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## WOMEN AND RESISTANCE TO COLONIALISM IN MOROCCO: THE RIF 1916-1926

BY C. R. PENNELL

ONE of the many difficulties in writing about the history of the rural Middle East and North Africa is that sources are far more limited than they are for urban areas. The towns are better recorded, partly because of higher literacy, partly because of greater government control and supervision. Even within the towns the historical record is skewed in favour of the elite, and particularly the political leadership. That leadership was (and is) largely male. In an article published in 1979<sup>2</sup> Nikki Keddie suggested that one way of overcoming a reliance on what she called 'ideal sources' ('the Quran and the traditional sayings of Muhammad, jurists and theologians') might be to make more use of material taken from prose, poetry, geographies, legal and theological writings, chronicles, wills, legal cases and so on.<sup>3</sup>

This of course is being done, but even so the picture of the activities of women in the Islamic world is biased towards the urban or upper-class sections of the various societies of the region. That is not to dismiss it, for such studies present some useful and important insights into women's roles in society as a whole.

One of the most intriguing of these suggestions is that women were by no means powerless; that there existed, because of the separation between the sexes, distinct female systems of power. Dengler, writing of upper-class Turkish women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries noted that:

by the mere nature of the separation of men's and women's worlds in Ottoman society, each sex came to acquire a separate hierarchy with its own specific system of information exchange and decision making. Women of the ruling elites, in part through personal ability, but primarily through linkage with their own friends, kin groups, and the army of subordinates placed under them, became the heads of vast clientage and patronage networks that at times gave them direct control over the entire State apparatus.<sup>4</sup>

Bates, in an article on 'Women as patrons of architecture in Turkey',<sup>5</sup> in

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank my friends Dr Marion Farouk Sluglett and Dr Peter Sluglett for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. I should also like to thank my friends and former colleagues at the National University of Singapore, Drs Daniel Turnbull, Andrew Major and Ng Chin Keong for their comments on a later version which was presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Australasian Middle East Studies Association in Sydney, September 1984. The abbreviations used for archival sources in this article are: FO, Archives of the British Foreign Office, Kew, London. MAEF, Archives of the French Ministry of Exterior Relations, Paris. SHM, Archives of the Spanish Army, Servicio Histórico Militar, Madrid.

<sup>2</sup> N. R. Keddie, 'Problems in the study of Middle Eastern women', *Int. J. Middle East Studies* (1979), 225-240.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Ian C. Dengler, 'Turkish women in the Ottoman Empire: the classical age', in L. Beck and N. R. Keddie (eds.), *Women in the Middle East* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1978), 229-44; reference here to 236-7.

<sup>5</sup> U. Bates, 'Women as patrons of architecture in Turkey', *ibid.*, 245-60.

which she draws attention to distinct peculiarities in the architecture of mosques through the patronage of women in both pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Turkey, comes to a similar conclusion:

Emerging from an overview of architectural patronage is the discovery that women of the elite classes were active in areas of the formal political system where it is unexpected.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, writing of nineteenth-century Egypt,<sup>7</sup> describes how upper-class women not only administered property but carried out business from the seclusion of their harems. She says that:

one must perforce reject the stereotype of the harem as a warm cocoon and come to regard it simply as a microcosm of upper-class Egyptian society, a society in which women felt at ease and which they controlled.<sup>8</sup>

The underlying theme is that there existed a definite 'female space' in which women operated with a considerable degree of autonomy. This may have been true of affluent urban women, but was it true of women in the countryside?

There is evidence that it was, at least in Northern Morocco. This region consists of two groups of mountains: the Rif, a narrow and fairly arid chain running along the Mediterranean coast, and the Jibala, a block of mountains to its west which forms the core of the peninsula on which Tangier stands, and which benefits from rain borne in from the Atlantic. In both areas cultivation is confined to the valleys. Certainly women in this region did not (and do not) have the same status as men. As David Hart writes:

The Moroccan world of tribal politics was and is definitely a man's world, in which women took and take little or no active part – although the division of labor by sex is very unequal: women generally work far harder and longer than men do. In structural terms women, handed around in marriage from one lineage to the next within a given clan, or, more rarely, to another clan or even to another tribe, provided links of alliance in which they themselves, being passive instruments of policy, had little or no voice.<sup>9</sup>

Since political power is intimately connected with access to resources, one area in which women were disadvantaged was in the inheritance of land. Islamic law, giving women half the share of the inheritance of men, was effectively ignored in pre-colonial Morocco.<sup>10</sup>

The sexual division of labour was also heavily weighted against women. They were responsible not only for keeping house, cleaning, cooking and fetching water, but also for various agricultural tasks: helping with reaping, grinding grain, feeding the cattle and looking after the chickens. Men, on the other hand, did the heavy agricultural work: ploughing and sowing, threshing and reaping, repairing tracks and paths and so on.

