

# CHANGING FAMILY STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY MOROCCO

## Women's Stories, Persistent Ideologies and Matrimonial Strategies

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This article analyses changing family structures in Morocco by examining four households within one family's residential compound. Despite its location in a rural setting, this compound is not the main site of economic production for these domestic units, meaning that other principles operate in the distribution and use of land. To analyse households within this property allows us to capture how marriage strategies and women's position inside the family change through generations. Taking into account both the tradition of the extended family organized along agnatic descent lines and recent changes, which have made conjugal households desirable, this paper explores whether the seemingly conflicting values associated with traditional extended households and current opportunities for personal social mobility can be harmoniously integrated by families.

*Keywords:* gender, conjugality, patrilineality, household, Morocco

### Introduction: The Lahmar Family

Along the national road linking Ounara to the largest cities on the north-western Moroccan coast, Safi, Al Jadida and Casablanca, the landscape is composed of small villages and towns.<sup>1</sup> This is the Arabic-speaking Chiadma region of Essaouira province, as opposed to Haha, the southern region, where the majority of the population speaks Tashelhit, one of three principal Berber dialects (Lapassade 2000; Crawford 2005). Cafes, markets, small grocery stores, kiosks and a large central mosque are visible from the main road; many of the villages look similar. The houses appear orderly, but serve to disguise a chaotic "backstage" composed of more buildings, rubbish, dirt paths and donkeys. Those travelling through the area might assume that no women live

here. This illusion is created by the female seclusion and segregation that often characterize Arab-Muslim societies. Here, it is only men on the streets, chatting, trading, drinking tea and coffee on the terraces, riding their donkeys. For much of the day it is rare to hear the sound of a car.

Hanchane<sup>2</sup> is a settlement in the province situated sixty kilometres north of Essaouira city, close to the province of Safi. It is a small town of 3,000 inhabitants but a municipal capital and therefore relatively well-served with a hospital, a school and various administrative services such as the Pasha, the local representative of the provincial governor.

In this paper I focus on one family headed by Mohammed (b. 1941). This family lives in the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya* (the Lahmar residential com-

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pound)<sup>3</sup> in Hanchane, on a small area of land which Mohammed and his siblings inherited. Mohammed was born in Hanchane and worked as a clerk for several *shaykhs*,<sup>4</sup> thereafter working as a civil servant in the local government where he was responsible for civil registration, retiring in 2001. As the eldest son of eleven siblings, he became responsible for his family after his father died (see chart 1).

It is through Mohammed's narratives of genealogical reckoning and the stories of his female relatives that I trace changing matrimonial strategies in this residential compound over time. As the oldest of his male siblings, Mohammed was responsible for the property distribution. Although it is located in a rural setting, this property is not the main site of economic production for these domestic units, and households within this property follow different paths and strategies, which are all somehow related to this same piece of land. As has been demonstrated and discussed elsewhere (Crawford 2008; Newcomb 2009), family solidarity is of great importance in Morocco, but its nature is changing. This paper tackles this question ethnographically, whether the seemingly conflicting values associated with traditional extended households and current opportunities for personal social mobility can be harmoniously integrated by families. As will be demonstrated, marriage strategies vary across generations and this is deeply influenced by women's changing position in society.

Utilizing the narratives recounted by Mohammed and his female family members, in this article I ask: How are family living arrangements and practices related to marriage and conjugality negotiated in rural Morocco? Can the seemingly conflicting values associated with traditional agnatic descent ideology and recent opportunities for individual social mobility be harmoniously integrated, and if so, how? And finally, how are matrimonial practices related to the prominent question of women's rights in Morocco?

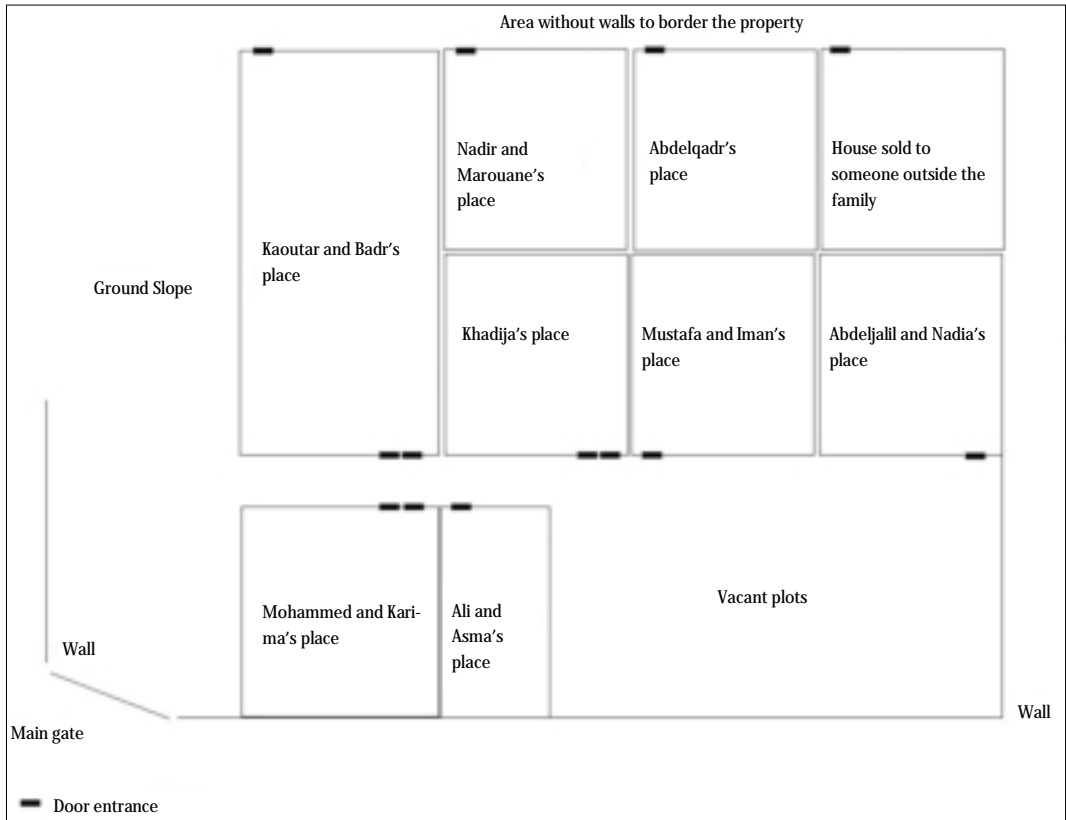
### **Mohammed and Karima**

After Mohammed's father Majid died, the property was divided among eleven siblings (nine males and two females) as well as Majid's widow. The twelve

plots have nine houses, seven belong to the siblings, one to Mohammed's son, and another was sold to a person outside the family who was described to me as a "foreigner." Two plots are vacant. On entering the property from the main gate, there are two rows of houses, which share a common yard. On one side is the oldest of the houses, belonging to Mohammed and his wife Karima. Next door is the house belonging to Mohammed's son, Ali, the only child who remained living in the *mujamm'a sakanyya* after getting married. Beyond this house is a large empty space. On the other side of the yard are four buildings with five doors which are Mohammed's siblings' houses. The third row of houses is on uneven ground, not visible from the main gate or from the common yard (see ill. 1).

