

## Tamazgha as Indigeneity-Informed Approach: Transforming Scholarship on Borders and Migration

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### Abstract:

How can an Indigeneity-informed approach reorient scholarship on migration? Drawing from ethnographic data with Imazighen living in the U.S., this article assesses the implications of Tamazgha, arguing for its potential to push the boundaries of current paradigms by 1) decentering and reorienting geocultural spaces; 2) offering a long-overdue Indigenous perspective on mobility and migration; and 3) providing insights about the relational nature of diasporic Indigeneity. The perspectives of Imazighen living abroad offer an understanding of how Tamazgha is produced, sustained, and practiced. Results illuminate a relationship toward the concept of Tamazgha living abroad, produced through everyday interactions with U.S. Americans as well as juxtapositions with other im/migrants, especially those from their own country of birth. In building on the voices of Imazighen and their understanding of Tamazgha through interactions, encounters, and experiences in daily life, this article illustrates how they construct alternative geographies of belonging that can only emerge through the relational context of migration. These findings contribute to a critical interdisciplinary reorientation of geocultural and intellectual space that emphasizes multilingual and Indigeneity-informed perspectives, opening up new theoretical insights on borders, migration, and practices of citizenship.

**Keywords:** diasporic indigeneity, migration, belonging, Amazigh, Tamazgha.

“If you are really *for* Tamazgha, building Tamazgha, then you identify as Amazigh first before a specific country,” reflected Zineb, a 27-year-old artist from Morocco who had lived in the United States for four years. “There is so much investment in nation-states, so that the idea of Tamazgha or identifying as Amazigh, sometimes that comes second for people. So, they will identify as Moroccan first and Amazigh second, but that’s just not me.” Like many Imazighen with whom I spoke, she emphasized that her Amazighity and sense of belonging to Tamazgha had flourished since coming to the United States. Youssef, a 40-year-old delivery driver also from Morocco, described his eye-opening introduction to a grassroots organization in the US, saying, “Moroccans, Algerians, Tuareg folks, everyone is under one flag. There was just the Amazigh flag. And that has a huge, huge significance.” Zineb, Youssef, and many others like them who now live in the U.S. prefer to foreground their Indigenous identity over the country of their passport. They develop a new relationship toward the concept of Tamazgha living abroad, produced through everyday interactions with Americans as well as juxtapositions with other im/migrants, especially those from their own country of birth. This produces novel forms of belonging that only emerge through the relational context of migration.

How can an Indigeneity-informed approach reorient scholarship on migration? Drawing from ethnographic data with Imazighen living in the U.S., this article assesses the implications of Tamazgha, arguing for its potential to push the boundaries of current paradigms by 1) decentering and reorienting geocultural spaces; 2) offering a long-overdue Indigenous perspective on mobility and migration; and 3) providing insights about the relational nature of diasporic Indigeneity. In examining the spaces of Tamazgha both as homeland as well as diaspora, the focus here is on the latter. The discussion builds upon voices of everyday, ordinary Imazighen like Zineb and Youssef—complementing perspectives of scholars, activists, and other experts—as they reflect on their relationship with the concept of Tamazgha through interactions, encounters, and experiences in their daily lives. From these voices, we learn how people construct alternative geographies of belonging and formative meaning in the diaspora, produced in relation to particular people and spaces.

### **1. Critically Unsettling Borders through Indigeneity-Informed Approaches**

The neologism Tamazgha as replacement for Maghreb or North Africa in scholarly practice infuses this place with an Indigenous dimension missing for most of the twentieth century. However, this is not a naive exercise in “thinking away” state borders, nor does it deny the importance of studying contemporary governance practices. Quite the contrary: a reorientation that places Tamazgha at its center enriches our understanding of postcolonial borders, highlighting constructions of empire while also shifting our ability to imagine alternatives. It is thus both a space inhabited by marginalized Imazighen as well as a space under the control of North Africa states and their associated border regimes.

