

Berber Women's Art: A Link Between North Africa and the Continent

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Berber women's art is the oldest art in North Africa that goes back to ancient times and has survived in the face of powerful conquering civilizations to date. It has fascinated and inspired scholars and ordinary people, but it is only in the postcolonial era that serious readings of this art started to become manifest. Read as a powerful cultural marker, identity marker, and as feminine expression, this art has affinities with mainstream African art. Some feminists contend that Berber women's art is perhaps the only surviving meaningful links between North Africa and the rest of the continent. In addition to providing a reading of North African history, it highlights how Berber women's artistic expression illustrates aspects of how communities lived and interacted in this history. It also highlights the link between this artistic expression and the codification and stabilization of the Berber language, a point taken further to another level by feminist reclamation to suggest that feminine art as practiced by Berber women produces linguistic knowledge and is a topic worth exploring further. Additionally, by focusing on women's art, this essay adopts a particular type of feminist methodology to address Berber social history and language, whereby historical sources are used to build knowledge and not simply to honor the past.

Some of the carpet designs that women imagined and created over the centuries have been replicated in body adornments, such as henna, tattoos, and in clothing. The designs have fascinated and inspired scholars and ordinary people, but it is only in the postcolonial era that serious readings of these designs have started to become prominent. The designs have been read as cultural markers, as identity markers, and as feminine art. Illuminating as they are, these readings tend to consider the designs as legacies of feminine creativity that need to be preserved (for scholarship on


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cultural markers, see Boely, 2000; Saulniers, 2000; Samama, 1996, 2000; Chafik, 2005. For identity markers, see Ben Miled, 1998; Ennaji, 2006; Chtatou, 2020. For feminine art, see Jereb, 1990 ; Mernissi, 2004 ; Becker, 2006). In this paper, I build on these readings to present the designs as a historical archive that continues to grow.

The spirituality of Berber women's carpet designs

Among the designs associated with women's spirituality and beliefs, the sun, the stars, the moon, and the sky loom large are related to the nature of ancient Berber religion (Herodotus [Book 4]; Ibn Khaldun Trans. by Rosenthal, 1958; El Bekri, 1857; Mercier, 1901; Doutté, 1909; Basset, 1910; Ouachi, 1985). According to the French Orientalist and linguist René Basset (1910), ancient Berbers considered the sky, the mountains, and the rivers as typical loci of divinity. The sky included the sun, the moon, and the stars, the mountains included the rocks and the caves, and the rivers included surfaces with water such as the sea and ocean. They saw the Atlas Mountains as "touching the sky" and overlooking the Atlantic Ocean which derives its name from the word 'Atlas'.

The presence of these sites of divinity in weaving is an expression of the beliefs of these women and their creation of a unique cosmology that has trickled down to their families and communities, and, in the absence of documentation on Berber religions, the designs may well be the only sources to help scholars understand these expressions of human creativity and their interactions with religion and spirituality. Of particular interest here is the recurrence of triangles, horizontal lines, and circles grouped together to represent Tanit, with the circle in the upper position (head), the triangle under it (body), and a horizontal line between the two (arms). Tanit was a Berber goddess of water (rain, fertility) in ancient North Africa (Ben Miled, 1998). She was the main deity of Carthage (today's Tunisia), from which her cult spread to the Mediterranean region. Tanit was also the lunar goddess and the symbol of war. Tanit has been represented in different forms, including in tajin, the traditional Berber cooking utensil, but the recurrence of the circle, horizontal line, and triangle remains striking.

Significantly, the presence of the goddess Tanit in carpet designs demonstrates the importance of sexuality, procreation, and fertility in ancient Berber women's cosmology. The meanings of these designs are immortalized in the ritual of Taghunja (or tasliyt n unzar—the rainbow), one of the most significant rituals in Berber communities in Morocco and across the region (Ben Miled, 1998). A physical reflection of Tanit, Taghunja (a big doll with a circular head, vertical body, and horizontal arms), is held by a procession of children chanting and imploring for the coming of rain. Like the carpet designs, the ritual of Taghunja, which is still alive, is a powerful archive and a source of information on Berber women's cosmology prior to the advent of monotheistic religions. In addition to serving as a doorway to Berber women's spirituality, the carpet designs also serve as a doorway to understanding women's natural environment and daily chores, as attested in the frequency of beetles, snakes, and scorpions, as well as rivers and flowers. Beetles, snakes, and scorpions denote a rural and hot environment that is matched by a more temperate environment in which rivers are full and flowers blooming. The aesthetics that the latter design captures and the contrast between the hot and cooler environments may be indicative of the changing cycle of seasons, itself linked to the harvest cycle, which is central to Berber life and cosmology.