When the family land was divided into twelve plots upon Majid's death, Mohammed's brothers gave him power of attorney so he could arrange the distribution of this inheritance (*taqsim*) with the *'adls* (notaries). Mohammed decided not to act according to Islamic principles, which stipulate that men and women inherit different amounts (Quran 4:11). Only two of the eleven siblings are women, which may partly explain why Mohammed opted for an equal division of land, regardless of gender. Whatever his reasons, it is a decision of which he speaks with pride. Each sibling inherited approximately 105 m<sup>2</sup> of land on which to build his or her home. The division also included Mohammed's father's widow, Rima – mother of six of his brothers – who unlike Mohammed's sisters received precisely what the Quran decrees for widows, that is, 1/8 of their children's patrimony.

Mohammed and Karima's home is the oldest and has undergone several changes: they added a second floor above the ground floor, which is still under construction – a phenomenon very common in Moroccan homes, built incrementally according to economic means. There is a terrace on the second floor, which is an important space for various activities such as the slaughtering of sheep during *Eid al-kabir*<sup>5</sup> or weddings. It was when I attended the wedding of Mohammed's 28-year-old daughter Hayat that I first came to visit the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya*.



Ill. 1: The Lahmar residential complex: spatial distribution of houses.

Mohammed and Karima have ten children (seven women and three men), and it was Hayat who gave me access to the world of this family.<sup>6</sup>

On special occasions, Mohammed and Karima's home is the most crowded of all in the *mujamm'a sakanyya*, since all of their ten children and respective spouses and grandchildren gather in their home. Of their children only Faiza (female, born in 1968), Naoual (female, 1975), Adel (male, 1980) and Hamid (male, 1984), all of whom are single, still live with their parents. The married children live in Agadir, Rabat and Essaouira, and another child, who is still single, resides in Dubai.

Mohammed married Karima when he was 23 years old and she was only 14. Karima is the granddaughter of Mohammed's father's sister's Zineb (known in her village as Sbayia, the Lion, a name

Karima retained). Karima is therefore her husband's second cousin. Mohammed recounted that his aunt Zineb arrived at his father's house with a young girl and said to him, "here is your wife." Zineb explained to him: "My son, I entrust to you this girl; she is the daughter of my son." Between 1961 and 1964, Karima lived in Majid's home while they waited for the wedding ceremony, which could only take place when she became physically mature, that is, when she began to menstruate. Almost all of Mohammed's and Karima's children finished high school and four of them obtained a university degree: Rahma (b. 1973), Naoual (b. 1978), Adel (b. 1980) and Hayat (b. 1982). In 2011, their youngest daughter Farida (b. 1986) went to live in Dubai, where she is still working. Hafeza (b. 1965), the oldest daughter, lives in France and is married to a Frenchman. She

works in the fishing industry and spends six months a year in Essaouira, where the couple have bought an apartment. Hayat, the last to get married, lives in Essaouira with her husband, also a Frenchman. Of all Mohammed's children, only Ali did not complete primary school (Mohammed's children in chart 2).

While in rural settings in Morocco women spend many hours of the day working outside the home, on this particular property, which is not productive, women usually stay at home. This is especially the case for the older and married women like Karima. Mohammed is retired and spends much of his time at home (where he contributes to some domestic tasks), but he goes out several times per day to shop in the market or to pray in the mosque. Adel and Hamid, the youngest boys, often have reverse schedules to those of their sisters and parents: they get up and go to bed late after meeting friends, and for this reason they are frequently out of the house. This absence of men at home and the different daily rhythms of men and women are neither accidental nor devoid of meaning. From an early age, men and boys understand the house to be a female domain and so often "enter the home mainly to eat and sleep, and spend their waking hours with their friends in school, coffee shops, workplaces, the market, the mosque, and the street" (Geertz 1979: 333).

Analysing households in a rural Berber context in the Middle Atlas, Crawford (2008) shows how households are a combination of productive and reproductive activities. Although labour is gendered and households are hierarchically organized according to age and gender, both men and women are responsible for productive activities or, at least, women are not exclusively dedicated to reproductive activities (nurturing, feeding, taking care of, cleaning, cooking). But when production is exclusively in the hands of men, women tend to be at home, something which can be indicative of the social status of households.

In the 1970s, Vanessa Maher (1974) noted that the status of women in cities was higher than that of village women. According to her, women living in an urban milieu were materially better off than their rural counterparts, although they had a price to

pay. They were more dependent on the marital unit than were village women, who had greater freedom of movement and were more easily able to divorce. Many village women work in the fields to support their natal extended families, for example, even after marriage. In the city, marriages to civil servants or merchants were symbolically and economically more profitable (involving a higher bridewealth), but meant that women cut their ties with their natal extended family, thereby placing them in a situation of greater dependence on their husbands. Divorce rates in rural settings were higher since women were less dependent on their husbands' income.

Except for Mohammed's elder sister Khadija who lives in Casablanca and maintains a holiday residence in the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya*, Karima (b. 1950) is the oldest woman living in the compound. All women living in the residential compound are in a similar situation: they are wives of a group of brothers. All of them are housewives (except for Naoual, Karima's daughter) and spend most of their time at home, leaving only to go to the market, to the public baths (*hammām*), or to pay visits to relatives. They often help each other in domestic tasks, especially at religious festivals, and visit each other regularly.

Feminine solidarity is important in these contexts and is often expressed through visiting, especially when women are housewives, as is the case of those living in the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya*. Family matters circulate among houses through such visits, and the absence of visitors indicates social distance, disregard, or ostracization. Nadir's wife, Malika, did not visit Karima when she was sick or when Hayat (Karima's daughter) got married; this was interpreted by the other women as a visible lack of concern. The women are inextricably linked through their husbands and expect a natural concern to exist among them. Visiting is a means of showing respect and a way of establishing connections; choosing not to visit is viewed as disrespectful and as a rejection of social ties. This is the reason why women closer to Karima (her daughters and daughter-in-law) do not have a close relationship with Malika.