This separation was mirrored in the way in which the products of agriculture were distributed. Women, for example, were responsible for

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>7</sup> A. Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'The revolutionary gentlewoman in Egypt', *ibid.*, 261–76.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>9</sup> D. M. Hart, *The Aith Waryaghar of the Moroccan Rif, an Ethnography and History* (Tucson, 1976), 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

selling such things as chickens and eggs in the markets. The distinction was carried even further in some of the tribes, where there were separate markets for women. These now exist only in the largest (and most conservative) Rifi tribe, the Banu Waryaghāl, but in the pre-colonial Rif they were also found more widely. The turnover of these markets was much lower than that of the regular markets, although it was not negligible; the commercial activity largely consisted of trade in specifically female articles: chickens, eggs, rabbits, pottery, things for cosmetic use and women's clothing. Apart from this they had other functions besides purely economic ones. They were places where marriages could be arranged, which was part of the political process, and they were centres for the selling of charms and materials for sorcery, a craft in which Rifi men credit their women with high expertise. It was also one closed to men (which gave them cause for considerable anxiety, since they could not know what the women were up to). This autonomy in the markets was organized: each women's market had its own female head (*amīna*) who collected a tithe from each woman who brought goods to sell. The only male function was to put a guard around the market to prevent all men from entering.<sup>11</sup>

The consequence of women's position in society was an extreme segregation of the sexes; to quote Hart again:

The sexual division of labor and the daily routine are both sharp economic indicators of the dichotomy between the man's world – open, public, and in the fields – and the women's world – private, secret and in the house.<sup>12</sup>

This division could only last while the social structure was not under too much strain. If there was serious pressure on the social and political system as a whole, then the role of women within it was likely to be affected as well.

Such strains came about in times of widespread warfare, and particularly when the whole of society was mobilized to resist European military pressure. In northern Morocco this happened in the second and third decades of the twentieth century.

Resistance to colonialism is, of course, one of the main themes of the modern history of the Islamic, and indeed the rest of the non-European world. In North Africa military resistance began in the 1830s and went on, in parts, for the next 100 years. It was mainly rural, if such a term can be applied to deserts as well as mountains: 'Abd al-Qādir's struggle against the French in Algeria (1830–47), Mā' al-'Aynayn's against the French in Mauritania, 'Umar al-Mukhtār's against the Italians in Cyrenaica and many others. Because they were mainly rural, writing the history of these efforts at resistance is made more difficult by the lack of written records which has already been described. Although a considerable amount has been done, there has always been a problem of finding sources which would allow a detailed examination of daily life in the resisting areas, and the way in which the lives of the ordinary people (as distinct from their leaders) were affected by the fighting and by the new political structures that emerged.

Northern Morocco was the arena for one of these confrontations between Muslims and colonialists, and one for which some record of the social consequences does exist. After the imposition of the Franco-Spanish protectorate on Morocco in 1912, resistance to the Spanish in the north slowly

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 86–8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

grew. From late 1920 until 1926 it was led by a Rifi *qādī*, Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭṭābī (commonly called Abdelkrim). The documentation of this struggle is quite extensive. There are the daily intelligence reports of Spanish spies, preserved in the army archives in Madrid, which while they have to be used with care, consistently cross-check with each other and with the narrative accounts of the war. These latter consist of the memoirs of Rifi and Spanish participants and of European and American journalists who visited the Rif during the war.<sup>13</sup> The other most important source is contained in four volumes of the papers of bin ‘Abd al-Karīm’s administration captured by the French and held in the archives of the French Foreign Ministry in Paris. Among these papers is a collection of the records of bin ‘Abd al-Karīm’s prisons, giving the names and personal details as well as the alleged crimes of the prisoners.

