broke through the taboo because one would think that the lavatory has another function. It created a safe public space for a multitude of otherwise taboo releases!

The choice of the “lavatories” was intriguing; but then, aren’t lavatories a safe place to express rebellion? In my attempt to ascertain the student’s statement and clarify things for myself, I would come early to the faculty in order to visit the men’s and women’s lavatories and note down the statements. That was an amazing experience for me. For the first time in my life I came into “physical contact” with statements in Arabic claiming Berber in a public space. I came across statements like “la hayata bila aslama” (There is no life without Islamization), and right under, it a counter-graffiti stating “wa laa li aslamatin tuqsi al-amazighyyah” (And no to an Islamization that excludes the Berber language); or “al-alrabiyyah wa al-Islam huma lhal” (Arabic and Islam are the solution) and right underneath, “al-arabiyyah wa al-Islam huma lmushkil” (Arabic and Islam are the problem) with the sign that is found in the Berber flag and is most distinctive of the Berber language and culture.<sup>4</sup> For me, that was a huge step forward, considering the latent fear I used to feel when mentioning Berber in class or in open meetings. Gradually, the graffiti I noted down started to leave the lavatories and settle on the walls of the university corridors and even inside classrooms before they were debated openly in the faculty’s main courtyard, not always without tension and sometimes violence.

As time passed, I could feel the power of both the visual signs and symbols and the discourse they radiated not only amongst my students in class discussions but also amongst my colleagues. Amongst the latter, there was tension but also genuine curiosity and sometimes awe. I thought the main source of tension was not always the “Berber” issue per se but also the fact that pro-Berber graffiti and discourse would often be considered “secularist,” hence a threat to the then-rising Islamist discourses. Indeed, as the years went on, graffiti (and otherwise) statements promoting Berber started to be used by Berber and leftist activists. I started to hear conversations in the Berber language in the corridors of my university! I remembered the days when I used to hide the fact that I was Berber, when I used to feel very embarrassed whenever my father would address me in Berber in the presence of my peers. I also started to sense that what students wanted to promote was the Berber language as a reaction to the frustration of not being able to openly use one’s mother

tongue in one's homeland. In the beginning, it was not easy for me to join openly in the euphoria of using Berber with students and colleagues, but I felt an immense joy and pride when I started to do so. I felt like I was coming out of an inner prison! I enjoyed the exhilarating freedom. I started to address some of my Berber students and colleagues in Berber and this time the euphoria was real. Even colleagues who did not know Berber or who defined themselves as "Arab" would say Azull (hi!) when they met me. Today, tokens of the Berber alphabet abound everywhere: on the signal boards of the highways that link cities, on the entrances of ministries, schools and all official institutions. What a change in such a small period of time! Each time I would see the Berber script in the public sphere, I felt we were entering a new era and sure we were!

My Berber identity has been paralleled by my gender identity. As a child, I always compared myself to my brother (who came after me) and always felt that, unlike him, or maybe to a greater degree, I constantly needed to toil and compete to get anything done. I admit that I was blessed by a father who cherished education because he could not have one, and that I owe my education to my father and not to the state because schooling, especially that of girls, was not enforced and was even resisted in rural areas, but yet in an outside home, my brother had more "support" for whatever he did than me.

My sensitivity to gender issues was triggered by my first day at school. A memorable day it was. The picture of my father, my brother, and me at the entrance of Sidi Ali Tamkart school in Nador, is still vivid in my memory. I remember the little skinny girl I was at six; I remember the awe, the joy-apprehension mix, and the enthusiasm. We were two weeks late because we had to move from Meknes, another town, to Nador and I was scared at the thought of losing the opportunity. My father used to speak of school as a life-changing experience. In his military suit, my father looked huge and impressive, and my brother was like me: apprehensive and expectant. We were wearing our best clothes. My father went straight to an elderly man as he saw him approaching the school gate. The man (whom I came to call 'ami Brahim—uncle Brahim); was the school keeper and seemed to hold authority in the school. My father informed him that he wanted to register my brother (eighteen months younger than me) in *tabdiri* (preparatory year) and me in *al-ibtida-i al-annual* (the first year of the primary school) because I was older and because he thought I knew the Arabic alphabet (it was actually my father who first taught me this alphabet at home). Although visibly impressed by my father's attire, 'ami Brahim was dead set against the idea; he wanted us both in the preparatory level. He could not understand how a pupil—and a girl at that—who had never been to school would go straight to the first year. The two men talked and gesticulated for a while, and at one point, as if by magic, I saw my father put his hand to his pocket and produce a fifty-dirhams note that he put in the hand of the school keeper, whose face immediately beamed. They continued talking for a while and in the end the school keeper suggested to "put me on trial" for a couple of months and see if I could "keep up" with the class. Fifty dirhams (around five dollars) in the 1960s seemed to do the trick: it made my father happy and "triumphant" and earned me one year of schooling!

