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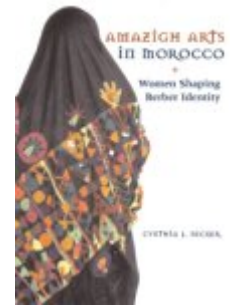
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cynthia Becker. *Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. Illustrations. 224 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-71295-9.

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Debating the Berber/Arab Divide: Are Generalizations Possible?

Cynthia Becker addresses the issue of Berber identity in contemporary and historical Morocco in *Amazigh Arts in Morocco*. She argues that art forms in Berber communities are controlled, produced, and worn by women. The arts ultimately draw attention to female fertility, and, in so doing, emphasize communal concerns for what the author terms the “ethnic purity” of group identity. Becker situates her study among the Ait Khabbash, a Tamazight-speaking community located in southern Morocco’s Tafilalet oasis. Due to historical changes wrought by French colonialism, this once nomadic group has settled, and it maintains a separate and distinct ethnic identity from its Arab neighbors.

Chapter 1 presents the wool blankets, carpets, and clothing produced by the women of this community. Becker explores representations of ethnic and gendered identity, examining the communal weaving process as well as conducting a careful formal analysis of the objects. The author provides novel readings of significant visual themes specific to the Ait Khabbash’s nomadic past, for example, interpreting the use of the triangle as a reference to recent settlements and constrained movement. Becker’s careful attention to the schematics of color as an identifying mechanism for female fertility is particularly convincing.

In chapter 2, she surveys the gradual process of gender socialization throughout the life cycle and associated adornment. Becker documents not only generational changes and historical continuity in clothing and

hairstyles, protective amulets, and tattoos, but also the variance among regional groups. The author extends her analysis of motif and color schemes into the consideration of dress among Ait Khabbash women, attributing conservative changes to increased contact with Arab neighbors. Becker interprets women’s evolving fashions as creative strategies for the negotiation of tensions between modesty requirements and the “source of their power: their connection to female fertility” (p. 75).

Public dances performed for celebratory occasions, including weddings and the reception of visiting relatives, provide the subject of the third chapter. The author notes that although these performances constitute a shared tradition among Berbers, Ait Khabbash choreography, musical techniques, and dress are a self-conscious demonstration of the group’s distinctiveness. The author’s proficiency in Tamazight enables a fascinating and thorough reading of the visual imagery related to female fertility embedded in celebratory songs and oral poetry.

Chapters 4 and 5 present a meticulous examination of marital preparations and ceremonies in which Becker challenges the normative interpretation of gender in Moroccan weddings. Rather than reiterating the alignment of women with private space often posited by the literature, the author documents practices of gender inversion in wedding preparations. Adornment of the groom, for example, takes place in a private realm, while the bridal decoration occurs in public and displays the young wife as an embodied symbol of community. Becker’s strength

in linguistic analysis appears here as well; the examination of accompanying songs uncovers revealing poetic references to the power of female fertility throughout wedding preparations. Analysis is all-inclusive, considering dress, performative play, accompanying songs, and spatial organization, to further demonstrate the communal emphasis on female fertility and its role in preserving group uniqueness. The author concludes with a comment on symbolic continuity in the marital ceremony, even as the Ait Khabbash grapple with historical change.

In chapter 6, Becker discusses the community's nomadic history and participation in the trans-Saharan slave trade. To further illustrate concerns with ethnic purity and preservation of group identity, Becker recounts the history of the Ismkhan, descendants of slaves taken from sub-Saharan Africa who live among the Ait Khabbash. While the Ismkhan share many cultural forms (such as dress) with the Ait Khabbash, they do not intermarry. Rather, they delineate group uniqueness through a variety of modes, including linguistic code switching during musical performances (from Tamazight to Moroccan Arabic), as well as references in song and oral poetry to a shared experience of slavery. The Ismkhan, who bear a marked resemblance to the Gnawa (also descended from sub-Saharan slaves and found throughout Morocco), are famous for healing capabilities, legitimated through their connections to the historical figure Bilal, a freed slave and companion of the Prophet. The author describes the Ismkhan as united with but separate from the Ait Khabbash and as a further example of communal concern for ethnic distinctiveness.

The book closes with an examination of contemporary use of Amazigh symbols in visual art. Becker explains that both Arab and Amazigh male painters are turning with increasing frequency to the visual art forms of Berber women, to forge a postcolonial national identity. The author profiles several prominent Moroccan painters and poets, among them Farid Belkahia, Fatima Mallal, and Mohamed Nabil. The final chapter also provides a brief summary of political activism and change in government policy on education, and touches on the recent birth of a transnational Amazigh cultural movement. The arts of Amazigh women, Becker concludes, are now appropriated to preserve the cultural heritage of groups like the Ait Khabbash, and to delineate the historical diversity of the Moroccan nation.