Women capitalize on their relationships both so-

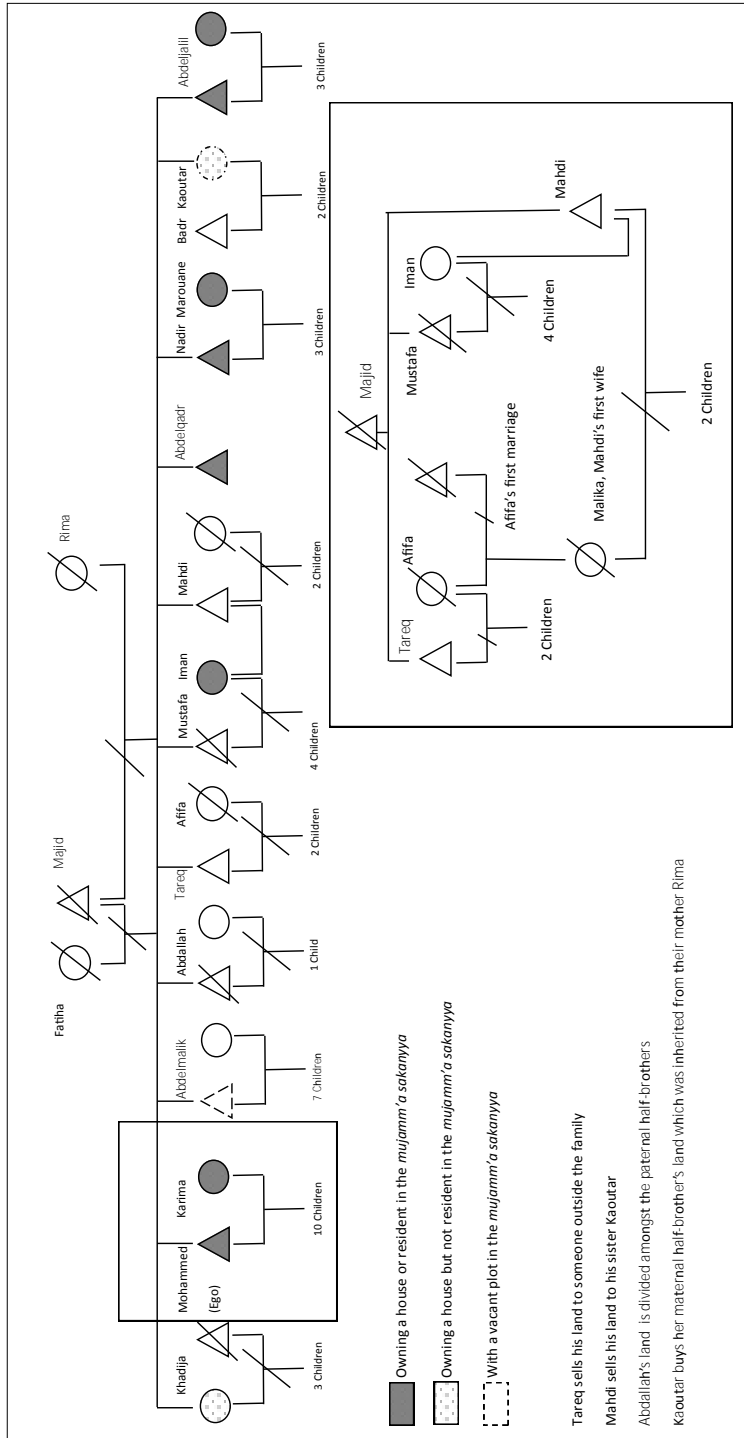


Chart 1: The Lahmar residential complex belonging to Mohammed and his brothers.

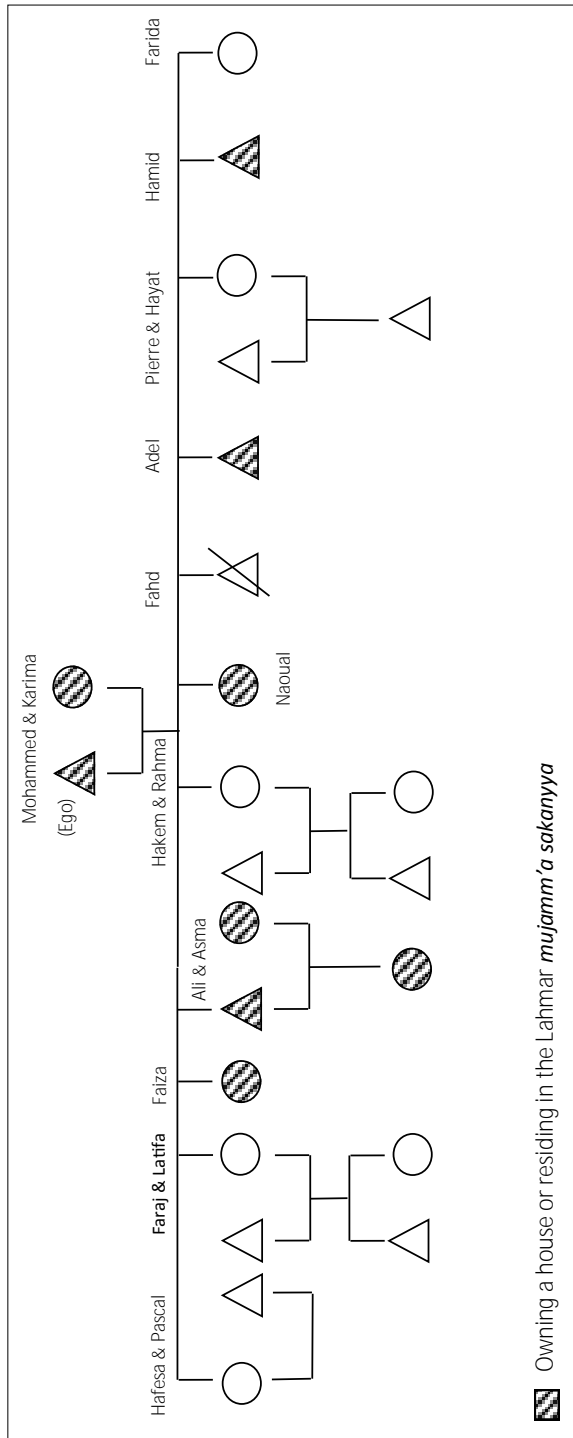


Chart 2: Lahmar family genealogy – Mohammed and Karima, their children and grandchildren.

cially and economically (see among others Eickelman 1974; Geertz 1979; Kapchan 1996; Newcomb 2009; Silva 1999). Closeness (*qarāba*) is an attribute of women's relationships and visiting plays an important role in the construction of familial and social ties. Mohammed and Karima's household has established particular relationships with other households; not all men and women necessarily follow the same rules. Kinship ties are maintained differently according to many variables: age, gender, social status, and shared experiences. Women's status within the family depends on their age, the number of children (especially boys) they have, and their domestic skills and industriousness. But this status changes over time.

Karima's status in the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya* is made visible through the fact that younger women kiss her hand when visiting her. This practice demonstrates an important feature of Moroccan society that has been noted in several studies (Crawford 2008; Ennaji 2007; Hammoudi 1997) and which affects every personal relationship: hierarchy based on authority and obedience (Hammoudi 1997). Among families, this hierarchy is particularly effective but intertwined with notions of care, love and affection (cf. Abu-Lughod [1988]1999; Joseph 1999). In the *mujamm'a sakanyya* these expressions of deference reveal Mohammed and Karima's position. They are the oldest couple living there and as mentioned earlier, Mohammed had a position in the government bureaucracy, meaning he is a literate man. At the same time, he is known for his uprightness and religiosity – the reason why his siblings seek him out for advice. He is also the eldest of his male siblings. Karima is married to him, and is the mother of ten children which, along with age and marital position, is an important factor affecting women's status in Morocco. Younger women in the *mujamm'a* also seek her out to discuss personal matters concerning children, cooking recipes, or if they are facing some trouble (for example in childbirth).

