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# How “Berber” Matters in the Middle of Nowhere

David Crawford

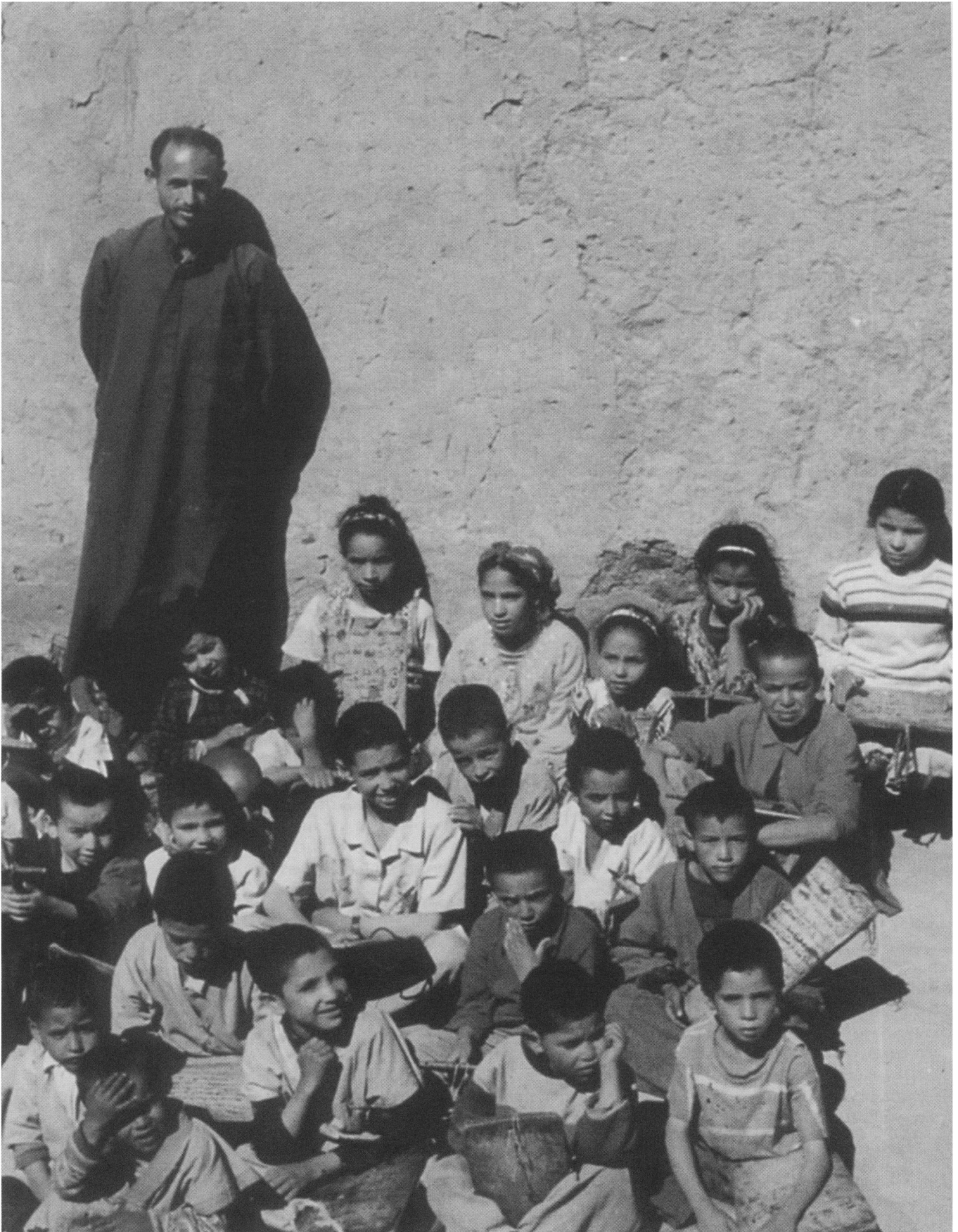
**An estimated 40 percent of Moroccans speak some variety of Berber as their first or only language. Today Berbers are pressing for what they argue are basic human rights: the freedom to speak Berber in schools and courtrooms, and for Berbers to take their deserved place in the official history of the nation. In the mountains, Berber language—the variety examined here is called Tashelhit—matters in some ways to most everybody who speaks it, and sometimes it matters in ways that might be considered political.**

