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978-0-521-04041-9 - Women and Property in Morocco: Their Changing Relation to the Process of Social Stratification in the Middle Atlas

Vanessa Maher

Excerpt

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Introduction

In a country in which the majority of the population cannot be assured of long-term employment, it may be expected that the market will not serve as the only vehicle of exchange and distribution. In the Middle Atlas of Morocco where this study was carried out, conditions of high unemployment obtain. Further, women do not work for wages because their participation in the 'public sphere' is considered immoral. Thus, some members of the population can sell their labour in the market; to the majority, this option is not available (see Table 2).

These two sets of circumstances give rise to two different modes of social relationship. The one is characterised by some of the traits which Weber associated with the rise of Western capitalism, and indeed, has become more widespread with the intensification of economic and cultural exchanges with Western Europe (particularly France) since the beginning of the twentieth century, and with the United States since the war.¹ The belief in the legitimacy of working for gain, and of accumulation, the belief that the individual is his own best patron, and a diminished dependence on ascriptively recruited groups for economic and political support – such traits are typical of this outlook.

The other mode of relationship, on the contrary, provides for the exchange and distribution of goods and services, and for the definition of social and political roles, outside the framework of the market. These processes take place, rather, through membership of ascriptively recruited groups and patron–client relationships. Vertical links of interdependence, those of kinship and simulated kinship, are of paramount importance in determining an individual's lifechances.

In the semi-urban environment with which I shall mainly be dealing, there are not two discrete 'systems'; it is necessary to insist on the phrase 'modes of relationship', for to a single individual both may be significant. The consumer goods which belong to the cash nexus are desired by those who cannot acquire cash by selling their labour in

¹ This is not to disregard the history of capitalism in an Islamic context (see for example M. Rodinson, *Islam et Capitalisme*, 1967).

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the market. On the other hand, goods obtained in the market are channelled through 'kinship' networks and patron–client relationships to non-earners, who themselves supply services in the name of 'kinship'. More important is the fact that even participants in market relationships work through regional and patron–client networks in order to acquire wives, and the statuses and esteem which the community awards for command of numerous dependants, proper celebration of *rites de passage*, and proper and generous response to the claims of kin, whether true or classificatory.

The task I have set for myself in this book is the exhaustive analysis of the roles of women in lending intensity to the status-based mode of relationship. They increase the significance of the systems of social stratification to which it gives rise, a system of segmentary tribal groups, and a system of hierarchically arranged 'estates'. These systems continue to have economic and political importance, partly because it is only through them that the majority of people can derive benefits from the market and from government, via patron–client relationships. I shall also study the social mechanisms, both political and ideological, by which women are confined to these roles.

It is this second concern which has led me to concentrate on the perspectives and activities of women, and, flying in the face of convention, to treat those of men in a more cursory manner. This emphasis follows naturally from the nature of my field-experience which afforded me more reliable insight into the world of women than into that of men. In a similar way I knew more of social life in the semi-urban context than I knew of either town or country, and I was less acquainted with the *élite* in the towns and the *haratin* in the countryside than I was with other categories of the population. This bias was not accidental, nor inevitable as in the case of my having better information on women; it enabled me to concentrate my attention on the area of 'contact', where the market principle and the prerogatives of kinship and status relations struggle for hegemony.

Perhaps the chief locus of this conflict is marriage. The world of women is structured much more consistently in terms of kinship obligations (which are extended to patron–client relationships) than the world of men, which is not wholly geared to the market either. To a wife in the *ksar*, kinship is a much more reliable source of economic and social support than the husband and his connections. This state of affairs is at once the cause and the result of acute marital instability. On the other hand, where a husband has a successful relation to the market as in the case of a well-to-do trader or a government employee,

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he is able to check the corrosive effect of his wife's social world by secluding her, and controlling her contacts with kin so that she becomes more or less integrated into his own kin group, and begins to identify her interests with his. Although the strains may be acute, the outcome is not inevitably separation, and the divorce rate is lower. Secluded wives resort to subterfuge more often than to confrontation. As in the *ksar* marriage, children act as cement to a union, but their presence does not necessarily reduce the antagonism of interests between husband and wife. Finally, where both husband and wife are educated and working (a situation which is rarely found in the Akhdar region) or where the kin interests of husband and wife are identical as when elite marriages are arranged to cement a business alliance, the divorce rate seems to be lower still. The wife's dependence on her kin is reduced by her control of a dowry, and her husband's ability to provide for her handsomely. Marriage here serves to promote capital accumulation. In the course of this study I point out that marriage has a different social significance in each of these three social settings: the proletarian, the petty bourgeois, and the accumulative elite. The relation of the conjugal household to the market is crucial in determining the importance it attaches to relationships based on ascriptive statuses, which will increase as access to the market becomes more uncertain. This lays a premium on the roles of women and on relationships between them which are generally regulated according to the ascriptive principle.