The very fact that there were prisons in the wartime Rif is a clue both to the nature of the movement which bin ‘Abd al-Karīm led and of the extent to which it changed society and politics in the Rif. Before 1921 there was no prison in the Rif, because there was no central authority to set one up. In pre-colonial Morocco, the power of the Sultan in the cities was extremely indirect over mountainous districts like the Rif. While it is not correct to say that the Rif was in a state of permanent rebellion against the Sultan (although that did happen at times), local political structures were responsible for maintaining order. These structures were based on a highly segmented social system in which the ‘tribe’ (*qabīla* in Arabic, *dhaqbitsh* in the local Berber dialect, was broken down into ‘clans’ (*ushr* {Arabic singular} or *rba* {Berber}) and ‘local communities’ (*dshār* {Arabic and Berber singular}) along supposed lines of historical descent from a common ancestor. Peace between these groups and within them was kept by a system of tribal councils (*jamā’a* in Arabic, *aith arba’in* in Berber) who imposed their will through a system of fines (*ḥaqq*).

These *ḥaqq* fines underpinned the political and social structure of the pre-colonial Rif. In an area where central government’s control was very weak, they were the only way of preserving order and preventing feuding. They were effectively an act of collective vengeance, and were naturally most important in cases of killing in or near markets, for that was an offence which could lead most rapidly to feuding, and the immediate breakdown not only of order but of the market system itself. The big markets were occasions when men of different tribes were present, and so the connection between markets and order was clear. Thus, if a man from one tribe killed a man from another the most important *a’yān*, or notables, of the whole tribe meeting at the main market of the tribe imposed a very heavy fine on the killer and then distributed the proceeds according to complicated (and varying) formulae amongst themselves. If the case involved people within a tribe, then the less important *a’yān* of the local market involved would split the fine. In essence,

<sup>13</sup> The memoirs of Muḥammad Azarqān, bin ‘Abd al-Karīm’s ‘Minister of Foreign Affairs’, are contained in the manuscript dictated by him to Aḥmad Skiraj, ‘al-zill al-wārif fī’l-muḥābarat al-rif’ in the Bibliothèque Générale in Rabat. The list of Spanish and French participants’ contributions is very long indeed, and mostly concerned with the military action (as was the majority of intelligence work, of course). Among the foreign journalists the most interesting for the purposes of this article are the books of Vincent Sheean, *Adventures among the Rifi* (London, 1926) and *Personal History* (New York, 1935).

the system depended on mutual co-operation between the most important members of competing groups. If the agreement between them broke down, then little could prevent feuding.<sup>14</sup>

This system turned out to be very unstable once Europeans began trying to impose their control over the area. The reliance on fines was a positive gift to the Spanish, whose economic and political weakness at home led them to adopt a policy of political penetration, or softening up, rather than outright military conquest for the first few years after they were granted their protectorate over northern Morocco. In brief, their policy involved the political destabilization of the unoccupied areas, by methods which included the disruption of the system of *ḥaqq* fines, so that feuding resulted. In consequence, united resistance to them became almost impossible.<sup>15</sup> When Spanish forces, commanded by Lieutenant-General Manuel Fernandez Silvestre, began advancing across the plains to the east of the Rif in 1919, efforts were made to restore the *ḥaqq* fines, but really effective resistance only began in 1920 under the leadership of a young *qādī* from the Banu Waryaghal, Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Karīm.

From the first he made it clear that his leadership would have two bases: his own unchallenged leadership, and the strict imposition of the *shar'* or Islamic law.<sup>16</sup> It is very difficult to determine where his religious ideology, based upon the Salafiya movement, left off and political considerations began,<sup>17</sup> but it is clear that the imposition of the *shar'* did help overcome the political instability inherent in the *ḥaqq* fines, just as the personal control of bin 'Abd al-Karīm undercut the ability of competing political groups to disrupt the political unity.