By critically unsettling borders, we can question conventional ideas about mobility across them and productively interrogate concerns related to power, identity, and inequality (Castañeda 2023). This allows us to rethink the spatialities and temporalities associated with borders – for instance, as incorporating both interior and exterior mobility management practices. Borders are neither natural nor fixed objects and they transcend physical boundaries, so that many bordering practices take place far away from points of entry and exit. At the same time, migration processes are not linear, unidirectional, nor easily split into discrete “phases” implying stable epistemic partitions between “here” and “there.” Mobility is neither exceptional nor transgressive, and sedentism the norm; migrants are not simply dislocated, dis-placed, or “uprooted” persons who demonstrate “spatial disobedience” (De Genova 2016). By troubling taken-for-granted models about borders, it is possible to focus instead on patterns fostering migration rooted in ongoing and broader colonial processes, produced and reproduced through laws, policies, bureaucratic procedures, and institutions.

Tamazgha places Indigeneity at the center of examinations of mobility in the region. This counters the conceptual tendency in traditional migration studies to naturalize the regime of nation-states, which produces a concomitant analytical bias – methodological nationalism – privileging the nation-state as the site for social processes to the neglect of other kinds of experiences. However, this is not to argue that a focus on contemporary and historical political boundaries is unfounded; Tamazgha is also a particularly ideal space in which to examine violences associated with statecraft and bordering practices, as the circulation of people throughout this space has been impacted by particular models of governance before and after colonial periods. Over the past century, North Africa has been a land of emigration, with millions of people leaving for Europe and elsewhere through both regular and irregular channels. This has been accompanied by shifts

in border governance in the form of militarized policing; a primary tactic has been the funneling of large numbers of migrants into the treacherous geography of “killing deserts” and “killing seas,” representing a particular form of managed violence (Rosas 2006). As a result, Tamazgha has the dubious distinction of being one of the deadliest frontiers in the world.

There is yet another layer here, of Tamazgha as a site of transit. Since the 1990s, it has emerged as a region through which those traveling to Europe from sub-Saharan and West Africa move. A series of bilateral securitization agreements between the European Union and states that comprise Tamazgha have fostered militarization and pressure to secure borders and limit maritime passages. As a result, the region has taken the role as the “border guard” or “gendarme” of Europe, which has outsourced the management of its borders (Andersson 2014, Belguendouz 2005), as governments of North Africa are forced to utilize migration controls as “geographic rent” to restore their role in regional politics (Natter 2014). While traditional research has examined the two purported “ends” of the migration spectrum – pre-migration decision-making and post-migration incorporation processes, focused on “sending” and “receiving” communities respectively – people in fact experience a series of movements often coupled with unanticipated moments of settlement, and may end up in purported “transit” regions for variable and unknown durations. Thus, rather than simply a place in which people are moving through, it has also become a site of stuckness (Carling 2008) or forced immobility (Stock 2019).

However, this implicitly posits Tamazgha a place in which people “get stuck” or that needs to be “escaped from,” at best tolerated for short periods of time. While ethnographic evidence underscores people’s general desire to continue onward to Europe (Andersson 2014; Bachelet 2019; Stock 2019), the phenomenon of “transit” is nonetheless frequently portrayed as an empty in-betweenness, wandering about, or a waiting process. Some have used the imagery of being “lost” or “stuck between the desert and the sea” (Schapendonk 2007, 2008). Thus, while a focus on transit migration can effectively challenge the traditional dichotomy of mobility and immobility, it must move beyond implicit conceptualization of certain spaces (here: Tamazgha) as “empty,” at best, and undesirable, at worst. This further reinforces the assumption of countries of the Global North as the only, primary, or preferred destinations in the migrant imagination. Particularly in the European context, the idea of “transit country” generally refers to the fringes of the EU, “accentuating further the presumption of the exteriority of these countries and the idea that a ‘natural’ border separates the EU from the rest of the world (Alioua 2017,152).” A focus on spaces like Tamazgha can debunk conventional colonialist ways of conceptualizing migration (Berriane et al 2015) and reorient approaches to the experience of space and mobility.

