

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN BERBER SOCIETY

Women's position in society has become a widespread topic. Indeed, much has been written, many conferences have been held here and there aiming to shed light on the life of women and mainly on the injustices and hardships undergone by them in different parts of the world, either in the past or present.

Needless to say that while some (and very few, unfortunately) search into the topic out of pure concern, the majority do so just to be in vogue, that is to say out of pure boastfulness. So what they come up with are generalities and clichés, repeated higgledy-piggledy, in different mass media, without probing deep into the subject and unveiling previously hidden realities about the sufferings of women and the injustices inflicted on them by society.

My concern in this paper is to "give the floor" to the Berber woman herself so she can express ideas about her position, how she lived in the past, what awful circumstances she had to cope with and what changes she has seen in present days.

I have tried to report, as objectively as I could, what I have witnessed and heard from some elderly women whom I cross-questioned about memories and tales from the remote past recounted by them by mothers and grand mothers and about personnel experiences they underwent. I have queried about changes taking place in the present. For practical

reasons, I have limited my research to the Middle Atlas region, and more particularly to the Bni Mguild (Ayt Myill) woman. But what I found about her life may be generalized in some aspects so as to apply to the whole.

The life of Berber women in the past: babyhood and early childhood

The Ait Myill woman's life was a very hard one, even from her birth. The birth of a baby girl was abhorred by the whole family. An elderly woman told me that the father had visualized her as another man's future property that, in the meantime, he had to nourish, nurture, bring-up and hand over, so he decided subconsciously that very little, if anything at all, was to be spent on her. The other members especially the paternal grandmother considered her a burden befalling her son's family. An extra useless mouth to feed, a worthless object that threatened the honor of the family. Since early childhood, the girl was reminded of her base nature. She should atone for this disgrace by being totally obedient and submissive, by serving the male members of the family, who were also considered her superiors. The mother herself wished for a baby boy even it were to be her tenth birth – giving. She was not to forget her bitterness at the coming of the girl as the first baby. Soon, the mother labored to make of the girl a good helpmate and immediately after, prepared her to face her own destiny and carry out everyday chores of a whole household successfully, at an early age and alone. If the girl didn't succeed in that early enough, all the blame and anger of the family and of the in-laws were to be poured on the mother.

At about the age of nine or ten, suitors started asking for the little one's hand especially if her mother was famous for hard work and patience. Sometimes the would-be husband would send his mother to test the girl's patience. The elderly woman would

find some way of putting her elbow on the girl's bosom and would then push as hard as she could. If the girl reacted in pain, she was simply not fit for the match. This would certainly cost her much as the elderly woman would spare none of her efforts to expose the girl's fragility and inability to the tribe. No good boy from a respectable family would dream of wedding such a weak and lax creature. But worse lay in store if the girl passed the test successfully.

If an agreement was reached, she wasn't even to know about the new household she would be transferred to. And she was to be transferred to serve in another household, among strangers. It was considered a shame for a father or for the head of the family (the grandfather or the uncle) to show concern for the girl's feelings. His manhood was questioned and he was considered emotional and weak, which were all womanly characteristics from which a respectful man should be free. So letting these aspects come out in public would cause him to lose respect in front of his peers, a matter that might debase him.

As a result, a marriage in the region was rarely if ever based on feelings of love, mainly on the part of the woman. If it were so, it was only a matter of coincidence. The suitor's family had the task of finding the right woman – a strong young girl who could fulfill all the needs of the new family without hesitation, a young “obedient head”, as the expression goes, who was not to contradict the desire of either the husband or, mainly, his mother. The elder woman was to be at last relieved from the tiring chores and she had a right to this since her begotten child was a male. Thus indeed, giving birth to a boy was the only good thing a woman could do. It was not just good for the family, but also for herself too, because at last she would have someone to command freely and proudly. In

other words, this owned her a servant and saved her from the deadly tasks she had to perform daily, in cold or hot weather, till she looked prematurely old at such an early age of 27 or 28 years old. Any way, now that her son had got married, she had the honor of paying visits and being visited, giving orders and being obeyed. She gained much freedom thanks to her male progenitor. She could even sometimes contradict her husband and express her opinion, which she could not do before this newfound prestige.

But, as for the young girl, her situation merely got worse. Not only was she generally wed to a stranger whom she didn't know at all, but she was not offered the chance to know him after. There was no privacy between them since they were to share the same room with the whole family. Even as a new bride and after the 1st seven days, for those who were lucky to enjoy them, no intimacy with the husband was possible. Even if he might sometimes want to be with her, he was afraid he would be discovered and scorned by all. So he avoided her and was severe to her when he asked her for a service. Toughness and harshness was necessary to control the "lower order". The very few moments of intimacy were shared in the middle of the night when every one was asleep. And even then no conversation was possible for fear the others might awaken and discover the shame. So in addition to being denied the right to relax, choose, play, she was denied the right to feel and live as a young wife.