That unity was very effective. In July and August 1921 the Rifis attacked the Spanish and all but ejected them from the north-east of Morocco. The Spanish fought their way back to the foothills of the eastern Rif during the next eighteen months, but by that time bin 'Abd al-Karīm, fortified by the prestige of his victory and by the enormous quantity of war materials left behind by the Spanish, was firmly in control in the Rif, underpinned by a small regular army. In 1924, in alliance with the people of the Jibala, he forced the Spanish out of the northwestern region, and promptly imposed the same autocratic rule there that he had set up in the Rif. The following year his troops turned southwards to attack the French, and for a short while it seemed that Fez might fall. Spurred on by this defeat, the French joined forces with the Spanish, and in a combined operation in September 1925 the European armies linked up, surrounded the Rif, and during the following winter effectively starved it into submission. In May 1926, with military and food supplies exhausted, bin 'Abd al-Karīm surrendered.<sup>18</sup>

The five years of fighting and political change had deep effects on the social

<sup>14</sup> Hart, *Aith Waryaghar*, 277-88, 292.

<sup>15</sup> C. R. Pennell, 'The responsibility for Anual', *European Studies Review*, XII (1982), 67-81.

<sup>16</sup> C. R. Pennell, 'Law, order and the creation of an Islamic resistance to colonialism: the Rif 1921-1926', *Revue d'histoire maghrébine*, XXI-XXII (1981), 25-39.

<sup>17</sup> C. R. Pennell, 'Ideology and practical politics: a case study of the Rif War in Morocco, 1921-1926', in *Int. J. Middle East Studies*, XIV (1982), 19-33.

<sup>18</sup> For a full account of the war see C. R. Pennell, *A country with a government and a flag: the Rif War in Morocco, 1921-1926* (London, 1986).

and political structures of the Rif. The war effort demanded manpower, bin 'Abd al-Karīm demanded obedience (and brought in detailed administration to ensure it), the imposition of the *shar'* required changes of attitude. This affected everyone, men and women.

There were the changes in women's roles which are the almost invariable accompaniment of war: they did jobs previously done by men. The main reason was that the demand for manpower to fight meant that the women had to take their places in the fields. By 1924, when the American journalist Vincent Sheean visited the Rif, the almost total mobilization of men had left only women in the villages, and they were working the land.<sup>19</sup> Women had always been involved in agriculture, so this was no more than an extension of their role, although an arduous one. They had also always been cooks, and they carried on so. For some women, however, this involved a more substantial change of role, for now for the first time there was a government in the Rif, and one which could employ them in its bakeries making bread for the troops. It did not always fulfil its obligations of paying its employees on time – in January 1926 a man wrote to bin 'Abd al-Karīm to complain that his mother who worked in a government bakery had not been paid for three months.<sup>20</sup> By that time the government was running out of money. Direct employment of women by a government was a new phenomenon in the Rif, as was the imposition of conscription. The nature of society was being changed by the creation of a centralizing government which began to intervene more and more in the lives of the people it controlled.

The intervention was not only economic. It was also advanced through the imposition of the *shar'*. The emphasis on the *shar'* had two inextricably linked motives: one political – the need to preserve political unity, the other religious – the desire to create a more moral Islamic society. As a result bin 'Abd al-Karīm and his legal officers were interested in the personal behaviour of both men and women. When, for instance, bin 'Abd al-Karīm ordered that in future all men were to pray the required five times a day, he also decreed that women should do so too; any woman who did not would be fined a chicken if she were found out.<sup>21</sup> The chicken was pre-eminently the women's livestock. The law was being carried into their specific female space.

This enforcement of the rules regarding prayer was symbolic not only of a government which aimed at upholding Islamic principles, but also of the pervasiveness of its power, which was vital to its political survival. Everyone had to obey, because if they did not the political structure might return to its previous fragmentation.

To stop that from happening differences between social groups had to be ironed out – the scalplocks which distinguished the men of one tribe from another were ordered to be cut off, for example<sup>22</sup> – and inter-personal violence in all its forms was vigorously repressed. Women benefited from this, for their personal protection was increased. According to the prison records, one man was imprisoned 'because he hit his wife and knocked a tooth out of her head', another 'on account of a woman . . . whom he promised to marry without its being valid in the *shar'*'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Sheean, *Adventures*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> MAEF Maroc 519, 134, Sa'īd b. al-Qā'id al-Sharīf to Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Karīm, 6 Rajab 1344/20 Jan. 1926.

<sup>21</sup> Hart, *Aith Waryaghar*, 389.

<sup>22</sup> Hart, *Aith Waryaghar*, 390.

<sup>23</sup> MAEF Maroc 519, list dated 1 Rajab 1342/17 February 1924, prisoners 77 and 10.

