WHO SPEAKS TAMAZIGHT? 
(PEOPLE AND HISTORY)

Berber is a name given to many heterogeneous yet similar ethnic groups with similar lingual, cultural, political and economic traditions and practices. Berber is viewed by many as a derogatory term and Berbers therefore refer to themselves as Imazighen, or Amazigh in singular form, which means free men. Most contemporary Berber speakers are Muslim due to the large Arab influence on the Maghreb. Traditionally, however, many Berbers were also Christian. One theory about the origins of the Imazighen based on Egyptian tomb paintings dates them back as far as 2400BC. When Arabs began arriving in Egypt, the Imazighen were pushed farther west into modern day Morocco, Algeria, Libya Tunisia and Mauritania. In fact, Mauritania was originally established as a Berber state. The Amazigh were among the principal merchants and stakeholders on the Trans-Saharan trade route.

TAMAZIGHT ALPHABET:

![TAMAZIGHT ALPHABET]

An Amazigh woman in traditional dress
IMAZIGHEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Berber is part of the Afro-Asiatic language family and has 15 main dialects with over 300 sub-dialects. Some of the most widely spoken dialects are Tachelhit (Morocco), Tamazight (Morocco), Tarifit (Morocco), Kabyle (Algeria), Tachawit (Algeria), Tunisian Berber (Tunisia), and various dialects spoken in the Jabal Nafusa region of Libya. The Berber/Amazigh people is more of a lingual notion rather than one based on phenotype as Amazigh people are diverse and comprised of many smaller polities and structures. A handful of families traditionally comprise a clan, a handful of clans comprise a community and a handful of communities make up the various sub-ethnic groups that we know of as Amazigh people. Amazigh people traditionally engage in various rural agricultural practices including raising livestock and crops. Berber people also have rich and internationally significant artistic traditions such as a plethora of musical genres, wood carving, pottery, jewelry, leather, and rug weaving (particularly in Morocco). Due to the large geographic area that the Amazigh people reside, cultural traditions can vary greatly from one place to another even though the Amazigh are united by a common language. Traditions such as cuisine, music, childbirth, weddings, and funerals can vary greatly even within the same country that the Amazigh reside.

Several famous Amazigh that have had notable positions in society include Khalida Toumi, (Algerian feminist and secularist, currently spokesperson for the Algerian government), Ahmed Ouyahia (Prime Minister of Algeria), Mohammad Albansir’Damsiri’ (Singer, Composer & Poet ), Ammouri Mbarek (Moroccan Singer and Song writer), El Hadj M’Hamed El Anka (considered The Grand Master of Andalusian classical music and creator of Algerian chaâbi music), Zinedine Zidane (French football superstar), Rabah Madjer (Algerian football superstar, Winner of the European Champions League in 1987 with Porto FC), and Mustapha Hadji (Moroccan soccer player nominated best African player of the year 1998).

WHY STUDY TAMAZIGHT?

Dialects of Berber are spoken by nearly 50% of the population of Morocco and 33% of the population of Algeria. There are also smaller numbers of various Berber/Amazigh populations reaching as far as Tunisia, Mauritania, Libya, Egypt, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso such as the Tuaregs. Some of the most widely spoken dialects are Tachelhit (Morocco), Tamazight (Morocco), Tarifit (Morocco), Kabyle (Algeria), Tachawit (Algeria), Tunisian Berber (Tunisia), and various dialects spoken in the Jabal Nafusa region of Libya. Besides Arabic and French, Berber is one of the most widely spoken languages in North Africa and the Maghreb. It is the most common indigenous language. Students seeking to understand the diverse cultures of North Africa may choose to study Berber for this reason. Furthermore, the Berber identity is culturally significant as is evidenced by the notable Berber role played in the Libyan rebellion during the Arab Spring of 2011.