I was taken immediately to the classroom, escorted by my father and 'ami Brahim. They both spoke to the teacher: Madame Benzakour, who was saying things in French. Before leaving me, my father kneeled to look at me in the eye; he wiped my face with a handkerchief, straightened my hair and said: "I know you will make it: remember you learnt the alphabet in one month; it took me one year to learn it." His words were soothing but I was shaking with apprehension, the unknown. All I remember now is that it was important for me to "please" my father. When I entered the classroom, Madame Benzakour, a tall and elegant woman, took me by the hand and seated me at the very back of the room explaining that I was "on trial" and that the best pupils were seated at the front row with the first pupil having scored the highest grade, followed by the second and so on. I sat at the back and made every effort to follow and repeat what she was saying: je (I), tu (you), il (he), elle (she)... I immediately liked the whole exercise. She also taught us Arabic. I started to dream of the first row! I was inhabited by a passion to learn which my father instilled in me. He used to tell me: "I

want you to get what I could not have; if only I swept the floor of a school!” He had passed on to me all he knew: the alphabet that some fellow officers taught him in the army, some arithmetic, some geography, how to pray and so on. Oftentimes when he was supervising me and my siblings revising our lessons or doing our homework, he would pick up a book and pretend he was reading but I knew he wasn’t because I once saw him reading a book that was upside down! The first weeks I spent at school are still engraved in my memory. I continued to dream of the front row. One day, my father came home a proud man: Madame Benzakour had told him that I was then seated in the middle of the classroom. I was moving towards the front. They decided to let me finish the year. I still remember the loud laughter and happiness of my father. He would tell this story now and again at home or in the village. Towards the end of that year, I finally reached the front row! I was seated in the third position. Only two pupils scored better grades. A dream come true! I gained the first row and a huge amount of self-confidence. That first year had a great impact on my schooling years and beyond. Ever since then, I would associate every small “victory” in class with my father. Then every academic victory with him. This did not change, even when my father became old and incapacitated, even after his death in 2005. His trust in me helped me face the many glass ceilings that were in store. He believed in me and made me believe in myself.

Although I am now accepted, nothing was given to me or could be taken for granted. Patriarchy and glass ceilings come to mind. I started at the lower end of the social scale, and from there I learned to navigate the whole spectrum—possibly better than someone born to a more privileged position who might see only her environment. I consider it empowering that I started at almost zero.

I started to teach at the University of Fez when I was in my late twenties. Some of my postgraduate students were often my age or older. One of my first students had been a classmate at the university! I remember that during that period, someone came to the department I was teaching in looking for a “Dr. Sadiqi.” It never occurred to him that I was a woman. When I met him at the door of the classroom, he apologized and left. I learnt later on that he was looking for a potential doctoral thesis supervisor. It took some time for male doctoral students to accept me as a supervisor. Now they do, but at the beginning I had this problem that I couldn’t understand. It took me almost six years to be accepted as a fully-fledged and credible academic. I encountered another glass ceiling in the 1990s when I first broached the subject of establishing Morocco’s first ever center for studies and research on women. Although I was a well-established professor by then, those inclined towards patriarchy opposed the idea—at least initially. I submitted my application in 1996 and was accredited by my university only in 1998. The same reticence, though to a lesser extent, was shown when I sought to establish the first graduate Gender Studies in Morocco in 2000. Older male teachers in the Arabic department saw women and women’s/gender studies as an unnecessary import from the West. I had to think of arguments like “women studies would democratize higher education in Morocco” to justify my application. It helped that I described my Gender Studies courses as rooted in Muslim and Arabic scholarship, and not feminist theory. I succeeded in the harder task of motivating students to appreciate the Gender Studies program. In the first lesson, I introduced the grammarian Ibn al-Anbari’s thirteen-century book *“The Masculine and the Feminine”* where he made non-typical references to women. I wanted my students to react to that, and they did. But I tried to make them understand that though untypical, Ibn al-Anbari’s book was special at the time: his pioneering views gave voice to the feminine. That’s how I started building up the Gender Studies Program, greatly helped by the students themselves who ended up wanting to know more about Western feminist theories. Teaching in the English department helped me improve the Gender Studies Program in my university and drew curiosity from other departments such as the departments of French, history, geography and sociology. In this and the following phases of my career, linguistic “space” has been of particular significance for me as a site of rebellion against patriarchy. The moment you gain mastery of a language, you also gain access to the language of the media, the government, the mosque—and you start speaking the language of authority in spite of the glass ceilings.