It was doubtless a new experience for Rifi men to be punished for beating their wives or giving unfulfillable promises of marriage, or at least to be so punished by an outside authority rather than (possibly) being summarily dealt with by the aggrieved woman's family. Quite apart from limiting feuding, the policy had a clear implication: people were expected to act in a moral and socially responsible manner. If they did not they would fall foul of the government, which was now responsible for maintaining order in society in place of individual groups within it. For this reason two men from the Banu Tuzin tribe were fined 4,000 riyals because 'they attended the killing of a man and a woman for adultery without the permission of the government'. When they did not pay they were imprisoned.<sup>24</sup>

The government did not only protect women, it also punished them. They were just as much subject to its laws as men, and if they transgressed them, they were arrested too. A woman suspected of killing her husband was imprisoned<sup>25</sup> and others were held on grounds of spying.<sup>26</sup>

The arrest of women for spying suggests that war changed the political role of women as well. Not only were they used in new economic roles as a result of the war, but in new political ones as well. The secrets of both Spanish and Rifis leaked to the other side with remarkable ease, and a considerable number of the spies were women. Throughout the war, women moved between the markets on both sides of the lines. In the early stages, for instance, when the Spanish had taken refuge in the city of Melilla, and their network of informants had practically broken down, women like Fāṭima bint al-Hādī of the Banu Siddal tribe and Fāṭima bint Ḥammū of the Mazuja tribe continued to bring them information.<sup>27</sup> It was a role they continued to play throughout the war. In June 1925, at the height of Rifi power, three women were arrested in the Banu Sa'īd tribe of the Eastern Rif for taking news to the Spanish.<sup>28</sup> In 1926 Fāṭima bint Sī Muḥammad 'Alī and 'Aīsha bint 'Amar Ukarrash were bringing reports to them.<sup>29</sup>

Not all women worked for the Spanish. Their opponents benefited too. Even before the Rifis had occupied the Jibala, Spanish security officers were complaining about the danger from women who crossed between the unoccupied and occupied zones collecting information for their opponents. One officer wrote:

'The most dangerous and prejudicial espionage of which the rebels in this tribe make use is that carried out by women, since they are confident that the [Spanish authorities] will not suspect or punish them simply because they are women. Thus [many women] . . . are involved in actions which are prejudicial in the extreme and they must be punished.'<sup>30</sup>

For the same reason that they made good spies, women made good smugglers. In the closing stages of the war they were particularly useful to the Rifis. In March 1926 a Spanish agent warned that all the women who left the Spanish zone for the market at Midar in the area still held by the Rifis took 20–30

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 146, prisoner 10.      <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, list dated 27 Ramadan 1342/2 May 1924.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>27</sup> SHM Melilla 18, *Información Agosto*, 21 and 29 August 1921.

<sup>28</sup> *Oficina de Intervención de B. Said, Hojas Diarias*, 28 June 1925.

<sup>29</sup> SHM Melilla 30, *Oficina de Intervención de Beni Ulichek, Hojas de Confidentes*, 4 May 1926; *Oficina de Intervención de Metalsa, Oficina de Drius, Hojas de Confidentes*, 7 March 1926.

<sup>30</sup> SHM Ceuta, 25 *Política Abril*, nota, 25 April 1925.



cartridges each. Women had extended their specifically female economy: for every 100 cartridges they were paid 50 Spanish cents.<sup>31</sup>

As the markets were places where people gathered, they were also places where public opinion was formed. That could be dangerous, for rumour and panic easily spread. In the aftermath of the Spanish defeats of July and August 1921, rumours spread that the Spanish were regrouping to attack. On 3 September the market at al-Nazur broke up rapidly when women started to shout out that the Christians were coming.<sup>32</sup> There had already been a wave of doom-laden prophecies circulating through the markets. One in mid-August promised that in the year which followed, events would lead to the demise of all the inhabitants, that the countryside and villages would be turned into fields of flames, that the little river at Silwan would overflow with blood and so on. One informant hinted that women played at least a part in the creation of this collective nightmare.<sup>33</sup>

Women's part in the formation of public opinion was not entirely detrimental to the Rifi cause. Bin 'Abd al-Karīm told his son, Idrīs, that he had asked one man who was particularly noted for his bravery why he was so courageous. He answered that it was 'because I do not want the women to speak about me round the fountain'.<sup>34</sup>

