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WOMEN, THEIR SPACE AND CREATIVITY IN BERBER SOCIETY*

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Abstract: Women are naturally associated with cultural production, especially in traditional areas relegated historically to women in their own respective societies. We can therefore sketch out the broad outlines of a tight relationship between women and folk art. Pottery, weaving, home decoration, decoration of grain storage compartments, embroidery, etc., are all women's ways of doing in many cultures. Such is also the case with many regions of the Amazigh world, and, of course, with that of the Kabylia homelands of Algeria and the Shleuh homelands of Morocco. The division of labor between sexes, which includes the cultural production of both the physical and the material, entails the intellectual production as well. Overcoming historical obstacles that impinge upon them on the socio-political level as well, Amazigh women have learned to exist as producers. Some Amazigh women chronicle the psychology of such an existence in both poetry and song.

Keywords: Amazigh women, Kabylia, Shleuh

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The Kabyle society, one of the most ancient Mediterranean civilizations, is well known for having a strict and exacerbated code of honor where men (in the Latin meaning of *vir*) enjoy a highly predominant status. The supremacy of men over women is based on mythology reflecting the downfall of women from their original status of mothers of the world to that of evil witches (Yacine, 1992a:137). Many folk tales attempt to justify why women are to be kept away from public places (the market is, for instance, an exclusively male space) and disowned for they—allegedly—betrayed God (Yacine, 1992a:144). There are many examples of women in that dominated status—this status draws its legitimacy in the remote mythical past. This interiorized mythical culture influences, to a great extent, social practice and human behaviors. Language, body, *hexis*, and distribution of tasks, all remind us constantly, explicitly and implicitly, of the absolute power of men over women. It is then up to women to fit in this social and cultural structure built by men for men.

Throughout history, women have been striving to occupy a space within the limits allowed by the dominating order. Within society, women are an anonymous body. They are voiceless. *They are talked about*. They are also depicted as a homogenous body whose members are all the same and identical. According to men, women are “interchangeable”. At the same time, this dominated body is essential to the world to function, in order to reproduce it and perpetuate it, to mimic it without adding any personal touch or creativity.

It is then difficult for women, even more so if they are confined to this opposition, to conceive the world (in the double meaning of to “make” and “conceptualize”). This appears with more acuity in the field of poetry. When women produce words and meaning, they do it, not as authors, i.e., producers, but as reproducers. This is why, just like the children they give birth to and who never bear their names, they never claim the poetry they produce. Women are not even owners of their own thoughts, for the individual expression of a poetess merges at once with a community expression that is already dominated by the established order.

Despite the above, Kabylia had its famous poetesses such as Yemma Khelidja Tukrift. Every village has at least one talented poetess. But their fame hardly goes beyond the limits of the village (in the Kabyle meaning of *taddart*) to, sometimes, reach the tribe. The themes tackled are in full conformity with the

values of the group: religion, morality and ethics, epic. They leave the strictly “feminine” sphere to join the larger space of religiosity. This may be construed as a recognition of an implicit link with the “community trap”, because, in order to leave behind the narrow female setup and have access to the spoken word (male discourse), women accept to introduce into their vision of the world the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action of their dominators and become their dominators’ spokespersons in the process. Furthermore, they are efficient at that because they are dominated.

Similar to the word, oral poetry is strictly codified. The importance of the word faithfully reflects the status of the speaker. It has its own channels of transmission and reception. Earmarked by the social and cultural conditions of production and transmission, it may give credit, social and symbolic importance, as its producer may adversely be doomed to punishment, failure and damnation. To possess eloquence is to be quick at repartee and to gain the favor and support of men, to win their alliance; but it is also, in turn, to take possession of the world (*bab n-yiles medden akw ines*, as the saying goes). [The owner (author) of the word owns all people.]

