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INKED BODIES, BLANK PAGES;

A STUDY OF AMAZIGH

TATTOOING

HANNAH MESOUANI

86 Pages

The tradition of Moroccan Amazigh tattooing reflects the values and lived experiences of the communities that partake in this sacred practice. Adorning their fellow women with symbols of protection, tribe alliances and fertility, Amazigh women display their core values on face and body that come to represent their community. The power of these images and the women who wear them have stood the test of time, even in a newly male-dominated, Islamic Morocco that frowns upon body modification and promotes a nationalism that leaves little room for Amazigh tradition. In a corner of the world where literacy rates are low, Amazigh art tells the often untold story of a community that was once buried in the sand. The semiotic significance and politically gendered ramifications of Amazigh body art allows for the telling of multiple truths. The layered meanings of these tattoos not only shift between the women who wear them and those men who see them, but their meaning also appears to change depending on the age of the women who choose to participate in the practice. Is the tradition of tattooing Amazigh women an act of rebellion and ownership of one's identity, or is it a form of cultural branding, or both? This thesis will attempt to determine the overall signifying power of these tattoos within a complex, ever-changing matrix of often competing meanings.

**KEYWORDS:** Morocco, body art, Berber culture, Amazigh, tattoo, postcolonialism

INKED BODIES, BLANK PAGES;  
A STUDY OF AMAZIGH  
TATTOOING

HANNAH MESOUANI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2019

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INKED BODIES, BLANK PAGES;

A STUDY OF AMAZIGH

TATTOOING

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Alḥamdulillāh.

It feels ironic that as a feminist whose thesis focuses on honoring the tradition of Amazigh women, it is mostly men whom I must thank for their continued support. First and foremost, I dedicate this and all that I do to my father, Mohamed Mesouani. Every day, I am increasingly thankful for him showing me how to value education, live with integrity and stand up against injustice and ignorance. I owe not only this thesis but so much of my graduate experience to Dr. Chidester who has been a role model, mentor, and friend to me throughout my time at ISU. Thank you, Dr. Chidester, for everything. Thank you, Dr. Baldwin for empowering me to focus on intercultural communication and for your clever wit and humor. Thank you, Dr. Davis for sharing your infinite wisdom and excitement for all that you teach – lecithin forever. I must also thank my partner, Kevin, for caring for me and our fur babies always; your patience and kindness are unmatched. To Greta, Kwame, my ISU and Wesleyan families of students and peers, and those friends who have believed in and caffeinated me, stay brilliant.

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## CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
Summary of Chapters	7
Summary	7
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	9
Culture and Subculture	9
Tattoo as Culturally Communicative Tool	12
Semiotics and Cultural Codes	17
Coding and Hegemony	21
Cultural Codes among Amazigh Women	24
Postcolonial Theory	26
Summary	30
CHAPTER III: METHOD	31
CHAPTER IV: AMAZIGH TATTOOS: A COMPLEX WEB OF CODES	33
The Amazigh Community	34
The Tattoo Art of Amazigh Women	35
Sacred Nature as Code	36
The Code of Tribe as Home	38
Protection as Code	39
IRCAM & AMREC	41
Online Sources About Amazigh Culture and Tattooing	42

The Arab Community as Code	43
Moroccan Media	44
The Royal Family and the Independence Movement	48
Untangling the Codes of Amazigh Tattoos	50
De-coding the Colonizers	51
The Muslim Perspective	54
Arab Nationalists	58
Moroccan Media	61
Today's Amazigh	62
Inked Stories	64
The Liminality of Amazigh Women	68
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION	70
An Amazigh Tattoo Signifying in a Complex System of Codes	71
Overview and Findings	73
Implications and Future Research	76
Conclusion	78
REFERENCES	79

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*Instruct a woman, you instruct a nation.*

Moroccan proverb

Morocco, located only nine miles south of Spain, has historically been a critical trade post for much of Africa, Europe, and Asia. As Europe's doorway to Africa, Morocco is a medley of cultures that come together through both globalization and colonization. The Amazigh, a nomadic group native to Northern Africa, a region also known as the Maghreb, are often difficult for outsiders to differentiate from the rest of the population in Morocco, a nation known for its Muslim faith and strong Arab identification. This was no different for French colonizing forces in the early 1900s and those Germans, Brits and Italians who also settled in and shaped Morocco at that time. Both Arabs and Europeans alike popularized the pejorative label of "Berber" to denigrate those indigenous tribes of the Maghreb. The term "berber," or *barbar* or *berbère* in Arabic and French respectively, originates from the Greek for "non-Greek," and though was popular not for its etymology, but because the word itself is onomatopoeic and meant to sound like the incoherent "babbling" of non-native Europeans. The identifier itself was used to marginalize and demean the Amazigh and their neighboring tribes, therefore the term Amazigh is preferred by most as "the descendants of these peoples still speak variants of the language they call Tamazight and refer to themselves as Imazighen," or the "free men" (Harrison, 2015, p. 155). Throughout North Africa, these indigenous communities of Amazigh "free men" share a vocabulary of symbols featured in art, tattooing, and crafts. The significance of Amazigh visual codes is amplified because not only Amazigh people's eyes, skin, and hair colors span the fairest to darkest features (Gray, 2008), but "Berbers no longer speak the same language [as] without a written form, geography and geology have fractured the Berber language into at least five

mutually incomprehensible dialects. But the visual language endures” (Courtney-Clarke, 1996, p. xv). The term “free man” also refers to the most prevalent Amazigh design that was proudly worn under the skin of Amazigh women who rejected the primitive characterizations that the West thrust upon them. Though there has been persistent reclamation of the term “berber” as a main identifier of the Imazighen, I will refer to the group, my own ancestors, as the Amazigh, the tribal name that is more widely used in Morocco.

As a Moroccan woman with Amazigh roots, I have grown up sharing meals with my great grandmother who proudly wore both facial tattoos and a hijab-- two seemingly contradictory identity markers since Muslim scripture does not condone body modification. My great grandmother and our shared family never spoke of the incongruent nature of her tattoos and our faith; instead she regaled my siblings and me with tales from her youth while artfully dodging any direct questions about her ink with quips ranging from “we all did it then” to “you wouldn’t really understand.” Many Amazigh traditions are still celebrated by several members of my family, though my own father prefers not to identify with his Amazigh roots due to the popular demonization of Amazigh traditions and the general negative stereotyping of our people as uneducated, ill-willed, and primitive. It is the lack of conversation around traditional tattooing, both in my home and Morocco as a whole, that has inspired me to pursue this thesis so that I can better understand and communicate the all but lost messages their ink conveyed before this Amazigh tradition was so heavily discouraged: “The language of Berber motifs is in danger of joining so many of the world’s other lost languages” (Courtney-Clarke, 1996, p. 78). Just as geography has eroded the spoken language, so do Islam and nationalism threaten the existence of the Amazigh visual language.

Little scholarship exists around the Amazigh, and even less from a communicative perspective, as prior to the past twenty years, these racist stereotypes tainted people's ability to reminisce on their history with pride. Bernasek (2008) described how French social scientists attempted to study Maghrebian tribal groups by documenting their use of Tamazight, the official indigenous language, a language that was and is generally frowned upon by the majority of Arab Moroccans. Prior to Morocco's Independence in 1956, the French sought to convince the Amazigh tribes of their dissimilarity to their Arab neighbors by highlighting such differences as language and those opposing ideologies of Islam that contradicted many Amazigh traditions. Despite the concerted effort of these colonizing forces to weaken Arab and Amazigh relations, Amazigh tribes did not align themselves with the European powers. Instead the tribal leaders stood by their colonized-Moroccan allies who vehemently sought liberation from Europe, clashing with any and all European forces who sought to exert power upon them. This alliance supported Morocco's Independence Movement by muddying Amazigh tradition as tribe members assimilated to the new Arab norm, even learning Arabic to trade with neighboring communities (Gellner, 1973).

It is important to remember that prior to this unionized front of Arab and Amazigh solidarity, and indeed to this day, mainstream Arab Moroccans viewed their Amazigh neighbors as second-class citizens. Their union was born of necessity and against a common colonizing enemy, the French, who had historically erased and devalued both Arab and Berber culture. Just as Arab Moroccans felt that French forces were erasing, negating, and whitewashing their history, so did the Amazigh feel that Arab Muslims had come into Berber communities with a desire to culturally dominate their practices in the name of faith and a culture they believed superior to those tribes whose land they settled on and whose traditions they diluted and erased.

This Amazigh-Arab allyship was built on shaky foundations though, as earlier Moroccan governmental and societal rhetoric created a nationwide air of mistrust and malaise toward the Amazigh, framing them as barbaric, slovenly, and un-Islamic. For these reasons, history tends to skip over the cultural tensions felt by those Amazigh who fought for their independence from Morocco as Moroccans fought for their independence from France: “Berber specificity was historically erased when nationalist historians constructed them as an Arabian tribe who had wandered far afield” and non-Arab groups became increasingly stereotyped with a broader, more disdainful brushstroke (Bernasek, 2008, p. xiii). The erasure of Berber identity was as political as it was social: their dialects were seldom recognized in courts and their common, sacred practice of tattooing directly contradicted Islamic beliefs that forbade body modification: “The recognition of Berber language [Tamazight] and culture was brushed aside as an unneeded complication in the rush to build the image of the homogenous Arab nation” (Bernasek, 2008, p. xiii). This internal xenophobia was prevalent as Moroccan authorities feared any chink in their national armor by which outside nations could infuse linguistic or cultural practices and ideologies that contradicted traditional Moroccan ideals, especially in a land frequented by outside, colonial entities. Though the Amazigh and neighboring tribes “share a sense of Berber identity, held together through a memory of common roots, strong linguistic, social, and cultural bonds,” popular Arab and Islamic practices in Morocco did not rest easily alongside the uniqueness of each tribe’s cultural differences (Bernasek, 2008, p. xi). At a time when a unified Moroccan identity was desired by the majority of the North, differences, especially those that contradicted the Islamic beliefs and language of the predominant culture, were far from embraced and often viewed as harmful to the aspiring nationalism and independence movement.

It is important to restate that Amazigh communities have been all but swept under the proverbial rug. It was not until October 17, 2001 that King Mohammed VI allowed for the founding of IRCAM (*L'Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe* or Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture), an organization dedicated to addressing “the cultural and linguistic demands of the Amazigh movement, to promote Tamazgha [or Berberness] as part and parcel of Moroccan identity and culture, and to insert the Berber language into the educational and administrative structure throughout the land” (Iahiane, 2017, p. 106). Though this was a significant achievement and resource by and for Amazigh activists who have long fought for representation, IRCAM was founded 40 years after the creation of AMREC (*L'Association Marocaine de Recherche et d'Échange Culturel* or The Research Association of Cultural Exchange), a French government-sponsored association which collected, published, and shared Berber heritage.

Not only have Amazigh identities and faith traditions been erased and blended into mainstream Maghrebian Islam, “no official population figures exist” even though “estimates generally place the number of Berbers today at 20 to 25 percent of the Algerian population of almost 33 million and at 40 percent of the Moroccan population of just over 33 million” (Bernasek, 2008, p. 6). Despite the Amazigh being a significant minority in the country, it was not until 2001 that Algeria recognized Tamazight as a national, though unofficial, language. Though many Moroccans and Algerians of Amazigh descent speak of their lineages with pride, they are consistently viewed as the Maghreb’s “hillbillies” with stereotypes of stupidity and avarice being predominant in media covering the region’s people. These tropes come from decades of systemic disregard for the Berber dialects such as Tashelhit and Shilha. These caricatures are still prevalent in modern television depictions of aggressive Berber market salesmen playing the fool to sell their trinkets to tourists. A lot of what Western tourists and

scholars alike know, or think they know about the Amazigh, come from the propagation of such stereotypes. Though there has been an increased commercialization of Berber goods as Morocco embraces the tourist industry, tensions remain between Berber tribes and their allied neighbors. The rising tourist industry in Morocco profits from the unique crafts and history of the Amazigh, but mainstream Morocco's day-to-day legislations and popular culture do not hold such respect for indigenous lives and traditions, and continue to malign their practices as primitive and devoid of value.

Most often overlooked is the role that women have played in shaping and maintaining the prevalence of Berber identity in Morocco and abroad. As mentioned, little documentation of Amazigh tradition remains. It is women's bodies that have historically served as markers for Amazigh identity and symbols of a culture whose roots run deep in Moroccan soil. The simultaneous objectification and symbolism of Amazigh women's bodies highlights a matriarchal culture's desperate fight to preserve its way of life and keep the power of representation in (and on) women's hands. I believe it is vital to explore the changing meanings and treatments of women's traditional tattooing practices, a cultural rite that has come to represent various and often conflicting definitions of what it is to be a woman in the Maghreb. In this thesis, I have sought to answer the following questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What do the tattoos signify to the Amazigh and the broader Arab community of Morocco?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How has the Islamization of the Maghreb and Moroccan Independence changed the narrative around Amazigh tattooing?

## **Summary of Chapters**

In the following chapters, I examine a variety of perspectives around Amazigh tattooing customs as well the symbols that make up the tattoos themselves. In Chapter Two, I explore existing literature around the concepts of culture and subculture as well as previous studies on tattooing across the world. I also share scholarship around semiotics, cultural codes, and postcolonial theory, all three of which serve as my primary lenses of study for this thesis. Chapter Three focuses on existing examples of Amazigh body art and the communication, or lack thereof, around the practice of tattooing traditions which reveals more about women's history and agency in the practice of tattooing. Though there are increasing numbers of texts on the Amazigh, many unfortunately tend to neglect either Arab or female representation. Equally important is the fact that the majority of academic texts were not written by Moroccans but by European or American men and women who bring an outsider's perspective and have not lived in the Maghreb as more than tourists. Chapter Four serves as my analysis section in which I apply Hall's theories on coding as well as semiotic analysis to the artwork whilst rebuking a colonial lens so that I may paint an accurate picture of current Berber sentiment on the almost forgotten practice of women's tattooing. Chapter Five, the final chapter of my thesis, focuses on a discussion of my findings, challenges the effects of such codes on today's lack of Amazigh representation, and provides directions for future research.

## **Summary**

Morocco is continuing to culturally evolve and Amazigh symbols, Tashelhit, and Tamazight are more prevalent in the country today than in past decades, though they are commercialized and, in my opinion, co-opted by men invested in the tourist industry. I have spent most of my life in a land colonized by White voices and white culture amongst a people

filled with equal parts pride and shame about our brown and black roots. Though I will study some Western perspectives to answer my research questions, I believe we need to tell our own stories and allow black and brown voices access to academic representation. I hope to amplify the voices of Amazigh women who have been silenced by the colonization, Arabization, Islamization, and the relentless patriarchal control of Morocco. During this thesis, I will refer to Amazigh women as women and not females. I believe the word woman is more empowering and less reductive than referring to half of a population by an adjective that centers women's identities on their sex and ability to reproduce. Women's stories across the globe have all too often been told in relation to the men with whom they share a community. Amazigh women, like their sacred practice of tattooing, merit their own story, even if history has coded it as secondary in the narrative of Maghrebi identity.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Body art is not a new topic in academic scholarship. Intercultural scholars have analyzed the practice through a variety of lenses, studying the context in which tattooing grew in popularity and the content of various cultures' artwork. In cultures in which oral communication takes precedence over any other method of intracultural transmission, the written word was not universally accessible to women who were historically the main transmitters of tradition through their children, beginning in the household and extending to the community at large. Artwork has been a conveyer of meaning for over 64,000 years, since at least the time of the earliest paintings in the Maltravieso caves of Cáceres, Spain. The permanent application of significant symbols to Amazigh women's skin was a key ritual in Amazigh ceremonies and daily life. Communities around the world such as the Maori and Tlingit continue to practice such traditions and allow us insight into the dying practice of Amazigh body modification (Mifflin, 2013).

