

| The Role of Moroccan Women in Preserving Amazigh Language and Culture

by *Fatima Sadiqi*

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Introduction

Moroccan women have played an essential role in preserving Amazigh language and culture, a role that has only very recently started to be fully appreciated. Indeed, the complex question of the point where 'gender' and 'language and culture' meet, and the relationship between that meeting point and the general status of women, is still a subject very little discussed in Morocco, although the citizenship and status of women in this multilingual and multicultural country are closely tied in with the Moroccan languages and their usage.

Moroccan women and the Amazigh language

Morocco is a country in which four principal languages – Moroccan Arabic, Amazigh, Literary Arabic and French – share the linguistic arena, but their socio-cultural status is worlds apart. That

status is rooted in history insofar as historical facts (which feed into socio-cultural facts) have led to a situation in which Literary Arabic is more associated with men and Amazigh is more associated with women. For example, Literary Arabic has real and symbolic power in the religious, legal, political, administrative and media spheres, because of its status as the official language, the liturgical language and as the language of institutions, written knowledge and so-called 'public' affairs, in which men are better represented and have more voices and choices than women. Conversely, until very recently Amazigh was typically an oral language, a maternal language and consequently one that was inevitably associated with women, especially rural women, in view of the high rate of illiteracy among women and of mass emigration of men to the towns. Throughout Morocco's modern history, the fate of Amazigh has been closely linked with the fate of women and it is no coincidence that Amazigh and women were pushed into the background during the years following independence, nor that the current sensitivity towards cultural and linguistic rights is matched by a new sensitivity towards women's rights.

In these circumstances, the inclusion of Amazigh in Morocco's educational fabric and an improvement in the status of women in the country can only be of benefit to Morocco's democratization and overall development. This view is justified both because history confers an undeniable legitimacy on Amazigh in Morocco, and because Islam as a cultural identity is not based on ethnic identity, regardless of whether that is expressed in racial or linguistic terms, or both. The Muslim community does not discriminate

among ethnic groups (which explains the use of Arabic by very different ethnic groups throughout the world). This position is further strengthened by the fact that multilingualism is a fundamental element in Moroccan culture, which was born first and foremost of the country's complex history and its geographical position at the junction of two continents.

The learning and use of Amazigh is closely associated with women; the oral literature (which is mainly disseminated in Moroccan Arabic or in Amazigh) is deeply feminine. Morocco's history was and still is built by men and women, and that process is conveyed in both written and oral languages. Oral literature is a national heritage which conveys in its very nature the uniqueness of Moroccan culture. It is time to preserve and to promote this literature, which, while often anonymous, nonetheless constitutes a collective memory reaching beyond the bounds of formal knowledge. This oral tradition draws on the realms of the wondrous in which women escape from their traditional roles, proving that women have a knowledge which is not always the prerogative of men. In folk tales, for instance, patriarchal laws are often overturned.

Amazigh owes its survival first and foremost to women. In fact, its survival is an exception to the usual development of languages. We have here a language that is several millennia old, but which has never been the official language of a centralized state that might have determined its linguistic standards and conferred on it the validation of legal status; a language which has managed to co-exist with far more powerful languages, for example, Punic and Latin in the



7. A young dancer during the Moussem of Tan Tan, a festival of nomadic tribes. This work was declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005.

past, and Arabic, French, Spanish and English today. The standardization of Amazigh and its teaching go hand in hand today with the promotion of women – here once again we find the correlation between language and women.

Indeed, the promotion of Amazigh is a duty for all Moroccans towards a language which has, throughout its history, done much to unite the country in political and religious terms. At the same time, education and teaching also happen to be primary factors in the emancipation of women and their promotion in all areas. As well as playing a role in aiding both individual and collective awareness, education is an effective development tool, especially in the age of globalization.

The active participation of women in public affairs may enable the languages to be used equitably. Such participation could even change usage and attitudes towards the languages: it could demystify and reduce the gap between men and women as well as between the languages in use.

It cannot be said often enough that the promotion of ideas about the impact of education and language-teaching on the status of women is a historical duty, especially in a developing country. The purpose of this debate is to find a way to allow the 'gender' dimension to be taken into consideration in the sphere of education in order to reach the juridical and administrative levels.

In a nascent democracy such as Morocco, only a language policy that takes account of women's socio-economic needs can be viable. It is true that the history of Moroccan languages may be told in different ways with different supporting

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8. Two women at the camp of the Moussem of Tan Tan festival, 2004.

arguments, but despite the heterogeneous nature of research fields and programmes aimed at promoting women, language rights of Moroccan men and women are fundamental to all human rights. Moroccan women's language rights rely on education as a tool for intellectual emancipation. Without it, women will remain on the edge of changing language policies and on the edge of the so-called 'dominant' languages in Morocco.