## **2. Indigenous Mobilities in Migration Studies**

A second contribution of Tamazgha for migration scholarship rests in its ability to foreground the experiences of Indigenous peoples in postcolonial politics of mobility, identity, and place. This region, at the center of prominent conversations about migration, parallels other geopolitical spaces with highly militarized borders, where mobility is impacted by colonial structures dependent on the exclusion of Indigenous peoples (e.g., North America, Australia). Reconfiguring such geographies by centering Indigeneity offers potential for new epistemic insights and theoretical innovation in understanding the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in contemporary migration processes as extensions of legacies of conquest and colonization.

However, Indigenous Studies remain largely focused on the territories peoples claim as homelands. This begs the question: with increased migration, how are collective repertoires of

meaning mobile for Indigenous peoples who cross borders? Indigenous status further raises particular and often overlooked challenges to inclusive citizenship, as state practices of defining migrants rarely include indigeneity (Riley & Carpenter 2021). Indigenous peoples' relationships with land generally predate the contemporary formation of states, with the establishment of borders disrupting religious practices, familial relationships, subsistence rights, and traditional mobility patterns. As migrants, they carry with them and face in the receiving country multiple, intersecting forms of ethnoracial and linguistic marginalization.

Yet international migration also provides new “anchors” for identity beyond those centered on the nation-state, as they are formed through new spaces of social cohesion (Delugan 2010). Indigeneity becomes (re)defined through the process of migration and in a transnational context in a process called diasporic Indigeneity, a concept that, at first glance, may appear to be a contradiction in terms. However, Indigenous and diaspora identities constantly remake one another through new articulations, rather than existing as fixed identities. This requires an intellectual departure from reductive assumptions about Indigenous attachments to place, especially about the necessity for continued or permanent residence, and instead theorizing Indigeneity in relation to context (Li 2000, 2014; Clifford 2013). In doing so, scholars can engage with the complexity of experiences that emerge detached from territory or place, so that “diasporic displacements, memories, networks, and reidentifications are recognized as integral to tribal, aboriginal, native survival and dynamism (Clifford 2013, 71).”

Another major focus of existing scholarship is on the Global Indigenous Movement and politics of negotiation in recognized international settings (Harris 2020), leading to the question: to what extent do Amazigh in the diaspora embrace the Global Indigenous Movement? Consistent representation of Imazighen as North Africa's Indigenous people at international fora hosted by the United Nations, European Union, or African Union has underscored the existential threats to this cultural and linguistic group. While diaspora associations underscore similarities between the struggles of Imazighen and those of Indigenous peoples globally, positioning their claims within the broader assemblage of Indigenous Peoples worldwide (Silverstein 2004, 2015), ideas of Indigeneity are also reworked in the diaspora. Through these dynamic processes, groups resist simply occupying an “Indigenous slot,” (Li 2000) or simplified frame within preconfigured regimes of representation. The positioning as Indigenous legitimizes Amazigh claims to broader ideals associated with the Global Indigenous Movement, but the particular rights they pursue have depended on specific regional, historical, and national contexts. Because Indigeneity is relational and context-specific, “the global Indigenous discourse articulates with key parts of the Amazigh movement's agenda but doesn't fit with others, leading some to reject it (Harris 2020, 2120)” — for instance, in cases where Indigeneity is understood through an essentialist lens as ethnocultural (or racialized) category in North America, or in the context of the francophone centering of *autochtonie*. The overwhelming focus of Amazigh Indigenous activism remains calls for states to recognize, foster, and guarantee the right to language and culture, rather than challenging the sovereignty of state borders.

### **3. Articulating Indigeneity in the Diaspora**

The study of diasporas and their transnational social, political, and economic practices has been the subject of much research since the 1990s, yet a focus on Indigenous diasporas has lagged conspicuously behind (Clifford 2013, Harris 2022). Thus, a third contribution of Tamazgha as concept relates to how Indigenous identity is articulated, experienced, and upheld among people

living away from their homelands. Migration studies can further insights about the relational nature of Indigenous identity, grounded in an understanding of belonging as contingent and processual. Tamazgha is a particularly productive case with which to examine these processes because of geopolitical referents that elide conventional constructions of state-territory configurations. Migration not only provides new anchors for identity beyond those centered on the nation-state, formed through new spaces of social cohesion, but also (re)defines Indigeneity in transnational context.

