Amazighité and secularism: Rethinking religious-secular divisions in the Amazigh political imagination

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Abstract
Within a predominantly Muslim society, the Amazigh movement for cultural and linguistic rights for the Indigenous people of North Africa has a strong secular tendency, and activists often present secularism as an important value in Amazigh culture. In a context where Islamization is linked to a post-independence process of Arabization, emphasizing a particular concept of secularism functions as a political performance to resist Arab-Islamic ideology. By doing so, activists draw on Indigenous values and philosophical frameworks of modernity to develop a locally specific Amazigh concept of secularism. This project seeks to explicate the philosophy of this discourse and its sociopolitical context. An interrogation of the ideologies and expressions of an Amazigh secularism brings a new perspective to the concept of the ‘secular’ in a global context.

Keywords: Amazigh; secularism; religion; Morocco
Introduction

Allah, al-Watan, al-Malik – God, Nation, King: these Arabic words are the official motto of the Kingdom of Morocco, encapsulating the Arab-Islamic ideology of the state. In contrast, Indigenous Amazigh activists have asserted their own, unofficial motto: Akal, Awal, Afgan, meaning, “Land, Language, People.”\(^1\) Not only is there no religious reference in the Amazigh motto, but the word “Akal” (land) is the root of an Amazigh word for secularism, takalant. Even the Amazigh language itself, Tamazight, is commonly associated with pagan, nearly anti-Islamic sentiments by the dominant Arab-Islamic sphere (Errihani, 2007). These opposing sayings and their importance in Moroccan nationalist vs. Amazigh activist discourse in Morocco point to a striking difference in the secular-religious ideologies of these communities, despite that both are predominantly Muslim.

The aim of this project is to examine the political dynamics of the Amazigh movement with regard to conceptions of the religious and the secular, focusing on activists in Morocco. What does “secularism” mean to Amazigh activists and why is it so integral to the movement, becoming an essential aspect of Amazighité?\(^2\) In what ways did this secularism originate and what is its relationship to Amazigh forms of religious belief? How has secularism been used as a means of spiritual decolonization and resistance in the context of imposed Arab-Islamic ideology?

I begin by relating Amazigh experience to the field of secular studies and in the politico-religious setting of Moroccan Islamism by considering the discourse of an influential figure, Abdessalam Yassine. Next, I analyze past and present uses of secularism by Amazigh activists, as well as the ways that ‘secularism’ is expressed as a political strategy. Finally, I return to locate an Amazigh secularism within a theoretical framework of the idea of secularism as a strategy of decolonization.

Secular studies and the Amazigh experience

Imazighen are the Indigenous people of a region called Tamazgha, which encompasses the entirety of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Western Sahara, Azawad,\(^3\) the Canary Islands, and

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\(^1\) This is a common saying by Amazigh activists in particular, and is also frequently represented by holding up three fingers in pictures.

\(^2\) Amazighité refers to the collective consciousness of Amazigh being, and translates roughly to “Amazigh-ness” in English.

\(^3\) Azawad is a disputed region that declared independence from Mali in April 2012 after a military struggle led by the National Movement for the Independence of Azawad (NMLA).
large parts of Mauritania, Niger, and Egypt. The Imazighen were already fully established in this region by 1000 B.C.E. and since that time have experienced successive colonizations, including by the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, and Western Europeans (Almasude, 1999). Prior to the Arab invasions of the 7th century C.E., there was great religious diversity in Tamazgha with significant Christian and Jewish populations in addition to Indigenous spiritual beliefs. Indigenous ‘pre-Islamic’ beliefs are now largely unknown, although heterodox forms of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are influenced by Indigenous traditions of religious belief.99% of the Moroccan population is identified as Muslim with 1% identifying as Christian and a population of 6,000 Jews (CIA World Factbook, 2013).

The Amazigh Movement is loosely composed of Amazigh organizations and independent activists within Tamazgha and in the Amazigh diaspora, which is primarily located in Western Europe in countries such as France, Spain, and Netherlands. These political activists seek to promote Amazigh culture and defend human and linguistic rights for Imazighen, resisting the Arab-Islamic ideology that is linked with both state structures and civil institutions in North Africa, including Morocco. Classically, including in academic parlance, Tamazgha has been defined as a part of the ‘Arab world’ or ‘MENA region’ (Middle East and North Africa) and Amazigh presence, culture, and language are ignored or actively silenced in this discourse. Arab-Islamic ideology is arguably the most dominant oppressive force in the post-independence North African state, and it is in that context that Amazigh activists must negotiate in order to access loci of political power.

The delineation between Arab and Amazigh identities is far from straightforward: largely, one is Amazigh simply by identifying as such. While the Moroccan population is nearly entirely of Amazigh origin (Gómez-Casado et al., 2000), historically self-identification has been linked to linguistic affiliation, i.e. whether one speaks Tamazight or Darija (a North African ‘creole’ language of Arabic, Tamazight, French, and Spanish) as one’s mother tongue. The loss of Tamazgha through urbanization and school Arabization policies has meant that over time more Moroccans identify as ‘Arab’ despite that their parents or grandparents were Tamazight speakers. From an Amazigh activist position, all of Tamazgha is of Amazigh heritage including those who identify as ‘Arab.’ The colonization of Tamazgha is not physically imposed by an outside ‘Arab’ population, as in settler colonialism, but is a distinct form of colonization enacted by a ‘post-colonial’ state and maintained by an Arab-Islamic ideology internalized by a historically elite sector.

What does it mean that the Amazigh movement is “secular”? It is not an explicitly secularist movement, rather it does not have a central Islamic character and in fact presents a serious challenge to the current Islamist political sphere. Amazigh cultural values stand in

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4 I use the term ‘Tamazgha’ because it specifies the Amazigh nation across North Africa and is prominent in activist discourse.

5 The best examples of these are the Barghawatas, Donatists, and Amazigh Jewish festivals.
opposition to a hegemonic Islamic fundamentalism, meaning that those values must be displaced in order to advance Arab-Islamic ideology. Amazigh activism reinforces those cultural values, thus opposing Islamization and serving as a decolonial strategy in both cultural and spiritual spheres.

