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Morocco is an incredibly diverse country, both historically and geographically. While it is without a doubt part of Africa, its location at the very northwestern tip has to some extent separated it from the rest of the continent. The climate of the north is very different from the south. Here the mediterranean influence is distinct. Lush valleys with fig trees, ancient cobblestone streets, and 'european' weather mark this part of the country. On the Atlantic coast there is a fertile plain. Much of the central part of the country is fertile as well, with widespread agriculture. Moving south everything changes. Farmland gives way to desert and the towering Atlas mountains begin to appear. The Atlas range is one of the highest in Africa, with an average elevation of 11,000 feet. It marks the border with Algeria, and for many years has protected Morocco from the political tumult in that country. Both the mountains and the desolate Sahara have at times acted as geographical barriers and impediments to movement. They have also, however, been at times great assets strategically and in trade.

Its location directly across the Strait of Gibraltar, only 6 miles from Spain, made Morocco a prime jumping off point for European explorers looking to infiltrate the continent. Indeed, throughout the ages Morocco has been such a target for foreign interest that its history reads like a history of the entire region - from Phoenicians to Greeks, Romans, Christians and Arabs, every culture of note has had some influence on the country.

The first people to inhabit the area were the Berbers. It is tempting to call them natives, but most likely they are not indigenous. Most books say the Berbers appeared around the second millennium B.C. but fail to mention where they came from. In any case, the Berbers had developed their own

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language and culture long before the Arabs or Europeans arrived. Their language is Tamazight, in which they refer to themselves as Amazigh or “free men”. The word ‘Berber’ is a Greek invention meaning barbarian or foreigner. I will use it in this paper because its easier to spell. By the time the outside world started showing up, the Berbers had spread themselves over the whole of North Africa, through the modern day countries of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Many towns in North Africa bear Tamazight names to this day, for example Agadir, Tetouan, Oran, Tamanrasset, etc.

Berber society is largely sedentary and agricultural. There are some nomadic tribes who wander the desert on camels, but for the most part Berbers like to stay put. Traditionally, they have divided themselves up into small farming villages that stay mostly independent from each other. These villages “jealously guard their autonomy and resist state authority” (<http://ngilegacy.com/amazigh.htm>). However, at certain points in history the Berbers have grouped together to form unified kingdoms.

Two of the greatest Berber kingdoms were Numidia and Mauretania, located in present day Algeria and Morocco. Numidia was a vibrant civilization by the sixth century B. C when the Phoenicians started arriving. The Phoenecians founded Carthage and it soon grew into a huge port city with a large army. Suprisingly, the Berbers and Carthaginians lived mostly in peace with each other and there was no major conflict. During the Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage, Numidia first allied with Carthage but then wisely switched sides when it looked like Rome was going to win.

Mauretania and Numidia came under Roman control in the 2nd century B. C. There was minor resistance but for the most part it was a peaceful and symbiotic relationship, with the Romans allowing the Berbers to continue with their cultural and tribal ways provided they grew food for the Roman armies. By the end of the 5th century, as the Roman empire began to decline, the African provinces were overrun by the Vandals. The Arabs invaded around 685 A. D, bringing order and islam.

The Arabs drove many Berber tribes inland, away from the coastal plain, and up into the Atlas mountains. Even today the Berber population is concentrated in the more mountainous areas. Berbers “ had the choice between living in the mountains, resisting Arab dominance, or moving into the Arab community, where Arab language and culture were dominating.” (<http://i-cias.com/e.o/berbers.htm>)

For centuries after the Arab invasion there were conflicts between the Berbers and their new rulers. Gradually, the Berbers adopted the religion Islam and integrated into the new society. However, there has always been an attempt among the Berber people to preserve their own unique culture and not be totally assimilated by the Arab influence.

The relationship between Berber peoples and Arabs is a strained one. Today Arabic is the official language, but a full quarter of the population speaks a Berber dialect, of which there are over 300. The worship of Islam helps to unite the two groups, but even then the style of Islam practiced varies widely.

There were times when Berbers and Arabs came together for a common purpose. In the early 8th century they unified to invade and conquer much of Spain. The Arabs did a lot of the fighting, but it was the Berbers who stayed on to form the great Moorish civilization of Al-Andalus. Andalus was the golden age of the Berber people. They had brought with them silk, rice, sugar cane, ginger, cotton, lemons. With so much great food its no wonder Spain flourished under their rule! In Moorish Spain, education was available to everyone – even women. Women became lawyers, professors, doctors, even rulers. The Umayyad dynasty, which ruled from 780-1031 is often credited for taking Europe out of the Dark Ages. Scholars translated thousands of ancient books into Arabic, preserving them from destruction. Scientists made great discoveries in chemistry, astronomy, medicine. Architecture, art, and city planning was refined immensely.

This flowering of civilization came abruptly to an end during the Christian crusades. The city of Valencia fell to Christendom in 1238, Cordova in 1239, and Seville in 1260. Moors who were not slaughtered for being “infidels” were banished from Spain.

Today, those of Berber descent or ethnicity make up anywhere between 60-80% of Morocco’s population. Only about half of these people actually identify themselves as Berbers, though. No census has been taken, so it is hard to come up with accurate numbers. Most still live near the mountains in their tight-knit villages. Their oral tradition of spoken poetry is still very much alive as is their art, as evidenced by beautiful woven fabrics and haunting music combining bagpipes, oboe, and African drums.