

## 10. Becoming Berber: ethnicity and identity politics among Moroccans in Belgium

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### Introduction

“I am not an Arab. It’s my country. I am Amazigh”.<sup>1</sup> It’s a sentence I’ve heard from many Moroccan Berber activists over the years, who were referring to their homelands as ‘their country’, a Berber nation and not an Arab one. Moroccan Berber activism denotes a particular form of cultural and political transnational activism, which opposes politics of ethnic and cultural categorization and assimilation. From Belgium, it remains directed towards Morocco as an ‘imagined homeland’ with which it maintains ties.

Migrant transnationalism heavily impinges upon the constitution and reproduction of identities (Glick Schiller-Fouron, 2001, Vertovec, 2004, 2009). As a form of identity politics, it becomes visible through social movements when migrant voices claim recognition and a right to difference, which is the basic message underlying Moroccan Berber activism in Belgium today. By emphasizing the unique character of the Berbers as an ethnic group and this group’s sameness from within, as well as its difference vis-à-vis others – in this case, particularly Arabs – Berber activists in Morocco and Belgium aim at replacing ‘old, possible solidarity bonds’ with new bonds that are based on kinship, which are moreover rooted in history (Ferguson, 2009: 144-146). Hence, by making use of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Martin Alcoff, 2000: 320) Berber activists claim a fixed location in history, as is the case with ethnic minority activism in general. In this way, their identity is perceived and presented as the result of a natural, historical process.

At the beginning of the nineties, a small network of Moroccan-born activists began founding associations both in Morocco and abroad, predominantly in urban settings. Traveling elites and migrating intelligentsia were the key driving forces behind the resurgence of a Berber cultural activism and Berber associations in Belgium, 'recovering' the Berber past of Morocco and Moroccan migration as a 'political archaeology', and carrying out the idea of a deep historical Berber nation to the masses; one that was and is different from an Arab and/or Islamic nation. The construction and dissemination of this particular view on Moroccan history in the diaspora was at the core of my dissertation research.

When I started interviewing Berber activists in Antwerp in 2008, and participating in their public events, I wanted to try and understand how and why these activists were stressing the ethnic component of their social and cultural identities. I also wanted to understand how and why, accordingly, they were attempting to engage with Moroccan national history and the history of migration towards Europe in new and meaningful ways. Shared understandings of the past forge collective identities.

The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the history of ethnic and cultural Berber activism in Belgium, with an emphasis on Flanders and Antwerp in particular. Whereas during the early nineties, some Moroccan Berbers attempted to establish associations in the cities of Ghent and Liège, most activities currently take place in the Antwerp region, which explains this geographical focus. The chapter is based on four years of ethnographic and archival research in Belgium, the Netherlands and Morocco. Throughout this period, I conducted life story interviews with forty activists in the Netherlands and Belgium, fifteen of which in Antwerp, interviewed fourteen representatives of other Moroccan (migrant) associations, attended associations' meetings and cultural festivals, and analysed their cultural production (e.g. published poetry, public history) and private archival records (e.g. reports of meetings and internal and external communication).<sup>2</sup> One of the main findings in this research was that the rise of Berber identity politics in Morocco and the diaspora could be explained by trends in both national (Moroccan, Belgian, Dutch) politics and (historical) migration patterns. However, the discourse of the Berber Movement can only be understood by also taking into account the legacy of French colonialism.

## The roots of the Berber-Arab issue

Several scholars have argued that under colonial rule, French administrators and ethnologists stressed ethnic and cultural differences between Arabs and Berbers in order to facilitate their colonial mission (Aouchar, 2005, Burke, 2007, Gellner-Micaud, 1972, Guerin, 2011, Hammoudi 1997, Hart 1997, Pouessel 2010, Silverstein 2004). They stressed the importance of safeguarding indigenous Berber culture and regarded Arab culture – and Islam – as exogenous to the Maghreb. From the late nineteenth until the mid twentieth century, the French produced what Hammoudi (1997: 112) has called “a dense authoritative corpus” in the Maghreb. This “Moroccan Vulgate” (Burke, 2007), underscored by orientalist ideas and colonial ethnology, continues to shape the Berber Movement’s perception of what it signifies to be Berber, with activists relying on historical and ethnological knowledge produced in the early twentieth century. In the long run, French colonial rule impacted the Berber speaking rural populations more than the Arab speaking urban populations (Gross-McMurray, 1993: 39-58). What French colonial discourse had denoted as ‘Berber culture’, and indigenous and also secular culture, survived well into the postcolonial era, when Morocco was reconfigured as a constitutional monarchy. Well into the nineties, support for the Berber cause was seen as support for policies having originated under the French colonialist regime (Maddy-Weitzman, 2007: 30). Even renowned scholar of nationalism, Ernest Gellner (with Micaud, 1972), predicted that Berber identity would not become a major issue in Moroccan politics and that Berber culture would be superseded by other common identifiers, such as Islam. The course of history, however, has proven that Gellner and Micaud were wrong on this account.