In the High Atlas valley of the Agoundis, less than 100 kilometers from Marrakech’s international airport, the lives of Berber-speaking farmers move in what seems a timeless rhythm. Men manipulate intricate stone canals, drawing water to steeply terraced plots of barley. Women in bangles and bright scarves lash huge loads of wood to their backs and pick their way down precarious trails. Fires from family bread ovens send thin tendrils of smoke into the sky while cows low, hungry in their pens. Young boys throw rocks and lazily tend goats; girls sing as they gather water or fodder or wash clothes in the river, their younger siblings strapped to them. The people of these mountains seem to live in an-

other Morocco entirely, one lacking car exhaust, televisions and noise of urban life, telephones or even toilets. But the Arcadian surface of village life obscures deeper realities: the perennial brutality of physical labor, but also a landslide of social, political and economic changes. These changes are related—but not reducible—to processes of migration, formal education and “development” occurring everywhere in Morocco. But in the Agoundis Valley, as in much of highland Morocco, there is an important difference: the people here do not speak Arabic, the national language.

The issue of Berber language and culture has received considerable attention, much of it shedding more heat than light. Colonial scholars and anthropologists tended to posit an isolated Berber culture detached from urban life and the broader currents of Arabic and Islamic culture. After Mo-

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Children in the mosque, Tigharghiet, Morocco. DAVID CRAWFORD

roccan independence in 1956, nationalist scholars reacted against this and denied any distinct existence to Berbers, including them in the modern, homogeneous Arab-Islamic nation. Today Amazigh (Berber) activists are challenging this nationalist project, pressing for what they argue are basic human rights: the freedom to speak Berber in schools and courtrooms, and for Berbers to take their deserved place in the official history of the nation. Since an estimated 40 percent of Moroccans speak some variety of Berber as their first or only language, this is no small issue. In the mountains, Berber language—the variety examined here is called Tashelhit—matters in some ways to most everybody who speaks it, and sometimes it matters in ways that might be considered political. The way that Berber language operates politically in the Agoundis may be idiosyncratic in some ways, but Berber speaking regions across North Africa are experiencing many of the same changes.

## Arrival of the “Outside”

I visited the Agoundis Valley as a tourist in 1995 and was impressed mostly with the hospitality of the people and the lush, seemingly sustainable agricultural system. It was a drought year and most of the country had been scorched to a dusty gray and dun. The cities were swollen with farmers driven off the parched land. Tangiers was rationing water that could only be delivered by tanker, and the air conditioners of Rabat were working overtime. But the Agoundis was green and cool with the shade of massive walnut trees and flowering pomegranates. It seemed the very model of a poor but vital subsistence economy.

In 1998 I returned to the valley to do research in a particular village, Tagharghist, and I soon realized that life was not percolating along in timeless homeostasis. In the short period since my previous visit the people of the Agoundis had built a road that allowed trucks access to the valley, at least on market day. The village of Tagharghist had a Peace Corps worker, the first one in the area. With his help, the villagers were busily constructing a potable water system. After the locals chiseled a flat spot out of the mountainside using nothing but sledgehammers and iron bars, the Moroccan government sent a crew to build a modern school, the first cement building in the village.

