REBERBERATION: MUSICIANS AND THE MOBILIZATION OF TRADITION IN
THE BERBER CULTURE MOVEMENT

By

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Abstract:

From antiquity to the present, music and oral tradition have been of utmost importance in Berber culture, proving as the main vehicle for disseminating news and ideas between villages and preserving culture. Thus, it is only natural that music would prove to be a main tool of the Berber Culture Movement that seeks cultural recognition under oppressive and hegemonic Arab-Islamic authorities in the region, which have sought to squash cultural plurality since the end of European colonialism. This thesis explores how politically engaged Berber musicians rally their people to the Berber culture and identity by taking that which is inherently and fundamentally Berber tradition and reworking it to give it modern value, a quality that the Arab-Islamic states have denied the Berber people. Musicians embody the historical Berber tradition of providing ethical insight to their people via poetry, and have become the voice of a movement. Music is one of the central means through which the Berber culture remains alive and thriving, and it is intriguing artists and activists from around the globe.
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In the words of legendary Berber singer Idir, “our culture is one of oral tradition. 200 years ago, you would find that when two tribes went to war, each side had its poet, and the poets fought with words. The one who could throw out the most beautiful word won, and the war would end, because the word is above economics, politics, business, etc. Poets have a position of choice in our society.”¹ As the purveyors of poetry, musicians in Berber society hold this high position and promote the celebration of Berber identity under conditions of oppression. Music is the jugular vein of the Berber movement for equal recognition, one of the main avenues through which the Berber culture remains alive and thriving.

In Tamazight, the language of the Berber people of North Africa, the word *bolitik* comes from the French *politique* (politics). Oxford Dictionary defines “politics” as “the activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power.” In Tamazight, this word means “falsehood” or “deception.”² It is not surprising that such a clairvoyant interpretation of the concept of politics comes from a culture in which poets have more power than politicians.

Music and oral tradition have been of paramount importance throughout the entirety of Berber history, proving as the main vehicle for disseminating news and ideas between villages and creating community adhesive. Thus, it is only natural that music would prove to be a main tool in resisting oppression and rallying the people to a cause.

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My main objective in this thesis is to explore the role of musicians and singers in the movement towards Berber recognition, rights, and in the preservation and development of the Berber culture. The artists and activists featured in this text take inherent and fundamental aspects of Berber culture and tradition, reworking them so they are relevant in modernity, a quality that the Arab-Islamic states have denied the Berber people since the end of colonization. By creating music, they give tangible cultural artifacts to their people. This proves that their culture is capable of existing and flourishing in the modern world, fomenting ethnic and linguistic solidarity capable of combating the oppressive Arab-Islamic authorities that seek to marginalize and eliminate them. Furthermore, when rallying people to a cause, ideologies must be accessible. Musicians have the ability to disseminate the message of the Berber struggle to a larger demographic, as a significant portion of the Berber populations in North Africa are illiterate, and do not identify with the various secular, Francophone political organizations headed by Berber intellectuals and activists.

Throughout my undergraduate education I have spent ample time researching the Berber people, mostly through the lens of language rights in media and education. Through doing so, I have found that English language scholarship concerning them is relatively scant, and narrows even farther when one is researching “Berber music.” Were I to mention “Berber music” in passing, my average countryman may assume I am referring, in a rather silly way, to a Barber Shop Quartet. For this project, I consulted US based Kabyle Berber musician Moh Alileche. When I asked him what his goal was in making music, he said it was to explain his culture and spread the message of his people, so that non-Berbers in his American audience would
understand that the Berber people even exist, and they have been in North Africa for a very long time. He says it is not an easy thing to explain, and that people have trouble understanding how he can be from Africa and not be black.

In exploring and presenting the most prominent politically engaged Berber musicians here, I hope to raise awareness of the existence of the Berbers and their struggle for equal recognition to their Arab counterparts. It is hard pressed to find an American who is aware of who the Berbers are, much less that they are the holders and purveyors of a rich and distinct culture which is under threat of homogenization. Not that this is a surprise—the plights of indigenous peoples are not exactly lighting up the news.

Nevertheless, in recent decades there has been an increase in discourse concerning the human rights of indigenous peoples and the importance of democracy and cultural pluralism. The assertion of civilian populations in the face of authority has opened a space where issues are being more openly voiced, and in this environment, the futures of cultural and ethnic identities are certainly part of the conversation. Thus, conceptions of ethnic and cultural identity are being contested more often, and in coming decades I predict the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities will become a larger issue when discussing the future of the nation-state.

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Who are the Berbers?

The Berbers, or Amazigh ("Free People", Imazighen pl.) as they call themselves, are the indigenous, non-Arab tribal peoples of North Africa. Their domain, a land idealized as Tamazgha, stretches from the Siwa Oasis of Egypt in the east, to the Canary Islands off the coast of Morocco in the west.4

The Berber population density is highest in Morocco, where they make up 40-45% of the population, and Algeria, where they are 20-25%. Despite having recently played a central role in the recent overthrow of Gaddafi, they are not as common in Libya (8-9%), and even less so in Tunisia (1%).6 There are more than a million of the nomadic Tuareg Berbers living in Niger and Mali, where they have been involved in armed conflict against the governments.7

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6 Ibid. 1, at 1
7 Ibid., p. 3, 9.
The Berbers’ origins are heavily disputed. They are not a homogenous people, as there are numerous tribes with differing histories and physical characteristics; some even appear blonde and blue eyed. “Modern Berber identity has multiple strands, from the illiterate female keeper of the household in the southeast of Morocco, to the rugged Kabyle villager in Algeria, to the Touareg camel-driving nomad, to the Paris-based intellectual.”8 What unifies them is linguistics, and although the Tamazight language is split into various regional dialects, they are mutually intelligible. As the signifier of a people, the Tamazight language is vital to the Berber culture and a huge factor in constituting a Berber cultural identity. It has been diffused orally for centuries, and with it the cherished poems and music that are crucial to the fabric of Berber life. However, an oral culture also means that invaders and colonists, who generally depicted them as savages, have written the history of the Berbers.9 The term “Berber” itself was conferred to them by the Romans, and comes from the Latin barbarus, implying that the indigenous peoples of North Africa were barbaric.

The resilience of the Berbers and their ability to maintain their culture in the face of conquering civilizations rests in their nature to rebel, an inherent tendency rooted in the “particularism of tribe and village.”10 This spirit has manifested in new modes of political action, including artistic, resulting in the intercontinental Berber Culture Movement of ethnic and cultural affirmation.

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9 Ibid., p. 2.
10 Ibid., p. 4.
Berber Demands

The Berber Culture Movement is a transnational secular social movement seeking to affirm ethnocultural identity and establish equal representation under Arab-Islamic governments.\(^\text{11}\) It by and large upholds liberal values of democracy, human rights, and multiculturalism, in heavy contrast to the ideology of Arab-Islamic homogenization of language, culture, and religion carried out by state authorities in North Africa.\(^\text{12}\)

The Berber movement is a hydra, spread out among various cultural organizations throughout North Africa and the Berber Diaspora that often differ drastically on approach and desires, however they are cohesive in acknowledging a chief demand: state recognition of the Amazigh people and the importance of their culture and history in North Africa. This most immediately requires that Tamazight be made an official language under state constitutions. Although Algeria has historically been much more forward and demonstrative of their demands than Morocco, the latter has had more success in achieving their demands, and under 2011 constitutional reforms, Tamazight gained official language status in Morocco. This is a great stride for the Berber people in Morocco. In Algeria, Tamazight remains only a national language. The Berber movement also demands the placement and fulfillment of

policies to iron out social injustices felt by Berbers since colonialism in the educational, social, and economic sectors.\textsuperscript{13}

Arab-Islamic identity and authoritarianism stand in opposition to the Berber Culture Movement, but this does not mean the latter seeks to exercise power and hegemony over the oppressor; they propose cooperation in fashioning multi-ethnic societies colored with diverse cultures with a reconstructed national identity that validates the place of Berbers in these states. Thus, the movement is cultural in nature does not aspire to upset or threaten the stability of the nations of North Africa.\textsuperscript{14} This is laid out in Moroccan Berber activist Mohammed Chafik’s \textit{Berber Manifesto}, signed by hundreds of Berber intellectuals and activists:

\begin{quote}
We believe that diversity is an enrichment and that difference is a sharpener for the human designs . . . [and that] ‘uniformity’ leads to the missing of opportunities for opening up (to the outside world and to other ideas), for development and refinement . . . We believe in the advent of a universal civilization which is capable of integrating all the contributions of mankind.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

When states with Berber populations are “governed along secular, egalitarian, multi-cultural and democratic lines,”\textsuperscript{16} the demands of the Berber struggle will be addressed.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 9.
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The Berber Flag

The Berber flag is a quintessential symbol of Berber identity, and is a common sight at Berber rallies, demonstrations, and celebrations. Naturally, the colors represent different things: blue for water, green for mountains & forests, and yellow for joy, gold, and the Sahara: the Tuareg realm. In the center is the Tifinagh\textsuperscript{17} letter “yz”, a symbol of the “free man.” It is in red, representing eternal life and also the Berber blood spilled as a result of resistance and oppression. “As the symbol of the free men defending their culture, it watches and enlightens Tamazgha.”\textsuperscript{18} Berber musicians often display it at their concerts, draping it around their shoulders in solidarity with the Berber people and movement.