## The Berber Movement from a historical and transnational perspective

In a recent volume on the history and current state of the Berber Cultural Movement in Morocco and Algeria, Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (2007) concluded that the more Morocco was challenged socially, economically and politically on both its interior and exterior fronts, the more predominant the role of the Berber Cultural Movement became (Maddy-Weitzman, 2007). Thus, the democratization and liberalization of the Maghreb on the one hand, and the development of Berber associations on the other, are linked. With the advent

of mass labor migration, and the formation of diaspora cutting across several national contexts, this framework became increasingly transnational. Migration has had lasting effects on not only the ways in which Moroccan national identity and politics have been defined and challenged, but also on the development of Berber associative life. In particular since the nineties, these associations are relying on a discourse of human rights and indigeneity (Maddy-Weitzman, 2007: 44). Berber activism in Morocco and its diaspora has become a significant contributor in debates on minority, human and women's rights, and the ongoing discussions about democratization and secularization in Moroccan society.

Moroccan political Berberism – politicized 'ethnic' sentiment – originally arose out of the *Mouvement Populaire*, a political party with a primarily rural and Berber-speaking following that had been created as a counterweight to the Arab nationalist *Istiqlal* in 1959 and out of discontent with the marginalization of local notables. Though the *Mouvement Populaire* channeled opinions of '*Berberité*', the party supported the national, centralized state authority. The party encouraged the new king to make room for a Berber element in newly independent Morocco, suggesting the use of Berber or Tamazight in national education. However, Mohamed V ideologically operated in the middle of Arabism and Berberism and proclaimed a Moroccan identity based on Islam, Arabism and 'Moroccanism', solving the ethnic issue, yet only temporarily.

Following the death of Mohamed V, the authoritarian system of Hassan II functioned as a way to co-opt competitive and threatening elements into the state structure (Hammoudi, 1997). The seventies were characterized by general political instability. Two military coups marked the beginning of Morocco's state of oppression and persecution of political opponents in years to come. As a result of the coups of 1971 and 1972, 'Berbers' employed in finance, security and foreign relations were discharged. Two 'Berbers' were behind the coups: Mohamed Medbouh from the Rif and Mohamed Oufkir from the Middle Atlas. A 'Berber dimension' was easily added to both affairs. The decade following these coups counted severely oppressed uprisings, political trials, and the creation of secret detention center Tazmamart in 1977. The appointment of Driss Bassri, the feared Minister of the Interior, in 1979 additionally contributed to the maintenance of a reign of terror within a dictatorial regime (Maddy-Weitzman, 2011: 92). This was the political climate in which the Berber Movement gradually arose.

Demands made by Berber activists throughout the seventies and eighties, were ignored, if not condemned, by Hassan II. Moreover, any sign of Berber identity in public space was seen as an act undermining state authority and national

identity. During these decades, known as *les années de plomb* (the 'Years of Lead') numerous members of the political opposition were kidnapped or imprisoned without a fair trial. Even though regarded illegal, the Berberist agenda was now organized outside of the political party system. In 1967 the two very first Berber associations were established, even though activists could not always freely meet. A group of Algerian and French intellectuals founded the *Académie berbère* (Berber Academy), soon renamed *Agraw Imazighen* (Berber Academy), in Paris. Originally, this association resembled more of an elitist society. It was also very much orientated towards cultural affairs and paid little attention to political questions.

During the seventies in Paris, several other associations were founded. Most of the activists that would develop the Movement in Morocco during the late sixties and seventies were in fact students in France and became inspired there, taking ideas back with them upon their return to Morocco. This element of exchange across national borders was vital from the start (Pouessel, 2010: 108).

