CHAPTER FOUR

ISLAM, LAÏCITÉ, AND AMAZIGH ACTIVISM IN FRANCE AND NORTH AFRICA

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In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the ensuing global “war on terror,” a rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations” has achieved a taken-for-granted analytical salience. While the most evident aspect of the war on terror has involved U.S. and allied military attacks on Middle Eastern states portrayed as “fundamentalist” or “terrorist” regimes, a less visible but more pervasive element has concerned the policing of political Islam in both majority Christian and Muslim countries. In France and its former colonies in North Africa, such policing has taken the form of discursive and legal struggles over the contours of laïcité, over the legitimacy of the public expression of Muslim belief and belonging. French fears that its “republic of citizens” is threatened by headscarved Muslim girls in public schools find themselves echoed in clashes of words and bodies involving Islamist and secularist movements in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, with the future of the postcolonial states at stake.

Perhaps the most outspoken group of Muslims in France and North Africa who have adopted a strongly pro-laïcité discourse have been Berber (or “Amazigh”) activists, who have transnationally advocated the cultural and linguistic expression of Tamazight in the face of what they decry as “Arabo-Muslim imperialism.” While often practicing Muslims themselves, these activists have rejected Islam as their primary mode of identification; have defended Muslim heteropraxy; have made concerted efforts to recover their ante-Islamic, Judeo-Christian heritage; and have even espoused reconciliation, if not symbolic identification, with Israel. Since the 1980s they have publicly advocated for government support of Berber culture in North Africa and the “diaspora,” arguing that Amazighité can serve as a bulwark against the perceived rise of Islamic fundamentalism across the western Mediterranean (cf. Maddy-Weitzman 2001; Silverstein 2003). In recent years, these states have increasingly incorporated the mainstream Amazigh Movement into its battle
against the Islamist opposition and its larger attempts to ensure the unity and reproduction of their national citizenry. In the wake of Amazigh support for the 2003 ban on signs that “ostensibly manifest” students’ religious belonging, France gave unprecedented support for Berber cultural associations, adding Berber language (Tamazight) as a second language option to the national baccalauréat examination. The Moroccan state went even further, establishing a Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) to introduce Tamazight into the national media and education system (Silverstein and Crawford 2004).

This paper traces the genealogy of Amazigh discourse on Islam to a set of colonial myths that posited an inverse relationship between the Islamic piety of different indigenous populations of North Africa and their potential for cultural assimilation. It further explores the ways such mythic representations have endured in the statements and practices of Amazigh militants in post-colonial France and North Africa, and the way such discourse has taken increasingly radical forms in light of the current civil war in Algeria and the ongoing marginalization of Berberophone populations throughout North Africa. In emphasizing the role played by Amazigh militants in the current struggle over laïcité, the paper argues that contemporary debates concerning Islamic modernity need to be approached in their larger transnational context through which Europe and North Africa have been and continue to be reciprocally tied across the Mediterranean.

1. Colonial Myths

As has been variously studied, the colonization of North Africa and beyond was justified by a self-aggrandizing myth—the mission civilisatrice—through which French officials narrated their violent conquest and settlement of overseas territories as part of a larger moral duty to elevate indigenous populations encountered to the status of civility.1 On the one hand, this narrative underwrote the progressive incorporation of the colonies and their inhabitants into the administrative and legal standards of the metropole. On the other hand, it spurred the production of vast ethnographic knowledge about such native peoples whose eventual assimilation was already foreseen. Following the conquest of Algiers in 1830, French military ethnologists and linguists published hundreds of ethnological and linguistic studies that effectively outlined an ethno-racial boundary between Arabophone and Berberophone populations in North Africa, groups whose cultural assimilability was deemed to differ according to their respective practice of Islam.
Arabo-Islamic Despotism

