Women in Berber Culture

Amazigh singer Fatima Tabaamrant performs during the festival to celebrate the Amazigh new year. Photo AFP

The Berbers of North Africa were colonized by, interacted with and outlived the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Byzantines. The recorded history of these civilizations hardly mentions women. Indeed, the history of pre-Islamic women is mostly recorded in the funerary steles that were erected in their honour.

This is in contrast to Berber culture, in which women play a prominent role. For example, the myth of Kahina, the pre-Islamic female warrior, is still very much alive in Berber culture and nowadays is used by the youth as a symbol of Berber language and culture.

Kahina is remembered for her acts of bravery and her clairvoyant ability to lead her people against the Arab invasions in the 7th century CE. She surmounted the masculine monopoly of military enterprise to become a legend and the only uncrowned ‘she king’ in Moroccan history. Kahina, whose
name means ‘priestess’ or ‘prophetess’, was born in the Aures Mountains in Algeria in the 7th century; the exact date is unknown. During her lifetime, Arab generals began to lead armies into North Africa, preparing to conquer the area and introduce Islam to the local peoples. Kahina directed a determined resistance to the invasions. Around 690, she assumed personal command of the African forces, and under her aggressive leadership, the Arabs were briefly forced to retreat.

Although the Berbers of the 7th century were not religiously homogenous – Christian, Jewish and pagan Berbers were spread throughout the region that is now Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya – Kahina was able to unite them against their invaders, leading them in battle for five years before she was finally defeated. Before taking her own life, Kahina sent her sons to the Arab camp with instructions that they adopt Islam and make common cause with the Arabs. They did so and would go on to participate in the invasion of Europe and the subjugation of Spain and Portugal.

Kahina is depicted as a figure who combined political and religious authority, a Berber queen and warrior who fought to defend her people and her country against the Arab invasion. Although it is hard for many Moroccans today to acknowledge such a powerful female figure, Kahina’s courage has been used by young people in recent decades to defend personal liberty and self-determination, carve out space to act in spite of patriarchal constraints or to control one’s destiny. After the Arab conquest, Berber women continued to play a central part in their families and communities, managing to combine their Islamic faith with their own ancestral traditions.

The legacies of Berber women attest to this. Indeed, the mixture of myth and reality that surrounds the pre-Islamic Berber goddesses and female warriors has managed to inhabit the collective unconscious and imagination of today’s Moroccans. This is mainly due to the fundamental role women play in transmitting Berber language and culture through rituality, orality and art.

These rituals revolve around healing, fertility, worship, lamentation and life cycles. The rituals, which can be public or private, are intended to bring personal and communal satisfaction regarding religious enactment, spirituality, emotional needs, reinforcement of family and social bonds, achievement of pedagogical goals etc. An example of a public ritual is the rite of taghunja or tislit n unzar (bride of the rain), which goes back to an ancient tradition of gathering and singing in front of the goddess Tanit to implore her to bring rain when water is scarce. The performance of this rite differs from region to region but the differences are small. Broadly, a procession goes from village to village and from one saint’s sanctuary to another’s. On the way, the ‘bride’ is splashed with water from terraces and windows. People give gifts of money to the leader of the procession. This is used to buy food for a meal that is prepared near a spring (anrar) or in a saint’s sanctuary (agurram), usually on top of a hill.

Berber women’s orality is ancestral, versatile and omnipresent. It covers poetry, songs, folktales and public oratory and ranges in topic from love, the self, family and community to the struggle for independence from colonialism and modernity.

Orality has also served as an instrument of language loyalty. Overall, the structure of Berber women’s folktales is highly complex and exhibits specific external and internal characteristics. The external characteristics can be divided into three: a beginning, a variable set of connected episodes and an ending. Internally, the narratives are both non-chronological and timeless. The most salient information is generally encoded in a distinctive way from the rest, that is, in the most relevant way from the storyteller’s point of view.