Other designs show tajins (cooking pots), teapots, and spoons, and, thus, serve as an entry to the universe of women's daily chores. It is important to add here that in addition to their use for everyday subsistence, these utensils also symbolize Berber hospitality and community pride. The tajin in particular links women's daily chores with their divinity, a link that is also confirmed by Margaret Raush's (2004) analysis of Berber women's poetry. This link is characteristic of women's feel for symbolism as a reflection of their experience with spirituality.

In sum, the geometric patterns, forms, and figures women create, weave, honor, and immortalize on carpets constitute an important doorway to their cosmological and everyday worlds where spirituality mingles with daily experiences. The power of these

patterns resides in their sense-making and symbolism, which have enabled the designs to survive and continue to attract attention. The deeply ingrained symbolism that the designs pass have become part and parcel of the “Unconscious” Berbers in the sense of Jung’s “Collective Unconscious.” This partly explains the sacredness, awe, rituals, and chanting accompanying the various stages of carpet weaving, which the community has cherished to this day.

Weaving in Berber tribes has always been surrounded with mystique, and weavers were and are thought to bestow baraka (blessing), and as such, command respect and authority within the family and in the larger community (Chafik 2005). This baraka is transposed to the wool they used. Astta, the act of weaving in Berber, is a highly ritualized performance. For example, wool is carefully selected, washed in the river, combed, spun, and dyed before carpets are woven on upright vertical looms that are often used as sacred objects in significant events, such as ceremonies to protect the virginity of young girls (Becker 2006).

The ceremony that accompanies the use of the loom varies from region to region, but in the High Atlas mountains, a maiden steps over the loom in a forward and backward movement seven times while older women repeat “bismillah, bismillah, bismillah” (In the name of God), hence, invoking the sacred power of the loom to protect the young girl’s virginity. This ceremony foregrounds the sacredness of the loom in maintaining the cohesion of the family and the community by ensuring the virginity of the girls as a guarantee of lineage.

Reading carpet designs as historical archives is a worthwhile endeavor where the utilitarian and the sacred intermingle semantically and materially. Semantically, the combination of the utilitarian and the sacred is part of how women see the world (whether physical or abstract), and materially, in real life, this double perception is part of women’s daily experiences. The extraordinary combination of the utilitarian and the symbolic is passed down from women to their families and their communities. It is no coincidence that Berber communities have always thrived on the need for both economic benefits and symbolism. This, in turn, highlights women’s role in not only producing artistic knowledge for their communities but also in consolidating their communities’ survival and continuity. The designs are so central in the symbolic system of Berber communities that they have been replicated in body adornment and clothing over centuries.

The semantics of Berber women’s carpet-weaving

Historically, the origin of carpet-weaving in Berber communities dates back to the Paleolithic era at a time when the first inhabitants of North Africa, the ancient Berber populations, used to hand-spin cloth (Brett and Fentress 1996; Chafik 2005). Significantly, every tribe has a style of carpet that distinguishes it from other tribes. Studies have shown that carpet-weaving is the oldest recorded art in North Africa and that this practice is intrinsically associated with Berber women (Mernissi 2004; Becker 2006; Sadiqi 2014, among others). Today, carpet-weaving is perceived as a rural female art. Most artists were/are illiterate in the sense that they were/are not taught how to read or write. The presence of symbols related to feminine divinities, such as the triangle, is the product of ancestral transmission, which they may modify without destroying the designs and patters they inherited. As such, the art of making carpets continues to be a product of women’s creativity and imagination, away from any ready-made models (Chtatou 2020).

