

A history factfile

1 Read the factfile. Match headings a–d with paragraphs 1–4.

a Language b History c Today d Daily Life

The Berbers



1

The Berber people have lived in North Africa for thousands of years, scattered across a wide region known as the Maghreb. From around 1000 BCE there were a series of invasions by the Greeks, Carthaginians and the Romans. Then in the 7th century CE the Arabs conquered North Africa, driving some Berber tribes into desert and mountain regions, and establishing the Islamic faith and Arab culture throughout the region. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, two great Islamic Berber dynasties – the Almoravids and the Almohads – controlled large parts of Spain, as well as North-west Africa.

2

Today the Berber population is smaller than it used to be. Communities now survive in pockets in the Rif and Atlas mountains and in the Sahara desert, and over a large area from Egypt to the Atlantic and from the Niger River in the south to the Mediterranean. Overpopulation and poverty have forced many Berbers to migrate to the large cities of North Africa to look for work. There has also been significant immigration to countries in Europe. France has the largest Berber population outside of the Maghreb.

3

Linguistically, Berber belongs to the Afro-Asiatic group and has around 300 dialects. The three main dialects used in Morocco are Tachelhit, Tamazight and Tarifit. It is basically a spoken language, although a Berber alphabet has existed for around 2500 years. Recently, there has been a movement to introduce Tamazight as an official language into schools. It has recognition as a national (but not official) language in Algeria, Morocco, Mali and Niger. In January 2010 Morocco established its first Amazigh TV channel, broadcasting in the Tachelhit, Tarifit and Tamazight dialects.

4

Many Berbers are farmers who grow cereals like wheat and barley in winter and grow vegetables and graze sheep and goats in the summer. Their villages are typically high up in the mountains, and have simple stone houses, a mosque, a communal granary for storing crops (called the *kasbah*) and a meeting place for the village elders (the *Jama'ah*). Others still lead a nomadic life, travelling across the desert by camel and taking their cattle to pasture in the high mountains in the summer. They still keep up old traditions such as weaving, pottery, metalwork and leatherwork, which they sometimes trade at the local souks. Despite the effects of modernisation on society, the old Berber values continue.

Did you know ... ?

The name Berber probably comes from the Greek and Roman words (βαρβαρία and *barbaria*) meaning 'outsider'. The Berbers call themselves *Imazighen*, meaning 'the free'.

Famous Berbers include ...

- The Roman Emperor Septimus Severus
- Ibn Battuta, the 14th century Moroccan traveller and explorer
- French soccer star Zinedine Zidane.

2 Read the factfile again. Choose the correct answers.

- 1 The Arab invaders ...
 - a arrived 700 years before the Romans.
 - b established one main dynasty.
 - c changed the culture of the Berbers.
- 2 Today most Berbers live in ...
 - a France.
 - b small areas in the desert and mountains.
 - c communities outside Europe and the Maghreb.
- 3 The Berber people speak ...
 - a hundreds of languages.
 - b many different variations of the same language.
 - c a Moroccan dialect called Tamazight.
- 4 Tribes survive in the mountains by ...
 - a growing crops and keeping livestock.
 - b living a nomadic lifestyle.
 - c selling their traditional crafts to tourists.
- 5 The name 'Berber' ...
 - a is both a Greek and a Roman word meaning 'the free'.
 - b is not used by the Berber people themselves.
 - c has the same meaning as *Imazighen*.

3 Answer the questions about the text.

- 1 What happened in the 7th century to change the way the Berber people lived?

- 2 What problems do Berber populations face in the modern world and how have they responded?

- 3 How have authorities in Algeria and Morocco reacted to pressure to teach Tamazight in schools?

- 4 Which are the three main buildings in a Berber village and what do they have in common?

- 5 What value do traditional Berber crafts have for the people?

4 Answer the questions with your own ideas.

- 1 How much do you know about the history of your country?

- 2 Do you think old customs and traditions are in danger of disappearing in the modern world?
Why / Why not?

- 3 What is the national clothing of your country? Have you ever worn it?