To set the stage for my analysis of the discourse around Amazigh tattooing culture, I will first explore the topic and definitions of culture and subculture as previously studied by communication scholars. I will also review existing literature around tattoos as culturally communicative tools as well as the study of semiotics in communication scholarship. I will then examine how codes are established within cultural hegemonies and close with an exploration of postcolonial theory as a framework for understanding the meanings conveyed by the tattoos and symbolic language of the women of the Amazigh.

### **Culture and Subculture**

Regardless of whether or not one finds the Amazigh practice of women's tattooing as representative or atypical to Maghrebian culture, one must first define what "culture" is. Merriam Webster defines culture as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a

racial, religious, or social group” (2019, online). Hebdige (1979) describes culture as the intellectual side of a civilization and as both product and process in and of itself. Hebdige pores over several definitions of culture that encapsulate a society’s way of life or what that society deems as ordinary, acceptable behavior over time. Though the term can be used to refer to so-called high-culture areas as ballet or literary arts, I will operate using the definition that does not presume excellence, but instead speaks to the prevalent ideologies and actions of a group of people with a shared identity and geography. A sternly policed cultural norm -- monitored not only by the leaders of a civilization but more importantly by one’s peers -- develops into a hegemony where the influencing parties and forces who preach conformity and order are more powerful. “The invisible seam between language, experience, and reality [that form culture] can be located and prised open through a semiotic analysis” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 10). Culture, though difficult to define and always in flux as it is both process and product, shapes every facet of one’s life and what one considers normative.

One cannot say that Morocco is without its own culture, but that it is a nation that dances with the tension of several overlapping cultures that combine out of necessity and history. Even in a diverse cultural landscape, there are overarching ideologies that come with hegemonic power and universalized expectations of behavior and thought. “To belong to a culture is to belong to roughly the same conceptual and linguistic universe, to know how concepts and ideas translate into different languages, and how language can be interpreted to refer to or *reference* the word” (Hall, 1997, p. 22). It follows that, within every dominant culture, or straddling the divides between adjacent cultures, there are subcultures, smaller socialized groups that seek to “go against the grain” and exert independence over authoritarianism, whether that independence be intellectual, artistic, or political. “Subcultures can be said to transgress the laws of ‘man’s

second nature.’ By repositioning and recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist defies societal expectations” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 102). In order for subcultures to exist, there must be a mainstream code of ideologies by which individuals are expected to abide. Hebdige (1979) asks “How does a subculture make sense to its members? How is it made to signify disorder?” (p. 100). Subcultures come in various shapes and evolve over time, as does the hegemonic culture of a nation, especially one so shaped by colonization and multiculturalism.

Amazigh representation, throughout the history of the people, has been both the accepted cultural norm and counterculture, often times simultaneously depending on the perspective of neighboring people. The evolution of the societal treatment of Amazigh tattooing practices is indicative of this cultural “cycle leading from opposition to diffusion, from resistance to incorporation [that] encloses each successive subculture” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 100). In a patriarchal nation whose policies and hegemonic ideals are shaped by male authorities, female expression may always be treated as a subculture or subsidiary to that of male interests. Given that Amazigh tattoos are a particularly female practice, it is possible that the art form served as a way for peripheral-coded female identity to influence the mainstream Moroccan culture that so often neglects its women’s agency. It is important to note the doubly marginalized culture of Amazigh women, especially as it relates to the dying practice of tattooing; in essence, the practice marks Amazigh women as both the cultural and gendered “Other” in relation not only to Arab culture, but to their Amazigh brothers who do *not* mark their bodies with symbols of their ethnic and spiritual identity.

This study will attempt to recenter women’s voices which historically have been overlooked as conveyors of cultural significance. That significance may be coded differently

throughout the history of the people, but it is nonetheless important to amplify that an entire half of the population that the Arabization of Morocco has disregarded and demoted to a silenced subculture of their own national community. Charged with carrying their tribal community's sacred value under their own skin, women whose tattoos once worn as badges of honor are now being judged as wearing marks of shame.

### **Tattoo as Culturally Communicative Tool**

Though there currently are no academic studies on the practice of Amazigh body art, many scholars have explored tattooing in other cultures, especially as practiced by women. Atkinson (2003) researched tattooing in Canada through discourse centering on figurational sociology. This highlights how societies change over time and how life can only truly be experienced and understood through interdependent social interactions. Atkinson (2003), who built on the work of Elias (1994), defines a figuration as “a complex web of social relationships based on individual and group interdependencies-- such as family, a school, a workplace, a community, an economy, or a political sphere” (p. 6). Individual acts such as that of getting tattooed are both the process and outcome of long-term societal evolution. This perspective harkens back to the work of Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) who viewed community as “a complex system of friendship and kinship networks and formal and informal social associational ties rooted in family life and ongoing socialization processes” (p. 329).

This is true of the history of Amazigh body art, a practice created to bring people together and honor the shared community of the different tribes and their women. The practice is uniquely feminine as an Amazigh girl would receive her first tattoo, on her face for all to see, as a sign that she had reached the onset of menses, a rite of passage that takes various forms of celebration across the globe. This blue line, with various adornments depending on tribal affiliation, marks

her entry as a full participant in her community, a woman ready to impart knowledge and tradition to the future generation she will help bear.

Tattoos are often thought of as rebellious in nature, the practice of a subculture of individuals seeking to differentiate themselves from the masses. However, one's body is never truly one's own; no matter our intentions in how we choose to present ourselves with various adornments, we cannot control how others *interpret* our physical choices about our respective bodies: "Expose too much of it, and religious fundamentalists will come after you. Pierce or brand it, and you assume the uniform of the counterculture" (Mifflin, 2013, p. 4). Mifflin (2013) reviews the ways in which women across time and cultures have modified their appearances with makeup, skin bleaching, waxing, and all manner of painful procedures to express themselves and communicate attractiveness, individuality, belonging or deviance: "Tattoos make unique the surface of one's self, embody one's secret dreams, adorn with magic emblems the Altamira of the flesh" (Ackerman, 1990).

As an extrovert's art form, however, tattooing appeals to the iconoclast in many women. It is no coincidence that women's initial interest in it came in the wake of feminism's first wave in the late 19th century, that a second craze crested in the suffragist 20s, and that women tattooists broke the gender barrier in the feminist 70s -- all periods when women's public profiles in any number of professions was surging (Mifflin, 2013, p. 8).

However, one must be cautious about presuming universal motivators for inking one's skin.

Some of the first examples of tattooed women in the Western world included Nora Hildebrandt and Irene Woodward, who were competitive tattooed ladies who made a profit by

participating in circus freak shows (Mifflin, 2013). They sensationalized the artwork on their bodies as they delighted onlookers by appearing in sexy costumes and regaled shocked crowds with tales of capture by savage Indian tribes. Woodward often spoke about how Sitting Bull himself had kidnapped her and forced barbaric images upon her otherwise pure white skin. The narrative they share is clear: The tattoos taint their prim and proper purity, but also serve as an alluring foray into an exotic land by way of their carriers being sidewalk oddities and entertainers.

Another infamous tattooed lady was Olive Oatman, who was captured by Yavapai Indians as a child: “A Mohave family raised [her] as their own; that included tattooing [her] on the chin and arm to ensure passage to the afterlife and to allow [her] adopted ancestors to recognize [her] there” (Mifflin, 2013, p. 17). Unlike Hildebrant and Woodward, Oatman appeared modestly dressed in academic settings and lectured on the Mohave tradition of using pulverized stones and cactus needles to apply ink that would beautify and protect their women, in this life and the next. Oatman bridged a gap between worlds; though she was “properly dressed” she was also “a tattooed savage [and] a de-civilized freak [with markings] no proper lady would willingly adopt” (Mifflin, 2013, p. 17). Though polite society could only appreciate her tattoos as part of a thrilling, savage tale, Oatman spoke of how revered the process and artwork was and is to Mohave women.

It is important to note that the tattooed-ladies were proverbial freaks while their tattooed male counterparts, often sailors or criminals, were accepted as a more palatable subculture that did not merit circus tents and admission tickets. As Amazigh women marked significant life events on their bodies, so did sailors who would tattoo various symbols on their chests and arms to mark their achievements of sailing certain distances or reaching far-off lands. Mead (1949)

theorized that men in so-called tribal cultures modified their bodies in this way because, unlike women who naturally manifested signs of life changes such as menstruation and pregnancy, a man's body had to be intentionally marked to tell the story of the life he led and the goals he had achieved. Mead failed to acknowledge that this ritual process had already crept into Western subcultures as previously mentioned.

Brain (1979) described body modification as an attempt to embellish one's natural skin with a cultural skin. Mead would argue that his "observation is especially resonant for women, whose ties to nature have historically been used to justify their exclusion from culture" (Mifflin, 2013, p. 146). This is true for those sailors and ex-cons from the United States; however, at a more universally cultural level, we see the same with the Mohave and Amazigh. Feminine body modification for these cultures is a reclamation of one's identity that has either been fringe to the male experience, or considered less important than the patriarchal standard. Though no culture can be reduced to an image or series of symbols in which its many nuances can be captured, the proud defiance of Amazigh body art, especially women's facial tattoos which are not covered by traditional Moroccan styles of the Islamic hijab, is a striking symbol of a people whose identity will not blow like the sands on which they build their homes. Many of the above findings are reminiscent of the motivations behind Berber tattoos. The act of tattooing among the Amazigh, whether using ink and needles or temporary henna, is a communal practice that brought Amazigh women together to share not only in the process of inking each other, but in conversation and landmark life moments such as first menstruation, marriage, the loss of virginity, and childbirth.

Pitts (2003) studied the cultural politics of various forms of body modification including how the stigmatization of the tattoo "allowed for it to become a mark of disaffection for groups who sought to stage symbolic rebellion and create a subcultural style, and, eventually, to create

personal and political body art” (p. 3). Though the practice of ritualistic Amazigh tattooing predates the colonization or, indeed, Arabization of Morocco, the practice has consistently been framed as less progressive than the newer advents of European or Islamic influences. “Body art is presented in modern primitivist discourse partly as an opportunity to educate others about what they perceive to be indigenous values” (Pitts, 2003, p. 129). It is not only the action or content of tribal tattoos that come under question in an evolving cultural landscape; it is the very *why* of body modification and how the values that once encouraged body art differ from the aspirations of a nation undergoing decolonization and a period of deep, cultural introspection. “The tribal body is defined by what it is *not* (for instance, the blond Barbie)”-- or in this case, the pious Muslim Moroccan--“the ‘primitive’ *itself* is not particularized, but rather unified as ‘Other than’” (Pitts, 2003, p. 136). The sheer different-ness of tattooing is sufficient for mainstream culture to call into question its value and its state of belonging altogether.

A unique consideration of this study is that I will exclusively consider the Amazigh tattooing of women. There exists some evidence that men of various tribes also participated in some forms of body modification, but the focus of this study is on the stories of my Maghrebian sisters. There is no shortage of colonial writing, which I have explored in later sections, that highlights how the “‘gender-specific sexualisation’ of indigenous bodies has been historically coded into colonial narratives” (Pitts, 2003, p. 137). This transcends the exoticization of kaftans and accents, but at its core, speaks to the notion that through the white, male, colonial gaze, other identities are there to be consumed for the white man’s pleasure. Pitts (2003) concurs that “‘primitive bodies, moreover, are imagined as more sexually pleased and erotic” (p. 138).

It is important here to note that the primitive label is not used solely by white European forces but by Muslim patriarchal doctrine that still actively condemns body modification in

Morocco and beyond. In exploring the significance of Islam in the Moroccan Nationalist Movement and the erasure of Amazigh practices, I am highlighting both how and why the combination of spirituality and decolonization have amplified the need to mask and control women's agency and physicalities. Though not universally darker toned, but coded as such through presumed-primitive customs, Amazigh women like other "women of color are often presented as especially erotic or sexual" (Pitts, 2003, p. 129). The intersection of their race/ethnicity *and* their cultural body art must be considered to fully understand the breadth and depth of Arab, Muslim, and European responses to the demonized, yet sacred practice.

### **Semiotics and Cultural Codes**

Morocco and the surrounding Maghreb have a history of patriarchal systems and practices that do not encourage the education and independence of women. A 2015 UNESCO poll reported that an approximate 47% of Moroccan women are unable to read or write; one can only imagine that this is *not* the lowest this number has ever been given recent efforts of Moroccan King Mohammed VI to increase education opportunities for women. This lack of access to formal education does not mean that Amazigh women did not contribute to their culture; communication occurs through more than the spoken or written word. Barthes (1964) wrote that "language is at the same time a social institution and a system of values" (p. 14). Socialization among Amazigh women may not have used the written word, but instead incorporated crafts, dance, oral history, and body art. "Language, in this sense, is a signifying practice. Any representational system which functions in this way can be thought of as working, broadly speaking, according to the principles of representation through language" (Hall, 1997, p. 5). The art and symbols Amazigh women used in their tattooing traditions served as one such representation since the arrival of the earliest Amazigh tribes in pre-Islamic Morocco and

throughout the 1900s. Due to the lengthy history of tattooing among the Amazigh, the communicative significance of their art holds true; “where there is a visual substance, the meaning is confirmed by being duplicated in a linguistic message [...] so that at least a part of the iconic message is, in terms of structural relationship, either redundant or taken up by the linguistic system” (Barthes, 1964, p. 10). The symbols that lie beneath the skin of generations of Amazigh women, such as the symbol of the “free man” or those symbols that reflect Amazigh values and aspirations, do not live in isolation; instead each serves as a page of a connected cultural history that represents their people. In painstakingly applying and then wearing these values in and under their skin, Amazigh women proudly display to each other-- and to the world that sees them as “babbling” Berbers-- that their culture is rich and lives within their skin as much as within their words.

Semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols as bearers of meaning across and within cultures and media, has been a focus of many communication scholars (Saussure, 1916; Berger, 2005). This study can include the permanent marking of the human body with signs and iconography. Goffman (1959) referred to symbols as “sign vehicles;” one could argue that the Amazigh women themselves were the pathways through which those “sign vehicles” were shared. Goffman’s *“Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”* (1959), reminds us that “the expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he *gives*, and the expression that he *gives off*” (p. 2). Regardless of one’s agency to deliberately and effectively communicate a matter or ideology, one cannot control *how* it is received; that is to say, we are never *not* communicating and we can never truly know what others think of our efforts to share our truths. This is not only the case with spoken or written language, but can apply to nonverbal

facial expressions, fashion choices, or symbols that have multiple, perhaps conflicting, connotations. Berger's (2005) application of linguistic concepts to non-verbal phenomena, such as imagery and iconography, allows for in-depth analysis of identity markers and popular designs and how the culture and its respective individuals formulate, over time, a shared understanding of signs. Referencing Saussure's (1916) analysis of the so-called life of signs, Berger (2005) discusses the relationship between the signifier and the signified -- that is, the often arbitrary, fluid associations and selections of representations and subsequent meanings. Though this allows for fluidity of meaning and for individualized understandings of meanings, it does not diminish the solid foundations upon which specific meanings have been ascribed to certain signs.