Because the activities of women were both useful and threatening to bin 'Abd al-Karīm's government, they had to be both organized and controlled. Control was particularly difficult because of the separation between the sexes. The answer was to set up a female security system. When the Rifis moved into the Jibala they employed five men and five women to report on anyone who spoke ill of the Rifis or of bin 'Abd al-Karīm.<sup>35</sup>

Such measures were an indication that women had real political importance. This contradicts the general impression of Rifi women's powerless position or at least suggests that their powerlessness was not as complete as men might have hoped. In fact women's political networks seem to have paralleled those of men in the Rif, very much as they did in Ottoman Turkey. The most striking example of this was given in a report by the British Vice-Consul in Tetuan in 1920, well before bin 'Abd al-Karīm had risen to prominence in the Rif.

In pre-colonial Morocco a tribe or clan which felt itself threatened by another group could call on a third for assistance. One way of doing this was to use a form of shame compulsion, called 'ār, which in its most dramatic form was done by sacrificing a bull or other animal on the steps of the third party's mosque.<sup>36</sup> This was an important political act and was normally carried out by men. In 1920, however, the Vice-Consul, describing fighting between the Spanish and the people round Shawin, reported that women of the Akhmas tribe 'have gone to the markets of the neighbouring tribes themselves and sacrificed to the women thereof to urge them to make their menfolk go to the aid of the Khmas [*sic*]'.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> SHM Melilla 30, *Intervención de Beni Tuzin, Oficina de Información de Tafersit, Hojas de Confidentes*, Muḥammad Sī Muḥammadi, 2 March 1926.

<sup>32</sup> SHM Melilla 18, *Información Agosto*, Captain of 2nd Mia, 3 September 1921.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Sīdī 'Alī al-Hīhī, 16 August 1921; Fāṭima bint Ḥammū, 29 August 1921.

<sup>34</sup> Personal information, Idrīs al-Khaṭṭābī, Rabat, 20 September 1977.

<sup>35</sup> SHM Ceuta 25, *Política Abril*, nota, 25 April 1925. <sup>36</sup> Hart, *Aith Waryghar*, 305-7

<sup>37</sup> FO 371/4527/A8463/2209/28, Atkinson to Kerr, Tetuan, 15 November 1920.

Once the Rifi government was well established, these female lines of political action and communication continued. Bin ‘Abd al-Karīm’s wife, whom he had married in 1919 when she was about 15 years old, occupied the top level of the female chain. Women came to her to ask her to intervene with bin ‘Abd al-Karīm in favour of their husbands.<sup>38</sup>

Political activity within the female space was one thing, but it might seem surprising in the male-dominated Rif for women to take an active part in the military campaigns. Yet this happened. Nor was it confined to the traditional women’s role in wartime of caring for the wounded and providing support behind the lines. Certainly they did this: bin ‘Abd al-Karīm instructed each tribe to send a group of women with each contingent of fighting men to care for the wounded. They were also employed in reloading cartridges and running messages.<sup>39</sup> These were of course extensions of women’s traditional roles, organized now by the government. Yet bin ‘Abd al-Karīm also used them in directly military activities. At the end of 1925 women were reported to be in the guard groups in the front line along with men.<sup>40</sup>

Was this an innovation brought about by the constraints of manpower? That may have been its reason, but it was not new. There was a considerable history of women in northern Morocco themselves taking up guns and fighting. In 1916, during the fighting against the Spanish in the ‘Anjara tribe near Tangier, women had taken the place in the firing line of their men who were killed.<sup>41</sup> In 1921 the women of another tribe in the Jibala used guns that they had hidden in the mountains to ambush a Spanish patrol which was burning their houses while the men were away.<sup>42</sup> Such behaviour was not confined to Morocco, for there were similar accounts which came out of the fighting of the Arab tribes in Libya against the first waves of Italian advances in 1911–12. A French journalist, Georges Rémond, was introduced to a woman, Salīma bint Mughus (Selima bent Mogos as he called her) from the Nuwayil, a nomadic tribe from the region of the Tunisian–Libyan border noted for its history of raiding and resistance to outside interference. She had, Rémond wrote,

taken part in all the battles around Tripoli, had been wounded with a bullet in the chest, and, after a fortnight’s rest in her tribe, come back to take her place among the fighters. Pol Tristan [correspondent of the French newspaper *Le Petit Marseillais*] gave her a sabre, which she brandished fiercely while singing her war-song.