While men still followed mules back and forth through ancient fields, trucks now carried other men to and from jobs outside the valley. Boys still herded goats while girls hauled fodder and firewood, but their younger siblings could be heard counting in Arabic in the bright pink schoolhouse. Women still baked *tanoort* and men made tea for any visitor willing to sit long enough for water to boil, but representatives of national and international development agencies swarmed

through the valley, dining on the bread and tea, asking questions, making promises. The people of these mountains have long interacted with the Arabic speakers of the plains, but outsiders now seem to be arriving more suddenly and in greater numbers than ever before. Generally these outsiders speak Arabic, but also English, German and especially French. Through processes of migration, education and development, the ordinary, often invisible fact of speaking Berber is coming to matter in new ways.

## Migration, Homecoming and Language

Today the new road into the Agoundis allows people to come and go much more easily, and the cash economy gives them a reason to do so. Landless men can now maintain households in the village and “commute” for a few weeks or a few months to jobs in mines nearby or to commercial agricultural areas further away in the plains. Because they are landless, these men would not normally figure prominently in village politics, but now cash wages allow some of them to “buy” influence in local affairs. Some migrant workers can also pay “fines” to be exempt from labor on communal projects. As such, wage earners remain “inside” the village social and political system precisely because they have paying work “outside” of it. The road also facilitates the movement of cash. Girls working as nannies in Marrakech and boys working on farms as far away as Demnat can expect their fathers to arrive on payday to collect remittances, leave a small allowance and return to the village.

Migration also affects the way language is used and the way different languages are understood to matter.

People who spend any time in the city learn that Tafsist, the Tashelhit word for French, is the language of the educated and the hip. Migrants also come to see that there are several equally “Arab” alternatives to Derija—the colloquial Arabic of the Moroccan cities—including the Egyptian version so often seen in movies, and Modern Standard Arabic, the language of news broadcasts and formal speeches. Agoundis Valley migrants who encounter Berber speakers from other regions also come to see their Tashelhit as but one variety of Berber, and they are far more likely than non-migrants to say that they can understand other dialects. Villagers who haven’t traveled tend to define Tarifit (the dialect spoken in the northern Rif Mountains) as “the language of the north,” for instance, and feel it bears no relation to Tashelhit, while people with more experience moving around Morocco more correctly see Tarifit and Tashelhit as varieties of Tamazight, the general term for Berber, the indigenous language of North Africa.

Travelers bring these understandings with them back to the village on summer vacations or during Ramadan

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**For some Berber migrant workers, speaking Tashelhit has become an act of homecoming.**

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and other holidays. They bring bits of these other languages with them and valuations about what they mean. For some migrants, speaking Tashelhit has become an act of homecoming, an assertion of a local identity in an increasingly de-localized world. Where languages and dialects mix, the meaning of what is said becomes intimately bound to the language in which it is uttered. This process is only beginning in the Agoundis, but it is sure to continue. In the Moroccan south every person I ever met who felt passionately about speaking Berber was a person who had spent time in places where Berber speakers were a minority. Increasing migration thus seems likely to enhance a sort of Berber consciousness, and with it the political potential of the Amazigh, or Berber culture, movement.

## Going to School

In the past, the children of Tagharghist have been educated in the mosque, where they focus on religion and some rudimentary math. The *fqih* (religious instructor) is highly valued by the community. As in other villages in the valley, the government pays him, but residents give the *fqih* a hefty supplement of wool, grain and sundry items. This payment gives the villagers leverage over the *fqih's* responsiveness to the needs of the village children. Still, the villagers do not see religious education by itself as adequately preparing children for life in contemporary Morocco. With immunizations helping more people than ever to survive childhood, and with the government requiring ever more literacy to function as a Moroccan citizen, it is clear to everybody that a more formalized, urban or "modern" style of education is needed. Parents know that there will not be enough land to feed the next generation. To marry and start families of their own, children will have to move to the city. Life in the city requires training unavailable in the mosque.