Pluralism is an essential aspect of the Amazigh discourse on secularism, perhaps because Amazighitë requires recognition of the totality of the Amazigh experience, including Indigenous beliefs, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and atheism. By developing an Amazigh political consciousness one becomes a pluralist by accepting this diversity. However, for other activists, the Amazigh political cause carries with it a rejection of Islam as a colonial imposition and as the primary driver of Amazigh cultural destruction. These dynamics play out in a context where Amazigh activists must negotiate ideals of particularism vs. universalism, and cautiously confront religious ideology in an Islamic society. Amazighitë is simultaneously presented as a local identity, as a political movement, and as the ethos of a cultural group interested in making their contribution to a globalized world.

Ethnolinguistic and religious identities nuance the political dynamics of secularism in a North African context, where Arabic is asserted as the ‘language of God’ and superior to the Indigenous Tamazight. Imazighen are thus prevented from maintaining their own language and customs due to the linked processes of Arabization and Islamization, a setting in which Amazigh culture is perceived to be inimical to the proper practice of Islam. Such a politicization of religious identities and practices is not a new phenomenon and is repeatedly demonstrated in the context of colonization and other forms of oppression. In the case of the Amazigh movement, the concept of secularism plays a particular political role in the resistance of Indigenous activists to confront Arab-Islamic ideology and the displacement of cultural values through Islamization. This development is intriguing: as a marginalized group, Amazigh activists must balance the preservation of tradition and culture while locating themselves within an unavoidable modernity. They accomplish this through the discourse of secularism, by drawing on local histories and values to develop a culturally specific concept of secularism, and then linking that to a universal notion of the ‘secular’ within a Western modernity.

Recent work in secular studies, such as that of Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (2008), questions the Western genealogical approach to the secularization narrative and development of the idea of the ‘secular’, saying that it assumes that people who “take up secularism” are joining in a universal ideal of what the ‘secular’ entails (p. 14). This silences the alternative conceptions or practices of secularism by looking instead for the ‘difference’ from a European-derived ideal. In writing about non-Western secularism, José Casanova attempts to avoid centering on a Euro-Christian secularism, but maintains that “‘the secular’ emerges first as a particular Western Christian teleological category, while its modern antonym, ‘the religious’ is a product of Western secular modernity” (2011, pp. 54-74). Amazigh presentations of secularism do not necessarily confront Western categories of secularism or reject the possibility of a universal framework category of secularism, but they do make their own contribution to a globalizing construct. In doing so, Amazigh experience also provides a decolonial framework to
religion-secular interactions by asserting a cultural claim to secularism in order to oppose Arabization. In this context, secularism as an assertion of a certain orientation to religion and spirituality has the power to assert an Indigenous identity, forcing Amazigh philosophies into a public sphere.

**Becoming Arab, becoming Muslim: Secularism and modernity**

Abdessalam Yassine, the founder of the Justice and Spirituality Movement, is a key figure in the Islamist opposition to the Moroccan regime (Zeghal, 2009). His critical letters to King Hassan II used Islam as a protective framework, thus allowing him substantial freedom in expressing dissent. He related himself to Hassan II – by claiming a similar ‘sainthood’ due to their piety and supposed genealogical descent from the Prophet Mohammed – and presents his critique through an Islamic call to repent and draw closer to God. Yassine used his legitimacy as a claimed Idrissid descendant of the Prophet Mohammed to question the legitimacy of the Moroccan regime and their claim to divine rule. Yassine opposes what he calls “the secular dictatorial regimes” (The School of Imam Abdessalam Yassine), and during Hassan II’s reign was fairly successful with this approach (Zeghal, 2009, p. 98).

The centrality of sainthood to Yassine’s conception of Islamism makes his movement more attractive to many Moroccans, especially Imazighen for whom Maraboutism and sainthood hold a particular significance. Islam provides a specific and well-established framework for resisting both a perceived Western hegemony and the oppression of the Moroccan regime. Yassine’s own humble beginnings as a poor Amazigh child increase his ability to spread an Islamist message among Imazighen, while his status demonstrates the rewards of a life dedicated to God. On the other hand, the privileged position with which Yassine holds Arabic – as the language of God – is alienating to the secularism of Amazigh activists, those who value cultural preservation over the language linked to a colonial religion. The Amazigh movement opposes Yassine’s, both for bringing Islam into the public political sphere and for holding Arabic in higher esteem than Tamazight.

Islamization and Arabization are difficult to distinguish in Moroccan politico-religious sphere(s). Yassine’s Islamism, for example, incorporates elements of ‘Amazigh Islam,’ practices and traditions such as sainthood that have a historic basis in the region, as compared to dominant Islamist trends imported from Arab countries. Yet, Amazigh cultural revival is still seen as an obstacle to the establishment of a proper Islamic state; “for [the Islamists], Tamazight is a pagan language, indeed not even a language but simply a cluster of closely related dialects with no standard form, no grammar, no literature, and no functional or symbolic value” (Errihani, 2007, p. 252).

Yassine and others who propagate Islamization claim that speaking the ‘language of God’ is necessary for proper Islamic practice. A Western language, such as French, may be excusable because of its necessity in the global sphere, but Tamazight is considered both useless and secular, even profane, “represent[ing] a pagan past that the Imazighen should dissociate
themselves from if they are to be true Muslims” (p. 253). In order to become a better Muslim, or even to achieve sainthood, one must transcend one’s ‘pagan’ heritage – represented by Tamazight – and embrace the ‘language of God,’ following Yassine’s example. He writes that, “he who disbelieves in the Arabic tongue also disbelieves in God. The Arabic tongue is God-chosen in the same way the prophets are chosen” (Aksikas, 2009, 97).

