Perceptions and Constructions of Islam: Reflecting upon Religion from Working with Imazighen in rural Morocco

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the perception and the practices of Islam in a valley in rural Morocco, populated by Imazighen, the indigenous people of North Africa. We argue that, in order to create guidelines for IslamicHCI, deeper investigations of what Islam and the practice of Islam means and implies are needed. When considering and cooperating religious aspects into HCI research and design, we demand a deeper and more reflective perspective on what Islam is and how it is perceived in multiple context to avoid falling for a stereotypical Muslim persona, be it female or male.

Author Keywords

Morocco; Imazighen; Islam; Berber; North Africa; Religion

Introduction and Research Setting

The Kingdom of Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. The current Moroccan royal family belongs to the Alawite Dynasty, which dates back to the 17th century. Over the past centuries, different colonial powers conquered Morocco. After a protracted struggle, Morocco celebrated its independence in 1956. The current monarch's grandfather, Mohammed V, organized the new state as constitutional monarchy and in 1957 proclaimed the title of king [12].

The valley our research team works in is located in the High Atlas and about 80km south-west of the city Azilal. Imazighen[1] have been living in this part of North Africa for several thousand years [8] and are considered the indigenous people of the region, which they refer to as Tamazgha, reaching from the Canary Islands, Morocco and Mauritanian to Libya and parts of Egypt [6:135]. Nearly all of the people converted to the Islamic belief, after the Muslim Arabs invaded the area in the 8th century, as they've previously adopted Christianity [9:85]. The Islam scientist Louis Gardet uses the term "Berber Islam", indicating a specific form of Islam that the Imazighen practice. Until today, it is still braided with Sufism and mysticism [3].

Approach and our Endeavour

Over the past four years our research team built a so-called computer club [1] in one of the villages, where weekly sessions with children are hosted by local coordinators. During these sessions the participants work on personally meaningful projects with the help of technology. The overall goal of computer clubs is to learn and explore by implementing technologies as useful tools in one's everyday life.

The main methodological framing of our research project is based on the participatory action research approach (PAR) [11]. By being part of the intervention, we try to understand the local situation, infrastructure, problems as well as identify various actors. It uses mainly observational, qualitative and ethnographic methods which are completed by informal interviews. Each stay was used to learn more about the valley and its inhabitants as well as the actual usage of media and technology. Right from the start it proved indispensable to work closely with a local NGO, which was focused on improving infrastructures in the valley, hosting cultural activities, empowering women and supporting children in their school career. This NGO had been working in the valley for the past 13 years and enjoyed the trust of community.

Imazighen and Arabs

Arabs and Imazighen together make 99% of the Moroccan population [5]. An earlier dichotomy between 'Arabs' and 'Imazighen', according to which Arabs were associated with being wealthy and living in the cities, while Imazighen are considered poor and living mainly in rural areas, was called into question, e.g. by David Crawford who notes that Imazighen "do not only exist in rural areas, but in all of Morocco's cities and all social classes" [7]. However, the majority of the rural population in Morocco is of Amazigh origin, as are most of the poor. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between urban and rural areas in Morocco. In the more remote mountain regions, in particular, there is a large lack of basic infrastructure or medical care, but there is also often a lack of access to work or education. Their native language Tamazight (a Hamitic language in the Afro-Asiatic family) is the oldest one in North Africa [10]. As part of the constitutional reform from July 2011, the Tamazight language received the status of an official language (with Tifinagh as the official alphabet) alongside Arabic in Morocco [2].

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[1] In this paper we use the terms ‚Amazigh' (singular) (which translates into 'free man') and ‚Imazighen' (plural) as mainly used by activists in the linguistic and cultural rights movement, instead of the external term ‚Berber'. Still, there is an ongoing scholarly discussion about the use and connotations of terms.

Findings from the Field and Discussion

As this brief discourse has shown, a distinction between 'Arabs' and 'Imazighen' needs to be made, especially but not limited to our case in rural Morocco. With regard to the workshop topic and framing, we aim to open up the question of designing for Islamic communities. If we consider Islam a factor for HCI design and research, we need to specify what Islam is and what Islam is not. Does it ask for a specific perspective on religion? Is it rather a cultural component that needs to be addressed? Not all Arabs are Muslims, there are also Christians, Jews and groups from other beliefs that are of Arab ethnicity. Not all Muslims are Arab. In the following, we present glimpses from the field, that caught our attention when trying to identify to what extent religion plays a role in this specific context. We want to point out that, these are our own experiences. We are not claiming them to be universal and we are not aiming to nurture stereotypes.

Islam is not equal Arab
Although Islam is often linked to being Arab, there are numbers of people following the Islamic belief who are not of Arab origin. In European countries, such as Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Muslim population is high [4]. There is also a number of Arabs who follow Christianity or Judaism [13]. As mentioned above, Imazighen have adopted Islam and this applies to all the people in the valley we've met so far. When following the people from the valley in their everyday life, we are often being confronted with the issue of being Amazigh and being Muslim. Especially when it comes to language and language barriers, the distinction shows. Only a minority of the older generation can speak (Moroccan) Arabic. The identity of the Imazighen people is, not only for them, an important one. It goes further than being Muslim or to differentiate themselves from being Arab. They are Moroccan, they are African. However, they are often overlooked.

Islam is not equal Islam
Compared to other Islamic marked places we've been at, the practices seem less set, strict and restrictive. The call to prayer is not so frequently, and the building, serving as a mosque, is only used on Fridays for their prayers or religious activities. People, especially men, step on rooftops, face East and doing their prayers. For the foreign eye, people don't seem to make a strong distinction between males and females regarding physical interaction. People shake hands and do other salutation practices, such as kissing each other's hands, freely, with no obvious exception for the other sex. Many women and young girls wear head scarfs rather loose, showing parts of their hair. In a more remote area, we once witnessed a woman breastfeeding her child on the side of the road, not covering the upper part of her body but wearing a head scarf.

Comparing our experiences to other places we've conducted field work in, such as Palestine, differences are obvious. Interaction between males and females are classified different. As a woman, I've experienced being treated differently – for my advantage as well as disadvantage and I still don't know how the males in these scenarios meant it. The call to prayer is omnipresent, stores close down every Friday and only some open up Friday afternoon. People are usually covered, shorts are highly rare and if worn, only by tourists.

Conclusion

Perceptions and constructions of Islam come in various shapes and are manifested in various practices. Our case provides a glimpse into the practices and meaning of Islam followed and constructed by Imazighen in rural Morocco. Although we express critique by providing insights and demanding a broader view, we genuinely appreciate the idea of moving away traditional views and to open up the HCI discussion to embrace diversity and inclusivity. Our critique shall be understood as a call for consideration of diversity within Islam and (Muslim) identity.

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