Historically, carpet-weaving in Morocco and the region has served two main functions: economic and symbolic. Anthropologist Claudine Cohen (2016) states that women have been weaving since time immemorial and their work have been important for the economy of their communities. Cohen draws on the work of the British anthropologist, James Frazer, who asserts that,

“Women have contributed more than men in the history of economic advancement, in particular to the transformation of the sedentary life, from a subsistence based on nature to a human-made lifestyle (Frazer 1912:129, cited in Cohen 2016:141). (Author’s translation)

This statement applies to Berber women, as various studies have shown (Ben Miled, 1998, Chafik, 2005; Mernissi, 2004; Becker, 2006; Naji, 2007). Throughout history, women imagined designs and wove them on carpets. Men then sold the rugs and the money earned was used to buy food and other necessities for the household. This practice continues to the present time in the villages of the Atlas Mountains and women's rugs continue to be sold in local markets as the main source of income for rural families (Belghiti, 1971; Belarbi, 1995). The volume and nature of the commercial transactions was historically affected by the specific environments in which they were made: the rugs were smaller and transportable if the tribes were nomadic or semi-nomadic and bigger if the tribes were sedentary. In other words, the type and size of the rugs had to match the lifestyle of Berber tribes. The thick and multi-layered rugs that abounded in the cold Atlas Mountains contrasted with the light and flat rugs of the hot Saharan areas. Today, tribes are more sedentary, and the rugs are generally medium to big in size.

It is evident that the various styles and textures of the carpets are key to information about ancient modes of living and how humans interacted with their environment in North Africa. Additionally, by helping communities to survive, carpet-weaving is a source of knowledge on the status of women as artists in Berber communities. Carpets are also key to studying the history and evolution of tribal lifestyles. For example, they may reveal a great deal about the agricultural way of life of the tribes where the function of sheep (from which the wool used for carpet-weaving comes) is essential. They may also be instrumental in revealing the direction of the movement of nomadic tribes, the continuity or discontinuity of such movements, as well as the changing size and economic state of the tribes.

Carpets and rugs can also inform us about the origin and development of craftsmanship in Berber communities because rugs were not useful only for the house and the community. They were/are useful for developing other activities, such as the preparation of the tools that women use to weave. These tools are generally two meters in length, made of wood, and have both vertical and horizontal shapes that facilitate their use on the floor with women sitting behind them. Studying the history of these tools and their evolution may shed light on how humans evolved in North Africa in their quest for sustenance and survival throughout history. These studies not only help us to understand the division of labor according to sex and family structures in ancient times, but they may also be used to understand the present. In sum, the economic utility of the rugs makes them genuine historical and cultural archives that can serve as sources of valuable information on the past and the present of the countries and regions where Berber communities lived and are living.

Rugs have had a symbolic function, as revealed by a textual analysis of the designs they have carried for centuries. Berber rugs are characterized by what is referred to as "the Berber knot," a technique that is performed manually by the weaver. The Berber weavers did not historically use any model and the Berber carpet does not originate from the oriental carpets of the Islamic world, although the two types share similar knotting techniques and certain patterns. It seems that it was Berber women who invented the Berber knot, and as weaving was the privilege of some women, performing the knot bestowed baraka on the weaver, a baraka that is then transferred to the wool and weaving instruments (Basset, 1922). The knot bestows blessing because it incorporates a woman's secret knowledge of how to make the knot. This blessing is transferred to the wool and the weaving instruments because these tools allow women's knowledge to be transferred from generation to generation.

The shapes and forms of carpet and rug designs vary in shape and form but there are recurrent patterns, the most spectacular of which are: inverted and non-inverted triangles, horizontal lines, circles, snakes, beetles, snakes, scorpions, rivers, flowers, stars, moons, hands, eyes, tajins, teapots, and spoons. The rugs also feature bright colors, mainly red, yellow, blue, and green. Symbolically, the red color represents strength and protection, blue wisdom, yellow eternity, and green peace.

The carpet designs have attracted the curiosity of various scholars and travelers throughout history, but it is only in the postcolonial era that serious readings of the designs have

started to manifest themselves, mainly as part of social history and the reconstruction of the history of North Africa. These readings may be roughly categorized into three main types: those that consider the designs as cultural markers, those that consider them as identity markers, and those that consider them as feminine art.