However, although women's relationships have most structural significance in the semi-urban and rural context, the social situations of women in all milieus are similar enough as to impose severe limits on the operation of the market economy.

Sources

The study is based on field research carried out in the Akhdar region between September 1969 and June 1971. I spent three weeks in a quarter of the town of Akhdar, where I made several lasting contacts, before moving to the *ksar* of Aghzim, where I lived for about ten months in all. During this time I travelled three times to the Alpha area to visit the kin and region of origin of Aghzim residents, and made three visits to northern towns with the same object, but most of my material was collected in the *ksour* situated not more than 10 kilometres from Akhdar.

In the assessment and interpretation of my material I have drawn

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on various written sources, notably the reports written on the area by French administrators during the first half of the century, and kept as unpublished memoirs in the Centre de Hautes Etudes sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Modernes in Paris.

This study was not intended to take the form of a comprehensive ethnography, but to focus on some aspects of the society rather than others, notably the way in which social structure, and social stratification in particular, is affected by the roles and relationships of women.

Chapter 1 is a brief historical introduction to the Akhdar region, in which I attempt to assess the main changes which took place in the pre-Protectorate political and economic organisation, as a result of French penetration. My picture of the Akhdar region at the turn of the century is built up from documentary sources, from travellers' accounts of visits to the Middle Atlas, from informants' narration of their own experience, and more detailed histories of an anecdotal kind which they had received from their parents. These I have attempted to check against each other, and have supplemented by my own observation of remote rural communities.

In the next two chapters I map out the systems of stratification based on ascribed statuses and analyse the ways in which they are interlaced today with that generated by the market economy. I go on to describe the ways in which different categories of the population are related through the processes of production, distribution and exchange within and outside the money economy. I discuss the system of land tenure and its relation to community organisation, pointing out the importance of patron–client relationships (especially among women) in compensating for the inadequacies of community support, and for the failure of the market as a mechanism of distribution.

Chapter 4 presents a detailed description of the economic organisation of a semi-urban *ksar*, and discusses the way in which the intrusion of *Makhzen* institutions has affected inter-*ksar* and interpersonal relations, separating the economic destinies of men but making women more interdependent. Following a study of a town quarter, I present a comparison of economic and social conditions in town and *ksar*.

The next two chapters show the cultural mechanisms which operate to exclude the majority of Akhdaris from mobility via the market. Education, by its content and its distribution has this effect. Further, different but overlapping systems of religious belief provide the rationales for 'capitalist' and 'status-bound' behaviour respectively. Special attention is paid to the religious justifications of women's

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non-participation in the 'public sphere' and to the idea of women as dangerous to men.

I go on to describe (Chapters 7 and 8) the division of labour which allocates the public sphere to men and the domestic sphere to women, noting the areas of overlap. I point out that because of the segregation of men's and women's roles there is intense interaction among women, which is regulated by a clearly defined authority structure. Women have a visible system of social organisation of their own. Moreover the bonds between matrilineally-related women have such structural importance that they resist severe strains. This fact helps us to understand the social significance of the institution of fostering (Chapter 9) which links matrilineal kin, and the prohibition on adoption which would upset these structural arrangements among women. I discuss fostering as an extension of patron-client relations, emphasising that the transfer of children can have many different meanings.

The next three chapters deal with the structural adjustments entailed in different forms of marriage, how they are affected by the marketability or non-marketability of patrimony, and how they are symbolised in different kinds of marriage payment. I pay special attention to the extent to which marriage disrupts a wife's relations with her kin, preventing her from realising certain values which she often continues to hold. Since the wife's world-view and social links are of necessity different from those of her husband, the marriage becomes a struggle in which the single-minded victory of the wife may mean the re-establishment of her pre-marital relationship with her kin, and therefore divorce. Only the birth of several children can impede this outcome.

In the last chapter I discuss divorce in *ksar* and town, suggesting that in the Middle Atlas marital stability, and the truncation of women's social networks, are necessary conditions for the 'achievement orientation' of the husband, the dominance of the mode of relationship governed by the market and consequently for capital accumulation.

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The background

In this brief account of the geographical and historical background of Akhdar and its region, I wish to stress the pre-Protectorate opposition between the impersonal and centralised authority of the *Makhzen*, and the 'egalitarian', segmentary organisation of the tribes 'outside the law', which was modified by alliance strategies and by the chance economic disequilibrium, ground for petty tyrannies to germinate.

The town immediately before the Protectorate in a more thorough-going sense than today was the site of market relations and the state machine; the social structure of the rural Middle Atlas was barely affected by these institutions. Here, social life was organised according to the principle of ascribed status. French penetration extended the economic and political sway of the central authority over the countryside. It did little to abolish the structural antagonism between them. This factor goes some way towards accounting for the importance of status-based social relations in the Middle Atlas today.