\textbf{History}

The departure of Ottoman rule left North Africa vulnerable to European colonization. Before the French occupation of Algeria in 1830, the literacy in Arabic was 40-50\%, and 50\% of the population were speakers of Tamazight.\textsuperscript{19} By the time of Algerian independence, French policies had managed the vast deculturisation of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[17] The Berber script
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Algeria’s people, and in 1966, Tamazight speakers were at 18.6%. Although the French had interest in Morocco since 1830, it was officially colonized in 1912, a time when two thirds of the kingdom identified as Amazigh. French occupation had a profound effect on the political, cultural, and ethnic structures in the two countries. From the beginning of occupation, the French sought to turn the Arabs and Amazigh against each other so as to fragment and weaken the populations of Algeria and Morocco for rule. They emphasized or created qualities adhering to each people, even creating the “Berber Myth,” which in Algeria exemplified the indigenous European-descended Kabyles over the savage and backwards Arabs. This same theory was propagated in Morocco, and in both countries the Amazigh were educated in French and the Arabs in Arabic. In 1950, the Moroccan monarchy established the “Berber Dahir” policy in Morocco, a policy that established two different legal systems for Amazigh and Arabs: customary tribal law for the Amazigh and Islamic law for the Arabs. After conquering Kabyle, the largest Amazigh wilaya of Algeria, different taxation policies were applied to each, the latter receiving preference until 1918. French colonists used this notion of the Arab savage to justify their “pacification” of the region.

Instead of aligning with the French as they had hoped, the Amazigh of both Algeria and Morocco united with Arabs under an Arab-Islamic identity, choosing to

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20 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid. 1
temporarily abandon their public identity as Amazigh for the sake of the resistance. However by not emphasizing their people’s role as Amazigh in the opposition to occupation, they thus compromised the preservation of their cultural identity to fight for independence, specifically in the resistance of Algeria. Both populations believed Amazigh culture would be celebrated and flourish upon independence.  

French policies had a large effect in creating the ethnic identity rift and an Arab mistrust of the Amazigh. As recoil from foreign occupation, post-independence Algerians and Moroccans adopted a strong nationalistic pride that rejected anything French or non-Arab. This was reflected in the policies of President Ben Bella of Algeria and King Hassan II of Morocco, who both embarked on intense missions to unite the hearts and minds of their newly liberated countries under an Arab-Islamic identity. This fervor of Arabization would lead to a linguistic purge of French and Tamazight from administration, government, and education at all levels, leading to the marginalization of Amazigh culture and the struggle for equal representation under the Moroccan and Algerian governments. By instituting solely Standard Arabic in education, the government sought to eliminate Tamazight, French, and colloquial Arabic from a child’s life, hoping the effect would carry over into the family. In 1962, Ben Bella eliminated the only area of Berber studies at the University of Algiers. This methodical systemization and Arabization of the education system began with the

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27 Ibid.
military coup in 1965, and allowed the government to exercise control of the country and destroy the legitimacy of the Amazigh identity.\textsuperscript{29}

Naturally, there were antagonistic sentiments between the Amazigh and the Arab-Islamic governments who denied them. Although this tension manifested violently several times in both countries, Moroccan Amazigh have not reacted nearly as aggressively as the Algerians. The most active in the fight for Amazigh recognition has been the Kabyle region, home to over 5 million Kabyle Amazigh.\textsuperscript{30}

In March of 1980, after the Algerian government prohibited a visit of writer Mouloud Mammeri to the University of Tizi Ouzo in Kabyle, tensions snapped and the Kabyle rose up in large-scale strikes that were violently repressed by the police throughout the region. The Kabyles demanded that Tamazight become official, that their children become literate in Tamazight, that it be taught at university level, that it be given more time in the media, and that they not be culturally oppressed.\textsuperscript{31} This was known as the Berber Spring, the event that would spark large-scale Amazigh distrust of government authorities in Algeria as well as Morocco. The Berber Spring was followed by bloodier strikes, including Black October in 1988 and the Black Spring in 2001.\textsuperscript{32}

Because of these uprisings, the Berber Cultural Movement began to gain more support and the government was forced to make amendments to further recognize Amazigh culture, creating the High Commission of Amazigh Affairs in 1995 to

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
promote Tamazight in public schools.\textsuperscript{33} Parallel to the HCA is the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture established in 2001 by King Hassan VI of Morocco in response to growing demands of the Popular Movement.\textsuperscript{34} Both organizations consist of members appointed by their respective governments and thus lack legitimacy in the eyes of many Amazigh activists.

The Amazigh cause has progressed, although more in Morocco than Algeria. Like the Agadir Charter of Morocco, in June of 2001 Kabyle representatives created \textit{El Kœur}, their list of 15 demands to the Algerian government. One demand of this was to “satisfy the Amazigh claim in all its dimensions (identity, civilization, culture and language) without referendum and preconditions and recognize Tamazight as a national and official language.”\textsuperscript{35} In response to this, President Bouteflika drafted Article 3a of the constitution in 2002, which established Tamazight as a national but not official language.\textsuperscript{36} In Morocco, King Mohammed VI added Tamazight as an official language in the July 1st Amendment of 2011.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Music as a Tool of Social Change}

Social movements, and in this case indigenous rights movements, are the union of culture and politics, and arise from socio-political conditions stemming from

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\textsuperscript{34} "Amazigh Activism and the Moroccan State | Middle East Research and Information Project." \textit{MERIP Home}. Web. 27 Mar. 2012. \texttt{http://www.merip.org/mer/mor233/amazigh-activism-moroccan-state}.
\textsuperscript{36} "Algerian Constitution." \textit{Welcome to The Embassy of Algeria Website}. Web. 2 April 2012. \texttt{http://www.algeria-us.org/algerian-constitution-mainmenu-74.html}.
\end{flushleft}
enduring historical circumstances. But what is it that distinguishes a “movement” from a general awareness and simmering sentiment of dissatisfaction? It is the accumulation of this displeasure, a boiling point that propels a people into fresh arenas of thought, which catalyze creation, reflection, discourse, and innovation. Through this, they transcend their condition. This liberation of ideas characteristic of social movements is essential in promoting regeneration and even cultural rebirth. Furthermore, the space opened by the politicization of social ideals is one where music can be reassigned as part of a new foundation of collective identity, while also reclaiming its “ancient, truth-bearing role.” This role is exercised when musicians, particularly of indigenous movements, use song to raise awareness of discrimination faced by their people, uphold the determination and strengthen the identity of the oppressed, and thus challenge the political forces of oppression. The contested figure will often respond with state censorship, and ban songs. For social movements, music has proved to be paramount as a vehicle of change.

Social movements certainly revitalize musical traditions, however this influence is not mono-directional. While social movements exert their influence over music, they also simultaneously draw their unity and significance from it. Therefore, social movements and its associated art are of mutual assistance to each other’s progression. This relationship can be a powerful one. Art is a major medium for the communication of ideologies and values to a broad swath of society, and consequently music is crucial in establishing a collective cultural identity and politicizing a culture’s taste in popular

39 Ibid., p. 25.
entertainment. The larger society is more susceptible to the intake of music than say, a written ideological document, because of music’s inherently attractive and emotive nature. While it is overall more accessible, especially to cultures that lack literacy, it also reaches more of the human senses than other mediums, and elicits a more aroused response with less effort on behalf of the recipient, opening a space in which they become lost and renew themselves. Therein lies music’s power to rally followers to a cause, enhance feelings of solidarity for those who already support it, and lay the lines of a collective cultural identity.

