

Terms of Reference in the Berber History, Tradition and Art in Maghreb

Mihaela Bratu*

Abstract: The present article aims at presenting the mysticism and beauty of Maghreb mirrored in the art and traditions of the Berbers, Kabylie and Tuareg people, who brought a generous contribution to the development and maintenance of their artistic and traditional values from the North African land.

Keywords: Algeria, Berber, Maghreb, Amazigh

A short introduction of the Berber people

Maghreb (in Arab برغمل, meaning “The West” – derived from the Arab verb “gharaba”, meaning “to set” = Sun) consists of three North African countries, such as Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and partially of Egypt, Libya and Mauritania, which have many common features, taking into account their history. An old Arabian proverb says that “Maghreb is a holy bird. Its body is Algeria, its right wing Tunisia, and its left wing, Morocco.”¹

Michael Brett, Lecturer in African History at London University, states in his article entitled “Berber people” as follows: “The Berbers, self-name Amazigh, plural Imazighen, are the descendants of the pre-Arabian inhabitants of North Africa. They live in scattered communities all around Maghreb region and speak various Amazigh languages, belonging to the Afro – Asian family. The two largest populations of Berbers are found in Algeria and Morocco, where large portions of the population descended from the Berbers, but only some of them identify themselves as Amazigh. Roughly, one-fourth of the population in Algeria is estimated to be Berber, while the Berbers are estimated to make up more than three-fifths of the population in Morocco.

From about 2000 BCE, Berber (Amazigh) languages spread westward from the Nile valley across northern Sahara into the Maghrib. By the 1st millennium BCE, their speakers were the native inhabitants of the vast region encountered by the Greeks, Carthaginians, and Romans. A series of Berber people – Mauri, Masaesyli, Massyli, Musulami, Gaetuli, Garamantes

* Visual arts teacher, Scoala Gimnaziala cu clasele V-VIII Liteni, Iasi, Scoala Gimnaziala cu clasele I-VIII Rusi, Iasi, visual artist.

¹ <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magreb>

– they gave rise to Berber kingdoms under the Carthaginian and Roman influence. Of those kingdoms, Numidia and Mauritania were formally incorporated in the Roman Empire in the late 2nd century B.C., but others appeared in late antiquity following the Vandal invasion in 429 A.D. and the Byzantine reconquest (533 A.D.) only to be suppressed by the Arabian conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries A.D.”²

During the unification of the indigenous groups into one large group, it began the islamization of the Berber people, thus creating Berber dynasties. “Their successors, the Marinids at Fès (now in Morocco), the Ziyanids at Tlemcen (now in Algeria), and the Hafsids at Tunis (now in Tunisia) and Bijaya (now Bejaïa, Algeria) – continued to rule until the 16th century.”³

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), in Arabian “اتحاد المغرب العربي” *Ittiḥād al-Maghrib al-‘Arabī*, is a regional association of states in North Africa, founded on the 17th of February 1989. The Union is formed from Algeria, Libya, Mauritania and Morocco (except for Occidental Sahara) and Tunisia. Its headquarters are in Rabat, Morocco. AMU was created for the purpose of promoting economic cooperation and cultural political cooperation, both internal and external. As a result of this union, various regional projects that had been planned for a long time could be developed.



Fig. 1 Old Maghreb map, 1889

Signs and symbols in Berber art

From the Fezzan and Tassili petroglyphs, from Libya and Algeria, to the Neolithic paintings from Morocco, the North African Muslim artists rejoice in an abundance of art that continues to influence their work. They

² Michael Brett, *Berber people*, retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Berber>.

³ *Ibidem*.

use traditional signs and symbols in their art to protest against colonial politics that imposed foreign cultures and languages upon them and also as a metaphor of the following cutting of freedom in the post – colonial era.

