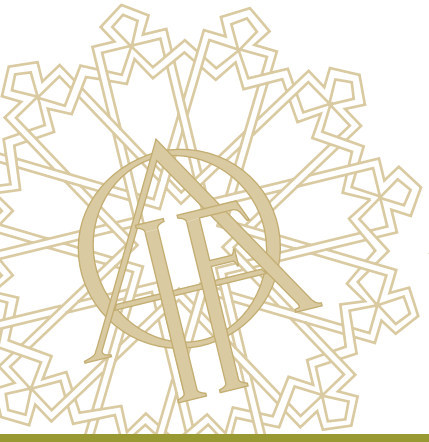
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Allen Fromherz

Being like Women to be Better Men. Mythical Origins of the Male Veil.

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ALLEN FROMHERZ

Being Like Women to be Better Men

Mythical Origins of the Male Veil

Writing in AD 1381, more than a century after the fall of the Almoravid and Almohad Berber empires in North Africa, an anonymous chronicler likely from Granada, that last outpost of Muslim al-Andalus, explained the peculiar origins of the *liṯām*, a mouth veil worn by male, Lamtūna Berbers, as well as other Berber tribes of the Saharan desert. While the men were veiled, the women of the Lamtūna tribe went unveiled. The anonymous writer finds no issue with this, however, because of the following, extraordinary myth he used to explain the alleged origins of the Lamtūna and the male veil:

> "One of the Tubbaʿ (Yemeni pre-Islamic) Kings had no like among the kings who had preceded him and not one of them had attained the virtue and the might of kingship which he had attained. …A certain rabbi had informed him … that God would send a messenger who would be the Seal of the Prophets and would be sent to all the nations. He had faith in him and believed what he would bring and said about him, "I testify that Aḥmad is the Messenger of God." …Then he travelled to the Yemen and summoned the people of his kingdom but none would assent to his summons except for a group of the Ḥimyar. When the people of unbelief overcame the people of faith and all those who had faith in him and followed had become either killed or exiled, or pursued and scattered, they took to wearing the veil as their women did at that time and fled... The *liṯām* [mouth veil] became the costume with which God had honored them…[1]"

1. *Al-Ḥulal al-mawšiyya*. There has been some speculation that the author was Ibn Ẓamak. With slight modifications, I use the translation of this text found in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (trans. J. F. P. Hopkins), here, p. 311.

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This paper argues that these mythical "Arab" origins of the *liṯām*, the male mouth veil of the Saharan Lamtūna (and present-day Twareg), were constructed in medieval Arabic sources as a response to the political and religious ambitions of both the Lamtūna, desert-dwelling Almoravids, and the Masmuda, mountain-dwelling Almohads. The extraordinary mythical account of the male mouth veil as a legitimate, Arab and Islamic custom as cited above developed after the conversion of the Lamtūna to an evangelical, Mālikī Islam preached by the Almoravid spiritual founder ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yāsīn (d. 450/1058–1059). It was the Lamtūna who formed the core of the Almoravid army and elite. This paper uses both the conventional Arabic geographers and historians, Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Bakrī, and Ibn al-Aṯīr, as well as Almohad sources, including Ibn Tūmart's *Aʿazz mā yuṭlab* to describe and explain the possible reasons for the development of this legend. In Almohad sources, especially the writings attributed to Ibn Tūmart, the male mouth veil was described as either unislamic or femininizing. The *Ḥulāl al-mawšiyya*, the work sympathetic to the Almoravids quoted above, and the writings of Ibn al-Aṯīr in the thirteenth century, however, both identify the Lamtūna not as Berbers, as most geographers had identified them in previous centuries, but as a lost tribe of Arabs. According to these sources, the Lamtūna were descendants of Ḥimyar, a pre-Islamic, exiled Yemeni tribe that professed that "Aḥmad is the Messenger of Allah" centuries before the coming of Muḥammad. The men wore the veil and dressed "as women," according this story, to avoid capture, escape the ignorance of enemy tribes in the age of ignorance (the *Ǧāhiliyya*) and flee to the pure lands of the Saharan desert where they roamed as primordial, Muslim Arabs lost in a sea of Berber lands and customs. In this legend, they lived a nomadic life, but often crossed through the city of Tādmakka, a name that means "Mecca-like" because it was the Saharan town whose setting looks most like Mecca.[2]