Yet the effectiveness of music in rousing unity cannot be reduced to its emotiveness; this is merely the essence. I have emphasized that social movements inspire the revitalization of culture, implying that there is something to be revitalized. In many cases, the recipient of this revitalization is tradition. In sociology, tradition is considered a hindrance to advancement, anathema to the modernity that these movements strive for. On the contrary, tradition is a vital part of cultural and artistic development, and achieves evolution through social movement. This is very evident in the Berber movement. Traditions are central in connecting a people to their culture, as they “are inherited ways of interpreting reality and giving meaning to experience; they are constitutive of collective memory and thus provide the underlying logical structure upon which all social activity is built.” Indeed, much of the effectiveness of music in influencing a social cause rests on its ability to rework tradition to fit into modernity. The most powerful Berber musicians have done just this, and by doing so they

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42 Ibid., p. 20.
emphasize that their culture is commendable, and thus worth fighting for. If used
consciously, with the intention of pulling out the relevant and usable aspects of
tradition and amending them to fit into modernity, this reprocessed incarnation of
tradition can unite the past and present. The artists behind this process revivify their
culture, give tradition new meaning, and consequently dispel the image of tradition as
something static that is eternally lodged in the past.

One case in which music was used with great effect as a tool of social change
was during the civil rights movements in the United States of America. “Freedom
songs” were drawn from the slave songs and spirituals of African-American tradition,
and according to Martin Luther King Jr., they "keep alive a faith, a radiant hope, in
the future, particularly in our most trying hours." They were a spring of strength,
enforcing solidarity among various classes of African Americans, rural and urban, as
well as with white supporters. Vastly empowering, they created a sense of
community, and the shared experience of singing gave protesters the resolve to non-
viole ntly stand up in the face of brutality, maintaining their dignity despite grave
humiliation. One song in particular, the famed “We Shall Overcome,” became the
unofficial anthem of the civil rights movement, and could be heard resonating from
meetings, prisons, and especially school sit-ins during the 1960’s. Students at these
protests would take old spirituals and modify the lyrics to revitalize and give them
contemporary relevance.

45 Ibid. 1, at 98
Drawing creative inspiration from their own heritage, musicians fashion artifacts that incorporate facets of tradition recognizable to members of that culture, reworking them into something fresh and contemporary. It is this traditional aspect that allows for cultural identification and inspires a collective memory and the creation of historical memory, whereas it is the innovative twist that fosters a faith in culture and the desire to aid in its progress. Thus, musicians of indigenous and minority rights movements often become heroes, standing as symbols of progress. Their music has the power to bond a people across local, national, and even international Diaspora communities. For the latter group, these songs can even come to represent the homeland. These musicians show us that it is inaccurate to consider tradition the enemy of progress.

Music in Traditional Berber Societies

The use of music to reinforce community cohesion and cultural identity in the Berber culture is not a new phenomenon. “Within Indigenous oral culture, song is a particularly powerful and familiar way of influencing others, of storing and sharing information.”46 Music has always played a crucial role in traditional Berber society, where songs and dances were “tied to village life.”47 Instead of attempting to touch on all the various traditional styles of different tribes, which would be exhaustive, I will

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take as an example the Tashelhit\textsuperscript{48} speaking regions of Morocco, where there are two main types of music; village and professional.

In \textit{Ahwash} between 20 and 150 men and women join in a village center to dance and sing around musicians playing drums and flutes. This is a complicated ritual that requires participation from a large part of the community, and thus necessitates rehearsal. “The music not only springs from the community but is also the mainspring of that community. It owes its existence to the life of the community, so its proper functioning is directly linked with the proper functioning of that community. It expresses the community ideal par excellence and far better than any other activity.”\textsuperscript{49}

A parallel performance ritual would be the \textit{a\breve{b}id\textacute{a}s} of the Chleuh region of Morocco.\textsuperscript{50}

\textit{Rwais} musicians are professionals that perform in groups of a dozen or less, and unlike the \textit{ahwa\breve{b}b}, are not village based. They travel throughout Morocco, and even into Europe. They are further set apart from \textit{ahwa\breve{b}b} by their instrumentation, as they incorporate stringed instruments, such as the \textit{rebab} and \textit{lotar} in addition to drums. The leader of the \textit{rwais}, who takes the primary singing role, is called a \textit{rayss}.

The \textit{rwais} honor a canon of Tashelhit Berber culture, called \textit{awal llma’\textacute{a}na}.\textsuperscript{51} This means that the songs are not meant simply for entertainment, but for purveying a profound message concerning political and moral ethics, the conditions and happenings of the world, and reflection on the state of society. “If the Berber language

\textsuperscript{48} A dialect of Tamazight
uses the same term, *awal*, for ‘word’ and for ‘power,’ it is not by accident. The power of words and the words of power become synonymous and recourse to special procedures affecting *awal* is unavoidable."

Among the *rwais* there is an established repertory of songs that are familiar across the region, however throughout their travel, the *rwais* are constantly soaking in the conditions of their environment and gathering the latest news, which they integrate into their lyrics. As observers and commentators on the conditions of society around them, it is only natural that the *rwais* would utilize their position to criticize political and social systems. During French colonialism, these protest songs often resulted in their jailing, and in rare cases even their death.

Without a doubt, Berber culture and its music are inseparable. While it would be wrong to deny its function as entertainment, that is not the most significant goal of its practice. Music is a powerful avenue through which communities are tied together and the Berber identity is affirmed. It is the

52 Ibid. 1, at 92.
54 Ibid.
“expression of the community spirit, as the collective apparatus intact, working by itself.”

Furthermore, songs carry an utmost depth and convey a system of ethics and morals. Music is a vehicle through which news concerning political and social conditions are imparted onto the people, accompanied by profound insight and gesticulations of how to move forward positively through changing times. As we have seen, this insight has even manifested as protest and criticism. Accordingly, it makes the utmost sense that music would come to be a primary means of resistance and creating cultural solidarity in the Berber struggle against Arab-Islamic ideology, as it was for the rwais. The messages of the rwais reach all swaths of society, literate or not. Philip Schuyler, scholar of Berber music, quotes a rayyan: "When I travel, I pay attention to what I see, and then put it all in a song. But tell me, which is better, an article like the ones you write, which can be read by one person at a time, or records like mine, which can be heard by hundreds?"

The Role of Musicians in the Berber Culture Movement

“When culture is not created, it dies. When people cannot share, they fight. And where the cultural dialogue stops, it is replaced with violence, death, and destruction” (1997:284-85) Richard Kurin

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The migration of Berbers to large cities in recent decades has meant that many grew up exposed to various other North African genres and popular Western music. This urban environment gave birth to several bands that began to modify traditional Berber music to fit western instruments and styles, arguing that “the best way to preserve Berber music in a modern urban context is to repackage it in Western form.” Despite this repackaging, they preserved the traditional role of Berber music as community adhesive, a way of spreading messages and news, and as a means of protest.

The following Berber singers and musicians have been especially influential to the Berber people, inspiring them to rally to their culture and language through politically charged and poignant lyrics. They have demonstrated to the Berber people that their culture can align with modern values and aesthetics, and hence is worth fighting for. Some of these artists have been very active in the past and continue to produce music today, while there are others who have passed on or even been martyred.

The Musicians of Kabyle and the Rise of the “New Kabyle Song”

Since the end of colonialism, the Kabyle Berbers have been the most politically active of all the Berber regions in North Africa, and in the 1960’s Berber cultural activism began to come out of the Kabyle community in France, initially as an effort to

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publish oral poetry and folktales, and standardize the Berber language. Modern Kabyle music has its beginnings in the 1930's, with Slimane Azem and Cheikh Nourreddine pioneering the way. These men, like many Kabyle musicians, got their start in the more liberal and permissive Paris, and specifically in Kabyle owned cafés. Cheikh Nourreddine was very active in adjusting traditional Kabyle melodies to instruments like banjo, guitar, bass, and violin; instruments found in French cafés at the time. For a young Slimane Azem, who had moved to Paris in 1937 to pursue music, Nourreddine was a creative inspiration, and Azem was drawn particularly to his song titled “Allo Tricité.” In his own songs, Azem evoked his homeland, often through animal imagery, in response to the homesickness felt by him and his countrymen living in France. Azem’s songs were also very political, as he was a staunch supporter of Algeria throwing off the yoke of French colonialism. He even got himself into trouble with the French police for a song he wrote with thinly veiled symbolism, titled “Fegh Ay Ajrad Thamourthiou” (Locusts, leave my country).