“Semiology is therefore perhaps destined to be absorbed into a *trans-linguistics*, the materials of which may be myth, narrative, journalism, or on the other hand objects of our civilization, in so far as they are *spoken* (through press, prospectus, interview, conversation and perhaps even the inner language which is ruled by the laws of imagination)” (Saussure, 1964, p. 11). Amazigh tattoos, which were commonly worn as markers of pride or prayers for fertility, can also be coded as subversive and be externally viewed as indicators of self-proclaimed Otherness to the Muslim norm and tattoo-less Amazigh masculinity while also being the norm within the “Berber” context. This duality of meaning can create tension, confusion, or offense depending on context. Goffman (1959) refers to a “kind of control upon the part of the individual [communicator which] reinstates the symmetry of the communication process, and sets the stage for a kind of information game-- a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, rediscovery” and potential misunderstanding (p. 8).

The focus of this study, however, is to understand the relationship with and histories behind Amazigh tattooing, a practice unique amongst neighboring communities that now

demonize the blue ink and needles used to complete these sacred ceremonies. Indigenous Maghrebian culture is so rich in symbols and signifiers that the artwork has become its own language, with slight differences in design bearing significant indicators as to the culture and intent of both artist and wearer as well as specific geographical markers. Berger (2005) describes the associations of symbols as learned and passed on from person to person, and generation to generation; the thousand words a picture is worth have no independent meaning without the specific context and ideologies of both sender and receiver. Semiotic knowledge requires a group understanding as Goffman's (1959) "concept of the team [which] allows us to think of performances that are given by one or more than one performer" and serve to communicate a shared meaning (p. 80). The denotation of many of these tattoo designs may have been lost over the years or altered through generations of artists creating and recreating each stroke, however the *internal* connotations and motivators inherently remain the same. These are proud symbols of identities and a cultural belief system that is as indelible as the ink used to draw each sign; the harmony of this system within larger, hegemonic Moroccan culture is what has evolved. "Every structure of 'figures' is based on the notion that there exist two languages, one proper and one figured, and that consequently [...] in its elocutionary part, is a table of *deviations* of language" (Barthes, 1973, p. 88).

The very nature of semiology and signs cannot exist as exclusive monads since the signifier and signified exist in a cultural landscape upon which they can and do affect each other (Barthes, 1973). As all expressions of interpersonal communication necessitate both senders and receivers, the same message may be coded differently depending on who is receiving it. All communicative messages can contain multiple layers of meaning, some of which may resonate more with some groups than others. Like Goffman (1959), Hall (1980) attests that meaning is

both based and built upon “shared linguistic conventions and shared codes” which implies that meaning can therefore be encoded and decoded, or *translated*, in ways that make sense to those who seek to understand it (p. 25). The study of semiotics allows scholars to understand the unspoken language of each artistic symbol and the creation and evolution of its meanings. Hall’s (1980) work on encoding and decoding allows audiences to unpack the various interpretations of symbols language, to decipher the core values of the Amazigh and understanding the significance of their bold choices within the context of the changing cultural landscape of Morocco and the surrounding Maghreb.

### **Coding and Hegemony**

In a nation whose meshing of colonizing cultures resembles that of a kaleidoscope of often contradictory yet concomitant influences, one might think that an overarching hegemonic ideal cannot exist. The Maghreb is a spider’s web of global tensions and social norms that influence each member of the social landscape. The hegemonic ideal is the “notion that a performance presents an idealized view of the situation [and] is, of course quite common” (Goffman, 1959, p. 25). Not despite but *because* of its global influencers, Moroccan identity has been intentionally negotiated and navigated by individuals and groups of individuals who try to create and socially, often legally, reinforce their hegemonic ideals. When an “individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, that his behaviour does as a whole” (Goffman, 1959, p. 25). These values, though hegemonic, are not to be mistaken as monolithic or devoid of some of the qualities, language skills, and worldliness that foreign influence brings. Hegemony requires resistance and in a land of layered cultures and norms, that resistance can take various, often contradictory yet concomitant forms.

Hebdige (1991) studied the notions of culture and the deliberate creation of subcultures which defied the overarching social ideals of a community. Though differentiation from the norm may be the goal, for example in the case of Moroccan scholars who sought to stand apart from the enforced French academic tradition, such defiance remains coded within and by the hegemonic norm. Despite adherence to or deviation from standard cultural practice, participants in a society share a “conceptual map” and make sense of the world using “the same language systems” (Hall, 1997, p. 22). In a part of the world with blended “language systems,” the fabric of identity management does not become less impactful, it becomes more intricate and provides increased layers to social expectations that vary across gender, class, geography, and race. Hebdige (1991) states that “each ensemble has its place in an internal system of differences -- the conventional modes of sartorial discourse -- which fit a corresponding set of socially prescribed roles and options [and are] expressive of ‘normality’ as opposed to ‘deviance’” which leads to behaviors and groups being viewed as normal and natural or deliberately corrupted, unnatural and *othered* (p. 101). Hebdige (1991) goes on to say that intentional communication, such as Amazigh body modification, stands apart as “a visible construction, a loaded choice. It directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read” (p. 101). The choice to deliberately mark oneself in Islamic Morocco is, as Hebdige (1979) writes, “what distinguishes the visual ensembles of spectacular subcultures from those favoured in the surrounding culture(s) [...] they are *obviously* fabricated. They *display* their own codes [...] or at least demonstrate that codes are there to be used and abused” (p. 101). These markings can be decoded as signs of belonging to an in-group or out-group depending on the identity of those who interact with tattooed Amazigh women.

Hall (1997) would agree with this notion in his argument that meaning is derived not from some natural, objective knowledge, but from the linguistic, cultural, and social conventions

we construct in our communities—that is to say, meaning evolves and can never truly be fixed or immutable. “The essence of language [including those symbols and gestures we share] is communication and that, in turn, depends on shared linguistic conventions and shared codes [...] we *construct* meaning using representational systems” (Hall, 1997, p.25, emphasis in original). This, in turn, creates meaning which is dependent on not only the relationship between the signifier and signified, but the code that frames both their connotations and denotations to various on-lookers who may have differing codes based on their own demographic and communicative backgrounds.

Though Goffman (1959) described social establishments “as relatively closed systems,” this simply cannot hold true in a society with so many cultural, religious, and global influencers mixing in both formal, legal and informal, social channels (p.105). Goffman (1959) discusses the ways in which we perform our identities according to larger social scripts, but on a multicultural, national stage. We, especially as Amazigh, must navigate a unique pressure around our self-conception and the potential for nuanced performance disruptions when following an Amazigh code or practice directly contradicts another embodied code, such as those which are Muslim, Arab, or Moroccan nationalistic in nature. Therefore “individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are being judged,” even when those standards are muddled across layers of tradition, familial obligation, national loyalties, intellectual integrity, and spirituality (p. 253).

Though the increase of Arab culture in once-Berber lands shifted the trend of tattooing causing many women to assimilate to mainstream Muslim norms, we must not fall into the trap of understanding identity as a zero-sum game as an individual’s race, for example, neither predicts nor negates their religious affiliation. Within the intersection of Arab-ness, Muslim-ness,

and Amazigh-ness, there lie countless lives and the countless choices of self and group-presentation that women made and continue to make to forge a sense of belonging across these spectrums. Socialization is critical to identity development, as is the salience of the ethnic identity to the group and individual. One might seek positive identity and dignity from clinging to facets of more innate “Berber” lineages. “In particular, group/category comparisons that accentuate group distinctiveness in favor of one’s in-group over a relevant outgroup are privileged. As a result, when a particular group becomes salient, the features associated with that group guide one’s attitudes and behaviors” (McKinley et al, 2014, p. 3). Amazigh women can thus paradoxically be defined both as representative of their tribal communities *and* as in opposition to Arab Moroccan culture that does not support many of its markers and traditions.

At a time when Amazigh erasure was at its peak given European and Moroccan tensions on defining the borders and cultures of the nation, the Amazigh people clung more firmly to their communities as they navigated French and Arab cultural and political influence. “Consequently, differences across groups are highlighted and disparities within categories are trivialized” as tribal communities such as the Amazigh and Tamazight came together as Berber above all else, displaying their commonalities despite the adversity of internal and external colonizing forces that sought to divide them (McKinley et al, 2014, p. 3). This held true not only for the Amazigh, but the Arab nationalists who sought to trivialize Amazigh identity by blurring tribal traits to fit into their ideal Moroccan cultural persona.

### **Cultural Codes among Amazigh Women**

The political pressures of a nation fighting for its independence, though powerful, cannot dilute the significance of communal and interpersonal codes that exist within Amazigh tribal communities that did not internalize either colonial or Arab “excellence” as aspirations. Family

is of critical importance to the Berber community and is matrilineal in lineage given the absence of paternity testing and no previous ability of tracking ancestry other than through the act of childbirth. Women's role in gender socialization is of equal importance as women are carriers of the weight of passing on the customs of the people through home-schooling and creation of traditional crafts and cuisine. Gatherings of Amazigh women are features of the Berber calendar, marking time in each woman's life with art dedicated to the entire cycle of life from birth, through puberty and marriage, and ultimately to death. In a nation where women were not afforded political influence or access to education, Amazigh women, though regulated by policy and patriarchy, were almost forgotten in much of the Independence Movement's desire to change and erase Amazigh practices. Therefore the patterns of socialization were female-guided, none more visibly than through the sharing of body art which could still be seen beneath any hijabs or kaftans Arab customs enforced. Amazigh women's histories are woven into the fabric of what it is to belong to the Amazigh community not only despite, but *in spite of*, opposing cultural trends in the surrounding area as they were doubly overlooked by a society that devalued them because of their womanhood *and* their presumed tribal primitiveness. Symbols that once made up the cultural code of protecting the very core of Amazigh womanhood have evolved into symbols of defiance. Twentieth century politics and Arab ideology entirely rewrote and recoded those pieces of indelible art that once honored life and death and, despite the symbols' permanence on women's skin, made their meaning mutable. Permanent artwork that honored life and death were stripped of their significance, even if the women were not stripped of the signs, they were stripped of the wider understanding of what they meant. Tattoos, doubly powerful in their modern homage to the primal state of life, were newly being questioned, challenged and written off, rendering them markers of Amazigh vulnerability, not strength.

## Postcolonial Theory

In attempting to understand the various perspectives and reactions to Amazigh tattooing customs, we cannot escape the reality of Morocco's colonized past. I remember stories from my great grandmother, who had face tattoos since her adolescence, and how she remembered walking the crowded streets of Casablanca and talking to British and Nazi soldiers as they stationed themselves in Morocco, their Sweden of Africa. She spoke of troops of German, British, and French soldiers with equal levels of calm—as one might recall the weather, for neither impacted her daily life any more than the Arab community she called home when her family moved North away from their Amazigh tribe's land. I also remember how my father, born in 1956, the year of Morocco's Independence, told me stories of his youth where he joined nationalist protests from the young age of 10. Arab pride and Amazigh pride lived in peace around their dinner table, but thinking back to my grandmother's headscarf and tattooed chin and cheeks, I wonder what stories she didn't tell; I wonder how those soldiers and her own grandson saw her markings, a tradition that is no longer practiced in my immediate family who are mostly conservative, practicing Muslims with the exception of my progressive father who deflects questions with a knowing smile and a quip of, "Do your research, Hannah."

And so I continue my research by considering a postcolonial lens, not one that is solely focused on European influence but on the Arabization of the Maghreb, a land that as far as documented history reports, was home to the Amazigh. Goffman (1959) wrote that "a region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (p. 106). Morocco's regions are often stacked layers of differing perceptions, like those at my family's dinner table where rules and regional customs are seen but seldom spoken of. This transcolonial identification as Harrison (2016) writes is "concerned with transversal engagements and

representations based on the understanding that the Maghreb [is part of] an overlapping, transnational (post)colonial history” (p. 9). When considering colonizing influences, we must not limit our study to that of North-South influence, but also consider the East-West axis of identification that comes with both the Arab and Amazigh diaspora’s intertwined lives.

Whether considering Arab colonization of Amazigh lands and tradition, or the Europeans colonization of Maghrebian culture, resources and politics, the words of Edward Said (1963) hold true:

National culture under colonial domination is a culture under interrogation whose destruction is sought systematically. Very quickly it becomes a culture condemned to clandestinity. This notion of clandestinity can immediately be perceived in the reactions of the occupier who interprets this complacent attachment to traditions as a sign of loyalty to the national spirit and a refusal to submit. This persistence of cultural expression condemned by colonial society is already a demonstration of nationhood (p. 172).

Though Fanon (1964) and Said (1993) focused much of their work on the Maghreb and the Middle East, Morocco remained largely unexplored in their respective works. However, much of their scholarship, including the above excerpt, still hold true not only in regards to the relationship between the Arabs and the French colonial powers, but, as mentioned, between the Amazigh and the Arab Nationalist Movement. In either case, a strength of imperialism and colonialism is the way in which those dominating forces make colonized people feel as though they should be subjugated (Said, 1993). This is true in Morocco where white European “excellence” remains the gold standard politically, physically, and culturally. This is evident in

Morocco's embracing of everything from U.S. fashion and music to skin bleaching kits which are available at every corner store.

Fanon (1964) wrote that "colonialism generally manages, at the turning-point when history and the nation will reject it, to maintain itself as a value" regardless of the efforts of independence movements to assert themselves (p. 101). Though logistically power may seem to be returned to the colonized peoples, they are simply fitting into a slot whose design has already been carved out and defined by imperial, foreign forces. Fanon goes on to write that decolonization can only turn into solid nation building by engaging with those moments of transition that hold "bubbling trepidation" and the uncertainty that allows a country to *truly* redefine itself outside of the values of outside colonial forces (p. xxv). Later scholar Harrison (2016) was of a similar mind-set in that true "cultural decolonization" allows people to speak for themselves without outside influence/control or censorship (Harrison, 2016, p. 11). This academic call for independent thought can often feel overly ambitious given the negative rhetoric and racism that have all but drowned formerly colonized peoples during the time of their subjugation. Said (1963) recalls such popular European beliefs that "the North African is a criminal [and] violently, hereditarily violent [...] sleazy camel jockeys" just some of the stereotypes that pushed key players in the Moroccan Nationalist into a corner; to fight their colonizers would prove such stereotypes true; to acquiesce to European excellence would not result in freedom (p. 223). However, centuries of exploitation, feudalistic poverty, and being made to feel less-than, eventually mobilized Arab nationalists into an organized rebellion in which they simultaneously partnered with and belittled the Maghreb's indigenous people.

