

## FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL ROLES IN A MOROCCAN SETTING

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Introduction

In attempting to analyze my field data on the various roles played by rural Moroccan women, I, like Beverly Chínas (1976), did not find much help in the traditional anthropological and sociological literature on roles. Turning next to the increasing number of anthropological studies which specifically focused on females, I found an interesting but unsystematic body of material in which the variety of approaches taken thwarted the drawing of general conclusions. These diverse approaches included Silverman's attempt to discover rural Italian women's economic and political functions by an examination of crisis periods in their lives (1967), Mohsen's focus on women's legal rights to provide insight into their position in an Egyptian desert population in general (1967), and Ardener's symbolic analysis of women's rites to facilitate his understanding of women (1972).

Another problem encountered in this literature was the great variation in terms used to characterize or clarify female position or functions in contrast to those of males. While the overall impression of a dichotomy emerged, this was described in references to formal or informal roles or social structures, or to official-unofficial, ideal-real, public-private, social-domestic or even culture-

nature oppositions. Attempts to systematically apply one set of terms in another context were often further hampered by the failure of an author to clearly define what was meant by the terms used. And although sometimes different authors both used the same terms and clearly defined their meanings, their usages were different. Thus Wolf uses the formal-informal dichotomy in an article on complex societies, describing informal structures as "supplementary interpersonal sets..." whose description and analysis "...reveal a great deal about the hidden mechanisms of complex society" (1966:20). His formal structures are "...great institutions..." or "...institutional features of national structure..." or the "...formal organization of their economics or legal or political systems..." (1966:19). Michaelson and Goldschmidt also use the formal-informal dichotomy in a discussion of male dominance among peasants, noting "...the mother's informal influence over her sons may have outweighed the influence of the father's formal authority (1971:338)." The latter use of "formal" does not coincide with Wolf; while he refers to the realm of national institutions, they use the term in reference to power within the domestic unit. Although more systematic approaches to the study of women are beginning to appear (Ardener, 1975; Friedl, 1975; Reiter, 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974), that proposed by Chiñas (1973) has proved most useful for my purposes.

Chiñas' approach has several advantages. One is that in her writing on Isthmus Zapotec women in Mexico (1973), she manages to combine and utilize in her analysis several of the useful dichotomies above. She considers women's (and men's) formal and non-formal roles, and whether they occur in the public or private domain. She avoids the confusion noted above by clearly defining her terms; the more specific one can be about terms, the more precise and valid are the conclusions drawn, and the more amenable to cross-cultural comparison.

A brief review of Chiñas' definitions may be useful. She uses role to mean "...the 'bundle' of rights and duties associated with a particular status position" (1973:3). Formal roles are "...those given formal status and recognition by members of the society" (1973:93), so that people have a clear idea of the rights and duties involved in formal roles such as mother or mayor. Non-formal roles "...are those which are not so clearly perceived or rigidly defined by the members of the society" (1973:94); in fact, people see their participation in such roles as individual behavior and it is only when the outside observer notes the repetition of such behavior by different individuals in many contexts that it becomes clear it is role behavior. Chiñas found Zapotec women making important contributions to the functioning of their society in non-formal roles as messengers and information-gatherers. These formal and non-formal roles may be played in the private or public domain. "The private domain refers to the basic social unit of the society, the family or other domestic group. The public domain refers to everything outside the basic social unit" (1973:3).

Chiñas' specification of different roles and domains allows her to include women to a greater extent than is usually done in her analysis of Zapotec society and to discern aspects of female functioning that are frequently overlooked but which are very important for the operation of the society as a whole. In my research on Muslim women, a group not usually noted for their contributions to their society, I hoped that the use of Chiñas' framework as a methodological and analytical tool would enable me to do the same.

#### Formal and Non-formal Roles in Rural Morocco

The data which will be analyzed using Chiñas' approach was collected during a year and a half of fieldwork (1970-1972) in a town of about 9000 which is located in an agricultural area of north central Morocco.

### Advantages of Chiñas' Approach

The population of the research site was entirely Muslim and practiced the separation of the sexes which is a common aspect of Muslim culture. In such a setting, female behavior in general and roles in particular are less obvious than those of males to the outside observer, so that one might expect the use of Chiñas' concepts, especially that of the non-formal role, to highlight often-overlooked female roles. It should be stressed, however, that the usefulness of Chiñas' approach is not limited to the study of female functioning in a culture; it can just as easily be applied to male behavior, as will be demonstrated below and as Dennis (1976) confirms.

