

# The Origins of Amazigh Women's Power in North Africa: An Historical Overview

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### **Background and Definitions**

The term "Amazigh" denotes the major linguistic minority of North Africa. However, "Berber" still remains the more widely used ethno-linguistic word for them. In antiquity, the Romans and Byzantines used this term to refer to those who did not speak the region's "lingua franca", Greek. During and after the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, the Arabs followed this Greco-Roman practice and referred to the indigenous peoples they encountered as "barbar." The French and English speakers adopted the vulgarised term, "Berber", and coined the word "Barbary," with respect to the region of North Africa and its people.

The "Berber" people prefer the term "Amazigh", which they use to describe both themselves and their indigenous languages. "Amazigh" signifies a "free" or "noble" person; the plural is "Imazighen". To define, in the most generic way, the language that they speak, Imazighen use the term "Tamazight." This term is also used specifically for the language commonly used by the Imazighen of Kabylia and Shawia in Algeria, the dialects used in the Middle Atlas (Rwafa) and Shlowh in Morocco, Zwara and the Nofusa Mountains in Libya and in parts of Egypt and Tunisia. Regional Tamazight speakers use their own local-

ized terms to define their own local linguistic variations, such as Tariffit in northern Morocco, Tashilhit in Morocco's Sous Valley, Tanfusit in Libya's Nofusa mountains, Tashawit in Algeria's Awras mountains and the like. The original Amazigh alphabetic transcription system is referred to as "Tifinagh." Variant transcription systems in use today include the Latin and Arabic adaptations of Tifinagh representations.

The Tuareg populations in Mali call their ancestral homeland Azouad (in north-western Mali), and the Tuareg of Niger call theirs Air (in the Air mountain massif of north central Niger, with its capital at Agadez) and refer to themselves as the Kel Air (i.e., "People of Air"). Other groups of Imazighen are also found in Libya, Tunisia and at Siwa Oasis, Egypt. The word "Amazighité" (i.e., Berberism) is often used to sum up the qualities that all Amazigh peoples tend to share commonly. These include speaking the Tamazight language, revering the national homeland (Tamazgha) and honouring of the Amazigh people, residing in the region including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, as well as other areas, including Siwa Oasis in Egypt, and parts of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and the Canary Islands. Practicing various common customs and traditions, instilling a historical awareness of

the basic outlines of Amazigh history and honouring famous historical figures are all part of this shared identity. They have all played a role in influencing the struggle for the improvement of the social and cultural positions of Amazigh women.

### Origins

Since the dawn of history, Imazighen have been the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa, their territory stretching from Egypt to Mauritania and from the Mediterranean to the boundaries of historic sub-Saharan Black Africa. Throughout their history, women have played a vital role in the development of Amazigh society. Various empires and peoples have conquered portions of historic Tamazgha, beginning with the Phoenicians and Greeks and continuing through the Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, French, British, Spanish, and Italians. Imazighen have been subjected to various religious beliefs: their own early pantheistic concepts; the polytheistic dogmas of the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans; and monotheistic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Since the 13th century, most Imazighen have professed the Islamic faith and Islam has penetrated deeply into their collective psyches.

Throughout their history, the Imazighen have always had their heroes or heroines who have defended their ancestral homeland, only to succumb to the superior "civilizational" might of their foreign conquerors. In 814 B.C., for example, Amazigh chief Larbas negotiated a deal to marry Princess Dido, daughter of the King of Tyre, in return for a small piece of real estate that eventually became Qart Hadasht (i.e., the New City, or Carthage). King Juba and King Massinissa plotted with the Romans against the Carthaginians. Prince Jugurtha mastered Roman fighting techniques and subsequently led a formidable rebellion from 106 to 104 B.C., according to the Roman historian Sallust's account of the Jugurthine War.

In the early stages of the arrival of Islam, the Aures tribal chief Kusaila, and later Kahena, resisted the Arabs in the late 7th-early 8th centuries until they were overwhelmed by the Arab forces, and forced to submit. Salih (Moroccan Amazigh) from the Moroccan Berghawata, took Islam as their role model and translated an "Amazigh" Koran in order to repulse Arab cultural penetration of Morocco's Atlas mountains. The Amazigh leaders, Yusuf ibn Tashfin and Ibn Tumart, established the great Amazigh medieval empires of the

Almoravids (al-Murabitun, "People of the Ribat") and the Almohades (al-Muwahhidun, the "Unitarians"), which dominated much of North Africa and Spain in the 12th and 13th centuries. From the 13th century on, however, Arab Bedouin tribes (the Banu Hilal, Banu Sulaym, and Banu Ma'qil) began to inundate the low-lying plains of North Africa and began a unfortunate process of Arabization that would continue into the 20th century.