Morocco's Independence of 1956 was and is a complex moment of history where some native peoples were released from their colonial shackles only to place these on the arms and

minds of their neighbors. Said (1993) wrote that decolonization in the Middle East and North Africa is:

far from a triumphalist story. Lodged at its heart, so to speak, is a complex of hope, betrayal, and bitter disappointment; the discourse of Arab nationalism today carries this complex along with it. The result is an unfulfilled and incomplete culture, expressing itself in a fragmented language of torment, angry insistence, often uncritical condemnation of outside (usually Western) enemies. Post-colonial Arab states thus have two choices: Many, like Syria and Iraq, retain the pan-Arab inflection, using it to justify a one-party national security state that has swallowed up civil society almost completely; others, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, while retaining aspects of the first alternative, have devolved into a regional or local nationalism whose political culture has not, I believe, developed beyond dependence on the metropolitan West (p. 253).

The pitting of Africanization against Arabization occurs under the colonial aftermath of European influence and the political, economic, and cultural insecurities it brought with it. These insecurities hit none harder than the women of Amazigh communities who lived amidst what Fanon (1963) called “the most heinous and virulent type of chauvinism” (p. 105). In any society, those less privileged are the last to reap any benefits of freedom and are first to feel the wrath of blame or economic scarcity.

The focus of my research is not to analyze the living conditions of the Amazigh, but the ways in which their cultural legacy has and has not been remembered in postcolonial Morocco. Ahmed (1992) wrote that “for women in general the effects of European political and cultural encroachment were complicated and, in certain respects, decidedly negative” (p. 127). I hope

that a close study of any existing discourse around Amazigh women's sacred practices as well as the symbols and values they honored in their art, will allow for history to remember their stories, not through the eyes of competing Arab and European ideologies, but through the women's connection to their land, their spirituality, and to each other.

### **Summary**

These existing bodies of literature around culture, subculture and semiotics highlight the changing matrices of meaning around symbols that affect and are affected by cultural hegemony and societal pressures to conform to what a community deems appropriate. The dual-colonization and marginalization of the Amazigh land and peoples necessitates an understanding of postcolonial theory that will inform the political rejection of indigenous customs and the more recent initiatives to revive Amazigh tradition.

Morocco is continuing to culturally evolve and Amazigh symbols, Tashelhit, and Tamazight are more prevalent though they are commercialized and, in my opinion, co-opted by men invested in the tourist industry. I have spent most of my life in a land colonized by white voices and white culture, or those men who aspire to whiteness, amongst a people filled with equal parts pride and shame about our brown and black roots. Though I will study some colonial perspectives to answer my research questions, I believe we need to tell our own stories and allow black and brown voices access to academic representation. I hope to amplify the voices of Amazigh women who have been silenced by the colonization, Arabization, Islamization, and patriarchy of Morocco.

### CHAPTER III: METHOD

Having reviewed the relevant literature to set the stage for my analysis, I will conduct a discourse analysis of existing examples of Amazigh body traditions and the narratives, or lack thereof, around the practice. Of those few texts on the Amazigh, the majority unfortunately tend to neglect not only female representation in the culture but the existence of women altogether. This project comes from a desire to increase female voices in the conversation around female art and agency, and stems from a lifetime of immersion and observation of the Amazigh and Islamic cultures that have shaped not only me, but many of the women in my family and the community which I call home. A majority of academic texts have been written by European or American men and women who have not lived in the Maghreb as more than tourists. There are several reasons for this, not least of which is that the Amazigh culture is recent and grossly underfunded as is the case with too many indigenous groups living on colonized or formerly colonized lands. I had hoped to center Amazigh voices, but as a Muslim immigrant in 2018 America, I have been without access to my homeland of Morocco -- rather, were I to return home to conduct interviews, there would be no guarantee I could return back stateside. Therefore, I have had to rely on the goodwill of strangers and the unreliability of Moroccan Internet communication, neither of which has proven successful at the time of my writing this thesis. I have contacted several members of the Amazigh Cultural Associations, fellow Maghrebian scholars in both English and French, and even family members with loose ties to the royal family, but to no avail.

Despite the lack of Moroccan voices, other than my own, what follows are several texts and topics that serve as solid foundations upon which I have sought answers to my research questions. I have included several prevalent symbols that feature in Amazigh tattoo iconography as well as more recent Amazigh-inspired crafts. The years after Morocco's Independence also

serve as indispensable evidence of the cultural climate in a newly decolonized land -- one with admittedly few female voices and almost no mention of Amazigh identity. This lack of artifacts serves as evidence in and of itself. I have also included online op-eds, articles, and social media, slim though it is, to highlight some of the sentiments current Amazigh and Arab people share about the evolution of Amazigh and Moroccan identity, especially in an increasingly globalized nation.

Having amassed these materials and set aside my own disappointments regarding my inability to travel home or receive much if any communication from fellow Amazigh women, family members or scholars, I set to work analysing what I could find. The goal of this analysis is to understand what these tattoos signify from various perspectives, and to examine how those perspectives have influenced the sustainability, or rather near erasure, of Amazigh tradition. Semiotics served as my primary tool for decoding the tattoos from an Amazigh perspective, however postcolonial theory is indispensable in dissecting the evolution of these codes as they are both remembered and forgotten in different parts of the country's national memory.

## CHAPTER IV: AMAZIGH TATTOOS: A COMPLEX WEB OF CODES

The woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. The men's words were no longer law. The women were no longer silent.

Frantz Fanon, 1959, *A Dying Colonialism*

I chose the above quote from Fanon to emphasize the unique placement of Amazigh women as colonized by *both* French policy, and, more importantly, Muslim Moroccan law and cultural expectations. What emerges from my research is the presence of four codes through which the various facets of Moroccan culture-- the Amazigh, the French, the Muslim, and the Arab nationalist-- interpret the symbolic language of Amazigh body art. It is through these codes that we can come close to answering the following questions.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the role of the sacred practice of Amazigh tattooing within the various cultural frameworks that make up Morocco and its complicated history. To review, the following research questions have served as the core of my study:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What do the tattoos signify to the Amazigh and the broader Arab community of Morocco?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How has the Islamization of the Maghreb and Moroccan Independence changed the narrative around Amazigh tattooing?

The goal of this chapter is to highlight that the sole point of consistency with the scholarship and history around the practice of Amazigh tattooing customs is that there really was and *is* no communication. As is the case of taboos in fragile political climates, especially ones with such a strong religious influence, there is little open discussion on what those tattoos mean to the Muslim Amazigh women who wear them. Afraid of being labeled as anti-Islamic,

Amazigh communities seldom openly discuss how they combine their faith and culture. At a time when both Amazigh and Moroccan identities were vulnerable to colonizing influences, any dissent or difference, especially as represented by women, was confined to the private sphere of the home or the rural countryside where a combination of poor literacy rates and political tensions dimmed the lights on what was once the tribe's guiding light of tradition, identity and protection for Amazigh women. It is this very lack of discussion and evidence of Amazigh women's tattoos outside of private conversations that makes this project so promising and necessary, and yet so maddeningly challenging. It is, however, clear that four distinct lenses of coding emerge from the ways in which different groups have historically, and currently, view Amazigh tattoos: Amazigh women themselves identify with the tattoos as markers of in-group identity; devout Muslims would code and categorize any form of permanent body modification as out-group and un-Islamic; Arab and European colonizing forces would similarly code tattooed Amazigh women as the other; and lastly Amazigh men would lie somewhere in the middle, recognizing familiar cultural identifiers of tribal association but still viewing the feminine nature of the practice as indicative of the gendered other.

### **The Amazigh Community**

The primary source of content for this study simply must come from the Amazigh themselves, not from those outsiders who study and often vilify or "other" them as has been the case for too many years. As the goal of this thesis is to understand the vanishing practice of Amazigh cultural tattooing, a logical place to begin is by looking at the tattoos themselves.

As mentioned, despite the hazy memories of tattooed faces from my youth, there are few tangible primary sources of Amazigh body art that exist outside of the rural communities in Morocco. Aside from scattered online sources and passages in Western books focused on other

aspects of Amazigh culture and politics and The Peabody Museum of Archaeology, home to an extensive collection of Berber art: “The Peabody’s collections from Berber North Africa came to the museum not as part of a systemic effort to create a ‘Berber collection’ but as a result of various people’s interests” which have amassed 450 pieces, the first of which was acquired from Boston in 1904 (Bernasek, 2008, p. 3). Given the global spread of African art which was “borrowed,” or some would say *stolen* by Western nations without the consent of indigenous peoples, there has been a dilution of meaning and context of much of the Amazigh tradition. “Much of the artistic vocabulary of the rural areas—that is, their symbols, designs, motifs and tattoos—originated from pre-Islamic beliefs influenced later by Islamic geometric patterning and ornamentation” (Courtney-Clarke, 1996, p. 10). The evolution and globalization of this linguistic code of traditional art cannot be fully understood until we further explore the original meanings and customs behind the practice.

### **The Tattoo Art of Amazigh Women**

Before diving into examples of the discourse around Amazigh tattooing, we must look to the art itself. Popular Amazigh iconography is combined into a mosaic of intricate lattice work that is inked on women’s chins, cheeks, foreheads, necks, torsos, and hands. Each design is a combination of individual symbols that are incorporated differently across tribal traditions (online, 2019). Various online communities, not least of which are Pinterest pages, and specific tribal groups attribute slightly different meanings to some of the symbols. “The symbolic design vocabulary of Amazigh arts is associated primarily with women’s work—patterned textiles and painted pottery in the north, embroidered leatherwork in the south [...] Berber artisans create beautiful objects that reflect many aspects of their worldview and beliefs” (Bernasek, 2008, p. 14). “Artisans from across the Berber-speaking world draw on symbolic vocabulary that is both

regionally specific and part of a larger symbolic universe” (Bernasek, 2008, p. 14). The symbolic linguistic code of prevalent tattoo symbols has recorded examples dating as far back to the time of Herodotus and his documentation of fifth-century cave drawings in Tassli, Algeria (Courtney-Clarke, 1996). Three prevalent themes can be found throughout Amazigh body art: nature as sacred, tribal affiliation, and protection. Animism is a central medium through which the themes of nature, tribal affiliation, and protection are represented.

### **Sacred Nature as Code**

A feature of Amazigh culture is its connectedness to nature. Moroccan Muslims, specifically those who closely tie faith with Arab nationalism, view this focus on nature as undermining of the Muslim faith, especially in regards to the practice of tattooing. Tuareg and Kabyle tribe members, the indigenous people of Algeria and Northern Mali, were often condemned as witches; this narrative followed some communities of Amazigh women who were vilified for their body art and reliance on herbal medicine instead of Muslim prayer (Rasmussen, 1998). To the Amazigh, even those who identify as practicing Muslims, there is a sacred quality to nature that can be found in the symbols women bore to honor the earth that sustained them.

The first tattoo a young Amazigh woman receives upon first menstruation is a vertical line that symbolizes her life and its connectedness to the world and upward connection to the sky-- or, depending on tribe, time, and reading, her connection to God and divinity. The vertical nature of the line transcends the mortal sphere but is also reminiscent of a dagger that points to her lips; we are to understand that her strength and power lies within her words and her ability to use her voice to share tradition and speak up.

Other popular images adorning the face of Amazigh women are the crescent moon, not as a symbol of Islam as it has become in more recent years, but as an acknowledgement of time

passing and the notion that everyone and everything who comes into being must also fade away. The Amazigh predated Muslims in the Maghreb, so a pan-Middle Eastern historical analysis of the symbol would be interesting in understanding if Muslim Arabs “borrowed” the symbol, or if both existed in respective exclusivity until the Arabization of Amazigh land. Though a symbol of life and provider of sustenance, the image of palm trees is tattooed on a woman’s cheeks to invoke what some refer to as the mother goddess. Palm trees, also known as *siyala*, are most often applied to girls at puberty. *Siyalas* are believed to be “particularly effective in averting harm and promoting fertility [and] is therefore seen as the ‘most feminine’ of patterns” (Gröning, 1997, p. 123). Not only does the *siyala* provide pubescent girls with protection while harnessing their feminine energy at a time they are marked as fertile and ready for motherhood, it also serves “a triple function: to embellish, to destroy negative influences and to increase the strength of positive forces” (p. 123). Women’s reproductive energies are also harnessed through wavy or zigzag lines, symbols of snakes. Though most often associated with the phallus, the tattooed snake in this context symbolizes the feminine libido and is applied to women seeking to become pregnant.

Palm trees are also inked on expecting mothers or those who wish to harness the fertility of nature. A woman’s cheeks may be adorned with a geometric rosette, composed of triangles. If the tip of the largest, center triangle faces upwards, it is to provide the women with virility as the triangle represents fire. Should the triangle tip face down, the women who wear the symbol channel more femininity as the symbol is reminiscent of a water droplet, a sign which is coded as more feminine and life-giving. Neither position of the triangle symbol is understood to be better than the other, however to each sign there is a positive strength and its duality that represent the good and the bad of nature and of human nature. This is also true of images of lizards and

salamanders who seek sunlight-- or in the symbolic language of their purpose as markers of the Amazigh women, seek goodness, representative of the human soul seeking the light of the world.

Animism is prevalent in Amazigh artwork, especially as symbols of life and life-giving force. “The fish symbol, common in many artistic traditions, represents water and rain, and, consequently, the fertility of the earth and general prosperity. The bird, frequently cited in the Koran as a messenger between heaven and earth, is associated with destiny, with the eagle more specifically symbolizing power” (Courtney-Clarke, 1996, p. 19). Amazigh women, like nature itself, are seen as powerful, and the tattooing ceremonies around each symbol serve to guide the woman’s energy to the goal and message of each sign. Older women wear a spiral or circle at the center of their clavicle to symbolize eternal harmony. Her first tattoo, the vertical line on her chin, points toward this symbol, grounding her in peace and cementing her role within the community as a source of peace and calm for her sisters and the traditions she shares.

### **The Code of Tribe as Home**

As previously mentioned, there are nuanced meanings, styles, and histories behind each symbol and what it communicates depending on the tribe for and from whom the sign emerged. As Amazigh women are tattooed as they enter womanhood, a rite of passage that not only signifies her readiness to bear children but makes visible her vulnerability to falling pregnant with the children of another tribe, many of the tattoos can be specifically identified to the tribe from which she originates. Amazigh women wear these symbols of tribal allegiance, perhaps as signs of pride, or as historical markers of tribal ownership: “There has been much speculation about whether the tattooed patterns of the Berbers might in former times have been a kind of ‘tribal mark’ to identify members of a local or kinship group. There are certainly regional differences in the decorations, and the actual technique also varies, but there is little solid

evidence to support this theory” (Gröning, 1997, p. 123). Part of this uncertainty comes from a mixing of cultures and lack of direct communication of traditions in intermingling communities: “Everywhere, the growing acceptability of intermarriage with Arab neighbors strengthens national identity and opens new opportunities, but gradually erodes the individual character of Berber culture” (Courtney-Clarke, 1996, p. xv). Though some Amazigh welcome the change, for others it is a slight in the face of a vanishing culture.

A prevalent tattoo, though small, is the simple, solid dot which symbolized the home and is often applied directly under a woman’s eyes, visible no matter the style of headdress or hijab she may wear. Another geometric signifier of home, or more specifically a house, is a square which women often receive upon marriage as a sign of her belonging to a home, an equivalent to a wedding band in many of today’s societies. This symbol allows women the power of protection for men do not wear such a mark. However, from a critical feminist lens, it would also follow that this symbol may serve as a protection *from* men, especially when applied at a time that signifies a woman’s ability to be sexualized and bear children. To this day, older Berber women can identify the style of these seemingly simple shapes and locate the specific Amazigh tribe from which its wearer comes. The placement of each sign, whether on one’s forehead, cheeks, or temple can also indicate the origin of the artist and wearer of the symbol, just as much as the sign itself.

