Poetry as a Strategy of Power: The Case of Riffian Berber Women

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Signs, Vol. 5, No. 3. (Spring, 1980), pp. 418-434.

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Although anthropological studies of the Middle East generally acknowledge the low status of Islamic women, the complex "mosaic" of national, ethnic, and tribal social organization makes it difficult to make accurate, significant statements about the area as a whole. Even when focused on a single country, anthropological accounts arrive at conflicting conclusions about the role of women. Ethnographers of Morocco like Westermarck, Coon, Hart, and Gellner have concentrated on the exercise of formal, public power and thus have stressed the hegemony of men over women.[1] This notion of monolithic masculine dominance and feminine subjugation has been somewhat modified by recent studies of women's ability to influence male decisions, a "power behind the throne" theory articulated by Roger Joseph.[2] Maher and Nelson have also argued that women wield some direct power through female systems of network and alliance. And

The data on which this study is based were collected during eighteen months of fieldwork in 1965–66 in the Rif Mountains of Morocco. The author wishes to thank the Berbers for their patience, interest, and hospitality; Roger Joseph for his unstinting intellectual rigor and assistance; and Cheryl and David Evans, Katherine Frank Clark, Donald Heiney, James McMichael, John C. Rowe, Maria Ruegg, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Diane Wakoski, and the anonymous reviewers of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* for their comments and encouragement. Portions of this essay were delivered orally at the California Folklore Society (1974, 1976) and the Modern Language Association (1977).

1. Edward Westermarck, *Marriage Ceremonies in Morocco* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906); Carleton Stevens Coon, *Tribes of the Rif* (1931; reprint ed., New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1970); David Montgomery Hart, *The Aith Waryaghar of the Moroccan Rif: An Ethnography and History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976); and "The Land and the People" and "Social Organization," in *Morocco: Subcontractor's Monograph HRAF-62* (New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files, Inc., n.d.); Ernest Gellner, "Introduction" and "Political and Religious Organization of the Berbers of the Central High Atlas," in *Arabs and Berbers,* ed. Ernest Gellner and Charles Micaud (London: Trinity Press, 1973).

2. Roger Joseph, "Sexual Dialects and Strategy in Berber Marriage," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 7 (1976): 471–81.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1980, vol. 5, no. 3]
 0097-9740/80/0503-0004$01.44

from a different perspective Mernissi has insisted that, with the exception of a few influential men, Moroccan males are as powerless and dispossessed as Moroccan females.[3] This variety of contradictory views makes it all the more important to engage in very specific studies that can help us ascertain the status and relative power of women in Islamic societies. The present study focuses on a delineated area—the Rif Mountains of northern Morocco—a particular people—the Riffian Berbers of the Beni-Waryaghar and Ibbucoya tribes—and a single question—the role played by the songs which Berber women compose for and then perform at wedding ceremonies. It attempts to analyze how women express themselves in a public arena *within* the formal, institutionalized structure of *male society,* rather than a female network system for covert influence. It explores the degree to which songs constitute strategic devices, weapons which can help women have a voice in the community and gain control over their lives.

Social Structure and Economy of the Berbers

The Berbers, speaking dialects of the Hamitic and unwritten language whose name they bear, form an ethnic and linguistic group within the larger Arabic culture of Morocco. The indigenous inhabitants of the country, they were gradually converted to Islam between the seventh and eleventh centuries A.D. by Arab missionaries and invaders. Today they are centered in the Atlas and Riffian Mountain ranges; the latter runs south of the Mediterranean coastal plain from Tangier to Melilla, in the northern section of the country. The Beni Waryaghar and Ibbucoya, the central Riffian tribes studied for this essay, live in the Al-Hoceima Province, once held under the Spanish Protectorate but a part of the Moroccan regime since the country gained independence from Spain and France in 1956.

In a country noted for its poverty, the Rif is one of the poorest sections. Its comparatively mild climate is offset by deforestation and soil erosion on the slopes. The Central Rif has only two major rivers, the Nekkor and the Rhis, as its water supply, and its essential crops of barley and maize are dependent on rainfall. Since the Rif is subject to years of drought alternating with flash floods, its food supply is uncertain and, even in good years, can only support a limited number of people. Overpopulation which has been a recurrent problem, was controlled in the

3. Vanessa Maher, *Woman and Property in Morocco: Their Changing Relation to the Process of Social Stratification in Middle Atlas* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Cynthia Nelson, "Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World," *American Ethnologist* 1, no. 1 (1974): 551–63; Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975). Mernissi's view has been challenged in a review by Daisy Dwyer in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 2 (1976): 470–73.