Women also perceive storytelling as a strong means of maintaining and perpetuating power inside the family, especially in rural extended households. Grandmothers reinforce their status by deliberately postponing the end of a story until the following night, thus creating continuous suspense. They also use stories to create rapport and give the impression that what they do not say is as important as
what they do say. In a sense, these women create their own power. This shows that contrary to essentialist views, women’s language is not powerless. Berber women’s storytelling strategies are understandable in settings where older women feel that younger daughters-in-law are gaining ‘too much’ power by having children and thus seek to retain some control over the parents through their children.

Most importantly, women are the artists in Berber culture. Berber women express art in carpet weaving, textile making, body tattoos, and face, hand and feet decoration.

These female practices have been carried out for millennia. It is known that visual expression far predates any form of written record. The shapes, colours and meanings of Berber women’s artistic expressions tell powerful stories. Women dominate the weaving process, metaphorically giving life to textiles. In rural areas, they comb, spin and dye wool for the blankets, shawls and carpets that they weave on upright vertical looms. Wool is thought to be imbued with considerable baraka (blessing), and some of this baraka is believed to be transferred to the weavers, hence the sacred nature of weaving. Berber women who work wool are highly respected, and it is said that a woman who makes 40 carpets during her lifetime is guaranteed passage into heaven after she dies.

This art is a source of pride and self-confidence for the next generation. It ensures continuity and fosters communal values of family, support, enterprise, etc. Political will and technology (the satellite dish and the internet) help the carpets to survive.

Islam’s influence on the Berber aesthetic was not merely one of constraint, it was also one of celebration and devotion so far as women are concerned. Thus, the predominance of architectural motifs, plants and flowers and the absence of faces is due to the fact that Islam forbids the artistic representation of human figures, since humans are the representatives of God, who is never depicted. For Berber women, creating objects of art is a tribute to God and, thus, an act of worship. Women often equate devotion to their work with devotion to God. Women regard their artistic creation as a meditative practice, hence their concentration when they apply tattoos or henna, which is meant to bring them closer to their creator. They often begin their work with the expression of devotion bismillah (in the name of God) and end it with lhamdullah (praise be to God).

Berber arts have changed since Moroccan independence in 1956. Berber nomadic styles and aesthetic expressions have been influenced by Moroccan Arabic, and the means through which Berber identity is preserved. Forms of Berber women’s arts, such as tattoos, gradually disappeared but were given a new life by contemporary Moroccan painters, both Berber and Arab. Male artists have appropriated indigenous Berber art forms and motifs intimately connected with women in their desire to express their postcolonial Moroccan identity, an identity that is increasingly tolerant of its Berber population. Similarly, Tifinagh, the script used to write the Berber languages, has reappeared in contemporary women’s textile and tattoo motifs. Painters as well as poets and writers are now turning to Berber visual and performing art forms for inspiration.

Women are valorized as keepers of Berber language and culture as central to identity construction. Identity construction and preservation through art is also at the heart of Berber women’s religious and spiritual agency. Through their artistic expressions, women not only control weddings as a means of preserving the sacredness of cultural distinctiveness in the midst of powerful societal influences, such as modernization, which are rapidly affecting their lives, but they also weave carpets, make tents and pottery, decorate face, hands and feet with henna and embroider clothing that reinforces Berber ethnic identity. Through art and mother-daughter transmission, Berber women link the past with the present.

This link gives material form to Berber consciousness. Berber women demonstrate the esteem,
respect and status accorded to motherhood by incorporating fertility symbols into their carpets, clothing, tattoos and hairstyles. Berber arts, therefore, are metaphors for motherhood, demonstrating the crucial role women play in propagating and preserving Berber identity. There has also been a reemergence of Berber women’s symbolism in contemporary youth culture. This is evident in the names of various women’s centres: Tanit, Isis, Kahina, etc. Likewise, various bands, websites, fashion shows and clothing styles popular among young people carry the same names.

Although largely absent from formal historical accounts, Berber women’s rituality, orality and art constitute a genuine source of knowledge, challenging mainstream narratives about women’s role in the production, use and adaptation of knowledge.