To strengthen Gender Studies at my university I wrote *Women, Gender and Language* (Brill 2003), a book that came to be the first one in the field of Language and Gender not only in Morocco but also in North Africa. I also started a series of international conferences on Mediterranean Women in the same year, which crystallized in a number of edited books such as a couple of books I co-authored with my husband: *Women in the Middle East and North Africa, Agents of Change* (Routledge 2010), *Women and Violence in the Middle East* (Routledge 2013), as well as a single-authored book *Women and Knowledge in the Mediterranean* (Routledge 2013).

Being a feminist, I made a point of celebrating March 8. This day became a special day for me. I like to think that on this particular day, people all over the world celebrate the Woman. I feel happy to be a woman on March 8. Ever since I joined the University of Fez in 1982, I have taken it upon myself to organize or participate in something to commemorate the day. However, of all the March 8s I remember, the one in 2000 stands out, and for a reason. March 8, 2000, celebrations were overdramatized by the unusually turbulent and widely unfolding debates on Moroccan women's rights. For the very first time in Moroccan history, women's rights were a national issue and on a grand scale! Two camps—the conservatives and the modernists—were literally jumping at each other's throat, and the bone of contention was basically whether to adopt a conservative or a modernist reading of shari'a (Islamic law) in matters of women's rights. Even my aging illiterate mother was excited and concerned! She who never could understand the king's speeches (delivered in Standard Arabic) wanted to know his position on this one! The Moroccan feminist community I was part of, decided to organize a big march in Rabat on March 12, 2000 to commemorate the day. I travelled from Fez to Rabat early in the morning on that day; I was with my husband, and we both were very enthusiastic at the prospect of celebrating the Woman. Rabat looked very different to me on that day: thousands of people were marching and shouting various slogans promoting Moroccan women. Huge banners were carried by women and men. There was a cheerful, convivial and festive spirit in the air. Old and young men, women, families with children, writers, civil society militants and politicians, all mixing and chanting. I saw a couple of older leftist political icons and leaders among the marchers. People came from various cities. The highlight of the day was a huge banner carried by dozens of people with slogans demanding more civil rights for Moroccan women. The slogans were in Arabic and French. Pictures were taken and reunions took place on the street; people shared water and food around on the street. I felt good especially that rumours were running that we were about 500,000 marchers. My goodness! How could women's issues garner all this energy, all this interest?

Around 2pm, I saw people running on both sides of the marching crowd and passing on messages to the marchers. I quickly learned that a bigger march was taking place at the same time in Casablanca. A woman spoke of 100,000, then 200,000, then one million marchers there! I felt happy. Wow! The march is bigger there because Casablanca is a bigger city than Rabat. But I was mistaken: more people were running anxiously and suddenly a man materialized right in the middle of the road I was in, stopping the marchers. He said in a loud speaker: those are not *dyalna* (ours), those are *Islamiyyin* (Islamists), and they are very well organized!

How come? Islamists supporting women's rights?! I was confused and I wanted to know more. The word "Islamiyyin" was "scary" in those days, much more than now. I had never heard anything about another march; the only one we got information about was the Rabat one, and then there was another march, a bigger one in Casablanca, and organized on exactly the same day! Surely a lot of thinking, strategizing, and work went into it!