### **Protection as Code**

The saying goes that there is safety in numbers, and in a once nomadic community, knowing one another’s roots at first glance allows the Amazigh to identify one another and whether or not they are tribal friends or foes. Women have historically been more vulnerable than men, so it follows that the protective nature of some tattoo symbolism is not solely linked to

tribal identification. As mentioned, the square symbolizes the woman's house: to overlay or superimpose another square atop it is to ask for God's shield of protection from curses and darkness that may befall the woman or her home.

In addition to tribal identifiers, which as mentioned, have conflicting evidence as to their significance as community identifiers, tattoos are also applied as protection from natural forces and illness:

Berbers attribute illnesses not only to physical causes but also to the effect of non-human forces. Children and those in a transitional stage of life in which their physical and mental state is weakened—such as puberty, marriage, pregnancy or childbirth—are particularly susceptible to malicious spirits [in Islam and older lore]. At such critical times there is also a fear of the negative forces of the Evil Eye, which malevolent humans might use to cause illness and death (Gröning, 1997, p. 121).

Moroccan folklore, both Amazigh and Islamic, warns that evil forces, including *jinn* or spirits, can enter and harm people through bodily orifices or the soles of their feet. “Because the harmful forces prefer to enter people through the bodily orifices, these have to be specially protected. “The women therefore tattoo their faces in particular, although protective and curative tattoos and paintings are also found on other parts of the body that cannot be protected by clothing at all times” and henna, a temporary dye, is often applied to coat the entirety of Amazigh women's hands and feet (Gröning, 1997, p. 121). The shift from permanent ink to henna does not negate the symbolic protective nature of the practice of applying body art.

Regardless of means of application, techniques and patterns are passed down from mother to daughter along with words of wisdom and guidance about moving through space as a

woman. Symbols such as that of the evil eye or the partridge, which are seen as “submissive but strong, astute birds [with] protective power” are also applied to jewelry and clothing to protect girls and women from harm, whether that harm comes from spirits, energies, or the threat of bodily harm (Bernasek, 2008, p. 70). Whether worn under or on one’s skin, these symbols safeguard the well-being of the wearer, ward off evil spirits, and channel the strength of nature and community to provide levels of protection and support to girls entering womanhood.

The “free man” symbol, which resembles the Greek letter *psi* but with a second downwards horizontal line, is first and foremost a sign of Amazigh pride and independence. The symbol represents the legs and arms of a man or woman, standing proud and strong, and is often coupled with a circle, representative of the absolute and protection from on high. Each symbol tells its own story about the specific life of its wearer, but the themes and power they communicate connect a region of women who speak volumes without ever having to open their mouths.

### **IRCAM & AMREC**

The Amazigh Cultural Revival brought with it two cultural associations that seek to resuscitate near-dead traditions that now live only in tourist trinkets and pockets of the rural countryside. AMREC, the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange, was founded in 1967 with a core value of preserving and advocating Amazigh tradition and cultural representation. Though, as mentioned, I did not receive response to my attempts at communicating directly with several members of their staff, I did note that only men are credited with creating the foundation and for the 2011 victory of Tamazight being recognized as an official language of Morocco.

IRCAM, the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture, founded under Moroccan King Mohammed V in 2001, is in its 18<sup>th</sup> year of documenting and sharing Amazigh tradition and advocating for indigenous social justice and legal representation in the community. Their website, which is predominantly in Tamazight, is by and for the Amazigh tribal community to share events, document history, and fundraise for social advancements. What was clearly missing from their online content was female representation as a focus was on the political history of Amazigh solidarity in the face of Morocco's Arabization. Though community events and news are actively shared on the pages of the site and their physical location in Morocco's capital, Rabat, IRCAM's focus is on the governmental facets of tribal existence and not on cultural or artistic histories and narratives as is the case with more of AMREC's focus on current events.

### **Online Sources About Amazigh Culture and Tattooing**

Morocco, like most of other corners of the world, has been greatly influenced by the technological advancements of online communications. Though innumerable examples on Moroccan memes, subversive music, and underground queer culture exist on such popular platforms as Facebook or YouTube, my Internet searches in English, French, and Arabic yielded only one Facebook group on the subject: "Tatouage Amazigh" or "Amazigh Tattooing" which, at the time of my writing, has only 57 inactive followers. Though I received no response when messaging the group's administrators, my exploration of the page uncovered two videos on Amazigh tattooing and a website on "vanishing tattoo" traditions. These sources ranged from French independent media, to AJ+, an offshoot of the Al Jazeera Media Network. Though small in number, these sources highlight some few likeminded individuals' desire to represent a dying tradition, not only from an outside perspective, but, in the case of one of the videos, a fellow

Maghrebian who recalls tattooed women from their own youth as they did the weekly shopping with their family.

Another main online source, by and for Moroccans, is [www.moroccoworldnews.com](http://www.moroccoworldnews.com). The site, which is written in English, is dedicated to reporting on politics, sports, culture, and current events in the MENA (Middle East/North Africa) region to a global (or Western, rather) audience, without governmental censorship or bias. As self-professed advocates for free speech, the writers at Morocco World News have dedicated numerous opinion and news articles to the advancement of Amazigh culture—a majority of which have impressively been written by women from Morocco. I had the pleasure of reading articles on Amazigh pride celebrations, the current debate on whether or not it is “haram” (or sinful) to celebrate the Amazigh new year, and recent Moroccan popstar Dounia Batma using her platform to share Amazigh fashion. I also had the displeasure of reading several articles on Madonna donning sacred Amazigh symbols and traditional headdress for her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in a post in which she wrote, “I am wearing C A K E on my head” (online, 2019). Further exploring current discourse around the Amazigh cultural revival also means examining a more recent controversy around the Amazigh accent as discussed in a 2019 article on some public mockery of a young Amazigh’s student pronunciation of English, a language he taught himself. Though little written scholarship or reporting is highlighted by sites like Morocco World News, there is a strong need to examine those accounts that tangentially highlight the ways in which different communities code Amazigh identity.

### **The Arab Community as Code**

Morocco, or *al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, which translates into the Far-West, is a land of contradicting, yet equally influential cultural codes. Despite the rural and urban divides that scatter the countries, as so often is the case in formerly colonized developing nations, life is a

blend of Muslim, Arab, and Amazigh traditions that somehow fit together in an unlikely puzzle. Skalli (2006) attributes this to the “country’s ambiguous geopolitical position within and outside the Arab community,” which as a country in perpetual transition, must respond to constant international influences while preventing the erosion of its own cultural foundations (p. 2). The symbolic language of the Amazigh has taken a backseat to the languages of two colonizers, the Arab and the French respectively. I confess that I have not been able to find an online source, but I recall my father quoting King Hassan II as saying, “The more time you spend in Morocco, the less you understand.” Whether the words were those of my former King or of my father, I feel they hold equally true. Laroui (1977) may have been inclined to agree with the sentiment when he wrote that Morocco is “neither completely African nor entirely Mediterranean [the Maghreb] has oscillated down through the centuries in search of its destiny” (p. 21). Tattoos and hijabs, French alliances with “barbarians;” -- the history of my country is perhaps best understood by what popular media and royal decree did and *did not* comment upon.

### **Moroccan Media**

Though long after the practice of Amazigh tattooing was prevalent and once the dust from Morocco’s fight for independence had settled, Moroccan women received some representation through two women’s magazines: *Femmes du Maroc* and *Citadine*. In her 2006 study of Moroccan women’s magazines between 1996 and 1999, Skalli examined both magazines’ struggle in a land that feared notions of Western femininity might compromise the integrity of the values Moroccan women had been socialized to revere, both through custom and faith. Skalli (2006) discussed the emergence of two groups in post-colonial Morocco; fundamentalists and unveiled feminists. *Femmes du Maroc* and *Citadine* were written for the latter, acknowledging Moroccan women’s globalized place in society. Though *Citadine* focused

on matters of the “*bled*” or quotidian life of Morocco, it interlaced French and English titles and fashions with *darija* Arabic and some oral histories of the country-- which, of course, refers to the Amazigh, though no articles specifically mentioned tattooing or other, older customs. Though “almost half of the journalists in *Femmes du Maroc* are Berber,” Amazigh identity was never a main article topic. Skalli’s interviews with these journalists reveal that their ethnicity was not a determining factor in their recruitment—their linguistic and professional competency was unquestionably the first consideration” (p-p. 84-85). The irony of Skalli’s findings, which has not yet been highlighted in similar scholarship, is that, considering these were magazines intended to promote cultural understanding, they completely ignore all things Amazigh; the negative stereotypes prevail and yet again silence Amazigh women even in the most outspoken of feminist spaces. It must be noted that due to the marginalization of Tamazight, the quality of being Amazigh or speaking Tamazight simply would not qualify as either linguistic or professional assets to the women.

Despite these magazines being the peak of self-authored Moroccan women’s representation, the numbers do not lie: The Amazigh continued to be overlooked. Moroccan print media, like its oral tradition, displays a plurality of cultural influences and multilingualism. However, by 1997 the national market offered some “644 titles of locally produced newspapers, magazines, reviews, and periodicals. 430 of these publications are produced in Arabic, 199 in French, and eight in the Berber [Tamazight], with six in English and one in Spanish” (Skalli, 2006, p. 56). As noted above, nearly half of the writers for *Femmes du Maroc* identified as “Berber,” but articles written in Tamazight only made up 1.8% of the articles. During Skalli’s (2006) interviews, all of the journalists of Amazigh origin:

expressed an attachment to their Berber cultural and linguistic heritage, [but] they refused to qualify themselves as militants for ethnic essentialism. In the words of Maria Daif, insisting too much on the Berber specificity is an expression of ‘ghettoism’ which she resents. Other journalists who stress their attachment to ‘Moroccan-ness’ more than Berber-centrism’ expressed similar views (p. 56).

The lack of Tamazight content and the Amazigh journalist’s equivalency of “Berberness” to “ghettoism” speak louder than both magazines’ claims that part of their mission is to encourage the promotion of Berber culture.

Magazines like *Citadine* and *Femmes du Maroc* were not the first of their kind. Between 1959 and 1963, a daily newspaper named *At-tahrir* (Liberation) also called for women’s right to education (Skalli, 2006). However, a census taken in 1955 showed that 96% of Moroccan woman were illiterate-- with illiteracy rates as high as 99% in rural areas (Skalli, 2006). This data, along with general frustrations of Moroccan women, both Arab and Berber, inspired a cultural revolution to change the *mudawana* or “family code” which serves as a document that outlines the rights of women across the sexes, focusing on such things as marriage and access to education for girls. Yet despite the work of the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women to advance the rights of women everywhere, a journalist from *Citadine* emphasized that “there are no contacts between rural and urban worlds, it’s like two different countries with people having the same nationality” (Skalli, 2006, p. 84). Multilingualism, illiteracy rates, and fragmented infrastructure increased barriers to Amazigh agency in the changing landscape of Morocco and yet again silenced women’s voices, specifically those from Amazigh tribes who, once painted as primitive for their customs, were now seen as uneducated because of the statistics that neglect the reasons of cultural exclusion and marginalization that made them that way.

Another publication professing a celebration of Moroccan-ness in a post-colonial land was *Souffles-Anfas*, which:

played a seminal role in the fields of Moroccan and Maghrebi literature, shaping debates about genre, form, language, and pop culture that continue to be central to the field today. From the first issue onward, it published iconoclastic and formally inventive texts, for the most part experimental poetry written in French, and later in Arabic as well” by popular male Maghrebi writers (Harrison, 2016, p. 20).

“*Souffles-Anfas*’ five-year run coincided with the pan-Arab fervor following the June of 1967 Israeli-Arab war [and worked to promote Arabic literature] within a pan-Arab, pro-Arabization agenda” (Harrison, 2016, p. 11). The magazine’s lens was often turned outward in its reports of current events from Palestine and other parts of the Middle East-- situating itself as a leader in Maghrebi literature with a global perspective that the French had previously accused Moroccans of lacking, due to colonial stereotyping of Arabs as lazy and backwards. *Souffles-Anfas* has been described as a “linguistic guerrilla [for] the irreverent, iconoclastic use of the colonial tongue, French, to decolonize Moroccan culture” (Harrison, 2016, p. 20). What is missing in this transcolonial narrative is any mention of the Amazigh and their oral or iconographic linguistic traditions.

This magazine, known for “the recovery of the Arabic language and the development of experimental literary forms independent from both French and Arabic canons,” utterly ignores its nation’s own past in its efforts to dispel colonial codings of Morocco as primitive and tribal (Harrison, 2016, p. 11). In their rejection of the mantle of French judgement, these magazines reaffirm the same hegemony that once belittled Arabic and those traditions they now fight for. The authors of *Souffles-Anfas* call their readers to join in a pan-Arab revolution that centralized

anticolonial thought, but in doing so, re-colonize the Amazigh through their disregard for the entire community and the stories they have to add that would fit the journal's mission to spotlight Third Worldist thought: "The Moroccan journal *Souffles-Anfas* was banned after two of its lead editors, Laabi (editor-in-chief) and Abraham Serafty, founded a radical leftist party, for which they were imprisoned in the infamous jails of Hassan II" (Harrison, 2016, p. 9). The way in which the paper's time came to an end adds to the ethos of rebellion and authenticity the authors fought to bring to their work.

### **The Royal Family and the Independence Movement**

The Independence Movement is inextricably woven with the rhetoric and ideals of Islam as represented by the Royal Family of Morocco. In a developing monarchy seeking its independence from colonial forces, discourse around sameness and other-ness, especially as it relates to the religious other, is of particular importance: "The Moroccan King is not only the head of state but also holds the title of 'Commander of the Faithful' (*Amir al Moumin*), which also makes him the highest religious authority in his country" (Gray, 2008, p. 80). Despite their political dominance by French authorities, the Kings of Morocco have been unquestioned religious leaders since the establishment of Islam's arrival in the Maghreb in 912 AD.

Though colonizing powers created the gold standards of culture, politics, and social elitism to which Moroccans ascribed, it was the King of Morocco and his fellow Muslims who exerted more social influence through their enforcement of Islam on a majority of Morocco's citizens. "We have seen that the objective of the nationalist parties from a certain period onward is geared strictly along national lines. They mobilize the people with the slogan of independence [and in this case, religious Muslim freedom], and anything else is left to the future" (Said, 1963, p. 99). With God on the side of Independence, at least according to those activists who fought to

be free of France's colonial grasp, rebellion was the right path for Morocco to pursue. French forces were not ignorant of this tactic, and so implemented the Decree of 1930, also known as the Berber Proclamation, which removed Amazigh areas from the sovereignty of Muslim law (Eickelman, 1976). As Gray (2008) wrote, the French decree "was a continuation of the colonial policy of setting one part of Morocco against another" (p. 85). What this narrative neglects to emphasize is the unique location of Amazigh women amidst these competing, legal ideologies.