pre-Protectorate days through the blood feud and since independence through large-scale emigration to the cities of Morocco, Algeria, and Europe. A settled, agricultural people, the Riffians work their steeply terraced land with hand tools, using oxen or cattle to plow only the flatter lands of the valleys. The meager crops are supplemented with vegetables grown in irrigated gardens near the rivers; nuts and fruits from orchards; and meat, cheese, and milk from the small herds of goats and sheep owned by more prosperous families. In spite of careful husbandry, malnutrition and disease are endemic in the Rif. To give but one index, at the time this field study was made the infant mortality rate, *within a week of birth,* was over 50 percent.

Women have only one access to the cash economy—the sale of eggs from their flocks of chickens and turkeys. Their days are an endless round of tasks connected with food preparation, child care, and home maintenance. Because the Riffians practice sexual segregation of women of childbearing age, these chores are associated with stages in the life cycle. From a very early age, a girl gathers firewood for her mother, assists in caring for younger children, and helps keep the house clean. As soon as she is old enough, she and her brothers take the flocks out to pasture every day, clean their pens in the household, and remove their droppings from the dirt floor. When strong enough, usually at adolescence, she gathers water from the nearest river or spring and carries it on her back in a jug which, when filled, weighs about thirty pounds. She also has increased child-care duties and plays a more responsible role in preparing meals. When she marries, a young woman will probably no longer work outside the home, unless the family cannot afford the luxury of losing some of her labor by segregating her.

Men in the Rif work in a seasonal pattern. During plowing and reaping periods, which are brief but intense, they labor for long hours in the fields. Much of their year, though, is leisurely and allows time for visiting, conversation, and forming political alliances. Women's tasks may be less intense but must be repeated on a daily basis and leave little time for relaxation; a woman is dependent socially on visits from relatives and women past menopause. Once a woman is no longer of childbearing age, her activities broaden again; meals may be prepared by her daughters-in-law, freeing her to visit neighbors and friends. Older women, especially if they are widows or have husbands who do not object to their appearing in public, may visit the women's markets and participate in religious sisterhoods.

The life of the Berber woman contrasts sharply with that of a relatively prosperous Arab woman in a Moroccan town. Whereas the townswoman will have at least one female servant and considerable leisure which she, veiled and in her *jaballa,* devotes to visiting the mosque, the baths, her friends and neighbors, her Riffian counterpart rarely has paid help within the home, goes unveiled, has a heavy share of household responsibilities, and may have a limited circle of associates. These

differences are reflections of two polarities: town/country and Arabic/Berber. One explanation for the differences between Berber and Arabic norms is that, until subjugated by European powers in the twentieth century, the Rif had always been *bled-es-siba,* land of dissidence, as opposed to *bled-al-mahkzen,* land of the regime or government. Because the Riffians lived in such an isolated and impenetrable area, they could refuse to pay tribute to the sultans of Morocco or serve in their armies and could practice their own way of life. They had minimal interference from the central government and limited contact with it.

The tribal organization of the Riffians is based formally on a lineage system which establishes specific rights and obligations in a reciprocal relationship with agnatic kin and a secondary set of obligations through the affinal bonds of marriage. This lineage system is considered normative by formalist Moroccanists like Westermarck and Coon, even though it ignores the alliance relationships with neighbors, friends, and associates which Berber men devote considerable time and energy to developing, and—what is more important—takes no account of the role of women in tribal life. In "Sexual Dialectics and Strategy in Berber Marriage," Roger Joseph has questioned the normative account of mate selection in the Rif which flatly states that fathers arrange marriages for their children and select their mates. Although this explanation would seem to be verified by the exclusive presence of males when the marriage contract is drawn up und the details of the dower or *sadak* recorded, Joseph has analyzed the specific behavior of both sexes and argued that the mothers of the bride and groom can exercize control over mate selection. In discussing the sexual dialectic between men and women of the Rif, Joseph characterizes the two models which have been used to study the Berbers as the "formalist" and the "interactionist." While formalists stress discrete kinship units within the segmentary lineage system that are closed and relatively stable, interactionists like Geertz focus on individuals negotiating in dyadic or face-to-face relationships which are subject to constant readjustments as each participant maneuvers for advantage and makes corresponding concessions. It is Joseph's contention that a study of both models reveals "an interplay between norms and acts"[4] that manifests the influence of women.

