



Who are the Berbers? How has their identity been constructed? Why have French scholars been so fascinated by this people? These are some of the hard questions answered by Judith Scheele, a research fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford, in her recently released monograph, *Village Matters*, the latest in a series on African Anthropology published by James Currey in association with the School for Advanced Research. As its title indicates, this book is also concerned with the importance of ‘the village’ as an analytical tool for understanding society, that is, as a unit of analysis for modern ethnographic case study. After conducting in-depth field research in a mountainous Kabyle village to observe and understand its local history, Scheele was soon confounded by a troubling paradox: ‘namely, the general consensus among villagers that history is all-important at the same time as totally absent from the village itself’ (p. 75). What did the Kabyle villagers mean when they said that their history has been stolen? Can history become clearer when analyzed from the local level? Does village really matter? Given its affirmative title, readers of this book will be surprised to learn that village does not matter, at least not in a way the naïve might think. Her book is ‘a failed search for “village” – from a space that could not be defined, via a history that could not be written, to a village council that had multiplied or disappeared overnight’ (p. 150).

To understand the significance of her negative finding, it is essential to read chapter one, where she outlines a romantic idealization of Algerian Berbers known as the ‘Kabyle myth,’ which projected 19th century ideal notions about social and moral organization debated in Paris onto the purported ‘primitive democracy’ of the Kabyle people. Strictly speaking, Kabylia is a mountainous region of Algeria, densely populated by a people who speak Kabyle, a local dialect of Berber that pre-dates Arabic in North Africa. Though hard to delineate the region on a map, Kabyle is more than just a geographical area. It is also an ideal. Colonial ethnographers saw in the Kabyle people something akin to themselves, something different from the Arab ‘other’. Kabyle became central to debates about the nature of good

Anatomy of a Berber Village

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Village Matters: Knowledge, Politics & Community in Kabylia, Algeria

by Judith Scheele

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government, of social and moral cohesion, race and nationhood, progress, and the role of religion and science in France, which eventually signified that ‘Algerian independence thus meant more than just the loss of an overseas colony, it meant the end of a certain kind – or rather, ideal – of France’ (p. 12).

The term ‘Kabyle’ itself is of recent origin, coined only during the years following the French conquest of Algiers in 1830. Contemporary Berbers like to trace their history back to Massinissah (239-149 B.C.) and his grandson Jugurtha (d. 104 B.C.) of Roman times, ‘thereby proving their historical legitimacy, their contribution to world history, their noble ancestry and their rebellious and democratic nature’ (p. 13). With the creation of North African kingdoms and empires from the 13th century onwards, ‘Berber’ appears as an oppositional category of non-Arab pagans who first resisted Arab Islamisation, but then fought against Muslims lacking enough religious zeal. The category of ‘Kabyle’ was more precisely defined as the ‘truly indigenous’ population of North Africa, originating from the mountainous regions east of Algiers. Turkish garrisons established on the coast never totally placed Kabylia under Ottoman control. It was not until the 19th century and French colonial conquest that the term ‘Kabyle’ became virtually synonymous with ‘Berber’ (p. 14).

In their own language ‘Berbers’ call themselves *imaziyen*, ‘men who are free and noble’. ‘Kabyle’ comes from the Arabic *qabâ’il* meaning ‘tribes’, indicating to French ethnographers their most important characteristic: ‘that they did not recognize any government’ (p. 14). French writers like Alexis de Tocqueville (1841) soon invested the

Kabyles with a romantic appeal as a mountain-dwelling people who resisted and were different from the violent, pious Arabs: ‘The soul of the Kabyles is open to us,’ he wrote, ‘and it is not impossible for us to enter it’. The early scholarly monographs on Kabylia by Ernest Carette (1848), Adolphe Hanoteau and Aristide Letourneux (1872-3) adopted an essentialist approach to Kabyle culture that credited them with such positive traits as egalitarian social values and democratic political culture: ‘Like the general tendency of their spirit, the constitution of the Kabyles is democratic’. The development of this primitive village democracy captured the imagination of 19th century French sociological theorists. So this traditional village was the unit of analysis which Scheele chose to study, admitting that Hanoteau and Letourneux’s work is ‘still largely the best available description of the Kabyle political system’ (p. 24). Ernest Renan reviewed it in the *Revue des deux mondes* (1873) and found support for his own theories of nationalism: ‘The Berber race has now not only incontestably gained acceptance in the world of anthropology; henceforth, it is the object of a science’. Scheele shows convincingly how 19th century French scholarship has left a lasting ‘Kabyle myth’.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of France in the creation of the Berber identity. Most academic knowledge of Kabylia is produced in Paris. Here, one finds the only Berber television station in the world. Most Berber websites are based here, and most Berber books are edited or re-edited here. The *Académie Berbère*, *Groupe d’Etudes Berbères* and the *Bulletin d’Etudes Berbères* have denounced militant Arab Algerian nationalists from here. ‘Ethnographic writing on the areas