Often ignored by religious officials, royal or otherwise, was the effect colonial forces had on the treatment of women. Ahmed (1992) notes that long before Islam, royalty throughout Europe kept harems and policed the bodies of women, a practice that was soon borrowed by those Muslim nations they colonized. Ahmed (1992) continues that it was Syrian Christians who believed that "merely seeing a woman represented a danger" (p. 35). When we combine such misogyny with a religion of modesty, a fear of difference, increasing colonial pressure *and* the expressive defiance of Amazigh women's body art, we are left with a perfect storm designed to wipe away the matrilineal history of a people who had already been labeled as primitive at best. A further threat to independence and the fight for a unified Muslim-Moroccan front was Amazigh women's connection to a spirituality that did not require the Qu'ran or royal interpretations. Eickelman (1976) writes specifically about the Berber Proclamation serving to protect Amazigh *marabouts*, or individuals with special relations to the divine. Women, whose bodies were already coded as threatening and tempting, therefore were increasingly policed when they adorned themselves with symbols of this spirituality that proudly existed outside the realms of the royal palace or the pages of the Koran.

## Untangling the Codes of Amazigh Tattoos

One cannot presume universality when it comes to the meaning a sign, symbol, or gesture conveys. As Hall (1997) wrote “we do not have a straightforward, rational, or instrumental relationship to meanings” because meaning is constructed over time and through individual and group interactions with a sign and all that it comes to stand for (p. 10). As mentioned in Chapter One, Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Theory explains that audiences derive their own respective meanings from texts and symbols; semiotics allows for these symbols to develop into their language system or systems depending on the receiver of the communication. Meaning can be negotiated, contested, and rewritten; the key point to remember is that meaning is never passive or universally representative of a capital T truth. Think of a nation’s flag; to some that might represent home, but to others it may signify the presence of an outsider, or an enemy. “So it is through culture and language *in this sense* that the production and circulation of meaning takes place” (Hall, 1997, p. 5). Meaning is therefore *produced* and then evaluated by those who come across the signifiers of meaning. This is no less true for the groups of Arabs, Europeans, and Muslims who interact with Amazigh symbolic language and for whom each symbol has a meaning that does not necessarily fit into the same linguistic code of meanings or values that it does for outside parties. This social constructionist approach explains the varying treatments of those who wish to forbid or those who wish to preserve this facet of Amazigh culture.

The erosion of Amazigh culture has distanced the people from the once prevalent practice, rendering the relationships between their signs and their referents to “become less clear-cut. The meaning begins to slip and slide away from us into uncertainty. Meaning is no longer transparently passing from one person to another” (Hall, 1997, p. 20). These fading echoes of meaning have been overpowered by a chorus of alternative cultural codes of colonialism. Instead

of ignoring these newer signifying systems as less authentic, destructive though they may be to the memory of Amazigh tradition, we must seek to understand their place in the world so that we can better understand the blending of social codes that make Morocco the country it is today.

### **De-coding the Colonizers**

The preceding summary of the discourse around Moroccan Independence and the Arab nationalist movement reflects the tactics and effects of colonialism on emerging-independent nations. The hybridity of Moroccan culture, which blends eastern and western cultural attributes, also includes those native African Amazigh influences that have survived double colonization. The Arab colonization of the Amazigh, and the following European colonization of Arab powers, presents overlapping layers of hegemony, much like a Venn diagram of diverse perspectives at the center of which is the belittlement and erasure of the Amazigh women's customs. The shifting geographical and cultural borders on nomadic peoples like the Tuareg, a neighboring "Berber" tribe to the Amazigh, actively link once-separate cultures to a globalized world that can then pass judgement upon them (Alesbury, 2013; Fischer & Kohl, 2010). The lens, or coding, of European findings on the Amazigh informed the Arab *and* Muslim coding of Amazigh cultural linguistics. Fanon (1963)

insists that the colonized's impassioned claim to difference is a challenge to the discourse of rational confrontation and universality, he is both using and opposing the very words and values – rationality, universalism—upon which the French *mission civilatrice* [civilizing mission] founded its governmental practices of colonial assimilation, associationism, and integration (p. xxi).

In addition to the colonial coding of rebellion as difference for difference's sake, we cannot forget that so many colonizing peoples begin to write the history of those they colonize

from the moment of their arrival, dismissing all previous culture and happenings as primitive and unimportant.

So-called studies of women's responses to outside patriarchal colonization run the gamut from ignorant to infuriating in much of the admittedly small body of research of tribal North African colonization. Particularly problematic were the writings of Rowbotham (1972) who studied post-colonial Algeria. Once again, the lack of scholarship around post-colonial Morocco has led to a game of comparisons in how Western history remembers its treatment of the Maghreb. Rowbotham (1972) wrote

There is something at once infuriating and enticing about the passivity and fatalism of the Algerian woman for the colonizer. They recognized that the older women possessed a particular kind of power to keep things as they were, and that the younger women's acceptance of men as their masters prevented Algerian men from really bowing to their colonizers. The Algerian man remained sure of his manhood because he controlled his own women so completely. Fanon describes the significance of the veil in the psyche of the colonizers. Here the hidden reality of exploitation and domination appears. The veil persistently appears as a symbol of rape (p. 237).

Here an Islamophobic primitivist lens is applied to the peoples of the Maghreb. Statements such as those of Rowbotham pit colonizer against colonized in a battle of values that only the hegemonic superior can judge, which holds true to Said's (1978, 1993, 2000) understanding of the power of colonial supremacist thought. Rowbotham (1972) goes on to write, "Emancipation to the European male meant the possession by western culture of the Algerian woman" (p. 63). This is true not only of the European perspectives on the treatment,

presentation, and ownership of Algerian women, but also of the ways in which European and Muslim ideology exerts control over Amazigh women, how they present, what customs they practice, and in which spaces they are given voice.

The danger of such colonial feminism not only disempowers women on numerous levels, but also discredits Muslim and Amazigh values as needing intervention because, according to colonial forces, without European influence, these women are either uncontained or unfairly treated-- either of which produces a level of threat around the very state of being both Amazigh and a woman. Ghabra (2018), unlike those European men who wrote of post-colonial Maghreb, locates feminism at the site of cultural politics, because without understanding the location or narrator of women's histories, "we risk feeding back into hegemonic structures, but at times gain spaces where we can create counter-narratives"( p. 159). To let Rowbotham's (1972) words go unchallenged risks that Arab, Muslim, and Amazigh women may internalize and feel pressured to perform "White femininity unconsciously and these are the moments in which one must train themselves how to identify how they have internalized Whiteness and are reproducing it" (Ghabra, 2018, p. 160). I would add that Amazigh women, especially those who still seek to practice their spirituality through the tradition of tattooing, must also be allowed the chance to examine how we might be internalizing an exclusively Muslim feminism that does coexist with the feminist agency Amazigh custom has provided for centuries.

As a Muslimah myself, I challenge the colonial framework that defines feminism as mutually exclusive from the faiths and traditions of developing nations such as my own. "Focusing on Islamic feminism as a postcolonial framework for rights, Islamic feminism is defined as the notion that women can work within their communities towards Islam to gain their rights" (Ghabra, 2018, p. 24). This perspective does not allow for either Arab or Amazigh

cultural or linguistic expression to present positively in Maghrebian women's lives. The effects of this are evident in ethnographer Katherine Hoffman's (2008) visits to Morocco. Hoffman found that older "Berber" women connected more with the poetry of their people than their younger counterparts, "suggesting a decline in the mastery of poetic language that often accompanies processes of language attrition and shifts toward a national language (in this case, toward greater borrowings and use of Moroccan Arabic even among self-described monolingual Berber speakers)" (Dwyer, 2013, p. 102). It is only through understanding the dual colonization of Morocco and the effects of how European rhetoric framed the people of Morocco that we can set the stage to understand the Arab, Muslim, and current Amazigh codes of interpretation around Amazigh symbolic language.

### **The Muslim Perspective**

As Fanon (1963) wrote, "Colonialism will attempt to rally the African peoples by uncovering the existence of 'spiritual' rivalries" (p. 105). A most effective means by which to exploit a weak link in a nation of difference is to go for those differences that speak to spiritual and religious values which are often held as more important than worldly disagreements and social dissimilarities. Islam first came to Morocco around 681 CE, and though not much recorded history remains, it was a slow process of Amazigh assimilation to Arabization that inevitably involved interactions and sharing conversations on religious beliefs and customs (Eickelman, 1976). This process of cultural mixing was not without challenges as Muslims held several battles against those Amazigh peoples who claimed prophetic revelations in Tamazight. This was doubly blasphemous to Muslims who favor Arabic and believe the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) to be the final prophet of God.

Religious differences were not only social; Morocco enforces laws based on Muslim principles and “law, like religion, reflects categories of meaning” (Gray, 2008, p. 73). Though Atkinson (2003) described an increase in “pro-tattooing” ideologies taking root in Western habits, the opposite is true of the Moroccan cultural ethos. As it is a predominantly Muslim nation, 99% of Moroccans are religiously and legally expected to adhere to the saying of the Prophet Mohammed according to the hadith of Imam Al-Bukhari, who quoted Abu Juhayfah: “The Prophet cursed those ladies who practice tattooing and those who get themselves tattooed.” Several Qu’ranic texts and hadith also reiterate the severity of the sin of causing bodily pain or permanent alteration. This is yet another reason mainstream Moroccan Muslims do not support Berber traditions though they are a significant part of their non-religious cultural heritage. In New Zealand, Pritchard (2000) completed a study on the cultural significance and subsequent appropriation of Maori tattoos. Though geographically worlds apart, Maori and Berber body art traditions share historical roots as markers of identity, housing similar tensions in regards to the conflict between today’s practices and the origins of each artform. It is important to note that Berber tattooing is not an artform for solely the wealthy: “Among the Berbers...art does not appear as a superior activity, which only an elite is able to access. It is a familiar companion in the life of men [and women], humble though it may be” (Terrasse et al., 1925, p. 34). Amazigh women of all social statuses and income brackets participated in the tradition, which further threatened the face of Islam in Morocco as visible tattoos were a blatant defiance of Islam as the norm.

Muslims have long had an aversion to all things mystical, including *jinn*, or evil spirits, so the direct connection of Amazigh art to natural spirituality was particularly sacrilegious. This included Muslim rejection of Amazigh *marabouts*, people thought to have special relation to

divine powers other than the God Moroccans were legally required to revere. Muslim officials were particularly threatened by Amazigh marabouts who “relate to the concrete life situations of their supporters in a way that the formal, egalitarian tenets of Islam cannot. Maraboutism implies a conception of the supernatural that is immediately present” unlike prayers to God which do not guarantee immediate results or granted wishes (Eickelman, 1976, p. 236). Marabouts were too close to witches and jinn in Muslim rhetoric and therefore harbingers of evil that threatened those they approached. Popular Muslim-Moroccan superstition warns of beguiling, uncovered witches like the siren Aisha Kandicha who devour devout men; given the visual difference of Amazigh and Muslim dress, folklore further othered the Amazigh, causing panic that all Amazigh women were hooved witches, a stereotype that one can still hear in Morocco today (Courtney-Clarke, 1996; Harrison, 2016). This threat was not only personal, but could undermine the popular acceptance of Islam. Goffman (1959) wrote on the dangers of public disagreement, such as the inking of female bodies instead of the covering thereof: “Such disagreement among a people who seek unification not only incapacitates them for united action but also embarrasses the reality sponsored by the team” (Goffman, 1959, p. 86). In this case, that reality is Islam itself. So every symbol of Amazigh-ness therefore became a sign of a lack of respect or reverence for Islam.

Furthermore, many Amazigh symbols referenced animals which is directly forbidden in Islam as only God can create living creatures (Courtney-Clarke, 1996). As previously mentioned, Amazigh tattoos may have also served as familial and tribal identifiers which directly contradicted another Muslim custom. “In Islam, everyone born to a Muslim father is considered a lifelong Muslim, regardless of their actual practice of faith” (Gray, 2008, p. 52). Matrilineal identifiers directly opposed another Muslim custom in which Muslim women do not take the

names of their husbands and show no outward display of marital status or fertility in the same way that Amazigh women did. Amazigh women did not veil, and perhaps more significantly did segregate from men in the same way that Muslim women were expected to in public spaces. The Amazigh penchant for non-gendered spaces increased the volume and range of communicative power of their visible tattoos which were coded as disrespectful and dangerous.

However, despite Amazigh resistance to Arab rule, “Islam eventually took hold, and Berbers became important actors in spreading the new religion” (Bernasek, 2008, p. 7). I believe that some inked women who chose to veil, did so not out of devotion but for safety from judgment or harm in increasingly Arab-ruled public spaces. Ahmed (1992) conducted a study in Cairo to determine why Muslim women chose to wear the hijab and found that “fifty percent of the women gave inner peace as the principal effect of adopting Islamic dress. Other responses were that wearing Islamic dress put an end to their being harassed in public places (19.5%) by men and that people treated them with new respect (20%)” (p. 277). Given many of the social similarities and expectations of female behavior, I believe a study conducted in Morocco would provide similar findings. Even today, those Amazigh women in more rural areas of Morocco do not practice Islam as visibly or as diligently as those women in urban, more publically-policed areas. Chtatou (2019) wrote that “in a similar fashion, there are even many Amazigh people who have outright rejected the Islamic faith all together, choosing to hold onto their traditional roots, or to accept other religions such as Christianity, as a way to maintain an identity separate from their Arab conquerors” (online, para. 17). Though Morocco is a predominantly Muslim nation, the significant Amazigh population must continue to code and de-code their relationship with their Amazigh traditions and symbolic language, regardless of which identity they choose to outwardly, or inwardly, reproduce and reverse.

## **Arab Nationalists**

Arab Nationalism spread across Northern Africa during an attempt at continental decolonization from outside powers. Bolstering this sense of unity in nationalism was the phenomenon of what Fanon (1963) coined as “the awakening of Islam.” In an effort to de-primitivize their global reputation, Muslims in the Maghreb sought to control their own narrative, sharing successes of near-forgotten Arab icons like Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, who was a 9th-century Muslim mathematician who discovered the concepts of zero and algebra. However, this cultural confidence boost came at the expense of the Amazigh whom the Arabs themselves still viewed as crude and uneducated. This tension informs the coding of Amazigh symbolic language as “the moment of historical formation is critical for any semantic field. These semantic zones take shape at particular historical periods [and] leave the traces of their connections, long after the social relations to which they referred have disappeared” (Hall, 1985, p. 111). The socio-political movement toward Arab nationalization displaced cultural dominance of French ideology over Arab-Islam and, instead, allowed Moroccan-Muslims the same level of control and judgement over the Amazigh. Salt in the wound for those Amazigh women who wore their culture on their skin was the universal truth that at times of societal renovation and regeneration, “the rights of women were not the sole nor even any longer the object of reform, but one among several” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 175). In a patriarchy where the guise of religious modesty allowed men to prohibit women’s access to public and political spheres, this was only all the more true.

As Muslim Moroccans attempted to shake off French presumptions of Maghrebian primitiveness that equated Arabs with those barbaric “Berbers” with whom they shared the land, the rhetorical strategy was and remains for Moroccan nationalists to equate their political and

social values with those of Islam. This can be seen in the Moroccan national anthem that references God and the King, but makes no mention of the indigenous Amazigh peoples. Fanon (1963), in his critique of formerly colonized nations' pursuit of independence at the expense of others, wrote that

National consciousness is nothing but a crude, empty, fragile shell. The cracks in it explain how easy it is for young independent countries to switch back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe—a regression which is so terribly detrimental and prejudicial to the development of the nation and national unity (p. 97).

