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(2007)

“Wives Against Mothers :  
Women's Power and Household  
Dynamics in Rural Tunisia.”

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“Wives Against Mothers : Women's Power  
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## “Wives Against Mothers : Women's Power and Household Dynamics in Rural Tunisia.”

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### **Abstract**

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*This article examines the way women's power and its relation to household dynamics have been addressed in the anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) through the classical works of Deniz Kandiyoti and Camille Lacoste-Dujardin. We argue that the notion of "classic patriarchy" they have elaborated and used is predicated on a "collectivistic " and "culturalist" perspective on living arrangements. We show the perspective's shortcomings and suggest an*

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*alternative, "atomistic" framework developed by one of the authors, which we adapt to the MENA. We finally assess the heuristic value of this framework by studying a Tunisian peasant village typical of the feminization of agriculture now taking place, a process through which women have gained power.*

*Keywords : women's status ; household dynamics ; classic patriarchy ; atomism ; Tunisia ; Middle East and North Africa*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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To most scholars of the Middle East and North Africa (hereafter, MENA), women's status and power parallel the developmental cycle of the patrilocal extended household (PEH) : at its lowest when the young bride moves into her husband's household, it reaches its apex as she gets older and in turn rules over a daughter-in-law. This has been best illustrated by two influential authors whose views encapsulate the way the [67] status of women and its relation to household dynamics have been conceptualized in the Anglo-Saxon and French traditions of MENA anthropology, namely, Deniz Kandiyoti (with her well-known definition of "classic patriarchy" and her equally famous notion of "patriarchal bargain") and Camille Lacoste-Dujardin (with her classic *Des meres contre les femmes*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society*, 2, no. 2 (1988) : 274-89 ; Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women and Household Production : The Impact of Rural Transformation in Turkey," in *The Rural Middle East : Peasant Lives and Modes of Production*, ed. K. Glavanis and P. Glavanis (London : Zed, 1990), 183-94 ; Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy : A Comparative Perspective," in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. N. Keddie and B. Baron (New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 1991), 23-42 ; see also Deniz Kandiyoti, "Sex Roles and Social Change : A Comparative Appraisal of Turkey's Women," *Signs*, 3, no. 1 (1977) : 57-73 ; and Camille Lacoste-Dujardin, *Des mères contre les femmes : Maternité et patriarcat au Maghreb* (1985 ; reprint, Paris : La Découverte, 1996).

These authors furthermore perceived the extension of wage labor and male migration, and the concomitant process of household nuclearization, in terms of a "breakdown of patriarchy" (Kandiyoti) or "decline of patrilineages" (Lacoste-Dujardin), and argued that although this should have improved women's status, it has failed to.

Building on Michel Verdon's study of European living arrangements, we argue that their description of classic patriarchy and its "demise" adopts a "collectivistic" and "culturalist" perspective on residence.<sup>2</sup> After having shown the shortcomings of the latter, we will present Verdon's alternative, "atomistic" perspective while qualifying it slightly.

Drawing on this framework and on data collected in Rmāyniyya, a small Tunisian peasant village and a typical case of male out-migration and the feminization of agriculture, as well as of household nuclearization, we wish to show that women's power and status do not necessarily follow the development of the domestic cycle. They vary in terms of power relationships within the household, which themselves are patterned according to a series of factors (the protagonists' gender, age, and kin support, as well as the composition and size of the family units). Contrarily to Kandiyoti and Lacoste-Dujardin, we have found women to be very active agents in the power game, not merely the puppets of a unidirectional and inflexible domestic cycle, and to enhance their status in the processes of feminization of agriculture and household nuclearization. In short, we shall find recent changes to have liberated women while, undoubtedly, overworking them.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Verdon, [\*Rethinking Households : An Atomistic Perspective on European Living Arrangements\*](#) (London : Routledge, 1998).

***"CLASSIC PATRIARCHY," OR THE DYNAMICS  
OF THE PATRILOCAL EXTENDED HOUSEHOLD  
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STATUS OF WOMEN***

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Kandiyoti did not conceive of patriarchy as a monolithic phenomenon and argued that the dynamics of power between genders varies according to cultural and historical contexts, a variability the concept of patriarchy should reflect. Classic patriarchy (a notion implicit in Lacoste-Dujardin's work), as its name indicates, denotes the archetypal instance of male dominance found throughout the "patriarchal belt" extending from Morocco to China.

Classic patriarchy is predicated on the dynamics of the PEH, "a powerful cultural ideal" found throughout the MENA.<sup>3</sup> Under classic patriarchy, young brides leave their natal home to live in their husband's father's household, in which they start married life on the bottom rung of the gender-age hierarchy, subordinated to both men and older women, primarily their mother-in-law. They move in almost without property ; the only means of production they bring with them is themselves, that is, their productive and reproductive capacities, totally appropriated by their husband's patrilineage.

This constitutes a first aspect of Kandiyoti's "patriarchal bargain" : men take over the roles of protectors and providers in exchange for women's labor, reproductive abilities, and complete submissiveness. Lacoste-Dujardin similarly wrote of a "patrilineal procreative service," whereby the young daughter-in-law increases the number of men in her husband's father's household and helps to enhance her affines's prestige ; [68] in exchange, she receives the most (if not the only) significant social status a woman can possess, namely, that of mother. Women living under classic patriarchy, as she put it, are "mothers-above-all."

Their status gradually improves as they get older and bear children, especially sons. They reach the climax of their power when they be-

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<sup>3</sup> Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," 278.

come mothers-in-law ruling over their daughter(s)-in-law. They will then strive to maintain their superior position and secure their old age by repressing the emergence of romantic love between the new spouses to ensure their sons' allegiance ; they act as a "screen" between their sons and daughters-in-law. <sup>4</sup> Under classic patriarchy, affectivity and sexuality are dissociated ; husband and wife relate above all as genitor and genitrix, and merge into the patrilineage, as reinforced by Islamic law. <sup>5</sup> Lacoste-Dujardin went as far as claiming that the only united and stable heterosexual couple that does not threaten the actual order is the one Unking mothers to sons.

The hierarchy and strains existing among women prevent the formation of any coalition that could threaten male authority and the patriarchal order. <sup>6</sup> Like Lacoste-Dujardin, Kandiyoti held that the very prospect of eventually ruling over younger women is the key factor prompting women to internalize classic patriarchy and collude in the reproduction of their own subordination ; they seek to establish their own authority by influencing their sons and husbands. This is the second aspect of Kandiyoti's "patriarchal bargain" : senior women find in the power they exert over younger ones a kind of compromise to or trade-off for male dominance, while being party to it. Mothers work against wives, a stance made explicit in the very title of Lacoste-Dujardin's book. Lacoste-Dujardin also spoke of women's collusion to their own subordination as their "revenge on agnatism" or as the "revenge of subservience," specifying that this revenge is by no means subversive but is strictly limited to the domestic and female realm, in which men have succeeded in confining it.

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<sup>4</sup> Lacoste-Dujardin, *Des mères contre les femmes*, 170ff.

<sup>5</sup> Mounira Charrad, *State and Women's Rights : The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algerian, and Morocco* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Amal Rassam, "Women and Domestic Power in Morocco," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 12 (1980) : 171-179.

***IDEALIZING THE IDEAL : COLLECTIVISM  
AND CULTURALISM IN THE STUDY OF LIVING  
ARRANGEMENTS IN THE MENA***

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In our opinion, the PEH—the very cornerstone of classic patriarchy for both Kandiyoti and Lacoste-Dujardin—stands as their argument's main stumbling block. Undoubtedly, the PEH represents (or represented) the ideal type of living arrangement in the MENA,<sup>7</sup> and Tunisia is no exception.<sup>8</sup> Yet, such an "idealization" leads researchers to overlook household variations.<sup>9</sup> People's will to form PEHs is, as it were, taken for granted as an ineluctable fact.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> W J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (London : Free Press of Glencoe, 1963) ; E. T. Prothro and L. N. Diab, *Changing Family Patterns in the Arab East* (Beirut, Lebanon : American University Press, 1974) ; and T. Stevenson, "Migration, Family and Household in Highland Yemen : The Impact of Socio-economic Political Change and Cultural Ideals on Domestic Organization," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 28, no. 2 (1997) : 14-53.