Joseph has emphasized the role of the mothers of the bride and groom, but not that of the potential brides and their attempts to affect the choice of their mates. It should be understood that in Berber society all able-bodied adults of both sexes are expected to conform to the Koranic injunction to marry; neither men nor women are allowed the option of remaining single. Within these limitations, however, young women are far more powerless than young men; indeed they are usually considered the most powerless members of society except for young children. It is, in fact, through their songs that females between the ages

4. Joseph, p. 471.

of thirteen and twenty try to compensate for their powerlessness; they attempt to seize the initiative in courtship and to usurp their fathers' public roles as the figures who choose spouses for their offspring.[5]

Form and Composition of the Songs

Extremely brief, the Berber song is made up of a single couplet. Each of the two lines is roughly twelve syllables long, although some contain only nine and others as many as fifteen. Each song is introduced by a traditional chorus which can be repeated as often as the singers wish:

Ayah-rala boyah-ayah rala boya
Ayah-rala boyah-ayah rala boya
Ayah-ra (la) boyah etc.

Most Riffians interviewed for this study regard this chorus as a series of sounds with no meaning. They say it is used because "it is the custom." Several informants, however, reported that the initial *a* is a vocative like the English "oh"; *yah-rala* was said to be a form of *la la,* madame, or lady, in this case the bride's mother; and *boyah* a form of *baba,* father. One anthropological account has translated the refrain as "Oh look, oh look, look at the bride."[6]

Rather than use formulaic or set material such as Lord and Parry have identified in oral narratives,[7] Berber singers engage in self-conscious composition, scrutinizing their work and subjecting it to numerous revisions. Indeed, there seem to be no Berber girls who are unable to compose and perform original songs. Composing is not only a privilege but a responsibility. It is expected that each girl will be a poet just as it is expected that each woman will bake bread for her family. One Berber song uses the complaint, "I have no songs," as a metaphor to suggest that its singer is unattractive and that no one wants to marry her:[8]

5. Young men try to influence their fathers' decisions by threatening to divorce an unwanted bride. Divorce is extremely easy for a man—who needs only repeat to his wife three times that she is divorced—and almost impossible for a woman to obtain. She can, however, drive her husband to divorcing her by threatening to use witchcraft against him. Such a step is rarely taken, however, since her father would have to return to the groom's family a large portion of the wedding settlement, already spent on food for the guests, and would mean that she would lose custody of all her children once they had been weaned.

6. *Morocco: Subcontractors's Monograph HRAF-62,* p. 178.

7. Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry,* ed. Adam Parry (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

8. All interpretations of the songs are based on native explications. Since they sometimes seemed far-fetched, I made it a practice to collect at least three interpretations from separate informants and found remarkable consistency in their understanding of the songs.

Madesrah wuware na-we thanen-awanu
Ra-la thasherethine agmathunt sufero
[I have no songs! I'm like a rock which has fallen in a well. . . .
Oh, my friend, catch the rock with a string.]

The complaint is used ironically in a song whose very composition disproves the singer's lack of songs; in the second line, the poet asks a girl friend to help her find a young man. Although some songs are better or worse than others according to Berber notions of poetic value, all of the women interviewed in the Rif during a period of eighteen months for this study were able to compose songs.

Although the poems are short, it is not unusual for a young woman to spend several months working on a few couplets, searching for the *mot juste* as she readies her lyrics for the weddings which occur after the harvest in late summer and early September. While going about her daily tasks, she composes her songs by singing the lyrics softly or chanting them under her breath, introducing changes by a process of conscious revision. If she replaces a word or a phrase in the lyrics, she can usually give a good reason: the revision enhances the meaning or sounds better with the other words in the song.

The Performance

Songs are performed at Berber weddings either in front of the houses of the bride and groom or on a central patio located within the walls of the house. The stage is a cleared area in front of an open fire, around which the guests are seated or stand. The audience is comprised of men of all ages, young women who are not yet married, older women past the age of childbearing, and young children of both sexes. Young, married women usually stay in the house itself, but they listen to the songs and watch the performance through windows if they can. The older women who stand behind the men in the audience, although they do not sing, add to the performance by ululating (making a shrill sound by trilling their tongues against the roof of their mouths) at various dramatic moments during the singing. The men in the crowd, especially the young bachelors, shout encouragement, cheer, and applaud throughout the evening.

