

**MOHAMED ARKOUN**

interviewed by

**TASSADIT YACINE**

*Women's role  
in Kabyle society*

Translated from the French by  
Robert Waterhouse

# Mohamed Arkoun

who died in September 2010 at the age of 82 is reputed for his work on Islamic history and thought. This Algerian intellectual, philosopher and historian taught for over 30 years in the most prestigious French universities and lectured widely throughout the world before and after his retirement. His interests extended beyond the historical to encompass contemporary Islamic Studies. He was a proponent of Islamic modernism and humanism and a critic of Muslim reformism that refused to take into consideration the context of the modern world. He pleaded for a systematic identification and destruction of prejudices and stereotypes both about the West and Islam. He was first and foremost a man of dialogue.

As Tassadit Yacine points out in her introduction to this dialogue with Mohamed Arkoun which took place in 2000, he was also very knowledgeable about his own Kabyle Berber culture, and its oral and popular aspects. His village, Taourirt Mimoun, in the predominantly Berber region of northern Algeria, was a reservoir of living traditions. He relates how he grew up in the heart of this area, shaped by the essentially practical way of life.

Arkoun's desire to reconcile the demands of reason and contemporary science with surviving traditions of a great religion makes him a singular observer among his generation. Tassadit Yacine wanted to discuss with him the period in his life when the strength of village culture had to face an external law, that of Islam which was not accepted by peasant traditions. In 1951, when still a young student at Algiers University, he organised a conference in his home village on the role of women in Kabylie. This event made a strong impression on what was then the administrative unit (douar) of his community, the Ath Yenni. (For the anthropological interpretation of this, see "Avec Mouloud Mammeri à Taourirt-Mimoun", in *Awal*, 1991).

**TASSADIT YACINE:** *Tell us a little about the circumstances surrounding this conference.*

**MOHAMED ARKOUN:** In 1950 Driss Mammeri returned from Morocco where his family were living and became famous for being the first young doctor in our village. Until then the sizeable population of Ath Yenni was served only by a dispensary run by the White Sisters at Ath Larba. When, aged three, I was struck down in high summer by enteritis this dispensary saved my life. My mother was always moved by memory of the Sister who saved me. Driss added to his family's prestige by being a real doctor speaking the language of his fellows. He, with other young people, was taken by the idea of starting a rural centre (modelled on what, in 1960s France, was called a *maison de la culture*). They launched a programme of seminars. I had the unexpected honour of leading the first on a subject which, for two reasons, already engrossed me: the findings I had just made at the Algiers faculty on so-called Muslim law and the clearly different status assigned to Kabylie women by a common law practice existing before the arrival of Islam and in force until Algeria's 1962 independence. It seemed to me there was an urgent need to try to explain that difference, to show the historical and cultural gap between what we called Islam and Berber cultural codes, and thereby awaken people's critical understanding not just in Kabylie but in the whole Maghreb region - which was, we knew, rife with nationalist liberation debate.

Recalling this 50 years later, after so many good and bad experiences affecting the Maghreb population, is for me a source both of pride and of profound sadness: pride at having had a sort of enlightened intuition about the contradictions which would dominate the subsequent history of the Maghreb; sadness at witnessing the constant, outright and sovereign rejection by every political elite of anything that might help the development of a critical awareness of social scientists and intellectuals in the Maghreb region. You only have to consider the struggles and the current debate on the position of women in the Maghreb to see the historical reach of these comments.

**T.Y.:** *Why particularly choose to talk about women?*

**M.A.:** I was sensitive to this area because I was myself raised entirely by women. Throughout my childhood I was surrounded by women - my mother plus four paternal unmarried aunts and two married ones who often visited. My father, like many Kabyle men, had been forced to travel to support a family with too many heads. He "exiled" himself far away at Ain el-Arba near Oran, where he worked as a tailor, then

ran a small grocery, from 1908 until his death in 1979. To save money my father made very short visits to the family he had left behind in Kabylie until he was prevented by Robert Lacoste's notorious blockade in 1957.

As a child, my aunts poured all their maternal feelings onto me. They argued strongly with my mother about their right to express their affections. In particular my oldest aunt, who recently died aged 105, went further than her sisters in expressing her maternal instincts:

**YVONNE SAMAMA.** *Atlas marocain.* 2000.



she always treated me as her own son. The resulting conflicts hurt my mother and introduced me to family problems well-known throughout patriarchal societies. As the oldest of eight brothers and sisters I personally experienced the emotions described by Camille Lacoste-Dujardin in "*Des mères contres des femmes*".

I grew up in an environment where, as the only boy in the family (my younger brother, born six years after me, himself died of enteritis) and in the absence of my father, I had quickly to step into the domestic and communal duties of being the only male in the family. For example, from the age of 12 I was expected to chaperone my aunts whenever they went out. This was the rule of the honour code. I also represented my family at village councils (*tajmaat*): because women weren't allowed they sent me there, despite my tender years, to follow the discussions and learn for myself how the decisions taken affected life in the community.