The first Berber association in Morocco, the *Association Marocaine de Recherche et d'échange Culturelles* ('Moroccan Association of Research and Cultural Exchange', AMREC) was founded by a group of Berber speaking students in Rabat in 1967 as well. Most of them were students at the faculty of arts and history. These students sought recognition for their people's language and culture in Morocco. The association *al-Intilaqa* ('The Launching') in Nador was the first association outside of the capital of Rabat to advocate popular and oral culture. The association temporarily dissolved in 1981 under severe political pressure (Feliu, 2006: 275). Berber associations were – and still are – predominantly made up by mostly left-wing, secular intelligentsia. Berber activism as we have come to know it since the late eighties and early nineties in Morocco has its roots in political ideologies such as Marxism (Pouessel, 2010). This also applies to the founders of associations in the diaspora, who were mostly highly educated, first-generation migrants.

Through governmental institutions such as the *Amicales*, the *années de plomb* were equally felt in the diaspora. The last decade of Hassan II's reign was marked by some significant changes, attained in part by substantial interior and international pressure to bring about more respect for human rights. A landmark in the development of the *Amazigh* movement, the *Charte d'Agadir relative aux droits linguistiques et culturels* dissected Moroccan culture and languages from the perspective of the Berbers' human rights as an indigenous, albeit now 'minority' population. The concise document, written by prominent Berber

activist Mohamed Chafik, appealed to the indigenusness of Berber languages and cultures in North Africa. All the while, it stressed the interaction of the Berbers with 'others' all throughout Moroccan history, stressing their ability towards intercultural exchange, an argument which is being made by activists in the diaspora in particular.

Though the last years of Hassan II's reign were marked by significant changes on a national level, the Berber movement increasingly profiled itself as an international and global movement, all the while struggling with local issues and internal differences of opinion. From 1997 onwards, when the first *Congrès Mondial Amazigh (CMA)*, was held, the *Amazigh* Movement had indeed become more internationalist, aspiring to unite all Berbers in North Africa and the diaspora for one common cause. Increasingly, activists sought out various international platforms where their voice could be heard and their rights in home countries and host societies defended. The *CMA* was founded in France in 1995 by some forty Berber associations, predominantly from Algeria, Morocco, and France (Kratochwil, 1999; Maddy-Weitzman, 2011: 133-139). Again, the role of the Berber diaspora was crucial.

## Migration to Europe and the development of migrant associations

During the early sixties, Hassan II's investment in national and local economies had been far too scarce to initiate entry in the international economy. An active emigration policy was to relieve the country from domestic unemployment. Migration was thus aspired to in view of migrant remittances and thus, supported a mainly economic goal. Consequently, migration due to domestic unemployment became a structural asset of the economy. Besides France, a large body of emigrants was employed in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium (Brand, 2008: 20-21). In particular the southern Souss and northern Rif regions provided the Moroccan state with a reservoir of migrants, whose first language was mostly Berber. According to some, especially migration from the Rif was fostered, and not just for economic reasons but political ones, too (Brand, 2008: 47; De Haas, 2007: 39-70; Reniers, 1999: 679-713). Bouras and Cottaar (2009), however, at least for emigration towards the Netherlands, argued that there is no evidence to support this thesis and asserted that in fact, all recruitment *bureaux* operated in the Atlantic coastal towns (Cottaar & Bouras, 2009: 35-37).

Few scholars in the Netherlands and Belgium have tackled the politics and discourses of Berber activism and the constitution of Berber identity among Moroccan migrants and post-migrants. Sociologists have studied identifications with Berber culture among Dutch-Moroccans and Flemish-Moroccans as part of studies on the integration and identifications of Moroccan migrants and their offspring. These studies were mostly based on surveys (Entzinger & Dourleijn, 2008; Crul & Heering, 2008). According to these studies, self-identification as Berber by way of mother tongue has increased to over sixty percent in urban areas among second-generation youth. Yet this identification does not obstruct self-identification as Moroccan. The role of new media in the construction of Berber identity and Dutch-Moroccan youth's rising interest in Berber culture on online discussion platforms such as *maroc.nl*, *maghreb.nl* and *Amazigh* websites at the turn of the 21st century was signalled and discussed by Brouwer (2006), Mamadouh (2001) and Merolla (2002, 2005).