The poetess has, therefore, a double role to play: to consolidate the dominant order, as it is an order of reference on the one hand and reject and denounce its aberration, hypocrisy and injustice, on the other. In this regard, women do represent, perhaps unwillingly, this dominated body which yet reveals a community history engraved in the social and mental structures (makeup) of the group. It is *they* who will highlight these differences through oral poetry, which, itself, follows strict codes of the craft. [We described in “*Izli ou l’amour chanté en kabyle*” (Paris, MSH, 1987), that the Kabyle society had its own set of rules which are part of the larger mythical and ritual system of the Mediterranean world. Social positions are determined by a number of features linked to culture (elder/youth, initiated/uninitiated, man/woman) and also according to one’s position within the social space (inner/outer, public place (*tajmaat, agora*)/home, market/fields, etc.). The limits imposed by geography are nothing but constraints dictated by society—hence, geographical and social spaces are closely related]. The old literary code distinguishes between two poetic genres: that of highly representative values (upper poetry of the heart) and that of stigmatized values (lower poetry of sex and feelings). These differences are also translated in the use of the geographic space: assembly, fields, fountain, yard, house, etc. The geographic space is a faithful reflection of the social space.

If the right to speak means symbolically access to power, for women, this also means a symbolic reversal of the established order. The social systems’ mechanisms require an apparent coherence by means of which women are totally or partially involved in the game—in which, if necessary, they let themselves be trapped—thereby concealing, through their silence, submission and complicity,

the power struggle emanating from those who practice it. This, being a denial, results in fact in the invalidation of domination. For men as dominants can only appreciate their power when it seems naturally and deliberately accepted. When women, through their misbehavior, induce them to exercise their power and show their tyranny, male brutality is disapproved in the public assembly, which is a man's assembly.

Outside this framework, female expression is perceived as a threat to peace, a reversal of the struggle for power and meaning, and, furthermore, an inversion of the world. Through its traditional channels (clairvoyance, poetry and, in the extreme case, madness), women's expression gives them the possibility to leave the group while letting themselves be won over by that very group. On an individual level, poetry induces paradoxical problems in the sense that women do contradict the dominant perception. Although there are some exceptions that confirm the rule, it is generally very difficult for a young woman to consider writing or vaticination (prophesying). On the other hand, this occurs more often with married women. Poetic expression does represent a way out of their condition of women without any "future" while keeping their status of spouse. By belonging to a social status and age group as poets, they try to get out of their condition. Once and if their skills and practices are recognized, they have access to the outer world, which is not the case of other women who are protected by male "honor". These new relationships introduced by the position of women as poets deserve a thorough and rigorous study.

Poetic expression gives women the opportunity to get out of the home sphere, to strain the bonds—seen as unshakable—with the family and/or the husband. By so doing, they are no longer under the control of society and they affirm their individuality (moving from the collective "self" to the individual "self"), they display a distinct and different personality, independent from the husband they no longer represent. Moreover, an inversion of hierarchies and sense takes place. The spouse becomes the husband of the poetess or female singer. His male identity, as a representative of the community, is entirely questioned. This is the type of relationship that has bound women and poetry until the sixties. Seen through this angle, one cannot say, however, that society had completely changed since that decade, although one witnesses the emergence of women in the field of professional singing (Elhabib Hachlef, Ahmed & Mohamed, 1993).

Like their male counterparts, female singers had to completely break off with the community if they were to exist for and by themselves. This is evidenced by the fact that they are only known by their first name or stage name [Exceptions do exist, as in the case of Bahia Farah, but this phenomenon is seen outside Kabylia, Mériem Abed]. They have no family name nor a clear "belonging" (Chérifa, Hnifa, Ourida, Djamila, Anissa, El-Djida, Karima, etc.)

without any evident link to a genealogy. Individual song expresses a revolt against society and its codes. Most great female singers who marked their community had actually lived very tragic lives: they had to leave their village, their family, and often an imposed (unwanted) husband. As in other fields, women as singers have usually played a marginal role. The first female singers were only "interpreters". They sang about their life and those of women in their condition. It is during the second world war that Kabyle women started to sing in public, and especially after a Berber radio station had been established in Algiers in 1948. The first lyrics were picked up from the public domain. As a matter of fact, in the fifties, it was not easy to distinguish between private and collective [The great classic singer, Marguerite Taos Amrouche, is not included in this typology. Although she expressed a social and existential pain, her driving force is mainly intellectual and political. Marguerite Taos Amrouche is first known as the first female novelist of Algeria, but she also carried out academic research and sang Berber poems collected within her family surroundings.] intellectual property.