Starting in the 1950s, Kabyle poet and musician Cherif Kheddam became well known for his songs about the hardship of the Berbers, immigration, Kabyle heritage, and women’s rights. He is credited with a significant role in modernizing Kabyle music, synthesizing it with Western and Egyptian influences popular at the time, and was involved in starting the careers of a newer generation of “new Kabyle song” singers who would spread Kabyle music internationally, such as Idir and Ferhat

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62 Ibid., p. 426
Mehenni.63 Ferhat’s 1979 song *Tizz bb wasa* became somewhat of a Kabyle national anthem, a powerful tool of protest sung at rallies and by political prisoners.64 The Kabyle and Berber world mourned Cherif Khedam’s passing in 2012, but continue to celebrate his rich legacy as illustrated in a quote from the Amazigh Cultural Association of America: “Our thoughts go to his family and loved ones. They go also to the Amazigh people as a whole as we mourn the loss of another pillar of Amazigh culture. May the younger generations cherish Dda Cherif’s work and use it as an inspiration.”65

**Moroccan “Berber Power” Groups**

In Morocco, the 1970s saw the rise of “Berber Power” groups, who had been inspired by an earlier “roots fusion” movement, involving world famous band Nass el-Ghiwane, as well as popular western music of the time such as the Beatles. One of these “power” groups was Izanzaren, started in the late sixties. They were one of the first groups of this new wave of groups to sing in the local Tamazight dialect of Tashelhit, interpreting and modernizing traditional Berber song to create a radical, political, and achingly poetic music. They reflected the sentiments and sensibilities of their disenchanted generation of rural Berber emigrants, articulating nostalgia for Berber traditions and anger at the sadistic policies employed against them by the Moroccan government. They were also one of the first groups to mix modern

63 Ibid., p. 425.
instrumentation with traditional, revolutionizing the Berber song. They represented “the germs of a revolution in the modern Berber poetic creation.”

Samples of Izanzaren Lyrics

Iggut lebrîh idrus may sellan igh wîth
Plenty of speeches And yet Nobody listens to the reason
Nettybwi zun ð tgbewi immargbi gb ijeowan ìkk ð lbi' akal
We are like grasshoppers taken between the skies and the dry grounds.

In the late 70’s, another group called Archache began to reinterpret the music of the rwaiw musicians from the Souss region of Morocco. In response to their poignant Tashelhit lyrics, the aggravated Moroccan authorities often censored their music.

Another beloved Moroccan and Berber icon that was an active artist at this time is Ammouri Mbarek. Mbarek was involved in a group composed of AMREC members, which was aimed at renewing Berber music. From this, the band Usma (Lightning) was born. After five years of touring European stages as the vocalist, Mbarek continued a solo career, always experimenting with fusing traditional Berber and Western music.

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69 The Moroccan Association of Research and Cultural Exchanges, a cultural Amazigh association.
Rayssa Fatima Tabaamrant

The rebellious and revered Rayssa Fatima Tabaamrant is a fascinating figure within Berber music and politics, greatly admired for her inflammatory lyrics and political commentary. Her singing style exemplifies the high pitch breathiness popular of female singers in Tashelhit music, an aesthetic associated with the roughness respected in a Tashelhit mountain women, who play a “critical role in transmitting heritage untainted by Arabic and Arab influence.” Tabaamrant began her singing career in the mid 1980’s, and under the tutelage of master rayssa (a professional head singer of the Rwais tradition discussed above), Tabaamrant began to gain her own status as a rayssa. Although women had held this role in the past, they were more likely to be backup singers and dancers, and Tabaamrant was one of the first to become popular as a rayssa with her own backing musicians. Keeping with the Rwais tradition of awal llma’na, Tabaamrant’s lyrics are insightful with a moral lean, focusing

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on the marginalized Berbers and their lack of rights. In these songs, which she has termed *najiba*\(^7\), Tabaamrant expresses her interpretation of society in its current state.\(^7\) In her culture, music is a very powerful and respected means of communication, and Tabaamrant embodies the role as voice of her people and bearer of heritage with supreme gravity and passion.

"Contentment and welfare where we live, we never experienced humiliation, Satan, we never knew him, he was never among us, He accompanied only those who sold their lands, Oh Baba Yuba!"\(^7\)

Tabaamrant’s career is significant. She has released many albums and has toured North Africa and Europe extensively. She has been the feature of several biographies, a full-length television performance, and has even starred in an autobiographical film about herself. Her music is adored throughout Morocco, and she is widely respected for her constant assertion of Amazigh identity and criticism of the Moroccan state, even from within its very guts.

Fatima Tabaamrant is an MP in the Moroccan parliament, a role in which she does not abandon her rebellious spirit. In the 2012 parliamentary session, Tabaamrant made history and sparked heated debate and controversy when she became the first person to pose a question in Tamazight in a parliamentary setting.\(^7\) In the video of this, one can see other parliament members react negatively as Tabaamrant speaks, a shawl with the Berber *yaz* symbol on it wrapped around her shoulders.\(^7\)

\(^7\) Roughly translates to "a moral sermon."
\(^7\) From "Baba Youba." Translated for me by Hafsa Oubou. Baba: father, it is a title that Berbers in Ait Baamran region, which is her region, use to show respect to an old male family member. Youba is a Berber king, what is known as Juba II. He is very symbolic as an ancient Berber figure to prove the long history if Amazigh culture and civilization:
\(^7\) Video of Tabaamrant in Parliament: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wimEoQtxZAM&feature=player_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wimEoQtxZAM&feature=player_embedded)
Tabaamrant was exercising the status of her language, which was recently made official under constitutional reform, her action resulted in a ban on the use of Tamazight until proper translation resources were allocated to accommodate the language in Parliament.78

Idir

Idir is a leviathan of Berber music, and has been since his rise in the 70’s as part of the New Kabyle Song movement. On Agraw.com, a “Portal dedicated to the Amazigh Culture,” Idir is described as “the pioneer of the Amazigh music and the messenger of the Amazigh culture to the world.” I can personally attest to his popularity, as I was blessed to have seen him perform live at the Sacred Music Festival in Fez, Morocco. His was one of the free shows available every night during the weeklong festival, attended by all parts of the community, whereas the other shows required pricey tickets and were thus frequented mostly by high-class Moroccans and European tourists. Idir played in Bab-Boujloud, one of the main centers of the

medieval city of Fes. Surrounded by fortress walls, the square was packed with Moroccans of all ages. When the discreetly garbed Idir ascended the stage and initiated his set, a roar rose from the crowd, and nearly every mouth was singing along with the Kabyle singer. Dancing children were held in the air by their ankles, swaying precariously in rhythm. In true Moroccan style, the audience clapped along, swaying in and out of polyrhythms that would make a Westerner dizzy.

Although I was only vaguely aware of whom Idir was at the time, there was no doubt in my mind that he was one of the musical treasures of North Africa. This was assured when a Moroccan friend of mine leaned over, practically having to scream into my ear; “He is Idir. He is very, very famous. People love him here.” The warmth Idir received by the people of Fez, while certainly not lost on him, was small in comparison to some of the 6,000 plus audiences Idir has entertained. His modest appearance does not give it away, but Idir is a superstar. Furthermore, he is one of the only big-time Kabyle singers of his generation that is still performing and releasing albums today.

Idir is a stage name meaning “to live” in Tamazight. He was born in 1948 as Hamid Cheriet, in the Berber village of Aït Lahcene in Kabyle, but moved to Algiers in 1963, where he attended university. Although he was a student of geology, Idir spent his vacations traversing the countryside soaking up as many different songs and styles of Berber music, gaining proficiency on an array of instruments. Idir honed his skills playing on a radio station in Algiers, but his rise to fame came in 1973, when he made international history, and profoundly impacted the Berber movement by releasing the

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tide-changing song *A vava inouva* (“Oh my father”). This song exhilarated Algeria then, and remains wildly popular today; its importance in rousing cultural pride is colossal.