The presence and development of Berber associations in the Netherlands and Flanders have been noticed and discussed by Bouras (2012) and Jacobs (2005) in their studies on the development of Moroccan migrant associations. Van Heelsum (2001; 2003; with Kraal 2002) studied the history and discourse of Berber associations in the Netherlands. Associative life of Moroccans in the Netherlands and Belgium developed from the onset but only started to flourish during the eighties when both the Dutch and Belgian government set up legal frameworks for family reunification. Berber cultural associations came in late and developed during the mid-nineties. Contrary to other migrant associations they were not founded by guest workers and their offspring, but mostly by new migrants, follow migrants, who came to the Netherlands and Belgium as students in higher education or in view of family unification during the early and mid-nineties, which may be explained by both migration patterns and policy shifts in Morocco itself.

Most historians studying migrant associations depended on the theory developed by Marlou Schrover and Rinus Penninx (2001), through which they could interpret the emergence and demise of migrant associations. They argued that during the earliest stages of the settlement of Moroccans in the Netherlands, organizations primarily attended to issues concerning their country of origin. Associations served practical purposes and offered aid with social security and working permits. This was followed by a stage where the focus on the specific needs and infrastructures for the migrants in the receiving country became more poignant. In this period, for instance, mosques were not merely religious



associations as they began to act as social organizations, offering communal leisurely activities. Thirdly, as the heterogeneity of the Moroccan community grew more marked during the eighties and nineties, prompted by family reunification and family formation processes, associations became more aware of the changing demands and needs of their fellow members. This resulted in the growth of women's and youth's organizations.

## The emergence of a Belgian-Berber diaspora

In Belgium, the Berber diaspora constitutes a pronounced Riffian community. The large majority of Berber activists boast a Riffian identity and maintain contacts with Berber activists in the Rif. As founders of associations, they were not guest laborers, but members of the so-called 'in-between' generation. They migrated towards Belgium as youth or young adolescents and most of them are highly educated lawyers, social workers or teachers. Emigration from Morocco towards Western Europe shows clearly defined, self-sustaining regional patterns (De Haas, 2007, 2009). The Rif was and still is a region where, once unemployment is high and the level of urbanization low, men are very likely to migrate as a way to opt out and start anew. Many times over, the activists in Belgium originating from the Rif area stressed during interviews that at the beginning of the nineties in the Rif area, Nador, Al Hoceima and Oujda as well, they were engaged in left-wing Marxist activism. Yet in the Rif, *al-Intilaqa* had already been a fixture in the Berber Movement from 1978 onwards, even though it had been temporarily forced to shut down its activities in 1981. It would, however, not be until 1990 when associative life in the Rif started to bloom. These associations were, and still remain, highly concentrated in the urbanized areas in between Nador and Al-Hoceima. In Nador *Ilmas* started out in 1990 with cultural activities, *Tanukra* ('Resurrection'), and *Taseghwnest* ('Fibula') followed in the first half of the decade. In Al Hoceima, *Numidia* was founded and Imzouren was home to *Nukur*, both names referring to 'ancient Berber kingdoms'. These associations were founded by an elite of alumni from the universities of Fez and Oujda, mainly lawyers, journalists and artists, sometimes with a past as activists in *Ilal Amam*, a Marxist-Leninist organization that was grounded in a secularist pan-Arab ideal. These associations organized cultural festivals, plays and poetry readings, next to conferences and debates on political themes regarding *Amazigh* culture,



language and identity. They often cooperated with human rights associations in the vicinity of Al-Hoceima and Imzouren.

Riffian associations have showed very little interest in national action and collaborating with other Berber associations. The associations active in the vicinity of Nador united in *Tamunit* ('Union') in 1997. Local associations' profiles have been remarkably regionalist from the start. As argued by Kratochwil (2002), this exceptional Riffian regionalism contributed to the idea of a culturalist 'neo-siba', a Berber countryside opposing the *makhzen*. This substituted for the previous, and popular Marxist-Leninist opposition of the seventies and eighties. The Rif had always refused to channel its political opposition through political parties such as the *Parti Populaire Socialiste* and *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* and the *Mouvement Populaire*. This also means that, during the nineties at least, opposition to the *makhzen* in the Rif was organized along cultural lines, and no longer took place along the lines of class struggle. This reluctance to participate in national associations was also noted by van Amersfoort and van Heelsum (2007). While Riffians founded several local associations, simultaneously, Belgian Moroccan-Riffians were doing the same in their places of residence.