As a study of art and gender roles in a specific, localized Berber-speaking group, Becker's book is a contribution to our understanding of an underrepresented region

and particular North African community. However, the author's choice of title and introduction expose her argument to criticisms avoidable had she opted for a more restricted scope of inquiry. The broad title, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity*, perhaps reflects the publisher's intention rather than that of the author. Nonetheless, it sets up an expectation for the reader that the text ultimately does not fulfill. It appears as though the book's premise is a survey of the arts among Berber-speaking communities; however, discussion of groups other than the Ait Khabbash is limited to the final chapter, an abrupt leap from the cohesion of the previous six sections. In this final chapter, Becker jumps from the localized Ait Khabbash group to Amazigh identity throughout Morocco, and inadvertently draws attention to problematic issues raised by the introduction.

The text begins with the author's thesis that Berber women are responsible for artistic production in their communities, emphasizing female fertility and the symbols of ethnic purity. Becker tells the reader that Berbers consider themselves the indigenous people of North Africa, and implies that the term "Berber," or "Amazigh," denotes a cohesive ethnic community—recognizably separate from Arabs (p. 2). It is not until the final chapter that the reader receives any indication of the high degree of cultural mixing between the groups. Becker writes that the contemporary artist Nabil "identifies himself as a 'true' Moroccan with a mixed Amazigh and Arab heritage" (p. 181). From the bulk of the text (particularly given its concern with "ethnic purity"), a reader might assume that Berbers and Arabs avoided intermarriage as a general rule, and that the categories, in fact, constitute separate and readily distinguishable ethnic groups.

However, as many of the scholars cited in the author's bibliography note in their own work, this is simply not the case. For example, M. Elaine Combs-Schilling writes that "collective identity, then and now, among peoples who happen to speak Berber, is based on other, more circumscribed ethnic and political criteria.... Hence, the only basis we have for lumping Berbers together is linguistic. Berber speakers were not and are not culturally, socially, nor genetically distinct at the level of the category as a whole." [1] Lawrence Rosen notes that a supposed ethnic distinction between the groups has "almost always been taken for granted," further commenting that "this tendency to avoid systematic analysis of the Arab-Berber distinction appears to stem from French colonial attitudes." [2] Colonial era scholars also relate the complexity of ethnicity as a category of separation between the linguistic groups. In his 1926 *Ritual and Belief in Mo-*

rocco, ethnographer Edward A. Westermarck comments, "It should be noticed, however, that the term 'Arab' is only an indication of language, not of race. There can be no doubt that the large majority of Arabic-speaking tribes in Morocco are purely or essentially Berber by origin." [3] Such accounts raise doubts about the applicability of ethnic purity concerns among Berber speakers as a whole.

The Berber/Arab dichotomy owes much to the influence of French colonialism. The Berber Dahir of 1930, a divide and conquer policy cited by Becker, failed *specifically* because differences between "Berber" and "Arab" were not sufficiently divisive to ensure French success. The decree provoked a widespread backlash on the part of both Berber and Arabic speakers, and escalated the struggle against imperial control. Rosen concludes that it was "only the most notorious (and disastrous) consequence of the French belief that Arab-Berber differences were so great as to permit a real divide and conquer policy." [4]

Even if one accepts Becker's own definition of "ethnicity" as referring to "Berber attitudes regarding group membership," other Berber speakers do not necessarily concur with the author's notion of collectivity (p. 1). Contemporary Arabic scholarship abounds on the hotly contested subject of Berber/Arab categories, a debate well known in North Africa. 'Uthman Sa'di, the Algerian Berber author of *al-Barbar al-Amazigh 'Arab 'aribah: wa-'urubat al-shamal al-Ifriqi 'abra al-tarikh* (1998), disputes the notion of a cohesive Berber identity distinct from the Arabs. [5] In addition to contemporary scholarship, valuable historical sources exist in Arabic on the topic of Berber-Arab relations in North Africa; among them the fourteenth-century accounts of Ibn Khaldun, which rank among the most in-depth scholarship in any language concerning Berber groups in North Africa prior to French colonialism. [6] For a scholar tracing ethnic identity construction throughout time, consultation of Arabic precolonial and contemporary documentation is invaluable. As Becker's proficiency in Tamazight provides such an integral component of this text, it is puzzling that she neglects any Arabic-language sources.