In Yassine’s Dialogue with an Amazigh Friend, he “urges the Imazighen to abandon their interest in the Amazigh language and popular culture” and considers their linguistic activism secular in itself (El Ednani, 2007, p. 49). Another Islamist leader of the movement, al-Badil al-Hadari (Civilizational Alternative), has the idea of creating “an Islamist-Amazigh alliance to confront the pro-Western Amazigh movement.” He backs up Yassine’s assertion that to be Amazigh is a ‘selfish earthly and worldly’ identity (Aksikas, 2009, p. 121). That al-Hadari automatically considers the Amazigh movement ‘pro-Western’ due to its secular nature is intriguing: the relationships between ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities have highly political connotations in the North African context and in relation to global power structures. Yassine and the Amazigh movement present opposing reactions to an encroaching - and forced - Western modernity that carries a secular component.

Samir Ben-Layashi writes that for Mohammed Chafik, a prominent Amazigh leader and linguist, “the key to modernity is the Berber identity, based on language and culture — Amazighitée.” Quoting Chafik on the issue:

The entrance into modernity depends on the answer to the question: who are we? There is no entrance into modernism without justice and without equality between people, without resolving conflicts within our society, conflicts which are related to the question of our origin and our ego as individual and as a collective. (Chafik, 2005b, p. 5)

Chafik’s emphasis on modernity includes secularism as a necessary aspect of a just society, one which can only be brought to Morocco through reviving Amazigh culture. He implies that modernity and secularism are not values that must be imported from the West, but rather principles of Amazighitée. The path forward is located within Amazigh society: our origin, our systems of justice, our philosophy. Subtly, this also sends the message that Arab-Islamic ideology is a backwards force, incapable of leading Tamazgha to modernity.

The conflict between Yassine’s Islamist and Chafik’s secular opposition to the Moroccan regime is based in the difference between their perspectives of colonization and resistance. Yassine, focusing on the history of French colonization, writes in Islamiser la Modernité that French was a “language forced upon [him]” due to the “fight over universality” (Aksikas, 2009, p. 102). Similarly (though this is not Yassine’s view), Arabic is a language forced upon

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6 Indeed, the Caliph ‘Umar is said to have called Ifriqiya “the ‘gateway to hell’” demonstrating a particular historical association of Tamazgha with unbelief (Savage, 1997, p. 1).
Imazighen and Amazigh activists, focused on the destruction of Indigenous culture through Arab-Islamic ideology, and resisted through asserting secularism. Yassine claims to write to spread, “a spiritual message to a modern man sick in his modernity” (p. 102). His approach is not to fight modernity to destroy it, but rather to Islamize it. Amazigh activism has much the same goal: to create an Amazigh modernity complete with a language on equal footing with Arabic or French and to develop a particular Amazigh secularism, just as France has its laïcité in a particular sociopolitical context. In the Berber Manifesto, which was signed by hundreds of Amazigh activists, Chafik writes, “We believe in the advent of a universal civilization which is capable of integrating all the contributions of mankind” (2000). Here, Imazighen are presented as equal to all other peoples in the world, as contributing their diversity, and with a place in this universality.

Amazighité is a threat to the ‘language of God,’ as evidenced by the “repeated apostasy” of Amazigh activists (Errihani, 2007, p. 252), by shirking Islamic identity and by their desire to promote Tamazight as a language equal to Arabic. Yassine argued that a rejection of Arabic and push to raise the status of Tamazight was a heretical insult to Islam; yet, Amazigh activist leader Mohammed Chafik’s response to Yassine pointedly promoted secularism using Qur’anic verses as a foundation (Maddy-Weitzman, 2011). Tamazight is itself considered un-Islamic, meaning that it must remain subordinate to Arabic. The high position of Arabic in Islamic religious practice entails that its role in society cannot be limited without also finding a division between religious and public spheres. Limiting religion to private spheres, in mosques and personal religious practice, would permit the strengthening of Amazigh culture. This, in other words, is a form of secularism and is the primary conflict between Yassine’s Islamism and Chafik’s Amazigh secularism.

The Islamist notion that Amazighité is an affront to Islam is confirmed by the secular ethos of the Amazigh movement, which recognizes the multifaceted religious and ethnic heritage of the Amazigh people and rejects the drive for further Islamization. This view is rejected by both Moroccan nationalists and Islamists, who do not make up discrete categories. Thus, I argue that Amazigh cultural values regarding religious doctrine and practice, as well as activist ideals of secularism in Amazigh communities, are fundamentally opposed to the Islamist political sphere. By asserting such values over a consuming Islamic identity, Amazigh activists have created a spiritual decolonization through looking at one’s own history of religious-secular interactions while simultaneously linking these local traditions to universal ideas in order to gain traction within a globalized modernity.

**Takalant: Amazigh secularisms**

My purpose here is to trace secularist-religious discourse among Imazighen and to explicate the various ways in which Amazigh resistance conceives of religious-secular dynamics in relation to
colonization, beginning with Abd El-Karim’s resistance to Spanish colonialism. Mohammed bin Abd El-Karim El-Khattabi came from a large and influential Aït of the Amazigh Rif region, now northern Morocco. In the 1910s he began arguing that the Rif should have a government of its own, “to be treated on an equal footing with Spain” (Symes, 2006, p. 3). Uniting the Rifian Aïts, Abd El-Karim organized guerrilla forces to resist Spanish colonialism (Pennell, 1986). The Republic of the Rif, established in 1921, was the first African state to gain independence after a process of colonialism and continues to play an important role in Rifian activism, with protesters still waving the flag of the Republic as a political statement (Associated Press, 2012).