This example demonstrates the multiple expressions of authority and obedience, since they can be rooted in a gerontocratic hierarchy but also reflect people's mutual concern and solidarity. As the old-

est couple living in the *mujamm'a*, Mohammed and Karima benefit from the fact that age gives them a high social position inside the family. But contrary to what Crawford (2008) found in the Tadrar, this principle does not give them the right to define their children's or younger siblings' futures. This is in part because the productive activities are located outside the joint home property, something that redefines the importance of the age factor in the family hierarchy.

Mohammed's genealogical reckoning is mostly patrilineal, emphasizing his social position inside the compound, as an elderly man and the oldest of his male siblings. As Bourdieu (1977) correctly argued, kinship reckoning is ideological, meaning that it depends on the standpoint of the person doing the reckoning within the family structure. It is a patrilineal account that is relevant to Mohammed since it better exemplifies what he thinks is valuable and relevant to the preservation of his family's memories.

Similarly, he wanted to demonstrate his fairness and sense of justice by describing how he distributed the inherited land equally among all his siblings – men and women alike. In Morocco relationships among family members are structured by patriarchy, that is, a “familial, hierarchical system of inequality characterized by domination by senior males” (Newcomb 2009: 59). Mohammed could have acted in accordance with patriarchal rules and given different portions of inheritance to men and women. But in this particular case, other principles were at stake. Generosity and a sense of justice, especially in those who are socially well positioned, are also values that guide people's actions in Moroccan society.

### **Kaoutar and Badr**

As already mentioned, Mohammed has ten brothers, four from his mother and six from his father's other wife. Two of his brothers are now deceased. Kaoutar is his half-sister, with whom he shares the same father. However, she did not have the same educational and professional opportunities that Mohammed did. Mohammed's daughter Naoual told me the story of Kaoutar one day while drinking mint tea and eating a tasty butter and honey *musammen* (a

Moroccan crêpe) in a coffee shop in Essaouira. Similar to what Crapanzano wrote about Tuhami, his favourite Moroccan interlocutor, often it is not the veracity of stories that is important but the “Moroccan values, interpretational vectors, patterns of associations, ontological presuppositions,”<sup>7</sup> which beautify and endow narratives with meaning. Stories can thus be seen as platforms for understanding whereby the narrator gives meaning to his or her world. And Moroccans love good stories, especially those with certain ingredients: moral values, the success or failure of the characters, their conquest over adversity or the opposite: their inability to endure hardship.

When Kaoutar was young, she went to Casablanca to work as a maid for a wealthy nephew. Like many Moroccan women, she migrated from rural Hanchane to the big city hoping to put aside some money and perhaps find a rich husband. Apparently, the nephew did not treat his aunt properly; he treated her as a servant, not a family member. He did not share family meals with her, something that can be understood as a personal offence, since commensality is visible proof of links among people, especially family members. Kaoutar went to the market every day to buy all the necessities for her nephew’s household. It was there that she met a man named Badr, who was from Meknes. They saw each other in the marketplace on a daily basis, exchanged glances, and one day Badr, who was a baker, offered her a flower. Badr told her he was in love and wanted to marry her. Kaoutar took the statement seriously and introduced him to one of her brothers living in Casablanca. When women receive marriage proposals it is common to discuss the subject with a male relative, usually their father or brother. Before the Family Law (*Mudawwana al-’usra*) reform in 2004, marriage contracts were signed by the women’s matrimonial tutor (*wali*),<sup>8</sup> who confirmed the patriarchal organization of Family Law. Nowadays, women can organize marriages themselves but it is a common practice to introduce the suitor to the family before accepting the proposal. Kaoutar’s brother accepted Badr’s proposal and the couple were married.

One day, Kaoutar dreamed that her deceased mother was telling her to settle down in Safi where

she and her husband would prosper. They therefore went and opened a pastry shop and became rich; their business continues to expand in Safi. Several of Badr’s brothers are currently working with them and Faiza, one of Mohammed’s single daughters, helps them during busy periods such as Ramadan and other religious festivities. Kaoutar’s is by far the richest household in the Lahmar *mujamm’a sakanyya* in Hanchane, which can be seen from the size and external appearance of the house. It has both been completed and painted, unlike other houses in the *mujamm’a sakanyya*. It has three floors and a basement. Kaoutar and Badr’s home is on the first floor and both the ground and second floors are rented to primary school teachers who have been assigned to the village. The basement has been rented out to a poor local family. Kaoutar and her husband’s wealth has been invested in the house; similar to many other Moroccans, their economic achievement has been converted into a house that demonstrates their financial success. But the house has also become profitable in itself through rental. Kaoutar and Badr bought a portion of the property belonging to Mohammed’s brother Mahdi who resides in Casablanca, which allowed them to build the largest house in the entire *mujamm’a sakanyya*. The couple also bought the empty plot inherited by Kaoutar’s mother’s half-brothers.

If migratory trajectories to the city led some brothers like Mahdi and Tareq to lose interest in retaining their own property and building homes, possibly due to a concern with investing their money in business or their children’s education, for others, like Kaoutar and her husband, this lack of interest provided them with the opportunity to acquire more property in the family residential complex. Geographical proximity also influenced Badr and Kaoutar’s decision to build a home in the Lahmar *mujamm’a sakanyya* since they live in Safi which is sixty miles from Hanchane. Although much of their time is spent in the pastry shop, they often come to Hanchane to visit and to rest.

As mentioned earlier, Mohammed considered both his sisters entitled to inherit property in equal proportion to the remaining brothers, an unusual



attitude in rural Morocco. When land is productive, endogamous marriage or the exclusion of women from inheritance are common practices (Maher 1974, 1986). Upon marriage, women often leave their patrilineal natal household and are integrated into their husband's family unit; these strategies are aimed at preventing the dispersal of property (Maher 1986).

The Lahmar property, by contrast, is small and unproductive, so the strategy has been for all siblings to maintain a close relationship and for each of them to build a house. The distribution of property did not exclude women because they were seen as belonging to the same descent group. When Rima and Abdelmalik died, Khadija and Kaoutar inherited only half the amount of land received by their brothers (each brother inherited 30 m<sup>2</sup> and the sisters 15 m<sup>2</sup> each). Mohammed's explanation for this distribution was that the plots were very small and therefore agriculturally insignificant. All of Rima's land was then bought by Badr and Kaoutar. Purchase preference was given to siblings (and to a nephew, as we will see in the next section), although one of the plots was sold to a person from outside the family.

