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Yennayer in New York:

Indigenous Algerian Resistance and Dance in Brooklyn

BY ESRAA WARDA

January 18, 2020, marks the date of a Brooklyn gathering at Murmrr Theatre of the Indigenous *Amazigh*, or “free people” of Northern Africa, celebrating Year 2970 of the Julian calendar. Known as *Yennayer*, the Indigenous new year is celebrated between the 11th and 14th days of January by the *Amazigh* population, who are native to what is present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya, and Egypt. The first day of the new year for the *Imazighen* (plural of *Amazigh*) marks the first *Amazigh* accession to the Egyptian throne of Shoshenq in the 10th century BC. Shoshenq was a general of ancient Libyan descent.

There are many of subgroups of *Imazighen*: the *Kabyle* people of North Algeria; the *Chaonia* people of East Algeria; the *Tuareg* of South Algeria, Morocco, Niger, and Mali; the *Chleub* of South Morocco; and the *Rif* people of North Morocco, just

to name a few. Although each subgroup and its respective tribes have their own nuanced cultural traditions and ways of celebrating *Yennayer*, among *Kabyles* in Algeria, *Yennayer* is generally celebrated among family with plenty of food. The couscous *gasaa*, a large communal plate, is the centerpiece where families eat all together. Food represents prosperity and strength of community for the year. Music, dance, and tales are shared (Guessous 2020).

One prominent community of the *Imazighen* in Algeria are the *Kabyles*, who are native to the *Djurdjura* Mountains in Northern Algeria in the areas of Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia, Bouira, and Akbou, among others. With their resilient spirit, living in a relatively isolated mountainous geography, they have preserved their cultural traditions for years, despite centuries of occupation. It is no surprise that *Kabyles* in the diaspora here in New York keep strong ties with their

heritage and also have a strong sense of who they are. The *Kabyle* region has a history of repression, discrimination, and censorship from the anti-Indigenous Algerian government, which denies their language and identity. For the *Kabyles* in the diaspora, identity transmission among their community is a priority. Youth are taught from a young age to be proud of their culture and traditions, and to speak their *Kabyle* language and learn about their *Tifinagh* alphabet.

The populations of *Kabyle* immigrants are spread sparingly all around the five boroughs of New York, with most of them concentrated in neighborhoods with high North African immigration, such as Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and Astoria, Queens. Although the immigration here is incomparable to Paris—the largest Algerian immigrant enclave in the world—in New York, the *Kabyle* community is steadily increasing as they are search for a stable future, individual liberties, and civil rights, which most are denied in Algeria. Due to the colonial relationship between France and Algeria, the *Kabyle* identity in France is racialized and contextualized more so than in New York. Therefore, here most *Kabyles* present as racially and ethnically ambiguous and often are met with raised eyebrows upon introducing themselves as “Indigenous Africans.”

Yennayer, although a cherished holiday among Indigenous communities, faces challenges in North Africa. The Indigenous struggle in Algeria is multifaceted: after centuries of occupation, particularly highlighted by the Arab and Islamic conquest in the 5th century, followed by 133



Kabyle Dance Group *Tafsut Imazighen* (Berber Spring) wearing traditional *Kabyle* dresses. Photo by Taddart-Nney.



Kabyle Dance Group *Tafsut Imazighen* (Berber Spring) wearing traditional Kabyle dresses. Photo by Taddart-Nney.

years of brutal French colonization, then the bloody “Black Decade” of civil war of the 1990s, and a fundamentalist religious government running Algeria—the Indigenous people of Algeria have constantly battled for their linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and human rights. On December 27, 2017, “Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced, at the Council of Ministers, his decision to establish *Yennayer*, the first month of the Berber (*Amazigh*) year, as a bank holiday,” as of January 12, 2018, and only after the Indigenous alphabet, *Tifinagh*, was recognized when the *Amazigh* language was made an official language in the Algerian Constitution in 2016 (Temlali 2018; see, also, UNPO 2016; Babas 2018; Chtatou 2019). These are fairly recent developments and comprise only the tip of the iceberg in granting the full validation and rights of Indigenous Algerians.

The Indigenous diaspora in New York, however, showed up strongly on a winter evening in January in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. Amara Challa, a good friend of mine and a local *Kabyle* immigrant and cultural organizer, put together this community gathering at Murmrr Theatre, packed with musical and dance performances from the *Chleuh* (*Amazigh* from the Sous region in Morocco) and the *Kabyles*.

This gathering occurred during a particularly historic moment in Algeria, because

early 2019 was the start of the *Hirak*, the revolution against then President Bouteflika and his oppressive “crony” regime in Algeria. This a movement of weekly Friday protests where youth, Indigenous communities, and women speak out on their political and socioeconomic oppression. Amara centered the theme of this *Yennayer* celebration about community support for the *Hirak*, with the money from the event being donated in solidarity, specifically for *Kabyle* activists who have been violently targeted and imprisoned due to carrying the Indigenous flag while protesting. On this stage in Brooklyn, the vibrant *Amazigh* flag of red, green, and yellow stripes with the “free man” symbol was hung proudly in the middle of the stage, with its fierce yet humble dignity.