The rumour got bigger by the minute, and it turned out to be true: a huge march of about one million people was indeed taking place in Casablanca. Later in the evening, the TV pictures of the Casablanca march showed two huge parallel rows: a row for men and another one for women. A very impressive and breath-taking sight. I said to myself, "well, are all these people interested in women's issues?" I realized later



on that the Islamists chose that day to display their “muscle” in the public space for the first time in Morocco. But beyond politics, there was a silver lining: women’s issues were indeed well on the street! Out there in the public space of authority. Yes, but... But then if anyone can say something about women, where are the rural Berber women (and men for that matter)? Isn’t it fair that they also should organize a legitimate march? After all, they do not seem to fit in either march, both urban and, I would add, “modern” and “sophisticated”? Maybe we needed this third march that would set the other two thinking, that would set a new tone at the eve of this new century. What a great perspective for the beginning of this apparently “woman-friendly” century, I was thinking. I was secretly enjoying these questions, which seemed like great food for thought. They had a curious flavor on that particular day.

Today, more and more people are proud of Morocco’s pre-Islamic heritage, and more and more academics are interested in Berber women’s art. For me, Berber women have always been the artists in North Africa. I spent the academic year 2006-2007 at Harvard Divinity School as a Fellow in the in Women’s Studies in Religion Program (WSRP). During my December 2006 fieldwork trip to Morocco, I visited Hadda, a paternal aunt who had lived all her life in Imshihn, my Berber village. Every trip to this village brings up sweet childhood memories. Hadda is one of my father’s twelve half-sisters (my own grandmother, Najma [star], died shortly after the birth of my father, and none of my step-grandmothers had a son). As a child, I used to think of my grandmother a lot because my father often talked about her, although he had never known her, and used to take me with him on his annual visits to her tomb. He also used to talk about Hadda, his favorite sister. Ever since, Hadda became some sort of icon for me: a strong, outspoken, and hard-working woman. She was very clever with her hands: she would make *djellabas* (men’s outdoor garments) for my father, who she called “azizi” (my dear one). She was also the “carpet-weaver” of the family. Hadda’s carpet-weaving was a subject that everyone would talk about in the household. I learnt about the whole process early in life: the selection of wool, the bargaining in the *souq* (local market), the dying of the wool, the colors of the year, what loom to use, where? But also, the visit to Sidi Abdelhaq, the village saint, to ask for *baraka* (blessing), the prayers before my aunt started weaving, the meditation (she would stop talking for a while), the songs, the prayers and celebration after she had finished a carpet, the visitors. These are unforgettable “flashes” in my memory. I so much liked Hadda that I used to think that I took after her physically and in personality. She too, has always been proud, of me and she would constantly talk about me and how well I did in school to the people of the village. When I visited her as an adult, she would always make a point of killing a hen and making a chicken couscous. As a sign of welcome, she would “ululate” to announce my visit. She also did this when I got married and when I gave birth to my sons. She wanted the neighbors to know that something good was happening. Because my mother is only fifteen years older than me, I have always considered her as an older sister, and I have always been attracted to stronger women like Hadda, my aunt. I later on discovered some resemblance to my aunt’s character in my mother-in-law, also called Hadda.

My aunt was in her late eighties when I visited her in December 2006. Of all the beautiful things she used to make, only carpet-weaving remained. As my research was on Berber women’s knowledge (skills) I planned to interview her about her carpet-weaving. The interview was part of the fieldwork that subsequently led to the writing of a book.

My aunt was very relaxed on that December 21st, 2006. It was a very cold day, and a fire was burning in one of the corners of the room where we were sitting. The room was part of my grandfather’s house where she had come to live after the death of her husband and the migration of her sons to Marrakesh. She lived by herself, but her sons and other sisters would pay her frequent visits. Although old and half-blind, she knew her ways about the house. The house was full of carpets. She took immense pride in those carpets.

We were having mint tea when I explained my project as simply as I could. I told my aunt that I was planning to write a book on the importance of what Berber women like herself produced, such as carpet-

weaving. I also explained that carpet-weaving was important because it was meaningful for the weaver; it was a way of expressing oneself, and I wanted to listen to her talk about her weaving and the beautiful rugs she produced. She listened to me with great interest. She liked the fact that I was interested in her carpet-weaving and she also liked the fact that I was recording her. I guessed she felt important. I told her that when my book was published, people would know about her and her wonderful skill. She laughed heartily; she liked the idea. I was very happy myself. I was sure she had no idea what the US was and what book-writing meant, but she knew it was something important for me and this made her happy. The farthest she traveled was a couple of times to Casablanca (some 250 miles away from the village), and she was completely illiterate.