Imazighen only retained their native Tamazight tongues in the Atlas Mountains and remote sections of the Sahara, not penetrated by these Arab groups. As a result, Amazigh communal consciousness remained strong in the High, Middle, and Riff Atlas sections of Morocco; the Kabylia mountain massifs east of Algiers; the Aures Mountains of eastern Algeria; the Mzab region of the northern Sahara of Algeria; Algeria's Tuareg sectors of the Ahaggar and Tassili-n-Ajjer; the Nofusa Mountains south of Tripoli, the Saharan Siwa Oasis complex in western Egypt, the Tuareg Azouad territory of northwestern Mali, and the Tuareg-occupied Air Mountains massif of north central Niger.

### Amazigh Women

As mentioned above, women played a very important role in Amazigh societies throughout the various phases of Amazigh subjugation. There have been female rulers, holy women or queens even during the period of the Islamization of North Africa. A female Amazigh leader name Kahina put up fierce resistance to the Arab conquerors of her time. Women were also important contributors to the Amazigh economy. In many cases, weaving provided independence for Amazigh women, especially widows. A comparatively large percentage of Amazigh women were versed in their people's literature and poetry and thus enjoyed exclusive knowledge about the Amazigh's Tifinagh tradition.

Not only the Amazigh themselves, but also the conquering peoples of the region were familiar with the tradition of strong female leadership role models. As early as 1200 B.C., Phoenician sailors, coming

from what is now Lebanon, recorded what they had found in North Africa (then called Libya), namely a race of Caucasians who worshipped the sun and sacrificed to the moon. Soon the Phoenicians became North Africa's first known conquerors and settled in what is now Tunisia. From there they exercised dominion over North Africa and the Mediterranean for more than a thousand

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## Non-Arab Ethnic Groups

years. A famous Phoenician queen, Didon Elishat, founded the fabled city of Carthage near modern Tunis, where she successfully defended it against the forces of her brother who sought to unseat her in about 980 B.C. By 150 B.C., Carthage was the greatest maritime power in the world. It had successfully disputed with Rome in two of three Punic wars and sent Hannibal over the Alps to conquer Spain and invade Italy. But in the third Punic War, Rome ended Carthaginian rule (by 140 B.C.) and reduced Didon's empire to a Roman province.

Amazigh women are thought to be the fabled Amazon female warriors recorded by Diodorus Siculus, who reported that they had led their men to war, mutilated their enemies, and hennaed cowardly men. Pre-Islamic desert Amazigh society has been described as being almost entirely matriarchal in nature.

### Who was the legendary Kahena?

By 682 A.D., during the Islamic invasions of North Africa, a legendary female leader, queen of Carthage and ruler of the Amazighs and Mauritians, rallied and united her diverse subject peoples. Her forces challenged the Arab/Islamic invaders, who were in the process of capturing and re-building Carthage in 698 when she successfully drove them from her city. She was historically known by many names including Dhabba Kahena, Dahia-Kahena or Dihya al-Kahin. This Amazigh heroic leader decided to leave nothing for successive waves of Arab invaders and therefore laid waste to her own country. Because of this sacrifice she was given credit for successfully preventing Islam's southward spread into the Sudan.

Kahena was known as the Veiled Queen by the Jerawa tribe of the Aures Mountains, from where she supposedly hailed. She was universally recognised as the most effective and savage of the feminine enemies of Islamic expansionism in North Africa. According to Ibn Khaldun, Kahena was an adherent of the Jewish faith, who claimed that her entire tribe had converted to Judaism. She continued her struggle against the Arab/Islamic onslaught until her death in battle in 702 AD. She is still gratefully recognised as the "Ancestral Queen Mother" by the Amazigh people. According to legend, she was born into a Jewish Amazigh tribe in the Aures Mountains some time during the 600s AD. During her lifetime, Arab generals began to lead armies into North Africa, preparing to conquer the area and introduce Islam to the local peoples. The

Amazigh tribes fiercely resisted invasion, and decades of war resulted.