On the first day of the wedding, the performance begins at sunset and lasts until dawn. It is then resumed on the second and third evenings, and the girls try to present a variety of songs, even though they sing several times each evening. They perform in groups of four, dressed in their finest, floor-length gowns, and wearing dark glasses which render their faces mysterious in the flickering light of the fire.[9] Although

9. These dark glasses are obviously a recent innovation in the Rif. Although firecrackers are now used instead of gunplay to frighten evil spirits at the wedding, I was

these dark glasses are supposed to function as disguises, members of the audience have no difficulty in recognizing the singers, and, in fact, much of the point of their songs would be lost were the singers to remain anonymous. It may be, however, that the glasses, operating as a fictive mask, make it easier for the girls to step beyond the role ascribed to young women of the Rif; it is this violation of normal decorum and restraint which gives the songs their particular import and potential power.

Berber women in groups of four sing the "rala boyah" chorus in unison although each presents her own lyrics as a solo. Holding tambourines and small drums called *tabours,* the young women do a side-shuffle dance as they sing, keeping time with their hand instruments. After the chorus is completed, the first singer presents her song. If the audience likes it, the men will cheer and shout *yallah* to encourage the quartet as it breaks into another round of the chorus; the tempo quickens, and the side-shuffle gives way to the *shidhih,* in which the girls undulate, moving their hips, waists, and breasts in circular movements while the audience shouts more encouragement. After a few minutes of dancing, the tempo slows, the girls resume their side shuffle, the second girl sings her song, and so on, until each of the quartet has performed. The girls exit to a last chorus of "rala boyah" and are replaced by a new quartet.

During this performance, the girls clearly flaunt sexual energy, perform provocative dances, and, dressed in their most seductive finery, expose themselves to public scrutiny. For the songs serve the vital function of a rite of passage for these girls within the framework of a larger rite of passage, the wedding itself. While the bride and groom are being initiated to their new status as married adults, the girls who sing at the wedding, like debutantes in Western societies, are being "presented" to the community as young women who have come of age and can be scrutinized by the parents of prospective grooms as well as by the young bachelors themselves. While the bride and groom are formally ratifying their relationship, the girls performing are setting in motion a train of events which may determine their own weddings. The Berbers themselves, of course, are consciously aware of the wedding as the context for the songs, as one lyric specifically indicates:

> Eh-ham rid gazar nunkor swatad er henne
> Wo-men gabridan saad enesh ma tuniye.
> [River Nekkor has risen, bringing tea and henna
> When luck was divided among us, I alone was forgotten.]

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unable to determine what, if any, custom the dark glasses have replaced. It seems unlikely that they replace an earlier use of the veil, since it is always regarded as an Arabic custom by the Berbers.

The singer associates a year of abundant rainfall ("River Nekkor has risen") with the prosperity necessary for many families to meet the expenses of weddings for their sons. The composer singles out for attention the sweet mint tea which is offered to the wedding guests, and henna, which is ritually applied to the bride and groom during the ceremonies of "The Big Henna" and "The Little Henna." In a year when all of her age mates are engaged or getting married, only the singer remains single.

The songs play their part in the very continuity of tribal society which requires marriage, the founding of families, and the rearing of children for its survival. While the adolescent girls sing, the girls who have not yet reached puberty try to memorize the songs of the performers, waiting expectantly for the day when they, too, will be allowed to sing. They are thus going through a socialization process, receiving informal training for their own future role as women.

Songs as Social Criticism

Over and beyond their sexual and social functions, the Berber songs essentially allow young women to address the entire community. The freedom to address the tribe *(tackbitch)* or community *(dchar)* as a whole, people of both sexes and all ages, is granted to any young woman who wishes to perform; it is, however, a privilege unique to young, single women. Married, divorced, or widowed women are not permitted to perform. Men, even the most powerful leaders, cannot address the entire community. Although they utilize tribal gatherings to speak to men of all ages, they can communicate with only those women who are members of their own family or are related to them by marriage. If they wish to reach other women of the tribe, males must use their mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters as emissaries.

The songs women perform at weddings are often explicitly critical of Berber life. The range of subjects for social critique is theoretically as broad as any singer's interests; the following song, for example, attacks not only native society but the countries of Europe that hire Berber labor, create new emigration patterns in tribal life, and contribute to social upheavals:

> Afer runil ekanit Nesar hend g-kesan
> Ay! *Alemania!* nefishan emsan.
> [A piece of packing cord has sullied a water glass. . . .
> Oh, Germany! You have given illusions to beggars!]