<sup>8</sup> L. Ben Salem, "Structures familiales et changement social en Tunisie," *Revue tunisienne de sciences sociales*, 100 (1990) : 165-80 ; L. Ben Salem and T. Locoh, "Les transformations du mariage et de la famille," in *Population et développement en Tunisie : La métamorphose*, ed. J. Vallin and T. Locoh (Tunis, Tunisia : CERES, 2001), 143-69 ; A. Bouhdiba, "Points de vue sur la famille tunisienne actuelle," *Revue tunisienne de sciences sociales*, 11 (1967) : 11-23 ; C. Camilleri, "Modernity and the Family in Tunisia," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 3 (1967) : 590-95 ; J. Cuisenier, *Economie et parenté* (Paris : Mouton, 1975) ; and A. Demeersman, *La famille tunisienne et les temps modernes* (1967 ; reprint, Tunis, Tunisia : Maison tunisienne de l'Édition, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Stevenson, "Migration, Family and Household," 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> Historian Lucette Valensi thus asserted that the basic unit of analysis of the social organization of the Tunisian peasantry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the PEH, going as far as to deny any analytical value to the nuclear household and the individual. L. Valensi, *Tunisian Peasants in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1985), 25. Moreover, the field of family history in the MENA has hitherto remained rather embryonic when compared to Europe, for instance. Doumani explained this lack of interest precisely by the fact that both indigenous and scholarly discourses fundamentally assume that "modern" nuclear households have gradually displaced "traditional" PEHs. B. Doumani, "Intro-

From Verdon's perspective, this classical view appears both "collectivistic" and "culturalist" (in this case, two sides of the same coin), and raises serious difficulties when trying to understand residential arrangements, as well as women's power and status in the household.

In his study of European living arrangements, Verdon identified two radically different ways of studying residential arrangements, namely, "collectivistic" and "atomistic" ones. The collectivists presuppose that individuals have a basic proclivity to live in complex households (stem, joint, or extended ones), whereas the atomists posit a tendency for couples and their dependent child(ren) to prefer living in their own household. When it comes to explaining the existence of complex households, the atomists evoke hindrances (e.g., widowhood, or economic or political insecurity), forces (e.g., coercion through manipulation of inheritance, or other economic incentives or threats), or both, which lead individuals to opt (reluctantly) for cohabitation with other family units.

[69]

When it comes to accounting for the presence of nuclear households, however, especially in so-called traditional settings, the collectivists either summon up a decline due to purely exogenous changes (e.g., low life expectancy, high infant and childhood mortality, or shortage of land) or invoke culture : the advance of individualism in the wake of capitalism or modernity. This individualistic pull translates into new sets of cultural representations ; this is why, in most instances, collectivism ultimately leads to culturalism in the study of residential arrangements.

Although the PEH seems to represent a cultural ideal, the data show that this type of living arrangement has never been statistically predominant in the recent past, neither in Tunisia <sup>11</sup> nor elsewhere in

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duction," in *Family History in the Middle East : Household, Property, and Gender*, ed. B. Doumani (Albany : State University of New York Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> L. Blili Ternime, *Histoires de famille : Mariages, répudiations et vie quotidienne à Tunis (1875-1930)* (Tunis, Tunisia : Script, 1999).

the MENA. <sup>12</sup> But the collectivists privilege rules, namely, the rules of postmarital residence, and therefore downplay the importance of nuclear households as a mere phase in the developmental cycle of households.

Undoubtedly, many individuals in the MENA do live in PEHs "at *some time*" in their life ; <sup>13</sup> also, the concept of domestic cycle offers a fair approximation of reality in some societies, including those in the MENA. In the final analysis, however, it remains normative and presupposes a unidirectional trajectory. <sup>14</sup>

It also raises questions about women's power. Kandiyoti and Lacoste-Dujardin portrayed passive women unwilling to break up the very basis of their submission—the PEH—and having no option but to wait for their mother-in-law's death before coming into their own. Only then would they attain the pinnacle of their glory, a glory they would have acquired at the cost of patience <sup>15</sup> but that they have not actively worked for. Yet as most feminist anthropologists have emphasized, tensions often flare up between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law and, most importantly, these strains frequently trigger off the PEH's fission. <sup>16</sup> Stamm Auerbach and Cuisenier observed this

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<sup>12</sup> F. T. Al-Thakeb, "The Arab Family and Modernity : Evidence from Kuwait," *Current Anthropology*, 26, no. 5 (1985) : 575-80 ; Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* ; and Prothro and Diab, *Changing Family Patterns*.

<sup>13</sup> Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, 124.

<sup>14</sup> R. Netting, R. Wilk, and E. J. Arnould, eds., *Households : Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1984) ; Verdon, [Rethinking Households](#) ; and Michel Verdon, "The Stem Family : Toward a General Theory," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10 (1979) : 87-105.

<sup>15</sup> S. S. Davis, *Patience and Power : Women's Lives in a Moroccan Village* (Cambridge : Schenkman, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> For example, J. Collier, "Women in Politics," in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1974), 89-96 ; L. Lamphere, "Strategies, Cooperation, and Conflict among Women in Domestic Groups," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society*, 97-112.

very process in Tunisia, the former in an urban setting and the latter in the countryside. <sup>17</sup>

The classic patriarchy model leaves no room for such power struggles ; or, if there are any, the outcome is known in advance—mothers win over wives. If women wish to escape their mother-in-law's control, why don't they actively try to do so ? Kandiyoti and Lacoste-Dujardin's answer seems to be that it is because women have internalized the patriarchal ideology. Alternatively, we could argue that it is because they are *constrained* by their husband or his parents. The latter conclusion, however, would imply that women have aspirations that conflict with the residential ideal, that this so-called ideal is not so ideal after all, or, more precisely, that there certainly exists predispositions among MENA women that run counter to the culturally defined norms.

In the classic patriarchy model, people are governed by an overwhelming culture imposing a given type of living arrangement ; to that extent, individuals almost appear as mere cultural automata. Lacoste-Dujardin thus wrote that under classic patriarchy, "roles are prescribed" and "[interpersonal relations ... imposed, given, and no freedom of choice is possible. This gives everyone a certain comfort, in a reassuring tradition," therefrom the fact that "individuals hardly assume personal risks." <sup>18</sup>

Kandiyoti tried to inject some individuality in women whose "strategies" and "coping mechanisms" she explored. It should be stressed, however, that these very women never threaten the cultural predominance and quasi-ineluctability of the PEH, which stands as an indisputable feature of a "normative order"—a different name for a familiar friend : culture—firmly anchored in people's minds.

If so, only a change in culture could rock the foundations of classic patriarchy. How can it ? Both authors submitted that the PEH, and therefore classic patriarchy, started dissolving as capital penetrated the countryside (farm mechanization, commoditization [70] of agriculture, and emergence and extension of wage labor) and as peasants

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<sup>17</sup> Cuisenier, *Économie et parenté* ; and L. Stamm Auerbach, "Women's Domestic Power : A Study of Women's Roles in a Tunisian Town" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Lacoste-Dujardin, *Des mères contre les femmes*, 183, free translation.



sank deeper into poverty (land shortage, agricultural underemployment, and out-migration). Patriarchs lost the material bases of their authority at the same time as their married sons found alternative sources of income, causing acute intergenerational oppositions that sparked off the nuclearization of households before the PEHs could complete their developmental cycle. The "breakdown" or "demise" of classic patriarchy (Kandiyoti), or the progressive "decline of patrilineages" (Lacoste-Dujardin), all point to the inability of fathers to maintain full authority over their sons due to want of resources. <sup>19</sup>

This amounts to assuming that sons were formerly coerced into subordination to their fathers for want of alternatives, because the fathers controlled the means of production (land) ; new economic opportunities made it possible for them to fulfill their separatist aspirations. The argument is quite atomistic and contradicts the collectivistic postulates, but Kandiyoti and Lacoste-Dujardin simultaneously understood the same process in an altogether different manner.

Indeed, they presupposed that the younger generations have suddenly developed a taste for privacy and autonomy because, with the emergence of capitalism and modernity, their culture has changed ! In other words, because the "patrilineal ideology" (Lacoste-Dujardin) or "patriarchal script" and "traditional normative order" (Kandiyoti) have all been challenged. In her conclusion to *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, Kandiyoti uses Kuhn's notion of scientific paradigms to characterize those changes. What lies behind capitalism is but a new cultural paradigm that defines new behavioral patterns to which individuals react by adopting new sets of strategies.

Overall, in the whole MENA, modernity and capitalism are seen to have ushered in a new series of values and norms, a new culture, which can be summed up in one word—*individualism*. From the Arab East, where some write of the rise of an "ideology of individualism," <sup>20</sup> to Morocco, where others record an "individual order" super-

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<sup>19</sup> See also Camille Lacoste, "De la grande famille aux nouvelles familles," in *Maghreb : Peuples et civilisations*, ed. Y. Lacoste and C. Lacoste (Paris : La Decouverte, 1995), 117-123.