Hence, since the late eighties, Berber cultural associations in France, Germany and the Netherlands have been advocating the rights of Berbers in the Maghreb and its diaspora. These associations nowadays continue to strive for the recognition and dissemination of knowledge on Berber languages, history and culture both in Morocco and among Moroccan migrants and their offspring in the diaspora. Members of such transnational associations more than often position themselves as secular actors. As opposed to other Western-European countries, Berber associations only became popular in Belgium during the early 2000's. Among Berber activists themselves, the lack of Berber ethnic sentiment among young Moroccans in Belgium has been due to the popularity of the Arab European League, in Antwerp in particular. Other activists stressed the relevance of Morocco's ties with its citizens abroad and explained that many Moroccans in Belgium were afraid of expressing themselves as Berbers well into the nineties, precisely because of Hassan II's repressive attitude towards the Berbers in their homeland. How and why have these associations then come to construct Berber identity in a Belgian diaspora context? In the following sections I describe and analyze the history of Berber associations and their members in Belgium, and Antwerp in particular, in a more detailed fashion against the backdrop of Moroccan labor and follow migration. I explain why and how these associations developed late in comparison to other Western-European countries and address

their public lives and roles as secular actors in Flemish society, by scrutinizing the interviews I conducted with activists and representatives of other Moroccan (umbrella) organizations in Antwerp. In so doing, I take into account both local Belgian politics and transnational ties.

## Rabat in Antwerp during the eighties and nineties: cultural diplomacy

The history of Berber identity politics in Flanders reaches back to 1986 in the region of Antwerp, when *Vreemd maar Vriend* ('Foreign but Friend'), bearing no reference to Berber identity whatsoever in its name, grew out of youth center Rzoezi in Mechelen. Some of the members of Rzoezi would become members of AEL (Arab European League), yet before there was AEL, *Vreemd maar Vriend* took care of providing a platform for Berber identity. The founder of *Vreemd maar Vriend*, however, describes the association as a cultural association, and not explicitly as a Berber activist association. In a similar vein, Dutch association *Bades* equally does not wish to be perceived as a Berber association as such, at least when relating to local, Dutch issues of integration. At the time when *Vreemd maar Vriend* was established, the association's leading figure was still a student, and experimented with a few activities, which initially failed because of a lack of professional organizational experience on his part. In fact, the founder migrated to Flanders when he was only a child during the late seventies. In 1991, he restarted, this time with a Berber festival in Brussels. His motivation, different from the political reasons given by Dutch activists born in Morocco around the same time, for doing so was: '(...) an opportunity to come out with it, not towards Belgians, but especially towards Moroccans because I saw that most Moroccans did not know their history and also know little about *Amazigh* culture or the Berbers and then I thought that it would perhaps be a good thing to organize something like that.' He focused on both second- and first-generation Moroccans. The first generation in particular had received very little education and regarded Arab culture as a higher culture.

At first, the founder of *Vreemd maar Vriend* used music as a means to reach out to the Moroccan communities. The first edition, he recalls, was very successful because he was able to attract well-known and popular Berber musicians and bands. The songs of these bands were, however, politically charged. They sang about poverty among and oppression of the Berbers in Morocco. One year later,

he expanded the program and added theatre and poetry readings in Berber. It was only natural to him that for the next editions, he invited speakers to touch upon topics such as Berber language, culture, tradition, history. Even today, this is one of the core activities practiced among Berber associations. Mostly students from Brussels attended these gatherings. As these Belgian Berber festivals in Brussels became more widely known, Berbers residing abroad started to attend. The founder recalls these foreign visitors were mainly Dutch Berbers. At that time, the popularity of Dutch Berber associations was on the rise. In 1997, Dutch newsletter *Adrar* noted the magazine that was being published by *Vreemd maar Vriend*, which was distributed in Antwerp, and spoke of the association in very positive terms: “a broadly orientated magazine (...) We are jealous of our Belgian friends. *Vreemd maar Vriend*.” In addition to the festivals in Brussels, *Vreemd maar Vriend* had started publishing a local newspaper and broadcasted a radio program in Antwerp.

