Accessories as the Ethnic Identity of the Berbers in Morocco

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Abstract

This article discusses accessories as ethnic identity. The Berber tribe has various types of accessories that have become their ethnic identities, such as tapestries, jewelry, clothes, and tattoos. This article discusses the jewelry of the Berbers, who wear innumerable types of jewelry, including necklaces, headbands, fibula, and earrings. The jewelry is worn as ornamentation and as a social symbol that identifies the Berber and the region of Morocco where the jewelry is made. The shape and design of jewelry also have spiritual meaning, for example, a charm that ensures fertility, protects from evil eyes, brings prosperity, and cures disease. The Berber women play a critical role in preserving their culture by making and wearing various types of jewelry. This is because the Berbers strongly uphold their tribal symbols and women as the symbols of fertility and the ethnic identity of the Berbers.

Keywords—Berber; Jewelry; Morocco

1. Introduction

Morocco is an Arab country and a member of the Arab League. Morocco is located in northern Africa and is bordered by the Middle Sea in the north, Algeria in the east, Mauritania in the south, and the Atlantic Ocean on its western border. Morocco’s strategic location has made this nation a target of western imperialists. Although this Morocco is located on the African continent, the environment is similar to the luxuriant, abundant, and water-rich environment of Asia. Thus, foreign tourists are amazed by the fertility of Moroccan soil, which is packed with trees and greenery. Morocco is a leading agricultural country among Arab and African countries; thus, the price of fruit for residents is inexpensive (Umam, El-Ghezwa, & Ridwan, 2014).

The Moroccan population comprises various ethnic groups, and the two main tribes are the Berbers and Arabs. The majority of the population of Morocco is Berbers. The majority of the Berbers are scattered in the southern parts of Morocco, such as Marrakech, Agadir, Ouarzazate, and their surrounding areas, and some Berbers are located in the northern parts of Morocco, such as Tetouan, Nador, and their surrounding areas. The Arabs were the second inhabitants to settle there. Each tribe has works of art that represent their ethnic identity. The Berbers have several traditional artworks such as handcrafted jewelry, tapestries, and artistry. The women in Berber communities play a critical role in preserving Berber culture through their handicrafts. These women also always wear their handcrafted jewelry because they consider the jewelry a representation of their tribe, symbol of fertility, and part of the ethnic identity of the Berbers. Jewelry is used to accentuate beauty or greatness of the wearer and functions as a symbol of identity for the tribe.
2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The method that the researcher employed was a literature review. First, the research topic was determined. Second, the relevant literature was reviewed. Third, a study related to the research topic was conducted. The data was collected from the following literary sources: books, journals, magazines, research results (thesis and dissertation), and other resources relevant to the research topic (Nazir, 1998).

In conducting this research, the researcher referred to the theory of artwork authenticity presented by Dennis Button. The theory of artwork authenticity refers to artwork that aligns with the desire and intentions of the artist or how close the relationship is between the artwork and the existing traditions (Dutton, 1983). The writer also employs the theory proposed by Jonathan Spencer regarding symbolic anthropology, which states that a symbol can describe the meaning of processes and traditions as well as illustrate how human beings interpret life (Barnard & Spencer, 1996).

3. The Berbers

Etymologically, the meaning of Berber is a group of ethnicities originating from areas near the African sea. Berber can also be interpreted as an Afro–Asian language family used in North Africa and Morocco. Additionally, others have commented that the word Berber is from the Greek word varvaros, meaning “chaos and overlapping sounds,” because when the Romans arrived in Morocco, the Berbers used a native language different from the language of Moroccan society. Subsequently, the Romans gave the title Berber to individuals who did not use Greek (Al-dahra jii, 2010). Notably, the Berbers name for their community is Amazigh (singular), or Amazighen (plural), and means free man. Some translators have also interpreted these terms as noble people.

By the first century of Hijri, the Berbers had already settled in Morocco and divided into three tribes: Amazigh, Silha, and Rifi. These three tribes have their own languages and dialects and are recognized by the Moroccan government. There are approximately 45 groups of Berbers scattered around the world. Each Berber group communicates through a unique language and dialect and produces a unique style of artwork. The Berbers name their groups on the basis of the group’s ancestors. The word Ait or Beni precedes the name of the group’s ancestors and means group. Examples of Berbers’ group names include Ait Atta and Beni Ourain (Becker, 2006).