<sup>20</sup> Prothro and Diab, *Changing Family Patterns*.

seding a "collective" one,<sup>21</sup> ancient solidarities thus seem to have rapidly given way to a taste for privacy.

Our observations echo those of Young and Shami, who noted that researchers working on the Arab family have hitherto focused either on values and attitudes—what they called the "normative approach"—or on formal law, be it secular or religious (the "legal approach").<sup>22</sup> Despite some superficial differences, both approaches are of one kind—both allude to a set of *normative representations* dictating *individuals' (inter)actions*, and do not consider actual *households* (or residential *groups*) and their dynamics. Why should this be a problem? Because norms—a major aspect of culture—have hardly any explanatory value. The argument goes like this: why do we find PEHs? Because of sets of norms, including a code of honor, if need be,<sup>23</sup> privileging this type of living arrangement. Such an answer, however, only begs the very question of the origins of those norms and is tautological.

There is an alternative, however—atomism and its focus on household dynamics. We will briefly sketch its main theses and show how it manifests itself on the ground through the example of a Tunisian peasant village.

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<sup>21</sup> T. Aziz, *he fellah marocain. L'exemple d'une tribu berbère : les Beni M'tir. Du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à nos jours* (Saint-Étienne, France : Université de Saint-Étienne, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> W. C. Young and S. Shami, "Anthropological Approaches to the Arab Family : An Introduction," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 28, no. 2 (1997) : 1-13.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Latreille, "Thinking Honor and the Sexual Division of Labor with and against Bourdieu : A Tunisian Case" (Montreal, n.d.).

## ***AN ATOMISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND HOUSEHOLD POWER DYNAMICS***

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For the purpose of Tunisian, and even MENA, anthropology in general, the classical census definition of *households* can be used. We shall thus define a household, or *residential group*, as the set of individuals domiciled in a given and identifiable dwelling unit, [71] whether these individuals live in that dwelling unit at a given point in time or are on labor migrations. Households are no monolithic entity, however ; as a rich feminist literature has shown, they can be divided as often as united.<sup>24</sup> Mediterranean anthropology shows this well,<sup>25</sup> as does MENA anthropology, dealing profusely with gender segregation and the often strained mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. Yet, as mentioned above, these issues have been mostly couched in terms of interpersonal relationships, leaving groups out of the picture. To rehabilitate the residential group with its built-in asymmetries and power relations, Verdon argued that we must break it down into "residential atoms,"<sup>26</sup> namely, sets of individuals whose cohabitation

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<sup>24</sup> J. Collier, "Women in Politics" ; D. Dwyer and J. Bruce, eds., *A Home Divided : Women and Income in the Third World* (Stanford, Calif : Stanford University Press, 1988) ; N. Folbre, "Hearts and Spades : Paradigms of Household Economics," *World Development*, 14 (1986) : 245-55 ; Lamphere, "Strategies, Cooperation, and Conflict" ; and D. Singerman and H. Hoodfar, eds., *Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo : A View from the Household* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> D. D. Gilmore, "Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11 (1982) : 175-205.

<sup>26</sup> In a recent attempt to rekindle the study of family and household in the MENA, Khadr and El-Zeini have suggested decomposing households into "basic family units" (BFUs) ; Z. Khadr and O. El-Zeini, "Families and Households : Headship and Co-Residence," in *The New Arab Family*, ed. N. S. Hopkins (Cairo : American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 140-164. The authors defined the BFU as "individuals residing in the same household who are either married, or are blood related up to the second degree within a maximum of two generations." Households containing a single BFU form nuclear-family households, whereas those with more than one BFU form extended-family households ; in the latter case, each BFU is called a *subfamily*. Some members

is taken for granted, not to say axiomatic, in given societies (or even normatively, one might even say, pushing norms down to the level of building blocks rather than applying them to the whole construct).

In Western Europe and the MENA, Ermisch and Overton's notion of "minimal household unit" (MHU) represents such axiomatic, indivisible, and irreducible cores of households.<sup>27</sup> Rephrasing everything in terms of residence, Verdon translated Ermisch and Overton's MHUs as "minimal residential units" (MRUs). In Western Europe and the MENA (not to mention most of Eurasia plausibly), an MRU designates (1) an unmarried adult, either male or female ; (2) a married couple with children (a family) ; (3) a married couple without children (a conjugal unit) ; and (4) a widowed or divorced parent with his (or her) unmarried and dependent children (residual couple forming a patri- or matricell, as the case may be).

MRUs inform us on household composition but remain silent about household dynamics. Hence Verdon's second postulate. He assumed that "normal" adults, men or women, prefer not to be bossed around in their economic and/or domestic activities, and wish to control the running of their everyday life. He therefore concluded, as several studies show, that the cohabitation of two or more MRUs can easily become antagonistic when one of them owns the dwelling unit and/or the main means of production, and can therefore lord it over the other(s). These antagonisms, however, do not concern individuals per se so much as MRUs (although an MRU can be composed of a single individual !) even if, at the existential level, they are lived as interpersonal relationships (frictions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, for instance, actually oppose co-residing MRUs).

Put differently, conflicts between members of a single MRU (a growing teenager and a father, for instance) can affect the manner in which various co-residing MRUs relate within a household, but, in and of themselves, MRUs have to be considered as units ; as an analogy, if one took households as units, the quality of the relationships

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of extended households, such as married sons, belong to two subfamilies (that of their parents and their own). Yet BFUs are too inclusive, because residential atoms should not overlap within the same household.

<sup>27</sup> J. Ermisch and E. Overton, "Minimal Household Units : A New Approach to the Analysis of Household Formation," *Population Studies*, 39 (1985) : 33-54.

between individuals in a given household might affect their relationships to neighboring households, but, for definitional purposes, their internal relationships would remain secondary attributes and households would remain the unit of focus.

Hence Verdon's main atomistic postulate : when houses and/or means of production are individually owned, thereby giving the MRU to which this individual owner belongs power over co-residing MRUs, the subordinate MRUs will then shun cohabitation and seek residential autonomy. But then why should some MRUs tolerate subordination and co-residence ? Because of hindrances precluding the achievement of their goal—for example, monoparentality and poverty (especially among the descending generation), or old age (among the ascending generation)—because of forces (manipulations or threats) exerted on the part of the superordinate MRUs (over the inheritance, for instance), or because of both. Once the sources of obstructions and/or coercion are removed or simply relaxed, MRUs then realize their residential autonomy.

[72]

This postulate calls for a clarification. In and of itself, co-residence should not raise any particular problem. The frictions it spawns stem mostly from house ownership and the antagonistic relationships surrounding the execution of domestic and economic activities. The house owners (often, simultaneous owners of the means of production) will feel a right to control the domestic and economic activities of co-residing MRUs. In other words, residential autonomy is the pretext behind, or the path to, domestic and economic autonomy.

*Domestic autonomy* is the exclusive control a single MRU exerts over the management of its domestic activities. Domestic autonomy can only be obtained through residential autonomy ; one normally involves the other. As a concept, *economic autonomy* is more difficult to define ; it does not mean "self-sufficiency," and, for the immediate purpose of our argument, we will define it in terms of decisional power : the power to control one's own labor and resources.

This atomistic framework excludes any aprioristic assumptions about a developmental cycle. Household dynamics and access to power do not follow a uniform trajectory, but depend on the units' strength, itself predicated on a number of factors. Gender is one of

them. Knowing that men as a category almost universally enjoy a higher prestige than women, MRUs comprising a man are more likely to rule than those without, whereas an MRU composed of a woman only (an unmarried woman, a divorcee, or a widow) will likely be subordinated if co-residing with an MRU including a man. Age acts similarly. Other things being equal, one can plausibly assume that a young daughter-in-law will act more submissively than an older one. Conversely, one may expect older parents to give up part of their authority to the younger generations, be it the son's couple or an unmarried daughter, as they become unable to carry out their own domestic and economic activities. The composition and size of units also affect the relationships : couples with numerous children (especially if these are boys) have more weight in the struggle for power than unmarried or widowed individuals without children. Economic power, genealogical proximity, and kin support are other variables.

Using Verdon's framework as a heuristic tool, we will now examine women's status and power, as well as their stakes and role in household dynamics, in the case of Rmayniyya, a small Tunisian peasant village.