In fact, *A vava inouva* was a phenomenon, as it did not stay within Algerian or even African borders. Its popularity was unprecedented: it was the first Algerian song to be played on national French radio as well as on a station geared towards French listeners, the first Algerian hit in Europe, and it also received coverage in major French publications.81 By 1978, it had sold around 200,000 copies, and was translated into more than a dozen languages.82 With the rise of *A vava inouva*’s popularity, the Berber people realized that their tradition and culture did deserve a place in the modern world. This gave them something to fight for.

During the years of 1970-1972, while Idir travelled through Algeria collecting the music of his people, he was also absorbing a large amount of popular western music from bands such as the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel.83 It was at this time that he developed the guitar part for *A vava inouva*, combining traditional Algerian Berber music with an arpeggiated chord style similar to that employed by Western folk singers of the day. The melody was based on the sung refrain of a Kabyle story with roots deep in Kabyle cultural history, which typically would be related by old women to their families. Although the song was released under Idir’s name, he actually did not author any of the lyrics of *A vava inouva*; he had requested close friend Ben Mohammed, a Kabyle poet, to write them.

82 Ibid., p. 65.
83 Ibid., p. 54.
The relationship between musician and poet is not foreign to Berber music. Mohammed had been influenced and entranced by musicians since early in life, and credits a childhood experience of seeing Slimane Azem play as a great source of inspiration, and his first meeting with Kabyle poetry. Thus, he was honored to accept the request of a friend to fashion the words for a song.

One function of the song is to emphasize cultural transmission and oral tradition, but it does not stop here; it laments the waning presence of this tradition in modern Berber society. To the casual listener, it seems like a politically impotent song, but in reality A vava inouva is a thinly disguised warning of the threatened status of Berber culture and language, menaced by the “monster of the forest,” aka the overbearing force of Arab-Islamic homogeneity.

A vava inouva (translation)

1. "I ask you father Inouva, open the door
   O daughter Ghriba, shake your bracelets
   I fear the monster of the forest father Inouva
   O daughter Ghriba, I fear him too

2. The old one is rolled up in his "burnous" (traditional trench coat)
   in the distance, to warm himself
   His son is scared to earn bread
   Looking at the days to come
   The grand-daughter-in-law sews
   Without stopping putting the cloth
   The children around the grandmother
   learn the teachings from the old days

3. The snow pushes up against the door
   the stew in the large cooking pot
   the elders begin dreaming of springtime
   the moon and the stars being the canopy
   the oak tree replaces the view
   the family gathers together
   ready to listen to the story.

The song had a profound effect on the Kabyle Berbers, rapidly becoming a treasured cultural artifact. Because the song took a folktale from the collective memory of Kabyle culture, added new verses and paired it with a western inspired guitar part, it crafted an intoxicating fusion of authentic cultural history and innovation. *A vava inouva* is actually an example of “world music” before it had become an established and recognized genre. “The song engendered simultaneously a sense of deep recognition and a feeling of novelty.”

It reached all demographics of Kabyle society, and for each one provided a link back to their culture. For old women, it was especially personal, as they could picture themselves as the elder storyteller in the song. For many others, it revived childhood memories of gathering around their grandmothers for story time, thus producing a new cultural memory. For Kabyles in the Diaspora, the song represented their homeland, and specifically the village; the locus of Kabyle society.

The Algerian state historically depicted Berber culture as backward and incapable of innovation, in contrast to the modernizing force of the Arab-Islamic state projects. *A vava inouva* gave the Kabyle community a weapon against such ethnically biased discourse. It shattered the state of acceptance that many Berbers had resigned to, and through this song, they were able to see their culture anew, but through the freshened eyes of their own culture rather than foreign eyes. This “internal gaze” was part of Ben Mohammed’s intention when writing the song, as he realized that Kabyles

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had only been examining themselves through the scholarship of others.\textsuperscript{86} He realized that the stoking of cultural pride could mobilize.

\textit{A vava inouva’s} success also hinged on the manner and cycles of its circulation. It was first played on a Kabyle radio station, which Ben and Idir had both been on several times before.\textsuperscript{87} Its arrival in Europe coincided with a rising world music scene, largely a product of increasing awareness from other third world countries about their own situations of marginalization and repression. Circulation went as far as television, where the young Idir provided a drastic and invigorating contrast to the seemingly antiquated Berber singers that were regularly broadcasted. In short, the massive circulation of this song provided substantial proof that not only was Berber culture capable of modernizing, but it could go as far as gaining audiences in first world countries. “The music is something that one can only succeed in if one is aware of the problems of the audience, the listeners.”

In creating \textit{A vava inouva}, Ben and Idir established a pillar of Berber identity, one that represented its rich cultural history in an innovative way. It shocked people out of their resignation, and they rallied around it as a symbol of modern Kabyle culture; something worth protecting and developing. “\textit{A vava inouva} created a new vision of vernacular modernity by setting Berber traditions in relation to ethnographic, nationalist, and postcolonial discourses as well as world markets.”\textsuperscript{88} The song, while coinciding with the Algerian state’s agenda of “modernizing traditions,” was opposite

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p. 64.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p. 68.
to the state’s authoritarian discourse that commanded obeisance, instead inviting reflection and dialogue around Kabyle culture.

Idir is not a one hit wonder. His songs are sung at weddings and by children’s choirs in Kabyle, and since 1976, he has released 8 albums, his most recent one in January of 2013, coinciding with the Amazigh New Year 2963. A lush and beautiful album, Agraw.com describes “Adrar inu,” meaning “My Mountain,” as “a tribute to the home land of the artist which continues to resonate in his memory even after 4 decades in exile. Idir’s discography is rich and varied, and for sure this new album will add more richness to the song-list of the artist that continues to survive from generation to another. The album, while loaded in traditional Berber musical elements, weaves in various other styles such as salsa and French chanson. He is a symbol of pride for his people, and takes this role seriously. In his own words, “the music is something that one can only succeed in if one is aware of the problems of the audience, the listeners.”

Lounis Aït Menguellet

Lounis Aït Menguellet is a stern activist for Berber language and culture and one of Algeria’s primary Berber political singers. He fills the time-honored role of a bard, a Kabyle tradition in which a poet acts as the voice of his people on ethical and

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political topics\textsuperscript{92}, similar to the \textit{rwais} of Morocco. “It draws on metaphors, images, and allusions sourced in daily life to formulate incisive commentary that both critiques the neocolonial and anti-Berber politics of the Algerian state and chastises the Kabyle population for acquiescing in its own disenfranchisement.”\textsuperscript{93} Unlike Idir, Aït Menguellet does not attempt to westernize his music, or blend with other styles, and thus Dr. Jane Goodman, author of \textit{Berber Culture on the World Stage}, argues that his music does not seek to “represent traditions through a modernizing lens.”\textsuperscript{94} I would argue that simply by representing the poetic tradition of his people and speaking of contemporary Berber issues, he is giving modern relevance to the rituals of culture.

Like many of his fellow Berber musicians, Aït Menguellet has been threatened by Algeria’s notoriously dangerous Islamist opposition parties, and has felt the heavy hand of the state, which has censored his songs on Algerian radio and thrown him in prison for a period.\textsuperscript{95} Despite the risk, Aït Menguellet refuses to be scared away and continues to stand his ground in Kabyle, his home.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. 187.
In the world of politically charged Berber music, there is no figure more loved, idolized, revered, and hated than the late Lounès Matoub of Kabyle, Algeria. In fact, I would argue that Matoub might even be the most influential and controversial personality of the Berber resistance movement, one who was at the head of it for twenty years, and capable of rousing tens of thousands of people in his name. His following among the Kabyle youth was unmatched by any other Kabyle singer, as “his life replicated their triumphs, defeats, and hopes.” His popularity stretches across North Africa, where he is recognized for his music and as a symbol of resistance. Matoub’s music is distinctly Algerian, as he played a powerful mix of the Cha’abi music popular in Algeria paired with volatile politically charged lyrics in Tamazight, which primarily bashed the Arab-Islamic ideology of the Algerian state for destroying his culture and country’s identity. He was unbending and hardnosed in his critique of the Algerian government’s policies, and claimed they had given birth to Islamic

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Fundamentalism. His TV broadcast response to the post-independence slogan spread by the National Liberation Front “Islam is my religion, Algeria is my nation, and Arabic is my language”97 was “I’m neither an Arab nor a Muslim.”98 Matoub’s character was defined by rebelliousness, and he had a reputation for his loud mouth, quick temper, and contempt for authority. “His mouth made him many enemies, but it was also the vehicle of his greatness. For him, pain, shame, danger and fear were there to be tested, confronted and then just brushed aside if they became too much of a barrier to living a full live.”99 He was passionate and proud, and he wore his status as rebel with pride.