The distribution of space reflects the relationships between men and women, reaffirming the domination of the male. Some specific places, with a very important social function, are naturally earmarked for making or delivering poetry: home, courtyard, fountain, fields, etc. Perhaps spatial distribution actually shows the regulating role played by women's expression. Space indeed is almost regimented according to social status and gender: women are indoors, away from outsiders' eyes, and men occupy open and public spaces. But in reality, this division is not as impermeable as it may appear. Inner/outer bi-partition is reproduced *ad infinitum*.

However, within this female and inner universe, some areas are more exposed and open than others. Compared to the street, the courtyard is a closed space, but it is more open than the world of the household. Similarly, inside the house, some areas are more exposed to light than others. An example of these exposed areas is the courtyard (*afraq*), where celebrations, usually held in the fall (Bourdieu 1972), take place. The courtyard is the open space of the house, an outside within an inside in relation to the house, and an inside within an outside in relation to public areas (exclusively male space) and fields--the latter being, symbolically called *lexla*, ie, void.

Men and women are allowed to meet and mix in the *afraq* during celebrations: order within disorder. Two distinct semi-circles called *ssef* are created, one for men, one for women [In Morocco, men and women do organize very lively singing/dancing sessions known locally as Ahwac or Ahidus. Depending on the region, contacts between men and women are more or less relaxed. In the Souss for instance women are completely separated from men, without any possibility of communication, whereas in the Middle Atlas the opposite prevails. See Yacine, 1992b; Galant, 1995; and Fraisse, 1989], where

both groups sing and dance in turns. The groups follow a specific pattern of movement on the dance floor. In the case of a big feast where many guests are invited, including “strangers” or individuals outside the larger family or the community (this is the case of feasts where professional bands usually perform), the yard is then divided into two areas with a blanket [Similar separation and divide inside the tent elsewhere.] serving as a curtain of separation: more of a symbolic than an actual separation. Material sung by women retains all its strength, substance and significance. In spite of the fictitious mixing, the songs are performed in public. Yet, somewhat, this is difficult to grasp fully. The whole idea of the game is to celebrate the event within limits. Women’s message will fulfill its goal and reach its logical *male* receiver without having any incidence on the established social order.

Let us now examine the status of the word and social agents. In Kabylia, and elsewhere, the word had a very important function; it could give life and take it away. For it to be effective, the word is said publicly (Bourdieu, 1980), face to face. The word, *par excellence*, is that of a man of honor (*aerdi*). This entails a total commitment of the person and of his folks. What does such a word, uttered behind a blanket, a wall or a door—a faceless word—mean? This word of exception and release is heard yet not listened to. This is a word that comes from within and goes straight into the ear from behind, from the back or rear of inhabited public, sometimes private, spaces. On the other hand, male’s word goes straight into the heart, comes from the front, and is more efficient, whether uttered in private or public space.

We are now encouraged, therefore, to pose a rarely raised but nonetheless significant question of our own, *What precisely is the situation today with traditional women expressing themselves in public?*

TWO BERBER FEMALE SINGERS

Two Berber singers, from Algeria and Morocco respectively, will illustrate what has been said so far and confirm that women’s expression is a full one (in the sociological meaning of the full social act) in the sense that it reflects society as a whole. More than men, women are concerned with reporting all that happens within the community, be it a major event or a hardly noticeable occurrence that nobody would bother to talk about (the high and low moments in life). Nouara Bali, originally from Kabylia, lives in France. Fatima Tabaâmrant is from the Shleuh country in Morocco. They have many points in common. They both belong to linguistically dominated communities; they are both orphans, and they both entered the world of singing in a social space other than their original place of birth. More details will be given about Nouara as we had already carried out a complete study of her poetry (Yacine, 1995).

Born in 1939 in Amalou, Bejaïa (Lower Kabylia), Nouara's parents died before she reached the age of ten. Although she was the eldest of the children, Nouara did acquire an acute sense of rebellion and revolt from her mother who did not hesitate to leave her husband and earn her living, without having to depend on him. Nouara's father emigrated to France before the Second World War. Her mother had, then, to face and put up with the overt hostility of her mother-in-law who meant to be and to be seen as the head of the household. This resulted in many conflicts between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. This state of affairs imposed on Nouara's mother to leave the village and her marital home to earn a living. In her teens, Nouara was in the care of her paternal aunts, who acted as custodians and also guardians of an established male order. Eventually, the same aunts would arrange her marriage and encourage her to divorce when the marriage turned out to be a complete failure.