In general, military scholars—following the lead of earlier arguments proposed by such luminaries as Alexis de Tocqueville—repeatedly reified Arab society as principally and primarily Islamic, and perceived an incompatibility of Islamic civilization with French (Christian-secular) modernity. Such a concern belied fears of Islam as a unifying political force during nineteenth-century anti-colonial revolts, a fear that was re-energized during the twentieth century by Arab nationalist movements in Tunisia and Egypt that would eventually give birth to the fight for Algerian independence (Lucas and Vatin 1975: 34). In colonial discourse, Islam served as the prime trope for explaining two opposed characteristics of the observed Arab personality: on the one hand, its bellicose, hostile nature, attributable to religious fanaticism; and, on the other hand, its inveterate laziness, resulting from reverent fatalism. In the first place, French observers argued that the Arab’s absolutism placed him in a “permanent state of war with the infidel, a duty of eternal war which cannot be suspended” (Servier 1923: 345-346). “Holy war is the aim of all the wishes, all the efforts of the Arab” (Anon. 1873: 49). Islam served as the main explanatory factor for the horrors of war (beheadings, tortures, mutilations) witnessed by the French expeditionary forces during their conquest of Algeria, horrors attributable to the “vindictive and cruel character” of Arabs “who know no other law than that of the strongest” (Hamelin 1833: 7). Studies conducted by military ethnographers paid particular attention to those Algerian religious organizations, like the marabouts and Sufi brotherhoods (khouan), which wielded mystical authority and were capable of organizing believers into potential violence (cf. De Neveu 1846; Rinn 1884).

In the second place, scholars focused on a contradictory aspect of Islam—fatalism, the absolute reliance on Allah to determine one's future. They viewed it as the root cause of a long series of vices: “... laziness, dissimulation, dishonesty, suspicion, unpredictability, love of voluptuousness, luxury and feasting...” (Van Vollenhoven 1903: 169), decrying the Muslim Arab as a professional “sun-drinker” (buveur de soleil) (Docteur X: 1891: 55). This reverent laziness was understood to reciprocally weaken the Muslim's intellect, impeding all social progress towards modernity.

Intellectually, the Muslim is... a paralytic. His brain, subjugated for centuries to the stark discipline of Islam, is closed to everything not predicted, pronounced, specified by religious law. He is therefore systematically hostile to any novelty, to any modification, to any innovation... Such a conception [of fatalism] prohibits all progress, and, in fact, immobility is the essential character of any Muslim society.” (Servier 1923: 346-347).
Moreover, French administrators perceived this essential religiosity of Arabs, their “unique creation” (Bertrand 1923: x), as an inherent stumbling block to their administrative or legal assimilation into the French nation. “In the Mahometian civilization, religion and law are too intimately confused for the juridical condition of Muslims to be identical to that of Frenchmen or Europeans” (Larcher 1903: 16). Such an assumption led to the effective suspension of laïcité in Algeria, in spite of the fact that the colony was officially a département d’outre-mer, and hence should normally have been subject to the same legal and constitutional regime as the metropole. The Imperial Act of July 14, 1865, and later the 1870 Crémieux Decree, denied Muslim Algerians (and not Jewish Algerians) French citizenship unless they renounced their religious “personal status.” When in 1891 the Third Republic considered eliminating this last impediment and naturalizing all Algerians, a violent debate broke out within the Parliament. One Senator, M. Sabatier, addressing the Senate on June 27, 1891, opposed the reform on the grounds that it would implicitly condone “Coranic” civil and familial practices, from feudal land tenure to polygamy, which “escape French laws, not to mention French morality” (cited in Borgé and Viasnoff 1995: 18). The consideration of religion in the granting of citizenship was only eliminated after World War II, on the eve of Algerian independence.

What was at issue was not the individual's right of accession to French citizenship, but rather the feared legitimation of a religious body that through its supposed fanaticism and fatalism would respectively undermine French state security and Christian morality. Beyond a “constant system of surveillance,” the best way to reduce the authority of religious leaders who “exploit the ignorance of the people” was through the instruction of Muslim children in French language and ideas. “Instruction destroys prejudices, prevents the unreflected adoption of others' ideas... it will eliminate the multitude of absurd beliefs which the Arab people accept because they do not have the means to dispute them” (De Neveu 1846: 13). Educators were effectively considered the foot-soldiers of the colonial mission civilisatrice. Given this history of representations, it is little wonder that the school remains the primary site in post-colonial France where struggles over laïcité—the mission intégratrice—are being fought.