Chiñas' framework was indeed useful when applied to the Moroccan data. Space does not allow detailed enumeration of the various roles available to Moroccan men and women, so a few examples must suffice. As one would expect, many formal roles with well-known rights and duties were available, including the private roles of mother and father and brother and sister, and public roles such as barber or bath-mistress.

Less well-known or widely-recognized non-formal roles were also highlighted; an example involving both males and females would be the roles of patron and client. While both sexes maneuver to get into a position of receiving or dispensing patronage, they perceive this as individual rather than role behavior; there is no word that is used to mean "patron" or "client" as a distinct role as there is for mother or uncle or barber. Once these roles are recognized, one can assess the participation in each of males and females. In general, males are more often patrons and serve both male and female clients. Females less often act as patrons, and when they do, their clients are also usually female.

Another non-formal role revealed by the use of Chiñas' approach was that played by women in female-based or uterine kin groups which serve as providers of both emotional and material support for other females. Formally, both

males and females are members of patrilineal descent groups; people were members of the local saintly lineage on this basis and their membership entailed certain recognized (formal) rights and obligations. However, when one examines where women needing help sought it, it was often not from their fathers and brothers, or the members of their patrilineage who are formally responsible for these females. Instead, women relatives often filled this supportive role. In some cases sisters helped sisters; one woman turned to her sister for both financial assistance and aid in childcare, even though she had a married brother whose aid could have been sought. In this case, the sisters are of course both members of the same patrilineage, but it is formally males rather than females who are obliged to provide aid. In other cases, help was sought from women who were more distantly related through females; one old woman was supported for several months by her sister's daughter, although the woman had a married son nearby with whom she could have lived. These are only a few examples, but the repeated occurrence of such behavior among females suggests that they do play a role of providing both material and emotional support for female relatives in need. One of the questions raised by Chiñas (1976) is whether non-formal roles may function as adaptive strategies for relatively powerless persons; these female-based support groups may provide one example of such an adaptation.

The roles described above provide just a few instances of the usefulness of Chiñas' approach for analyses of data on rural Moroccan men and women. Many others are available, but I think it would be more useful here to describe some of the problems encountered in using the framework in this particular socio-cultural setting. The resolution of these problems will further refine the framework and make possible its application in a wider variety of cultural contexts.

Problems in Chiñas' Approach

In the application of Chiñas' framework to the Moroccan data, three main problems have arisen. The first two are not specific to the Moroccan context and may arise with reference to other cultures; the third is specifically related to the separation of the sexes in Muslim cultures.

The first problem encountered was the temptation to classify particular rights and obligations within an overall role as individual roles; this was especially troublesome when the overall role would be classified as formal but the right or obligation as non-formal. For example, the formal role of mother is available to a Moroccan woman. Two of the obligations within the role of Moroccan mother are to bear children and to care for them or provide for their needs. These obligations were widely recognized and many women were observed to meet them both. However, there were also a substantial number of mothers who attempted to limit the number of children they bore, thus ceasing to meet their obligation as child-bearer. Although women know others may limit their child-bearing, it is seen as individual, deviant behavior rather than generally recognized. It was thus tempting to describe a non-formal role for women as "child-limiter" in opposition to a formal role as "child-bearer."

After careful consideration, however, it became apparent that these were not two separate roles but rather both fell within the role of mother. Bearing children was one of the rights or obligations of motherhood, and limiting children was a failure to meet this right or obligation. This problem was partially resolved by considering roles as a whole as either formal or non-formal. However, doing only this limits one to the normative aspects of a role; a mother should bear children and care for them. Of course norms are not always met, and by recognizing that this is true for specific rights and obligations within a role we enrich our understanding of the actual behavior of the members of a

culture; not all women are always ideal mothers. Thus we can say there is a regular occurrence (otherwise it is not worth noting) of women not meeting their obligation to bear children by the use of birth control, and further that this failure to meet the obligation is not generally recognized but is instead perceived as individual behavior, so we can speak of non-formal failure to meet certain obligations. Chiñas' distinctions of formal and non-formal can thus be extended beyond the categorization of entire roles and applied to the meeting or failure to meet specific rights and obligations within a specific role.