The interpretation of Amazigh identity and symbolic expressions is still shaped by this national pursuit of Arabness over Amazigh or African-ness. To this day, “Morocco, a constitutional monarchy, is the only African country that is currently not a member of the African Union. Instead, it is a member of the Arab League” (Gray, 2008, p. 3). So how can Amazigh women, who outwardly cannot conceal their Amazigh-ness even if they wanted to, fit into this system of cultural worth? In Dwyer's (2013) account of ethnographer Hoffman's visits to rural Moroccan schools, he writes that school teachers were instructed to teach exclusively in Arabic which “promotes unity among the girls” whereas “Tashelhit was for the home” (p. 102). Though girls may have protested, the teacher concluded that “in Morocco, you don't ask a girl's opinion” (p. 106). When Goffman (1959) wrote about performance management, he explains a front stage and back stage on which individuals present themselves. People across cultures acknowledge different performance expectations in public and private spheres; Goffman described these spheres as a front stage where members of an out-group are privy to one's performance, and back stage where only in-group members interact.

It is clear that Tamazight was not encouraged as front stage, even in the classroom. Amazigh women, in particular, were given a new Arabized role to play in society, and, as Goffman wrote, when a performer must move through a shifting cultural landscape of rules, “he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct himself, nor will the facts of his new situation press sufficiently on him from the start to determine his conduct without his further giving thought to it” (p. 72). Amazigh women were automatically coded as less-than upon Morocco’s Independence as their tattoos, once more generally accepted as symbols of ethnic pride, stood out as socially, religiously, *and* politically forbidden. The language of these women’s symbolic art was policed and demeaned without their consent. However, the meaning of this language is still evolving as “modifications of one’s personal front that are considered misrepresentative one year may be considered merely decorative a few years later, and this dissensus may be found at any one time between one subgroup in our society and others” (p. 61). The encoding and decoding both of each symbol, *and* of the visual language as a whole, is ongoing to this day and highlights the shifting values and prejudices of those communities who engage them. However, the very nature of tattoos that remain uncovered even in modest Islamic dress places the wearer in a permanent state of being front stage with their identity. Even if the practice of inking takes place in backstage, exclusively female Amazigh spaces, the produced tattoo transcends to perpetual visibility in the front stage of social interaction.

Even though King Hassan II displayed an openness to discussing Amazigh representation in 1994, it was not until 2001 that his son, King Mohamed VI, sponsored IRCAM, the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture, which standardized Tamazight (Dwyer, 2013; Chtatou, 2018). Further still, it was not until 2005 that Amazigh culture was presented in the classroom and not until 2011 that Tamazight was officially recognized as a national language. Though change was

slow, the ink under Amazigh women's skin remained indelible in the face the shifting rhetoric of opinion surrounding its very existence. Moroccan-Amazigh scholar Chtatou (2018) claims that both IRCAM and AMREC are in decline as they allow the Moroccan government control over the Amazigh cultural narrative. It is hard to disagree with the sentiment when we consider the persistent lack of Amazigh representation in Moroccan media.

### **Moroccan Media**

The most important text following Moroccan Independence was *Souffles-Anfas*-- the plural of *souffle*, meaning breath or inspiration in French--a journal founded in 1966 by a group of Moroccan scholars and poets ten years after Moroccan independence. From its second issue, *Souffles* became dedicated to debating and challenging national culture, European colonialism, and the global treatment of the Arab world. Laabi, one of the magazines founders, "coined an expression that captures the journal's broader cultural and political aim: 'cultural decolonization,' the elaboration of literary and artistic forms that would break with French canons without seeking a return to tradition, which Laabi, like Frantz Fanon before him, identified as a colonial construct" (Harrison, 2016, p. 19). Though progressive for its time and a solid artifact of Arab pride, *Souffles* only featured one female author and never published an article on Amazigh culture. Skalli (2006) argued that the "indigenization of cultural and media products should not just be an option but probably an obligation [as increasing the] indigenization of cultural/media products might be the more realistic approach to negotiating the local/global dialectic" (p. 184). The creators and writers of *Souffles* sought to do this, but completely overlooked the entire Amazigh community in their effort to promote Arab identity. Though Laabi clearly references "the physical and psychological violence of colonization," he recreates that hegemonic abuse of power through a cultural erasure of the Amazigh experience in

its entirety (Harrison, 2016, p. 19). More ironically, Laabi also writes about “internal colonialism: the postcolonial state’s subjection of its citizens” while internally re-colonizing the indigenous peoples of the Maghreb (Harrison, 2016, p. 19). It is only online that there remain some proud Amazigh voices, spread across scattered website op-eds and in angry comments on those few Morocco World News articles that report on the Amazigh Cultural Movement or the recent assassination of Amazigh student-activist, Omar El Khalek (Kasraoui, 2019). The lack of discourse around Amazigh identity resonates just as powerfully as those negative stereotypes that remain in popular culture to this day.

### **Today’s Amazigh**

The Amazigh cultural identity could have suffered a death by a thousand cuts, but certain aspects of ancient tradition remain. In a subculture where the written word-- or in this case the symbol-- is legible only as long as the person who wears it, it is difficult for shared legacy to expand past the bounds of the community itself. The practice of tattooing, like many others, is a “symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture, or identification with one’s local community. It is part of the language of national identity, a discourse of national belongingness” (Hall, 1997, p. 5). Central to the very core of Amazigh identity is blood, or *ddam*, which is spilled whenever a woman partakes in the sacred practice of body art (Chtatou, 2018, online). Equally important is the shared *ddam* of Amazigh lineage, once identifiable by inked women, but, through Muslim family law, is now maintained through patrilineage where a mother legally can no longer share a surname with her children. Stripped of yet another means of identification with her community and agency of her identity, the traditional Amazigh woman is further lambasted by current Muslim Arab nationalists for “undermining the delicate mosaic of the ethnically and racially diverse south-eastern oases with

a divisive discourse of cultural authenticity” (Dwyer, 2013, p. 122). Though Amazigh tattooing is growingly increasingly rare, especially in more urban areas, there are current iterations of past traditions that remain popular and even encouraged.

Morocco depends on tourism for a significant part of its national income. Rasmussen (1995) discusses the commodification and subsequent evolution of “Berber tourist art” that is promoted to foreign visitors to the nation (p. 594). With an outward-facing emphasis on local products and Moroccan tradition -- which does not detract from the internal promotion of Muslim and Arab values-- Amazigh symbols are appearing more frequently in pottery, metalwork, textiles and trinkets sold in open markets to tourists and some Moroccans who either identify as Amazigh or have found a way to appreciate that tradition without sacrificing their Arab-Muslim values. The linguistic code has evolved into a new, urban vocabulary that includes “epigraphic expression in the form of Koranic verses, names of Allah (of which there are ninety-nine), calligraphy and geometric designs composed of polygons and arabesques in floral and other vegetative motifs” (Courtney-Clarke, 1996, p. 11). These symbols are not exclusively adorned on inanimate objects; henna, a temporary dye, allows for women, Moroccan, Amazigh, and international alike, to revive the practice of body art, whether for weddings, sacred ceremonies, or simply for those on holiday looking to do something fun and “exotic.”

Some of these motifs directly harken back to Amazigh tradition: it is commonplace for new brides to coat the soles of their feet in henna and have their mothers paint their hands and feet, two of the more vulnerable parts of her body, in symbols such as the evil eye for protection. Even the most Arab homes that do not outwardly discuss any Amazigh allegiance are furnished with purely decorative symbols that directly descend from Amazigh iconography including “crosses, dots, straight lines and triangles, along with stylized representations of date palms and

branches” (Gröning, 1997, p. 123). Perhaps it is the temporal distance from the “Berber” uprisings of the 1930s, or maybe it is the meaning of these symbols dissolving, but here we see, as Barthes (1985) alluded to, a “deviant language” newly interpreted as having a place in proper society. Arab households, though often located in more urban areas, now share far more aesthetic similarities with those formerly disparaged, rural Amazigh communities.

Regardless, Amazigh activists remain a thorn in the government’s side, especially with such “little female representation in positions of legislative power” (Dwyer, 2013, p. 105). As carriers of custom, Amazigh women must socialize their children to remember traditional values and keep Tashelhit alive, despite outside Arab pressures. “Such efforts increasingly draw on a transnational politics of indigenous rights that explicitly refuses the ‘museumification’ or ‘folklorization’ of culture that activists consider to be the legacy of anthropological praxis” (Dwyer, 2013, p. 119). The Amazigh people in Morocco do not want to be remembered as a part of their country’s muddy past; they are actively protesting their lack of representation which renders current officials “profoundly uncomfortable with the increasing international attention to the voices of women, youth, and indigenous or minority populations” (Dwyer, 2013, p. 114). Amazigh heritage is not to be confined to the realms of nostalgia. For those women who still wear or engage in the practice of traditional tattoos, it is their code and their understanding of their symbolic language that must return to center stage despite those contrary interpretations that have pushed them by the wayside.

### **Inked Stories**

To better understand their linguistic code, we must center the voices, practices, and narratives of Amazigh women; we must examine their relationship with the inked symbols they permanently wear on their bodies. Barthes (1985) differentiated the text-- in this case Amazigh

tattoos-- from literary works. Barthes wrote that it is not a product but a signifying practice; “it is not a structure, it is a structuration; it is not an object [or] a group of closed signs, endowed with a meaning to be rediscovered, it is a volume of traces in displacement” or, in short, “a Text of Life” (p. 7). We must refocus the spotlight on the stories each inked symbol sought to tell, not to Western scholars, but to the Amazigh communities by and for whom they were created. Such understanding requires “analysis of the actual signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words and sounds -- the material forms-- in which symbolic meaning is circulated” (p. 9). Barthes (1964) wrote that language serves as both product and instrument of speech; this is true of Amazigh symbolic body art whose meanings and values are informed by and continue to inform societal values and aspirations. Some of these symbols served to differentiate women from girls, and distinguish tribal affiliations, the initial motivation for the sacred practice, which began long before Islam’s arrival to the Maghreb, was *not* to go against the mainstream culture or religion (Barthes, 1972; Hebdige, 1979). The practice was once the cultural and spiritual norm by which Amazigh women expressed their values and connectedness to their community.

Amazigh art, which often had regionally specific design traditions that could be identified through color and motif use, is far more than decorative and acts as individual and communal talismans for protection (Bernasek, 2008; Gröning, 1997). The placement of sacred imagery around eyes and other bodily orifices personalizes and highlights the importance of the symbols used. Animal iconography represents the power of the everyday for the Amazigh women who found strength in what flora, fauna, and spiritual practices were commonplace to the communities. “Many of the animal images are executed with great simplicity and elegance; the representation of the most dangerous animal, a snake, scorpion or jackal, for example, is intended not to invoke fear in the viewer, but to act as a symbolic protector” (Courtney-Clarke,

1996, p. 19). Their art was not meant to be threatening to outsiders as other codes might suggest; in fact, “after centuries of Islamic taboo about imagery and tattooing, some Berber designs show compliant avoidance of human and animal representation” (Courtney-Clarke, 1996, p. 21). One overlooked meaning is that Amazigh women tattoo themselves *for* themselves, not to throw sand in the face of other traditions. Motifs center on protection and fertility, themes that promote Amazigh well-being but not deliberately at the expense of others whose own cultural evolutions at a time of decolonization may have coded Amazigh identity as obstinate and archaic.

Tattoos in and of themselves have been studied by numerous scholars as reviewed in Chapter One. Though I argue that the prohibition Amazigh women’s agency in continuing the practice of tattooing is innately anti-feminist, I must also agree with Mifflin (2013) who wrote that “tattoos are not innately positive, and it would be silly to suggest that wearing them makes women *de facto* feminists” (p. 7). Tattoos have been both culturally validated and devalued, not because of their artistic merits, but because of the meanings they give to the wearers and the meanings they *give off* to others. It was in a time of decolonial flux that Amazigh women’s tattoos had “real-world ramifications to the extent that they [defied] socially sanctioned standards of feminine beauty and force the recognition of new, largely self-certified ones” (p. 78). Mifflin is not incorrect, but given the unique socio-political climate of the fight for Moroccan Independence, we see Amazigh tattoos force the recognition of *old* feminine standards of beauty:

Tattooed bodies ultimately force a visual recognition of the social construction of the body while simultaneously calling into question the logic of construction. Tattoos constantly confront naturalization because they mar the pure and ‘natural’ surface of the body. Metaphorically and literally, therefore, tattoos illustrate and confront the inscription of social norms and codes upon the body. Tattoos implicate the skin, they

become part of the body, and therein resides their power and the subsequent desire to regulate their meaning (Fenske, 2007, p. 55).

The Independence Movement re-coded Amazigh body art as culturally deviant when it once was the norm. Regardless, the tattooing practice, whether formerly normalized or newly frowned upon, was for and by women. However, where some code tattoos and the symbols they display as a deviant effort to exert societal control, some “critics of women using tattoo as a means of empowerment began to question its real world impact, arguing that tattooing shifts the focus of women’s issues from society to the self; the tattooed women are empowered only in their minds” (Mifflin, 2013, p. 78). Without directly interviewing women for whom this tradition is still salient, it is impossible to determine how feminist a practice this was and how willing female participants were in the custom. But in post-Arab influenced Morocco, we can agree with Mifflin (2013) that tattoos do send perplexing, yet distinct, messages about gender and agency. Women can communicate any number of identities, milestones, or markers of their heritage through tattoos which serve as “touchstones for women’s changing roles and evolving concerns [which] serve as passkeys to the psyches of women who are [writing and] rewriting accepted notions of feminine beauty and self-expression” (p. 8). Amazigh symbols of protection were also placed on women’s cheekbones and necks to highlight their femininity and bone structure. Additionally, these “marks are symbolically weighted by their visibility [and] by their signification of Otherness” (Pitts, 2003, p. 105). The tribal body is therefore defined by what it is *not*-- that is, tattooed Amazigh women are *not*, at first glance, pious Arab Muslims, but instead proud bearers of their culture who defy golden standards of whiteness, Muslim-ness, and Moroccan-ness.

## **The Liminality of Amazigh Women**

Liminality, or the transitional period or phase during a rite of passage that leaves each participant in an undefined, in-between status of flux, is a prolonged state for Amazigh women who exist within multiple codes and cultural rites of passage. Though the ink remains on their bodies from such milestone moments as first menses or marriage, the echoes of that moment remain as visible markers that each woman has experienced that time in her life, and it lives on within her. Though the meaning of those lines and sketches of lizards or flying birds may still be calls to higher powers for protection, they are also signs of her difference, and symbols of her other-ness and vulnerability to a mainstream culture that does not value such rites, let alone such permanent markers of customs that a nation is actively trying to erase at worst, or reframe for tourist consumption at best.

