

Oral History in Morocco

Anthropologists and Historians in Morocco

Morocco got its independence in 1956; now only people over fifty have an actual memory of the colonial period. Yet in all this time, surprisingly little has been written about Morocco under the protectorate or about the Moroccan nationalist movement in general—only a few political histories and memoirs, and virtually nothing about women's roles and contributions. This may be because Moroccan women's tradition is generally oral rather than written, and most Moroccan historians consider written records to be more reliable and thus more important as source material. A few scholars who have focused on the armed resistance do use oral testimony, but even they don't include women among their informants.¹ Women are recognized neither as important agents of history, nor as reliable reporters and interpreters of history.

In the oral histories that are at the center of this book, Moroccan women speak freely about their personal lives—growing up, going to school, their roles as women, wives, mothers, and especially about their involvement in the resistance against French colonialism in the 1940s and 1950s. However, these histories don't tell us much about French colonialism itself. What emerges instead is a picture of women engaged in what Australian literary critic Michael Hall calls a "double rebellion": rebelling simultaneously against colonialist occupation and oppression and against the restrictive attitudes of traditional society.² The women know Moroccan society intimately, and describe it in vivid detail. French colonialism, on the other hand, remains a shadowy enemy, talked about only in the most abstract terms.

My interests were somewhat different from those of most of the anthropologists and historians who have worked in Morocco.³ On the whole, I found that while historians have minimized the contributions of Moroccan women or left women out entirely, anthropologists who focus on women are not generally concerned with history—reconstructing the specificity of the past and the process of change over time. I was interested in both women and history, and especially in women as agents and interpreters of history. I wanted to find out what happened when Moroccan women took on "men's roles" in the

independence movement, as well as to explore the relationship between that chapter in history and roles of women in present-day Morocco. By doing so, I hoped to chart the process of social change not only in its visible, public manifestation but also in less tangible, private ways, in the consciousness of individual women.

Moroccan Women's Oral Traditions

In doing oral history interviews with Moroccan women, I was tapping into a strong oral tradition. These women learned their history first from their mothers or grandmothers—a history rich in myth and meaning, telling of the heroic exploits of the Moroccan men and women who resisted foreign invasions. In the late thirties and early forties when these women were growing up, there were people still alive who had experienced the 1920–26 Rif War against Spanish colonialism led by Abdelkrim El Khatabi, and women especially had created an oral tradition that included not only vivid, detailed descriptions of scenes from the war, but also songs. The women I interviewed were also aware of the larger Islamic tradition, with its numerous accounts of women warriors who played an active part in the armed struggle to establish the faith (*jihad*) that took up so much of early Islamic history.⁴ Some of these women actually took up arms on the battlefield, while others urged men on to fight to the end. Later, in Morocco and elsewhere, a conservative Muslim (male) tradition developed, which relegated women to more passive, supporting roles in war, but the fact remains that there were women warriors in early Islamic history, and their lives and deeds were celebrated in biographical works. Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat*, a tenth-century biographical work, tells the story of Umm 'Umara, a woman who stayed to defend the Prophet while others fled, even though she herself had been "wounded twelve times at Uhud and her hand was cut off."⁵

Because these women warriors were engaged in *jihad*, their actions had a religious sanction; Islamic ideology exhorted all Muslims to defend the faith. Similarly, the women from the resistance insisted that everything they did was for their king, their country, and God. It was a *jihad* that they were fighting, and their exceptional courage was God-given. Indeed the women I interviewed spoke of almost everything in their lives in terms of a larger moral purpose. Every action (sometimes even marriage) was taken in the service of God or nationalism, never just for their own fulfillment or pleasure.

Several women warriors in the Islamic tradition were known for their spirit of defiance. One, named Hind, was not even a Muslim; in fact she was a major enemy of the Prophet.⁶ She arranged for Hamza, Mohamed's uncle, to be killed, and then ate his liver raw on the battlefield. After one battle she danced among the bodies of the dead Muslims as she sang: "If you battle us, we will crush you in our arms/ If you retreat, we will let you go/ Farewell to love."⁷

Historians have written copiously about Hind, presenting her in all her complexity—courageous, witty, bloodthirsty.

For a defiant and outrageous heroine in a different vein, there is Sukayna, daughter of the Prophet's grandson, Hussein. She was celebrated for her beauty, intelligence, and wit, married five or six husbands, and refused to pledge obedience (*ta'a*) to any of them. In all her marriage contracts she specifically stipulated that she would do as she pleased, and that she did not acknowledge her husband's right to practice polygamy. She continued to actively pursue her interests in political affairs and poetry even after marriage, receiving visits from poets and attending meetings of the Qurashi tribal council. She even took one husband to court for violating the monogamy stipulation in the marriage contract.⁸

Storytelling is an important part of Moroccan popular culture; even today, in women's circles, storytelling skills are highly valued. Many of the women I interviewed revealed childhood memories of long, enchanted evenings when all the women and children of the household would gather to hear an older aunt or grandmother tell the tales of the Arabian Nights, stories of Islamic religious figures and saints, and Moroccan folktales.⁹ Now, as older women themselves, they have become practiced storytellers; and many of the Moroccan folktales in their repertoire feature a strong, smart heroine who outwits the men in authority to get what she wants—an archetype in marked contrast to the sleeping beauties, Cinderellas, and other more passive heroines of Western folktales.