For the Muslim artist or crafter, combining geometrical patterns represents, without doubt, the most intellectually satisfying activity, because it can be the most direct expression of a certain concept, of the Divine Unity, underlying, then, the endless variety of the world itself (“al – wahda – fi l – kathra”⁴). A favourite way of merging geometrical patterns is to create a network of combinations of rosettes, covering various surfaces.

In Ancient times, the Sun was represented as an ensemble of symbols and emblems, such as wheels. In the Arab world, the symbolism of the sun is entirely enveloped in the symbol of the circle and that of the circumference. The symbolism of the circle is overlapped by the one of the eternity and continuous renewal. In other words, the symbol of the Sun (in Arab “shams”) seems to be the Ancient Semite name of the God of Sun from Sumer, Utu⁵.

After the emergence of Christianity, the sun, also known as “the firmament’s peacock” in Persian mysticism, became the most representative allegory for the Divine Glory, the triumph, the purity and the clarity.⁶ “The Koranic symbolism of the sun is more concrete, the sun being one of the heavenly bodies that accepted the divinity of Allah and prayed to Him”.⁷

The Circle is one of the most widespread geometrical elements in the Orient, often found under the form of rosettes with several petals. This symbol dates back to pre-Islamic civilizations and it is mostly used in embroideries, wooden decorations, architecture and amulets. Aside from their aesthetic purpose, the rosettes also have a more prolific meaning, being used against the “evil eye”.⁸ Divided in degrees, they represent time, the circle and the idea of time, giving birth to the representation of the wheel.

Another symbol, the Rhombus is representative of the feminine gender, as well as of fertility. In the Berber world, it is found as decoration on

⁴ Burckhardt Titus, *Art of Islam: Language and meaning*, World Wisdom Publishing House, 2009, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁵ Bonoist Luc, *Signs, symbols and myths*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1995, p. 55.

⁶ Chebal Malek, *Dictionary of Muslim symbols: Rites, mysticism and civilization*, Paris, Albin Michel Publishing House, 1995.

⁷ Malek Chebel, *Dictionnaire des symboles musulmans*, Editions Albin Michel S.A., Paris, 1995, p. 262.

⁸ “Aïñ”, “Tîñ” (in Algerian Berber) – The evil eye symbolizes the hatred and the envy of the other: it can cause failing, abortions, injuries, maybe even sickness and death. One of the ways people can protect themselves from the evil eye is to denigrate the very object or person, by using euphemisms towards them that devalue them. In the countryside, people hang vertebrates in front of the property (in Kabylie these vertebrates are called “ighes n-tezli”). They also plant scarecrows in the fields and hang horseshoes by the main entrance. If none of these measures are successful, they can always say the phrase “khamsa fi- aïñik, rabbî ya’mik”, meaning “Five in your eyes, so that God blinds you” – *Ibidem*, pp. 262 – 263.

clay pots and carpets, being often used by artisans and crafters not only in Algeria, but also in Tunisia and Morocco.