Climate

The study was carried out in the anticline which separates the southern slopes of the Middle Atlas from the northern ones of the Central High Atlas.

Although it is high, at 1700 metres (5000 feet) Akhdar is reputed to escape the rigours of winter experienced by the mountains to the north and south, and the waterless barrenness of summer reported from the Tafilalet region to the south. However, in winter, the snow falls to a depth of two or three feet, and winds rage; during the day, and especially the night, temperatures often fall far below freezing point. The mountain villages are a memory left over from summer and Akhdar itself is frequently cut off from the north by snow between December and February. With the milder spring weather and rain, the mountain snows melt, and the rivers turn into raging torrents which break their banks, often causing disastrous floods and carrying away crops, animals and houses. I witnessed this in two consecutive

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springs in the Akhdar region. From April onwards the temperature rises to its peak between mid-June and mid-September. In June there are fierce hail storms which ruin ripening grain. This is the period of long siestas and school holidays but also includes the two main harvests of the year: wheat in June and maize towards the end of September.

Ecology

The settlement pattern of this region plays on the theme which runs through the Middle and Central High Atlas, varying slightly according to topology and proximity to a town offering agricultural employment.

The hamlets, comprising from ten to thirty households, are usually built on the slope of a river valley or on a rising which overlooks it. The fields of a hamlet, *ksar* (pl. *ksour*), are cultivated in strips perpendicular to the upper banks of the stream, like the teeth of a comb. Above the fields, linked to the stream by irrigation channels, and by paths which the women use to fetch water, are the clusters of daub houses. Today most hamlets are linked to the nearest market and to the main road by a rough track.

The lower bank of the river, generally flooded in spring, provides daub for building houses and clay for making pottery. Most households keep a few animals – sheep and perhaps a cow or mule – which are taken to browse in the mountain pastures. For these families, lucerne and hay for winter fodder figure importantly in the list of crops grown, mainly cereals, barley, wheat and maize, pulses and root vegetables. Some peasants also plant cereals in small well watered mountain fields.

The surrounding plains offer little in the way of vegetation to the eye of the stranger: camel thorn and clinging xerophytic plants, grey clumps of tough grass on which the sheep graze, shading reluctantly to green towards the bases of the mountains, which clutch scrubby oakwoods in their crevices. But these plants also count in the Berber peasants' economy. Reeds for making carpets and brooms, wild rosemary and thyme, used for a wide range of medicinal purposes, wild lettuce and berries, the wild acorns and small animals found in the woods. Bees are caught and kept in rectangular mud hives and pigeons may provide an occasional meat-rich meal. Scrubby bushes (*ifssiyn*) and the stunted oaks and species of pine in the mountains provide fuel for the fires or stoves which people cook on throughout the year and huddle around in winter.

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In the flat region immediately surrounding Akhdar the *ksour* are generally built on ridges and rocky outcrops, in strong positions overlooking the river valleys where their fields are planted. Some sites have been occupied for three and even four centuries, though the buildings are rarely more than 150 years old. The older ones are protected by a high mud wall, broken only by two narrow entrances north and south. At the corners rise the powerful towers (*borj*) characteristic of the Tafilalet, the arid region to the south of Akhdar.

Transhumance

At the turn of the century, the Akhdar plain was overrun, season by season, by transhumants from the less favoured regions of the Tafilalet and the north-eastern plains, bringing their flocks of sheep and, more rarely, goats. Usually they set up tents, but occasionally a transhumant group would build a village in land ceded to them by the host tribe, but this was rare, occurring as a result of a national disaster or tribal war.

Tribal wars took place in a context of fierce competition for pastureland between transhumant groups. The situation was particularly acute for the smaller tribes. Ruet, writing as an *Officier des Affaires Indigènes* in 1952, describes the pre-Protectorate winter transhumance in the Akhdar region thus: 'Lorsqu'une tribu du Moyen Atlas était suffisamment forte pour choisir sa zone d'habitation elle s'installait sur une bande de terrain grossièrement orientée N-S. Son territoire comprenait alors des pâturages d'été et des terrains en plaine où pâturaient les troupes pendant l'hiver.... Pour de telles tribus, la transhumance d'hiver restait une transhumance intérieure.'¹

For the rest the annual transhumance was often preceded by a battle, but the receiving tribe was usually able to gauge when it would be useless to fight. In such a case the receiving tribe had to move north, pushing yet other tribes out of their territory. The weakest and most desperate tribes might be forced to move into the despised pastures vacated by richer ones.

