

THE AMAZIGH: ORIGINS OF MOROCCAN CULTURE

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Moroccan culture is an amalgamation of various religious and ethnic groups: the Roman Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate, and the French, among others, have all contributed to the richness of contemporary Moroccan heritage. Islam expanded into Morocco under the Umayyad Caliphate, where it is now practiced by 99% of the population and the basis for Morocco's laws. The establishment of French public schools has had a lasting impact on language and education in the country. Prior to French colonization, Morocco's primary language was Arabic, closely tied to the country's cultural and religious identity. French influence challenged pre-existing ties between religion and culture, and fears of youth losing religion led to the development of an education system free of government control.¹ Currently, French is Morocco's primary language of commerce, economics, culture, sciences, and medicine, and is taught in most primary and secondary schools. The Roman Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate, and the French, among others, have undoubtedly shaped the country; however, Moroccan language, culture, and art were most significantly defined by a group of people called the Amazigh.

The Amazigh are indigenous to North Africa and ancestral to most northwest Africans; they are the people who the aforementioned empires first fought, and the people who maintained Morocco's independence until the French established a protectorate in 1912. They also fought alongside the Arabs during the Islamic Empire to expand their influence into the south of Spain, otherwise known as Andalusia. Historically, the Amazigh

have been referred to as "Berbers," a belittling and offensive term originating from the Latin word "barbarous," meaning "barbarian." The Romans used this word as a blanket term for individuals who did not have Roman or Greek characteristics; however, the Amazigh currently self-identify as the "free people" and reject this derogatory term.

The Amazigh currently live in scattered communities across Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and the Canary Islands. Their origins are unclear as they relied upon oral tradition to pass down their history, which varies for each tribe. Their history was first recorded in writing by the ancient Egyptians.² These initial records were documented from the perspective of outsiders, adding to the ambiguity that arises when studying Amazigh history, as there are no primary sources to cross-reference. It is believed that they entered Morocco toward the end of 2000 B.C., before the influence of Islam in North Africa. The Amazigh had a crucial role as merchant nomads who bridged the gap between the Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa.³ Apart from the Tuareg, one of the only remaining Amazigh nomadic populations, the Amazigh no longer live within nomadic tribes, having settled in their lands for centuries.

The Amazigh culture, unique and separate from Arab culture, has heavily influenced Moroccan language, art, and design. Morocco recognizes both Standard Arabic and the Amazigh language, Tamazight. Colloquially, the Moroccan population has combined both languages, as well as French and Spanish, to form the Moroccan dialect and spoken language, Darija. This synthesis of

languages makes the Moroccan dialect more difficult to understand in comparison to other dialects in the Middle East and North Africa. Countries with the highest Amazigh presence and influence, such as Algeria and Tunisia, share similar linguistic patterns.

Amazigh influence in Moroccan culture also extends to gender roles, where women, rather than men, are the face of the Amazigh public identity. Women have contributed to Amazigh art and culture by designing jewelry, carpets, tapestries, pottery, ceramics, and leatherwork, all of which are central to their identity. Their artifacts incorporate various colors, geometric shapes, and motifs that are seemingly simple but encode complex meaning.⁴ The Amazigh did not develop as a singular nationhood; instead, each tribe formed separate identities, marked by designs like individual carpet patterns, which incorporated symbols from nature and revealed their history. Another example of intentional design choices is the Amazigh flag, which is made of blue, green, and yellow horizontal stripes, as well as the Tifnagh letter "yaz." Blue symbolizes the Mediterranean Sea, green symbolizes the mountains of the region, yellow symbolizes the Sahara Desert, and the letter translates to "Free Man." In fact, some women tattoo symbols like these on their faces.⁵

Although they often go unnamed, the Amazigh are inextricably tied to Morocco; through language, art, and design, they have rooted themselves at the heart of the country's culture and identity.