Very little is known about Kahena's family, or her early life. Her father's name was reported to have been Tabat, or Thabitah. The name Kahena or al-Kahina is a recognised feminine form of "Cohen", and it may indicate that her family or tribe were Cohanim. It could also have been a title given to her personally, meaning something like 'priestess' or 'prophetess'. Her followers, and their enemies, credited her with prophecy and magical knowledge. She married at least once, and had sons. Beyond that, almost nothing is known about her.

The Imazighen of the seventh century AD were not religiously homogenous. Christian, Jewish and pagan Amazigh were spread through the region that is now Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. They shared a common language and culture, however, and the invasion of the Arabs presented them with a common cause, enabling them to join forces in order to drive out the foreign invaders. Kahena emerged as a war-leader during this tense period, and proved amazingly successful at encouraging the tribes of the region to join together against their common enemy. Her reputation as a strategist and sorceress spread, and she managed to briefly achieve an historically unique feat, uniting all the tribes of Ifrikya, the Amazigh name for North Africa, ruling them and leading them in battle for five years before her final defeat.

Another famous female Amazigh warrior was Barshako who dressed as a man and led camel raids on other tribes. She is said to have returned home only to dismiss her husband, saying that she would no longer cook and keep house for a man.

The Tuaregs call Tin Hinan "Mother of Us All."

The tall, noble, proud, fierce and nomadic Tuaregs (Imucagh or free people) live in the Ahaggar and Tassili N'Ajjer Mountains of Algeria and the Air Mountains of Niger. They are called "The Blue People"

because the indigo dye of the robes they wore coloured their skin blue. These historical robes are now reserved for wearing exclusively at fairs and festivals. They trace their origins as a separate people to an Amazigh desert matriarch, Queen Tin Hinan, who led them on a desert trek to the Ahaggar Mountains.

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The strongest impression of genuine Amazigh culture is conveyed by the Tuareg. This people lives in the Sahara desert and because of its seclusion was able to preserve its uniqueness over time. Only in the beginning of the 20th century did the French succeeded in subduing this proud people. The tomb of the legendary Tuareg queen, Tin Hinan, is located in Abalessa, the ancient capital of the Hoggar region.

In Tuareg custom, only the men are veiled, women wear a head-dress. The sight of a veiled Tuareg noble astride his prized white camel is as romantic and it is arresting. However, it was a sight thought to strike terror in the hearts of all who beheld them sweeping across the desert in raids on caravans of traders and travellers, seeking bounty and slaves – a pursuit that gave the Tuareg tribes a reputation of being wealthy and powerful beyond their borders. Historically they were feared and respected as daring, deadly warriors. A position they retained for as long as merchants crossed the Sahara by camel.

Now that the deserts are traversed by truck, automobile and airplane, and a large portion of the tribesmen's livestock has been destroyed by drought, Tuareg nobles no longer rule their world. Some still keep livestock, while others now lead tours to the ancient, enigmatic rock paintings at Tassili N'Ajjer, northeast of the Ahaggar, and still others work in the cities. Although the freedom loving people understandably dread the perhaps inevitable, future transition to a settled, rural life style, they continue to be proud and noble.

#### **The Transition in the Role of Women**

Although the unveiled Tuareg women lost some of their power after their conversion to Islam in the 11th Century, they still retained more economic and social power than most of their urban counterparts. They lived in a completely matrilineal society. Tuareg women regarded themselves as men's equals, marrying at will, speaking in council and serving as heads of encampments. Wives went where they pleased, owned property, taught and governed the home. Tuareg children, in this distinctly hierarchical society, acquired their mother's rank and regarded maternal uncles as next of kin. Matriarchs presided over some the Tuareg tribes and the men who headed others were chosen by women.