That evening twelve women fighters arrived from the Fezzan.<sup>43</sup>

The Fezzan, the Nuwayil area, the Rif and the Jibala, which are widely separated, all saw moments when the women took direct part in the fighting. Since people do not simply pick up a gun and start shooting to any effect without any sort of knowledge of how to do it, this suggests that there must have been a far wider and longer acquaintanceship with firearms than the

<sup>38</sup> Personal information, Idrīs al-Khaṭṭābī, 20 September 1977. <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> SHM Melilla 27, *Información de Alhucemas*, Telegram Comandante Jefe Centro Intervención Ajdir to Coronel Inspector General Intervenciones, Ajdir, 23 December 1925, ‘Urgentísimo’.

<sup>41</sup> R. Forbes, *El Raisuli, Sultan of the Mountains* (London, 1924), 231.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 281–2.

<sup>43</sup> G. Rémond, *Aux camps Turco-Arabs, notes de route et de guerre en Tripolitaine et Cyrénaïque* (Paris, 1913), 56.

portrayal of women as socially and politically marginalized would allow. In fact these women seem, once again, to have been acting within a traditional context, this time one of military activity.

If women continued to act within a female space, parallel with that of men but separate from it, then that presented the Rifi government with the problems of controlling them and of organizing them. The question of control was answered by bringing women into the security structure. The question of organizing them for the purposes of the war raised problems of communication by a male leadership with the other sex. This was a difficult matter. Bin 'Abd al-Karīm was not simply a religious reformist but also a modernizer, anxious to use European techniques when they could benefit his cause. But how were these new techniques (largely the result of male experience, even if they concerned 'female' functions) to be passed over to women? It may, for instance, have been a traditional job of women to look after their wounded men, but how was he to educate them in modern methods of care? The person who knew most about these methods was the man who was largely responsible for health care, a black pharmacist from Tangier named Maḥbūb, who arrived in the Rif in 1921. He worked through men, teaching them the general principles of new methods of care so that they could pass them on to their wives. The only way of reaching women directly was through other women. Bin 'Abd al-Karīm's sisters were literate, which, although it was a rare accomplishment for women in the Rif at this time, was something of a tradition in the al-Khaṭṭābī family and one in which it took some pride. These women attempted to teach others the essentials of the Three R's, although like the rest of the very rudimentary education system which bin 'Abd al-Karīm set up, it was never very effective.<sup>44</sup> The result of all this was that women did learn new things as a result of the war, but the process of learning took place within the traditional social structures – through their menfolk, or through other women – and did not involve a fundamental change in male–female relationships or roles.

In fact, although the contribution of women to the war effort was vital, they remained absolutely in a second place to men. When they were employed alongside men in sowing for example, they were paid 2.50 Spanish pesetas; the men received 4 pesetas.<sup>45</sup> In the final event they were expendable. In March 1926, when food supplies were running short, there was a general move to get rid of as many 'useless' mouths as possible. One of the front-line commanders announced that he would let women cross into the Spanish zone provided each one who did so paid a tax of 10 pesetas.<sup>46</sup> Shortly afterwards it became apparent that bin 'Abd al-Karīm had advised that all those who were not necessary (i.e. women) should be sent to the Spanish zone because the Rifis could not feed them.<sup>47</sup> The same instructions were apparently repeated over much of the Rifi zone.<sup>48</sup>

What then was the role of women during the Rif war? Did it change? The general consensus of opinion, as expressed particularly in Sheila Rowbottom's

<sup>44</sup> Personal information, Idrīs al-Khaṭṭābī, 20 September 1977.

<sup>45</sup> SHM Melilla 28, *Oficina de Metalsa, Hojas Diarias*, 12 June 1925.