In this song, the drinking glass, a fragile, expensive item which must be imported to the Rif, represents Germany and other European countries

which send representatives to Morocco to recruit Berbers to work in their factories. The singer describes the glass as being cheapened and dirtied by a piece of packing cord, a metaphor for those Berber men, usually of poor families and low social standing in the Rif, who sign contracts and go to Europe to work. By living inexpensively abroad, these men amass what the Berbers consider a fortune, which they often use, upon their return, to buy land and to try to marry girls of proud lineage. These young men are regarded with a mixture of contempt and respect by the settled Berber community. The girl who composed this song is voicing a criticism shared by the larger Berber community when she claims that the boys are still "beggars" and their hopes of entering Berber society an "illusion." Yet emigration is a powerful mechanism in the Rif and allows young men to have greater control over their choice of spouses. With the cash accumulated abroad a young man can threaten to arrange—and pay for—his own wedding should his father be too insistent about a potential bride who is not his own choice.[10] Two other songs by Berber women attack the *Makhzen* or Moroccan government. These songs date from the time when the government pressed impoverished tribesmen into service to construct the road that cuts through the Rif from Tetuan to Mellilla. In the first the government comes under fire for paying its workers so little that they are unable to buy the head scarves for their wives that Berber decency requires; in the second, for forcing Berber men into labor that takes them far from their homes:

E-hudem abred e-hudmen opeyuz
Themrarin incid quren suz-uzh.
[The workers who labor with picks on the road!
Their women must wander bareheaded.]

A-breth n-tumobil hudminth a breth-n-kum
Uk-seer thetwon the-bre-then red-n-hum.
[The highway? The workers must make their own road.
The women of Tetuan aren't theirs and cannot be seen through their veils.]

The first song contrasts a Berber custom, the wearing of a head scarf by girls and women, with the Arabic custom, referred to in the second, of veiling the face. Although rural Berber women tend to go unveiled, some who have moved to towns like Al-hoceima have adopted the custom in imitation of Arabic women.

In a modern song that criticizes the government for levying an admission price at a local beach in the town of Al-hoceima, the phenomenon of tourism itself is scrutinized:

10. For a more detailed discussion of immigration and its impact on the Rif, see David Hart's *Aith Waryaghar,* pp. 93–95.

Shebab n-Al-hoceima hisrah su sekn
Kenu alemanan hezrah tibe serkun
[The young boys of Al-hoceima dive from the shining cliffs
You, the Germans, sprawl on the blazing sand.]

When the Playa Quemada beach was taken over in 1966 for the use of two government hotels and a fee of one dirham was charged for admission to what had once been a public beach, the Berbers felt the fee was aimed at discouraging them from using the beach. Rather than pay admission, the Berber men perform the dangerous feat of diving from the cliffs above the beach while the tourists lie on the sand below, acquiring the suntans the Berbers, with their liking for fair skin, consider unattractive. The song's social criticism is aimed at the invading tourists and the *makhzen* for forcing the Berbers to pay to use their own beach. Although the song was composed by a young woman who lived in Al-hoceima, it was taken up by the rural girls who had some contact with the town, and it became popular in the countryside, even though inlanders had little personal interest in tourists nor a stake in using the Playa Quemada beach. Several informants explained its appeal in the tribal area by saying that the new admission price was similar to the government's infringements on other aspects of Berber life since Morocco's independence.

The Love Songs

The woman who performs her songs at a wedding uses them not only as social criticism but as strategies to defend herself, attack others, encourage suitors, announce an engagement, remind young men of the tribe that she is in love, shame or ridicule an unwanted swain, or justify her decision to break an engagement. Even the most ordinary love song represents a form of social criticism since it implicitly attacks three powerful stereotypes often expressed by Berber men: (1) women, especially young girls, are too foolish or uninformed to hold strong opinions about something as important as the choice of a mate; (2) they are merely pawns in the male game of strengthening past affinal relationships or establishing new ones through marriage; (3) unmarried girls, segregated from contact with nonrelated males, have no opportunity to develop positive or negative feelings toward any particular young man. Yet men not only accept these songs, they like them, memorizing their favorites to quote or chant in conversation.

Some of the most interesting and problematic songs of the Rif are addressed to young men who have already entered into successful negotiations with the composer's father. Since these negotiations will lead to marriage, the singer, if she does not care for him, must discourage

the young man so thoroughly in her lyrics that he will voluntarily withdraw his offer:

A thsib-banah-tasebnath: astsah ho fades
Jemah sucarinik-nish d shik udentes
[I am going to wash my fringed head scarf; I shall hang it on the *fades* bush:
Take your sugar away! You and I aren't good together.]