At the height of the Arab/Islamic empire, Amazigh

women were famed for their beauty as well as for their energy, strength, and the heavy work they cheerfully performed. In the huge, opulent homes of the Islamic Caliphs of Baghdad, Egypt, Spain and Istanbul, captured Amazigh women were described as the most beautiful of the beautiful, as well as the most desirable and entertaining. The mother of the second Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad was an Amazigh slave named Sallama. Zineb Nafzawi, one of the most famous Amazigh queens, shared power with her husband after the Islamic conquest of Spain, led by Islamicized Amazighs. Together, she and her husband ruled a huge empire extending from North Africa to Spain, between 1061 and 1107. When the Spanish expelled the Moslems from Spain at the end of the 15th century, many Andalusians, who were of Amazigh ancestry, settled in North Africa. From there some engaged in piracy, raiding the Mediterranean for slaves and treasure. Sayyida Al-Hurra was so successful a pirate leader that she became the governor of Tetouan, Morocco. She retained the office for many years and was the undisputed leader of pirates of the western Mediterranean, while her ally, the famous Turkish Barbaros of Algiers, led the pirates of the eastern Mediterranean. Sayyida was a key player in the political bargaining between the Mediterranean powers as well. After the death of her first husband, she married the king of Morocco (on her terms, requiring him to come to her for their wedding). She reined in Morocco from 1510 to 1542.

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As recently as in the 19th century, an Amazigh prophetess, Fatma n Soumer or Lalla Fatma (Lalla, "Lady") took part in the resistance to the French in Kabylia in 1854, a woman leading the North African peoples to war once more, this time against the invading French. It took an army of 30,000 to finally defeat the prophetess. The Kabyles, however, remained unconquered until 1933.

The freedom and independence of Amazigh women is well known. An Algerian traveler, Al Warthilani, complained that the women in some Algerian towns went about unveiled, "exhibiting their ravishing beauty and shapely breasts". During Warthilani's pilgrimage to Mecca, Amazigh women from the Beni Amer tribe joined his caravan and virtually drove the pious man mad, displaying their bare-armed, bare-legged charms and gaily trying to seduce those men whose attention they attracted. Claiming divine powers, whether in jest or in all seriousness, these flirtatious pilgrims threatened



Picture Credit:  
Ayman Mroueh

anyone who rebuked them, which Warthilani did with disastrous results. Their curses seemed to materialize, he complained, calling these “playful girls” slaves of Satan.

Freedom for some Aures Mountain Amazighs extended as far as free love and polygamy. In the same Aures Mountains that spawned the legendary Kahena, some girls of the Azriya tribe enjoyed ample sexual freedom, their inaccessible location protecting them from officials, travellers and the attention of the region’s patriarchal prudes, whose intervention embittered their Ouled Nail sisters. The Azriyat (plural of Azriya) of two communities, the Ouled Abdi and the Ouled Daoud, were dancers who traveled from mountain village to mountain village to perform as well as have sexual relations with their patrons.

If an Azriya dancer became pregnant, she was expected to keep her child and was feted by the villagers with baby showers to insure the child’s good fortune. Most Azriyat would eventually marry, and/or, if they were financially successful, perhaps make the pilgrimage to Mecca to secure Islamic status. But whatever their fate, they were always accepted by their own community.

Historically, Aures Mountain women shared with the men equally in the hard labour carried out by her family, including ploughing, sowing, harvesting, grinding and shepherding. In order to establish their equality and independence, girls were known to elope in groups with young men. After this “honeymoon” they returned home with the respective husbands that had been chosen by them during this absence. This practice was attacked by the Algerian Arab nationalist movement in the 1950s, which established headquarters in the Aures Mountains and effectively curbed these liberties.

In Morocco, Amazighs account for at least one half of the total population. Although many Amazighs became citified and Islamicized over the centuries, many continued to live in pueblo-like, mud homes in villages of the Atlas and Rif Mountains of the Sahara where they honoured their ancient heritage. Many remain semi-nomadic even today. Some of these nomads are known to have retained their matrilineal traditions. They are famed for their strength, independence, bravery and fighting spirit. Despite some intermarriage with the Arab/Islamic population, which began a rapid undermining of the traditional Amazigh freedom accorded to women, many mountain villages merely pay lip-service to this encroach-

ing religion, and the women still remain quite independent.

An example of this split relationship with the predominant Arab/Islamic culture can be found in the continuation of the Amazigh tradition of the autumn bridal fair, which has survived to varying degrees throughout Moroccan Amazigh society. The Amazigh of Ait Haddidou, who gather on the Imilchil plateau in the Atlas Range for the annual September Mousseem or festival are a good example of this ongoing resistance to cultural encroachment. Combining a local saint's day with a market, the Mousseem also serves as a bridal fair.