<sup>46</sup> SHM Melilla 30, *Oficina de Intervención de Beni Ulishak; Oficina de Información de Dar Mizian, Hojas de Confidentes*, Said bin 'Hobsa' [sic], 9 March 1926.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Mamat bent Hammu [sic], 14 March 1926.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Faqīr Qaddūr Azugāj, 20 March 1926.

influential book about the role of women in anti-colonialist struggles,<sup>49</sup> has been that as the resistance advanced so the women gradually became more involved. From 1955 onwards women ‘began’ to take on combat roles in the F.L.N. in Algeria.<sup>50</sup> This was apparently the case elsewhere as well: in Vietnam against the Americans, in Cuba against the Spanish.<sup>51</sup> Such events might be ascribed to the conditions of total war, and Rowbottom goes on to suggest that men were willing to allow an active role to women in the circumstances of immediate struggle, but as a temporary expedient only:

Perhaps they [men] accept the participation of women actually when they are fighting imperialism, but they tend to see the future society as one in which women are put back firmly in their place.<sup>52</sup>

To attempt to guess what might have happened had the Rifi movement survived takes us into the realms of ‘what-if?’ history, which is hardly conclusive. It is significant, however, that bin ‘Abd al-Karīm himself complained after the war was over that

even my most faithful supporters, and those of the greatest knowledge and intelligence believed that after the victory had been won I would allow each tribe to return to complete freedom despite their realization that this would return the country to the worst conditions of anarchy and barbarism.<sup>53</sup>

If bin ‘Abd al-Karīm was correct, then even the political structure he had set up was seen as no more than a temporary expedient, let alone any changes that might have taken place in the role of women.

That still begs the question of what those changes were. The evidence so far suggests that before the Rif war the separation of men and women carried with it the existence of autonomous female structures. They can be seen in an economic form in the existence of women’s markets and in a more diffuse form in the strictly female preserve of magic and sorcery, a real form of power because it was perceived to be so, and one which men did not control and feared accordingly. It stretches belief to suggest that, with these structures, women did not have political links of their own as well, and that the sort of political activity and alliance-forming that was reported in the Akhmas sprang suddenly out of the conditions of war, just as it seems unlikely that women suddenly and spontaneously learned to shoot in 1916 in one place, and 1920 in another. It is far more likely that within their own female space women had far more autonomy and power than men were willing to acknowledge, or possibly even know.

What the war did bring was an intensification of the importance of female structures. That is an obvious consequence of the social and political changes brought about by war. If the men were involved in rapid change it is clear that women would be as well. The more open functioning of women’s power systems in the Akhmas, for instance, was a direct consequence of the Spanish pressure (and was more interesting to the British vice-consul because it was directed against other Europeans). Equally, when men were first mobilized

<sup>49</sup> S. Rowbottom, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London 1972). <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 210 ff., 220 ff. <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>53</sup> Interview in *al-Manar*, pt 8, vol. XXVII, 1344–5/1926–7, 630–634, entitled ‘jahl zu‘amā’ al-Muslimīn wa mafāsīd ahl al-ṭuruq wa’l-shurafā’ wa kawnuhum sababan li fashal za‘īm al-Rif al Maghribi.

to fight for a government and forced into a new relationship with that government, women were mobilized as well: their traditional roles in preparing food, looking after the wounded and so on, took on the same formal role in relation to the state, and their arena was expanded, through the lack of manpower typical of wartime, into new areas of agriculture.

In short, although the war dramatically increased the involvement of women in the economic, political and military struggle, all this happened within the already-existing female environments in northern Morocco. It does not seem to have substantially changed the relationship between men and women. That is not to devalue or discount the importance of women in the war nor, more essentially, that of the 'female space' in northern Morocco before the war. What is clear from an examination of what women did during the Rif war, acting within traditional structures, is that those structures always had a far wider actual and potential ambit than has often been realized. This is clearly a direction in which future research might go.

#### SUMMARY

This article attempts to investigate the role of women in rural society in Morocco, and by extension in the Muslim world of the Near and Middle East. It does so by examining the evidence thrown up by a major crisis, the Rif war of the 1920s. The mobilization and organization of tribal society by Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Karīm (Abdelkrim) to fight the war against the Spanish and the French extended to women as well as men, involving them in new tasks under new laws. In the end, however, the evidence points not so much to a revolution in women's lives as to the activation for the purposes of war of a traditional 'female space'. In so doing, it points to the real importance of the women's sphere in a society which was sexually strongly segregated, confirming the impression derived from studies of more literate, urban and aristocratic Muslim societies of North Africa and the Middle East.