Across history and space, national formations have been influenced by diaspora mobilizations. It has been said that “[t]he Amazigh diaspora cannot be conceptually dissociated from the Amazigh movement (Harris 2020, 2116).” Initially emerging as an intellectual defense of language and culture – particularly among diaspora in France – there has been increasingly a focus on Amazigh Indigenous politics, territoriality, and the mobilization and distribution of resources. Ongoing processes of mobilization and identity (re)formation, actively and continually produce Tamazgha through structures, events, and practices. Across Europe and North America, people are united in hundreds of organizations with an interest in preserving and promoting a shared vision of Amazighity. Thus, Tamazgha territoriality and consciousness is produced through the practices of the diaspora and its assemblage of people, organizations, ideas, and materials as they define, construct, and produce a collective sense of Amazighity, while new forms of solidarity and citizenship are created abroad precisely through the framing of Indigenous identity (Harris 2020, 2022). As part of this maturation process, there has also been a recognition of differences and, in some cases, shifts away from a pan-Amazigh unified geography to more fragmented and regionally specific constructions of territory (e.g., Kabylia, Rif) (Harris 2022). In addition to signaling a fluid group identity over time, these developments further challenge existing state-territory configurations. Yet despite fragmentations, the size, longevity, and continued relevance of the Amazigh diaspora movement points to its ongoing relevance.

Revitalization of the Tamazight language is perhaps the central identity claim of the Amazigh movement, including in the diaspora. Language practice – and the maintenance or revitalization of heritage languages – is a key area in which an Indigeneity framing can illuminate transnational experience. Accounting for experiences of migrant speakers of Indigenous languages offers opportunities to further inclusive citizenship practices in addition to reconfiguring conceptions of space, territory, and belonging, disrupting conventional ideas about transnationalism. It was through activism and knowledge production related to the Tamazight language that group identity and territorial definitions first emerged, and Amazigh Diasporic Indigeneity has broadened to be inclusive of all Tamazight speakers. As such, it is highly enmeshed in larger discourses about linguistic rights in conversation with other Indigeneities. Against widespread state repression of Tamazight in their home countries, language maintenance connects Imazighen to Tamazgha.

Indeed, Tamazight revitalization is even taking unprecedented manifestations in places where Amazigh migration is more recent, such as Scandinavian countries and North America. Indigenous language revitalization in many of these new contexts is heavily fostered by grassroots organizations seeking to preserve and sustain language and culture (Hermes 2012). The use of Tifinagh has also become increasingly popular for symbolic use in the diaspora, representing a key vehicle for social media activism (Mnouer 2021). Tamazight linguistic revitalization is one of the key expressions of a uniquely Amazigh diaspora and has thus played a crucial role in the articulation of the Tamazgha as a larger homeland, opening up possibilities to collaborate beyond North African nation-states.

#### 4. Ethnographic Evidence from the Diaspora: Imazighen in the United States

The perspectives of Imazighen living abroad are necessary to assess the implications of Tamazgha for studies of migration, and specifically for how it is produced, sustained, and practiced in the diaspora. As part of a long-term ethnographic study on the experiences of Imazighen living in the United States,<sup>1</sup> we interviewed 50 people who self-identified as such. Semi-structured interviews lasting 1-3 hours were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Recruitment relied on snowball sampling, in which participants aided researchers in identifying additional participants. Unlike studies based on the perspectives of scholars, activists, or those engaged with community-based organizations or transnational associations, this approach resulted in data that reflects the experiences of a broader slice of “everyday,” non-expert Imazighen. Participants had lived in the United States between 2 and 35 years (average of 15 years), resided in thirteen different states, and represented a wide range of immigration experiences. As part of the project’s commitment to the concept of Tamazgha, participants were not recruited based on nationality but rather self-identification as Amazigh; this resulted in a sample of individuals born in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Niger, and Tunisia.