It is here where one can see how reverence for the ancient female heroines of Amazigh civilisation encourage the enduring independence of the region's female population. During the three days of livestock trading, jewelry, clothes and kitchenware vending, sweet-mint-tea-drinking, respect-paying at the domed, white tomb of a marabout (saint), and family and friendship reunions, young Amazigh eyes eagerly scan the lanes between tents and stalls for glimpses of prospective brides and grooms. Swathed in deep blue, striped woolen capes, adorned with huge amber, coal, turquoise and silver necklaces, some displaying the emblem of the Carthaginian Great Goddess of the Sky, Tanitt, rouged and khol-eyed marriageable "daughters of Kahena" gather, gossiping and jesting, to discreetly study prospective grooms who, in turn, observing the bulkily-clad girls as best they can.

On the last day the traditional selection process is carried out. Women and girls promenade down the central path while their suitors rush to grab the hands of their favourites. When her hand is seized, the girl can accept or reject by clasp his hand or pulling hers away until she and the man of her choice find each other and proceed, hand in hand, to stand together before the notary. Later, after the harvest, the traditional marriage of a virgin bride will take place. First there is a mock fight between members of the two families, then comes the bride's ride on a sheepskin-saddled donkey to the groom's house and finally, she is carried over the threshold by her mother-in-law. Unless, of course, she has already been married and divorced, which seems to not be that uncommon. The majority of brides at the Mousseem marriage fair wear the peak headdress of a divorced or widowed woman, while minority virgins wear flat headdresses.

According to tradition, these Atlas Amazighs, like their Aures Mountain and Tuareg cousins, are permitted to initiate a divorce as well as retain their dowries after separation. It is possible for them to remarry and there is no upper limit to the number of men a female divorcee can marry. According to local custom, a woman enjoys the right to marry a new husband every year if need be. The historically independent female Amazigh leaders remain legendary role models for young village women to this very day.

### Amazigh Women in the Present

The stories of the past aided in the mobilisation of modern day Amazigh women in Algeria. Their struggle dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when the position of village women had rapidly degenerated. The early Amazigh pioneers pressured their elected Algerian leaders to appeal to the French Government regarding the need for reforms in favour of Amazigh women (NB: at that time only French women had the right to vote). These demands were largely unsuccessful. These early attempts at change were, however, later rediscovered by the leading Amazigh political parties during the 1940s. The movement for an improvement of the rights of Amazigh women found support amongst the

ranks of leading literary figures. These included the novels of Djamila Débèche (Leila, An Algerian Woman, Aziza) and Assia Djébbar (The Innocent Larks).

The best know literary champion of Amazigh women's rights was Fadhma Amrouche, a women of Kabyle origin. Born in 1882/1883 in a simple Algerian village, her father never legitimised her birth. Thus, she was subjected to endless ridicule by the villagers, prompting her mother to send her away to a Christian convent school for her own protection. Several years later,

at another convent, she was to meet her future husband. They were married, thus necessitating her conversion to Christianity. In the pages her novels, Amrouche describes her schooling, her marriage, and her children. Her personal and family struggles are the clear focus of her literary work, while two World Wars, various epidemics and the Algerian War of Independence flicker through in the background. Despite her popularity, Amrouche's life was not easy. She was never able to feel at home, neither in France and Tunisia, nor in her husband's house, or her own village of origin. But when you consider the time period she lived through, how different was her experience, in the end, from those of her compatriots?

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## Non-Arab Ethnic Groups

Amrouche's books are well worth reading for the wealth of information they contain about conditions in late 19th century Kabylia as well as for their portrayal of the simple art of endurance.

Fadhma Amrouche later became a well known Amazigh poet and singer in Paris in the 1960's. She is the mother of the famous writer Marguerite Taos, and the Amazigh singer Jean Amrouche. Her detailed autobiography portrays what it was like to grow up as the illegitimate outcast of her village. A bright and strong-spirited girl, she was educated in French in an age when few women enjoyed the privilege of receiving an education. Her books describe her constant worries about providing for her eight children. They represent a fascinating insight

into the traditional family dynamics of a polygamous household, and reveal her passionate love for Amazigh culture.

The Amazigh women's political struggle would come to an abrupt halt in 1962 following the achievement of independence by the National Liberation Front (FLN). A single party was established and retained exclusive power until 1989. After coming to power with the support of the country's women, the FLN would fulfil few of the promises made to women with respect to their emancipation. Furthermore, the FLN, backed by Egypt, imposed Arab-Muslim nationalism as the predominant state ideology, thus further undermining the position of Amazigh women.

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# Forthcoming

## Arab Women and War