Just to get a sense of the night, one of the musical artists garnered a large response from the audience upon singing “Pouvoir Assassin,” which means “government assassin,” an homage to the iconic *Kabyle* militant activist Lounès Matoub. He was murdered in 1998, with many suspecting that he was targeted by the Algerian fundamentalist government, which consequently led to widespread protests in the *Kabyle* region. Matoub is an icon for the *Kabyle* struggle for liberation. He was a singer, musician, and advocate for the rights of the Indigenous, especially around cultural liberty

and secularism. His famous words are now chanted at *Hirak* protests, as a form of resistance to the oppressive Algerian regime. This night in Brooklyn was revolutionary; it was the intersection of New York diasporic solidarity, embodying the spirit of political resistance back home.

As an Algerian dancer and a cultural researcher, I was stoked to attend this celebration of *Yennayer*. Doing field research for the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) Living Traditions archive, with City Lore and the Brooklyn Art Council, my mission was to document a performance by the dance group *Tafsut Imazighen*, a group of young diaspora *Kabyle* women, who are cultural preservationists of traditional *Kabyle* dance. I grew up dancing this dance colloquially in family gatherings and weddings in Algeria, but because I am not from the *Kabyle* region, it was a humbling learning opportunity for me to participate in this gathering.

Traditional *Kabyle* dance is unique. On this stage were 4 to 6 young women, dancing with linear and symmetric choreographic distribution across the floor, all while marching rhythmically to the 4/4 *Kabyle* rhythms. They wore handmade fringe scarves on their hips that emphasized the tremulation of the hips (the distinct characteristic of women’s *Kabyle* dance), which was exaggerated for the stage. The trembling of the hips are, in fact, upward reverberations or reactions from the bottoms of the feet hitting the floor—a difficult skill to master. The women wear a handmade *tagenturt*, traditional dress, with vibrant orange and yellow vertical stripes cut with horizontal stripes on the hem and V-neck stripes. They are dancing with an *amendil*, a scarf, either hung around the shoulders or as a dance prop to swirl between two hands, or to lift with both arms above the head, swaying them side to side.

Although the women of *Tafsut Imazighen* did not specify why they chose their name, my personal intuition says it is possible that the name of their group is inspired by the famous first “*Amazigh* Spring,”—which is the literal translation of their group name.

Many know the “Arab Spring,” from the first time when the word “spring” was used to mean a time of revolt in Northern Africa in the 2010s. However, the *Imazighen* in Algeria had their first postcolonial “spring” in March 1980, when the Algerian government banned Mouloud Mammeri, an *Amazigh* intellectual from presenting a conference on *Kabyle* poetry, which then led to demonstrations and strikes by the Indigenious community. This was known as the *Tafsut Imazighen*.

In an interview after the performance, Zahra, a member of *Tafsut Imazighen* said, “*Yennayer* is a special event to remember who we are... to be proud to be *Amazigh* people.” Sara, Zahra, Dehia, Thamila, Lydia, and Katia—all these incredible women were, perhaps, underestimating the power of that timely gathering and what their presence and performance meant. Although not full-time artists, they are well deserving of being labeled cultural practitioners and preservationists.

What does it mean to know that Algeria now is a country in political and civil unrest, and yet to show up in solidarity in Brooklyn, New York, undefeated by history on your shoulders? These women represent the power of dance, resistance, and cultural evolution. They give power to the present and future, because they show respect for the past. This whole night proved the Algerian diaspora shows up strongly and that our Indigeneity and cultural celebrations of *Yennayer* will not be forgotten. And that youth and women are the reason why we remember. ▼

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[Editor’s Note: Read Esraa Warda’s Field Notes and see a video of the *Kabyle* Dance by *Tafsut Imazighen* at the *Yennayer* 2970 (Amazigh New Year) Performance Final on the NYSCA Living Traditions website: <https://nytraditions.org/digital-heritage/kabyle-dance-tafsut-imazighen-yennayer-2970-amazigh-new-year>]



Esraa Warda is a dancer and teaching artist of traditional Moroccan and Algerian dance forms through movement workshops and interactive performances. A young talent of Algerian origin, Warda is a community-taught dancer under the mentorship of women elders in her family and artists from Morocco and Algeria. She is a firm advocate of the power of intergenerational transmission, women-led traditions, decolonizing Eurocentricity and women’s bodies in dance.

Warda, meaning “rose” in Arabic, is a cultural warrior driving North African dance styles out of the margins and into the global and local dance scene. Warda has been featured in *Vogue Arabia*, *Al Jazeera Plus*, and *NBC Asian America*, and has taught all over the world, from the Brooklyn Arts Council and Movement Research in New York, to the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, to the National Algerian Centre in London. Warda currently is a mentee under two renowned North African women’s groups—*Bnat el Houariyat* in Marrakech, Morocco, and *Lemma* in Béchar, the Algerian Sahara. Photo of dancer and artist Esraa Warda wearing traditional Algerian *Chaoui* dress. Photo by Joe Murphy.

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