In 1968, the complete Arabization of schools excluded Algeria’s Berbers. This halt in many Berbers’ education was a major catalyst of dissent among Matoub’s generation; “It was then that Algeria’s descent into hell began” Matoub writes in his memoir.100 Furthermore, he actively and consciously skipped his Arabic language classes; “every class that I missed was an act of resistance, a slice of liberty conquered. My rejection was voluntary and purposeful.”101 Matoub’s disillusionment and distrust of the Algerian state was exacerbated during his compulsory military service during Algeria’s war with Morocco, where he witnessed the horrible treatment of Moroccan families, some Berber, evicted from their homes. Furthermore, he was heavily discriminated against by other Arab soldiers, and saw deep corruption among the

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99 Ibid., p. 115.
higher ups of the army.\textsuperscript{102} The only thing that maintained him through his service was writing poems.

Out of the army with an education cut short, Matoub was at a loss. All he had was a collection of poems and songs he had written, but because they were in Tamazight, he would have little chance as a public performer under the restrictions of the Algerian state. “This language, so beautiful, in which I learned to speak, that I use in my texts, that allowed me to realize my profession as a singer, continues to be undesired in Algeria, where it is not recognized.”\textsuperscript{103}

In the wake of thousands of Kabyles before him, Matoub set off for France. Originally supporting himself, even flourishing, by playing music in émigré cafés in the town of Annemasse, Matoub eventually moved to Paris, where he continued to gain recognition playing music in cafés. It was here that he came under the tutelage of Idir, who at this time had already gained widespread fame through \textit{A vava inouwa}. He also met one of his greatest role models, Slimane Azem, who is half responsible for creating modern popular Kabyle music in the 1950s and 1960s. This is who Matoub alights his message of rebellion to, whereas he attributes his musical technique to Cheikh El Hasnaoui, the other half responsible for modern popular Kabyle music.\textsuperscript{104}

Although the message of Matoub’s songs may be close to Azem’s, he wrote with more simple conviction and confrontation than his predecessor. In fact, he was far more provocative than any political Berber singer before him. “When I started,  

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.  
modern songs didn’t carry that need to express anger, they didn’t have any convincing protest lyrics. I shouted out my anger in my songs. Music is my anger.”

This simplicity was in stark contrast to most protest songs of North Africa, which resorted to the use of extensive symbolism to express their criticism of the oppressor. His lyrics were austere, unembellished, and uncensored. His fame grew rapidly, and by 1980, Matoub was headlining Paris’ famed venue L’Olympia, which at one time housed a performance by another star of Algerian Berber descent: Edith Piaf. The occasioning of this concert was serendipitous, as it coincided with the fateful Berber Spring (*Tafsut Imazighen*), the event that reinforced solidarity and fired the revolutionary fervor of Kabyle, not to mention their reverence for Kabyle singers. To show his unity with the uprising, Matoub performed in military fatigues.

Lounès Matoub spoke his mind, and his straightforward words reverberated profoundly with the Berber youth in revolt. He and his audience were devoted to the same cause, and they fed off of each other’s fire. Matoub gave hope and passion to his people, one oppressed by economic marginalization, riots, and discrimination. However, as virtuous as it may be, honesty makes enemies, and Matoub’s big mouth consistently got him into trouble. He made many enemies, especially after writing a song disparaging the London Accords, through which Algerian President Ben Bella and his historic rival, Aït Ahmed, leader of Kabyle supported FFS, reconciled their differences for purely practical reasons. However, due to threats received, no North

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African music producers in France would publish the album with the song on it.\textsuperscript{106} He was even shot at by North Africans in Paris.

Despite censorship from the Algerian state, Matoub maintained a massive Algerian fan base. But one cannot be a hero of a people without being a target of the enemy, and Matoub’s fame meant recognition from state authorities. Despite the hazard that awaited him upon a return to his home country, which he was by no means unaware of, Matoub could not stay away from Kabyle. In his book \textit{Rebelle}, Matoub wrote “that country is my refuge, my bolt hole, my consolation and the only place where I feel really good.”\textsuperscript{107} Unfortunately, the danger materialized in October 1988 in a brutal episode that would ironically elevate Matoub’s legendary status even higher.

Along with students of Tizi Ouzou University, Matoub was handing out flyers calling for a strike in support of rioting students in Algiers. After leaving the university to distribute more in another town, the car Matoub was driving was chased down by the pseudo-military police force, the Défense Nationale. He was arrested, beaten, and shot 5 times. Although he was miraculously not killed, Matoub endured a hellish period of infections, excruciating pain, depression, and morphine addiction before being transferred to better health-care in Paris. Although his recovery improved in France, he was left with a permanent limp, and a colostomy bag. It was only due to the support of his family, friends, and hundreds of visiting fans that his sanity was saved.


\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p. 120.
Throughout his recuperation, Matoub fought madness on his own by composing songs and poems.

Ironically, one policeman’s act of aggression and hatred only heightened the status of his victim to that of a warrior hero who had stared down death. Matoub’s survival of five bullets added a mystique and legitimacy to his reputation. He was the only Kabyle singer whose words could be backed up by his own near brush with death, and thus they carried the weight and allure of a legend. “He was no longer a theoretical artist, but one who knew pain and suffering as intimately as it was possible to do so without losing your life.” Always a warrior and rebel, and at this point a legendary hero, the proud Matoub again returned to Algeria accompanied by cane and colostomy bag, this time to perform in a football stadium in Tizi Ouzou, the heart of Kabyle. “Aggression, which could have annihilated me, ended up reinforcing me. That day I knew that the five bullets of Aïn El Hamman were defeated.” The Berber people’s love for Matoub and his cause were reinforced.

109 Ibid., p. 120.
Incredibly, Matoub’s story intensifies further. His outright atheism and denouncement of Islamic Fundamentalism and traditional marabouts, the holy men that controlled Kabyle society, earned him the hatred of the various Islamist groups that were vying for power with the army appointed High State Council, which had been created to prevent the FIS (Front Islamique du Sud) from sweeping elections in 1992 and destroying democracy within Algeria, resulting in civil war. The Shariah law touting FIS and GIA (Armed Islamic Group), which opposed music and everything else that Matoub stood for, viewed Matoub as a root of moral disintegration within Kabyle. In 1994, upon a return to Kabyle for a Tafsut anniversary celebration, Matoub was taken hostage by fifteen members of the GIA in a roadside café.\(^\text{111}\) In the remote captivity of the Islamic jihadists, Matoub was tried by two GIA leaders and given the death sentence. With death looming, for the first time Matoub swallowed his pride, vowing to put an end to his singing career and swearing to do what he could to dissuade the political motivations of the Berber movement. After more than weeks in captivity, to Matoub and his people’s astonishment, he was released.\(^\text{112}\)

Matoub’s discharge was not the result of goodwill on the part of GIA, nor was it their trust of his word that he would withdraw from his career. Rather, it was out of fear and necessity, as the Berber people had rallied in order to assure his release. The Berber Cultural Movement (MCB) had sent a message guaranteeing complete armed war against the Islamists unless Matoub was freed. Not only were search parties sent through the mountains, but the streets of Tizi Ouzou and Algiers were filled with tens


\(^{112}\) Ibid. at 1.
of thousands of angry protesters. I watched one video about the kidnapping, and in it one can see the protesters chanting “Matoub or the Gun!” (Matoub ou le pistolet!).

“The terrorists freed me because they had no choice… For the first time a whole region mobilized, arms in hand, to show that they would not give in to intimidation… My songs, my music, my struggle will be even stronger now.” Naturally, Matoub did not give up music, and went on to release an album dedicated to a less lucky victim of the GIA: daughter of Kabyle writer Tahar Djaout. Matoub’s legendary status was only made more ephemeral among his supporters. His aggressors were only making him more powerful and his people bitterer.