Overall, the lifespan of this early Berber association was, especially when compared to the Dutch case, quite short. *Vreemd maar Vriend*'s members explained that the Moroccan community in Antwerp during the mid- and late nineties did not at all times agree with what the association printed or discussed on the radio, especially with regard to their emphasis on Berber culture and call for Berber culture and contributions to Moroccan history to be recognized. However, their failure in Antwerp was also explained in reference to Hassan II, who, until 1999, was still king. Not only were they pressured by consular employees to halt their activities, Moroccans in Antwerp were also afraid to speak up against his regime and oppression of Berber languages in Morocco. In short, both the association and the Moroccan community in Antwerp, Brussels and Mechelen felt surveyed by the Moroccan government. The ‘Berber-Arab issue’ remained a sensitive one, even after the 1994 king's Throne Day speech, when Hassan II promised a change in policy towards Berber culture and language.

The rising popularity of Berber identity and culture in Belgium from the late nineties onwards, within the historical framework of Moroccan migration, may henceforth in addition be explained by trends in Moroccan politics. Morocco has continuously sought to tighten relations between the state and its citizens abroad on both economic and cultural levels. The most logical reason would constitute the policy shift in Morocco, especially since Mohamed VI's rise to the throne towards citizens abroad, the *Marocains résidant à l'Étranger* (MRE's) (Belguendouz, 2006; 2009a & 2009b; Brand: 2008). Hassan II's *Amicales*, for instance, had by then been dissolved and consultative bodies were installed in

order to assure participation of the *MRE's* in a more democratic way. The nineties were marked by a significant change with the creation of a Moroccan *Ministry for Moroccans residing Abroad*, quickly incorporated into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1997. Nowadays, the *Fondation Hassan II pour les Marocains résidant à l'Etranger*, initiated in 1990, continues to take up this role as an informative and advisory body to which *MRE's* may appeal for economic, cultural and social affairs. An advisory board of *MRE's*, the *Conseil de la communauté marocaine à l'étranger* (*CCME*), was founded in 2007 yet dissolved in 2012 in search of other institutions to guarantee bonds with the diaspora and promote participation.

### Berber identity politics in Antwerp after 2000

Whereas members of the Berber Movement in the Netherlands have by now already started to reflect on the history of their movement, currently only one association in Flanders is active: the Antwerp based *Tilelli*, previously named *Umas*, signifying 'little brother' in Tarifit (Riffian Berber), but equally referring to '*Unie Multicultureel Antwerpen Stad*' ('Union Multicultural Antwerp City'). The members involved, however, were recent migrants, arriving in Flanders after 2000. But the earliest – albeit rather unsuccessful – initiatives in Flanders were undertaken by Moroccans who had migrated to Belgium at a younger age, having attended primary school in Morocco yet not having lived through youth and adolescence in Morocco. This particular migration pattern has impacted the development of associations in Flanders and explains the differences in their activities when, for instance, compared to the Netherlands. One of the founding members of *UMAS*, however, had been active in *Vreemd maar Vriend*. From 1995 onwards in Brussels associations *Jugurtha* and *Tiddukla n'Imazighen* were active. In Leuven, *Agraw Imazighen* co-organized activities of the *Rif Autonomy Group*, a grouping of Belgian and Dutch activist striving for more regional autonomy in Morocco, in 2011. *Tifawin* and *Yuba* are two younger associations active in Brussels. In Ghent, *Tilelli* organized a week-long festival in 1996, to which representatives from foreign associations were invited. No Berber activists active in Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven, nor in the Netherlands, however, knew the association had existed. Although the amount of local associations is thus far smaller in Flanders, a *Mouvement Amazigh Belgique* (Belgian Berber Movement) exists outside of a regular associative network similar to that of the Netherlands.

Ties between Flanders and the Netherlands are tight, also among those second-generation youth engaged in activism. Among the latter, those raised in the diaspora, language often poses problems. Whereas older activists who were born in Morocco maintain ties with France and are active in Brussels, younger activists (born in Morocco or in Belgium) focus on ties with the Netherlands because their mastery of French is insufficient. As a matter of fact, since those born in the diaspora often lack a thorough knowledge of the mother tongue, activities are not always fully conducted in *Tarifit*. As such, language acts as a divisive factor. Flemish Riffians often attended debates and festivals in the Netherlands because there are very little of those in Flanders itself.