In this song, the singer places in explicit opposition the formal negotiations of the masculine world and her own, informal system for getting what she wants. The reference to sugar is an economical way of saying: "You came to my house and asked my father for my hand; he has encouraged you, accepting your proposal, but I don't want to marry you." In Berber society sugar is considered the most expressive symbol of the affection which unites an engaged or married couple. It is also used as a signal between the boy and the girl's father to open or close negotiations for a wedding. On the occasion of his first visit to the girl's home, the young man (or his representative) will present her father with five or six hard cones of tightly packed sugar. If the father is amenable to the idea of accepting the young man as a son-in-law, he will strike a cone with a hammer and break the sugar into lumps which will be used to sweeten the mint tea that he will share with the young man. If the father does not wish to encourage the young man, he will either return the cones or ostentatiously use household sugar in preparing the tea. With nothing overt having been said by either party, the young man has declared his intentions, and the girl's father has indicated his willingness or reluctance to open formal negotiations.

Moreover, by washing her head scarf, the composer of the song is metaphorically washing her hands of her lover. This cleansing is an act of purification as well; she will become a new woman who has broken with the past. The *thasebneth,* which is made of brightly colored and patterned silk with a long, soft fringe, is considered the most beautiful head scarf worn by Berber women and is worn only on special occasions when a woman wishes to be particularly attractive. The poet's use of the *fades (pistacia lentiscus)* intensifies the cleansing imagery of the lyric, since ashes from the *fades* bush are used by Berbers to make soap. By hanging her head scarf to dry in a conspicuous location outside the home, the girl is not only rejecting her suitor but making a public declaration of the rupture and of her own freedom to consider other offers of marriage. There is also, of course, a veiled threat to use the newly washed scarf for flirtatious purposes.

The audience listening to this song would know what particular young man was seeking the singer in marriage, even though no names are mentioned in the lyric. It is unlikely that a suitor subjected to a

rejection witnessed by the entire community would continue to press for marriage. Of course, the composer takes the risk that the young man will persist, that the negotiations will go through, and that she will find herself married to the butt of her song. It is only because the songs are trusted to be generally effective that a young woman can afford to gamble, wagering her desire to extricate herself from an unwanted match against the unpleasant possibility of finding herself married to a man she has spurned in public.

Berber poets exercise considerable license in their songs, in sharp contrast to the normal decorum and modesty required of a young Berber virgin. In the following song, a young woman abuses a suitor with impunity, something which she would never do to his face.

> Math zwed *el vino* nhara methumnat
> Math zwed *el vino* math kul bid tazeyat?
> [Did you drink wine today or yesterday?
> Did you drink wine glass by glass or the whole bottle at once?]

The singer is saying that the boy must have been drunk and, by extension, out of his mind, to have asked for her hand; he was as drunk as if he had consumed an entire bottle of wine before setting out to make arrangements with her father. Since the drinking of wine is expressly forbidden by the Koran, an injunction which rural Berbers take seriously, the singer's accusation would be an embarrassment both to the boy and to his family. It is doubtful if the young man, after this verbal face slapping, would pursue any further his plans to marry the girl.

Whatever the verbal license of the singers, the victims of their lyrics are expected to suffer in dignified silence. At a wedding which took place on the Bulma Peak in the Rif Moutains in the summer of 1966, a young man became so incensed about a song which he considered insulting that he and a group of his friends began throwing stones at the singer. The adult males in the audience quickly intervened, the boys were forcibly ejected from the compound, and the evening continued without further incident. Most of the wedding guests were shocked by the boys' behavior and observed that however insulting a girl's song might seem to any given young man she has a right to sing it. This freedom to overstep the boundary of ordinary Riffian courtesy is one of the most powerful weapons which songs give Berber women.

Many of the Berber lyrics are efforts at self-justification or defense. In one song the composer, accused of a sexual transgression, defends her own life:

> Nanis eguma wutchma anrret a-hisen
> anri ahzezbo huma urensen.
> [The boys have challenged my brother, "It would be better

to kill that wanton your sister!"
Then let them kill me to silence their lying tongues!]