The Kabyle Exception

While Muslim Berberophone populations in colonial North Africa—and in particular Algerian Kabyles—were subjected to the same juridical canon that maintained their second-class status, they nonetheless were considered by French colonial officials to be more potentially assimilable into French modernity. Less fanatically attached to Islam, Kabyles were argued to “have accepted the Koran but they have not embraced it” (Daumas and Fabar 1847 (I):
From their worship of saints and reliance on marabouts, to their inconsistencies in observing daily prayers, Ramadan fasts, and prohibitions on alcohol and pork, “the Kabyle people are far from the religious ideas of the Arab people” (Daumas and Fabar 1847 (II): 55).

Moreover, their lack of religiosity was symbolized by the treatment of women. “Their religious notions are rather obtuse. Their women do not veil themselves at all” (Hamelin 1833: 15). According to what was later denoted as the “Kabyle Myth,” scholars argued the Kabyles held their women in high respect; Kabyle women were masters of the household and “have a greater liberty than Arab women; they count more in society” (Daumas and Fabar 1847 (I): 40); that Berber society was at its base matriarchal. The divorced or repudiated woman, instead of being made a slave in her father's house, enjoys all of her liberties (Daumas and Fabar 1847 (I): 34; Pomel 1871: 56-57). Moreover, the Kabyles, colonial scholars emphasized, did not practice the polygamy that their religion allowed them, “contenting themselves generally to a single wife” (Garrot 1910: 1047). In the end, then, the Kabyles seemed to approach French Christian morals in their practices, proving that their “Islamization” had always been superstructural.

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.... [The Kabyle] re-dressed himself in a burnous, but he kept underneath his anterior social form, and it is not only with his facial tattoos that he displays before us, unbeknownst to him, the symbol of the Cross (Daumas and Fabar 1847: 77).

As with their incipient laïcité, the Kabyle's political structure, not determined by Islamic absolutism, belied a proximity to French qualities of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” Colonial scholars characterized the Berbers as honorable warriors, fiercely defending their mountain refuges against all invaders (Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, French). Whereas the Arab accepted the tutelage of Islamic caliphs, the “fiercely independent” Berber, according to the reports, abhorred the very idea of central authority and was prepared to defend his absolute liberty to the death (Guernier 1950: 171-172). Their natural “anarchy” was seen to represent an underlying democracy, symbolized by the village council (or Tajma’ti) and its elected officials. “In this republic, the dominating spirit is that of republican equality” (Guernier 1950: 172; cf. Masqueray 1886; Rambaud 1895). Rather than assimilating the shari‘a into civil life, the assembly rendered judgment on the basis of customary law (qanun) (cf. Hannoteau and Letourneux 1871; Pomel 1871). These laws not only regulated individual contracts and feuds, but also determined the bases for social
solidarity, defining the individual's duties to the community in terms of collective labor (tiwizi) and taxes. As such, according to Auguste Pomel,

[The Kabyle's] political and social constitution is equally well different from that of the Arab people, and it must have been vigorously anchored in the mores and needs of the race for it to resist against the dissolving action of Islamism whose political regime presents an absolute contrast. In effect, instead of a despotic patriarchy which annihilates individual liberty, we find a democratic organization which is its antipode (1871: 56).

In the end, Kabylia represented for these scholars a “savage Switzerland” composed of federations of independent tribes/cantons (Daumas and Fabar 1847 (I): 419). As such, the Kabyles were constituted as the natural ally of the French colonizers, and were hence singled out as the privileged targets of the mission civilisatrice. “If the utopia of assimilation is realizable between the European and the native... it is therefore the Kabyle race which will be solely capable of it” (Pomel 1871: 60). With Islam constituting for the Kabyles but a “superficial varnish, a simple stamp… a feeble imprint” (Anon. 1924: 216), their transformation into colonial subjects would be comparatively unencumbered.

