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Memories of Berber Struggle: Reframing the Nation in Contemporary Moroccan Berber Politics

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The paper explores how contemporary Berber (Amazigh, pl. Imazighen) activists in Morocco articulate their demands for cultural and linguistic representation through a process of memory-work that re-claims a history of Berber struggles on behalf of, but also in opposition to, various instantiations of the Moroccan state. Morocco is a multi-ethnic and multi-racial country which was historically at the crossroads of trade and migration from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Rural southern Morocco is particularly marked by this historical diversity, with the majority Berber speakers hailing from a number of formerly transhumant tribes co-existing with Arab speakers who trace their arrival to 7th century Islamic armies; Bedouin who later migrated from the eastern Sahara; Shurafa, holy lineages that trace their descent to the Prophet Muhammad; black Haratine (now generally called Iqbalin) who often anteceded the conquering Berber tribes in the oasis communities and were forced to sharecrop for them; and Gnawa/Ismakhan, former black slaves brought from West Africa. With the exception of the Arabs and Bedouin, the other groups all speak Berber, but generally distinguish themselves from Imazighen.

In spite of this demographic heterogeneity, national unity since 1956 independence has been premised on shared Islamic belief and fealty to the Sherifian monarch who presents himself as the Commander of the Faithful and traces his descent likewise to the Prophet - - both of which privilege the Arab dimensions of Morocco's past. Further, the state apparatus has been largely in the hands of the Arab nationalist Istiqlal and Socialist parties, both of which worked to suppress any public evocation of Morocco's ethnic diversity. Arabic is the official language of the state, dominating the media and progressively replacing French as the language of classroom instruction. Since the 1960s, Amazigh students and teachers have founded associations, recorded Berber oral poetry and folklore, and developed a written Berber (Tamazight) to protect what they feared to be a disappearing language and culture. After the 1980s, this intellectual work was supplemented by an increasingly public militancy that demanded state policy changes. While such activism was largely repressed, with activists jailed as late as 1994, under the new King Muhammad VI the state has gradually acceded to the demands, creating a Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) in 2001 charged with introducing Tamazight into the schools and media. While most Amazigh activists applaud these efforts, many fear that it amounts to little more than a politics of cooptation, and demand an official status for Tamazight, with its full inclusion into the government and legal systems from which Berber speakers have been largely excluded.

As importantly, Amazigh militants call for a re-writing of Moroccan history (particularly as taught in school manuals) which they claim has marginalized the national contribution of Berber culture. Inscribing an historical counter-memory in various activist newspapers

Silverstein Abstract (continued)

and websites, they underline the role of Berberophones in the anti-colonial struggle. Moreover, they demand the official acknowledgment of post-independence oppression at the hands of a postcolonial Arabophone state through a number of cases which they have brought forward to the various truth and reconciliation commissions created by Muhammad VI to "turn the page" on the years of human rights abuses under his father. In insisting on these various minor key histories, activists, while often accused of advocating secessionism, seek to re-frame the Moroccan nation as ethnically inclusive and sensitive to different local and regional histories.

The paper examines two cases of counter-memory work emerging from southern Morocco. The first case contests the official naming of a French Protectorate era decree regarding the rule of customary law on the Moroccan periphery as the "Berber dahir" insofar as it has been deployed by Arab nationalists as proof of a French pro-Berber colonial policy. Activists have even brought a civil law suit against the former minister of education for maintaining such a designation in current school textbooks. The second case involves the 1981 arrest, interrogation, and detention of 17 young men from the southeastern oasis community of Goulmima for having protested against the former king's ban on the traditional 'Aid ram slaughter in light of the country's drought conditions, supposedly by hanging the corpses of three slaughtered puppies on the entrance to the town's main walled residence compound. Local activists brought the case to the truth and reconciliation forum, calling for an official apology and an indemnity for the victims of what they decry as unlawful and inhuman detention for what was at worst an expression of free speech.

These two cases highlight how the struggle against historical amnesia has become central to contemporary Berber politics. However, these calls for historical inclusion and reparation do not simply challenge the state, but have been locally contested as well. On the one hand, activists are accused of exploiting individual trauma in order to build individual political careers, of "playing politics" for personal gain. On the other hand, multiple histories of struggle co-exist that are often mutually exclusive, with different versions, for instance, of local compliance to French colonial rule maintained in opposed family memories. Moreover, the struggle for Berber inclusion in Moroccan national history often comes at the expense of the various other groups in southern Morocco, who are written out of the Berber story. In particular, Iqbalin residents contest Amazigh activism as simply another form by which Berber dominance in southern Morocco has been maintained, in spite of the increasing economic and political power gained since independence by these former serfs. The paper pays close attention to these local tensions and contests. In so doing, it points to the way memory struggles for inclusion on a national scale can simultaneously imply exclusion at the regional or local levels. Scholars of memory need to take into account these scalar discontinuities lest they, in their tempting embrace of subaltern resistance, underwrite new hegemonic memories and historical amnesias.