In the case of Mohammed's family, the fact that this was not agricultural property, and that setting up a new household in Morocco is economically challenging, prompted a distribution of land which included women as heirs. Excluding female relatives would not have benefitted male heirs in any case, since the property was not large enough for agricultural production and a division among males would only have established a hierarchy among family members. As we can see, Badr and Kaoutar purchased the largest portion of land. Gender inheritance asymmetries in Morocco are often associated with patrilineality and agnatic descent. This particular case shows that the situation can often be more complex.

The division of land among male and female siblings highlights a horizontal principle which seeks to ensure physical proximity among family members. But, at the same time, verticality is expressed in the choice of a privileged interlocutor for the purchase. This was Kaoutar's husband Badr, whereas Kaoutar's

role in the transaction was passive. She was certainly not excluded from the negotiation process that led to the purchase of her deceased brother's and mother's property, but Mohammed's narrative assigned her a secondary role. The story of Badr and Kaoutar reveals how economic wealth is based on the hard work of both husband and wife. However, similar to what Maher discovered during her research in the Middle Atlas region in the 1970s: "[s]ince the management of property involves contacts with the public sphere of male activity, women retain only marginal control over their own property. At most, they can veto the proposals of their male guardians" (Maher 1986: 105).

The next household I examine is that of Mohammed's son and daughter-in-law, Ali and Asma. Like Kaoutar and Badr's marriage, theirs was also presented as motivated by "love." Ali and Asma's domestic unit shows that both virilocality and patrilocality are organizational principles in families' living arrangements, but at the same time, physical co-residence ensures women's autonomy in the management of the domestic sphere.

### **Ali and Asma**

Ali is the third of Mohammed's children. He is the first male child, out of a total of three men and seven women (see chart 2). He was born in 1969 and often cheers up family evenings with his jokes and exaggerated body language. He has a bruise on his forehead, the result of his head touching the ground repeatedly during prostrate prayer (*sujūd*), a phenomenon which is common among men who have prayed for many years. He is a plumber, but not thought of as a very good one. His father often asks for his help to solve problems with the plumbing at home, but his "solutions" can make things even worse, a topic which his siblings always joke with him about. Ali is the son who has remained closest to Mohammed and Karima. Following marriage, he continued to live with his parents but subsequently built a small house adjoining theirs. After the death of one of Mohammed's brothers, the surviving brothers inherited the deceased brother's plot of land. Khadija, Mohammed's eldest sister, gave her nephew Ali the 15

m<sup>2</sup> plot which she had inherited, and his father gave him 30 m<sup>2</sup>. Ali bought a further 30 m<sup>2</sup> from his uncle Abelmalik and thereby managed to obtain a total of 75 m<sup>2</sup> on which to build his own house.

First, he built a basic house, which was barely inhabitable. He then decided to renovate the interior and, together with his wife and daughter, moved temporarily into his father's residence on the first floor (Mohammed and Karima live on the ground floor). This floor was unfinished but Ali's family lived there for several months, under very unpleasant conditions, using blankets to cover the openings in the unglazed windows. But the new house was an improvement, with bedrooms, a living room, kitchen and stairs to the terrace. According to his siblings, Ali was a bohemian who only settled down later in life, after he stopped drinking alcohol and began to pray. He met Asma, his wife, at his aunt Kaoutar's home in Safi. Asma worked there taking care of Kaoutar's youngest daughter who has cerebral palsy.

Naoual, Ali's sister, had earlier met Asma when working as a primary school teacher in Asma's Berber home village for six years. This was a difficult period for Naoual, who had to live without water and electricity and was treated with suspicion by the local people. Educated Moroccan women describe isolated and remote villages as extremely traditional and reactionary. Naoual claimed that local people considered her a whore because she was unmarried and living away from her family. One day she attended a local wedding and noticed a beautiful woman who had long black hair and dressed differently. Naoual struck up conversation with her and found out she had been working in Casablanca and had only recently returned to her village. She was the only woman in the village who spoke fluent Arabic and she was very unhappy living there; after the experience of living in Casablanca it was difficult to return to the isolated villages of the countryside without basic services. This woman was Asma. Naoual knew her aunt Kaoutar was looking for someone to take care of her daughter and suggested Asma take up this work. According to family lore, it was at Kaoutar's home that Asma and Ali met and fell in love at first sight. After some time they got married.

As mentioned earlier, Ali was the only one of Mohammed's children to build an actual house on the family property. The three older sisters got married and moved away to live in their husbands' home towns or where their husbands were working. Hafeza lives in France, Latifa near Rabat and Rahma in Agadir. As the eldest son, Ali assumed the responsibility of taking care of his parents, although they were still living with four of their unmarried children. But Ali is also the only one of his siblings who did not study beyond the second or third grade and has therefore attained less economic success. Traditionally, it is common for women in Moroccan society to move into their husbands' family's household when they marry. As women often devote themselves to domestic activities, it is their husband's livelihood that defines their living arrangements. Hence, women may be integrated in the wage labour market, but when they marry they often leave their jobs to dedicate themselves exclusively to their family as housewives – a practice that underlines the central role of men as providers.

Although many married couples establish new nuclear family households, meaning that they do not live with the husband's family, it appears to be the husband's work and professional career that determine where they settle. In the case of Ali and Asma, they established their own household next to Ali's parents, which shows that virilocality is an operating precept. Ali enjoyed the generosity of both his father and aunt who were aware of his financial problems, which enabled him to build his own home, something that would not have been feasible in any other setting. This co-residentiality allows families to maintain reciprocity: among his siblings Ali is the one best able to take care of their parents as they grow older.

In Essaouira, where I have carried out fieldwork with a women's association, I met several families who shared a block of apartments: each floor occupied by a son or daughter (usually the son), or, less frequently, by a brother or nephew. Although the structure was nominally an apartment building (*'imāra*), under these familial conditions people called it a house or home (*dar*). Economic viability

appears to be the dominant motive behind this arrangement, since it involves the purchase of only one single property. But I also met two families not experiencing financial constraints who still opted for this type of living situation. Each household is expanded as necessary: women come together when there are religious festivals and support each other with various domestic tasks. Sometimes the kitchen is built in the main apartment, which is that of the father or oldest brother, and women prepare meals together. Responsibility for older family members, especially widowed parents, is distributed among the various units. Contrary to the conventional notion of a block of separate apartments, which does not imply any kinship relation among the different households, this kind of unifying “home” enables distinct conjugal units to maintain close bonds while at the same time retaining separate domestic households and a certain level of autonomy.

Unlike his brothers and sisters, Ali established a home close to his parents because he was the oldest male sibling and had no economic means of buying a house elsewhere or moving to another city. But at the same time, the configuration of his household reflected the conjugal desire for privacy. The particular residential constellation which emerged resulted in a relative power balance among the various women in the family. Their close proximity within the separate units allows them to enjoy leisure time together (despite differences in age), gather the extended family together on festive occasions and even alleviate the burden of everyday household tasks. At the same time, the spatial separation of the conjugal families prevents conflict among women and allows periods of relaxation together as they retain individual power over their own households and domestic tasks. They can keep a close watch on other women while at the same time maintaining some distance.