The Berbers are the original inhabitants of North Africa in the region west of the Nile valley they call Tamazgha. The Berbers believe that their ethnicity differs from the Arabs’ ethnicity because of the Berber’s unique ethnic, cultural, and linguistic aspects. The area where the Berbers reside is from the Atlantic Ocean on the west coast of Morocco to the Shiva Oasis in Egypt, and from the northern Mediterranean coast to the southern Niger River. Berber tribal centers are located from Egypt to Morocco, with an estimated 1 million Berbers in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Libya, and an estimated 140,000 Berbers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania. The largest population of Berber tribes is in the western region of North Africa. An estimated 25%–30% of Algeria’s 30 million residents are Berber, and the Berber population in Morocco is approximately 40%–60% of its 31 million residents. The Berbers in Morocco mainly reside in three major geographical regions: Tarifit in the Rif Mountains of northern Morocco, Tamazight in the Atlas Mountains and Desert Oasis of southeastern Morocco, and Tashelhit in the Sus Valley, Atlas Mountain Peak (Atiyah, 1955, p. 3).

4. Berbers’ Artworks

Every tribe produces art intended to establish an ethnic identity to ensure that each tribe has a unique characteristic that can be used to distinguish between tribes.

The Berbers have a variety of traditional artworks and techniques to create these artworks. The women in the Berber community play an important role in all aspects of the processes to create artworks, for example, rugs, jewelry, and accessories to adorn the body. These women create and employ symbols of the Berbers’ ethnic identity that include fabric, tattoos, ornaments, and clothes. The Berber women weave wool shawls and dresses usually worn by the men in the Berber community. The women weave the symbols that represent their identity into fabrics and paint them on ceramics. The women tattoo their faces, hands, and ankles with symbols that represent their ethnic identity; however, the men do not tattoo their bodies and do not wear jewelry (Becker, 2006).
5. Jewelry as the Identity of the Berbers

In a society, jewelry is sometimes related to customs or perspectives. Local people, for example, are usually concerned regarding the variety of jewelry and link the variety with certain occasions or the social position of the wearer. The use of jewelry should be based on the shape, color, or other complementary decorations. The function of jewelry has been emerging in the literature and is becoming increasingly complex along with the increasing complexity of human civilization (Husni & Siregar, 2000).

The history of Moroccan jewelry started long ago and includes the history of migration to this nation. Individuals have immigrated Morocco for centuries. After the Reconquista of Spain in 1492, many silver craftsmen who were Jewish immigrated to Morocco and brought their expertise in making jewelry. These craftsmen shared their knowledge with the Berber community. At that time, jewelry was made from silver and carvings coated with fine paint, and crafting ornaments on the jewelry materials were the popular techniques used to make jewelry. Semiprecious stones, for example, amber (translucent fossils of yellow-brown dammar used in making ornamental objects), coral, turquoise (bluish or greenish) were often attached to jewelry, and amulets were often attached to jewelry too (Moroccanbirds, 2017).

Morocco is famous for its artistic beauty, and one of those artworks is jewelry. The jewelry produced by each Berber group has a distinctive motif. Traditionally, most of the Berbers’ jewelry was made of silver. Moroccan jewelry is notable because the artists are women, and the women proudly wear their jewelry. Women have a relatively high status in the Berber community because they perpetuate the artistic symbols of the Berbers’ ethnic identity. Ait Khabbash women produce brightly colored rugs and headaddresses, decorate their faces with tattoos, wear intricate silver and amber jewelry, and embroider brightly colored headscarves. The Berber women have created the artistic symbols of the Berbers’ ethnic identity and wear them on their bodies to demonstrate the ethnic identity of the Berbers.

Moroccan jewelry is notable because of its esthetic value and the value of its symbols. Moroccan jewelry can be categorized by ethnographic and geographic lines: Arabic and Arabic-speaking people compared with various Berber language groups, and urban residents compared with rural residents. A map of the various Berber language groups and centers of many jewelry-making techniques links the inhabited areas of the Berber-speaking people (especially the Tachelhait and Tamazight) with the metal-making engineering center. However, the difference is not between urban and rural jewelry, but whether the metal used is gold or silver (Liu, Wataghani, & Watagha, 1975). Traditional Berbers continue to wear silver jewelry despite the increasing popularity and economic value of gold jewelry. Morocco ranks twentieth in world silver production and has been operating silver mines in the Souss-Massa-Draa since the first century. This abundance of natural resources has resulted the city of Tiznit city becoming a major center of silver production and sales. The arrival of Islam in Morocco in the seventh century led to the primacy of silver because certain verses in the Koran forbade the use of gold jewelry. In traditional cultures, jewelry has many functions, for example, for protection, to enhance beauty, and demonstrate social status.