In modern times, the first group of people to be interested in the designs of Berber rugs were the French colonizers. During the colonization of Morocco (1912–1956), the French endeavored to co-opt and demystify Berber women's weaving by appropriating their art. Hence, in the 1930s, many French designers such as Le Corbusier, Charles and Ray Eames, and Hugo Alvar Alto included soft Berber rugs in their houses as a complement to their austere-looking furniture. Others, like Frank Lloyd Wright, brought carpets from Morocco for their clients. It is practices like these that popularized Berber rugs in the West. For these colonizers, Berber rugs were a marker of a distinct Berber culture, a distinction useful for the divide-and-rule strategy that the colonizers used to separate Berbers from Arabs. In parallel, many French scholars were interested in simply studying the rugs (Westmarck 1904 and 1926; Ricard 1982; Berque 1964 and 1978).

In the post-independence period, Moroccan scholars used social history to reclaim the voices that had been marginalized in official national history. Novelists such as Driss Chraïbi and sociologists such as Abdelkebir Khatibi wrote in French but used Berber women's productions as a cultural subtext to their fiction and scholarship. In parallel to this, some promoters of Berber language and culture, such as historian Mohamed Chafik, saw in the Berber rugs a strong emblem of a reclaimed Berber language and culture. He argued that Berber tribes have historically distinguished themselves from each other by the type of rugs and weaving styles they adopted (Chafik 2005). According to him, each tribe is traditionally reputed to have its own weaving style, often used to decorate the interior spaces of tents and homes or to display on the back of horses during ceremonies, such as weddings and local festivals. Berber carpets were read as cultural markers and tokens of resistance against French colonization (Chafik 2005). By safeguarding and displaying their carpets during the fight against the colonizers, Berber tribes brandished their pride and ancestral chivalry by decorating their horses with the tribe's rug designs. In a sense, rugs were flags in times of crisis. While the French colonizers appropriated women's carpets by making them part of commercial transactions between Morocco and France, and by so doing brushing aside their value as art and Berber women as artists, Moroccans used the discourse on the carpets to reconstruct and decolonize the country's modern history by including Berber language and culture, which were marginalized in national narratives of resistance (Sadiqi 2014).

Artistic designs used by women are also a form of writing; that is, a combination of messages that educate us about the past and the present. For example, Khatibi (2002) uses data from the philosophy of language to argue that tattooing (which is related to weaving as shown below) is writing in its capacity as a visual and spatial semiotic system. This thesis is supported by the fact that tattoos in Berber culture appear in the visible or exposed parts of the body such as the face, hands, arms, and neck, which presupposes that they have meanings that are intended to be construed and interpreted. In sum, for Khatibi, the tattooed body is a written body, in the sense that it is a language that tells and retells stories. This is an important point because writing is linked to speaking: semioticians like Julia Kristeva (1969) consider writing to include voice and body language. Similarly, Moroccan sociologist Rahma Bourquia (1995) sees in the traces of tattooing the speech of women. These two views are important for the argument I make in this essay because tattooing replicates the older carpet-weaving designs.

Carpet designs as identity

From the mid-1980s onward and with the rise of the Berber movement, carpet designs became emblems of identity reclamation. In addition to decorating the covers of books that address Berber identity, history, and culture, they started to appear in Berber NGO (non-governmental organizations) brochures and in various newspapers and other media outlets, such as websites that promote Berber culture and language. The symbolism and

aesthetics of the designs inspired Berber scholars and politicians. Activists, in particular, adopted the colors of the rug designs for the new Berber flag. In parallel, some scholars started to use the history of Berber women's carpet-weaving as proof of the long history of Berbers (Ennaji, 2014; Chtatou, 2020). It is remarkable that the designs are reappearing in today's youth culture as a token of Berber identity and have at times been used to express a Moroccan, Maghrebi, or a broader African identity as opposed to a Middle Eastern one (Sadiqi 2014). The use of carpet designs beyond carpets intensified before, during, and after the 2010–2011 uprisings in North Africa. The recognition of Berber as an official language in the post-uprisings constitution gave more symbolic power to the designs as identity markers.