### ***THE FEMINIZATION OF AGRICULTURE IN TUNISIA, AND WOMEN'S POWER AND STATUS : AN EXAMPLE OF ATOMISM***

#### *Observations from Turkey*

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Rmāyniyya is located in the region of Nefza in the mountains of northwest Tunisia, a region of poor agriculture and smallholdings with a long history of male labor migration. Some estimate that at the eve of the French Protectorate (1881), 10 to 15 percent of Rmāyniyya men had to get work in Beja, the governorate's capital. Wage labor and male migration have continued ever since, but substantially escalated during the 1970s, thus "feminizing" agriculture and speeding up the fission of PEHs—what we will hereafter refer to as a process of *nuclearization*. Before examining the consequences on the status of

Rmāyṇiyya women, let us examine Kandiyoti's observations about similar processes in the Turkish countryside.

[73]

In Turkey, she wrote, economic transformations among peasants have affected authority relations among men only ; younger men found in wage labor (and migration) a means of escaping their father's control and setting up independent households. Women allegedly had no active role in the couples' emancipation from the parents and did not benefit from it. Women's newly acquired autonomy would have had an effect "through complementarity" only,<sup>28</sup> and in a very mitigated way. In fact, wrote Kandiyoti, the potentially liberating effects on women of household nuclearization have remained largely potential, because new forms of exploitation have replaced the former patriarchal one, and because women have remained unrecognized and underprivileged laborers. The situation seems worse in cases of the feminization of agriculture, in which women have taken over agricultural labor, namely, tasks "traditionally" considered as male (whereas men have never taken over female tasks) ; in such cases, men remain idle when at home and unemployed. This yields "extremes of quasi-parasitic dependence on women's labor, a dependence which far from giving women greater autonomy can only be sustained by means of harsher and more violent subjugation of women."<sup>29</sup> Rmāyṇiyya's case could not be further from the Turkish one.

### *Rmāyṇiyya : A "Feminized" Village*

Rmāyṇiyya's agriculture is clearly feminized, with most active men (83 percent of men aged between twenty-one and forty-five) working outside the village and coming back once a month or even less. The only men working on the farm are either youngsters who have left school and have not yet started working, or older men who have settled back in the village. In all, women represent 90 percent of people working on family farms and perform most of the farm work. As a result, their workload has substantially increased ; in the whole

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<sup>28</sup> Kandiyoti, "Women and Household Production," 189.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

of Tunisia, the northwest ranks first as to women's contribution to agriculture.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, women have gained much influence and decisional power within the household because of their agricultural responsibilities, further increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem, so much so that a majority now openly claim themselves to be farm heads.<sup>31</sup> At the time of fieldwork (2000-2002), slightly more than three quarters of the 119 family farms of Rmayniyya<sup>32</sup> were said to be managed by a woman, either exclusively or jointly with their husband (or son) (Table 1).

<sup>30</sup> S. Triki, *Budget-temps des ménages ruraux et travail invisible des femmes rurales en Tunisie* (Tunis, Tunisia : CREDIF, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Latreille, "Thinking Honor" ; and Martin Latreille, "Rmāniyya : Féminisation de l'agriculture et condition féminine dans le Nord-Ouest tunisien" (Ph.D. diss., Université de Montreal 2006). The nature of the impact of the male labor migration on women's power and status varies from one case to another. Some studies reveal that it has had negative repercussions or, at best, that it did not really improve the fate of women. See M. Abaza, *The Changing Image of Women in Egypt* (Cairo : American University in Cairo Press, 1987) ; P. R. Baduel, *Société et emigration temporaire au Nefzaoua (Sud Tunisien)* (Paris : CNRS, 1980) ; and C. Myntti, "Yemeni Workers Abroad : The Impact on Women," *MERIP Reports*, 124 (1984), 11-16. Others show that, on the contrary, it has had a rather favorable impact. See L Brink, "The Effect of Emigration of Husbands on the Status of Their Wives : An Egyptian Case," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 23 (1991) : 201-11 ; M. Hammam, "Labour Migration and the Sexual Division of Labour," *MERIP Reports*, 95 (1981) : 5-11 ; A. Kadioglu, "The Impact of Migration on Gender Roles : Findings of Field Research in Turkey," *International Migration*, 32, no. 4 (1994) : 533-560 ; C. Keely and B. Saket, "Jordanian Migrant Workers in the Arab Region : A Case Study of the Consequences for Labor-Supplying Countries," *Middle East Journal*, 38, no. 4 (1984) : 685-711 ; L. Khaled, "Migration and Women's Status : The Jordan Case," *International Migration*, 33, no. 2 (1995) : 235-243 ; F. Khafagy, "Socio-economic Impact of Emigration from a Giza Village," in *Migration, Mechanization, and Agricultural Labor Markets in Egypt*, ed. A. Richards and P. L. Martin (Boulder, Colo. : Westview, 1983) ; F. Khafagy, "Women and Labour Migration : One Village in Egypt," *MERIP Reports*, 124 (1984) : 17-21 ; H. Khattab and S. ElDaief, *Impact of Male Migration on the Structure of the Family and the Roles of Women*, Regional Paper no. 16 (Giza, Egypt : Population Council, 1982) ; E. Taylor, "Egyptian Migration and Peasant Wives," *MERIP Reports*, 124 (1984) : 3-10 ; and P. Weyland, *Inside the Third World Village* (London : Routledge, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Three of the 122 households in Rmāniyya neither owned nor rented land, and thus were not considered family farms.



When trying to define the circumstances under which a family farm is more likely to be run by a woman than by a man or by both, the criteria that stand out most are household composition, the power configuration within the household, and a woman's position within it (a position that does not necessarily follow a cyclical course). We will return to this below. For the time being, let us consider the extent of the process of nuclearization in Rmayniyya.

*Rmāyniyya : An Atomized Village*

PEHs have never been numerically predominant in Tunisia. Within living memory, Rmāyniyyans also claim that PEHs have often split before the father's death. Thus, although fissiparous tendencies are far from new, we could nonetheless assume that following the spread and generalization of wage labor, especially among young men, nuclearization (or "decohabitation") has gained ground in Tunisia as a whole <sup>33</sup> and in Rmāyniyya in particular. In 2002, Rmāyniyya counted 122 households ; of these, the vast majority included a single MRU formed around a couple (with or without children ; hereafter, called *nuclear households*) or a widow (*residual nuclear households*). There

[74]

**Table 1.**  
Farm Headship According to Gender

|  | N   | %    |
|--|-----|------|
| Female-headed farms                    | 80  | 67.2 |
| Male-headed farms                      | 27  | 22.7 |
| Jointly headed farms                   | 12  | 10.1 |
| Total                                  | 119 | 100  |
| Female-headed and jointly headed farms | 92  | 77.3 |

<sup>33</sup> S. Bouattour, *Les femmes en Tunisie 2000* (Tunis, Tunisia : CREDIF, 2002).

**Table 2.**  
**Breakdown of Households According to Composition**

|   | N   | % of Total Farms |
|---|-----|------------------|
| Elementary households   | 104 | 85.2             |
| A. Nuclear households   | 91  | 74.6             |
| Conjugal unit   |     |                  |
| Couple without children   | 5   |                  |
| Nuclear family Couple + Child(ren)                                    | 83  |                  |
| Incorporated nuclear family Couple + Handicapped Adult/Fostered Child | 3   |                  |
| B. Residual nuclear households  | 11  | 9                |
| Residual nuclear family Widow + Child(ren)                            | 11  |                  |
| C. Unmarried adults   | 2   | 1.6              |
| Complex households  | 18  | 14.8             |
| D. Patriarchal households   | 9   | 7.4              |
| Extended family   | 7   |                  |
| Couple + Married Son  |     |                  |
| Multiple extended family  |     |                  |
| Couple + Two or More Married Sons                                     | 2   |                  |
| E. Residual patriarchal households                                    | 9   | 7.4              |
| Residual extended family  |     |                  |
| Widow + Married Son   | 4   |                  |
| Residual extended family Widow + Son's Widow                          | 1   |                  |
| Residual multiple extended family                                     |     |                  |
| Widow + Two or More Married Sons                                      |     |                  |
| Complex residual extended family                                      |     |                  |
| Widow + Married Son + Married Grandson                                | 1   |                  |
| Total   | 122 | 100              |

were no divorcees, and, therefore, no households formed around divorcees. There were, however, two cases of unmarried adults living separately in their own dwelling units, namely, a man in his thirties whose mother had died recently and a goitrous woman in her fifties who never got married (Table 2).