has been rich since the early nineteenth century, and Kabylia is still the area that takes up most space in the anthropology section of mainstream French bookshops’ (p. 3). The majority of academic and literary work on Algeria is written in French, and published in France. Scheele, who is of German origin, notes that out of the 6,976 titles held by the U.S. Library of Congress on the subject of ‘Algeria,’ only 15 per cent were written in Arabic, while some 81 per cent were written in French (p. 12). Given that only 4 per cent of these works were written in English, Scheele’s contribution should be credited with providing a welcome introduction for the Anglophones. Her literature review clearly demarcates a change in the tenor of French scholarship that occurred after 1870 with the arrival of ‘land-hungry, racist settlers’ (p. 26) who lost the idealistic belief in science and progress, and gradually abandoned the scientific study of Kabylia for settler kitsch. ‘Rather than the subject of learned monographs, Algeria became the inspiration for orientalist novels, paintings, and fantasies of unlimited eroticism, exoticism and freedom, often projected onto the nomadic South, which was still only partly under French control’ (p. 27).

In her second chapter, Scheele describes the ‘new historiography’ that emerged in the early 20th century, which rejected any claims to a separate Berber identity as a ‘colonial invention’. The underlying rationale of this new ‘national’ history was to redefine Algerian history as unified and homogenous, in order to promote the colonial project. Algeria was part of France, and the Kabylia was part of Algeria. This unifying tendency of late French colonialism was only magnified by the war of independence, when the FLN became the voice of ‘nationalism,’ and thus the enemy of cultural distinctiveness. The war was a destructive affair, and Scheele notes that a third of all rural settlements in Kabylia had been bombed to the ground by 1959, and in ‘the village where my fieldwork was conducted, a quarter to a third of all adult men had been killed’ (p. 36).

It was during the years of war that many of the foundations of the recent

sociology and anthropology of Algeria were laid, when 'overtly non-political and time-less ethnological descriptions of Kabyle rituals and legends were produced, as if trying to capture a world of coherence that was, at least superficially, rapidly disappearing' (p. 37). Notable among this new generation of French sociologists was Pierre Bourdieu, who started his research in Algeria during the war, and published works on the demise of Kabyle society in 1963, 1964 and 1965. A major leitmotif of post-independence Algeria is the 'Arabisation' of national identity, which provoked political resistance by the Berbers of Kabylia. Rapid and violent Arabisation was first met with skepticism by French-speaking intellectuals and French-educated former colonial officers who saw that, 'Algeria was "Arabised" by a French-speaking elite who themselves tended to educate their children in French' (p. 41). But soon 'Arabophone' and 'Francophone' became shorthand for a cultural, social and political divide that crystallized in the war and was quickly assimilated to a distinction between Kabylia and the rest of Algeria: 'Kabyles were indeed more "Francophone" than most other Algerians – or at least they seemed to be from an "Arab" point of view' (*ibid.*).

When Scheele arrived in the village, she expected to be able to gather eyewitness narratives from villagers about the war of independence, thereby reconstructing the local version of the larger national history. But in chapter four, she describes how she was sent to other villages, cities, or even France, to speak with the so-called 'experts' on 'Berber history'. The villagers complained: 'We don't have any history, everything is oral, and most of it has already been lost, because our old people die' (p. 74). Along with the repeated statement that local written sources did not exist, the villagers also complained: 'It's the marabouts. They write, and then they keep it all to themselves' (p. 75). Written history was perceived as an instrument of power rather than as a means of information. As she remained in the

village, and continued her investigation, however, Scheele uncovered a secret history everyone in the village knew, but were reluctant to talk about. The Berbers of Kabylia had been among the most active fighters in the war of independence, yet at the end of the war, Arab leaders returning from exile took over the movement, leaving Kabyle families with 'the feeling of having been cheated of the results of their struggle' (p. 85). Thus, the official history taught in the schools is perceived as a lie, perpetuating injustice. 'As true historical knowledge was confined to locked shelves, the knowledge of local events became either dangerous or forgotten; the gap between what had actually happened at village level and the official history was too large to be bridged', and that is why history is conspicuously absent from the village (p. 96).