To understand their relationship with the concept of Tamazgha, transcripts of interviews were analyzed with the following questions in mind: How is Tamazgha articulated and represented in the diaspora? What kinds of interactions, encounters, and experiences do people describe when reflecting on Tamazgha in their everyday lives? Below, the voices of Imazighen are inserted in the conversation about diasporic Indigeneity, offering a small snapshot of major themes that emerged.

One of the most prominent topics related to feelings of affinity beyond (or, rather, across) country of origin, with a reference to shared Amazigh identity. Many participants had made friends with Imazighen from countries other than their own and explained that this was because shared Indigeneity mattered more to them than a shared passport. For example, Moussa, a 35-year-old engineer from Niger who has lived in the US for 11 years, said, “I hang out with some people *because* of the Amazigh flag. You know, that’s like an attraction, like you feel comfortable when you see the flag. It’s the one thing that makes you approach them. But when someone is raising the Algerian or the Moroccan flag, it’s like, okay, well, it’s not someone I connect with.” In Moussa’s case, such nationalist identifications deterred him; originating from Niger, he had a smaller community of compatriots in the United States to begin with, and thus actively drew upon his Amazighity as a means of identifying and connecting with others.

In another case, 40-year-old Youssef, from Morocco, had actively sought out community organizations for social connections, but was selective in his approach. He said, “The organizations I visited, they were fully focused on Amazigh identity, not folklorization. There were Moroccans, Algerians, Tuareg folks, and everyone is under one flag.” Youssef went on to explain that he had had disappointing experiences with organizations focused specifically on the Moroccan diaspora, which he described as promoting particular political interests; here, he describes his “home flag” as the Amazigh one. After living in France for several years, Youssef had also learned that many diaspora organizations focused on what he referred to as “folklorization,” that is, the celebration of cultural markers (holidays, dress, music), but without an explicit commitment to engaging with

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<sup>1</sup> This study followed human subjects protection protocols to protect the rights, anonymity, and welfare of participants and was approved by University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (Study# 004168). I gratefully acknowledge my research assistant, Amine Bit, for his collaboration with data collection.

Indigenous identity. In the United States, this was something he actively sought out because of its importance to him.

Other participants elaborated that they felt a distinct disconnect from compatriots if those people did not share a cultural and, especially, linguistic background. Ayoub, a 27-year-old teacher from Morocco, who has lived in the United States for two years, reflected that, “Even if I meet someone from Morocco, but they speak Arabic, I wouldn't go very much along with them compared to someone who speaks Tamazight. I mean, I would still talk to them, but I feel like we don't have much in common and it just makes the conversation weird, or you don't have much to talk about. The only thing that would make me connect with someone is the same language.” Similarly, Ahmed, a 37-year-old utility worker from Algeria, who has lived in the U.S for 17 years, stated, “The truth is, just because someone is from your country, it can be really hard to be friends. There are people from Algeria here; I invite them to my house and when they see I'm singing in Kabyle, and the dress is from Tizi Ouzou, the couscous is a little different because, you know it's the recipe of my family, then they really don't show that they are happy. But if someone is Amazigh, even from Morocco, it's easier to be comfortable with them, easier because he will be very happy celebrating that and he knows the language.”

Several participants shared experiences of marginalization back home, and expressed that living in the United States offered them more freedom to express their identity. Hassan, 37, works in IT, has lived in US 15 years. He stated, “When I grew up in Morocco, I really did not like being an Amazigh. I tried my best to hide my identity, because at least when we were growing up, it was associated with so many negative things, like you are from the countryside, backward. But I had an accent, so people would always know. I was not very proud. When my mom would talk to me, I would always be embarrassed. So, when I came to the United States, I thought, ‘I don't have to be someone I'm not. I can be proud of who I am.’” Hassan embraced his Amazigh identity precisely because of moving to the United States, where he no longer felt marginalized and “embarrassed.” He had even taught himself Tifinagh, something he recalled was not imparted to him in Morocco and that he had never had an interest in until recently.