If the adjacent tribes were at peace their *jema'aiya* (councils of elders) would meet to decide on the movement of sheep. Ruet cites the agreement of 31 January 1921 between the Ait Mguild and the Ait Guerrouane: 'La transhumance correspond à une nécessité de la vie pastorale, elle est consacrée par un long usage. Ce droit a été légué aux gens du présent par leurs ancêtres et exercé, de tout temps, sans

¹ C. Ruet (1953).

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qu'aucune redevance n'ait été acquittée en retour. Le jema'a des Ait Mguild demanda toutefois qu'il leur soit donné acte qu'il ne s'agit que d'un droit d'usage qui ne crée aucun droit sur le bien fonds. C'est seulement une servitude qui grève leur droit de propriétaire.¹

However, according to the relative strength of the tribes the treaty might favour one or the other. Between tribes of equal power it was common that a proportion of the lambs born during the period in question should be divided among the receiving tribe. It was a grievance which the Ait Hadiddou nourished against the Ait Morghad that the latter never gave them anything in exchange for pasturing concessions.

All this points to a history of sharp struggle over land, water and stock, both among the autochthonous *ksour* and against less favoured groups from the south fleeing from drought, floods and intertribal wars. 'It was just like Texas then,' I was told. No stranger ever left his village to travel to another one unless he had intimate friends in the other village who would act as protectors and guarantors. People constantly risked assassination. They made no windows unless they were very high up and at night kept them always shuttered for fear that an enemy, seeing a shadow pass across the candle-light would fire. Some people made windows by fitting the sieve part of the *kskas* (double pot for steaming *couscous*) in a hole made in the wall and filling the holes with *couscous* (semolina), so that outsiders could not see in, but the inmates still had light and safety.

'Makhzen' and 'siba'

Before the Protectorate the Moroccan tribes were said to be in a state of *siba*, which has been translated as 'anarchy' but corresponded more closely to the segmentary organisation of the so-called 'stateless society'. They acknowledged the spiritual overlordship of the Sultan but not the secular authority of his government, the *Makhzen*. The term *Makhzen* signifies also the regions and tribes under its aegis.

The relationship of *bled-es-siba*, the country of dissidence, to the *Makhzen*, or centralised political organisation, has been aptly described by Gellner: 'Siba was a political condition and a condition of which people were explicitly aware: local tribesmen themselves employ this concept...Such tribesmen know the possibility, indeed the most ambivalently regarded obligation of being incorporated in a more centralised state, sanctioned by their own religion; indeed they

¹ Ibid.

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may have deliberately rejected and violently resisted this alternative.' And again '...the inconveniences of submission make it attractive to withdraw from political authority and the balance of power, the nature of mountainous or desert terrain, make it feasible'.¹

This attitude of the Berber tribes to external authority seems to have been evident from the time of the first Arab incursions (and the Romans met with it even earlier). Religious heresy was an important corollary, and expression of political dissidence. Ibn Khaldun remarks that after the invasion of Morocco by Uthman's governor in A.D. 647, the Berbers 'continued to rebel and apostatised time after time. The Muslims massacred many of them. After the Muslim religion had been established among them, they went on revolting and seceding, and they adopted dissident (Kharijite) religious opinions many times.'²

The authority exercised by the central government on the Akhdar region is best described as concessionary or contingent. It depended most of all on the personality and power of the Sultan's emissary, the *caid*, to whom were allocated the duties of tax-collecting and other forms of profitable mediation between the Sultan and his people. The *caid* was sometimes a stranger to the region. The limits of his powers were set by the tribesmen themselves but because of their factionalism they put up with a great deal of petty tyranny. The pretext for an uprising was often that the *caid*, the Sultan's emissary, had made an assault on the moral and social order of the tribes. It was expressed in these terms, however bitter might be the grievances on grounds of economic exploitation and political oppression, for the tribes acknowledged only a mystical relationship with the Sultan. The following legend is a typical instance: In the reign of Hassan I (1875–90) a certain *caid*, who had abused the Ait Izdeg for too long, finally ignited their fury by demanding to see the face of a woman in one of the houses he visited. Unfortunately for him, she was a *sherifa*, so that his demand constituted a sacrilege. The tribes armed against him, defeated his forces, killed him and carried off his head with which they played football in the villages. A village woman had the head stolen and sent to the king, who marched on the Ait Izdeg with an army of 10,000 cavalry to avenge his emissary. He was met by a delegation of *shurfa*, sent by the Ait Izdeg, to persuade him to listen to their grievances and redress their wrongs rather than punish them for bringing a tyrant to justice. The Sultan, being a descendant of the Prophet himself, recognised the validity of the pleas.³

¹ E. Gellner (1969), 1–2.² Ibn Khaldun, trans. F. Rosenthal (1958), 332.³ Account given by Ali of Ceima, with corrections and comments by Haddou of Ceima.