As Table 2 shows, three quarters of households are nuclear ; when residual nuclear households are included—that is, widows whose couple had gained its autonomy before the husband's death—this figure rises to 83.6 percent, an eloquent testimony to a pervasive atomistic proclivity.

[75]

To refine the analysis, let us decompose these households into MRUs, considering only couples and residual couples (widows), while adding Rmāyniyyan couples who settled elsewhere immediately after their wedding (extralocal neolocality) or soon after (Table 3).

We then get 124 couples and 21 residual couples living in Rmāyniyya, in addition to 30 nonresident couples, a total of 175 "familial" MRUs. Eighty-three of these 175 couples and residual couples were married in 1980 or before, and 92 of them after this date. If we exclude those cases for which we have no data and those in which cohabitation was not possible because both the husband's parents were dead at the time of his marriage, we have respectively for each period 68 and 86 couples that could have lived with the husband's parents or with one of the widowed parents, because one or the other parent was still alive when the couple got married. But what did the couples actually do ?

Among the older generations married in or before 1980, 20.5 percent ( $N = 14$ ) of the couples remained with the husband's parents until the latter had died. This total falls to 4.7 percent ( $N = 4$ ) for those who got married after 1980. Conversely, the proportion of couples that became autonomous during the lifetime of the husband's father climbs from 42.6 percent ( $N = 29$ ) among those married in or before 1980 to 52.3 percent among those who married after this date ( $N = 45$ ). <sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> If we add to this figure those who moved away from the group after the death of the patriarch but during the lifetime of his widow, the total increases from 52.3 percent to 64 percent (TV =55).

Among the total 175 couples and residual couples (living in Rmāyniyya or elsewhere), there are 54 in which the husband's father is still alive. Of these, 42 separated from the patrilocal home and 15 even left the village. In all, out of the 95 couples and residual couples for which both or one parent (a widow, in this case) is still alive, two thirds have broken up from the patriarchal home before the death of the remaining parent, of which 53 broke up from the home while the father was still alive (there were also 7 couples for which it was the patriarch who excluded the couple).

At present, there are only 12 married sons (22.2 percent) living with their father, for a total of 10 households (9 patriarchal households and 1 complex residual patriarchal household). Five of them had been married fewer than five years at the time of fieldwork. The others, as we shall see below, had a certain amount of status within the household.

Overall, if all the married men whose fathers were still alive applied the patrilocal "rule" and lived with the latter, 6 extended households or multiple extended households would increase in size, and 19 others would appear. There would then be 94 households in Rmāyniyya and not 122. If all lived with their widowed mother in their natal household, this figure would fall to 76, of which 43 would be complex households instead of the existing 18.<sup>35</sup> In short, there are far fewer complex households than there could be, a sure sign of the strength of the nuclearization process.

In parallel, the number of people leaving the village definitively has increased, either people who left as soon as they got married (extralocal neolocality) or after a short period of cohabitation. The earliest instances of neolocality date from the 1970s, but since 1990 nearly one marriage out of four is extralocally neolocal. The increase of nuclearization and neolocality has happened hand in hand with a decrease in the number of exclusions by the patriarch. In the MENA, cohabitation is first of all what the patriarch desires, because he is always aiming to extend his "dominion," his social surface. But when

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<sup>35</sup> If we pushed patrilocal and patrilineal logic to its extreme and assumed that the brothers whose parents are both dead shared a roof, there would only be forty households in Rmāyniyya, of which thirty-six would be complex households !

cohabitation is no longer an advantage to him, he can decide to exclude all or any one of his married sons. Insufficient financial contribution to the family budget is an important motive for exclusion. Looking at Rmāyṇiyya's living population, there have been ten expulsions, involving sixteen couples in all. Seven

[76]

**Table 3**  
**Couples and Residual Couples and the Context in Which They Gained Their Autonomy**  
**(those married in 1980 or before compared with those married after)**

|   | Married in or before 1980 |                  |                  |           | Married after 1980 |                  |                  |           | Total      |
|---|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------|--------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------|------------|
|   | Couples                   |                  |                  | Subtotal  | Couples            |                  |                  | Subtotal  |            |
|   | Living in Rmāyiyya        | Living Elsewhere | Residual Couples |           | Living in Rmāyiyya | Living Elsewhere | Residual Couples |           |            |
| Separated while husband's father alive                            | 17                        | 6                | 6                | 29        | 29                 | 16               | —                | 45        | 74         |
| Husband's father <i>still</i> lives                               | 4                         | 2                |                  | 6         | 23                 | 13               | —                | 36        | 42         |
| Husband's father now dead   | 13                        | 4                | 6                | 23        | 6                  | 3                | —                | 9         | 32         |
| Separated while husband's mother alive<br>(husband's father dead) | 6                         | —                | 1                | 7         | 4                  | 6                | —                | 10        | 17         |
| Expelled by husband's father                                      | 0                         | —                | —                | 8         | 2                  | —                | 2                | 4         | 12         |
| Expelled by widowed mother <i>of</i> husband                      | 2                         | —                | 2                | 4         |                    | —                | —                |           | 4          |
| Actually cohabits with husband's father                           | —                         | —                | —                | —         | 12                 | —                | —                | 12        | 12         |
| Actually cohabits with widowed mother of husband                  | 3                         | —                | —                | 3         | 9                  | —                | 1                | 10        | 13         |
| Lived with husband's parents <i>until</i> their deaths            | 12                        | —                | 2                | 14        | 4                  | —                | —                | 4         | 18         |
| Lived with other (e.g., husband's brother) until his death        | 2                         | —                | 1                | 3         | 1                  | —                | —                | 1         |            |
| Subtotal  | 50                        | 6                | 12               | 68        | 61                 | 22               | 3                | 86        | 154        |
| Autonomous at marriage (husband's parents dead)                   | 7                         | —                | 4                | 11        | 5                  | —                | —                | 5         | 16         |
| Data not available  | —                         | 2                | 2                | 4         | 1                  | —                | —                | 1         | 5          |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>57</b>                 | <b>8</b>         | <b>18</b>        | <b>83</b> | <b>67</b>          | <b>22</b>        | <b>3</b>         | <b>92</b> | <b>175</b> |

[77]

happened before 1980 ; since then, only four couples have been excluded. In two of these cases, it was because the woman had been pregnant before marriage.

Now, the ascending generations' main problem is actually to slow down the centrifugal move toward nuclearization (and neolocality), and to keep at least one married son at home. Among other things, the number and value of his sons provide a measure of a man's symbolic capital.<sup>36</sup> When he fails to keep them at home and under his control, he can at least endeavor to turn them into valuable allies. The value of land does not derive so much from the products cultivated as from the number of sons one can settle on it. Without sufficient land to make a living, the sons are tempted to leave the village or feel less bound to obey their father's orders. This explains why many fathers have given part of their land to those of their sons who chose to move out. Depending on the context in which the group was dissolved, the sharing of the land can take place as soon as the son leaves or later. In addition to cultivating its own land, the young couple can also rent out some from relatives or neighbors.

In short, the power relations between ascending and descending generations have been somewhat reversed, or at least more balanced, enabling young couples to acquire their autonomy more easily. And in this process of nuclearization and quest for autonomy, the women are far from passive : they have played a crucial role and continue to be key players.

### *Household Composition, Women, and Power*

### *QUALIFYING VERDON'S THESES*

This leads to a slight qualification of Verdon's theses. He argued in terms of MRUs because, with the exception of preemancipation Russia, he dealt mostly with European societies with stem or monofamili-

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<sup>36</sup> Latreille, "Thinking Honor."

al households. In the context of MENA in general and northwest Tunisia in particular, however, other factors come into play, namely, gender segregation and female seclusion on one hand, and the feminization of agriculture and of households on the other. This, in our opinion, somewhat alters household dynamics, as Martin Latreille observed in Rmāyniyya.

In Rmāyniyya, where husbands leave on labor migrations for relatively long periods of time, it is actually women of subordinate MRUs—usually newly wed daughters-in-law, or the youngest sisters-in-law (HBWs)—who desperately seek residential autonomy (which entails, let us recall, both domestic and economic autonomy). The very perspective of being able to head their own household and farm—that is, to organize domestic and farm work (the division of tasks, and work schedules and rhythms) and manage the resources (cash, land, and animals)—emboldens them to convince their husbands to leave the patriarchal household and set up their own independent, nuclear household. And the latter are very likely to listen to their wives. As the saying goes, "The wife defeats the mother" (*l-wissēda tighlib l-willēda*, literally, "the one who shares one's pillow' [with the sexual connotation this implies] defeats 'the one who gives birth'"). Lacoste-Dujardin's stance is inverted !