Carpet designs as art

By the beginning of the twenty-first century and with the consolidation of the women's movement in Morocco, carpet designs started to be read from a feminist point of view as an artistic expression of Berber women. The first feminist scholar to provide such a reading was Fatima Mernissi, who researched carpet weavers in the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains (Mernissi, 2004; 2006). According to Mernissi, carpet-weaving is an art form that deserves to be protected in museums because its continuity may be seriously threatened by the increasing migration of young people to nearby towns and cities or to Europe. Mernissi states,

Tribal rugs, antique and contemporary, with their vibrant colors and bold designs, have always fascinated me, just like the art of Matisse and Klee and others who fell under the spell of indigenous art. Many art lovers and collectors all over the world feel passionately attracted to these artistic creations from the most remote desert and mountain areas of North Africa. Numerous books have been published but nobody has focused on the women artists who have been creating these carpet paintings for a very long time (See Mernissi, 2006).

Mernissi's reading of Berber carpet-weaving highlights the historical and social value of Berber women's art. Historically, this art is the only remaining link between the two shores of the Mediterranean after the Second World War destroyed most of the rural aspects of Europe (Fatima Mernissi, personal communication). Socially, this art has escaped the control of both the colonizers and the Moroccan state and has managed to survive in the rural areas. This is a testament to the power of art.

Reading carpet designs as a historical archive

Significantly, the designs that Berber women have imagined and created are metaphors with specific significance in Berber communities and therefore may be used as genuine historical and linguistic archives. Metaphors are not just an expression; they record and give life to our imagination (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). As a historical archive, they should cease to be considered a "subordinate discourse" (Messick, 1987) and instead become known as a "different canon" (Pollock, 1999). In the context of this essay, we have shown that they are genuine gateways to three research paths: women's spirituality, the overall environment in which women evolved, and their constant endeavor to protect themselves, their families, and their communities from evil and supernatural forces. Body adornment in Berber communities is a woman's ancestral art whose forms, designs, and rituals are easily traceable to those of carpet-weaving. Of these symbols, the frequency of triangles, circles, and horizontal lines abound. There are three main types of body-adornment: traditional tattooing, henna applications, and traditional clothing. Whereas the first type is almost extinct today, the latter two are still vibrant not only in isolated Berber communities but throughout present-day North Africa and beyond.

Tattooing

Tattooing (injection of ink into the human body) has been historically recognized as a human practice since the Neolithic Age (Deter-Wolf, 2013; Deter-Wolf, Robitaille, Krutak & Galliot, 2016). In North Africa, a recent study reports that the world's most ancient figural tattoos on human bodies was discovered in Egypt¹. In Berber communities, face and body tattooing is called lusham or siyala and is a traditional practice that leaves permanent marks on the skin. The tattoos are performed on various parts of the body, mainly the cheeks, chin, neck, and the bosom. Such tattoos have meanings depending on the part being tattooed. Thus, the tattoos on the chin symbolize fertility and those on the neck and bosom symbolize protection from the evil eye. The color of the tattoos is light to deep green, which is probably the natural result of the herbal plant ingredients used in the tattoo art.

Traditionally, tattoos were performed by older women on the bodies of younger women and young boys during important life rituals or events, such as birth, marriage, circumcision, etc. More specifically, it was generally the case that would-be mothers-in-law performed tattoos on the face and body of young virgins to mark them as future daughters-in-law. This specific act is called rshim in Berber. As for young boys, they were traditionally tattooed before circumcision to ensure their virility and to protect them from the evil eye. The results of these two artistic performances would be displayed during the wedding and circumcision ceremonies to highlight the purity of the bride and the boy to be circumcized. This display marked the entry of girls and boys into the community. To accompany these important rites of passage, traditional tattooing combined aesthetics (the beautification of women's faces and bodies), protection from the evil eye and spirits, and socialization.

Beyond their social functions, traditional tattooing marked other cycles of a woman's life, such as the onset of pregnancy, childbirth, and baptism that symbolize the value of the community for the individual. Tattooing was also used as a healing practice and as a shield from infertility. The aesthetic, therapeutic, and social functions of traditional tattooing in Berber communities have been recorded in images and linked to the local practices that preceded the coming of Islam in North Africa (Brousse 2012).

