4 The Status of Women in the Haut Plateau: Between Islam, Politics and Popular Perception

The status of women in the context of Islam throughout the Arab World remains among the most discussed topics by Western scholars today. While much has been written about this subject, some neutral and some favorable, a significant amount of the literature simply regards women’s secondary role in Arab society to be rooted in Islam rather than in traditional customs. Stereotypes and fables regarding women and Islam in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region) are abundant as it is, and the events of September 11 seem only to have heightened them.

This, at least in terms of the written work, is the posture predominately held for rural Algeria as well. Nationwide, the Haut Plateau region is well known by the Algerian people themselves for the way its inhabitants “cling” to traditions and for their strong resistance to cultural change (Bourdieu 1958; Miner and De Vos 1960; Knauss 1987). Why that is has a lot to do with its colonial past, especially in the way Algerians found themselves in a state of constant counterbalance with the French Occupation. More aspects surrounding this situation will be brought to light in further detail through the course of the chapter.

In what follows some of the more prominent and widely referred-to studies on the status of women in Algerian society will be outlined. The succeeding section begins with an overview of the family and social structure. One should bear in mind that the bulk of the information stated throughout this study stems from the observations made in Tiaret and thus best aligns with the current situation of Arab-Islamic women living in the High Plateau region.

Beginning with the matter of the banal insinuation that the evolution of Algerian women runs a more apathetic course, Alf Andrew Heggoy (1974), The Evolution of Algerian Women, quite eloquently made the following contention quite early on:

“The role of Algerian women in their own society has rarely been what it has seemed. Outside observers have often indulged in generalizations based on a lack of understanding, in judgements represented by only partial truths. David Gordon’s recent pronouncement (1968) that ‘women are the serfs of Algerian society’ is, for example, a fair enough description of the position of the majority, but it is, in the end,
no more accurate than Jacques Berques’ (1967) axion that ‘there were not even any bastards’ produced by the temporary sexual relations between Algerians and European settlers in the 1930’s. What is quite clear is that women have played and continue to play important roles in Algerian society although they have always suffered definite legal, social, and cultural disadvantages that have not been essentially changed by independence.”

“Historically, Algerian women have enjoyed more freedom than is usually admitted by Western authors. In rural areas women were allowed to go about daily routines without hiding. Only in cities was the wearing of the veil normal, and even this practice can be easily explained. Germaine Tillion’s interesting and convincing interpretation (1964) on this issue comes to mind: the practice of wearing a veil in countries bordering the southern shores of the Mediterranean is simply an attempt of basically nomadic peoples to maintain privacy in the crowded cities. Nor is this custom unique; Spanish women wear black, a practice that serves much the same purpose as the veil in Muslim lands.” (Heggoy, 1974:449)

Here Heggoy makes mention of some other early writers on the status of Algerian women, including Gordon (1968), Berques (1967) and Tillion (1964). Granting the perception of women’s status held in these works is stagnated to a certain extent, both Gordon’s short study Women of Algeria: an essay on change and Tillion’s Les femmes et le voile dans la civilisation méditerranéenne are regarded as important contributions in women’s history.

Whereas the separation of men and women continues to be thoroughly adhered to in rural Algeria, much of what Tillion noted about female farm life along the Mediterranean shores in the 1960s could be corroborated in this study by the observations made of women living in the farming regions just outside of Tiaret city. On several occasions the author had the opportunity to assist in the annual gathering of olives, pomegranates and figs. It is notable that none of the female farmers wore an over-cloak (Djeleba) or covered their faces (Ajar) when going out on any of these kinds of outings, something considered inconceivable in the city.

In many instances during the early spring, the women would walk about an hour’s distance from the farm settlement in order to dig up the bulbs of thistles known as “garnina”. This is considered a highly revered vegetable similar in taste to steamed green asparagus. When men from neighboring farms or distant acquaintances happened to pass by during such an outing, the women would candidly exchange greetings before going on with their work. If these same women were to be greeted by a male neighbor or any other male acquaintance not closely related to the family while out in the city, they would blush in embarrassment.