The fact deserves special mention. Not only are women the main secessionist agents, but also the younger ones above all. This both qualifies and strengthens Verdon's atomistic theses. Indeed, as we shall see, younger women are those who will most suffer from residential separation in their workload, yet they are the keenest to leave. In brief, the most subordinate in the power game are the most secessionist.

[78]

This shows that power is the key issue at stake, to wit, the power for women to control their own person, time, and resources. But not all women are able to achieve residential autonomy and become the head of a family farm. Some will have to cohabit with and under the rule of their mother-in-law (or sister-in-law), whereas others enjoy having much influence within the PEH and do not, therefore, see any immediate advantage to moving away. It all depends on the power relations within the household.



In the following section, we will analyze the distribution of power, assessed in terms of farm headship in relation to household composition (Table 4). To do so, we will examine exclusively nuclear and patriarchal households, because the residual nuclear and residual patriarchal households display similar patterns (see appendix).

### *FARM HEADSHIP AMONG NUCLEAR HOUSEHOLDS*

Table 4 reveals that only 17 of the 88 farms formed around a single couple (henceforth, *monofamilial farms*) are said to be managed exclusively by a man ; when the 11 male co-heads are included, 31.8 percent of men in monofamilial farms take part in the farm's management. Women, in contrast, manage exclusively 68.2 percent of monofamilial farms, and, when the 11 cases of co-headship are included, 81 percent of them manage the farm totally or partially. In two cases of female headship, it is a daughter who runs the farm ; in all other cases of monofamilial farms ( $N = 86$ ), the farm is headed by either husband or wife, exclusively or jointly.

On close examination, these 86 cases clearly show the motives for residential autonomy and its effects on the status of women.

As Table 5 reveals, the wife manages the farm exclusively among 38 of the 52 couples who have left the husband's father's household when the father was alive, and in 6 of the 9 cases in which the couple separated when the husband's widowed mother was still alive. Overall, when couples acquired their residential autonomy while one or both of the husband's parents were alive, the wife acts exclusively as farm head in 72.1 percent of the cases ( $N = 44$ ) ; when the couple was already autonomous at marriage because the husband's parents were both deceased, the wife manages the family farm in 40 percent of the cases ( $N = 6$ ). If we include cases of co-headship, these figures rise to 83.6 percent ( $N = 45$ ) and 66.7 percent ( $N = 10$ ) respectively. Overall, these figures demonstrate eloquently that women, and mostly wives, are much more likely to head the farm in nuclear households ; they find in autonomy a way of acquiring power and recognition.

Most agree, however, that the first years of autonomy are financially difficult. Others believe that this independence gives couples a momentum that encourages them to work more and better to compensate for the loss of income. The dark side of residential autonomy is precisely women's increased workload, as Kandiyoti noted. In complex households, female members share the work. As a peasant said, "The burden of a bunch (weighs like) a feather" (*hmel jma' rish*). Nevertheless, despite their increased workload, all women living in nuclear households bless their independence and freedom : the freedom of working for themselves, of managing both their own schedule and the fruits of their work, and of raising their children as they please. As people say, those who achieve autonomy certainly feel more tired and are more fragile economically, but at least their mind is at rest, *mertāh*. A man who came to live in his wife's village because of a conflict with his own father and stepmother, and who was present while his wife was being interviewed, spoke eloquently on the subject :

[79]

**Table 4.**  
Farm Headship According to Gender and Household Composition

|   | <i>Female-Headed Farms</i> | <i>Male-Headed Farms</i> | <i>Jointly Headed Farms</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>% of Total Farms</i> | <i>% of Farms Exclusively Headed by a Woman</i> | <i>% of Farms Exclusively/ Jointly Headed by a Woman</i> |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|-------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Elementary households</b>  | 72                         | 18                       | 11                          | 101      | 84.9                    | 71.3  | 82.2   |
| A. Nuclear households   | 60                         | 17                       | 11                          | 88       | 73.9                    | 68.2  | 80.7   |
| Conjugal unit: Couple without children                                  | 2                          | 3                        | —                           | 5        |                         |   |  |
| Nuclear family Couple + Child(ren)                                      | 56[2]                      | 13                       | 11[1]                       | 80[3]    |                         |   |  |
| Incorporated nuclear family: Couple + Handicapped Adult/Fostered Child  | 2                          | 1                        |                             | 3        |                         |   |  |
| B. Residual nuclear households  | 11                         | —                        | —                           | 11       | 9.2                     | 100   | 100  |
| Residual nuclear family widow + children                                | 11[1]                      | —                        | —                           | 11       |                         | 100   | 100  |
| widow + children  | 1                          | 1                        |                             | 2        | 1.7                     | 50  |  |
| C. Unmarried adults   |                            |                          |                             |          |                         |   |  |
| <b>Complex households</b>   | 8                          | 9                        | 1                           | 18       | 15.1                    | 44.4  | 50   |
| D. Patriarchal households   | 3                          | 5                        | 1                           | 9        | 7.6                     | 33.3  | 44.4   |
| Extended family: Couple + Married Son                                   | 3                          | 3                        | 1                           | 7        |                         |   |  |
| Multiple extended family: Couple + Two or More Married Sons             |                            | 2                        |                             | 2        |                         |   |  |
| E. Residual patriarchal households                                      | 5                          | 4                        | —                           | 9        | 7.6                     | 55.6  | 55.6   |
| Residual extended family Widow + Married Son                            | 3                          | 1                        | —                           | 4        |                         |   |  |
| Residual extended family Widow + Son's Widow                            | 1                          | —                        | —                           | 1        |                         |   |  |
| Residual multiple extended family Widow + Two or More Married Sons      | 1[1]                       | 2                        | —                           | 3        |                         |   |  |
| Complex residual extended family Widow + Married Son + Married Grandson |                            | 1                        |                             | 1        |                         |   |  |
| <b>Total</b>  | 80                         | 27                       | 12                          | 119      | 100                     | 67.2  | 77.3   |

*Note* : Numbers in brackets refer to cases in which an unmarried child or the son's widow, as the case may be, heads the family farm.

[80]

**Table 5.**  
**Farm Headship among Nuclear Households and Context**  
**in Which the Couple Gained Its Autonomy**

|   | Female-Headed Farms | Male-Headed Farms | Jointly Headed Farms | Total |
|---|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Separated when husband's father was alive   | 38                  | 1                 | 7                    | 52    |
| Husband's father still alive  | 20                  | 2                 | 4                    | 26    |
| Husband's father dead, husband's mother alive   | 8                   | 2                 | 1                    | 11    |
| Husband's parents dead  | 10                  | 3                 | 2                    | 15    |
| Separated when husband's mother was alive and husband's father dead   | 6                   | 3                 | –                    | 9     |
| Husband's mother still alive  | 3                   |                   |                      | 3     |
| Husband's parents dead  | 3                   | 3                 |                      | 6     |
| Autonomous at marriage (husband's parents dead)   | 6                   | 5                 | 4[1]                 | 15[1] |
| Autonomous at the parent's death after a period of cohabitation with husband's parents or other (e.g., husband's brother) | 8                   | 1                 |                      | 9     |
| Data not available  |                     | 1                 |                      | 1     |
| Total   | 58                  | 17                | 11                   | 86    |
| Have separated married son(s) (living in the village or elsewhere)  | 10                  | 5                 | 4                    | 19    |

Note: Numbers in brackets refer to cases in which an unmarried child heads the family farm.

"There is fatigue caused by work, and mental fatigue; mental fatigue [i.e., that of living in complex households], *that is fatigue*" (*femmā t-t'eb l-khidma ūt-t'eb l-mokh; et-t'eb l-mokh, hūwa t-t'eb*). Once a minimum level ensuring physical survival can be established, autonomy is desired.

Autonomy, however, is not a sufficient reason for women to declare themselves farm heads. Other factors influence accession to the title, such as the husband's age and what we shall dub his *residential mode*, to wit, whether he lives continuously or sporadically in the village (Table 6).

Table 6 shows that among the 42 couples in which the husband resides intermittently, women claim to be farm heads in 88.1 percent of the cases ( $N=37$ ); when adding female co-heads ( $N = 3$ ), this figure rises to 95 percent. In contrast, only almost half ( $N = 21$ ) of the 44 women whose husband resides permanently in the village declare themselves to be running the farm. When those managing their farm jointly with their husband are included, their ratio rises to almost two thirds ( $N = 29$ ).