In 1998, the men of Tagharghist toiled for weeks in the hot sun to hack a flat platform from the mountainside that would be suitable for a government school. Once they'd finished government workers appeared, and up went the schoolhouse, with a toilet (only the second in the village), glass windows, desks, blackboards and a coat of shocking pink paint. The villagers were exuberant. Every child lucky enough to get a government-issue backpack filled with school supplies would not take it off, and for weeks the matriculating class pranced around the village waiting for the first day of school. No rock or wall was safe from the newly acquired chalk, and even I was pressed to do short arithmetic lessons in Tashelhit to mollify students impatiently awaiting the arrival of the teacher.

Finally, she arrived. She was pious, wearing her scarf tight around her chin in the urban style, and monolingual, an Arabic speaker from Casablanca. Her initial attempts to conduct class were hampered because most of the students couldn't understand a thing she said. One

girl who had lived part of her life in Marrakech did some translating, but many children who couldn't comprehend what they were supposed to be doing were beaten. (Corporal punishment is contrary to government policy, but is widely practiced and accepted by many parents as a disciplinary necessity.) The teacher's books—written entirely in Arabic and full of pictures of crosswalks, refrigerators, streetlights and modern ovens—were incomprehensible to rural children. Enthusiasm for school quickly faded, and punishments were administered for absenteeism and tardiness. The teacher too became frustrated, often shortening the school day or calling it off entirely. She was a sophisticated urban woman unused to and unexcited about her primitive and lonely life in the village. Parents couldn't read the written school reports and anxious mothers asked me to explain what the various checks in the various boxes might mean. The teacher asked for a transfer, and the students were released for the summer to await the new rookie teacher.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of school was not restricted to the children who endured it. Despite the schoolteacher's aloofness, local teenaged girls quickly began to wear their scarves in her style. To them the teacher was a woman who had made her own way in the world, the only woman they had ever seen who did not have to haul impossibly heavy loads up and down steep paths, who could buy her own clothes rather than giving money to a man to purchase them at market, who could travel by herself. The teacher was haughty, but men showed her respect. It was hard to parse whether the teenagers wanted to emulate her urbanity or her strident piety, her government position or her lifestyle. But her language was Arabic. The teacher made no attempt to speak Tashelhit and nobody seemed to expect that she should. She told the villagers that her own dialect of Arabic was the closest possible to the language of the Qur'an, and thus very nearly God's language. Tashelhit, she said, was a language scarcely better than the babble of children. To the dismay of at least some of the older women, teenaged girls could soon be heard addressing one another in simple Arabic.

## "Traditional" Education

Many Berber and especially Tashelhit students move through the mosque-based educational system to become religious teachers. All of the teachers in the mosques of the Agoundis Valley speak Tashelhit as their first language, and many are from this or nearby valleys. I never met a teacher in a mosque who thought that children should only know Berber, or that Tashelhit was superior to Moroccan Arabic. But unlike the "modern" schoolteachers, religious teachers didn't have a problem teaching in a bilingual environment.

This became clear to me one evening as I watched the *fqih* finish his lessons. The children had completed their religious studies and some practice doing long division on a small, much abused blackboard. Gathering the boys and

girls around him on a reed mat, the *fqih* waited for the class to fall silent. Very quietly, in colloquial Moroccan Arabic, he asked, “What would you like today?” Evidently the children knew the drill well. The *fqih* needed only to look at a student for her to reply with an imaginary item from a grocery store. If the child gave the name of the item in Tashelhit, the teacher would look to another eager face, and then another, until somebody gave the Arabic name. There were no beatings or raised voices.