At the end of my recordings, which took almost two hours, and as a token of gratitude, I offered to buy a small rug of hers and told her that I was going to give it to an American female friend who was director of the program I was in. Hadda looked at me and said: "What is this place you are writing your book in?" I said: "It is a place called Carriage House." I also translated it into Berber as "tigmimi" (house). Hadda then said to me: "So it is a house you are writing this book in?" I said: "Yes. It is a house." She took my hand and said: "Good. Open the box on your left and take the small rug on top of the pile of clothes; it is the one I finished last month. She added "Tell your friend that your aunt is giving the rug to the house." I said "Why?" and then Hadda said: "Because it will stay there; the house will take care of it much better than the woman. I don't want any money for this rug; I want the house to take care of it and I know it will. We all die but houses remain. Look at our house: my poor father did not leave a son; your father was the only brother we had and he died; but the house is still here. See in that corner, there's your grandfather's slippers; it is as if he is just sleeping." I directed my gaze to the corner: there was indeed a pair of shabby-looking and dusty *tisila* (Moroccan shoes). I never knew that they belonged to my grandfather. I was very moved but I did not show any emotion. I took the rug and promised my aunts to take it to "The House."

When about to take my leave, my aunt said to me: "I like the rug I gave you because it is a picture of something I have never seen; it is my inner "rug" (she accompanied this with the gesture of patting her chest). I said, "you seem to like the rug, and it breaks my heart to take it from you." She said, "I give it to you. I have other pieces like that. I cherish them and I don't give them away, but this one I give you because it will protect you and bring you luck in whatever you are doing." Carried away by the euphoria of the moment I said to her "How do you feel when you are happy with your weaving?" She immediately responded "I feel I am at the top of the palm tree!"

I kept thinking about what Hadda said long after I left her. At the Casablanca airport, I checked in everything except the bag where the rug was. I once lost a suitcase in Europe and I did not want to lose the bag where the rug was. I was still jet-lagged when I told my American friend about the rug. She herself was taken by the story, and it was she who wanted me to write down the story and take a picture of the group of researchers I was a part of with the rug in front of Carriage House. The picture was taken on May 24, 2007. The group picture with the rug is now part of our legacy when we left the house in June 2007, and so is Hadda's rug and part of Hadda herself. I never thought that this would happen when I first entered the Carriage House. But I was fascinated by the thought that my aunt's carpet weaving was somehow now part of the knowledge-production at Harvard! I felt I was on top of the palm tree!

In my 2014 book, *Moroccan Feminist Discourses* (Palgrave Macmillan), I produced a critique of Moroccan feminist discourses and argued for a rehabilitation of the Berber dimension in these discourses and in the larger African feminist discourses with the view of adapting them to old/new realities. Through my research on Berber identities, I broaden scholarly understandings of what it means to be Berber, Moroccan, African.

Navigating my way through the intersection between my Berber identity and my Islamic feminism has always been a source of hope; I am sure the future of feminism in North Africa partly will depend on how to manage the emerging Berber identity and its intersection with gender.

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- <sup>1</sup> In my writings, I use both "Berber" and "Amazigh." I am aware of the fact that we Berbers self-identify as "Imazighen,"—plural of "Amazigh" and meaning "free men", but in the Anglo-Saxon literature, the term "Berber" does not carry the derogatory meaning of "savage" that the French and Arabic equivalents do. I am also aware of the fact that for militant Berbers, especially the youth, the word "Amazigh" is the "politically correct" term, but I personally have no problem using either one. I will use "Amazigh" in this essay whenever appropriate.
  - <sup>2</sup> Berbers are any of the descendants of the pre-Arab inhabitants of North Africa. The Berbers live in scattered communities across Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mali, Niger, and Mauretania. They speak various Berber languages belonging to the Afro-Asiatic family related to Ancient Egyptian. At the turn of the twenty-first century, there were perhaps 14 million in Morocco, 9 million in Algeria, 6 million in Libya, and much smaller numbers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauretania; in the Sahara of southern Algeria and of Libya, Mali and Niger, the Berber Tuareg number about 1 million (Fatima Sadiqi, *Moroccan Feminist Discourses*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
  - <sup>3</sup> The French colonizers designed the 1930 Berber Decree with the aim of having Berbers follow their customary law and the Arabs shari'a (Islamic) law.
  - <sup>4</sup> See: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Berber\\_flag.svg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Berber_flag.svg)