Jewelry is a social symbol that identifies the Berbers, and Morocco is where this type of jewelry is made. Additionally, the shape and design of this type of jewelry has spiritual meanings, and some types of jewelry are believed to be protectors that ensure fertility, defend from evil eyes, bring prosperity, and cure various diseases.

The art of body decorating begins when a child is young to identify gender differences and as protection from the devil and evil forces. The first seven days of a child’s life are believed to be dangerous. If a child dies within the first 7 days of her/his birth, the belief is that the devil has successfully exchanged its child with a human child. The Berber women usually put a lit candle next to their newborn children to prevent the devil from disrupting their children because the devil, supposedly, does not like bright rooms and gleaming items. In addition, Ait Khabbash women adorn their children with items that contain Baraka or “divine blessing” to protect them during this crucial period (Becker, 2006).

The Berbers wear various types of jewelry. Some of the most notable forms of jewelry from the Berbers are necklaces, headbands, fibulas (i.e., intricate, triangular brooches used to tie clothes), and earrings (see Fig. 1). Jewelry is worn, for example, at a wedding ceremony. The Berber women also employ tattoos, jewelry, hairstyles, and headgear to demonstrate their ethnic identity.
6. Types of Berber Jewelry

Jewelry produced by each of the Berber groups has a unique motif, and traditionally, most of the Berbers’ jewelry is made of silver. Silver is considered similar to the color white, a color often associated with purity and piety. For instance, in Fig. 2, a necklace worn by the women from the Ait Khabbash group called Tiferfrin (Becker, 2006).

The Berbers’ jewelry is made of silver and not gold because gold is considered related to evil. The women of the tribe wear bracelets, fibulas, anklets, earrings, and headdresses. This jewelry is used every day or for occasions such as festivals, pilgrimages, and funerals. Jewelry is considered as a protector, medicine, and a magical object.

Children begin to wear beaded necklaces created by their mothers, who combine glorified substances for their protective strength. The beaded necklaces are worn on the shoulders of the child and coiled on their chests (Becker, 2006). The birth of a boy is considered desirable and provides certain prestige values. The Berber women adorn their newborn sons with intricately beaded necklaces to distinguish them from their daughters, who wear only single-bead strands (see Fig. 3).
A type of jewelry used as a protector for children is a leather pendant decorated with five shells, often referred to as Khamsa (Fig. 4). Another type of jewelry intended to protect children is a necklace of a goat’s tail (animal sacrificed/slaughtered during the seventh day of the child’s birth), shells, silver coins, and black beads. In addition to using jewelry directly on the body, the Berber women also put a pendant in a mirror to pull and deflect a negative gaze from evil eyes (Becker, 2006).
The jewelry often used by the Berber women is a necklace commonly referred to as *Tazelaght* (Figure 5). This necklace is commonly used by women from *Ida ou Semlal*, the Berber tribe in western Anti-Atlas. This necklace is usually used as a dowry, but is also a symbol of family wealth. Another type of jewelry is commonly worn by the *Ahl Massa* women, a tribe from the southwest of Morocco. This type of jewelry consists of red coral beads and several spiral pendants, which symbolize eternity.

![Figure 5. Tazelaght](http://www.alartemag.be/en/en-fashion/berber-jewelry-a-wealth-in-heritage/)

Berber women also wear bracelets. The Ait Atta, a Berber tribe in southeastern Morocco, wears a star-shaped bracelet for self-defense. This bracelet weighs approximately 1 kilo per pair and comprises ornaments similar to nails (i.e., 12) around the bracelet. This bracelet is sometimes used to defend the wearer because the form resembles a finger protection device made of metal used as a weapon to assault other individuals. Another model that remains popular is *shams wa qamar* or a sun-and-moon bracelet (Dady, 2015). The woman of *Ida ou Semlal* wear *Adelbidj* (Fig. 6) and jewelry with a hanging pendant decorated with geometric patterns and flowers. The Berber jewelry is unique (Assou, 2013).