Sometimes in a single lesson, the *fqih* was teaching Qur’anic Arabic, Moroccan colloquial Arabic and Tashelhit without degrading any of them. Certainly the “religious literacy” promoted in the mosque schools is locally valued, and this would seem to help the Moroccan government to build a certifiably Muslim citizenry. By contrast, the government’s attempt to provide a more “modern” education in the Berber-speaking mountains appears

destined to generate the very linguistic polarization it seems designed to avoid, one that serves neither the interests of Amazigh cultural activists nor the nationalist interest in creating a linguistically homogeneous citizenry. The *fqih* and the schoolteacher from Casablanca clearly had very different personalities, but the more important difference arose from the fact that the schoolteacher was assigned to the village while the villagers themselves hire the *fqih*. This difference in local control and pedagogical method is too easily perceived locally as a difference between Berbers and Arabs. Significantly, the most radical activists for Berber rights that I met lived in areas that had modern government schools far longer than the Agoundis. These activists often described ill treatment and discrimination in schools as factors that led them to a more politicized Berber consciousness.

## Languages of Corruption

The almost viscerally unpleasant English word “corruption” does not capture the Moroccan way of doing things. At least in the countryside, what we call “bribery” is merely the exchange of gifts for the services of government officials. It does not necessarily have the moral overtones of the English concept. Many decry corruption, but everyone understands it as the *modus operandi*. Villagers only become outraged when the cost of services seems excessive. So what might be called “bribery” elsewhere is here a complicated negotiation for the appropriate price of services rendered. The problem is that in Berber-speaking areas these negotiations often occur across a linguistic divide. The officials are often Arabs, or speakers of Arabic and French. The locals are all Berbers.

However, the way people discuss the linguistic divide is extremely complicated. After a visit by an official who seemed always to demand more than he should, a local man told me, “Only Christians are honest.” He went on to say that all “Arabs” were dishonest. I took “Arabs” to mean Arabic speakers, since the

official who had demanded the bribe spoke only Arabic. But when I pressed the question he said all *Muslims* were dishonest, a peculiar sentiment given that he himself was Muslim. He certainly did not mean that he himself was dishonest! In this context the local man was conflating Muslims and Arabs, and juxtaposing this whole group to Christians, whom he equated with all foreigners. As a monolingual Tashelhit speaker and a devout Muslim, the man considered himself “Arab” in the context of this one exchange. This man was not really making a

point about ethnicity or even language, but was contrasting the actions of foreign development workers who gave money with local officials who took it away.

Given this linguistic confusion, and despite the slippery conceptual categories of “Arab” and “Berber,” some people in the Agoundis clearly asserted that Arabic-speaking officials are generally more corrupt than Tashelhit-speaking officials. If this is true—which is unclear—the reasons surely relate to the fact that Tashelhit speakers are typically lower in the graft hierarchy. They would be able to take less. Tashelhit-speakers are also more likely to live locally and have family in the area. Local connections are no guarantee against opportunism, but the social pressure they exert provides some safeguard. While there is a democratic system for some governmental functions, the officials who have the most power in the high valleys are appointed rather than elected; they answer only to (Arabic-speaking) urbanites. As roads and development extend the reach of the state, more relatively powerful Arabic-speaking officials come into contact with more relatively powerless Berber-speaking citizens. When these officials demand exorbitant gifts, the blame for their greed too easily adheres to their Arab ethnicity rather than their government position or their personal ethical failings.<sup>2</sup>

## Translating for the World Bank

International development agencies also must deal with corruption, but they run into additional layers of linguistic problems. The World Bank—which is funding a series of programs in the Agoundis and other valleys bordering the new Toubkal National Park—is very con-

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cerned that as much Bank money as possible ends up being spent on the projects for which it is intended. To this end, one day in 1999 the Bank sent a representative to Tagharghist to discuss the terms for disbursement of funds. Nearly a dozen Moroccan bureaucrats accompanied the French-speaking representative, representing various government agencies. Most spoke French and all spoke Arabic. None spoke Tashelhit.

When the two 4x4 trucks pulled up the tracks the villagers knew something important was happening. Children were dispatched to call the men from the fields and they streamed in, gathering at the home of the one man in the village who claimed limited fluency in Arabic. Women from several families cooked an impromptu feast of meat, bread and tea, the likes of which local people would only eat once a year, at the 'Id al-Kabir (the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice). The food was not for the villagers, of course, but for the visitors.