After releasing his thirty-sixth album, “An Open Letter to…,” which featured a song parodying the national anthem, Lounès accompanied his wife back to Algeria to obtain a Visa. On June 25, 1998, masked gunmen stopped a car driven by Lounès Matoub at a roadblock. They opened fire on the vehicle, finally killing the seemingly invincible Berber hero and injuring his passengers; Matoub’s wife and her two sisters. Immediately, news of Matoub’s death spread like wildfire to the Kabyle populations throughout Algeria and the diaspora. The magnitude of this singer’s influence on his people could be seen instantly. Thousands of mourners crowded around the Mohamed Nédir Hospital in Tizi-Ouzou, where Matoub’s body had been taken. The crowd immediately threw blame on the Algerian state, chanting slogans such as “Government, Assassins” in French.

114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
Matoub’s murder sparked a week of volatile riots throughout Kabyle. Youth clashed violently with riot police, regional government offices were attacked, public property was destroyed, and three young men were killed. The situation drew the attention of the international community, and James Rubin, press secretary for the US State Department, called on the Algerian government, as well as its people, to stray from the use of violence as a political tool. The United Nations also took strides, claiming that a mission of delegates would assess the situation in Algeria. Disregarding this, the Armed Berber Movement announced its presence, swearing to “avenge the blood” of Matoub, touting the claim that the government not only assassinated Matoub, but the Berber culture. In defiance of law, they covered signs with slogans like “Assa, Azekka. Tamizight Tella” (Tamazight, today and tomorrow).118 Lounès Matoub had been martyred.

On July 5th 1995, ten days after the death of Matoub and the 36th anniversary of Algeria’s independence, an Arabic-only law went into effect, commanding exclusive use of Arabic in all public domains including education, businesses, and media. This was a move meant to complete the Arabization process began by the FLN after independence. Lounès had been an outspoken critic of this discriminatory law, which was essentially enabling linguistic cleansing. Thus, it is natural that many Berbers would link his death to an overall attempt at killing Berber culture.

However, the Kabyle people carried on the struggle Matoub had so fervently promoted, and chaotic unrest in response to his murder forced the government to soften their attitude on the new law. “Invoking the Kabyle ‘cycle of reproduction,’ in which the deceased is mythically understood as resurrected in the birth of the next generation, young Kabyles have transformed Matoub’s death into political inspiration,
utilizing his assassination to advance their cultural and linguistic demands.” At the end of his biography, Matoub wrote a call to arms. “I call for resistance…It is not only with words that one must stop terrorism, but with arms.”

Like his life, the death of Lounès Matoub is surrounded by controversy, and although these circumstances are fascinating, it is not what I choose to focus on. What can we take from this account of Lounès Matoub’s life? The claim by Berbers that Matoub’s murderers had not only killed him, but the entire Berber culture, says so much on its own. According to Kabyle singer-songwriter Moh Alileche, there is no figure in the Berber rights movement that has come close to rivaling the power of Kabyle rebel bard Lounès Matoub. The story of his life gives evidence to Alileche’s claim. Lounès Matoub is undoubtedly the most tantalizing Berber musician of history thus far, and the hero of a generation that had been stepped on, oppressed, murdered, and disrespected by nearly every side of Algerian society. He was the voice not only of his generation, but also of an entire movement, and he galvanized it. He sang in the face of oppression, and called things as he saw them, refusing to bend to injustice. The unwavering love and passion that Matoub had for his culture were channeled through his music, and thus transferred to his supporters. Matoub was brave, stubborn, and idealistic, and made no attempt to disguise his ideals and criticisms. His tendency to never back down from a challenge, and his constant insistence on returning to his beloved Kabyle mystified and inspired a beaten and forgotten people. It also angered and scared his enemies. The account of Matoub’s life and his continued elevation in

120 Ibid.
121 From personal conversation.
status is proof that musicians and singers have played a principal role in rallying the Berber people to their own culture and given them something to be proud of, and thus something to fight for. Matoub called forth the poetry and music that his millennia old Berber blood was ripe with, and stripped away archaic and ambiguous imagery and symbols. The result was a modern, poignant, and zealous music that evoked the emotion, pride, anger, and strength of his people, and continues to do so.

When police murdered 18 year-old Kabyle youth Massinissah Guermah in 2001, two weeks of volatile and deadly protests very similar to those that followed Matoub’s death were initiated. Some referred to this as “Kabyle ‘s own intifada.” Although the clashes eventually mellowed into peaceful marches, demonstrations rose up in major cities throughout Algeria, Morocco, and France denouncing “the repression and persecution of cultural identity in Kabyle ' and to express solidarity with those 'Amazigh brothers' who 'are being assassinated for [their qualities of] dignity, liberty, and Amazigh identity'. Wearing traditional Kabyle clothing and marching under banners featuring Tamazight writing and photographs of Matoub, the supporters yelled ethno-nationalist slogans such as 'Free the Kabyles' and 'We are not Arabs'.” Even in his death, Matoub continues to surface in movements of resistance, invoked by his people as a symbol of defiance, courage, and cultural pride.124

Alileche was good friends with Matoub, and in 2009 released his album *In Memory of a Hero*, which was devoted to the late singer.

**Takfarinas**

“Twenty years ago, it was hard, hard, hard to make music, to say “Berber,” to say ‘Amazigh,’” it was difficult. The 80s! The 70s—harder, even! Yes! But not anymore. Now everyone says, ‘We are Berber. We are Amazigh.’”

-Takfarinas

In a wonderful and illuminating conversation about Berber music, my friend Kevin Cloud, a previous band mate of Moh Alileche, related details about his involvement in organizing a Takfarinas show in the Bay Area. Chuckling, he described Takfarinas in his fully white suit, referring to him as the “Berber Bruce Springsteen.”

After viewing footage of the Kabyle superstar, I do not doubt the verity of Cloud’s description. A video of a January 2013 mega concert in Libya shows choreographed dancers in traditional dress, stage lighting, Takfarinas in leather pants, hundreds of Berber flags, and a hysterical and massive crowd.

In an interview with Afropop Worldwide, a radio program and online radio, Takfarinas claims a variety of musical influences, including several political Moroccan groups (“they were the rockers”) and the traditional *shaabi* music of Algeria. Above all, Takfarinas credits Idir as an idol and the Berber singer who inspired him to take up

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125 Kabyle Singer based in US. This is from a phone conversation I had with him.
music. “It was he who was the first, he was my idol, in some sense; the modernism, it was he who modernized Algerian music, and who made Algerian music be sung beyond Algeria in all of Africa.” The array of inspirations to Takfarinas’ music is clear evidence of the melting pot of North African, western, traditional and modern styles that modern Berber music encompasses.

With his custom-made double-necked mandol, showy moves, and often quite gaudy outfits, Takfarinas is certainly a performer. That said, he is not all show, and his songs do not just entertain the romantic. He mostly about the political injustice felt by the Kabyle population in Algeria, and his song Alaroplane Awiyi (Airplane Take Me) calls out to everyone in the Diaspora. This call certainly reached the large Berber population who gathered to see him in the Bay Area, fully equipped with Berber flags and cultural pride.127 Takfarinas is Kabyle’s rockstar.

**Tinariwen**

The musicians discussed thus far have a massive following in North Africa and the Berber Diaspora, but their crossover to Western audiences has been rather nominal. This is absolutely not true of the band Tinariwen, a Tuareg group started in Algeria and based out of Mali. I recently attended my second concert of theirs in Tucson, Arizona. The large following this group of ex-militant Tuaregs has acquired is fascinating in itself; their music has managed to bridge audiences in a way that that of no other Berber musicians have. This is evident in the incredibly diverse and wildly

127 From conversation with Kevin Cloud
enthusiastic crowd that gathered to clap, dance, and ogle at the striking Tuareg dress on April 24, 2013. While the extent of their popularity is certainly interesting, it is not hard to see why their music is so accessible to American audiences. They have collaborated with several well-known Western musicians, and included several features of recognized names on their latest album. In addition, their music is composed of pentatonic scales and 4/4 timing, like the American blues and rock n’ roll genres, earning it the nickname “Tuareg Blues.” The bass lines are funk gold, heavily danceable rhythms roll off the djembe, and the lilting, bluesy melodies of the guitars intertwine with hypnotic vocals. The result is rhythmic and spellbinding, a link to a primordial Saharan spirit. To the Westerner, the music of Tinariwen may feel simultaneously familiar, comfortable, foreign and exotic. It is mysterious, but accessible.