In this resistance, religious rhetoric of ‘jihad’ was used as a means of propaganda to rally and unite people to fight against the Spanish, with posters proclaiming:

There is no God but God…Through God’s will we have declared war on the Christian Spaniard, and have thrown him out of our beloved land, blessed by the Prophet…to that end Jihad has been called throughout the Rif. You must not make war, sons of Mohamed, like bandits. We must go to battle in an orderly fashion, beneath a flag….We must make war as the Prophet commanded. Kill the enemy under arms, leave the old, the irresponsible, the children, the women. God gives you the right to booty and the enslavement of the defeated, but obliges you to forswear useless cruelty. (Pennell, 1986, p. 97)

These records demonstrate the way that Islam was used to religiously justify the war and set forth rules for conduct, but whether doing so was strategic propaganda or part of the ethos of the resistance movement is unknown. In later statements, Abd El-Karim called the idea of a “holy war” outdated and of the “Middle Ages,” saying that, “quite simply, we wish to be independent and to be governed by God” (Pennell, 1986, p. 125). The role that Islam would have played in the Republic’s new government is unclear, and this propaganda could simply demonstrate the rebels’ rejection of the Christian ideology of the Spanish invaders. In Abd El-Karim’s example, we find two themes that are maintained in the dynamics of the modern Amazigh movement. First, Abd El-Karim’s insistence on establishing a state to be treated on an equal level with Spain asserts the Amazigh place within the modern system of nation-states. Second, whether in arguing for rebellion (as Abd El-Karim may have) or for secularism, using Qur’anic justifications to appeal to a predominantly Muslim population has a tradition as a strategic component to political change.

Today, the influence of French colonialism still affects social and religious dynamics in Tamazgha. The French politque berbère involved, in part, a system of classifications to determine the religious, linguistic, and political characteristics of the ‘natives’ (Hoffmann, 2008). In contradiction to the common myth that French colonialism directly supported Amazigh nationalism, Katherine Hoffman suggests that French rule, “increased the prestige of using

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7 “Aït” can be roughly translated as “tribe.”
classical Arabic outside of religious domains” (p. 725), supporting a shift to use Arabic as a lingua franca rather than Tamazight. This took place because colonial officials and settlers were more comfortable and able to use Arabic than the Indigenous Tamazight language. Bringing Arabic into the public sphere, where it was previously confined to religious spheres — the mosques and limited Islamic education — became a prerequisite of the post-independence Arabization process.

The idea that Arabization and Islamization are linked in Morocco was reinforced by the approach of French colonial officials like Robert de Caix, who said that, “Arabiser, c’est Islamiser” or “to Arabize is to Islamize” (Hoffman, 2008, p. 734). Yet Islam existed and spread within North Africa since the 7th century C.E. and from that time to the beginning of the twentieth century Tamazight still remained the lingua franca in Tamazgha. As Hoffman argued, French policy unintentionally furthered Arabization by (1) promoting a linguistic shift to Arabic and (2) inspiring a pan-Arabist, nationalist movement to rise up against French imperialism. This latter movement revered “the twin pillars of Arabic language and Islamic religion as the foundation of Moroccan resistance,” disdained Amazigh languages and religious practices, and portrayed Imazighen as “French collaborators,” an accusation which remains common today (pp. 748-749). In actuality, Imazighen

were at the forefront of anti-colonial resistance both in mid-nineteenth century Kabylia and in southeastern Morocco during the so-called ‘wars of pacification’ of the 1920s and 1930s. Kabylia was likewise the center of the nationalist movement and was the hardest hit by the French war effort, famously suffering from the latter’s ‘scorched earth policy.’ In general, Kabyle revolutionary leaders advocated for an Algérie algérienne, a multi-ethnic and secular nation-state; however, they were subsequently marginalized (if not exiled or assassinated) from a nationalist movement that came to be monopolized by the National Liberation Front (FLN) party with an ideology of Arab nationalism and Islamic unity. (Silverstein, 2007, p. 109)

Upon independence, the Kabyle call for a secular-pluralism to be the foundation of the new state was subordinated to the dominant Arab-Islamic platform of the party that ultimately came to power. The new Algerian constitution declared Algeria an ‘Arabo-Muslim country’, putting the Amazigh push for a secular state in opposition to the Arab-Islamic ideology that the country eventually took on. The Amazigh call for a secular state resulted from opposition to this Arab-Islamic ideology and in favor of a locally specific secular modernity, and not from a ‘collaboration’ with French colonialists.

Both Hoffman and Paul Silverstein (2007) note that many colonial officials romantically imagined that Imazighen had greater potential to assimilate to French standards than other African subjects, even creating mythologies that they were of European and Christian ancestry. Quoting one French official:
Beneath the Muslim peel, one finds a Christian seed. We recognize now that the Kabyle people, partly autochthonous, partly German in origin, previously entirely Christian, did not completely transform itself with its new religion…it is not only with his facial tattoos that he displays before us, unbeknownst to him, the symbol of the Cross. (Silverstein, 2007, p. 108)

The facial tattoos described refer to the common 't' or 'cross' which is traditionally tattooed between the eyebrows of Imazighen women. Whether this has any relationship to the symbolic cross of Christianity remains disputed, but it is clear that regardless of how Imazighen may interpret the meanings behind women’s tattoos, French colonizers imposed their own meanings as part of a larger mission intégratice (Amiras, 2009). The same traditional tattoos were later cast as ‘haram’ by religious leaders in post-independence Tamazgha, another ‘proof’ that Amazigh culture was seen as antagonistic to Islam. This current condemnation of traditional tattooing represents the loss of Amazigh culture through Islamization, in particular the arrival of more rigid Islamic interpretations.

Mohamed Chafik exemplifies one ‘type’ of Amazigh secularism that emphasizes some delineation between private and public spheres, but also fully accepts religion, including Islam, as an important part of Amazigh identity. Although a secularist, Chafik uses Islam as a way to argue for the separation of spheres, writing that “the definition of ‘secularism’ is wrapped in the Qur’anic text, ‘la-Iqraha fi-al-din’ (‘there is no coercion in the religion’)… We speak here of freedom of religion and freedom from religion. According to this verse, religion and religious faith are a personal matter” (Ben-Layashi, 2007, pp. 3-4). Chafik recognizes that Islamic religion currently plays a strong role in Amazigh societies and does not claim to seek the elimination the presence of Islam from the public sphere. He even writes to Yassine, “I do not agree with those who seek to limit your role in officiating prayers and burying the deads [sic]…I want you to deal with politics but you have to change your way” (Chafik, 2000). Although Ben Layashi considered this to be a vague statement, it seems very clear to me. Chafik finds the Islamist approach – coercion, glorification of Arabic as the language of God, dismissal of syncretic Amazigh religious beliefs, arrogance toward monolingual Tamazight speakers – to be problematic, and thus they must “change their ways.” Only by taking another path, one that accepts the Indigenous Amazigh past and present of North Africa, can one argue for the presence of Islam in state politics.

