

Berichte und Kommentare

Representations of Kinship

Agnatic Ideology and Uterine Values in a Berber-Speaking Tribe (Southeast Morocco)

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Kinship studies conducted in Moslem societies almost invariably concentrate on the Arab system of kinship and marriage, although this is not the only system within the Moslem sphere of influence. Other conceptions exist, both similar and different, such as the representations derived from the fundamental narrative of the Ait Khebbach tribe, a Berber-speaking group established in Southeast Morocco. Their perceptions of origin provide the material for a new approach to the paradigm that opposes agnation (Arab) and cognation (Berber).¹

All Moroccan Berber groups have adopted the Arab system of kinship based principally on agnation² in which kinship rests exclusively on patrilineage. The Ait Khebbach have adopted agnate ideology but allusions to uterine ties of kinship are frequent too, as the different configurations of kinship prove.

Symbolic representations are particularly visible in the social fiction of a group, especially its genesis and the related foundation myth. The Ait Khebbach live in a society that is penetrated by such a myth. This happens to be an exceptional analytical tool to gather information on a system of values, representations, and cultural practices that

remain valid even today. The aim of this study is to discover where reality meets with myth and the circumstances in which ideological construction and social practices overlap. The author studies the way symbolic representations reflect different levels of kinship – ties of blood (through males) as opposed to ties of milk (through females) – and investigates the typical Berber form of kinship through aggregation.

In the foundation myth, the Ait Khebbach doubly assert an attachment to uterine values by relating first the ancestry and then the marriage of their founder. This is followed by a biographical panegyric in which the hero becomes a sort of incarnation of paternal power (agnate values). Then mythical discourse on the destiny of the eponym gradually launches into contemporary determinisms of milk kinship in which women play an essential part.

Representations of kinship, therefore, oscillate between agnate ideology and an attachment to uterine ties. The author proposes to investigate this permanent alternation from one value to the other.

The Ait Khebbach Tribe

The Ait Khebbach belong to the powerful Ait Atta confederation. Originally they were nomads (*rhal*) and ranked among the most accomplished voyagers on the long trans-Saharan routes leading from Morocco to Mali across the Sahara. They controlled the Tafilalet oasis, seat of the famous Berber kingdom of Sijilmasa³ and, for centuries, had also protected the caravans (*ichabarn*) of

1 The term cognate refers to a group of individuals related through ties of blood, whether on the male or the female side.

2 Ibn Khaldoun in the 14th century (1999) and W. Robertson Smith (1885) note, however, that uterine kinship does exist in the Arab system of kinship. For further information see Conte (1991, 1994, 2001) and Bonte (2000a, 2000b).

3 The kingdom of Sijilmasa, founded in the 8th century by the Miknasa Berbers, was to become one of the largest metropolitan centres of the Sahara. Its commercial, political, and religious influence (Kharijite Islam) lasted for nearly seven centuries. In the 11th century, the historian El-Bekri (1913 [1068]) described the history of this kingdom. See also Jacques-Meunié (1982) and Mezzine (1987).