The Arab European League joined the *Federatie Marokkaanse Verenigingen* (*FMV*) soon after its inception in 2000 and critiqued integration and anti-discrimination policies while boasting an Arab but more predominant Muslim identity, blending multiculturalism with pan-Arab nationalism. According to the president of *FMV*, the umbrella association had been wary of Arab and Berber initiatives, as they might divide the community of Moroccans in Flanders, who were already facing the threat of popular, discriminatory political parties in the late nineties and early two-thousands. Matters escalated in 2002, however, when *AEL* initiated civil patrols after police reports on monitoring of Moroccan youth had leaked, and the murder of a Moroccan by a Belgian caused riots after which *AEL* leader Dyab Abou Jahjah was arrested for inciting the violence. In early 2003 Dutch branches were set up, but *Amazigh* activists protested against these plans. *AEL* never attained similar popularity among Moroccan youth in the Netherlands. In Antwerp, however, the number of members among Moroccan youth grew.

A Flemish *Berber Movement*, initiated by local liberal politician Mohamed Talhaoui, was short-lived and never had a significant impact on Moroccan associative life in Antwerp. During my interviews in Antwerp, many *Amazigh* activists argued that Talhaoui had failed because he had created the movement solely on political and instrumental grounds, directed against Abou Jahjah, and not on an authentic attitude of *Amazighité*. *AEL* urged the Moroccan migrant population as the actor to bring about change in Antwerp and Flemish society, but all the while claimed 'Arab' domination over Berber culture, even though Abou Jahjah had stressed that from a pan-Arab ideal, 'non-Muslims' were to be tolerated (Jacobs, 2005: 105). In Antwerp, Arabism thus predominated Berberism.

However, the success of the *AEL* did not bury the Arab-Berber question altogether. In fact, some members questioned the predominance of Arabism over Berberism. This caused some Flemish Moroccans to refrain from further membership, though only very few of these considered founding an *Amazigh* association as an alternative. Rather, they would incorporate *Amazighité* in other ways: through social work or a broader framework of professional work with youth on a local level. Besides within *AEL*, during the nineties already, some youth centers had also debated the topic of *Amazigh* identity. The short-lived initiative 'SoRif' organized travels to Morocco for Moroccan youth attending centers of social work, in order to become more acquainted with their 'identity' and 'history' as Berber Moroccans. Some of these initiators had ended up in *AEL*. During the heydays of the *AEL* in Antwerp in 2002, the topic was subject to much debate. Some conformed to the overarching Arabism as the basis and structure of social organization, whereas others did not.

A clear *Amazigh* political answer to the *AEL* with regard to their Arabism, however, was never formulated. In Antwerp and Mechelen in particular, Berber identity was embedded in social work and thus took on a different shape than in the Netherlands, where it formed the basis of cultural associations. In Flanders, however, social workers of Moroccan origin in the late nineties and early two-thousands started to set up courses in Moroccan national history and paid particular attention to Riffian history and Berber identity, as well as focusing on the shared past of Moroccans and the Flemish, such as in the commemorative practice of the burial site of Chastre near Gembloux, where Moroccan soldiers, as part of the French army during the Second World War, were buried in Islamic fashion next to Christians (Karrouche, 2011). In Flanders, boundaries between cultural and social activism had thus become blurred.

Over the past years, cultural initiatives related to Berber culture and identity have been supported by local and national politics, such as the teaching of Berber on the level of higher education in Flanders, the founding of Moroccan-Flemish cultural center *Daarkom* in Brussels, which directed attention towards the Berber issue in Morocco. Cultural centers in Brussels (BOZAR), and Antwerp (Moussem) have increasingly incorporated Berber art and music in their programs. In Antwerp, Berber cultural festivals have now become a fixture in the city's cultural programming. Often, this has been due to the influence of individuals affiliated with the Berber Movement, without necessarily being involved with or being founders of a local Berber association, or intellectual elites of Berber origin. The accommodation of the Dutch *Berberbibliotheek* in





*Moroccan Tirailleurs buried in the cemetery of Chastre (source: KADOC)*

Flemish publishing has likewise popularized and mainstreamed Berber culture and languages.