2. Anti-Islamism

Berberophone populations obviously never became the colonial toadies that French military scholars imagined and later Arab nationalists accused them of being. Berber speakers 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. The Algiers Charter, adopted after independence as Algeria's de facto constitution, declared Algeria to be an “Arabo-Muslim country” and decried regionalist identities as “feudal survivals” and “obstacles to national integration.” In response, the Kabyle war hero Hocine Aït Ahmed founded the first rival political party, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), in September 1963 and subsequently led a ten-month guerrilla insurrection throughout Kabylia against the Algerian national army and what he decried as the “ethnic fascism” of president Ahmed Ben Bella (Chaker 1990).
French Amazighité

With the growing hegemony of the FLN in Algeria, the locus of Kabyle struggle shifted to France. In Algeria, Ben Bella and later President Houari Boumédiene suppressed Berber cultural expression and pursued a project of Arabization of the Algerian media and education system, specifically locating a disproportionate number of Islamic institutes in Berberophone areas. In France, to the contrary, a number of Kabyle immigrants and exiles actively voiced their support for Berber language and culture.² Calling themselves Imazighen (literally “free men”), they founded cultural associations in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, and Roubaix to promote Berber culture to generations born in France. In particular, they sought to standardize and disseminate Tamazight as a language to be written either in Latin characters or in a revitalized ancient Libyan alphabet (Tifinagh), though explicitly not in the sacred Arabic script of the Qu’ran.

These efforts at cultural promotion dovetailed with the larger Beur Movement of the early-1980s. In a set of experiments in multiculturalism, second-generation French-Maghrebis (les Beurs) sought to define their hybrid cultural belonging outside of both the assimilation proffered by the French state and the Arabo-Islamic identity promulgated by Algerian overseas agencies. Many Beur theater troupes, musical groups, radio stations, and novelists devoted themselves to popularizing artistic genres deemed native to Berber societies and drew political inspiration from the annals of Kabyle resistance leaders. Indeed, the very appellation, “Beur,” while generally considered today to be a syllabic reversal of “Arab,” was averred contemporaneously to signify “Berbers of Europe” (cf. Aïchoune 1985).

In spite of the demise of the Beur Movement by the late-1980s, Amazigh militancy has continued apace in France and North Africa to the present. The civil war in Algeria that has raged since 1992 has particularly increased public awareness and support for Berber language and culture, as Kabylia finds itself simultaneously threatened by an Arabizing military government and an Islamist armed opposition that has often targeted Berberophone intellectuals. People originating from Kabylia can, of course, be found in every camp of war, occupying high state positions and even numbering among the leaders of the jihadi militias. However, the economic marginalization and periodic violence by government and Islamist forces that has struck Kabylia has largely swelled the ranks of the transnational Amazigh Movement and has radicalized its politics (Silverstein 2003). In addition to renewed claims for regional autonomy, Amazigh militants in both France and North Africa have increasingly adopted a virulent pro-secular, anti-Islamist discourse that at times can approach virtual Islamophobia.
Amazigh Laïcité

In the first place, Kabyle political parties like Said Sadi's Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), along with their immigration wings based in France, have taken strong “eradicator” positions, refusing any dialogue whatsoever with Islamist forces. The platforms they present in their political campaigns consistently avoid references to Islam, preferring categories of “democracy,” “republicanism,” “citizenship,” “social justice,” “human rights,” and “secularism” drawn directly from French universalist discourse. Borrowing imagery from the colonial Kabyle Myth, the RCD, for one, has consistently opposed any “Middle Eastern or Afghan identity” for Algeria supposedly proffered by the “peons of the Islamist International,” and instead has called upon Kabyles to rise up in “resistance” following the “spirit of independence” of the “eternal Jugurtha.”

Such an anti-Islamist position has dovetailed perfectly with French conceptions of laïcité and has been thus deployed by the Amazigh Movement in France to argue for state support of Berber culture. In an open letter to the candidates for the 1995 French presidential elections, and in the wake of a series of “headscarf affairs” that after 1989 had made the public expression of Islam the subject of national debate (Silverstein 2000, 2004b), the RCD wing of the MCB described the Republican school system as the “principal instrument of integration and social promotion” and claimed that it needed to be protected against Islamist “manipulation.” Appealing to mythic representations of Berber culture as inherently democratic, the letter urged the institutional encouragement of berbérité as the true cultural “soul” of North African immigrants as the key to their future “integration” in France.