I think it is relevant and of interest to mention that the group opening for Tinariwen was a duo called Sihasin, from the Navajo nation in Northern Arizona. Sihasin mixed traditional Navajo music and punk rock, a quintessential music genre of resistance to state authority. Consisting of a brother and sister duo, “they grew up protesting the environmental degradation and inhumane acts of cultural genocide against their traditional way of life. Their music reflects hope for equality, healthy and respectful communities and social and environmental justice.”128 During Tinariwen’s encore, they called Sihasin onstage to join them for a song. What I witnessed was a collaboration of musicians representing marginalized peoples from two different continents, a coalescence of indigenous identity through music and performance,

potential evidence of a global escalation in indigenous assertion and identity. I managed to trade a few words with members of both band. I told Sihasin that I was studying indigenous music and social movements. I was met with a sigh, and told that I had a lot of work to do. In Tamasheq, my friend Hafsa Oubou communicated that I was studying Berber music to one of Tinariwen. Smiling and shifting his focus to me, he replied in French, which Hafsa again translated. He told me that Berber music was a rich and vast world, and that maybe one day I could have a big job.

Conclusion

The Berber people have vast potential to mobilize against the oppressive Arab-Islamic governments that confine them. One cannot speak out against an oppressor without a voice, and the voice of the Berbers comes from their musicians. It is a timeless voice, primordial and satiated with the collective experience of a resilient and hardy people in the face of oppression, infused with the centuries-old practice of poetry and prose, the tools through which Berbers have disseminated their understanding of the world and consequences of living. This voice, while belonging to an entire people, has been most effectively wielded by Berber musicians.

Berbers are not a people to acquiesce to repression, and their rebellious nature has been a major obstacle for the Arab-Islamic agenda of North African states. The musicians featured here are heroes to their people. They instill love and appreciation for Berber traditions, and the fire that pushes people to refuse the homogenization that has engulfed so many rich indigenous cultures. They represent what it means to be a
Berber in a traditional sense, while demonstrating that there is a place for the Berber language and culture in the modern world. Idir’s beloved *A vava inouwa* is prime evidence of this, as it transported Berbers back to their villages, grandmothers, and fireside tales, yet in aesthetic it was tastefully and creatively contemporary. This song was groundbreaking, and inspired a cultural pride in Berbers across the diaspora and homeland of Tamazgha. His popularity has hardly waned since.

These artists assert ethnocultural identity and the principles of democracy, human rights, and multiculturalism. Lounès Matoub, possibly the most influential of all Berbers in recent history, was a bastion of cultural pride and resistance, refusing to bow to a repressive Arab-Islamic agenda. His lyrics and music were straightforward in their denouncement of the loss of Berber culture, language, and rights. It is also deeply beautiful, and one can feel his anger, pride, and love without understanding Tamazight. Musicians such as Moh Alileche devote their albums to him and play his songs. There are festivals in his honor, and his rebellious spirit lives on in rallies and protests, portraits of his rugged face touted by Berber activists across North Africa. His courage, sensitivity, and passion launched him into the hearts and intellects of his people, and he fortified them against repression. His ability to mobilize Berbers proved to be dangerous to the hegemony of the Algerian state, and continues to be so after his death.

The tradition of the *rwais* is evidence that musicians have been guiding and rallying the Berber people long before they were ever oppressed by state authorities. Like the bards of Kabyle, the *rwais* travel the land, soaking in the state of the world. They filter this information through a system of ethic and insight to relay it via poetry.
and music to the Berber people. This is the virtue of *awal llma’na*, the tenet of speaking profoundly and with intuition concerning the conditions of the world and Berber communities. It is an egalitarian system of disseminating information and ideology to all people.

Rayssa Fatima Tabaamrant upholds this virtue. As a singer and Member of Parliament, she is truly a voice of her people. When she became the first person to pose a question in Tamazight to the Parliament, Tabaamrant asserted herself as a serious activist and contender to the Arab hegemony in the Moroccan Parliament, sparking an initiative to allocate the proper resources for the use of Tamazight in such settings. In the Tamazight language, Tabaamrant speaks the truths of the Berber reality, standing up for her people in politics and music alike. In this, she fulfills her role as *rayssa*, and for it she is a symbol of cultural pride.

The musicians I have featured are the luminaries of political, however they represent only the tip of an iceberg, and future potential is measureless. Berber music is moving forward in varied and remarkable ways. Through this research, I have discovered that there is a flourishing Berber hip-hop scene in North Africa and across the Diaspora. Their lyrics retain the original role of rap and hip-hop, which is to address injustice. In an interview with Radio Netherlands Worldwide, a singer of Moroccan group Rap2Bled claims that they intend on spreading and making the Berber language more accessible by fusing it with hip-hop, which is popular among Moroccan youth.129 In one video, rap group Style Souss can be seen sampling a

traditional Moroccan Berber flute player and mixing it into their beat. There are also collaborations between Berber rap groups throughout North Africa, which implies a trans-North African solidarity among Berber artists from differing states. Fascinatingly, there are also a large number of militant Berber metal bands singing in Tamazight about their frustration of being marginalized under Arab hegemony.130

Applied ethnomusicologist Richard Kurin claims that by promoting culture, one can actually become a catalyst for progress—"to expand the ability of people—regular people, common people, people at the grassroots—to create, debate, and manipulate their culture, and to share it with others."131 By endorsing and spreading the music of Berbers and other indigenous minority movements, one can play a huge role in enlightening people to the existence of culture. The broadening of a receptive audience inspires additional creation from the producer, and also the listener. Collaboration between Western and Berber musicians is an exciting development, and the conversation it sparks could lead to greater insight into the effects such interactions yield.

Tuareg musicians seem to be leading the way with this sort of engagement, the path paved by Tinariwen. Another Tuareg superstar Bombino recorded his very recent album Nomad in the Nashville studio of Dan Auerbach, member of the wildly popular Black Keys. American rock and blues come together with hypnotic Saharan grooves in an empowered and fresh Tuareg sound that is turning the ears of the American media.

According to applied ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon, “we learn from each other, when it goes well, and we collaborate; we are partners in a common cause.”

During a 2011 artist project held in Morocco, New York based art/research group Beyond Digital uncovered the mystical and stirring music of Imanaren, an obscure group of Berber musicians who claim the politically engaged Izanzaren and Archach as major influences. Beyond Digital ended up interacting and collaborating musically with the band, Imanaren, and even filming a music video for them. Their album has been re-released by Dutty Artz, an innovative New York label run by DJs. What was once a rare DIY album from the mountains of southern Morocco is now available to open-minded artists and individuals across the world. They have performed a show in Tangier in collaboration with American band Nettles, and are set to release an album in collaboration with another American band Soot. In the context of the Iraq War, Titon speaks of the importance of promoting culture to develop or rebuild a community: “Our efforts to sustain music, on behalf of the shaping power of art that each human being possesses, and that all of us use in our lives every day, as we shape those lives, create our environments, celebrate spontaneity and creativity—these efforts will outlive and outlast the negating powers of control and destruction, of slavery and empire building, of greed and the desire for material wealth.”

As long as the Berber culture is alive, the people will possess a say in their fate. Culture can be implemented effectively against an oppressor, which is why Berbers must remain steadfast in the preservation of their culture and its progression forward if

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they are to realize the demands of their movement. Musicians inspire this to happen, and through them the Berber culture remains energetic and thriving. “When the movements in which they had been involved were no longer active, the ideas and ideals of the movements lived on in their art. And, in many cases, they served to inspire new movements by helping to keep the older movements alive in the collective memory.”

Although they influence each other to great extent, music exists outside of political organizations; it is more essential. Through music the Berber spirit is affirmed, and culture blossoms. Music is the spring from whence the Berber spirit rings loud and strong into the modern world, uniting and engaging a people in its cause to live; it is the source of “reberberation.”

Hafsa Oubou and I with members of Tinariwen

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