In present times, traditional tattoos have fallen in esteem and are disappearing as a token of ancient paganism that is strictly prohibited by Islam. Indeed, the coming of Islam, a monotheistic religion, was exploited by male interpreters of the sacred texts to prohibit any display of the human body. They saw tattoos as a threat to the Islamic faith and those with tattooed body parts as destined for hell where only fire could erase their tatoos. However, although disappearing, traditional tattooing is still considered part of women's know-how in Berber communities, mainly because of its attractive symbolic dimension.

The shapes and forms of lusham are similar to those of carpets. This claim is corroborated by the fact that lusham designs, like carpet designs, were generally accompanied by the ritual of chanting and, like carpet designs, were considered sacred in the community. Additionally, beyond the household, the patterns of tattoo designs, like those of carpets, were a means of distinguishing one tribe from another. They were also a means to retrace one's family lineage or the history of their land, thus highlighting the position of women in the cohesion and durability of Berber communities (Brousse, 2012).

Tattoos, like carpet designs, express Berber women's spirituality. The image of the goddess Tanit materializes in both types of art through a combination of vertical and horizontal lines and circles or dots, continuing, thus, the symbolism of women's sexuality and fertility. Finally, in the absence of written documentation – like carpet designs – tattoos are valuable keys to decode women's symbolic knowledge. They can help retrace the identity and history not only of women but also of Berber communities, their art, and their endangered cosmology.

1 See <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/natural-mummies-from-predynastic-egypt-reveal-the-worlds-earliest>

Henna

Henna is used in dying or coloring the human body. The henna colors vary between light and dark red. Like carpet weaving and tattooing, henna preparation and application are a feminine practice that is often accompanied by rituals and chanting and is associated with baraka, healing, and protection from the evil eye; it is a sacred practice in Berber communities, and hennaed designs are also used to combat infertility (Westermarck, 1926).

An important function of henna is to mark the major events and cycles of a human's life: birth, marriage, pregnancy, circumcision, as well as other culturally meaningful events. It is applied on the hair, hands, and feet, as well as on the body of women, but also on newborns, circumcised boys, and grooms. Henna is still the main element in bridal body adornment. This specific use is meant to protect her from evil spirits, supernatural forces, illnesses, or death. To a lesser extent, this use also applies to the groom and the newborn. Beyond the physical body, henna has a therapeutic function in Berber communities in the sense that it is used to heal mental illness such as depression. In this respect, it is believed to bring solace and peace of mind in moments of internal tension. Indeed, the word henna is semantically associated with the word *lhnint* (affection) and the latter may have derived from the former; henna is also believed to originate in Paradise. Interestingly, henna designs are similar to carpet and tattoo designs. The frequency of inverted and non-inverted triangles, circles, and horizontal lines are very reminiscent of other women artistic designs and share their symbolism.

Clothing

In Berber communities, women have been creating various styles of clothing for women, men, and children to celebrate stages of familial life such as marriage, birth, and circumcision. The first wearing of these clothes is often accompanied with specific rituals where divinity is implored to bestow blessings on the wearers. These special clothes reinforce family bonds and highlight the cultural meanings that specific stages in a person's life carry and at the same time highlight the centrality of women in engineering and transmitting these events. These dresses are also a means to ensure a particular socialization of people within their communities and inscribe specific social meanings, construct specific values, and, through ritual, transmit identity and ensure the continuity of their communities. In addition to celebratory dresses, Berber women make dresses that are used in collective mixed public dances. An example of such dances is *Ahidous*, which originally was performed in public and private spaces to celebrate harvests and still enjoys great popularity among Berbers and Moroccans in general.

The motifs and designs of women-made clothing are similar to those used in carpet-weaving, tattoos, and henna. Similarly, the triangle, circle, horizontal lines, and the moon, as well as the bright colors are carried over to textile-making. Like carpet-weaving, textile-making is thought to bestow baraka on whomever wears the homemade clothes and protects them from dark forces (*djins* or spirits) and from the evil eye. A textile-maker, like a carpet-weaver, tattooer, or dressmaker, commands respect and authority in the community.