The Lamtūna male mouth veil was thus not a symbol of tactical gender confusion or of Berber custom as it was described in earlier Arab sources. Rather, the male veil became a gift from Allah to the lost Arab tribe, an Arab tribe that only reclaimed its rightful inheritance with the establishment of the Almoravid empire and the founding of Marrakech c. 452/1060. Ironically, a symbol of profound difference, a male veil, became a sign of integration, integration into a wider Islamic mythology of legitimate Arab origins: the notion that in order to be legitimate, an empire must be Arab in origin. The male veil, the *liṯām*, was thus no longer a garment or a custom that distinguished the Lamtūna from the Arabs. The male veil became a symbol of Allah's special protection over Lamtūna and the Almoravids as "true Arabs" and primordial Muslims who had recognized the authority of the Caliph in Baghdad and established a strict form of Mālikī Islam.

A primary reason for the elaboration of this legend of Lamtūna Arab origins, a legend that appears most explicitly in sources written after the twelfth century, was the polemic preaching of Ibn Tūmart (d. 524/1130), spritual founder of the Almohads. It was the ambition of Ibn Tūmart and his Almohad followers to conquer Almoravid lands. As part of this ambition,

2. The geographer al-Bakrī (d. 1074) described Tādmakka as "Mecca-like." He did not, however, identify the Lamtūna so explicitly as a lost Arab tribe: *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, p. 85.

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Ibn Tūmart described the Almoravids as feminine and weak, bathing in the corruption and luxury of power. In Ibn Tūmart 's logic, their wearing of mouth veils only proved that they were like women; it proved inherent, effeminite degeneration. Instead of being "true Muslims" who happened to wear a mouth veil, Ibn Tūmart claimed that the prophet Muḥammad opposed wearing honors dress:

> "The Messenger of God commanded opposition to people false in their dress, their actions, and their affairs.... He said: Oppose the Jews, oppose the polytheists, oppose the Magians, and likewise the unbelieving anthropomorphists who resemble women by covering their faces with a *liṯām* [mouth veil] and *niqāb* [face covering], while their women resemble men by revealing their faces without a *liṯām* or *niqāb*."[3]

Preaching to the first Almohad followers in the mountains Ibn Tūmart explicitly described the *liṯām* as licentious, as proof that the Almoravids were ripe for penetration and conquest by the masculine, unveiled Almohad mountain Berbers. Ibn Tūmart's successor, the Caliph ʿAbd al Mu'mīn, did eventually conquer Marrakech, capital of the Almoravids, in 1147, securing most of North Africa and al-Andalus by AD 1160. Later, Arab opponents of the Almohads such as Ibn al-Aṯīr and the writer of the *Ḥulal al-mawšiyya* rejected Ibn Tūmart's propaganda, reifying the Lamtūna as a lost Arab tribe. In an interesting contrast to both the account of Ibn Tūmart and the accounts of sources sympathetic to the Almoravids, Ibn Ḥawqal, providing one of earliest accounts of the mouth veil in the tenth century, described a much more mundane and summary explanation: they wore the mouth veil because they found the mouth shameful. Grounding the story of the *liṯām* in the context of medieval Maghrebi history, this paper will demonstrate how and why the story of the male mouth veil went through so many permutations.