In the 2003 debates over laïcité that resulted in the ban on conspicuous religious signs in French public schools, Amazigh associations in France and North Africa made pro-secular claims on behalf of Berber culture even more broadly. On the one hand, Berber associations have acted out of largely parochial interests. A communiqué dated 13 December 2003 released by the Paris-based Amazigh association Tamazgha encouraged the application of the reforms proposed in the Stasi Commission report on laïcité. In particular, the communiqué underlined the proposal for the teaching of “non-state” languages (notably Berber and Kurdish) as part of the larger “fight against discrimination.”

On the other hand, Amazigh support for the proposed reforms has derived from a more general sense of occupying an embattled position vis-à-vis an expanding political Islam. In a letter published by the Amazigh press across the globe, the president of the Federation of Associations of Berber Culture in France, Arezki Sadi congratulated Jacques Chirac on behalf of all “the Berbers of France” for his decision to press for a legal ban on the “veil” in public schools. Claiming that religion is an “affair of individual conscience and
spirituality,” Sadi championed the proposed law as protecting young women against the “pressure of politico-religious groups,” and schools against the “rampant plague (fléau) of Islamic fundamentalism (intégrisme).” Sadi specifically underlined the distinction between his position and the intégrisme of the most outspoken opponent of the proposed law, Tariq Ramadan—whose fundamentalism was further emphasized in an op-ed article in Libération sponsored by the Paris-based Association de Culture Berbère (ACB) (Mekboul and Metref 2004). Rather, Sadi claimed that the identity of Berbers in France could not be reduced to a “simple religious subjectification (asujettissement),” and ended his letter with an evocation of the spiritual assimilation of French Imazighen: “Because France is our country, her interests are ours and our interests are hers.”

Women Amazigh militants have been likewise publicly outspoken in their denunciations of the “veil” and the Islamist interests supposedly behind its multiplication across France and North Africa. In my discussions with Kabyle activists in Paris, many young women harshly criticized their peers for adopting the headscarf as a sign of protest. For these women, the girls were operating under a false consciousness through their tacit support of an Islamist political position, and thus merited their expulsion from school. Sonya, a Franco-Kabyle schoolteacher outside of Paris who herself abstains from alcohol and pork and fasts during Ramadan, told me that she could not understand her hijab-wearing students, seeing in it a conscious rejection of integration. “If you don't want to live here, go home. If I felt so out of place in France, I wouldn't stay” (Silverstein 2004b).

In a similar vein, Khalida Messaoudi, a Kabyle feminist who has received death threats from Islamist militias, decried the “veil” as a “uniform marking the segregation of women and their lifelong status as minors.” Famously comparing headscarves to Jewish yellow stars, she warned that if France accepted the hijab, it would debark on the same slippery slope to Islamic totalitarianism that had occurred in Algeria (Le Figaro 29-30 October 1994: 27; cf. Messaoudi 1995). Other French Amazigh women, including singer Djura Abouda and association president Fadela Amara, have likewise joined French feminists in denouncing the hijab as the preeminent means and symbol of Muslim patriarchy.

### 3. Islamic Heteropraxy

Given their pitched battles against Arab nationalism in North Africa, it is not particularly surprising that Amazigh activists would take strong public anti-Islamist positions, or that they would explicitly encourage the French state's imposition of radical secularism and a larger post-September 11th “war on terror.” They tend to see Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden as part of the
same scourge of “Arabo-Muslim imperialism” that threatens their cultural particularity, not to mention the world at large. Certain members of the Amazigh Movement in Morocco are proud to have been among the first to offer their public condolences to the American ambassador in the days immediately after September 11th. While opposing violence in general, they later came out strongly in favor of the American invasion of Iraq–thus running firmly against the grain of Moroccan oppositional politics–and were beside themselves with joy over news of the capture of Saddam. In southeast Morocco where I work, some residents even joked that Bush must be himself an Aït Mughrad (the local Berber tribe), going as far as creating a fictive genealogy to incorporate him as their symbolic brother. Indeed, the only reproach I heard from Amazigh activists concerned why he had not already taken the battle to Saddam’s “Arabo-Ba’athist” neighbors in Syria (Silverstein and Crawford 2004).

