

Was it by contempt (Barbarian?) or by ignorance that this ethnic and cultural group received the name Berber? They call themselves Imazighen which means free men...yes, free men who saw waves of invaders pass through but who now demand the right to be themselves.

The Berbers were in fact the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa (tamazgha). Their presence in this region goes back many millennia. Historically the Amazigh language was spoken from the Siwa Oasis in Egypt to the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean including everywhere in between: Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

Berber culture remained resilient in the face of Phoenicians settlement in 1200 B.C. and subsequent invaders: Romans, Vandals, Byzantines and Arabs. Images of the female warrior Kahnia capture the Berber spirit of independence and resistance despite her eventual defeat in 698 B.C.

The Ottoman Turks were succeeded by the French who took control of certain parts of Berber territory beginning in 1830.

Since the independence of the North African countries approximately 50 years ago the various regimes in place have practically forbidden the propagation of Amazigh culture or language. Any effort to encourage or restore Berber culture is suspect and therefore squelched.

Morocco has the largest population of Berbers in all of North Africa; upwards of 20 million. Moroccans are still today largely a Berber people fewer Arabs settled in this region. Even if they speak Arabic many are still Berbers. The Berber languages in Morocco include Chleuh or tachelhit, Riffi, Soussi and Tamazight.

In Algeria there are 4 Berber communities speaking Chaoui, Chenoui, Kabyle, and Mozabite. Kabyles make up the most numerically significant Berber group in Algeria. It's worth noting that the author Mouloud Mammeri was prohibited from teaching the Berber language at the University of Algiers at the same time that universities in other nations of the world (France, USA, Denmark) were offering degrees in Berber languages.

In Libya, where they speak Neffussit, the support for the Amazigh culture is considered by the regime of Colonel Qaddafi as an attack on Arab nationalism.

In Tunisia, where Djerbit is spoken, this Berber culture has been completely erased from the history books in the face of a radical policy against 'Berberness'.

Mention must also be made of the Tuaregs, the 'forgotten of the desert', dispersed across several countries: Libya, Algeria, Niger, Morocco, Mali and Burkina Faso. They call themselves 'free men' but are known by the outside world as 'The Blue Men' in reference to their traditional clothing. They speak Tamajaq.