Chafik, like many other Amazigh secularists, is also proud of historical Imazighen who adhered to a variety of religious beliefs, among them Massinissa, Jugurtha, Kahina, St. Augustine, Tariq Ibn Ziyad, and Ibn Tumart (Ben-Layashi, 2007, p. 163). This shows a typical sort of Amazigh pluralism, which accepts pagan, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic beliefs as legitimate and even essential aspects of the Amazigh past and present. The Islamists, in contrast, reject some of these figures as part of a barbaric, pre- or anti-Islamic past which must be denied in order to show complete submission to God.
Ahmed Adghirni, Secretary-General of the now-defunct Moroccan Amazigh Democratic Party (PDAM), advances a similar platform as Chafik, referencing Islam as the justification for a secular-pluralism:

Today there is a new program. First of all, we are a new kind of Muslim, with pluralist principles. The others are sick with the disease of a so-called unity that dissolves everybody. They must not unite people through compulsion. Islam forbids this. The Koran says: "We made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know." Indeed, the most honorable in Allah’s eyes is the one who is most righteous. (2008)

It is important to note that Adghirni identifies as “a new kind of Muslim, with pluralist principles.” Although another, Arab-identified, individual accuses the PDAM of being a “secular” party “loyal to foreign elements,” in the same interview, it is clear that Adghirni does not reject Islam and even reprimands his interlocutors for their lack of “respect for Islam.” He goes on to reproach Arabists, saying: “You exploit the Islamic faith, the qibla, and the holy sites to spread your racist ideology. We promote a new ideology. It is difficult for the fossilized pan-Arabs to understand what religious tolerance means. It is difficult for them to understand what ethnic diversity means” (2008). Adghirni is able to present his religious politics as the true Islam, referencing the Qur’an to support his pluralistic ideals and denouncing the way that Arabists manipulate the religion to support their own politics of domination. Similarly, Amazigh militant and philosopher Ahmed Assid spoke out about the importance of secularism in the aftermath of popular North African revolutions, saying that it is necessary because of the rise to power by Islamist movements in many North African countries and thus “secularism must rise now as a solution for the future” (Assid, 2012). He positions secularism as an alternative to Islamism, an approach to entering modernity that has a basis in the history and culture of the Indigenous people of the region.

Chafik and Adghirni both represent a challenge to the European binary of the secular and the religious. They explicitly use Islam and their own religious interpretations to support their secularisms and argue for religious pluralism. Sudanese legal scholar Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im (2008) uses a similar approach, unequivocally making his case for a secular state from an Islamic perspective and as a Muslim. Just as dominant ideas of secularism are said to have arisen out of a specific genealogy, these individuals use their own – notably African and Islamic – histories and backgrounds to justify their secularisms.

The philosophy of pluralistic secularism so integral to the Amazigh movement does not capture the perspective of another set of activists, who take a more radical position and, as a decolonial strategy, reject religion entirely. Their secularism is directly intended to minimize or eliminate the role of Islam in society. To understand this radicalization of Amazigh militants, we must consider the psychological impact of education for Amazigh children under Arabization policies. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) described the alienation and schism that developed within himself when he began to attend school and his native language, Gĩkũyũ, was strictly banned. He
was beaten for speaking his mother tongue, and the only way to succeed was to succeed in English, which was seen as “more than a language” (p. 11). This alienation is a part of the radicalization process for many militants. Activist singer Lounes Matoub experienced Arabization in much the same way after Algerian “independence” when state Arabization policies were imposed. He wrote that when he was told to speak Arabic instead of French and his native Taqbaylit, “I said no! I played hooky in all my Arabic classes. Every class that I missed was an act of resistance, a slice of liberty conquered. My rejection was voluntary and purposeful. That language was never able to penetrate me. To this day, I know nothing or almost nothing of Arabic” (1995). To Matoub, religion and the character of Arabic as a religious language is a confining phenomenon that is incompatible with the expression of Amazigh identity and demanded the rejection of one’s ancestors and mother tongue.

Similarly, many other activists have publicly and privately described the experience of being shamed for speaking their language and being beaten when a teacher overheard. This experience is commonplace across Tamazgha as well as the entire African continent, where the use of colonial and Indigenous languages is highly politicized. For these Imazighen, success could only come by rejecting one’s family and upbringing, to replace Tamazight with Arabic along with that the ‘proper’ practice of Islam and the memorization of the Qur’an. This is a rejection of the Arab mission civilisatrice (civilizing mission, as we have seen in other examples of colonialism) aimed at assimilating the barbaric ‘Berbers’ into a larger, and more prestigious, Arab/Islamic world.

This severe repression and psychological trauma encouraged a process of radicalization for future militants, eliminating the possibility for a moderate view of the role of religion in state processes. It has also, in the Amazigh case, forced people to use French or another European language as a lingua franca in order to avoid Arabic and its religious associations. To oppose Arab-Islamic ideology, far more prominent in Tamazgha today than the history of European colonialism, radicalized activists turn to European languages and secularism, which is seen as both a part of Amazighité as well as the free, modern West. Lounes Matoub even praised the “White Fathers,” French missionaries whose “teachings were secular,” a deliberate slap in the face to the Algerian regime considering their long and brutal war for independence from France (1995).

Matoub (1995) goes on to say that “This language [Taqbaylit], transmitted through my mother, is my soul. Thanks to her, I have made myself, I have dreamed listening to songs and stories.” Despite his avowed atheism, Matoub attributes a spiritual or mystical status to his mother tongue, calling it his “soul.” This is distinctly reminiscent of pre-Islamic Amazigh pagan beliefs, in which the ‘earth’ is given reverence: the mountains, sun, astrological formations, and the Tamazight language itself. Imazighen are not separate from this spiritual world as subjects of an external God, but exist within a natural world that is given spiritual signification. Matoub locates a return to that philosophy by tracing his soul not as endowed by God but given to him by his mother, the carrier of life who continues to hold a sacred role in Amazigh culture. The nature
of that soul is also not from God, but rather constituted by the ‘earthly’ and ‘pagan’ language of Imazighen.