Such Americanophilia represents but an instance of a larger contrarian attitude taken by many Amazigh militants in France and North Africa. To a great extent, such an attitude derives from a general rejection of orthodox Islamic social norms which Amazigh activists argue are the imposition of an Arab culture prone to extremism. In point of fact, Amazigh activists incorporate a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices into their everyday lives, with some militants engaging in regular prayer and following Islamic dietary restrictions, while others going as far as excising all references to Allah from their spoken language and harboring scarcely hidden contempt for the believers amongst their ranks. However, even the most extreme atheists outwardly defend “traditional” forms of Berber Islamic practice that they claim to be flexible in application and perfectly integrated into larger cultural forms. Such claims to Berber cultural-religious distinctiveness generally ignore movements of religious reformism and purification in which Berber groups themselves historically engaged, most particularly during the Almohad and Almavard Berber empires of Andalusia. Moreover, they tend to draw on the same stereotyped representations present in the colonial “Kabyle Myth.”

In the first place, Amazigh activists defend Muslim heteropraxy and ante-Islamic survivals among Berberophone populations in North Africa. They highlight the continued prevalence of marabouts (known as igurramn in Berber Morocco) and support their claims to religious legitimacy against attacks from shurafa (mostly Arabophone lineages claiming descent from the Prophet) and state-appointed imams trained in a reformist (salafiyya) mode. They uphold the pilgrimage to the tombs of ancestors and saints, as well as to other natural sites endowed with sacrality, as efficacious in the healing of physical ailments and infertility. Moreover, they defend the republican and secular nature of Berber political institutions, averring that the role of the local imam in the tribal
assembly (*Tajma’h*) is purely consultative and removed from political decision-making.

Secondly, like colonial ethnologists, Amazigh activists insist on the matriarchal base of Berber societies, claiming that contemporary patriarchy and institutionalized misogyny are but recent Arabo-Islamic impositions. They indicate the centrality of women in the domestic life of Berber villages, highlighting their role as the preservers of the mother language and culture (Tamazight). They likewise cite women's song and dance as being at the focal point of public ritual life, underlining the place of women in the mixed-gender dancing (*aherdus*) occurring during marriage festivities. More generally, they underline the relative freedom of women in Berber society, claiming that social codes of female modesty have never led to the cloistering of women or the imposition of the “veil.” Rather, they stress the relaxed forms of interaction that exist between men and women in Berber villages, paying particular attention to a form of playful flirting between unmarried adolescents known as *taqrefeyt* in southeast Morocco. Although Berber families actually tend to be quite diverse in the relative freedom accorded to wives and daughters, Amazigh activists generally insist that cases of social conservativism are primarily the result of a protracted history of imposed “Arabization.”

**“Beerberism”**

The Amazigh discourse on Islam, while underlining the local flexibility of Berber religious practice, occasionally results in the espousal of extremist secular positions that blame Islam *in toto* for the current marginalization of Berbers, and of North Africa in general. In the talk and writing of certain militants, such a position leads to symbolically-charged claims of religious ignorance, of never having prayed or read the Qu’ran. One of the foremost symbols of contemporary Amazigh resistance, the assassinated Kabyle singer-activist Lounès Matoub, is a poignant figure in this rhetoric. Considered by activists across North Africa and the Berber diaspora as a martyr to the Amazigh cause, Matoub was famous for being a self-described “rebel,” for never submitting to social or political authority. His 1995 autobiography explicitly juxtaposes his commitment to the Amazigh cause, Matoub was famous for being a self-described “rebel,” for never submitting to social or political authority. His 1995 autobiography explicitly juxtaposes his commitment to the Amazigh cause to his lack of religiosity. In addition to somewhat incredulous claims concerning his lack of understanding of Arabic, the book emphasizes his refusal to lead a pious life, even when threatened at gunpoint by his Islamist kidnappers in 1994. As if to emphasize this point, the autobiography is peppered with scenes indicating Matoub’s drinking prowess, if not debauchery (see Matoub 1995).