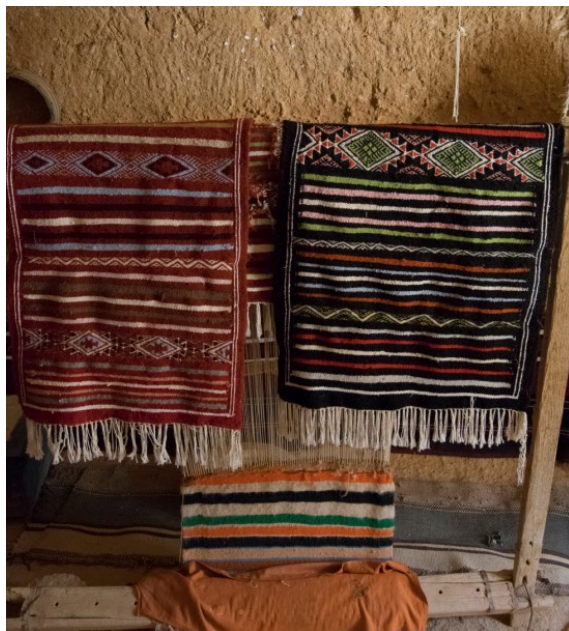


Fig. 2 Decorative rugs from a Berber house in Tunisia

From all the grains, the wheat is considered the most noble one. It has been given a sacred meaning by the Arab, Berber, Persian and Turkish people, being one of the basic nutrients in those lands. It symbolizes growth and renewal, as well as the Cosmic cycles of the Earth. In Algeria it actually symbolizes power. As a matter of fact, an old Algerian saying states: “That who has wheat can borrow flour”, meaning that it can only be borrowed to the rich ones⁹.

In addition to that, henna is an aromatic, pharmacological and ceremonious plant, with confirmed astringent properties, which is used by the Arab women with the cosmetic purpose of dyeing their hair and, in some cases, their hands. It is considered that its perfume is that of Paradise; it is also used in purification rites¹⁰.

The pomegranate is one of the fruits that has inspired symbolists the most, meaning fertility and benediction. As for its frequency, this symbol is found in all the Arab – Mediterranean and Islamic area, from Marrakesh to Mosul, where it inaugurates the time of the cultivation of land and the time of weddings. The pomegranate is of Semite origins, as it can be found in various

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Images and symbols: essay on the magical – religious symbolism*, Humanitas Publishing House, 2013.

¹⁰ Chebal Malek, *Dictionary of Muslim symbols: Rites, mysticism and civilization*, Paris, Albin Michel Publishing House, 1995, p.197.

religious monuments, from the columns of Solomon's Temple to the stars dedicated to the Libyan deities, the symbol dating back to Greek and Latin Antiquity.

The painted ceramics in the Maghrebian Antiquity are, according to Gabriel Camps¹¹, decorated in various ways, illustrating stripes painted in red over white in a gliding motion, uninterrupted stripes covered with triangles with tips always pointing up. Usually, ceramic is filled with two or three different alternating systems (the most frequent ones can be observed on the back of the chess boards). Between the triangles, the spaces are filled with patterns placed in the interior or superior side, which can only occupy a small part of the design. The Kabyl artists work with their palms and fingers, introducing motifs found in nature as being elements of their art.



Fig. 3 Ceramic vessel from Algeria



Fig. 4 Oil lamp from Algeria

Besides their practical and decorative aspect, the Kabyle crafts also had a magical/religious function. The art of the Berbers is situated in an emotional aesthetic space that impresses through all of its signs and undeciphered codes used on ceramics, jewellery, carpets and attire¹². The decorative motifs show an abundance of ideas, philosophical interpretations of the world, life, death, work and hope, being based on various leitmotifs. The first one is the geometrical figure, consisting of triangles, rhombs, circles, lines and dots of various sizes, which all represent actions from the

¹¹ Gabriel Camps (May 20, 1927 – September 7, 2002) was a French historian, founder of the *Encyclopédie berbère* and considered as a prestigious scholar in Berber historical studies – from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Camps.

¹² <http://chroniquesalgeriennes.unblog.fr/2016/02/05/artisanat-berbere-signes-et-symboles-part-2-murs-tapis-tatouages-bijoux/>

lives of the Kabylie people. For example, a *fibula*¹³ is not only used for its beauty, but it can also contain a protection talisman, or it can indicate the fact that the girl is promised to someone or married.



Fig. 6 A silver pair of *fibula*



Fig. 7 Berber musician from Sousse, 20th Century

Another important aspect of the Berber art is the chromatics, which is composed mostly of red, yellow and black. The signs and symbols of the Kabylie people are similar with those present in the art of the Berbers in Tunisia and Morocco.

The Kabylie women from Algeria paint with their fingers on ceramic and on the walls of their homes, using various signs and symbols which are considered to have healing qualities or magical attributes. They are believed to protect against the evil eye and against catastrophes. For this reason, these ancient symbols found their way to the contemporary art as well.

