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Cynthia J. Becker’s, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity*, uses Berber arts—weaving, tattooing, decorative arts and song and dance associated with fertility rites—as a lens through which to understand the evolving relationship between gender and Amazigh ethnic identity in post-colonial Morocco. *Amazigh Arts in Morocco* is based on two years of extensive and detailed ethnographic research among the Berber Ait Khabbash tribe centered in the Tafiltalt Oasis of southeastern Morocco.

The book is composed of an introduction and seven chapters dealing with various aspects of Ait Khabbash art and culture and an appendix, which includes transcribed songs associated with Ait Khabbash wedding rituals; Becker provides transliteration of the lyrics and their translations from Tamazight to English. The book contains a number of color as well as black and white photographs of wedding rituals, samples of clothing and weaving and tattooing taken by the author herself. She also includes photographs taken between 1930 and 1950 of Ait Khabbash and other Moroccan Berber tribes, which she located in French colonial archives. Finally, Becker draws on extremely limited secondary source materials in order to discuss and analyze the relationship between gender, ethnicity and tribal arts in North Africa. The paucity of literature on the Ait Khabbash is paralleled by the relative geographic isolation of the Tafiltalt Oasis and the difficulty in reaching it—a ten-hour bus drive on “thin winding roads” as Becker explains (p.9).

Becker’s goals in writing the book are threefold. First, she seeks to challenge the notion—most famously (in the case of North Africa) elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu—that strict gendered divisions of public and private domains define North African Berber societies. Rather than the passive and subservient female roles implied by rigid public/private dichotomy, Becker seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the “generative power of women is metaphorically extended to the creation of artistic symbols of ethnic identity.” (p.4) She argues that it is through “control over the visual symbols of Berber ethnic identity” that women garner “power and prestige.” (p.1) Second, unlike previous studies dealing with Berber arts, Becker takes an inter-disciplinary approach to her investigation of the relationship of gender, ethnic identity and artistic production in order to situate “art forms such as textiles and jewelry within a dynamic cultural context, considering how they interact with verbal and performing arts.” (p. 6) Indeed, Becker asserts the historicity of her study of Berber art and the role of women in its production by examining its evolution over time. This constitutes the third stated goal of Becker’s book. The author distinguishes her study by emphasizing the changing...
nature of Berber artistic production in the twentieth century. To this end, she highlights the impact of French colonial policy, independence from France and the forging of a Moroccan Arabo-Islamic national identity, and most recently, the advent of a trans-national Amazigh cultural and political ‘awakening’, which asserts an ethnically defined cultural heritage and advocates for the rights of Berber peoples across North Africa. Becker also explains that sedentarization and intermingling with Arab tribes have also affected the roles of women in Ait Khabbash society. Finally, she points to the effects of socio-economic transformations such as female education, the rise of wage labor among the Ait Khabbash, and other developments associated with the extension of the nation-state’s administrative power throughout Moroccan society.

Amazigh Arts in Morocco is highly ambitious in its scope and intent. This is evinced by the publisher’s classification of the book as simultaneously ‘Middle Eastern/Islamic Studies, Art History, Women’s Studies and Anthropology’. The inter-disciplinary nature of the work is both its strength and weakness. Becker’s effort to view the relationship between gender and ethnicity within an historical framework moves her discussion of Amazigh arts beyond strict study of objects toward a broader cultural history of Moroccan society in the 20th century. Amazigh Arts contains invaluable ethnographic documentation of Ait Khabbash songs, forms of dance (known as ahidous) and textile and carpet production processes and draws on inter-generational discussions with Ait Khabbash women in order to interpret their meaning and symbolic value. Furthermore, Becker examines the ways in which contemporary Moroccan artists working in diverse media are now in the process of creating a new self-reflexive Moroccan artistic tradition that actively recognizes its Amazigh roots. This new artistic canon draws on symbols and iconography associated with Amazigh decorative arts Becker examines in the previous chapters of the book.

Yet while the author seeks to nuance our understanding of women’s role in Ait Khabbash society, Amazigh Arts spreads itself too thinly across the disciplinary divide leaving the reader wanting for deeper theoretical elaboration in the fields the book seeks to straddle. As a result, at times, the book inadvertently falls back on other rigid dichotomies associated with colonial knowledge about North African societies; namely, the division between Arabs and Berbers and between heterodox/rural and urban/orthodox Islam. One glaring example of this appears in Becker’s effort to explain the decline of tattooing among Ait Khabbash women. She argues: “In past generations, Arabs and Imazighen living in rural areas (not living near centers of religious education) were often unaware of the Hadith that rejected tattooing.” On the basis of an interview with an octogenarian Ait Khabbash man, Becker locates the reason for this in the fact that “in general, nomadic groups like the Ait Khabbash rarely had access to formal religious training.” This situation changed with sedentarization, which she explains earlier in the book, occurred in the 19th century. Becker adds that “by the 1970s “the Ait Khabbash had abandoned the practice “as a result of increased exposure to Islamic teachings and social pressure from Arabs.” (p.17) Becker tells us that in the past, “Arabs” were also unaware of the injunction against tattooing. Yet why and how do they then become the enforcers of this injunction? One is left to conclude that Arabs now lord it over Berbers, when once they had been equals. The sentiment suggests victimization.