**T.Y.:** *But your father did return every now and then?*

**M.A.:** Yes he did, but his visits were very spaced out at the time. And I was struck by something which really shocked me. When my father returned after a long absence (sometimes as much as three years) he embraced his children and his sisters but it was as if he and my mother were strangers; they had to hold back any expression of tenderness and, *a fortiori*, of love, until they were alone in their own room. They even avoided looking at each other or speaking between themselves. Later, when I studied Islamic practices relating to man-woman relations, I tried to understand the role of accepted religion and that of Kabyle (Berber) customs in the areas which so intrigued me.

**T.Y.:** *So what was the status of Kabyle women at that time?*

**M.A.:** Women enjoyed certain kinds of freedom forbidden by what the Koran calls *muhsanat* - being isolated from looks and contact. A woman could not go out alone into the fields, or to the spring, or even to visit other women in the village; as I've noted, she had to be accompanied by a male, even a very young one. An elderly and respectable woman could assume the role of protector required by the honour code...A group of women could also go to the field, to the spring or to visit each other.

The disparity in status between men and women showed itself also in the way work was shared out. Men returning from the field walked without a load whilst women had to carry firewood or a heavy basket of fruit and vegetables on their backs. Worse still, if the

family had a donkey the man rode it; the woman shared the load with the donkey.

Is it "better" for women to be confined to domestic chores – as the fundamentalists demand today – or to be part of the outside world with men so that they work together? The question was not put in that way in traditional society. Back home in the evening, women were anyway faced with all the tasks around the house. Women's emancipation in a contemporary context rests on a philosophical redefinition of human beings beyond conventional status or religious law predating modern times.

**T.Y.:** *Were there no exceptions to the general status of Kabyle women?*

**M.A.:** My maternal grandmother, having given birth to many children, was discarded by her husband for a younger wife who also bore several children. When her own children attained important positions in the community she was freed from the constraints binding spinsters and wives: she could go between villages on her own, stop on the way to chat with men, offer an opinion on subjects discussed by men, even say what she believed to be right and gain the respect of men in certain areas.

My paternal grandmother could also be seen as an exception. Because she worked as a midwife she escaped the restrictions placed on other women. She had proved herself by delivering babies, having herself had many children and having fulfilled the role of wife and mother. Her rôle as a social worker won her freedom and all-round respect within the district or "people" (*l'arch*) of Ath Yenni. Her changed status was marked by several explicit signs: men went out of their way to greet my grandmother by her family name of Ghnima Ath Waarab. They openly honoured her and did jobs for her; there was no question of ignoring her advice or of trying to prevent her involvement in a variety of roles. This suggests that the cultural codes did allow for adjustments of the normal rigid system as described by Bourdieu under the broad heading of *sens pratique*, (commonsense).

**T.Y.:** *On the other hand, this ensures that boys' behaviour is 'reproduced' by the honour code and by social rituals which perpetuate inequality in the way roles and work are divided and in the status of men and women.*

**M.A.:** Quite correct. I remember the aunt who wanted to be my second mother scolded me when, accompanying her to the fields one day, I chose out of respect for her to walk on the verge of the path so that she could take the more level track. For my aunt, the

man – even if a child – must always take priority, leaving the less favourable course to the woman, even if she were older and eminently respectable.

**T.Y.:** *So you could say that men's 'virility' stems from the way women implicitly accept secondary status.*

**M.A.:** Absolutely. During a dispute between my village and a neighbouring one, Taourirt el-Hajjaj, over a prized spring called *Thala b-omsedh*, the situation got so bad that firearms were in the offing. Imagine, although barely an adolescent, I was urged by my mother and my aunts to stand alongside other male villagers in a gesture of solidarity, demonstrating that my family was there too. But I was incapable of using a rifle, and anyhow our family didn't own one. Because my father was absent I had – according to them – to show that I was a real man, part of the group solidarity which guarantees personal safety. So it is quite right to say that this virility is fed by an irresistible moral force of mothers, wives, sisters and aunts who prefer to push their most precious providers towards probable death rather than bring dishonour on the family.

Note that these codes were still functioning in Kabylie after 100 years of French rule. In practice Kabylie operated as an autonomous region without a police force, without courts, without tax collectors, without any direct administration until the 1950s. There's no doubt that women played a major role in educating boys as well as girls in all the many requirements of *sens pratique*.

**TASSADIT YACINE** is a professor at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales. She is the author of *Poésie berbère et identité*, of *L'izli ou l'amour chanté en kabyle* (Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme) and of *Les voleurs de feu* (La Découverte). She edits *Awal*, the Berber studies revue.