Present-day for the Berber woman

Life has changed for every one and the woman herself had her part in the benefits of change. But life in the mountains has retained its usual harshness because not much change has occurred to ameliorate human existence and especially the woman's. True, there were hints of introducing schools inside the mountains for the new generation to be

integrated in educational programs. Now, in the middle of the mountains, we see groups of little children coming and going to school among them little girls with their bags on their backs. What for? All that to get rid of the hardships underwent by the mothers, sisters, and other kinswomen. In one of my last visits to our tribe in the Middle Atlas, I observed that no marked change has occurred at the social, cultural or economic level. The woman is still considered as a debased creature that is suspected in all her actions. In actual fact, I saw that she was considered as a creature that is guided by instinct, not by reason, and that she is too weak to be more than a doll in male hands.

However the newborn baby assumed to be a girl was no longer a matter that bothers the family that much.

It is welcomed and cherished even if there is still a slight difference between celebrating a coming boy and a girl. But and indeed, and in some families, the girl is considered as a more caring and affectionate creature that takes more care of the parents better than the boy.

In an inclination to have an independent life after marriage, the boy rarely stays on with his parents. The blame is poured on the daughter-in-law who is always accused of having separated blood relatives and of being the one who intrigues with the son of the house so that he would disobey his parents. So the hardships are still there but they are a little bit diminished since the new bride is taken from the first months to live alone with her husband. Gathering wood, fetching water and caring for the household are still tasks the woman performs. Now that she is alone, she performs all this willingly in such a way to show her husband that his money did not go in vain and to show the in-laws that they have to regret the loss of such a treasure. She even goes to the extent of backbiting

women who are careless about their households, whatever their conditions are. The woman takes the role of the male since she becomes convinced of her position and considers that any other woman who does not perform her duties to perfection as an inferior one.

Yet, more freedom, especially in the choice of the partner is given to the girl. She is now able to visit the weekly market with her parents, of course, and there she should be intelligent enough to seek the chance to talk to the man she wants to have. She also has the opportunity to meet her beloved in celebrations and in other social events, but that will cost her a series of punishments if she is caught doing so. All that spoils her reputation as a suitable girl who deserves to be brought to a respectful household as a bride. Transgressing rules and values set by the heads of the tribe, laws that are not even respected by the settlers themselves, is a crime that accompanies the young girl to her grave. Without forgetting that she may be forced to marry another man as a punishment for her delinquent deed. While all that she tries to do is to keep her right in choosing her partner whom she can love and live in peace with.

I can give a concrete example of a cousin of mine, and that just happened two years ago, who was discovered to be in a love relationship with a young man from the same tribe. The young man was a constant visitor to the family, and a love relationship grew between them. This discovery angered the father a great deal; he tried, and he is still trying to prevent any legal bonds that may tie the two. He even went to the extent of trying to send his daughter to Saudi Arabia even though she is only 17 years old, as a way to eternally separate them.

Deep inside him, he knows that what he is doing is against logic and against any respect for the human feelings, but his vanity as a man who has been betrayed, prevents him from surrendering and is blinding his eyes and his sense of reason. This will certainly put an end to every similar deed that will come from his other four daughters. The choice of one's partner will not be tolerated without the blessing of the parents. They are the ones who give the final word; either it is consent or a refusal of the match.

Sometimes, the parents of the bridegroom will elect selected persons from the tribe to beg the father of the girl to agree for the marriage. Different cases of elopements have occurred in the tribe in order to defy the desires of the parents, but they are frequently followed by big scandals that finish the romantic relationship in unpleasant ways. The romanticism we frequently hear about in Berber tribes remains only in celebrations and in the memories and tales and has no link to reality. And even if it exists it does not continue for too long. The intervention of the parents mainly if they are against the match, breaks every romantic aspect of the relation that frequently ends with divorce or a sense of deadly indifference between the two partners.

After the failure that follows such unions, the young divorcee finds it difficult to keep on living with her family. To be again dependent on her father to provide her with her needs, support her financially adds to his burdens after thinking that he has got rid of her. Attracted by a new life of the town mainly if she has the chance to visit it, she begins to conceive of such a life. A life that will offer her comfort, cleanliness, and a more modern style of life. And effectively what we see now is the concentration of more and more women, especially divorced ones who move to live in Sidi Addi, Azrou and Ain Leuh and who most of the times form collective groups in order to be able to pay the rent

and to cope with the new needs of life. Faced with new demands mainly for the divorcees who have children, compel them to look for sources of money. The opportunity to have a decent work in these towns is very rare considering that their economy relies on traditional agriculture controlled mostly by men.

What does it mean for women? The need to support oneself financially opens the door for engaging in prostitution, which begins as a leisure pursuit, and ends as a professional occupation in order to face up with the difficult circumstances of life. Nevertheless, in order not to lose hope and in order to improve life in the mountains, more interest should be paid to the mountain woman. It is true that there is a tendency to educate girls at schools with the hope of improving their situations but circumstances do not help with few primary and secondary schools within the mountains, in addition to the scarcity of financial resources.