Becker glosses over the complexity of the Berber/Arab categorization, and, as a result, subsequent analysis seems forced. For example, Becker writes that "many Berber groups living in the mountainous regions of Morocco or its desert fringes, continued to speak their own languages and retained their political autonomy from the urban-based Arab dynasties that ruled Morocco over the centuries" (pp. 2-3). The mention of urban-based

Arab dynasties is factually inaccurate. Many historic urban-based dynasties were, in fact, Berber, among them the Almoravids, Almohads, and Marinids. This generalization exposes the central weakness of the book's argument, and jeopardizes the adjoined thesis that control over female sexuality is meant to preserve a distinctly Berber ethnic identity.

Becker attributes close control of female sexuality to concern for purity of bloodline. Here, the text suffers from lack of specificity. Many of the customs the Ait Khabbash practice are not limited to Berber-speaking groups themselves. For example, Becker writes, "among Amazigh groups, women's breast milk also has the ability to forge kinship relations. When unrelated children are nourished by one woman's breast milk, the children become *awlad laban* or 'milk children'" (p. 4). The author explains that such bonds prohibit later marriage, and relates this practice as evidence that women "unite and bind the society together through their reproductive abilities" (p. 4). Although occurring in Berber-speaking communities, *awlad laban* is an Arabic concept deeply rooted in Islamic history, present, for example, in anecdotes about the life of the Prophet. As Becker's footnote indicates, milk kinship was often used by the Ait Khabbash to cement relationships with Arab trading partners. It is a widespread practice throughout the Muslim world, and perhaps indicates that Islamic influence has more to do with constraining female sexuality than does concern for ethnic identity. As Nawal El Saadawi points out, errant behavior in a woman poses a larger threat to the fabric of Muslim society than does that of a man, as "it may lead to confusion between descendants and inheritance,... which together constitute the cornerstone of the patriarchal system" (p. 56).

This is not to say that Ait Khabbash practices or identity are not specific to the group; rather, the study that Becker presents in the text's initial six chapters is compelling and marks several artistic practices as unique among both Arabic- and Berber-speaking groups. For example, the gender inversion in the group's marital practice indicates that preservation of communal identity is a central concern for the Ait Khabbash on a localized level. The question, however, is whether these distinctions can be generalized, particularly given the complexities of Moroccan cultural history and the hotly contested nature of the Berber/Arab categories.

Amazigh Arts in Morocco constitutes a pioneering contribution to the field of North African cultural and artistic history. Becker's lucid prose conveys an inti-

mate knowledge of the Ait Khabbash, and a sensitivity for the complexity of women's lives and the artistry with which they negotiate social tensions within Muslim North Africa. Becker's analysis of Tamazight oral poetry and song is particularly strong and makes a necessary and valuable contribution to the field of North African art history. The author successfully balances archival documentation with her own beautiful and well-selected photographs from the field. The use of photo reimaging software to safeguard privacy at the request of informants further displays Becker's deep respect and regard for the Ait Khabbash community.

As the first in-depth investigation of North African art history in English, Becker's study is significant. While not unproblematic, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco* is a pioneering work, and contributes to the ongoing debate concerning ethnicity, gender, and artistic practice in Islamic societies. However, it also raises the question: in a country as historically diverse as Morocco, are generalizations possible?

Notes

[1]. M. Elaine Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality and Sacrifice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 15.

[2]. Lawrence Rosen, "The Social and Conceptual

Framework of Arab-Berber Relations in Central Morocco," in *Arabs and Berbers: From Tribe to Nation in North Africa*, ed. Ernest Gellner and Charles Micaud (London: Duckworth, 1972), 155.

[3]. Edward A. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 1:5-6

[4]. Rosen, "Social and Conceptual Framework," 156.

[5]. Although, regrettably, this text is not yet available in English, its title translates as "The Berber/The Amazigh: Arabs, Arabization, and the Arab character of North Africa throughout history."

[6]. Much of Ibn Khaldun's work is available in French and English translations. His most important works concerning Berber history in North Africa include: Ibn Khaldun, *Histoire des Berbères et des dynasties Musulmanes de l'Afrique Septentrionales*, 4 vols, trans. Baron de Slane (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1998); Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'Ibar wa-diwan al-mubtada' wa-l-khabar*, 7 vols. (1384; Cairo: Bulaq, 1867-68); and Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal, 2nd. ed., 3 vols. (1958; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

[7]. Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. and ed. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Press, 1980), 56.

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