## Being Berber

In the Belgian-Berber diaspora, the Berber activist agenda and discourse varies according to the context and location of the member associations' actions, not only interpreted geographically in the strict sense of territoriality, but also in terms of discourses as mobile cultural practices (Clifford, 1992). The Berber elite that initiated Berber identity politics in the late sixties set up cultural and popular research associations both in Morocco and among the small Moroccan exile-communities, mostly in Paris. Nowadays, the movement has grown larger, more diverse. Moreover, it has lost its elitist character. The agenda of the Berber Movement is at once local, national, transnational and global. At times this renders the logic of the movement complex, even to such an extent that it may lead to the "*coexistence of multiple, incommensurable (yet not incompatible)*"



*logics of practice and knowledge operating in different spheres of social interaction*" (Silverstein, 2011: 68).

Today Morocco upholds its longstanding tradition with both internal and external migration, and it remains one of the leading emigration regions in the world. 'Moroccannes' is still mediated across national borders: politically, economically and culturally. Several institutions have done so in the past. During the past two decades in Flanders, the Moroccan Berber Movement has developed a cultural and political discourse with an emphasis on their difference from Arab-Islamic culture. Associations within this movement in host societies, established by highly educated first generation follow migrants, have faced a growing interest from second-generation youth. This opens up space for renewal: new ways of appropriating Berber representations of the past and rethinking current positions of Moroccan-Berbers, their transnational ties, cultural belongings and political engagements.

As culture makers Berber activists function altogether as the 'gatekeepers' (Hoffman – Gilson Miller, 2010: 10) to what is 'acceptably Amazigh'. Activists themselves in Belgium have acknowledged the disunity of the Movement and its inability to mobilize large masses with clear political demands, as for instance the *AEL* was able to do. Yet not the founders of these Berber associations are nowadays at the core of current developments within Berber activism in the diaspora; post-migrants are. They will inevitably impinge upon modes of identity-construction and collective, political action based on Berber identity.

More than forty years ago, in their seminal work 'Arabs and Berbers', Gellner and Micaud (1972) predicted that there was no 'Berber problem' in the Maghreb. The course of Moroccan history and migration history has proven them wrong. Developments as recent as the Arab Spring in Morocco in 2011 and the rise in interest among second- and third-generation youth in host societies, who attend Berber cultural festivals, point out that Berber culture can still be regarded as an identifier in multicultural societies, and that their Berber activism is still relevant. Whereas Berber activism in the eighties, nineties and early two-thousands was mostly a male affair, women and post-migrants are increasingly participating in Berber activism. Women have also started to establish their own associations and networks. This suggests that these women, often post-migrants, only partly identify with the men who founded the associations that got them acquainted with a thorough understanding of the relevance of Berber culture to Moroccan history in the first place. Nowadays, in young Berber women's lives in the Maghreb and the diaspora, Berber activism often intersects with feminism. In the

diaspora-condition, Berber activists have viewed the Berbers as ethnic minorities living within Moroccan minorities in host societies.

On the other hand, Berber identity remains contested. What is needed, according to second-generation Moroccan migrant critics, is a uniting factor and not a divisive one. Given the focus of the Flemish integration debates on Muslim identity and 'radical Islam', stressing internal differences between Moroccan Belgians would only work in their collective disadvantage. This argument is precisely what held the development of Berber associations in Flanders back during the nineties. With which histories will post-migrants in the future identify, which collective histories will shape their identities, their cultural and political actions? Addressing such issues of plurality consists one of the main challenges not only policymakers are facing today, but Berber activists as well.

## Notes

- 1 I use 'Berber' and 'Amazigh' ('free person') interchangeably for stylistic reasons. Many activists denounce the term 'Berber' because of its implicit negative bias.
- 2 The associations in Belgium that were researched between 2008 and 2012 were: Agraw Imazighen, Leuven; Jugurtha, Brussels; Tiddukla n'Imazighen, Brussels; Tifawin, Brussels; Tilelli/Thirelli (previously UMAS), Antwerp; Tilelli, Ghent; Vreemd maar Vriend, Antwerp; Yuba, Brussels.

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