The impact of Arab-Islamic dominance on internal perceptions of Tamazight in relation to religious belief is demonstrated in one story:

One Amazigh high school student told how God sent the angel Gabriel to distribute languages on earth. As he was flying home, an Amazigh saw him and reminded him, "We haven't received any language yet." Gabriel apologized and explained that he had finished all the languages he had brought from heaven, but would try to look for one. The Imazighen waited and waited, but he never came back. Finally, they tried to make some words, but they could not understand each other. The boy concluded, "I don't think they speak [a language].” (Almasude, 1999)

This account demonstrates how religious tellings place Imazighen and their language as inferior, and exceptionalize Imazighen as unique among all peoples in that they do not even possess a language. In the story, the angel Gabriel (Jibril) forgot about the Imazighen and their lack of a language and did not have any language to give them. God, although not mentioned directly, did not send a language to the Amazigh people, meaning that although every other language is divinely given, Tamazight is of the earth and humanity and has no relation with God. This corresponds with the root ‘akal’ (land) of ‘takalant’ (secularism) in the Amazigh language. Imazighen, forgotten by God, have only their language and land. The assertion that Tamazight should have equal status with other languages, and in fact even treated as a language rather than an inferior ‘dialect,’ serves as a decolonial rejection of current hierarchies and understandings of Tamazight.

For those like Matoub, secularism means far more than a divide between religion and state to allow for traditional Amazigh pluralism: it is an ideology that can be used as a tool to overthrow Arab-Islamic hegemony in North Africa and restore Amazigh cultural and linguistic pride. Their disenchantment with oppressive forms of religion leads to the belief that freedom from religion is one of the keys to liberation from Arab nationalism. This philosophy is another expression of a larger idea of Amazigh secularism and is an even stronger example of the use of secularism to confront Arabization by opposing Islam as a source of cultural disenfranchisement.

**Expressions of secularism**

Just as there is variation in the philosophies of Amazigh secularism, there are wide-ranging and intriguing expressions of these ideas, often taking the form of rejecting Islam, embracing a religiously pluralistic history, and/or highlighting Amazigh ways of practicing Islam. In this section I show the relationship of activist philosophies regarding secularism to practiced manifestations of that secularism.
Alcohol functions as a symbol of the Amazigh rejection of Islamic fundamentalism, if not Islam itself. Paul Silverstein (2007) noted that many Amazigh militants met in bars, with one activist saying “We are no longer ‘Berberists,’ we are ‘Beerberists’” (p. 115), demonstrating the acceptability and even the importance of alcohol as a part of the Amazigh activist tradition. This is representative of the historically variable and tolerant “version” of Islam that is practiced in much of North Africa, particularly in rural Amazigh society. The association of Arabization and Islamization means that in some sense, a rejection of Islam – specifically stricter interpretations of Islam or devout adherence to the religion – is a rejection of the imposition of Arab identity.

The choice to show their hair, rather than wear hijab, on the part of prominent female activists signifies a similar rejection of Arab-Islamic imposition. Meryam Demnati and Khalida Messaoudi are two examples of leading militants who do not cover their hair; this is not particularly unusual, but Messaoudi and others have actually condemned the hijab, calling it a “uniform marking the segregation of women and their lifelong status as minors” (Silverstein, 2007, p. 112). Official children’s textbooks from the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh (IRCAM) show girls and women with their hair uncovered or covered traditionally, in a style which generally allows the neck and some hair to show. Activists emphasize the patriarchal nature of Amazigh society by pointing to mixed-gender dances, the cultural importance of women’s arts, and the lack of strict female modesty standards to demonstrate that the repression of women comes from Arab-Islamic domination (p. 114). Demnati (2012), in writing about women’s rights, says, “Il nous faut séparer l’État de la religion et traiter cette question des droits des femmes comme une question des droits humains,” and emphasizes the way that she is doubly oppressed as an Amazigh and as a woman.8

For one Amazigh-American activist, choosing to take off the hijab was a sign of a growing Amazighité. Soumia Aitelhaj described in a news interview how she once rejected her Amazigh identity, even making fun of another Amazigh girl for not speaking Arabic. Later, in the United States, she reclaimed her heritage: “I look at it as an evolution of identity…during my freshman year, I decided to remove my hijab. It was a scary experience, but one I could deny no longer. I knew I had to find myself and turned to the part of me that is Amazigh” (Beecher, 2010). She associates her decision to stop wearing hijab, despite any social or internal struggle with that resolve, with finding her self, an Amazigh identity which transcends religion. The rejection of Islamic religious symbols should be read as a reaction to increasing Islamic fundamentalism encroaching on traditional society rather than a wholesale rejection of Islam itself. The extent of religious belief and practice of activists may vary greatly but, despite this, “even the most extreme atheists outwardly defend ‘traditional’ forms of [Amazigh] Islamic practice that they claim to be flexible in application and perfectly integrated into larger cultural forms” (Silverstein, 2007, p. 113).

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8 “We have to separate the state from religion and treat the issue of women’s rights as an issue of human rights.”
There is a connection between secularism and simply speaking Tamazight: Tamazight is seen as a pagan language, associated with the supposedly ‘barbaric’ pre-Islamic era in North African history (Erríhani, 2007). Considering this, asserting Amazigh identity by speaking Tamazight is perceived as a threat to the authority and supremacy of Islam and Arabic. Central to the Amazigh movement is the desire for Tamazight to be seen as at least hierarchically equal to Arabic, an idea Ahmed Boukous calls a “secular tendency” which brings Arabic “back to its communicative role by removing its aura of holiness” (Ben-Layashi, 2007, p. 1).