Some of the most used signs in Kabyl art are:

1. The moon and the stars, representing the image of a woman with her son
2. Two triangles, like a chair, representing the man and the woman
3. The egg, in the form of a white triangle filled with signs, is a symbol of birth and eternity
4. Two triangles combined with the Σ letter represent union during the sexual act – the sacred function of maturity.¹⁴

¹³ An ornate, oversized clip, usually made of silver, which is used by the Berber people to hold together a robe.

¹⁴ <http://chroniquesalgeriennes.unblog.fr/2016/02/05/artisanat-berbere-signes-et-symboles-part-2-murs-tapis-tatouages-bijoux>.

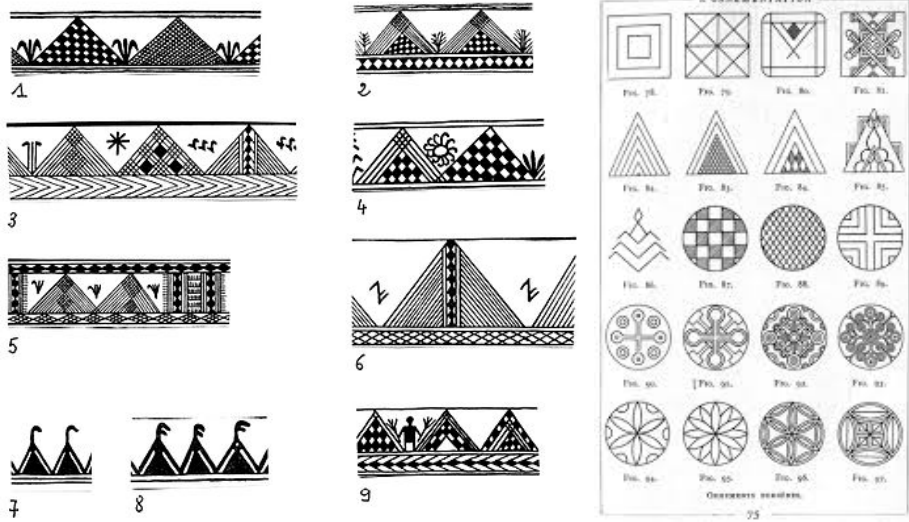


Fig. 8, 9 Amazigh symbols

We must mention that drawings created and shaped by the esoteric Berber women send the watcher to a world of mystery which is hard to decipher. The Kabylie woman protects, with the help of magical rites, her home and love, also the well – being in her home, including these actions symbolized by various patterns and her art. Ceramics in this region can only be created by women, who give them a rare and beautiful simplicity. The use of clay mixed with cow's milk and a type of ashes \give it a lighter or even white colour. The pottery has various shapes: small barrels, jars named *ikoufan*, amphoras, plates ornamented with flowers and leaves.

The Kabyle ceramic art started making its presence felt ever since the middle and the end of the Bronze Era, the vessels having flat bottoms and encrusted signs. The author Jean – Bernard Mareau identifies the main signs used by the ceramists, discovering the painted stones from Mas d-'Azil¹⁵, Hituit hieroglyphs and Sumerian writings. Therefore, comparing four drums, he realized that the Numidian, Tifnagh, Fennician, Iberic, Etrusc and Lating writings are, with all their alphabethical sculptures, all identical.

¹⁵ Le Mas-d'Azil is a commune in the Ariège department in south western France, containing a cave that is the typesite for the prehistoric Azilian culture. – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Mas-d%27Azil.



Fig. 10 Tifinagh alphabeth

Paradoxically, the ethnographers and archeologists admitted only in 1990 that in the Kabylarian countryside, there are two great currents of painted ceramics from Classic Orient. The Kabylarian ceramic which are modelled by hand is a survival of the pre-Carthaginense techniques. The ceramics painted on a red background are of Neolithic origins and the white ceramics appear in Sicily at the end of the Neolithic Age, as well as in the Bronze Age.