All in all, Berber women's imagined and created designs, originally used on carpets, are replicated in tattoos, henna, and clothing designs. Whether woven, tattooed, hennaed or clad, these designs are genuine keys to Berber women's spirituality and cosmology. In Berber communities, the designs are widely believed to bring about peace of mind in moments of transition or anxiety, hence their constant association with the highly sought-after baraka that women's art invokes. It is interesting to note that the carpet designs, as well as the symbolism they carry, have been replicated in body adornment as if women unconsciously resisted losing their art in the face of strong aggression by hegemonic religions. This constant replication of protective designs saved their art. Just as the power of women's imagined and created designs is key to their spiritual and cosmological world, it is also key to the language they have preserved and transmitted throughout millennia, as I demonstrate in the following section.

Carpet designs as Berber language

Although Berber communities have never been united on religious grounds, they have always been so on linguistic grounds.² In other words, linguistic unity has constituted the backbone of Berber culture and the main means of its survival. In a sense, while religious practices have been local, linguistic unity safeguarded the larger boundaries of Berber communities. Interestingly, this unique configuration of the religious and the linguistic has been solidified, preserved, and transmitted mainly by women.

A characteristic of the Berber language is its Tifinagh alphabet, one of the oldest in the world. Tifinagh and its grammar has been the subject of serious studies since the mid-twentieth century. This does not mean that Berber did not have a grammar prior to the mid-twentieth century because language is by definition a grammatical system. The relative delay in the production of Berber grammar is mainly due to the fact that, unlike Arabic, Berber is a secular and private language that has not been promoted in public because it has never been supported by a holy book³.

A striking fact about the Berber Tifinagh script is its longevity despite the fact that it has not been historically used very much and not for long texts. Second, theoretically speaking, the time span between the adoption of an alphabet and the standardization of a language is long; yet in the case of Berber, the standardization of Tifinagh and the standardization of the Berber language happened almost simultaneously from the 1960s onward. In light of these facts, I argue that the Berber alphabet was not created from scratch but was adapted from Berber carpet designs. This claim is supported by the striking physical similarity between the carpet designs and the Berber alphabet script and the evolution of this script.

There is a striking physical resemblance between the rug designs and the designs and scripts on the rocks in the use of horizontal and vertical lines, as well as the circle, an intriguing presence of Tanit and women's spirituality. Archaeological research has also revealed many other similar inscriptions throughout North Africa and the Mediterranean. The physical resemblance between the carpet designs and the Tifinagh script raise the following question: How can one explain the relationship between the Tifinagh script and writing in Berber language?

Tifinagh is one of the oldest forms of writing in human history (Bouhali, 1987; Camps, 1996; Claudot-Hawad, 1996; Chaker, 1996; Brous, 1996; Souag, 2004; Lefkioui, 2018). It has existed for twenty-five centuries and is one of the few scripts that resisted the hegemony of other scriptures that supported strong civilizations, such as those of the Romans and the Byzantines. Tifinagh originates from the graphic symbols on rock carvings. It was first used by Tuareg nomads to write short texts in Tamashek (a variant of Berber). Only a mastery of Tamashek allows a deciphering of such texts, mainly because of the absence of vowels. As with most human languages, the first version of Tifinagh contained a limited inventory of consonants. Increasing contact between the Berber language and other written languages, especially Phoenician, was a positive factor in the improvement and modernization of the Tifinagh alphabet (Billouche, 2003; O'Connor, 1996; Souag, 2004). The original Tuareg ancient Tifinagh was, thus, subject to several revisions (sometimes referred to as Neo-Tifinagh), the most important of which are: the former Sahara, the Libyan vertical, the horizontal Libyan, and the Berber Academy Agraw (see Tifinagh n° 1, December 1993/January 1994, p. 12).

Today's version of Tifinagh in Morocco is called Tifinagh—IRCAM (Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture). Whereas the ancient Tifinagh and Neo-Tifinagh do not contain vowels, contemporary Tifinagh contains 33 symbols including consonants and vowels and is Unicode (1 sound per symbol). This latter version has been established in Morocco on

2 What I mean by linguistic unity in this context is the fact that Berber dialects constitute one language in that it has one grammar. The attested differences between various dialects of this language are the levels of sound and meaning. See Basset (1952) and Sadiqi (1997), among others.