The Earliest Descriptions of the Liṯām

Known sources on the early history of the Almoravids, the Lamtūna, the Sahara and West Africa more generally, were written outside of the Lamtūna Berber context. Almost all sources were written by Arabs in Arabic. Even the name *liṯām* is Arabic in origin. Although it would be difficult to document the exact word used by the Lamtūna in the medieval period, the Saharans almost certainly used variation of the words *alechcho*, or *asenged*, *tamahaq* for mouth veil and head veil respectively.[4] Medieval sources on the veil thus must be seen primarily through the cultural and historical lens of the Arab geographers and historians. These writers attempted to explain the visibly different cultural practices of an other that was also, perhaps most disturbingly for Arab writers, very similar. From the earliest Arab point of view the Saharans were a society that had many similarities with the Arabs—an appreciation for oral poetic expression, for long-distance trade, tribal honor and nomadic ways of life—but they

3. Ibn Tūmart, *Aʿazz mā yuṭlab*, p. 390–91.
4. Bourgeot, "Le costume masculin des Kel Ahaggar," p. 355.

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manifested their culture very differently. That difference was most visible in their dress and the required use of the mouth veil by men, but was also more profoundly expressed in their gender roles and inheritance practices. In the matrilineal system of the medieval Twareg, the son of the sister of the chief inherited the title, not the son of the chief, who was looked upon suspiciously. After the conversion of the Lamtūna to Mālikī Islam, their conquest of North Africa and the imposition of Mālikī Islam, a common feature of almost all medieval, Arab accounts of the veil are attempts to justify the practice of mouth veiling as an expression of paternalism and warrior values or to show that it is actually a modification of original Arab practices.

Before the successful Almoravid conquests, however, the earliest Arab geographers explained the mouth veil remarkably in the same way as modern French anthropologists: the vague theory of "shame." Without any notion of why such shame should exist, the mouth veil was worn simply because the Saharans thought it was shameful to show the mouth. The mouth veil, according to these early Arab authors, was more foreign and less familiar than it was to later medieval Arab writers. There was no need to justify or explain the practice. According to these earliest Arab writers, writers who felt no immediate historical or political affiliation with the Saharan peoples, the veil was worn out of a sense of shame. Ibn Ḥawqal, a geographer who traveled throughout al-Andalus and the Maghrib between AD 947–951, succinctly described his understanding of the reason for the mouth veil:

> "Nobody has ever seen the face of any one of them, nor of the Ṣanhāǧa, except for the eyes, for they don the veil (*liṯām*) when they are children and are brought up with it. They consider that the mouth is something shameful, like the genitals, because of what issues from it, since in their opinion what emanates from the mouth smells worse than what emanates from the genitals."[5]

Ibn Ḥawqal's *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ* provides a glimpse of the Sub Saharan regions and the Lamtūna decades before the beginnings of the Almoravid movement started by Ibn Yāsīn. The Andalusi geographer al-Bakrī, writing with a tone of cultural and religious superiority in the same years as when the Almoravids began their movement, listed the wearing of the veil among the "ignorant," "peculiar practices" of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yāsīn, spiritual leader of the Almoravids:

> "All the tribes of the desert preserve the custom of wearing a veil which screens their foreheads, above the other veil which covers the lower part of their face, so that only their eyes are visible. They do not remove these veils under any circumstances. A man does not distinguish his relative or friend unless he is wearing the veil. Thus if one of them is killed in battle and the veil is removed, nobody can recognize him until the covering is put back, for it has become for them more necessary than their skins".[6]

5. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, p. 75–76.
6. Ibid.

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Unlike Ibn Ḥawqal's theory of shame and the veil, al-Bakrī simply described that the veil was used, not the importance or origin of the veil. The male veil was simply another example of the ignorance of the Saharan Berbers in al-Bakrī's view. Other geographers hostile toward the Saharans went further. The *Kitāb al Istibṣār*, an update of al-Bakrī's geography written in AD 1190 by an anonymous author who was almost certainly sympathetic to the Almohad cause, described the allegedly loose women of the Saharan town of Awdagust.