Similarly, Hoffman (2008) found women’s prayer circles in the Souss (Shelha) region, “where sung and spoken prayers were as often in Tashelhit Berber [sic] as in Arabic” (p. 725). Although it would be inappropriate to label this an expression of “secularism” in the popular Western conception of the term, praying in a language other than Arabic has significant implications as to the way that Islam is practiced in rural Tamazgha. In this case, Arabic has been brought down from its place as the exclusive means of communicating with God and included along with Tamazight, removing its sacredness entirely. The women have never been told that prayers must be done only in Arabic or they simply reject this claim and choose to speak to God in their mother tongue. Either way, this points to an important phenomenon: that Imazighen, like many other people groups, have taken Islam and made it their own. This sentiment was echoed by Ahmed Adghirni when he said that, “We do not need any (other) racial group to give us our Islam” (2008).

One of the most intriguing and difficult to comprehend examples of “Amazigh Islam” is that of the Barghawata tradition which existed from approximately the mid-eighth century to the mid-twelfth century. As John Iskander (2007) has noted, representations of the Barghawata sect are highly politicized, variously considered by modern scholars to symbolize:

a corruption of Islam, part of a more general wave of ‘heretical’ movements across al-Andalus and North Africa during the Umayyad period, as a sect of the Sufriyya Khawarij, as a Berber [sic] national liberation movement directed against the Arab domination of North Africa, as a resurgence of a pre-Islamic association between certain Berber [sic] and Jewish communities in the area, or even as a way of reasserting a latent Christianity which the Muslim conquest could not immediately extinguish. (pp. 37-38)

Although it would be anachronistic to label the Barghawata sect an example of an Amazigh nationalist movement against Arab-Islamic orthodoxy, it was nevertheless a uniquely Amazigh form of Islam and used a Tamazight-language Qur’anic interpretation in place of a Qur’ān in the classical Arabic (Iskander, 2007, p. 39). This last note demonstrates a particular way that Imazighen reconciled their linguistic and religious affiliations.

The most politically potent expression of Amazigh secular-pluralism is support for Amazigh Jews, which sometimes manifests as support for the state of Israel. As mentioned, Amazigh activists often point to pluralism as a fundamental value of Amazigh culture, praising Kahina and celebrating Jewish festivals like Mimouna. Such actions are highly symbolic,
emphasizing the diversity of North Africa and serving as a “counter-narrative” to the “dominant Arab-Islamic narrative” (Schroeter, 2007, p. 177). There also exists a sort of nostalgia for the ‘old days’ when Jews were an essential part of Amazigh religious and cultural society, a part that was largely lost when Amazigh Jews emigrated to Israel.

When Israel’s siege of Gaza in 2008-2009 brought about strong support for the Palestinians in the dominant discourse of Morocco, Arab nationalists accused Imazighen of being traitors to the ‘Arab world’ for their silence on the matter. Amazigh activist Ahmed Assid responded by writing that Imazighen do support the Palestinian struggle, but that there is no room for our support because the public sphere in Morocco is dominated by pan-Arabists and Islamists who push support for Palestine as a divine duty and/or one of Arab solidarity. Such individuals are only concerned with human rights “when it is Arabs who are wronged” (The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2009). In this case, Assid is saying that he supports the Palestinians as human beings – not as an Arab or Muslim – but that the exclusionary and racialized rhetoric of pro-Palestine activism in Morocco prevents him from being involved. Other prominent Imazighen, such as Moha Moukhlis, Azouaou Azeggagh, and D. Messaoudi, cite the anti-Semiticism of the Moroccan Arab pro-Palestine activists and, like Assid, ask why these pan-Arabists care only for their own people, Arabs and Muslims. This “selective humanism,” caring for the Palestinian struggle while brutally repressing Amazigh rights, delegitimizes the Palestinian cause to Imazighen (MEMRI, 2009). In contrast to pan-Arabists who do not value the religious diversity of North Africa and may often be anti-Semitic, Adghirni makes it clear that his party’s platform (barnaamaj) “promotes religious tolerance” and takes “pride in the Jewish part of our country” (2008).

Conclusions

The Amazigh movement demonstrates a case of secularism used as a means of resisting Arab-Islamic ideology. The linking of Arabic as the ‘language of God’ to Islamization in Tamazgha, uses Islam as a lever to displace Amazigh culture. In the dialogue between Abdessalam Yassine and Mohammed Chafik, ‘the pagan past’ of Tamazight is compared to the sacredness of Arabic, carrying a mandate to embrace the Arabic language to earn favor with God. Yassine writes that “the Arabic tongue is God-chosen,” endowing it — as is common — with a sacred character. In contrast, activist singer Lounes Matoub also sacralizes language when he calls Tamazight his ‘soul’. The idea that Tamazight is the soul of Imazighen is nearly profane: a language of the ‘earth,’ spoken by an Indigenous people driven into the mountains and forgotten by God.

Yassine’s approach to modernity is to Isamalize it, just as his opposition to the Moroccan regime is to seek a ‘truly' Islamic state. The ‘worldly’ Amazigh identity is seen as linked to a Western modernity, but draws on Indigenous values rather than religion in order to develop a secular Amazigh identity within modernity. Whether successful in doing so or not, this is an intriguing contribution to the idea of secularism as a means of decolonizing the spiritual life of Tamazgha. The insistence on asserting a Rifian state, along the lines of a European nation-state,
was a primary philosophy within the anti-colonial war of Abd El-Karim. In order to resist Spanish invasion in a continent colonized by European powers, he sought a place for the Amazigh Rif region on a global level: attempting to protect the local by asserting the Amazigh in a universalizing modernity.

Arabization and Islamization were inextricably linked through the role of Arab-Islamic ideology in the establishment of French colonial policies and through the post-independence Arabization process associating Tamazgha with the ‘Arab world’. French colonialism increased the use of Arabic as a lingua franca, outside of religious sphere, thus making space in a public sphere for later Arabization and Islamization. At the same time, European colonialism created an illusion of the ‘Berbers’ as a lost Christian people, with the potential to become civilized. Amazigh tattoos of the cross-shape — which is the letter t in the Tifinagh alphabet — were used as ‘proof’ of the imaginary Christian past of the ‘Berbers’. Later condemnation of these tattoos as ‘haram’ demonstrates the negative position of Amazigh culture within an Islamic framework, and implies that certain traditions must be eliminated in order to ‘civilize’ the Berbers as proper Muslims.