3 Although North Africa was ruled by powerful Berber dynasties from the 11th to the 15th centuries, the language of the royal courts and public politics has always been Standard Arabic. Marginalized in the public spheres of power and relegated to the private realm, Berber has largely been preserved by women and the fate of Berber and women has always been parallel: they were both marginalized during colonization and state-building and they both organized in movements by the end of the twentieth century. See Sadiqi (1997) where I provide a grammar of Berber and 2003 where I argue that Arabic is a "male" language and Berber a "female" language.

the basis of the previous versions of Tifinagh and is used to write words and texts in and outside national public and private schools in Morocco and Algeria. The IRCAM-Tifinagh is also used in advertisements throughout cities, towns, and villages in the region, as well as at the entrance of ministries and other official institutions. In sum, Tifinagh is now fully accepted as the alphabet of the Berber language, thus consolidating the ancestral linguistic unity of Berber communities.

The physical resemblance to carpet designs of Tifinagh is related to women both historically and in modern times. Historically, it was mothers who taught Tifinagh to their children by drawing letters on the sand (Sadiqi et al., 2009). Tifinagh signs were also said to convey special meanings and cryptic messages that only women could understand or decipher (Sadiqi et al., 2009). In modern times, anthropological, sociological, and literary studies have shown that Berber women's carpet and tattoo designs, like Tifinagh, were forms of writing (Marcy, 1973; Ramirez & Rollot, 1995).

The fact the alphabet of a language is the basis of its morphology and syntax (that is grammar), then the Tifinagh alphabet signs constitute the building blocks of the grammar of Berber, a grammar that withstood the test of time although Tifinagh was not used abundantly in writing Berber texts. The only explanation for the survival of Tifinagh and the Berber language is the unbroken trajectory of carpet-weaving. What I am claiming here is that the Berber language existed orally for many centuries, but that it was codified and written as an alphabet only later, using women's carpet designs as inspiration. In other words, Tifinagh survived through the art of carpet-weaving and it was women's artistic imagination that created, perpetuated, and saved carpet designs and the Berber language. The symbolism that characterizes both is a recognition of the centrality of Berber women's spiritual and utilitarian role in the sustainability of their communities throughout centuries.

The survival of Tifinagh as a writing system is, thus, due to its close semantic and semiotic relationship to women's artistic designs, which also function as women's writing and speech. In other words, the carpet and body-adornment designs are central to the codification and stabilization of the Berber language. If the carpet motifs inspired tattooing and subsequently the Tifinagh alphabet, then it is possible to postulate that they inspired the codification of the Berber language.

This is a unique phenomenon in linguistics that merits further research because there is a solid assumption in this field of research that if an alphabet is not used for a long time, the language it is supposed to write dies. The case of Berber refutes this hypothesis in the sense that this language has existed for millennia, but only in its oral form. This is an extraordinary phenomenon in linguistics and its symbolic implications are yet to be fathomed. Additionally, the uniqueness of the Berber case is that it differs from the usual cases whereby the codification and stabilization of languages is more grounded in linguistics, rather than artistic elements (Ayres-Bennet & Sanson, 2020). As women are generally marginalized in the linguistic canon, a further implication of this study is that women, not men, codified and stabilized the Berber language (Bennett & Sanson, 2020).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented a reading of Berber women's ancestral creative designs on carpets as a growing archive and key to understanding the past and the present in Berber communities. The designs are repositories of women's spirituality and their role in the codification and stabilization of the Berber language. This reading clarifies the links between women's symbolic designs and their spirituality, environment, community, and language. These links are key to further research on the power of feminine symbolism, which has preserved these links and continues to do so. The historical and linguistic dimensions of women's symbolic expressions are vast and reveal exciting new research possibilities about women in North Africa. Today, a nascent interest in the role of women in the history of languages and linguistics forces more focus on the linguistic dimension of Berber women's art (Bennett & Sanson, 2020).

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