In the 20th century, the Moroccan artisans continued to keep the traditional crafts with distinct influences from the Andalusians. The Moroccan artisan is respectfully referred to as *mu'alin* or master – artisan. The competences of these traditional crafters are appreciated by contemporary artists as well, who freely borrow techniques and meanings from traditional crafts, re-inventing and incorporating them in their own work.

Farid Belkahia's art¹⁶ is entirely based on natural materials that he finds in his region, replacing chemical pigments with natural ones and using them on surfaces such as copper, ceramic, wood, handmade paper and lamb's skin. The stretched or irregular surfaces of the "canvas" form the background of his ginormous artworks, consisting of signs and symbols of an archaic language. "The processing of the work on both copper and leather is for Belkahia an important aspect of the creation of his art, and his work typically highlights not only the organic shapes that make up the content of the work, but also the texture dimensionality of the materials themselves. Belkahia's work typically uses organic shapes that recall bodies or corporality. Many of his works use triangles, arrows and hands, and often involve questions of sexuality. He often employs Tifinagh letters from the Amazigh alphabet and symbols taken from the traditional visual culture within Morocco, derived from rugs, tattoos and architecture. Part of the interest in his work, however, is the way in which these symbols are re-constituted and re-imagined to become an integrant part of his modernist visual vocabulary."¹⁷ Particularly, the artist uses magical numbers (for instance, number five) representing Fatima's hand¹⁸, as a symbol of protection against the evil eye.



Fig. 11 Untitled, copper, 190 x 86 cm, 196 Fig. 12 "Hand", dye on leather, 150x125 cm, 1980

¹⁶ Farid Belkahia (1934–2014) considered as one of the founders of contemporary art in Morocco, invested his efforts from the 1960s on in artistic research regarding multiple forms of expression and a process of fundamental research into new modes of accessing modernity – https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farid_Belkahia.

¹⁷ *Farid Belkahia*, written by Holiday Powers for Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World. <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Farid-Belkahia.aspx>.

¹⁸ The fourth daughter of the Prophet Mahommed and his wife Khadija; the wife of Ali, Mohammed's cousin, the fourth calif of Islam, and mother of two sons: Hassan and Houssain. She is celebrated by the Sunni Muslim as a sacred woman, protector of the people, while the Shia muslims believe she had a shining, vibrant personality – Chebal Malek, *Dictionary of Muslim symbols: Rites, Mysticism and Civilization*, Paris, Albin Michel Publishing House, 1995, p. 161.

An imaginative discourse of signs often undermines and perturbs the common methods of speech. For example, in the works of Rachid Koraichi¹⁹, marked by the tradition of Sufi spirituality, writing and signs hold sacred importance and calligraphy is often a significant backbone of his work. Inspired by the Arabic calligraphy, the artist has created in some ways his own scrip or graphic languages, that include Amazighi and Tuareg letters and also mystical symbols. This calligraphy is often abstracted with these repetitions, becoming signs or figures. The artist has showed for a long time interest in the the Sufi poet and scholar Rumi, whose poems inspired multiple installations in Koraichi's long – term project "The path of roses" (*Le Chemin des Roses*)²⁰. By using the Berber signs, the artist not only invokes their aesthetic qualities, but also their mystical properties, by transforming ancient symbols into something new.



Fig. 13 "Le Chemin des Roses", installation, 1995 – 2005

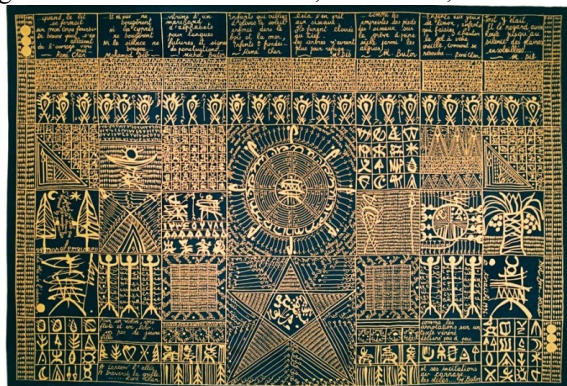


Fig. 14 "Hommage à René Char, Michel Butor et Mohammed Dib", tapestry, 1998

¹⁹ Rachid Koraïchi – an Algerian artist, sculptor, print-maker and ceramicist, known for his contemporary artwork which integrates calligraphy as a graphic element – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachid_Kora%C3%AFchi.