A group of young men, probably disgruntled suitors, accuses the singer of sexual immorality. So serious is this allegation in the Rif that the brother would be within his rights if he defended the family honor and killed the girl. In the song, the poet shows her brother believes in her innocence, and, by openly confronting unpleasant gossip, she transforms a dangerous situation into an opportunity to defend her reputation. Only by exposing the problem to the whole community is she able to combat her accusers and maintain her good name. In another song of defense, the poet uses the public forum of the wedding to appease a fiancé who has broken their engagement because she admired the young men of Al-hoceima on a visit to the town:

Themdenth n-Alhoceima arras wah ebaden
Thene esother a-lefeno zugen.
[The city of Al-hoceima with its strong walls!
It was there I fell from the esteem of my darling.]

The poet admits that her head was turned by the "strong walls" or attractive young men of the town, but this public confession serves to minimize her misdemeanor. In fact, upon hearing the girl sing this song at a wedding, the fiancé decided that he had been too harsh and their marriage took place within a month. The songs are a recognized channel for redressing wrongs and for allowing the young women of the tribe to speak in their own defense. One lyric specifically mentions this function:

Suneth ezranino ashar riz-bubenik
Mirme gar thar-ruth wuh ah-wuth u wa sherenik
[Fill your ears and your heart with my songs!
Tell my denouncer he lied!]

Like occidental love poetry, Berber lyrics are often songs of celebration, lamentation, and seduction. One typical love song is written as a dialogue, in which the fiancé poses a question in the first line which the composer answers in the second:

Eni mi shem rahgah a yah denub
Donue gui a lefino mani tigguth i-kultub
[He asked me, "Where shall I put you, my poor little one?"
Put me, my darling, where you put your book.]

The singer asks her lover to place her in his hip pocket, where he carries his book, so that she can be with him all the time. *Denub,* "poor little thing," is a word that is usually used for young children and is a term of

affection when applied to an adult. The other endearment in the song, *lefino,* is the first-person singular possessive of the noun *lef,* the word that signifies the trusted allies who laid down their lives for a man in the days of the blood feud; it is the strongest word for "beloved" or "darling" in the Rif and has no literal equivalent in English. In a representative example of a lament, the singer voices her loneliness for a fiancé who has gone to Europe to work in a factory:

> Lefino e-sahwar ge-fotographia
> Ah-we or-resewer afefraz-a-nita
> [His face in the window of the photographer's shop
> The portrait can't speak, but how it resembles my darling!]

Such a song, with its reference to her fiancé's passport photograph on display in the window of the photographic shop in Al-hoceima, allows her also to remind other young men that she is engaged and is waiting for her young man to return.

Songs of seduction sung at weddings must veil their eroticism in order to be performed in public.[11] According to a Berber male informant, the following lyric is "the song most in love of any," or it is as explicitly erotic as any song which can be sung before an audience:

> Ath-sarsh temese hokahmom owahnu
> Athadosun waman athaso lefeno athesu.
> [I shall lower a candle at the mouth of the well.
> If the water rushes upwards, my lover will drink.]

The song begins with the commonplace activity of fetching water at the well, but moves into the realm of the extraordinary as the water under-

11. Songs which are too blatantly sexual for the wedding ceremony are reserved for private encounters between the composer and her man. The following lyrics are two cases in point:

> Arge we-u-fen thakamun a tereyuk
> Ager wuht unbtho atere fath-e-nuk
> [God, if you can find him, send me a breakfast of his kisses
> When the flowers bloom great thirst slays.]
>
> Wala mathak-e-nir menrarer thuggwazen
> Ebasheno thetfah mazwa thatubsen
> [By God I swear I shall not tell all that I hide beneath my gown:
> Breasts hard and round as apples and under them, a bowl.]

A Berber bride is supposed to be a virgin at marriage, and the cloth stained with her hymenal blood is exhibited to the guests at the wedding. But if the groom has been the girl's lover, his mother will often kill a chicken and use its blood for the cloth to prevent scandal. Should his wife not be a virgin, the groom has the option of sending her back to her father's house in disgrace and reclaiming his *sadat;* but if he likes her and she can put her sexual experience with another man in a sympathetic light, he will often keep her nonetheless.

goes a miraculous transformation and becomes a fountain. The reference to a candle, which suggests that it is night rather than day, implies a tryst at the well. Even more, many Berbers claim that this lyric contains an explicitly sexual metaphor: The well symbolizes the girl's vagina, the candle the boy's penis, the flame their sexual passion, and the act of drinking that of sexual intercourse. Since the lyric can be read more literally, however, it falls within the Berber concept of propriety and can be performed without causing offense.