![Figure 6. Adelbidj bracelet](http://www.alartemag.be/en/en-fashion/berber-jewelry-a-wealth-in-heritage/)
A type of jewelry that is a talisman for the Berber women is Khamsa. This jewelry is widely used throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The shape of this jewelry is similar to an open hand and made of silver or beads (Fig. 7). Khamsa is usually worn on the chest and the large ornaments are typically placed inside their homes.

![Figure 7. Khamsa](image)

The jewelry often worn by the Berber women at a wedding is Tasfift (Fig. 8). This type of jewelry is worn on the head and decorated with silver or nickel coins featuring King Mohammed V or Hassan II (Sheppard, 2014). Silver coins have been used as a source of metal or as jewelry by the Berber women, and as the main material in fibulas and pendants. In addition to the silver coins having a satisfactory quality for making jewelry, the uniformity of their form, for example, the repetitive design and decorative surface design, has value. The use of coins in jewelry is widespread (e.g., crosses in Ethiopia and Mexican pesos for Navajo jewelry).

In Agadir and the Berber Museum in Marrakech city, examples of jewelry are available.

![Figure 8. Tasfift](image)

The next type of jewelry comprises fibulas (see Fig. 9), jewelry generally worn by women in everyday situations and on certain special occasions. Fibulas are the most useful type of jewelry and, in general, are carved triangular-, round-, or oval-shaped ornaments that serve as a clamp for clothes, that is, to tie two pieces of material together to form one garment. A fibula is usually worn in a pair, on the right and left sides. The Berber women often wear one or two garments wrapped
around their bodies and tied with a belt. Thus, a fibula is a practical tool because clothes are created without having to cut or sew.

Figure 9. Fibula

7. Meanings and Functions of Berber Jewelry

Traditional jewelry reflects the wealth possessed by the variety of ethnic groups in the world and is a reflection of creativity, customs, traits, and ancestral characters of the ethnic groups that create it. Jewelry is as a means to enhance beauty and has functions: 1) a status badge or symbol, 2) a repellent (talisman), 3) a medical device, 4) a dancer’s costume, and 5) supplies for the afterlife (Husni & Siregar, 2000).

The Berber women’s jewelry is created as a decoration and is symbolic. The jewelry used by the women also identifies them as a member of a specific tribe, is a sign of wealth, reflects cultural traditions, and has power beyond aesthetics. A woman receives jewelry from her mother until she is marred. During the marriage ceremony, the groom assigns his mother and his brother to provide the bride with jewelry, and this jewelry is kept as a dowry.

Geometric designs dominate the jewelry forms: straight or curved lines, squares, circles, diamond shapes, round shapes, and spirals. Flower designs are also common in the jewelry. Notably, animal designs have not often observed, except for shapes of pigeons and birds’ feet shapes. Birds symbolize a feminine impression as is an inverted triangle shape, which is the most common form in the fibula. Humans are never depicted in jewelry because human depiction is prohibited by Islam. The form most commonly observed is the hand shape or Khamsa (Liu, Wataghani, & Watagha, 1975).

Jewelry is also used as a talisman to protect against the influences of evil spirits and has economic value. The Berber women may buy jewelry and then sell the jewelry to support the family’s finances during difficult times. Wearing jewelry is much more than adding accessories to clothing, and represents a means for a woman to express her unique identity.

Ait Khabbash jewelry is made from silver pendants interspersed with plastic beads and colored glass. The pendant is called a Tiferfrin (Fig. 2), a Moroccan Arabic term meaning fly. The Ait Khabbash women are likened to a dove; thus, the name of this pendant is because of the triangular shape of a bird’s tail feathers. The Ait Khabbash also considers the triangle shape in this type of jewelry to refer to the triangular motif in woven textiles such as Tahanut (“room”) (Becker, 2006).

The necklace worn by the Berber children is made of materials consisting of, for example, various colors of beads, amber, shells, and silver coins (Fig. 3). There is a small knife-shaped pendant at the tip of a necklace made of silver or copper, imitating the koummiya. Koummiya is a curved dagger and carved in silver or brass. This symbol was typically worn by Ait Khabbash men until the 1960s (Becker, 2006). The dagger is attached to a rope suspended on the left side to be easily removed by the right hand. The knife pendant connects the boy of the tribe with the history of Ait Khabbash’s men involved
Tazelaght (Fig. 5) feature yellow beads (amber), coin pendants, and coral. The yellow pendants are worn as a protector from the evil spirits that bring disaster. This necklace is also a symbol of a wealthy family. The red beads in this necklace are a symbol of eternity.