Drinking alcohol is a potent symbolic act for Amazigh (male) activists. Events sponsored by Amazigh associations often include alcoholic beverages, in
spite of the militants’ knowledge that many of the laity in attendance will not drink. More centrally, many Amazigh militants tend to convene their meetings in bars, reveling in the fact that such spaces are the object of Islamist ire. During the 1990s, members of the ACB, the largest and most important Berber association in France, referred to the bar across the street from the association locale as their “headquarters” (quartier général), and on any given evening one could find it filled with local activists and artists, as well as visiting militants from Kabylia. In Rabat, a number of activists in the Amazigh Movement reunite nightly at the Capri, a central bar run by a Berber family that militants claim has been the informal meeting space for three generations of activists. When I commented to one of the militants that I found it symbolically appropriate that they meet in a bar, he replied, “Yes, Paul, we are no longer ‘Berberists,’ we are ‘Beerberists’ (bièrebéristes).” That such spaces—and hence the meetings—tend to be almost exclusively masculine belies ongoing issues of gender segregation within the movement, the fact that women are important symbols of, but rarely active participants in, Amazigh resistance (see Goodman 1996; Silverstein 2004c).

Philo-Semitism

In a similar contrarian vein, transnational Amazigh activists have rejected the generalized anti-Zionist (and occasional anti-Semitic) politics of the Islamic world, adopting instead an avowedly philo-Semitic (if not pro-Zionist) discourse. In general, Jews are “good to think” for Amazigh activists, as they appear to represent a people similarly marginalized under the historic mantle of Arabo-Islamic hegemony in the Middle East and North Africa. They see in the Zionist movement a model for the Amazigh struggle: the successful codification and preservation of a threatened language, the obtaining of political and territorial autonomy with the establishment of the State of Israel. While by no means the agents of the Israeli state that Islamists occasionally accuse them of being, Amazigh militants have actively sought to reconcile Jewish and Berber populations, and have publicly advocated a normalization of relations with Israel. Beginning in the early-1990s, delegations of Kabyle artists and intellectuals visited Israel and published reports of their voyages in Amazigh newsletters in France.

Given these sympathies, a number of Amazigh militants have increasingly refused to voice their active support for the Palestinian struggle, viewing the hegemonic pro-Palestinian politics of North Africa as a poignant example of imposed Arab nationalism. In Morocco, such reticence has brought them into direct conflict with the very leftist groups in which the majority of current Amazigh activists cut their political teeth during the 1970s and 1980s. This
disagreement over the Palestinian question has even occasionally broken out to violent confrontations between the two movements, such as recently occurred in the University of Errachadia in November 2003 where a handful of Amazigh militants were brutally attacked by members of the Marxist Basiste movement for refusing to participate in an exam boycott on behalf of the al-Aqsa intifada.

Outside of such explicit political struggles, Amazigh militants and sympathizers have likewise sought to reconstruct the close relations that previously existed between Berber and Jewish populations in North Africa. They are fond of pointing out the ante-Islamic, Jewish origins of various Berber cultural practices and historical figures, including most notably Princess Kahina who led her eastern North African tribe to battle against Islamic armies of invasion during the seventh century. They wonder why the vast majority of Moroccan Jews who left for Israel in 1967, blame the Moroccan state of actively encouraging their departure, and hope that they will once again return to give an economic boost to the peripheral Berber regions. In the meantime, they recount stories of their parents' close relations with Jewish neighbors, of the sharing of meals and mutual aid, and welcome the occasional “homecomings” of Israeli émigrés. They are likewise particularly open to Jewish researchers, particularly those exploring Judaic cultural traces in North Africa. Indeed, when I finally admitted to one of my close Kabyle militant friends in Paris that I was Jewish, he exclaimed jubilantly, “I knew it all along! There was always something in common between us. You see, we're cousins.”

Perhaps the most poignant example of the Amazigh philo-Semitism occurs in southeast Morocco, around a masquerade festival known locally as Udayen Achour (Jewish 'ashura). The festival occurs one month after ‘id al-adha and ritually closes the end of the year holiday, with the last, dried morsels of the slaughtered ram eaten in a communal couscous. After the meal, residents of the town of Goulmima gather outside the Igoulmimine ighrem (Ar. ksar, walled, multi-family residence), where young men perform a ritual of inversion. Referring to themselves as udayen (“Jews”), the performers sport grotesque masks and outfits designed to hide their identities, with certain performers even cross-dressing to portray female udayen. They engage in hyper-sexualized taqrefeyt with each other, as well as with the young women spectating on the periphery of the carnival. More generally they act and talk outrageously in a manner that satirizes both local religious and government authority figures, as well as more marginal characters of town life (e.g. beggars, prostitutes, drug users)–behavior and speech acts that would be practically impossible under everyday social norms.