Ibn Tūmart against the Lamtūna

In a similar vein, Ibn Tūmart, the infallible Mahdī of the Almohads, described the *liṯām* as a symbol of the inherently effeminate nature of the Lamtūna. The Almohad tribes of the Atlas Mountains north of the Sahara, however, were much more patriarchal in nature. Women did not seem to have quite as much freedom in the mountains as they did in the desert. When Ibn Tūmart (d. 524/AD 1130), a charismatic religious reformer who claimed to be the Mahdī, arrived among the Almohad, mountain tribes, one of the ways he justified the conquest of the Almoravid desert tribes was by identifying them as feminine, and thus, in his view of Islam, illegitimate. For Ibn Tūmart the Almoravids, then the rulers of Marrakech and a vast empire that stretched from the Sahara to al-Andalus, represented decadent and feminized passiveness while the Almohad mountain tribes were masculine and active. According to Ibn Tūmart's writings, especially his book of doctrine or the *Aʿazz mā yuṭlab*, the Almoravids were essentially ruled by their women.[7] By actively feminizing the Almoravid enemy tribes in his polemics, Ibn Tūmart helped rally the Almohad (al-Muwaḥḥidūn) mountain tribes and justified the eventual conquest of their feminized, Almoravid desert rivals. According to Ibn Tūmart's writings, a good masculine tribe must control its feminine or feminized neighbor. Among their greatest sins was the way their "women wore their hair [unveiled] high on their heads" like a bees' nest.[8] This was one of a long list of traditional, Lamtūna practices that Ibn Tūmart used to justify jihad, holy war, against the Almoravids.

For Ibn Tūmart and the mountain tribes of the Atlas the fundamentally feminized nature of their Almoravid rivals was embodied by Sūra, the Almoravid princess and sister of the Amīr who rode proudly unveiled on her horse without any regard for what Ibn Tūmart and the Almohads viewed as the strict norms and ideals of Islam. According to the historian Ibn Ḫaldūn (d. 808/1406), who wrote for the Almohad Ḥafsids and was often sympathetic to the Almohad cause, Ibn Tūmart "encountered Sūra, sister of this prince [Ali b. Yūsuf of the Almoravids] who was going around in public with her face and head exposed, as did all the Almoravid women and upset at this spectacle, he gave her a vigorous reprimand. She ran crying to her brother and recounted the insult. [In response] Ali subjected Ibn Tūmart to questioning…"[9] Thus an eminent Almoravid, Lamtūna woman, the sister of the Lamtūna leader who,

7. *Le Livre de Mohammed Ibn Toumert*, p. 258–266.
8. *Le Livre*, 259.
9. *Histoire des Berbères*, p. 162.

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according to Lamtūna tradition, was afforded special honors and whose son would normally inherit power, would become symbolic not of honor but of decadence. In the midst of tribal feuds and tribal polemics the women of the Almohads and the women of the Almoravids would face this feud as respective embodiments of Almohad and Almoravid honor.

Lamtūna "Arabness"

Ironically it would be an Arab historian living thousands of miles away, a historian who had never visited the Maghrib, who would first come to the defense of the Lamtūna. In his *al-Kāmil fī l-ta'rīḫ*, Ibn al-Aṯīr (d. 630/1233) provided one of the first examples of the alleged Lamtūna Arab origins, an account that would be elaborated further by the anonymous chronicler of the *Ḥulāl al-mawšiyya* mentioned at the beginning of the article. According to Ibn al-Aṯīr, the veil began as a practical measure, wearing the *liṯām* in the same way male Arabs wore a head scarf to keep out the sun. "Before they ruled they had worn their *liṯām* in the desert [only] against the heat and cold, as the Arabs do, and were mostly of swarthy complexion." Soon, however, when they became "rulers" of the desert they came to use the *liṯām* more frequently. The reason for the *liṯām*, according to this account, was military tactics. The Lamtūna wore the veil in order to trick their enemies. They dressed like women in order to be better warriors, better men.