National statistics reveal an increase in the number of neolocal conjugal households at the expense of what can be characterized as traditional extended families. According to the National Family Survey, last conducted in 1995, nuclear family units constitute the largest proportion of Moroccan households; 51.1% in 1982 and 60.3% in 1995 (Royaume

du Maroc 2005). The vast majority of these nuclear households consist of both parents and their unmarried children. Lfarakh (1998) shows that 21.6% of all Moroccan households are what he calls “complex domestic units,” that is three generations living within the same household. In the case presented in this paper, however, we are dealing with a common domestic configuration in Morocco that defies demographic categorization. This new kind of arrangement could be called a “horizontally extended domestic complex.” In it, each house or floor hosts a conjugal or nuclear family with kin ties to residents of other houses or floors.

Within horizontally extended domestic complexes, the term *co-residentiality* captures the persistence of traditional social organization whereby families maintain support and “monitoring” of each other while at the same time some autonomy is established for each conjugal household. Nowadays, not only in Hanchane but also in Essaouira and other Moroccan cities, such shared residence has emerged as a solution that embraces recent values and changing matrimonial strategies.

Women search for some autonomy inside the family, especially in three areas: they want to choose their own spouses, they do not want to live with their parents-in-law, and they want to make decisions about their conjugal unit, meaning for example that they want to decide where money is allocated. This reflects the changing status of women in the conjugal unit as they gain some economic autonomy. Parents also imagine a different future for their daughters and education becomes an important asset. Marriage is still decisive in women’s social status, but many parents take into account daughters’ preferences and expectations.

Today, it is largely only in situations of severe economic difficulty that families are forced to merge multiple conjugal households within the same house, resulting in an extended family household in which the mother-in-law can exercise power and control over the new couple and especially the daughter-in-law. The new solution of forming a household adjacent to other households of the same extended family allows young women to wield a domestic authority

and autonomy that previously took them considerable time to achieve. At the same time, as the next story illustrates, the agency and autonomy of female family members in horizontally extended domestic complexes is not unlimited. Female co-residents are expected to act in accordance with cultural norms, which are based both on their gender and on their position within the extended family.

### Mustafa and Iman

Like his siblings, Mohammed's brother Mustafa built a house in Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya* where he lived with his wife and their four children until he died of cancer in 2008. The story of this family begins on Mustafa's and Iman's wedding day, when according to Hayat, Mustafa beat his bride. Karima, Mohammed's wife, reprimanded him at once and told him he should not behave in such a manner. Mustafa did not explain why he had beaten his bride but he remarked that one day he would regret marrying her. Mohammed's wife and daughters enjoyed Iman's company very much; they could not understand why Mustafa was so hard on her. After Mustafa's premature death, Iman married Mohammed's widowed brother, Mahdi, who lives in Casablanca and would come to visit her every month. According to Hayat's account, in this way neither of them was lonely despite their physical separation. Iman is also the sister of Badr, Kaoutar's husband. Badr brought her to meet Mustafa, which is how they eventually married.

After Mustafa's death and Imam's marriage to Mahdi (see chart 1, right corner box), people in the village noted that Iman had started to change her appearance, dressing in a more uninhibited way, and speculated that she was romantically involved with an 18-year-old baker. One day Adel, Mohammed's son, came home at night and a drunken neighbour sitting on the doorstep told him: "I'm drunk, but I know what my eyes saw, a man entering the house of your brother Mustafa." Adel insulted the man and denied his claim but had, in fact, heard similar stories, and was troubled. Adel and his brother Hamid kept guard on the terrace of Mohammed's household at night to discover the truth. One rainy night,

Adel saw a man leaving his uncle's house in which Iman was living. He jumped from the terrace and tried to catch up with the stranger but the man ran away. Mohammed, Nadir and Abdeljalil, all brothers of Mustafa and Mahdi, went to see Imam to get her to tell the truth, but Iman refused to engage in conversation with them, saying that no one had the right to interfere in her life. Indeed, she complained about Adel's behaviour.

After this episode, the other women in the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya* severed contact with Iman. Karima, who had cherished her like a daughter, dramatically stated that one of her daughters had died. Nowadays Iman lives in a separate house with her four children in the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya*. Her children maintain a relationship with the rest of the family, albeit a confused and uncertain one. The following conversation is an extract from my field notes, which illustrate how Iman is understood by other women in the family:

Hafeza, Hayat's sister who lives in France, told me that in that country people do not care about what others do with their lives, but Hanchane is a small village. Iman should not have brought a man to "their home," especially with children being there. She could have an affair, but only far from home and away from the children. Hafeza told me that Iman's deceased husband had been very authoritarian with her and perhaps this is why she felt free when he died and tried to enjoy life. But to bring a man home late at night was not correct. She had accepted marriage to Mahdi, Mohammed and Mustafa's brother who lives in Casablanca. In fact, Hayat told me that after finding out about Iman's affair, Mahdi said that he would not divorce her and so she would be neither divorced nor married. He would not come to visit her anymore. In the end, Hayat and Hafeza told me that Mustafa's and Iman's children, especially the older ones, suffered as a result of this whole story, since they realized what was happening.

The events of this story led to several changes in the *modus vivendi* of the family, particularly among the

women. The observation made by Mustafa on his wedding day was interpreted as a warning about what would happen in the future. In the eyes of the female members of Mohammed's household, Iman broke the bonds of trust and closeness that made her a "daughter." Badr also cut ties with Iman, his sister, demonstrating to the Lahmar family his disapproval of her behaviour. Only Kaoutar continued to support Iman economically since she felt responsible for Mustafa's children. Iman's needs and desires bothered these women, especially Hafeza. According to her, Iman might have had desires, especially following her husband's death, but should never have behaved so disrespectfully towards the family. Iman was part of a shared universe of affection and now suffered the consequences of betraying the confidence of her husband's family.

This is the reason why Karima claims to have lost a "daughter." Iman was accepted by Karima as a younger female relative within the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya*, which meant that her relations with other women were conceived of as both familial and emotional. When Iman showed disrespect for the implicit rules of the *mujamm'a sakanyya*, Karima severed the familial link and her status was dramatically transformed. Probably the only reason Iman is still able to live in the *mujamm'a sakanyya* is because she is the mother of Mustafa's four children.

In Morocco, women's behaviour is often viewed as tending towards chaos and lack of sexual control and is therefore highly controlled. Several proverbs confirm this notion, such as one that states that when a woman leaves her home alone she is pursued by *Sheitan* (Satan). These stereotypes, analysed by Fatima Sadiqi (2011) and Mokhtar Harras (2000), have an influence on gender conceptions. The images employed are ambiguous: women can be modest and pure as mothers and caretakers but they can also be sexually unrestrained lovers. A family's weaknesses and its men's lack of authority can be "exposed" to the outside world through the violation of social rules by women.