The husband's residential mode is related to his age: men return to the village for good when their labor migrations are over. Consequently, the average age of men declared heads among monofamilial farms is higher than that of their wives, thereby suggesting that a substantial number of men coming back to live in Rmāyniyya after age forty-five are given back the title of farm head. This seems to reinforce the conclusions of some other studies according to which change and improvement in women's status do not survive the husband's return.<sup>37</sup> This may be true, but only partially so. Let us analyze the figures from a different angle.

Let us consider the 51 autonomous couples with husbands forty-five or older. Sixteen of these husbands are intermittent residents; only two (12.5 percent) claim to be exclusive farm heads, whereas women claim this in 13 cases (81.3 percent). (In this

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<sup>37</sup> Brink, *The Effect of Emigration of Husbands* ; S. Ferchiou, "Invisible Work,' Work at Home : The Condition of Tunisian Women," in *Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy*, ed. R. Lobban Jr. (Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 1998), 187-197 ; Kadioglu, *The Impact of Migration* ; Keely and Saket, *Jordanian Migrant Workers* ; and Taylor, *Egyptian Migration*.

[81]

**Table 6.**

Farm Heads among Nuclear Households According to Age and Husband's Residential Mode (continuous/discontinuous residence)

| Age                | <i>Female-Headed Farms</i> |                             |                                | <i>Male-Headed Farms</i> |                             |                                | <i>Jointly Headed Farms</i> |                             |                                | <i>Husband's Total</i>                                    |
|--------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
|                    | <i>Wife</i>                | <i>Husband</i>              |                                | <i>Wife</i>              | <i>Husband</i>              |                                | <i>Wife</i>                 | <i>Husband</i>              |                                |   |
|                    |                            | <i>Continuous Residence</i> | <i>Discontinuous Residence</i> |                          | <i>Continuous Residence</i> | <i>Discontinuous Residence</i> |                             | <i>Continuous Residence</i> | <i>Discontinuous Residence</i> |   |
| 16-20              | 1                          | —                           | —                              | —                        | —                           | —                              | —                           | —                           | —                              | —   |
| 21-25              | 1                          | —                           | —                              | —                        | —                           | —                              | —                           | —                           | —                              | —   |
| 26-30              | 6                          | —                           | 1                              | —                        | —                           | —                              | 2                           | —                           | —                              | 1   |
| 31-35              | 12                         | 1                           | 8                              | —                        | —                           | —                              | 2                           | —                           | —                              | 9   |
| 36-40              | 14                         | —                           | 9                              | 2                        | —                           | —                              | —                           | 3                           | 1                              | 13  |
| 41-45              | 7                          | 3                           | 6                              | 1                        | 2                           | —                              | 2                           | —                           | 1                              | 12  |
| Subtotal for 16-45 | 41                         | 4                           | 24                             | 3                        | 2                           | —                              | 6                           | 3                           | 2                              | Continuous residence : 9<br>Discontinuous residence : 26  |
| 46-50              | 7                          | 3                           | 8                              | 5                        | —                           | —                              | 2                           | 2                           | 1                              | 14  |
| 51-55              | 2                          | 2                           | 2                              | 1                        | 2                           | 2                              | 1                           | —                           | —                              | 8   |
| 56-60              | 1                          | 3                           | 1                              | 2                        | 3                           | —                              | 1                           | —                           | —                              | 7   |
| 61 +               | 7                          | 9                           | 2                              | 6                        | 8                           | —                              | 1                           | 3                           | —                              | 22  |
| Subtotal for 46+   | 17                         | 17                          | 13                             | 14                       | 13                          | 2                              | 5                           | 5                           | 1                              | Continuous residence : 35<br>Discontinuous residence : 16 |
| Total              | 58                         | 21                          | 37                             | 17                       | 15                          | 2                              | 11                          | 8                           | 3                              | Continuous residence : 44<br>Discontinuous residence : 42 |
|                    | 58                         |                             |                                | 17                       |                             |                                | 11                          |                             |                                | 86  |

[82]

**Table 7.**  
Farm Headship among Patriarchal Households

|  | <i>Female-Headed Farms</i> | <i>Male-Headed Farms</i> | <i>Jointly Headed Farms</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>% of Total Farms</i> | <i>% of Farms Exclusively Headed by a Woman</i> | <i>% of Farms Exclusively/ Jointly Headed by a Woman</i> |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|-------------------------|---|--|
| Extended family Couple + Married Son                       | 3                          | 3                        | 1                           | 7        |                         |   |  |
| Multiple extended family Couple + Two or More Married Sons | —                          | 2                        | —                           | 2        |                         |   |  |
| Total  | 3                          | 5                        | 1                           | 9        | 7.6                     | 33.3  | 44.4   |

category, if couples, husband and wife manage the farm jointly in 1 case.) In contrast, among the 35 couples with husbands living permanently in Rmãyniyya, 13 of them (37.1 percent) declare themselves exclusive farm heads ; in 17 cases (48.6 percent), the wife does, and the remaining 5 cases are co-headed. In short, even among nuclear households with older husbands residing permanently, the wife is still more likely to manage the farm exclusively, albeit to a lesser extent.

***FARM HEADSHIP AMONG PATRIARCHAL HOUSEHOLDS***

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Patriarchal households are composed of the father's couple and that of his son(s). There are nine patriarchal households in Rmãyniyya (7.6 percent of all family farms). As Table 7 shows, the men declare themselves exclusive farm heads in five of these nine households.

In all five cases but one, the father lives in the village year-round and runs the farm. In one case, however, the son acts as head ; he also resides in the village permanently, but his parents are too old to do any work. <sup>38</sup> This son and his wife thus enjoyed a favorable position in the power configuration, because their presence was sorely needed. <sup>39</sup>

Among two of the remaining four PEHs headed by a man, the daughter-in-law nonetheless wields a fair amount of influence without calling herself farm head. Why ? First, all these patriarchs reside in the village permanently, are still active (although one does not work on the farm as such), and enjoy the respect due to their age and gender. But there is more. In fact, people often mention that it is not advisable to let a woman run the farm in patriarchal households (or to let her overtly claim she does) to avoid the potential conflicts among women and thus obviate the group's possible fission. Such a split would weaken groups both economically (loss of economies of scale, and a possible increase in the workload) and symbolically (the dissolution of an "ideal" and prestigious group). By delegating the title of head to a man, *at least nominally*, one avoids the direct confrontation among women and prevents the possible dissolution of the group, at least temporarily.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that even among the nine patriarchal households, women manage the farm exclusively in three cases (in one case, it is the [83] daughter-in-law, whose mother-in-law is unfit to work and whose family of origin is an immediate neighbor) and jointly in one case. In the latter, the husband was seventy-seven

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<sup>38</sup> His older brother had already left his father's house, and his youngest brother's wedding not only was recent (in 2000) but also had been celebrated in a manner that raised questions on the integrity of the bride and groom.

<sup>39</sup> We should note that the latter herself comes from a multiple extended family. But here, the patriarch acts as the farm head. Interestingly, however, his eldest daughter-in-law has much influence within the group. Apart from the fact that she has a strong personality, her mother-in-law is aging and weakening, and her sister-in-law had just married and, moreover, done so in particular circumstances (she was reputed to have been pregnant before the wedding, and to have had an abortion). The eldest daughter-in-law and her husband had previously separated from the group, but, acknowledging her importance within the household, her father-in-law had implored her to return, notably promising to grant her more power, to which she acquiesced.



years old at the time of fieldwork and twenty-two years older than his wife ; he was riddled with arthritis, only herded cattle by the house, and was slowly retiring from the farm's management. Their daughter-in-law, for her part, very recently married, was not in the least interested in agriculture. Although she was born there, she had been formerly working as a maid in a large city and wished to resume similar work ; both village life and farm work bored her.

In short, patriarchal households are slightly more likely to be headed by a man. His prestige as a man, his physical capacity and involvement in agriculture, on one hand, and the antagonism among women and consequently the risk of dissolution of the group, on the other, all work in that sense. But as soon as power relations are transformed and the risks of confrontation diminished, then women, be they wives or daughters-in-law, can take over the farm's management. The situation is similar among residual patriarchal households, that is, complex households with a widow as MRU in the ascending generation (see appendix).