Actually, the game of marriage and divorce started very early. In her early teens, Nouara had to experience the unbearable cycle of failed marriages. Whereas some of these failures were due to her insolent behavior, it is also true that she had never felt her femininity in full because of her inability to procreate (she was sterile). Added to this "abnormality" is the heavy burden of forced exile. For financial reasons, Nouara had, at different times, to emigrate with her various husbands to France.

Of exile she says:

*Exile is a burden
Loneliness a hurdle
I'm in no good company*

Nouara had to go through very difficult times of suffering and depression. She, nevertheless, yearned for knowledge and learning. She eventually learned to read and write, which helped her greatly by allowing her to transcribe her poetry. As with many other women, these important events that literally made her life appear clearly in her poetry. One of her themes is the first injustice that deprived her of her parents' love and affection, especially that of her mother who died when she was little. She wrote:

*I was ten
when mother died
leaving me behind with my brother*

In Nouara's community of origin, roles and hierarchy are clearly defined: a widow's daughter shall not enjoy the same rights and social status as a girl whose father is still alive. This theme can be found in a great number of her

pieces:

*Father, why did you reject me ?
Aren't I your daughter ?
Mother, why did you leave me,
Gone with no trace left behind ?
When you, both, abandoned me
I had no idea of life
Sadness was my sole company
Though I did nothing wrong
Your hearts showed no warmth toward me
And you did not fear the Lord
The blood in my veins is yours
As for me, my lament is my solace (poem 296)*

In addition to this loneliness, Nouara's sterility could only double her suffering. She felt her condition as an injustice, a submission to destiny. She depicted herself as a "lifeless tree", a "lonely goat", when she went to the public fountain (*tala*) or in the fields (*lexla*). Although living in France, Nouara was fundamentally a Kabyle woman, conscious of the duties pertaining to her female condition. A dozen or so poems deal with this topic.

*Had I given birth to a child
My life would be all happiness
I would give it a warm home
And enjoy his love
Nothing would cloud my life.
But fortune passed my door
Without leaving a trace*

*Were it not for my infertile womb
I would have never left my beloved*

*I yearned for a nest of love
But I could not have it
The fault was in my fate (poem 297)*

Another aspect of her life that she wrote about was her relationships with men--often imposed husbands:

*I was married by force
Seven years later
Our life became hell*

In emigration, where the group changes while keeping good hold of the same means of control of the traditional society, Nouara struggled to see more clearly in her relationship with her various husbands as she married no less than five times:

*I needed love and understanding
I longed for a true partner
But my dream collapsed
Everything is against me*

Similarly, she was in a strictly female world where a woman's position is defined by the status of her husband and that of motherhood. In these various marriages, Nouara had to face mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law who were often cruel toward her. It was in France that the poetess learned new ways and modes of expression and opted for the modern type of transcription [The most widely used today, it is a transcription based mostly on Latin characters.] of the Berber language. Eventually, she sought the help of a female anthropologist who came from the same cultural background. In spite of her own problems and difficulties, Nouara has always shown a genuine interest in all matters that relate to her environment: Berber identity and cultural claims, immigration, political turmoil in her country (Algeria), including the 1988 unrest and present events. This poetess's itinerary is of great significance. It helps us understand how agents of a mode of expression perform in a space of creation that is not naturally theirs.

Fatima Tabaâmrant is younger than Nouara. Born in 1963 at At Laxsas, her mother died when she was two. Her father had, then, to marry again. Fatima had to put up with her destiny at a very early age. As soon as she felt independent enough, she opted for the outside world. Away from the protecting and yet "stifling" tribe, it is in the urban world that she will have to face the tough life in its brutal and crude reality—"a young and good looking woman without a male protector is often perceived as an easy prey in the heartless world of show business". Women have to go through unbearable treatments in the practice of their jobs as singers and dancers. Fatima's lot was in no way different. She had to fight to secure herself a position in the field of singing and to impose herself as a woman and a Shleuh Berber all together. She is nowadays one of the most famous singers in Morocco—thanks to her voice, her lyrics, and her strong presence on the stage. The themes tackled in her songs are not different from those of Nouara:

*Loss of parents
I find no solace
No peace
Sadness is my daily lot*

*Oh cruel death
You took away my mother in the best of her age
And broke the hearts of orphans
But God is caring for us [The English version of these poems
are a translation of the French translation of the original Berber
works.]*

Love and nostalgia

*Here I lament
My beloved gone
My suffering knows no limits
My heart cannot bear it
Love, listen to my lament
Since I cannot see you
Here is what you left behind*

Tabaâmrant also sings her dominated and oppressed *tashelhit* (Berber) culture. The Berber language should be recognized, she lyricizes, because it has its own alphabet.

*True, I will never sell myself for money
Nor relinquish my Berber heritage
I will work restlessly
For the promotion of my identity
The Tifinagh alphabet
Is deep rooted in my heart
Glory and grandeur for our culture*

The situation of women is a recurrent theme in her songs:

*A woman is born a dove
in grace and freedom
Her wings will take her
Away
Anywhere she wants
To teach others what she learnt*

The poems of these singers allow a better understanding of the issues discussed here. It is about life, inequality, gender and individual conditions (Yacine, 1995). The impact of women's message goes far beyond the private and public spheres. They talk of men, praise them, denounce them, and unmask them.

By reminding the male partner of his duties and responsibilities, women

hit a very sensitive issue, that is, the gender distribution of tasks. Unlike the predominant male ideology (universally practiced), the Berber culture in its Kabyle expression evidences the mythical relationships by which women are recognized in their power to give life, and in their sexual power as well. Mythical literature conveys that the world (life, earth) is “delivered” by a woman. Woman therefore has power over the cosmos and its organization. The fall of woman (the mother of the world) came as a result of an irreparable failure, which eventually led to her being depicted as a witch (*stut*).

Sexual domination in society is thus justified by resorting to a myth of origin that relates the way from the outside to the inside. This reversal is how men seized power. Men “hunt” women, a goal that is contrary to the idea of mythical times that men were hunted by women. Men hunt the female: the female is what her name indicates but it also suggests a prey (e.g., the partridge). This myth sheds light on the relationships between men and women on the one hand and between women and nature on the other hand.

The bi-partition of space is dictated by a division of roles and tasks. According to practice and tradition, women had tried to follow this vision of the world. But historical events may be decisive for individuals and communities alike. There existed women who played important roles in specific situations, such as the fight for independence. The same women who sang love itself into being revealed themselves to be highly eloquent and persuasive when singing and praising resistance and revolution. While men left the settlements, women had to take over and relay the fight of the partners. They naturally took over the duties and practices of men while continuing to exercise their own functions.

CONCLUSION

The struggle of Berber women poet/singers for self-expression, is an independent struggle to express an inside/outside lyricism that will reveal to us how poetry sung by women obeys a set of socially and historically predetermined rules. The sung discourse of Berber women is organized into a hierarchy of experiential poesy. However, as a dominated section of the community, women seem to produce only a dominated discourse, in its perception, classification, and in its already established historical set of social values.

Here, the song is synonymous to joy, lamentation, and sadness.

The division of the social space into an “inner” and an “outer” one, is a reflection of the inner themes of poetry: intimacy, love, hatred. It is precisely this intimate nature that is both revealed and projected on the other side (an outsider aspect of the female self): the male dimension as represented by the virile

organ—a “foreign” and yet familiar organ. Whereas the female organ, *her* vagina, is metaphorically known as the *ddwaxxel*, i.e., the inner. This does confirm an analogy of universally known practices: it is often men who go to meet women. They come/go *in*. Men’s movements also illustrate the very movement of their virile organ. The Kabyles make use of terms such as broom, millstone, and ladle in a metaphoric manner, to refer to sexual/erotic situations.

Greatly charged with meaning and emotions, the structure of the imaginary of a populace unfolds. For Amazigh women’s poetry and song, the populace is Algerian, Moroccan, Northern African, and Mediterranean. The elements of experience of song and poetry always help us to understand the present problems of a culture and its societies, especially when most of these elements have long been repressed. Liberation of voice and equality among women and men begin to emerge when these elements of experience are freely and plainly expressed.

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