In an example involving males, the obligations of the recognized formal role of son include respect for and obedience of one's parents. These obligations are usually met with regard to one's father in Morocco, but there is more variation in the interaction of a male and his mother. Formally, boys are expected to respect their mothers, but this norm is often not met. Boys frequently talk back to their mothers and ignore their demands or requests, behavior they seldom or never exhibit with their fathers. Further, this non-meeting of the norm of respect for one's mother is generally recognized, or formal; women do not perceive this behavior as idiosyncratic and something to worry about, but rather concede that "boys are like that" and hope they outgrow it soon. The norm of respect still exists as one of the obligations of the formal role of son with his mother, but if we stop our analysis at the level of the formal role we are unaware of what types of regular deviation from the norm may occur. Such deviations provide useful information about the overall functioning of the culture. For example, this male failure to meet the obligation to respect his mother is recognized and thus formal, while female failure to respect the father (as evidenced by girls running away to avoid arranged marriages) is seen as irregular or idiosyncratic, thus qualifying as non-formal. In this case, it appears male deviation is more readily recognized in the culture; if

this is a general trend it suggests that males may have more options open to them than females.

A second general problem in the application of Chiñas' framework is the precise distinction between formal and non-formal roles. In some cases this distinction is quite clear; Chiñas finds people very aware of women's formal role as mother, but unaware that women's behavior in gathering information is regular and constitutes a non-formal role. However, one encounters role behavior which does not fit quite so neatly into either of these two categories. For example, Chiñas calls "friend" a non-formal role, while I classify it as a formal role. It seems to me that the rights and obligations involved are well known and that people are aware of themselves and others in the role of friend. Chiñas may call friend a non-formal role on the basis that the rights and obligations involved are either less clear or less generally agreed upon than are the rights and obligations of the formal roles of mother or father.

Chiñas has suggested that a possible solution would be to ask one's informants what rights and obligations a particular role entails; if there is general agreement the role is formal, and much variation in answers would suggest it is informal. While this would provide an empirical solution, it does not seem feasible for two main reasons. First, one would still have to draw an arbitrary dividing line. Roles with 90% agreement among respondents concerning the rights and obligations involved would clearly be formal, and those with only 10% agreement would clearly be nonformal. But would roles whose components were agreed upon by 55% of respondents be just as clearly formal? And would those with only 45% agreement clearly non-formal? A second problem with Chiñas' suggestion is that, assuming a culture has a wide variety of roles available, it would be a very cumbersome and time-consuming task to ask several informants to list the rights and obligations involved in each role and then to tabulate the results. It is possible that the division of roles into the distinct

categories of formal and non-formal is a useful heuristic device, but that it does not accurately reflect a reality in which roles fall along more of a continuum. If this is the case, we must assess whether the heuristic value of the model justifies this departure from reality, or whether the model should and can be refined to reflect this continuous quality from formal to non-formal roles.

A third problem in Chiñas' approach is related to the above-mentioned clarity of distinction between formal and non-formal roles, but this time in terms of the Moroccan context. Rather than there being confusion about whether a role is formal or non-formal in terms of the whole culture, my data raise the question of whether a role can be formal (recognized) for one sex and non-formal (unrecognized) for the other. Since males and females spend a great deal of time interacting with only the members of their own sex, it is possible that role behavior well-known to one sex is unknown to the other sex.

This was found to be the case with the role of "friend" between two females. While both males and females recognize the role of friend for males, males do not recognize this as a possible role for females. In men's eyes, a woman should interact mostly with her female relatives; if she does see other, unrelated women it should be at formal celebrations, like weddings and she should be aloof and reserved to protect the honor of her family. Females also acknowledge that women should behave this way, if at all, with unrelated females, but in fact they do not always follow this norm. Instead, they do form close friendships with women who are not relatives, and spend considerable time in unstructured visits or sharing of household tasks with women they consider good friends. Since men are not present, they are unaware of the existence and content of these friendships.

How, then, does one classify the female role as friend? In male eyes it would be a non-formal role because they are unaware of it, while to females it would certainly be a formal role. Does this mean we need to analyze roles separately for each sex? Yet there is more overlap than disagreement; both males and females recognize the formal roles of father and mother, and the non-formal

roles of patron and client are equally unrecognized by both sexes. Still, in some cases such sex-based disagreements arise in this Muslim culture. Perhaps, as McIntire (1976) suggests, we need to include a male-female dimension in the schema. However, her data <sup>is</sup> also from a sex-segregated society; such a dimension may not be necessary or useful if we are attempting to make this model as generally applicable as possible.

#### Conclusion

It is clear that the approach suggested by Chínas for the analysis of the roles played by females and males has brought some order to this area of inquiry. Examples of its usefulness in a Moroccan context have been presented, as have certain problems that were encountered in its application. While possible resolutions to some of these problems have been suggested, it is clear that there is also much still to be done.

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