What is at stake is not just a patriarchal ideology maintained by men and women but also a non-singularized notion of *person*. People only exist

in a universe of other persons, which forces us to abandon a segmented notion of the "individual" as a closed entity independent of his or her community (e.g., Joseph 1999). Although based on gender asymmetries, sentiments concerning honour are not merely about masculinity and patriarchy; they are also rooted in how societies conceive of personhood. In some cultural contexts the self may be better understood as a social actor whose agency is not merely constrained, but also made socially intelligible and thereby *enabled*, by one's social roles (Hollis 1985: 281). While as a person, Karima's daughter Hafeza could understand Iman's loneliness and longing for freedom, the widowed woman could not be allowed to jeopardize the social status of the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya*; her behaviour showed no consideration for her deceased husband's family, hence her ostracization.

Women's modesty is important for the maintenance of family status and this is why Adel stood guard night after night, to discover the truth about the rumours that had been circulating. Iman's actions and attitude cast into doubt the moral standing of the Lahmar *mujamm'a sakanyya*, particularly the status of men, who occupy the public sphere and are therefore constantly subject to outsider gossip. Iman's punishment was familial exclusion, stigma and marginalization from the network of family women. She was also placed in an ambiguous marital situation: still formally married to Mahdi although no longer visited by him. In this way, Iman no longer enjoyed the emotional and economic security of marriage and yet, still married, she could not find a new husband. In a context in which women spend most of their time in the domestic sphere and their social status is defined by their marital status, Iman has been left with few options.

This also explains why among all the dwelling structures within the *mujamm'a sakanyya*, Iman's is the least complete and is the only one that has just a ground floor. Standing alone in the compound, the house symbolizes a discontinuity in the history of the conjugal family that created it, and is maintained in a state of adversity.

## The Daughters

The matrimonial and residential strategies of Mohammed's children are quite distinct from those of their parents and uncles. As already stated, their educational level is much higher than that of the previous generation, something of which Mohammed is proud. Rahma and Latifa live in Agadir and Rabat respectively: the former met her husband while pursuing her studies at the University of Agadir; the latter worked for years in high-school administration in Hanchane where she met her husband. He was later posted to Rabat and they settled in the suburbs of the capital. Rahma and Latifa both stopped working after getting married and having their first child, a practice common among Moroccan women.

Hence, although social and cultural practices concerning marriage are changing in Morocco, many men and women consider matrimony to be a common project entailing different gender-based tasks. For many couples, the husband's role is to be the economic and financial provider, and the wife's role is to nurture children and take care of the household. Although in practice this is not what always occurs following marriage, the ideal remains very widespread. Mir-Hosseini (2000) has shown how the gap between ideal and reality is responsible for much of the domestic violence in Morocco, something to which my interlocutors at a women's association in Essaouira, which supports victims of domestic violence, attested. This local association provides women seeking a divorce or alimony free legal services. The cases I followed and interviews I conducted with beneficiaries of the association reveal a similar reality to the one Mir-Hosseini found in the courts of Rabat and Casablanca during the 1980s.

For many women, married life entails accommodating notions of modesty and segregation between the genders: they have to spend more time at home and change their style of dress. Both Rahma and Latifa started to wear a headscarf and *Jillāba* (a long garment with full sleeves and a hood) after getting married. For these women, this mode of dress is a sign of respect for their husbands, since these garments hide body shape and hair, avoiding unwanted attention from other men. But many women need

to work in Morocco because men are unable to be the sole economic providers. In this case, such traditional normative models can be at odds with the practical economic reality that couples face. For men and women from the lower middle classes who are integrated into the wage labour system, work is usually characterized by informal and ill-paid jobs, exposing women to situations considered improper for them (working, for example, in coffee shops only attended by men). For this reason, many men and women in Morocco, particularly those from the lower middle classes, seek a married life based on the husband's ability to provide and the wife's exclusive dedication to domestic activities. This middle-class model often legitimizes men's position of authority and justifies women's legal obedience. Despite financial difficulties faced by households, many women stay at home. Statistics indicate that many women do not declare any economic activity; according to 2007 data, 80.4% of women above the age of fifteen and living in an urban context stated they were economically inactive (61.8% of these were housewives; this category also included girls still in school), and 19.6% defined themselves as active (15.5% were employed and 4.1% unemployed). In the rural context, 62.3% reported being inactive (53.3% were housewives) and 37.7% economically active (Royaume du Maroc 2008). This trend is also visible in 2012 statistics: In the urban context, 14% were defined as active and having a profession, 82.4% inactive and 3.6% as unemployed, as opposed to the rural context where 34.9% were active (0.7 % are unemployed) and 64.4% inactive (Royaume du Maroc 2013). These data reveal the perpetuation of a family model whereby women dedicate themselves exclusively to the household. In rural settings, women regularly work as paid labourers in agriculture or on family properties, which may explain the disparity between the rural and urban contexts.

Moreover, for many women children constitute a "life project" which is more important to them than work. Rahma and Latifa considered taking care of their children to be something far more worthy and necessary than any professional achievement. But social reality in Morocco is diverse. Other women,

sometimes those with similar educational and economic backgrounds, seek different types of conjugal life. Hafeza and Hayat, Rahma and Latifa's sisters, have pursued other options: Hafeza did not have children and Hayat did not want to abandon her professional life despite her marriage and her desire to have children. Hayat expressed no intention of leaving her job when she married, while Hafeza spends half a year working in France and half a year resting in Morocco. Both married Frenchmen. Although they have different qualifications and income levels – Hayat works in a library in Essaouira but she earns a lower salary than her sister who works in a fish canning factory in France – both mentioned the importance of contributing to the household income and not being economically dependent on their husbands.

Hafeza and her husband Pascal got to know each other as “penpals” who began writing to each other when Hafeza saw an advertisement for a sewing machine that Pascal had placed in a French magazine selling in Morocco. Hafeza told me the story in a romantic way and described how she originally had no intention of marrying a Frenchman (she was perhaps trying to distance herself from a friend who, I was told, married a much older French-Italian to improve her family's living conditions). Morocco is a country of emigration; mixed marriages are common but often disapproved of locally. A study of the marital trajectories of mixed couples in which one spouse was of Moroccan nationality reveals that in Morocco this kind of marriage is often considered a “transaction” as opposed to a love union (Therrien 2009). Economic motivation and acquiring residence in the spouse's country of origin are often seen as the main motives in such mixed marriages. By stating that she had never intended to marry a Frenchman, Hafeza strove to show that she did not identify with other Moroccan women who had married for more practical motives.

Marriage to a foreign man in Morocco is not allowed by the state unless he converts to Islam, unlike the case if the marriage is between a Moroccan man and foreign woman. Islam understands the father to be the principal figure responsible for children's reli-

gious education and for this reason, Muslim women are not allowed to marry someone of another religion. Moroccan women who marry foreign men are treated with ambivalence because they defy Muslim (and in Morocco, legal) codes and yet, at the same time, they enjoy a special social status since they travel to foreign countries and possess more economic security. Foreign men, particularly Europeans, are also considered to be less rigid and authoritarian than Moroccan men, since they do not always restrict women movements and ways of dressing.