Amazigh women today live in a hybrid state of tribal-ness and Arab-ness as “go-between” performers between worlds, who are asked to represent contradictory codes of what it is to be descendants of indigenous Maghrebians in an Arab land. Goffman (1959) discusses how we each represent our communities through established codes. Amazigh women take on multiple established social codes as carriers of Islamic knowledge, Moroccan lineage, and Amazigh pride, three facets of self that are constantly challenged by mainstream ideology. The unfair expectations placed on Amazigh women to represent discrepant roles caused them to become inadvertent informers, that is, they are at risk of sharing destructive information to other societies that might disparage the integrity of the communities they epitomize.

True individual representation is unattainable as Gouldner (1970) attests that “every social theory is a tacit theory of politics, [and] every theory is also a personal theory, inevitably expressing, coping, and infused with the personal experience of the individuals who author it” (p.

40). The liminal position of Amazigh women does not exclude them from either code, but instead their liminality allows for and further requires the mastery of simultaneous codes. As meaning is never truly fixed, we must think of interwoven cultures as sharing “conceptual maps, shared language systems and the *codes which govern the relationships of translation between them*. Codes fix the relationships between concepts and signs” (Hall, 1997, p. 21). It is in moments of liminality that meanings can become stable through the process through which it is shared-- for example, the practice of tattooing Amazigh women during significant life moments. Liminality allows for temporary breathing room between cultural codes as the focus is on the act of sharing an intended meaning in a specific moment located in a sacred time which frees participants from the daily performance of competing codes (Pitts, 2003; Shields, 1991). This liminality allows Amazigh Moroccan women to move between Muslim public spheres and the private sphere of the home where they hold greater influence and can more freely share their traditions with their community.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The findings from my research have mixed implications and are an interwoven tapestry rooted in time and conflicting perspectives. Springer (1978) wrote that we must continue to reevaluate theories to be more applicable to the real world; I fear that Amazigh culture is losing its place in the lived world within the borders of Morocco—except when tradition is reduced to a quick sale of “brown face” caricature to entice tourists with the magical wonder of an exoticized land. Almost 40% of Moroccan citizens can claim Amazigh roots, but a majority either choose not to, or fear that doing so will jeopardize their public image, the goal of which remains whitewashed and Euro-elite. I may have failed at my initial goal to de-center Western commentary in sharing Amazigh symbolic codes and histories, but I must re-affirm what Said (2000) wrote, that though “the histories, traditions, societies, texts of ‘others’ are seen either as responses to Western initiatives—and therefore passive, dependent – or as domains of culture that belong mainly to ‘native’ elites” indigenous people were practicing their customs long before Arab or European influence, and those are not the only languages in which local customs can be translated (p. 301). Part of the power of Amazigh symbolic language was that it was for *everyone*, specifically Amazigh women who would see their values reflected on the familiar faces of each one of their sisters, cousins, neighbors, and friends. Amazigh women controlled the dissemination of culture in their communities. Were they used as pages in a book to tell a story? Does that outweigh the fact that it was they who wrote the story and carried it with them, bold and uncovered? The very nature of a tattoo, one uncovered by hijabs or kaftans, means that female Amazigh identity is, to reference Goffman (1959), *always* front stage. Though meaning may be crafted and ink may be mixed in backstage female spaces in rural Amazigh homes, these tattoos are messages consumed beyond the walls that those women call home.

## **An Amazigh Tattoo Signifying in a Complex System of Codes**

The symbol which is most prevalent amongst Amazigh women and at the forefront of my memories of my own great grandmother, is that of the simple, deep blue line, inked from her bottom lip to the bottom crease of her chin. As mentioned, this once-popular tattoo would be the first given to a girl as she entered womanhood upon her first menses. The vertical line, applied by her mother using dye made of natural rocks and plants, would be ceremonially embedded into her skin. Though no doubt a painful rite of passage, it was one both endured and celebrated by women across Amazigh, Tuareg and Kabyle tribal communities. For Amazigh women, this ceremony served as a gathering, with no men present, during which they would share stories of their own transition to womanhood, not unlike mothers across the world telling their daughters of the birds and the bees, or explaining the expectations of womanhood; increased responsibility, the cultural necessity for marriage and childbearing, and, most intimately, that she was now ready to be seen by the men of her community as sexually viable. This simple vertical line, however, serves as more than a memory of a debutante ball or a photograph of a “sweet sixteen.” It forever marks each of its wearers as an adult *female* member of her tribe.

Boys entering puberty did not modify their bodies in a significant way that my research has uncovered. The act of tattooing was exclusively a female one, showing a young woman’s belongingness to her community but also her separateness from the men in her community. Much like young Muslim women are sometimes expected to wear a hijab upon entering puberty, Amazigh women also display outside signifiers, or coverings of a sort, that they are no longer little girls. The coding of a tattoo, however, is not a covering of one’s beauty, but to the Amazigh was also meant to amplify beauty. The placement of the vertical line draws attention both to a young woman’s lips and neck, two eroticized features of the female form. The multiple meanings

of this symbol to the Amazigh, both sexualize and *protect* from hypersexualization. The line both reaches up for divine protection and simultaneously goes down to the earth, grounding her not only in the strength nature provides her but symbolically planting her roots in her community, a community that will protect her from physical or spiritual harm or assault.

To a Western code, this line, like many of the exoticized African traditions of temporary face- and body-paint, was simply another marker of primitive, somewhat childlike tradition. This simple line, to foreign eyes and understanding, did not cement a woman's place in an esteemed community, but branded her as primitive and "belonging" to a culture of the so-called "Dark Continent" that was lightyears behind European standards of femininity. As seen with the scholarship around Oatman and her fellow tattooed ladies, no woman of class or substance would allow for her body to be mutilated in this way.

Similarly for the Arab Muslim community, the simple, powerful symbol did not signify a reaching up to a divine, spiritual source of protection. For those Arab nationalists seeking a unified front in the face of colonial imperialism, tattoos such as those given to the young women of Amazigh communities, could have been seen as militarizing the youth against their mission of an independent Morocco. As mentioned, the bitter aftertaste of colonialism is the unattainable pursuit for cultural "excellence" that all too often diminishes and demonizes indigenous practices, especially those of women who have historically been left out of the decision-making processes in so many nations' political movements. A symbol once meant to anchor a young Amazigh woman in the strength of her identity and the power of not only womanhood, her sexuality, and her tribe, but of her connection to a divine sense of worth, had evolved into a "scarlet letter" that garnered whispers of disapproval instead of a sense of peace and a spiritual connection to her community and her own body.

My analysis discovered the four separate codes through which traditional Amazigh tattoo art is understood, both by members of the tribal communities and beyond. The evolution of Amazigh symbolic language is prevalent in artifacts around the Maghreb geared towards tourist consumption, however discourse around Amazigh identity is almost nonexistent. Authenticity is the shiny side of a coin that is domestically seen as having no value. Overall, these findings highlight the fact that shifting cultural and political tensions of post-colonization Morocco have overlapped layers of understanding and coding of Amazigh symbols that jeopardize and silence the existence of female Amazigh identity altogether.

### **Overview and Findings**

In seeking to answer RQ<sub>2</sub>: How has the Islamization of the Maghreb and Moroccan Independence changed the narrative around Amazigh tattooing? I have found mixed results. Amazigh symbolic language continues to thrive in urban art marketed towards the Western, aspirational other. Goods such as blankets, shawls and communal plates for cous cous are adorned with these symbols as decorative markings of blurred Moroccan “authenticity”, but seldom are those same symbols recognized in Moroccan homes like my own, as part of a traditional symbolic code of protection and familial connection (Bernasek, 2008, p. 58). Museums and White immigrants alike covet these aesthetics from the past that now only remain in rural Amazigh homes which are less influenced by either Arabization or globalization. Like many developing nations once ravaged by colonial pressures, Morocco is a medley of progress and shanty towns, sometimes side-by-side, but largely spread throughout the Atlas region. Though the literal meaning of the “free man” symbol, the emblem of Amazigh identity, lives on in flags and face paint—though few actual tattoos—at Amazigh cultural celebrations, its meaning is as unwavering as it was then applied directly to the skin of Amazigh girls entering

marriage. Some Amazigh are defiantly here to stay and will take ownership of their own culture, minds, bodies and souls in an era where outsiders perceive that image as outward disrespect to Islamic culture. Yet some others, like the journalists of *Citadine*, believe their “Berber-ness” to be secondary, or more so an impediment to their success as Moroccan women in a male-dominated world. And so we are left with what Ghabra (2018) referred to as a clash of feminisms “directly blossomed out of the history in the region between colonial and non-colonial powers [...] caught at the crossroads between ideologies” (p. 21). Revered symbols are scattered on tourist trap trinkets, but at least harken to a time when they were as visible on the faces of loved ones—is it better to be represented as commodity or to be altogether forgotten? For those rural Amazigh women who still apply tattoos, and those older women who still wear them, Fenske’s (2007) words come to mind: “The body that does not conform to norms of physical homogeneity and behavioral control is constructed as deviant in order for society to maintain a sense of order and to assert control” (p. 65). The sad truth is that it is not Amazigh women’s code of understanding that matters most nationally, it is the historic and systemic silencing of that code that prevails.

There has been a resurgence of more high-end Amazigh-inspired art, though most of these artists are male, like the vendors of pseudo-Amazigh souvenirs for visitors to Morocco. These artists, both of Amazigh and non-Amazigh ancestry, “draw inspiration from older Amazigh art forms and symbols. In the years following independence, artists who had been trained in European art forms created a specifically North African style by drawing on indigenous symbols such as in textile and tattoo designs” (Bernasek, 2008, p. 59). And so we find a possible answer to RQ<sub>1</sub>: “What do the tattoos signify to the Amazigh and the broader Arab community of Morocco today?” Transnational Amazigh identity is both appropriated and

celebrated as traditional Moroccan identity, not in classrooms or legislature, but open markets and international museums that give even jaded Amazigh-Moroccans like myself a little hope that *some* of our past lives on. Orientalist though these reproductions may be, there is something more passable about Arab-colonialist ideology replicating a cheaper version of the past than when Madonna or other Western souls don venerated attire and markers as tribute not to a higher spirituality, but to a co-opted attempt at exotic fashion. Said (1993) wrote that “one of imperialism’s achievements was to bring the world closer together,” but that should not allow us to forget or simplify history in a common experience that can be shared without discussion of who has the privilege to wear sacred symbols, and who does not (p. xxii).

In my experience, Moroccan vendors are more likely to sell skin-bleaching kits than offer Amazigh tattoos, permanent or temporary. It seems that today’s Arab community has placed Amazigh identity on a bottom rung of the social class ladder and that aside from a profitable fetishization of “Berber” identity, the Amazigh are not allowed to live boldly in their skin without fear of judgment, violence, or denigration. I doubt that my great-grandmother would have had her tattoos removed if she could have done so, but I do know that she never felt comfortable or empowered enough to tell the stories behind them, or perhaps I, with my Arab father and European mother, was simply not worthy of hearing them.

This leads us to RQ<sub>2</sub>: “How has the Islamization of the Maghreb and Moroccan Independence changed the narrative around tattooing?”; possibly the only question to which we can solidly respond as the ink that history remembers has been in the pens of Muslim Arabs, not on the skin of the Amazigh. In a land where brown identity was policed by foreign white influence, Moroccan hegemony was extra on-edge in its codification and treatment of Amazighness as incongruent to the desired image of a unified Moroccan nationalist front. Colonial

influence did not magically disappear when Morocco became independent, it just got a tan. In regard to how the Amazigh were and were not allowed to practice and display their “Berberness,” the popular British rock band The Who said it best, “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss” (1999). For Amazigh women to be successful contributors to a newly Arab Maghreb, they had to downplay their Amazigh culture. Yet how does this differ from their participation in Amazigh tradition when that was the cultural norm?

Amazigh women were marked as successfully entering womanhood, marriage, and motherhood by inking their skin. They were also marked as protected by higher powers from worldly and spiritual harm by participating in tattoo ceremonies. Oral tradition was nurtured and passed on alongside the sharing of sacred symbols from mother to daughter. Perhaps these girls and women felt pressured to prolong this practice, painful and life-altering as it was. Without first-hand accounts, it would be quite “white feminist” to generalize and to presume that Amazigh women lacked the agency to decide how they participated in their culture. I agree with Pitts (2003), who wrote that “any critique of women’s body practices as inherently deluded and self-hating must reveal and critique its own assumptions of the truth of female embodiment and subjectivity” (p. 75). Amazigh feminism, not a Western feminist lens, nor a Muslim feminist perspective, must be allowed to examine the ways in which Amazigh womanhood and femininity are coded, treated, and expressed.

### **Implications and Future Research**

It follows that future research must include the voices of Amazigh women, both those who practice the tradition of tattooing and those women, both old and young, who do not. There is a clear societal divide in Morocco between urban Westernized, Arab spaces and those rural communities that are still viewed as primitive for their continued expression and ownership of

Amazigh values and traditions. Another area that simply begs to be discussed is the intersection of race. Moroccans are not monochromatic, yet colorism is a fact of life there as it is in so many parts of the world. I recall searching for an apartment in 2012 in Casablanca and meeting a potential landlord who, upon seeing my pale skin, thanked God that I was not “*africaine*,” or black. More telling still is Morocco’s resistance to joining the African Union or identifying with its southern—read: darker—neighbors.

The implications are plentiful. As Barthes (1971) wrote, “The model of Saussurian linguistics is democracy” (p. 155). I argue that for the Amazigh, such democracy does not exist outside the tightly closed walls of their communities. Morocco may be globally and culturally diverse, but the rankings of acceptability and class treatment of these multiple cultures is evident in the ways in which they are expressed. To this day, if I were to go to a “nice” part of town in Casablanca and ask for a coffee in *darija* Arabic, I would not be served. If I were to go to my family’s neighborhood in a less affluent corner of Casablanca and speak French, I would be judged for my haughtiness and arrogance. In either location, I would garner judgmental stares were I to display any Amazigh attributes, whether tattooed or temporary.

These situations are not the hypothetical daydreams of a removed academic; this is life in Morocco and the socio-political implications are clear as day. “‘Traditionalism’ and ‘internationalism’ compete in many ways over the determination of the cultural order. And they do so within a context of conflicting and complementary influences between the sacred and the secular, the Arab and the Berber, the rural and the urban, the poor and the rich, the male and the female, the oral and the literate traditions” (Skalli, 2006, p. 57). Morocco is a mosaic of identities that create a colorful, often cacophonous image of lived stories which vie both to be remembered and to take up their rightful space in what it currently means to be Moroccan.

## Conclusion

Morocco has always existed in an in-between space: never fully African, not European, and too far West to be truly Middle Eastern. A country of cultural contradictions, Morocco has prioritized its people and their customs to fight for recognition in a postcolonial world. As Fanon (1963) wrote, “Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity” (p. 145). We cannot separate Amazigh history from Arab custom, nor can we disconnect Islam from Morocco’s Independence. The current and past meanings of the “free man” symbol and delicate artwork around the eyes of Amazigh women fade in and out of memory, and in and out of favor depending on the cultural and language system each Moroccan must employ to navigate their homeland. Women’s stories have too often been secondary to those of men, and the narratives of people of color, especially indigenous people, have not been granted their rightful place or power in history. Amazigh women live at an intersection that is now seen as a crossroads between feared magic and failed, female Muslim conduct.

Ink may be permanent, but meaning is not, and it is up to Moroccans, Arab and Amazigh alike, to honor the messiness, ugliness, and beauty of our challenging past.

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