Jewelry with Khamsa is often observed in Morocco (Fig. 7). The word Khamsa comes from Arabic and means five. The motive describes the five times of prayer or the five pillars of Islam. Khamsa is a type of palm-shaped talisman famous in the Middle East and North Africa. Khamsa is generally attached jewelry or used wall decoration to fight evil eyes. In Arabic, these evil eyes are called ainul hasud. Khamsa is believed to cause harm or bad luck to someone because of malice. From the pre-Islamic era, the Jewish, Carthaginian, and Roman people assumed that Khamsa had the power to prevent evil. However, Islam adopted the symbol and named it “The Hand of Fatimah” to honor the daughter of the prophet. The Jewish people consider this symbol as a reminder for all to praise God by using the five senses. This jewelry is popular among the Berbers. Khamsa is made of solid silver with additional ornaments and is coated with paint. Many of the ornaments include flowers, scorpions, birds, daggers, or the evil eyes. Each symbol strengthens the protection to the talisman (Dady, 2015).

In Fig. 8, there are coral, amber, silver coins, or nickel beads considered to be an antidote to all forms of evil and a distinctive symbol of the Berbers. A rooster symbol is at the tip of this jewelry that symbolizes fertility for new brides (Sheppard, 2014).

Semiprecious materials, such as garnets, agates, and coral are employed more often as beads, corals, and ambers (used in making ornamental objects). Corals have economic value because they are commonly used in jewelry throughout the Maghreb i.e., Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The best coral reefs are located along the Algerian coast, especially near Bone. Japan exports coral reefs to Europe, which may have reached North Africa in trade. This jewelry also uses amber fossils from the Balkans, the majority of which use Moroccan beads in their jewelry (Liu, Wataghani, & Watagha, 1975). Amber and coral of good quality have high value in some parts of the continents, and these materials are intended to be used as jewelry materials and believed to have magical powers to heal many diseases. Coral reefs from the west Mediterranean may be obtained from Portuguese traders. This material is used in various types of the Berbers’ jewelry. Jewelry that contains amber and coral are worn by children to provide protection. Amber is highly valued in certain regions as a status symbol. Amber originated in the Baltic, the center of amber in the world, and is traded through the Mediterranean, then crosses the Sahara to the West African savanna or through Egypt and the Red Sea to the end of Africa. Kopal, a semi fossil dammar similar to amber, is also traded. Kopal from Senegal is used as jewelry by the Berbers (Publication, 1988).

The tools used to make Berber jewelry are simple, but the manufacturing techniques are not simple. The workshop is located in the medina. The blacksmith’s workplace uses a small stove, with charcoal as the fuel, and a container for forging iron (usually also made of iron) mounted on a large piece of wood. Every goldsmith also has a container for melting metal, plate slabs, hammers, pliers, and a tool usually made of hardened steel by cutting ridges to form or smooth the surface, especially a metal cutting tool to engrave steel that has sharp blades, jewelry materials, and a frame for casting. During the casting process, wet sands are filtered and put into the frame. Next, the main material is pressed into the sand to form a mold.

8. Conclusions

Jewelry is influential in the ethnic identity of the Berbers in Morocco, especially in family customs and traditions: The men i.e., father, husband, or brother figure generally buy jewelry for their wives, sisters, or mothers. The reason for this tradition is that women are prohibited from engaging men considered outside their family circle. Jewelry is the property of the husband; thus, a husband divorces a wife, the jewelry becomes the property of the man. Thereby, jewelry is only lent to the women.

For the Berbers, the main function of jewelry is the ethnic identity of the people. Jewelry is also considered to improve life (especially women’s fertility) and protect against bad influences that can cause havoc, such as infertility and disease. The shapes of the jewelry and the techniques and materials used to make jewelry are functional and support the Berbers’ ethnic identity. The shapes and functions cannot be separated in the art of rural communities. Jewelry is a useful object (e.g., the
function of fibula as a pin and protector of evil forces) as a social symbol (e.g., a sign of membership in a group and a sign of authority), religious symbol (e.g., an expression of psychological or pious meanings), and economic investment.

The Berber women play a critical role in preserving their culture by making and wearing various types of jewelry. The Berbers highly uphold tribal symbols, and women are a symbol of the Berbers’ fertility and ethnic identity. Wearing jewelry serves as an addition to clothes and as a means for a woman to express her distinct tribal identity.

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