²⁰ *Rachid Koraichi*, written by Holiday Powers for Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World. <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Farid-Belkahia.aspx>.



Fig. 15 Banner, 348 x 200 cm



Fig. 16 Serigraphy from “7 variations indigo”

By combining signs with magical numbers or by stylizing traditional symbols, contemporary artists explore the subconscious in order to create an abstract work that refers not only to the past, but also to the present. After several visits in North Africa, the artist Paul Klee was inspired by these mystical shapes and started introducing numbers and letters in his artwork.

The geometrical repetitive patterns, specific to North African ceramics, have been used for four generations of women and represented in the artwork of the Algerian artist born in France, Zineb Sedira.

Representing a generation of North African artists who live in the Western world, Sedira examines the change of identities and questions the preconceived notions of the East and the West by provoking their Occidental and Islamic perceptions about gender and Islamic art. This very aspect could initially be interpreted as a mundane repetition of the geometrical Islamic drawings. In reality, there are representations of women’s faces caught in a pattern that forms a matriarchal chain, which incorporates human figures in an essayist Islam, predominantly non-figurative.

List and source of illustrations:

Fig. 1 Old Maghreb map, 1889,Img source: migmapblog.com

Fig. 2 Decorative rugs from a Berber house in Tunisia, Image source: personal archive

Fig. 3 Ceramic vessel from Algeria, Img. source: janetstreetclayworks.com

Fig. 4 Oil lamp from Algeria, Img. source: collections.vam.ac.uk

Fig. 5 A silver pair of *fibula*, img source: Wikipedia

Fig. 6 Berber musician from Sousse, 20th Century, Img. Source: Wikipedia

Fig. 7,8 Amazigh symbols, Img. source: Wikipedia

Fig. 9 Tifinagh alphabet, Img. source: temehu.com

Fig. 10 Untitled, copper, 190 x 86 cm, 196,Img. source: fondationfaridbelkahia.com

Fig. 11 "Hand", dye on leather, 150x125 cm, 1980, Img. Source: fondationfaridbelkahia.com

Fig. 12 "Le Chemin des Roses", installation, 1995 – 2005, Img. source: rachidkoraichi.com

Fig. 13 Hommage à René Char, Michel Butor et Mohammed Dib", tapestry, 1998, Img. source: rachidkoraichi.com

Fig. 14 Banner, 348 x 200 cm, Img. Source: rachidkoraichi.com

Fig. 15 Serigraphy from "7 variations indigo", Img. Source: rachidkoraichi.com

Bibliography:

Burckhardt, Titus, *Art of Islam: Language and meaning*, World Wisdom Publishing House, 2009, Bloomington, Indiana.

Bonoist, Luc, *Signs, symbols and myths*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1995.

Chebal, Malek, *Dictionary of Muslim symbols: Rites, mysticism and civilization*, Paris, Albin Michel Publishing House, 1995.

Eliade, Mircea, *Images and symbols: essay on the magical – religious symbolism*, Humanitas Publishing House, 2013.

Michael Brett, *Berber people*, Retrieved from

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Berber>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Camps

<http://chroniquesalgeriennes.unblog.fr/2016/02/05/artisanat-berbere-signes-et-symboles-part-2-murs-tapis-tatouages-bijoux>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Mas-d%27Azil

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farid_Belkahia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachid_Kora%C3%AFchi

<http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Farid-Belkahia.aspx>