The general consensus in the village remained that the truly beautiful and interesting and valuable things – 'including true Berber traditions and knowledge about Berber matters' – are outside the village (p. 148). Therefore, if Scheele had come to an authentic Kabyle village to study the Berber, the villagers would have sent her to Paris and Algiers to find out the 'truth' about them. In chapter five, she writes about the way that Berber identity has been constructed outside Kabyle, by the universalizing agents of Sufi Islam, by French schools and, not surprisingly, by Kabyle migrants to France. Emigration from the village was mainly concentrated in northern Paris. Migrant remittances comprise the bulk of money income in the village, and every family had many members living in France, whom Scheele divides into three groups.

The first generation, who left the village during the war of independence and who live on one street in northern Paris, remain very active in the 'village committee' which has the main purpose of collecting funds. This generation maintained traditional Kabyle cultural patterns of community and village. The second generation, their children, who

have French national identity, have 'mostly become part of France's *banlieue* culture' (p. 119), but still try to spend at least one holiday out of two in the village. This second generation is very active in shaping the image of Berbers abroad. 'A large proportion of students at French universities who conduct research on Kabylia are by now second-generation emigrants', observed Scheele, 'the numerous Berber associations in Paris are mainly run by Kabyle emigrants of a similar profile', as are the 'equally numerous web-sites that deal with all sort of matters relating to Kabylia in Berber culture and language' (p. 120). Finally, there is the third generation, those who made it to France 'on their own account' and are more interested in individual goals, like getting a job or pursuing their education, than in communal or village goals. For them, the old men of the first generation are too oppressive; as for the second generation, who were born in France, 'they don't have any education, they just don't care, everything is far too easy for them' (p. 121). This third generation differentiates itself from the other two: 'We just don't live in the same world, it's as simple as that' (*ibid.*).

While the second half of her book could be described as ethnographic in its methodology, Scheele has produced a work of political anthropology. Her interest is not in the poetry or cuisine of the Kabyle, but as her book's subtitle states, in knowledge, politics and community. In chapter six, for instance, she embarks on an examination of local political institutions, those 'village assemblies' or *tajmaetin*, made famous by romantic 19th century ethnographers. While these organizations still exist, she finds that her village abounds in political institutions ranging from a traditional council and Sufi shrine to more modern cultural associations, political parties and social movements. Notwithstanding their differences, 'these various political institutions are strikingly similar, in terms of their personnel, their objectives and the practice' (p. 147).

With sympathy for the persecuted and empathy for the her subjects, Scheele attempts to apply what she has learned from her case study to the larger movements of Berber resistance in contemporary Algeria. She discusses how the banning of Berber poetry which resulted in the 'Berber Spring' of 1980 was more than just a matter of language. 'The linguistic issues raised were seen as symbolic of a larger political and social struggle for a more democratic and less exclusive form of government' (p. 42). She discusses how the riots which broke out in Kabylia during the 'Black Spring' of 2001 were 'another episode in the long struggle of Berbers against a central government that could not and would not take into account their inherently democratic aspirations' (p. 47). What Scheele finds most interesting is the role played by 'tribal committees' or *aârouch*, in the 2001 Berber movement, which joined several village assemblies, or *tajmaetin*, together into a much larger organizational structure. In a sense, despite her disappointment at the theft of history from the local communities, there is a positive feeling that village might still matter politically.

But this is refuted by her conclusion, where she laments the failed search for village, and raises larger questions about the fuzziness of such categories which purport to local knowing:

The implicit assumption of field-work-based anthropology – that 'things' will become clear once they are analysed from a 'local' point of view – thus here proves to be erroneous. The truth about what really happened in Algeria remains elusive on all levels, and is certainly not to be found in the village, where people tend to be as much in the dark as the various political theorists puzzling over Algeria (p. 150).