The presumed translator and host of the meeting had gained his knowledge of Arabic by listening to the radio and studying the Qur'an. A landed, politically powerful patriarch with no need for cash wages, he had not spent time in the cities. The men who had spent time working among Arabic speakers were, of course, off working. What ensued was tragicomic. French sentences that began, "We require transparent accounting" were rendered into Moroccan Arabic by the coterie of officials, and then into Tashelhit by the host. At the end of the translation chain, these sentences sounded something like "Do you want money?" The answer from the villagers, not surprisingly, was yes. Later, most of the men in attendance told me they had understood nothing of the actual language, only the general idea that they were to receive money for village projects, and they weren't supposed to steal it.

The big and controversial question was whether the villagers wanted the money disbursed directly to them or whether it should be handled by an intermediate government agency. Both the Bank representative and the villagers seemed to believe that the Moroccan agency in question would skim some portion of the funds. Accordingly, the Bank representative seemed to think the villagers foolish when they decided to let this agency deal with the money. He labored to explain the advantages of getting the funds directly, but the villagers held firm. They believed that they would have to pay out a portion of the funds as bribes one way or another. If they got the money directly they would be accountable to the Bank for all the money, including the sums paid out as bribes, and they wanted no such responsibility. From a village perspective, it made far more sense to take what the government agency in question did not skim rather than risk getting in trouble with the Bank, a new and curious entity with uncertain powers.

Language matters here in simple terms of comprehension, but also in the sense that people who can claim comprehension are in a powerful position. The man who

hosted the meeting was not keen to sign for the World Bank money directly. But it is a safe bet that he will have much to say about how to spend whatever money finally filters down—which canals should be improved or whose house gets piped water. The host presented a plausible claim that that he had the linguistic resources necessary to lead the villagers in this crucial interaction with the outside world. The outsiders were, in effect, creating local leaders.

## Wider Ambits

Aided by new communications media, urban Amazigh (Berber) activists have managed to articulate a sense of cultural identity as Imazighen (Berbers), but in the countryside there are no demonstrations or press releases, no Internet discussion groups, magazines or newsletters. In much of the mountains, radio reception is patchy and illiteracy is almost total. But even if rural villagers lack the sort of Berber consciousness one finds in urban or international contexts, there are still shifts in how mountain Berbers see themselves and their world.

Increasingly the social and political ambit of Tashelhit-speaking mountain farmers includes Arabic-speaking schoolteachers and government officials, development agents speaking French, German and English, and a rising tide of multilingual migrant workers. This expanding movement and interaction generates a real cognizance in the mountains that life without electricity, adequate medical care or sanitation facilities is less than wholly adequate. Such changes also foreground a central but long invisible fact about these Moroccan farmers: they're Imazighen. The national language is not their mother tongue. It remains to be seen how these changes in cultural perception "in the middle of nowhere" will play out on the main stage of Moroccan politics. They will surely have a role. ■

*Author's Note: This article is based on research conducted in 1998 and 1999 with funding from the American Institute of Maghrib Studies and the Near and Middle East Program of the Social Science Research Council. Several versions of this article have been posted online since November 2000 at [http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~crawford/berber\\_matters.html](http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~crawford/berber_matters.html). Thanks to Samah Selim and Hillary Haldane who read early drafts and helped improve the text considerably. Thanks also to Abderrahman Ait Ben Oushen, Katherine Hoffman and Latifa Asseffar, who helped make the research possible in the first place.*

## Endnotes

1 By the 2000-2001 school year, the Moroccan government was employing Tashelhit-speaking teachers in the Agoundis Valley. But teacher absenteeism is reported to have increased rather than improved things. In March of 2001, villagers were divided about whether the new Tashelhit-speaking teachers were better or worse than the Arabic speakers who came before them.

2 It should be noted that the number of officials locally considered "corrupt" in the Agoundis Valley has markedly declined between 1998 and 2001.