The Songs and the Reality of Women's Lives

Although Riffians make a conscientious effort to keep adolescent boys and girls apart as part of the ideology of sexual segregation, the songs reveal that unmarried boys and girls spend enough time in each other's company to form attachments and antipathies. Since both sexes have tasks to perform which take them outside the home, parental supervision is necessarily limited. Unmarried boys make it a habit to appear at the well, river, or spring when the girls arrive to fetch water. A boy who is struck by the appearance or manner of one of the young women will accompany her part of the way to her house, staying several feet behind her; this pretense at social distance enables young people to insist that they are not together if challenged by adults. If the boy likes the girl he will begin to linger along the path just out of sight of her home in order to follow her to the well or as she goes about her errands. A few words will be exchanged, and if the girl is friendly they will walk abreast of each other when no one is in sight and perhaps disappear into a grove of olive trees to converse privately. Such encounters are "dates" in Riffian society and help young people conduct courtships and make decisions about whom they wish to marry. Despite these social patterns which have existed for at least several generations, adults, especially parents discussing their children, assume that little or no communication takes place between adolescent boys and girls. Adults maintain this social blindness because the society tries to uphold sexual segregation and clings to a formal model in which the fathers of the bride and groom arrange the marriage of their offspring. And these partial fictions are maintained in the face of the evidence from the song lyrics, heard at ten or fifteen weddings a year, which are presented and understood as true statements, not as imaginative constructs.

Although the Berbers pay lip service to a formal model in which the father of the bride arranges her marriage without consulting her wishes, the songs reveal a different world in which the bride accepts or rejects various suitors on the basis of their attractiveness to her; her father, if he appears in the lyrics at all, is a shadowy figure who simply carries out the wishes of his strong-willed daughter. One possible reason why Berber

girls are allowed to expose social fictions and to challenge certain aspects of their patriarchal society may be that the performance of songs occurs during a rite of passage, what Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* has called a marginal or liminal event (from *limen,* "threshold" in Latin), in which the participants are on a threshold between two social categories and are ambiguous figures who are not fully members of either.[12] This liminality also extends to the guests at the wedding, whose own status groups are being changed by the marriage. The parents and families of the bride and groom are bidding farewell to their offspring as children and, like the elders of the community, must accept them henceforth as married adults; and the adolescent friends, the age mates of the bride and groom, must adapt themselves to the change in the couple's social role. Within the liminal event, *reversal* of social categories and *inversion,* in which the high exchange places with the low, seem to be consistent features. The Berber wedding shows a paradigm of reversal in power relationships: unmarried girls, who are less powerful in ordinary Berber life than any group except small children, suddenly become figures of authority who are allowed to address all the members of their society and to use their creativity to achieve their own ends. The powerful father of a singer (and with him, all the adult males who expect to oversee the marriages of their children) is reduced to being a passive member of the audience while his daughter is the center of attention, singing words which her audience not only carefully listens to but often actually memorizes, as she comments boldly on the attractions and weaknesses of various young men in the crowd. The girl's performance, then, allows her to play "queen for a day," but because her usurpation of power takes place within the formal structure of the marriage rites she is expected to resume her docile, obedient demeanor after the wedding, and not attempt to exercise authority until the next time she performs in public. The irony of this expectation is that the girl seizes the moment of her performance to encourage relationships which will continue after the wedding or to permanently dismiss an unwanted suitor. Her songs can have far-reaching consequences and affect the shape of her life long after the wedding is over.

The Berbers recognize that the songs are critiques of their existing mores, but when asked why such songs are allowed to be performed in public they reply in amazement that a wedding would not be a wedding without the songs, that Berber women have always sung at weddings. The more thoughtful suspect that it would be unfair to force a woman into an unwanted marriage without giving her a chance to prevent it through her lyrics. In fact, apart from the songs, a woman has no way of discouraging an unwanted or hated fiancé except by threatening or at-

12. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969).

tempting suicide. However, the songs may also be perceived as a mechanism which, while giving women the impression of gaining power, ultimately supports the patriarchal system, for in spite of the rebelliousness of many of the lyrics the act of performance itself is also a mode of participation in a "marriage market," a display of wit, talent, and attractiveness to an audience that includes potential mates. Whatever the specific content of any given lyric, the singers never attack the institution of marriage itself in their songs. Their aim is to discourage unwanted suitors and to ensure engagement to their preferred young men. Notwithstanding the difficulties of determining their exact revolutionary force, the Berber songs expose the problems and deficiencies inherent in traditional views of male-female relationships in the Middle East and to the need for further, more intensive studies.

Department of English and Comparative Literature
University of California, Irvine