Life Stories

We all use narrative to construct our sense of ourselves. We find identity and meaning by telling stories about what we have done in our lives, our actions in history.¹⁰ But the specific form that life history narratives take, and their main points of reference, are often culturally determined. For Moroccan women the most significant turning points are times when the family moves, times of famine, times when a girl takes on the brunt of the household work (after her older sister is married, for instance), and most important of all, a girl's marriage and her move from living with her own family to living in her husband's family—under what is often described as the heavy hand of her mother-in-law. The key event is marriage. It represents the transition from being a part of one family to becoming a part of another, the transition from childhood to adult identity.¹¹

The women I interviewed diverged significantly from this pattern in telling their life stories. The nationalist women who were among the first Moroccan Muslim girls to go to school recall that experience in great detail and see it as a turning point in their lives. On the other hand, the women who participated in the armed resistance construct a life history that centers on their

experience in the resistance. The events that these women stressed were their awakening to consciousness of the struggle against colonialism, the exile of King Mohamed V, entering the "family" of the resistance, and carrying out missions for the resistance that tested their courage and resourcefulness.

Nationalist Women/Women of the Armed Resistance: Differences and Similarities

The most obvious differences between the nationalist women and the women of the armed resistance were differences of class and education. The experience of growing up in Fez as a daughter of the traditional bourgeoisie was a world apart from the experience of growing up in Casablanca as a daughter of the new proletariat.¹²

The nationalist women were part of a very small Moroccan elite. Not only were they born into the great families of the great bourgeoisie, a class which consisted of only a few hundred families in all of Morocco; but they were also among the very few girls of that generation to have access to education. Education brought these daughters of the bourgeoisie out of seclusion, and thrust them into positions of leadership among women in the nationalist movement. While they were still in their teens, they began to give classes to older women, teaching literacy and nationalist awareness. Starting in the mid-forties, they became leaders of the women's organizations of the political parties, and leaders in education and social action.

The women of the armed resistance were born into poor families, most of them recently migrated from rural areas, members of a growing neoproletariat in Casablanca and other industrial centers. Some of them participated in meetings organized by the Istiqlal (Independence) Party in the forties or joined the first cells of the armed resistance as they were formed starting in Casablanca in 1947. Most did not begin to participate in the armed resistance until after the exile of King Mohamed V in August, 1953.

From 1944, when the Istiqlal Party began a mass mobilization which also targeted women, until late 1955, when King Mohamed V returned from exile, there was a great deal of solidarity between different classes. In this period, the nationalist women and the women of the armed resistance played overlapping roles in the national liberation movement. In the late forties, proletarian women attended secret meetings organized and led by nationalist women, and in the early fifties, nationalist women helped to smuggle arms and hide partisans for the resistance. But after independence, in 1956, the solidarity between the Istiqlal Party and the armed resistance quickly disintegrated. The (male) political leaders from the party joined with King Mohamed V in forming the new government, specifically shutting out leaders of the armed resistance and liberation army. While women of the nationalist movement took on leading roles in

education and social service, women of the armed resistance went home and back to their domestic roles. For the next decade, the government and the social service organizations headed by women from the nationalist movement all ignored the women of the armed resistance, while the women themselves were preoccupied with survival.

The difference in class makes a big difference in women's experience, perceptions, and memories. Nationalist women see their lives as a continuous development, their childhood and education preparing them for participation in the national movement, and the national movement in turn preparing them to take on leading roles in social service and education after independence. Women from the armed resistance don't want to talk about their childhoods or the period after independence. They focus almost entirely on what they did in the resistance, framing that narrative in myth and the history of other wars Morocco has fought against foreign invaders.

Gender Ideology: Images and Self-Images

The main thing that women from the two groups had in common was their gender, an important bond given the prevailing Moroccan ideology of separate roles and spaces for men and women. The nationalist women spoke frequently of French opposition to Moroccan women's education (especially Islamic, Arabic-language education) and emancipation. They also spoke of Christians as generally fearing and respecting the power of Islam, and of Islamic learning and faith. But above all was the conviction that educated and politically aware Islamic women were a force to be reckoned with and would pose a serious threat to French colonial rule.