On the face of it, the masquerade replicates those inversion dramas found throughout Berber North Africa which were historically performed between the ‘id and ‘ashura. Colonial observers, in their search for a primordial “Berber
religion,” typically linked these performances, in Frazerian fashion, to pagan rituals of social renewal, in which the fertility of the soil was regenerated through the symbolic death and rebirth of the agricultural God, through the expulsion of evil via scapegoats (Hammoudi 1993: 15-32; cf. Laoust 1921: 254). Personified Jews, as well as blacks (ismakhen, “slaves”), are generally interpreted as functioning as such scapegoats, and are uniformly portrayed by Berber Muslims in the same grotesque, sexualized fashion displayed in the Goulmima festival. Given this imagery, Berber masquerades have since Moroccan independence provoked the ire of Islamic reformers who decry the events as “vestiges of paganism (jahiliyya)” that threaten to infect everyday social comportment and destroy Muslim virtues (Hammoudi 1993: 89, 167).

Udayen Achour represents a pared down version of this ritual, represented as and transformed by Amazigh activists into a celebration—rather than a mockery or symbolic expulsion—of Judeo-Berber culture. Like the colonial ethnologists and Islamic reformists, local Amazigh militants emphasize the masquerade’s ante-Islamic (if not anti-Islamic) genealogy and even attribute its origin to a Jewish ritual revived by activists in recent memory. Although they recognize its timing on the Islamic lunar calendar, they disassociate it from the ‘id sacrifice or the larger celebrations of ‘ashura as the Feast of the Muslim New Year. Underlining the Jewish nature of the event, they greet each other with the supposedly Hebrew “Tchafou,” sing songs featuring Jewish characters invoked to replenish the local river’s water supply, make pilgrimages to the old Jewish quarter (mellah), and work Hebrew writing and six-pointed stars into their costumes. They proudly relate how in 2000 masked youth even provoked a fatwa from the local imam by carrying signs written in both Hebrew and Arabic that argued for a rapprochement with Israel.

Beyond a space for the fetishization of a lost Jewish heritage, Udayen Achour functions for Goulmima Amazigh activists as an annual occasion for the celebration of Berber culture more generally. The active promotion of the festival as a Jewish-Amazigh event has made it famous throughout the Berber world, and has transformed the event into a de facto annual pilgrimage (moussem) not only for (Muslim and Jewish) Goulmima residents abroad, but also for Amazigh militants across France and North Africa. Local militants utilize the event to promote local and national political causes, attracting police surveillance and a repeated threat of state intervention. Costumed activists regularly brandish Amazigh flags and banners that advocate the recognition of Tamazight as an official language of North Africa. In February 2004, the event served as a space to protest the provincial government’s sale of a section of local tribal land to a private investor. Masked protestors carried banners calling on the pasha to “Stop the cession of the land of widows and orphans!” and solemnly marched with a cardboard coffin inscribed with the names of the tribal fractions
(ighsen) whose territory—and hence, for the protestors, whose very existence—was threatened by the sale.

4. Conclusion

Udayen Achour is clearly an extreme example, but nevertheless felicitously symbolizes the more general Amazigh Movement's rejection of Islamist discourse in favor of a secular, multi-confessional identity politics. That such politics dovetail nearly perfectly with current republican ideologies of laïcité advocated by self-proclaimed “modernists” in post-colonial France and North Africa results as much from the particular historical conjuncture of consonant French and Amazigh anti-Islamisms, as it does from any supposed cross-Mediterranean cultural unity as postulated by colonial ethnologists. Nevertheless, the growing prevalence of the Amazigh Movement, particularly among young Franco-Maghrebis in “diaspora” France, indicates that debates over the place of Islam in the context of globalization cannot be reduced to a rhetoric of a “clash of civilizations,” of a presumed confrontation between secularizing nation-states and a radicalizing Islam. The Amazigh discourse on Islam points to important divisions within the Muslim 'umma that transcend the borders of Europe, as well as those of individual North African nation-states. Indeed, any analysis of global Islam today requires a rejection of reified formulations and an embrace of the historical and transnational contexts that multiply and divide Muslim polities.