Hafeza and Pascal's marriage is not particularly well accepted by her parents. Pascal is a large and expansive Breton, a trucker who told me about his long trips to my home country of Portugal thirty years ago, and who expressed some disdain for the Moroccan way of life, complaining about corruption, the dirty condition of the streets, etc. He is proud of being French. His comic personality cheers up family evenings, and he is especially popular among Hafeza's sisters, but he is also known for his disrespect towards his wife's religion. This is why Mohammed and Karima have not wanted to accept the fact that Hayat, eighteen years younger than her sister, also wanted to marry a Frenchman. They discussed the difficulties experienced by Hafeza in France, away from her family and her social environment. However, Pierre had lived in Essaouira for fifteen years and he made a good impression when he visited Hayat's parents to ask for her hand in marriage. Mohammed and Karima therefore ultimately accepted the marriage.

The matrimonial strategies pursued by Mohammed and Karima's daughters were markedly different from those of Karima, Mohammed, and his brothers. Among the older generation, choices were influenced by kinship relationships, especially because women did not work or study. For example, Mahdi married a woman (Malika) whose mother Afifa, after she was widowed by her first husband, married Mahdi's brother Tareq (see chart 1). When Mahdi's wife died, he married Iman, the widow of his brother Mustafa. Iman is, as already mentioned, the sister of Badr, Kaoutar's husband. Mohammed also married Karima, the daughter of his paternal

cousin. Kin proximity in marriage was thus preferred within the older generation, a practice that has disappeared with Mohammed's children.

Educational level is higher among Mohammed's children. Migration to larger cities to work or study has increased contact among men and women and thus extended the possibility of marriage outside of kinship ties, whereas women with less education living in rural areas still tend to marry according to family preferences and within their kin group. In Morocco, endogamy or marriages between cousins do not represent the majority of marriages, however. According to the 1995 National Family Survey (Courbage 1998), 16.1% women married for the first time with a member of their agnatic family and for 11.8% of women, their first marriage was to a uterine relative. Yet although constituting a minority, these marriages are statistically significant. The same study indicated that the probability of marrying outside the kinship group increased both with age for first marriage (68.3% among women getting married before twenty years of age, and 81.5% among those of more than twenty-five years of age), and in relation to level of education and literacy (30.1% of illiterate women were married to a person of their kin group as opposed to 17.5% among those who attended secondary education or higher). These data suggest that greater age and increased assets such as education enlarge marital choice, as it was the case with Mohammed's children.

### **Conclusions: Romantic Love and Women's Autonomy**

This brief tour inside several co-resident households is a case study of family relations in Morocco from a chronological perspective. Through Mohammed and Karima's household we enter into this family's compound dynamics and can follow some of its trajectories. In the older generation, marriage is defined by kinship relations; the marriage arrangements of the younger generation have been characterized by free choice. New couples usually settle where men find a job and women sometimes prefer to stay at home.

Although women seek greater autonomy from

their extended families as we have seen with the expansion of co-residential units, this does not necessarily mean they conceive of marriage as assigning the same roles for men and women. Rahma and Latifa are women who could have had jobs but decided to abandon their professional life to stay at home and take care of their children. For them, family entails different responsibilities for men and women. Hafeza and Hayat think differently; they do not want to depend on their husbands' salaries. Finally, women's search for autonomy co-exists with women's self-discipline, as we have seen with the story of Iman. Although Moroccan families are adapting to recent social changes through different coping strategies, this does not necessarily mean they are facing a transition from extended traditional familial arrangements to nuclear modern domestic units.

The Moroccan state does not intervene directly in family planning, but the reform of Family Law in 2004 is symptomatic of drastic changes in the conjugal unit. This is due in part to a changing conception of women rights. Nowadays, and although the law is not always applied, women can ask for divorce without resort to proof,<sup>9</sup> they can choose whom to marry without the approval of older male family members, and men are not legally considered the head of the couple (Mounir 2011). The lengthy public debate on the Family Law (Buskens 2003), its final reform promoted by the king and the proliferation of women's associations in Morocco have encouraged women to seek legal advice in order to defend their rights. Liberal and Islamic feminists have also contributed to the circulation of discourses about women's rights and the ideal of couples being united by love (see, e.g., Mernissi [1985]2011) without the intrusion of elder family members.

At the same time, Turkish soap operas and Indian television series, especially those produced in "Bollywood," are very popular among Moroccans and circulate images of couples united by romantic love. The king himself has introduced several changes in his personal life, showing the "royal couple" as a symbol of a modern monarch (Vermeren 2011). He ended his father's harem and introduced his wife to Moroccan society, posing with their children for



magazines and national newspapers in a manner similar to European royal families. The king's father, Hassan II, had always kept his wives secluded. The presentation of the king's private life in public has signalled his interest in a different model of monarchy and family. But what is striking in Morocco is that these images co-exist with high rates of unemployment and illiteracy and the almost total lack of social policies towards families (Chekroun 1996; Daoudi 1998). The conjugal couple is not accessible to everyone. The limited scope of the state in offering welfare policies is one of the reasons why many couples cannot secure their financial autonomy and must depend on solidarity with the broader kin group.

This case study has shown how these processes take place in families. The middle and lower classes are affected differently, since economic and social opportunities define house arrangements, the couples' ability to provide for themselves, and the importance of education in establishing a conjugal home. But it also shows how these marital dynamics co-exist with patrilocal and patrilineal practices and ideologies that have withstood major macro-economic and social transformations in Moroccan society.

## Notes

- 1 This article is a result of my doctoral thesis in anthropology titled *Authority and Autonomy: Conjuality and Feminine Lives in Essaouira, Morocco* (2014). The research was funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology of the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science. I am indebted to my supervisors, Professors João Pina Cabral and Maria Cardeira da Silva, for their advice and support.
- 2 Names of towns and people have been changed to ensure anonymity.
- 3 *A mujamm'a sakanyya* is a residential compound which includes a number of houses or domestic residential units.
- 4 *A shaykh* is a man of a certain age, respected for his experience and knowledge, especially in religious matters, but also for writing and maintaining bureaucratic records.
- 5 One of the principal Islamic celebrations, in which every family with economic means slaughters a sheep to celebrate the sacrifice that God asked of Abraham.

6 I have carried out fieldwork in Essaouira between 2010 and 2012, and there I met Hayat, who became my friend and introduced me to her relatives living in Hanchane. I often went to Hanchane to visit this family, staying in Mohammed and Karima's household. In Essaouira I made observations and interviews with a women's association that supports victims of domestic violence.

7 Crapanzano (1985: 7).

8 The matrimonial tutor is a man considered responsible for the marriage arrangements of his family's female relatives. Usually it is the bride's father or older brother. He discusses the marriage conditions with the groom's family, especially the terms of the bridewealth.

9 Until the 2004 reform on the Family Law, women could ask for divorce in the following situations: the failure of the husband to meet one of the conditions stipulated in the marriage contract, default of maintenance, absence, injury, proven addiction or contagious disease, abandonment, and continence.

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