I found no evidence for this idea in French sources, but it was certainly very widespread among Moroccan nationalists, both women and men. It is true that the French were extremely elitist, and this elitism was evident in their views on education. They wanted to limit education for Moroccan Muslims to a small male elite, and for that purpose they established a very limited number of schools, with a curriculum focused on French language and culture.¹³ It was the Moroccan king and the nationalists who promoted education for Moroccan Muslim girls, and it was the nationalists who created schools and began to offer education to girls and eventually to different classes of Moroccans.

Moroccan Muslim women did not have much exposure to European culture, or much contact with "Christians" during the period of the protectorate.¹⁴ While some Moroccan Muslim girls from the urban proletariat went out to work in French factories or as domestic servants in European homes, Moroccans and Europeans lived in separate areas of the city, and there was very little mixing. Almost no Moroccan Muslim women spoke French, and almost no Europeans spoke Arabic, so there was little possibility for interaction. Despite this lack of

contact, both the bourgeois women in the nationalist movement and the proletarian women in the armed resistance were well aware of the stereotypes that the French had of Moroccan women.¹⁵ French officials “respected” Moroccan women, and normally would not touch them or search them. They thought women incapable of getting involved in politics or in militant action, and the women learned to use the French officials’ presumption of their ignorance as a part of their disguise, playing these stereotypes to their advantage.

The women all felt that Moroccan collaborators were more dangerous than the French officials themselves, and of course they were intimately acquainted with the extremely negative stereotypes that Moroccan men had of women, and with the norms of traditional Moroccan society: the seclusion and veiling of women, and the absolute authority of the husband in the patriarchal Moroccan family. Again, they used these stereotypes to their advantage: when a woman insisted that it was *unthinkable* for a man to come into her house while she was there alone without her husband, there was nothing a Moroccan collaborator could do but stay outside.

Gender Roles

By their active participation in the nationalist movement and armed resistance, women from both groups moved beyond traditional gender roles. The nationalist women had already created a revolution and a scandal as the first girls to go to school, especially if they continued in school after they reached the age of puberty. By walking through the streets to get to school, and by attending school together with boys and getting the same education, these women were breaking out of their seclusion, their restriction to the “women’s space” inside the house, and moving into the “men’s spaces” of the streets and the schools. Then they took on roles that were new for Moroccan women in the women’s associations of the political parties, mobilizing and organizing other women, and learning how to make them work together.

Women who joined the armed resistance took on active, militant roles, working together with men. Missions for the resistance not only brought them out of seclusion, but sent them into dangerous situations, traveling long distances by themselves, carrying messages and weapons, even setting bombs, all the while using their wits to escape detection. Several of the women defined these roles as “men’s roles” that they were taking on in the resistance. One woman, Fatima Roudania, a resistance fighter in Casablanca, is described as dressing in “men’s clothes”—wide-legged golf pants and a man’s head covering.

These were dramatic changes in the roles that women played and in the spaces that they occupied. Yet as the women talked, it became clear that the women themselves usually defined even these new roles largely as “women’s

roles" in the sense that they were different from and complementary to the roles that men played. American scholar Margaret Collins Weitz, in her work on women and the French Resistance, found a similar phenomenon. Women's roles in the resistance were looked on (by men, at least) as an extension of traditional female responsibilities—offering food and shelter to male resistance fighters, typing and coding secret papers (clerical work), and liaison (running errands)—and this led to minimizing women's contribution.¹⁶

The women's organizations of the political parties were quite independent in organizing their own activities, but followed the political direction of the party executive committee, which was made up of men. Social service organizations were headed and staffed entirely by women, and the women raised money and took care of housing and food for students in the nationalist free schools who needed help. In the oral histories, nationalist women speak with pride of women's accomplishments, emphasizing the activities that were organized and funded entirely by women. In the period before independence, it was still unusual to have meetings or classes where men and women mixed. So women had separate meetings, organizations, and areas of activity, thus reproducing the patterns of traditional society, with separate spaces and different, complementary roles for men and women. Political leadership seemed to have been largely reserved for men.

Women from the armed resistance talked about being inspired by photographs of women carrying guns in Palestine or Algeria, in the 1936-39 Palestinian uprising or the Algerian national liberation struggle against French colonialism.¹⁷ For the first time in their lives they got the idea that Muslim women could play men's roles in the fight against colonialism. But in the Moroccan resistance only men actually used arms. Men also planned and directed resistance operations, and were the heads of most resistance cells and organizations. Transporting arms and messages was something that was usually assigned to women, because the colonial authorities were less likely to search them, and because it was easy for a woman to conceal arms in the voluminous folds of her haik or tucked in under her baby strapped on her back.¹⁸

Relations between Men and Women

Women from the armed resistance noted a dramatic improvement in their relations with men during the period of the resistance. Not only were women in the secret cells given the same responsibility as men in carrying out missions, but relations between men and women generally became much more relaxed in this period. Whereas before it would have been unthinkable for a young woman to receive men in her home when her husband was not present, during the resistance that happened often, and men in that situation would treat the woman like their sister, or their mother or their daughter.