> "It is said that the reason for their adoption of the *liṯām* is that a party of Lamtūna went out to raid one of their enemies, but the enemy came up behind them to their tents, there being there none but the old men, children and women. When the old men realized that it was the enemy they ordered the women to wear men's clothes and fix *liṯām* tightly so that they should not be recognized and to gird on weapons. This they did, and the old men and children advanced before them while the women circled round the tents. When the enemy came close they saw a great body and thought that they were men, so they said: 'These are with their women, and will fight to the death in defense of them. We would do well to drive off the livestock and depart, and if they follow us we will fight them away from their women.' While they were gathering the livestock from the pastures the men of the tribe came up and the enemy found themselves between them and the women, and many of the enemy were killed, the more so on account of the women. From that time they have made the wearing of the *liṯām* an invariable custom, so that one cannot know an old man from a youth. They do not remove it by night or day."[10]

Like the *Ḥulāl al-mawšiyya*, Ibn al-Aṯīr claimed that the Lamtūna were actually Arabs. They had worn the veil "normally as Arabs" but now used the veil differently, as a tactic, as a way of gaining victory. The mouth veil was a symbol of victory, the victory of an "Arab" tribe over their less-clever Berber neighbors. Ibn al-Aṯīr cited what he claimed to be a common saying about the Lamtūna, a saying that associated them with their alleged Yemeni ancestors:

10. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, p. 161.

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A people who have reached eminence in Ḥimyar; though they
Acknowledge affinity with Ṣanhāğa they are who they are.
When they had acquired every virtue modesty overcame them
And they hid themselves behind the *liṯām*.[11]

The Ṣanhāğa are a Berber confederation of tribes. The Ḥimyar, as mentioned previously, are the Arabs who allegedly fled from Yemen. Interestingly, this verse admits that the Lamtūna "acknowledge affinity with Ṣanhāğa," even though, in Ibn al-Aṯīr's mind they should be considered Arabs from Ḥimyar.

Ibn al-Aṯīr's extraordinary view of the *liṯām* as, in fact, a symbol of original "Arabness," or, according to the *Ḥulal al-mawšiyya*, pre-Islamic divine favor, was likely a response to Ibn Tūmart and the Berber Almohad Empire. Whereas the Almohads never attempted to relinquish their Berber character and established Almohad doctrine, a doctrine that developed in North Africa to legitimate the Mahdī Ibn Tūmart, the Almoravids were seen as legitimate, orthodox Mālikīs. As such, for writers like Ibn al-Aṯīr, the Lamtūna and the Almoravids, as representatives of true orthodoxy, could only be Arabs.

Modern Twareg and Arabness

The Twareg elite of the Saharan desert claim to be the modern descendants of the Lamtūna. Interestingly, some of their cultural and social practices, described in detail by a host of anthropological reports, most importantly the division of Twareg society into an alleged hierarchy of Arab, Berber and slave, may be explained or justified, at least partially, by the legend of Ḥimyar and the appropriation of an Arab identity by the elite Lamtūna tribe.[12] Twareg society has sometimes been described as "feudal" in nature, with nomadic Arab tribes controlling the Berber herding tribes who in turn control black-skinned agricultural peoples who have sometimes been taken as slaves in raids. The term "feudal," however, is not appropriate. A classic feudal, agricultural system is not possible because there are very few opportunities for extensive agricultural exploitation of the land, except perhaps on the Aïr Mountains and regions south of the Niger River.

The Twareg—often spelled Twareg or Tuareg in French and English and Ṭawāriq in Arabic—are a traditionally nomadic, tribal people inhabiting a vast and geographically diverse territory. As nomadic people the Twareg are not easily confined within a fixed region or area. Twareg territory crosses over several national boundaries in Saharan Africa. Generally speaking, the Twareg are found in a large circular zone radiating from the Haggar Mountains of Niger. In addition to Niger, Twareg are found in Mali, just south of the Niger River; in the desert regions of southern Algeria and Libya in the north; in Mauritania in the west; and in significant parts of Chad and Burkina Faso in the east.

11. Ibid.
12. On the supposed "feudal" nature of Twareg social divisions see Edmond Bernus, *Touaregs nigériens: unité culturelle et diversité régionale d'un peuple pasteur*, Paris, 1981 and "Tawāriḳ," *EI²a*, s.v.