In other cases, people had no sense of Amazighity whatsoever until they arrived in the U.S. Zahra is a 34-year-old medical professional who came as a teen. She admitted, “I didn't even realize I was Amazigh until I moved to the United States,” emphasizing that she had never fully recognized the meaning of this term. “When you grow up in Morocco, ok, you're Amazigh, fine, but then for political reasons, the whole pan-Arab nationalism situation, you never get to celebrate your culture. Even though we speak Tamazight, not Arabic.” Zahra had a revelation when she encountered the possibilities associated with social networking: “When we came to the US, I was on Facebook one day and it asked me to add my home country to my profile. And then a flag popped up, it was the Amazigh flag! Tamazgha. And like, I've never seen that one before. Wow!” This experience led Zahra to further explore this identity and connect with others; today, she volunteers to teach courses in Tamazight to people in the U.S.

Another theme related to building Tamazgha through everyday practice, as opposed to active participation in community-based organizations. Zineb, the 27-year-old artist quoted at the start of this article, described herself as someone who strongly supported “building Tamazgha,” in her words. However, she was not interested in participating in any Amazigh organizations; rather, she had built her own personal networks through social media and attending live music shows, producing a meaningful Tamazgha outside of the expected formal channels. In fact, music was a unifier referenced by many participants as critical to their identity in the diaspora. Yassine, a 30-year-old building manager from Algeria who had lived in the US for only a year, described

attending a concert associated with a Yennayer (New Year's) celebration and explained afterward: "I didn't know what to expect. I was like, 'Oh wow, unbelievable, I didn't know there was that much people here!' The people organizing, they are not Algerian, but we have the same culture, Amazigh. We speak Tamazight. All those people, half of them are Moroccans, half of them are Algerians, it's just a mix. It was amazing. We have same culture. There are different dialects, but we have the same flag." As Moussa explained, laughing, "You know, I'm more likely to catch a show by Tinariwen or Imarhan here in the States than back home, anyway." In mentioning these popular bands, he emphasizes opportunities available to him to engage with aspects of Amazighity in the United States that were always outside of his reach in his home country, thus transpos the spaces and possibilities of Tamazgha into the diaspora.

## Conclusion

Tamazgha represents a critical interdisciplinary reorientation of geocultural and intellectual space that emphasizes multilingual and Indigeneity-informed perspectives. In doing so, it opens up theoretical insights on borders, migration, and practices of citizenship. Here, I have outlined the possibilities for innovation by 1) decentering and reorienting geocultural space(s); 2) offering a long-overdue Indigenous perspective on mobility and migration; and 3) providing insights about the relational nature of diasporic Indigeneity.

In relation to this last point—reimagining Indigeneity in the spaces of Tamazgha as diaspora—this article has offered a small sample of voices from Imazighen living in the United States to illustrate how they engage with the concept. This illustrates how it functions in this context and, in doing so, links together ideas of migration, mobility, and the space of Tamazgha. Many felt a distinct disconnect from compatriots if those people did not share an Amazigh cultural and, especially, linguistic background. Several also had experienced marginalization in their home countries and felt that life in the U.S. offered them more space to express their identity; some explained that they had had no sense of Amazighity at all until they im/migrated. From this snapshot of voices, we learn how some Imazighen construct alternative geographies of belonging and formative meaning in the diaspora, produced in relation to particular people and spaces, and often in dialogue with organizations, social media, art, and music. People's self-identification as Indigenous represents "a positioning which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle. The conjunctures at which (some) people come to identify themselves as indigenous, [...] are the contingent products of agency and the cultural and political work of articulation (Li 2000, 151)." Indigeneity, thus, is always lived, practiced, and relational (Hunt 2014). At the same time, Indigeneity is understood variably in different places, especially as it relates to effects of marginalization; there is no singular global experience of Indigeneity, which frequently limits comparisons across space and time.

The construction of an alternative geography of North Africa – a relational geography that extends to the diaspora – opens new possibilities for belonging and flourishing in countries of settlement. Diaspora identities are shaped while also shaping conceptions of space, territory, culture, and belonging, disrupting along the way conventional ideas about transnationalism. In a context where Indigenous peoples continue to confront colonialist boundaries of many kinds, it is critical to open our imaginations to how alternative territorialities, spaces, and belongings are formed.



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