## **CONCLUSION**

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Verdon's atomistic set of axioms proved a very useful heuristic tool. Standard representations of household transformations, as we have suggested, have shown some kind of dissolution of an ideal, the PEH, because of labor migrations and the insidious penetration of capitalism and its individualist mentality—in short, because of new cultural values. In this process, as Kandiyoti argued, men gained everything, and women paid the price, as they always have.

Verdon argued in terms of MRUs but has overlooked the fact that divergences of opinion and interests could arise within MRUs, more precisely between husbands and wives. In societies practicing gender segregation and female seclusion, as in Tunisia and the MENA, and mostly in cases of feminized agriculture and households, as in Rmāyniyya, the frictions raised by cohabitation and the organization of domestic and agricultural tasks are more acute among women than among men. In-marrying wives are more eager than their husbands to

satisfy their autonomist wills (although they would surely agree to become matriarchs and rule their daughters-in-law !). In short, Verdon's atomistic framework can be applied to household dynamics in the MENA with one significant qualification : the MRUs' centrifugal pull mostly involves subordinated married women, and men to a lesser degree. The result, however, is the same : the couple becomes autonomous.

From our point of view, what the recent changes brought about was certainly a weakening of agnatic solidarity but, more so, a fantastic opportunity for women to achieve their dream of residential autonomy. And, as this study shows, they have achieved it. Did they pay for it, as Kandiyoti argued, by remaining the system's ever-losers until they had daughters-in-law ? It depends on how we perceive the trade-off. In Rmãyniyya, women traded a lighter workload, greater financial benefits, and subordination to an often tyrannical mother-in-law for a heavier workload, financial losses, but complete freedom. They believe they won in the bargain, and we share their belief. All this happened, not because of an individualist ethos brought home by labor migrants fed on capitalism and Western films, but mostly because of women's agency and determination.

[84]

### *Appendix*

#### *Farm headship among residual nuclear households and residual patriarchal households*

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As Table 8 shows, most of the family farms including a widow are female headed. This may seem obvious in the cases of widows living alone with their unmarried child(ren) or in the case of the widowed mother-in-law living with her widowed daughter-in-law. But in the first case, headship is taken on by an unmarried daughter, whose widowed mother is old and sick and whose married brothers have all left the village ; and in the second case, it is taken on by the daughter-in-law, whose old mother-in-law can hardly manage the farm (although she still herds the sheep and goats in the vicinity of the village).

There are no cases of residual nuclear households in which a son is considered head. Similarly, there are no known cases of an unmarried son setting himself up independently after his father's death and claiming his due share of the patrimony, thus depriving his mother from it. In a society in which a man's status is acquired primarily through marriage, such an act would be considered highly ungrateful and would be symbolically too costly. The son who would act in this way would alienate his whole family and kin, who would no longer be prone to contribute to, or attend to, his marriage.

The situation slightly differs when the son marries. In fact, it all depends on the widow's implication in the production process, the number of married sons living with her, their residential status and occupation, and the duration of their marital life.

One observes for instance that three of the four widows living with only one married son and his wife have kept the title of head. The first question we ought to ask is Why do the daughters-in-law tolerate co-residence ? The fact is that the sons of two of the widows, although continuous residents, have nonagricultural jobs, have married very recently, and have few financial means, so that the daughter-in-law could hardly separate and even less pretend to be head. In the third

case, the son has been married for several years (since 1992), his wife has a certain importance within the household, and the mother-in-law, although aging, is still active on the farm. We have seen that in such cases, a man comes between the women to hush up the tensions likely to exist. But here the son worked in the capital, came back to the village only occasionally, and could not therefore be considered farm head. By virtue of her status as mother-in-law and of her contribution to the household economy, the latter acted as head. She did not, however, rule her daughter-in-law tyrannically for fear that she might encourage her husband to leave. The widow had only one son on whom she could rely.

An intractable widow would run the risks of arousing her daughter-in-law's (or son's) wrath and provoking the departure of the young couple, which would probably entail the division of the patrimony. The widow is more likely to act in this way when she has other sons, unmarried, who will eventually replace the one she lives with and provide for her, in addition to making her benefit from their own portion of inheritance. There is only one widow, reputedly difficult to get on with, whose married sons have all moved away, some because of her character, and others simply because their wife came from the city and did not want to live in the countryside.

Things change significantly when the widow gets older and slowly withdraws from the production process, and when the son has been married for a long while, has children, lives permanently in the village, and is entirely devoted to agriculture, as in

[85]

**Table 8.**

**Farm Headship among Residual Nuclear Households and Residual Patriarchal Households**

|  | <i>Female-Headed Farms</i> | <i>Male-Headed Farms</i> | <i>Jointly Headed Farms</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%of Total Farms</i> | <i>% of Farms Exclusively Headed by a Woman</i> | <i>% of Farms Exclusively/ Jointly Headed by a Woman</i> |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|------------------------|---|--|
| Residual nuclear households  | 11                         | —                        | —                           | 11       | 9.2                    | 100   | 100  |
| Residual nuclear family: Widow + Child(ren)                              | 11[1]                      | —                        | —                           | 11       |                        | 100   | 100  |
| Residual patriarchal households  | 5                          | 4                        | —                           | 9        | 7.6                    | 55.6  | 55.6   |
| Residual extended family: Widow + Married Son                            | 3                          | 1                        | —                           | 4        |                        |   |  |
| Residual extended family: Widow + Son's Widow                            | 1[1]                       | —                        | —                           | 1        |                        |   |  |
| Residual multiple extended family: Widow + Two or more Married Sons      | 1                          | 2                        | —                           | 3        |                        |   |  |
| Complex residual extended family: Widow + Married Son + Married Grandson | —                          | 1                        | —                           | 1        |                        |   |  |
| Total  | 16                         | 14                       |                             | 120      | 16.8                   | 80  | 80   |

*Note :* Numbers in brackets refer to cases for which an unmarried child or the son's widow heads the family farm.

*Note :* Numbers in brackets refer to cases for which an unmarried child or the son's widow heads the family farm.

[86]

the case of the only man living with his blind and crippled widowed mother and his own newlywed son. This is also the case of the only male-headed residual extended family. Interestingly, this household formerly included the couples of two other brothers who moved away during our stay, the youngest sisters-in-law protesting that their eldest brother-in-law and primarily his wife organized labor and allocated resources unfairly, and prevented them from doing what they wished. The eldest brother-in-law was then heading the household, so as to avoid a direct confrontation among women—as has been recommended among patriarchal households—but has failed to calm down the tensions.

This is what the two sons at the head of a residual patriarchal household have managed to do so far. Both men live and work permanently in Rmāyniyya, whereas their widowed mothers are aged and only herd the sheep and goats in the immediate vicinity of the village. The power struggle is mostly played out among the sisters-in-law (HBWs). The eldest of them have a strong say within the group and govern by proxy, so to speak, but as far as possible not too unfairly. Their husbands attempt to maintain a peaceful climate, which is sometimes difficult. Indeed, in both cases, the subordinate women wish to manage their own destiny and set up independent households, but various considerations preclude them from doing so. They all come from distant villages and do not benefit from the immediate support of their kin. Furthermore, in one case, the husband of the young sister-in-law did not yet have much money of his own. In the second case, the brothers had formerly been sick, worked irregularly, and were somewhat indebted to their elder brother. Here, however, admitting that the whole household was getting too large to manage and that tensions had increased, the group had started to build a house in anticipation of its dissolution.

There is only one case of a residual patriarchal household headed by a woman, in that case the eldest of two daughters-in-law. The mother-in-law is old, handicapped, and no longer active, and the husbands work in the capital. The one who acts as head, nearly twenty years older than her subordinate, benefits from her seniority and from the support of her family living nearby, whereas her younger sister-in-law comes from a distant village. What is more, the husband of the

head is the only one who can speak in a family of deaf and mute people. Put differently, the power relation within the household does not justify having a man intervening between the women and taking over the title of head, not least because both sons/husbands are migrant workers.

In short, widows living with their unmarried children usually head their farm, but after the marriage of one or many sons, they gradually yield power to one of the latter, most likely the eldest. As in patriarchal households, headship in residual patriarchal households is preferably held by a man so as not to cause a flare-up of tensions among the co-residing women. One may govern by proxy through her husband, but subtly, tactfully, and not too overtly. It is only when there is a too great imbalance in the power relation among women that one of them can have a claim to headship.

### *Acknowledgments*

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## **NOTES**

Pour faciliter la consultation des notes en fin de textes, nous les avons toutes converties, dans cette édition numérique des Classiques des sciences sociales, en notes de bas de page. JMT.

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**Fin du texte**