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Despite their diverse ethnic roots, their difference in physical appearance, and a host of different dialects, the root Twareg language—commonly known as Tamashek but also called *tahaggart*, *tairt*, *tawllemmet*, and *tadraq*—provides the Twareg with a unified identity. Even though a Twareg from Mali speaks the Kidal dialect, one from Algeria speaks the Djanet dialect, and one from Burkina Faso speaks the Gorom Gorom dialect—in all there are about eight main dialects—the basic linguistic variations among these dialects are not great. All Twareg generally understand one another. Indeed, as a sign of their general linguistic unity, Twareg do not, in fact, call themselves Twareg; that name was introduced by French colonial writers. Instead, they identify themselves simply as *Kel Tamasheq*, or "the speakers of Tamashek." Tamashek is a Berber language and shares much of the vocabulary and structure of the Chleuh Berber speakers in Morocco and the Kabyle Berber language in Algeria. Various forms of Tifinagh, the written form of Tamashek, have been discovered on prehistoric carvings and have been adopted by Berbers in Morocco as the written form of Berber. Tifinagh is still widely used by Twareg, especially among the women, who use the script for short messages, inscriptions, and even poems.

Although Twareg society has experienced rare and spectacular bursts of unity, such as the Almoravid movement in the eleventh century described in the medieval sources, Twareg society remains largely decentralized. Individual tribes who elect their *amghar*, or chief, make most decisions. Historically, the Twareg tribes have been divided into about nine confederations, corresponding with different dialects and geographic regions. Each confederation includes about a hundred different tribes. The confederation is led by the *amanokal*, or supreme chief. The power of the *amanokal* is very limited except in times of war. Before the modern rise of nation-states, the *amanokal* also dealt with most issues related to foreign affairs and diplomacy between confederations and European powers. The title of *amanokal* is inherited by the son of the sister of the deceased *amanokal*. Only in extremely rare circumstances will different *amanokal* come together to form superconfederations. In one incident the so-called Sultan of Agadez in central Niger was able partially to unite some confederations, but most tribes and confederations jealously guard their independence from any central, controlling authority. In fact, Twareg society is based not on feudal rules but on egalitarian tribal systems.

The matriarchal nature of the Lamtūna seems to have survived in the contemporary practices of the Twareg. The traditional form of succession through the female line—for example, through the sister of the *amanokal*—is often cited as an example of the largely matriarchal nature of Twareg society. Indeed, women enjoy a great deal of freedom and influence in Twareg society. They own their own property. In the event of a divorce the woman keeps the tent and often owns her own livestock, as well as significant wealth in the form of elaborately carved silver jewelry. Most Twareg women favor silver over gold. As in the medieval period, the young man's family pays a bride-price to the family of the young woman in the event of marriage. As in the medieval period, women go unveiled, whereas men are expected to wear the traditional mouth veil, the *lithām* that covers the entire face except the eyes. It is considered indecent for a grown man to show his face to elders, especially to his relatives-in-law. The veil is seen as a mark of manhood and is worn by boys when they start puberty.[13]

13. Keenan, "The Tuareg Veil," p. 3–13.

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Conclusions

Speculating about the origins of modern Twareg practices in medieval sources is inherently problematic. Arabic sources clearly seemed to manipulate the legendary origins of the Lamtūna in order to confirm a dominant Arab narrative. According to this narrative, the Lamtūna were only successful, good Muslims because they were Arab. The fact that some modern Twareg practices happen to correspond with medieval Arab sources does not make those associations factual. It would be intriguing, but nearly impossible to know if the claim of "Arabness" and the Arab masculinization of the veil was a reading of history adopted by the Lamtūna and the Twareg into their social patterns, or was merely a reflection of existing social norms. Disentangling the legendary and the historical, let alone which legend belongs to the Twareg and which to the Arabs observing the Twareg has yet to be done. The only certain conclusion that can be made is that the male veil certainly aroused the medieval Arab chroniclers with suspicion, interest and even praise.

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