Secularism is philosophized by Chafik, Adghirni, and Assid as both an Amazigh cultural value and a principle of a Islamic religious tolerance. They gain traction by using Qur’anic justifications to argue for secularism within an Islamic society. By drawing on Amazigh traditions, they bring a centuries-old and culturally specific approach to the idea of secularism, rather than allowing it to be perceived as solely an external, European philosophy.

Amazigh culture is perceived as intrinsically problematic for the ‘proper’ practice of Islam, as belonging to a pagan people with an earthly language — indeed, not even a language. The Indigenous tradition of tattooing, prohibited in Islam, casts Amazigh women’s bodies as profane, an expression of the ‘secular’ in itself. Activists like Lounes Matoub resist the negative portrayal of the Amazigh as profane by rejecting Islam and re-embracing his language, transmitted through his mother, as his ‘soul.’ Other expressions of Amazigh secularism in practice show a public rejection of Islamic mandates, prioritizing Amazigh traditions over the religion that displaces Indigenous culture. These include drinking alcohol publicly, women’s style of dress, valuing Amazigh rather than orthodox Islamic practices, and on a more political level, emphasizing the Jewish history in Tamazgha in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The conception of Amazigh secular-pluralism also fits with a general model of Amazigh identity politics, providing a general context and explanation for the necessity of this secular-pluralism to Amazighité. At the center of Amazigh consciousness and resistance is the concept of freedom. The Aza, or letter “z” which is the symbol of freedom, is prominently displayed in red on the Amazigh flag, symbolizing the blood of the martyrs who have died for our freedom. The very name “Amazigh” is said to mean “free person,” and this etymology is invoked politically. One’s identity as an Amazigh and involvement in the struggle against repression is inspired by this conception and it is sometimes used to encourage confidence. Such appeals to our history and name promote an idea of almost super-human strength and ability to prevail. Moha Moukhlis, when writing about the pan-Arabist and Islamist hypocritical support for Gaza
while attempting to destroy Amazigh culture, wrote “I am not part of the flock that bleats as it is being led to the slaughterhouse…I am an Amazigh, a free man” (MEMRI, 2009). Freedom to adhere to any or no religious belief is just one aspect of the holistic freedom that Amazighité defends. The idea of Amazigh secular-pluralism is thus rendered coherent by the greater sphere of identity politics put forth by Amazigh militancy.

In the absence of a specific set of Indigenous spiritual beliefs, Imazighen who choose to reject Islam for political reasons are left in a certain limbo: with neither colonial religion or an Indigenous set of beliefs there is a further loss of identity. Here enters the possibility of secularism as a decolonial approach to religion and spirituality, with land and language re-envisioned with sacred meanings as in the case of Matoub’s naming of Tamazight as his “soul.” New identities as “atheist,” “secularist,” and “spiritual” are ascribed positions in the Amazigh activist imagination — or perhaps, these are not so new after all but have a place due the sociopolitical history of Imazighen. As a political identity and means of approaching spirituality in the face of the colonizing force of Islamization, activists have developed a unique presentation of secularism as simultaneously Indigenous and decolonial but coherent with a universal value that religion should be limited to a private sphere. I propose that Amazigh secularisms — particularly with the roles of decolonial resistance and political assertions — present a new paradigm of religious-secular dynamics.

Rajeev Bhargava argues that secularism is not a primarily Western or Christian concept (2011). Although it may have been explicitly articulated by Western actors, he considers Western secularism to be insufficiently evolved and says that “the later history of secularism is more non-Western than Western” (p.110). In the Amazigh case, it is a philosophy that the division between “secular” and “religious” must be such that there is no coercion to one’s religious beliefs and all are free to adhere to their beliefs. By defining secularism or the concept of the ‘secular’ as European in genealogy, Euro-Christian secularism is able to be attributed as the essence or core of the secularism of ‘other’ parts of the world, while their Afro-Islamic background and references are imagined as superficial. If the ‘secular’ is Western, then ‘other’ secularisms can only be modifications of this Western concept. Yet Amazigh activists trace their own genealogy of secularism from different roots, to the same or similar general philosophy.

Secularism is not bound by a specific culture or religious/historical context and may develop independently – and in many different forms – in any number of societies. Amazigh secularism, as it has been articulated or expressed in recent times, has roots in a long tradition of Amazigh culture with inside and outside elements contributing to its current and multiple conceptions. Expressions of secularism by Amazigh activists have, in fact, challenged paradigms in Western secular studies by de-centering the genealogy of Euro-Christian secularism and using secularism for a distinctly political agenda to oppose Arab-Islamic ideology.

There remain some important questions to be addressed. How has generational change affected the dynamics of the Amazigh movement? Is it possible to be an active, aware supporter of an Islamist party and maintain an Amazigh identity? Finally, one of the most important and difficult to ascertain questions: how do Amazigh activists who are devout Muslims reconcile
these identities and reject the Arabization that is often associated with Islam? How can Indigenous beliefs be recovered and created to develop a notion of a uniquely Amazigh spirituality?

The philosophy of secularism as religious pluralism, as well as secularism as a political strategy, is demonstrated in the Amazigh motto discussed earlier: Akal, Awal, Afgan, or land, language, people. This saying, intended to be inclusive of all Imazighen, appeals to common values and ideas of horizontally-structured communities, in contrast to the hierarchical Arabic motto of the Moroccan state: God, Nation, King. The Amazigh saying gives high regard to community, our ‘un-Islamic’ language, and the earth, standing in direct opposition to Arab-Islamic hegemony of the Moroccan state. As these activists do, we can imagine a society structured around these values, in which the land is revered, the Tamazight language is recognized as the soul of Imazighen, and the wellbeing of the people is protected. The absence of Islam or any other religion in this vision demonstrates a philosophy of secularism and the limited role of religion in the public sphere.

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