Oral literature

Moroccan women have preserved an entire heritage of oral literature, often anonymous since it belongs to the group, not the individual, as Chafik wrote in his work on Amazigh poetry.¹ Oral

literature includes music, songs and dances, as well as stories, proverbs and riddles. The ancestral lifestyle of both men and women may be uncovered in this literature.

The oral tradition is a feature of Moroccan culture: Amazigh songs, for instance, employ both the major classical techniques of monodic song and polyphony and allow us to appreciate a music which, although it has evolved a great deal since its origins, retains an authentic vigour. After surviving a long period of neglect, it was rediscovered in the 1990s, and today young people are reclaiming this heritage. The soul of Amazigh is indisputably expressed through song and music, the two components of an oral literature which has for



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9. A group of women on the road to the Moussem festival.

centuries been passed down from generation to generation in the mountains of Morocco.

Through oral literature women have always inspired the greatest respect in their communities. History tells us that Amazigh women shared in decisions concerning family, inheritance rights and education. The work of men and women was clearly differentiated, but was always recognized as being of equal value. In ancient history, Amazigh women occupied an important place and sometimes were at the head of kingdoms.

Moroccan women and Amazigh culture

Whether or not they speak Amazigh, Moroccan women are exemplary vehicles of Amazigh cultural heritage dating back over 5000 years. They are the chief owners of a heritage that they have succeeded in preserving and that they still transmit from generation to generation. Despite the lack of a written language and despite mass illiteracy, this age-old knowledge arises from the observation of nature, its cycles and its phenomena which women express in all their daily practices – linguistic, spiritual, creative, aesthetic or domestic. This is

what created the cohesion and continuity of the family, tribe and nation despite the weight of patriarchy, the hazards of life and historical upheavals. Whether urban or rural, women have managed to keep the thread unbroken, linking new generations to old and establishing a dialogue between the visible and invisible worlds, since women – although interested in change – never put at risk their cultural heritage and the mass of experience accumulated since the earliest times.

Women are also naturally associated with artistic production, especially in the traditional sector. Pottery, weaving, decoration of walls and storage jars, embroidery and so on, are mainly created by women. Amazigh jewelry dates back to the most ancient times and constitutes some of the first North African artworks. Like Egyptian or Carthaginian women, the Amazigh woman first felt the need to fix her headgear firmly on her head, her garment on her shoulder and her flying *haik* on her body. That led her to use metal pins, which might be said to be the Amazigh woman's first jewelry. Jewelry was born of a sense of ornament. Pins were transformed into pretty clasps, bracelets and brooches of various designs. The most striking thing when you first see a woman from the Moroccan countryside is how simple and poor her clothing is compared with the lavishness of her jewelry: triangular clasps as wide as a hand on the chest, strong chains and several multi-coloured necklaces in which silver, coral, blue, yellow and green enamel, and amber form a majestic harmony. Moroccan towns transformed Amazigh jewelry by replacing silver with gold, and coral with diamonds. An Amazigh woman's attire is dominated far more by her jewelry than by her clothing. Women succeeded in preserving

Amazigh jewelry together with the memory of past times and civilizations.

The knowledge of women is revealed above all in divinatory and therapeutic practices. Through their role as mothers and teachers, Amazigh women have preserved the secrets of divinatory and therapeutic practices from the dawn of time. Those practices arose from ancestral traditions that began in the Capsian Neolithic age and were enriched through the centuries by Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Arabic and other contributions. It must be emphasized that these practices reveal just as much intellectual competence as any book knowledge.

In addition to physical work, women's knowledge includes intellectual production. In that regard, we have in Morocco what is called the other history, non-official history, written by women. I am a member of a North African research group whose mission is to delve into history to resurrect women's voices and locate them on the chessboard of history, so as to highlight their contribution to the construction of North Africa. An anthology entitled *Women Writers of Africa* will be published in 2008 as a result of this work.

The variety, depth and wealth of the (oral and written) texts that we have assembled, of the voices speaking in the first person, is overwhelming. The roads travelled by the authors bear the imprint of that female knowledge. They demonstrate an extraordinary mastery both of bodily events and biographical rites and of truly female ways of thinking. It remains for us to highlight the themes of Moroccan women writers, themes which are in direct relationship with

Moroccan reality. The intention is to focus attention on these writings as powerful documents that bear witness to their time and to the society that produced them.

Conclusion

Amazigh culture has indeed survived to our day despite the fact that Amazigh has never been the official language of a centralized state, has not been sustained by a holy book, and has had to withstand far more politically powerful languages such as Phoenician, Punic, Latin and Arabic. Today, we owe the fact that Amazigh has survived and is officially recognized, to the commitment of women to cultural issues at stake in our societies.

| NOTE

1. Mohamed Chafik, 'Armed Resistance in Amazigh Poetry.'



© Charo Oquet, Installation, 2006

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10. *Return of Anacaona*: a work by artist Charo Oquet in the *Diaspora and Intercultural Dialogue* exhibition organized by UNESCO in cooperation with the Dominican Republic's Permanent Delegation to UNESCO, on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2007.

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