

Arranging the Bones: Culture, Time, and In/equality in Berber Labor Organization

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the organization of collective labor for irrigation canal maintenance in a High Atlas village, an organization that compensates for the fluctuation of available labor over the domestic cycle of individual households. Such labor transactions between households are accomplished by employing several different, and seemingly incompatible, cultural logics: a tradition of division by five, an emphasis on the importance of agnatic kin, a belief in the natural authority of elder over younger men, and an ideal equality among all men. Empirically the groups forged by villagers are fair and unfair according to different specific types of equality under consideration and, especially, the temporal framework employed. This integration of different forms of inequality and the importance of timeframes to their operation bears on anthropological and economic theory, and the practical aims of development.*

KEYWORDS *Inequality, Berbers, labor organization, household dynamics, development*

The village of Tadrar¹ is an assemblage of mud and stone houses etched into a mountainside ninety kilometers south of Marrakech. It sits 1,500 meters above sea level in a valley carved by a small river, the Agoundis. All 212 residents of Tadrar speak Berber,² most of them exclusively, and they support themselves growing barley, almonds and walnuts in more than a thousand small, steeply terraced plots. These small plots are irrigated by an elaborate canal system that draws water from far up the valley and distributes it via seven main canals with innumerable offshoots and ditches. As of 1998 the canals were constructed purely of rock, mud and a few logs; the engineering is impressive. Using nothing but hand tools and gravity villagers effectively transport a continuous supply of water across several kilometers of precipitous mountain while the river that sustains the operation surges from a trickle in the late summer to a torrent in the early spring.

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This paper focuses on the organization of collective labor by which this canal network is maintained, an organization known locally as the *kham*s, from the Arabic for 'five'. In the simplest terms this involves dividing the adult men of the village into five work groups. These five *kham*s work groups are isomorphic with – but not the same as – the three *ighsan* of the village, Berber for 'bones' or lineages. The social operation that animates the *kham*s is thus the 'arranging of the bones', the transmutation of three lineages (comprised of twenty-seven independent households) into five working *kham*as, or fifths.³

Such arranging solves several practical problems. First and most fundamentally, households must be assembled into larger units because they cannot contribute to the communal labor pool at the same rate over the course of their lifetimes. The organization of households into larger groups allows for families at the peak of their productive power to compensate for relatives at more vulnerable points in the domestic cycle. Lineages – the primary, locally sensible way to reckon relatives – cannot be used for this amalgamation because they are too unequal demographically. The largest lineage contains more than four times as many households as the smallest, and thus a rearranging of the 'bones' is necessary to create viable work groups that are seen to be balanced or 'fair'. Both household and *kham*s organization facilitates the transfer of labor across time spans longer than any individual maintenance project, or, indeed, any individual life. The organization of these transfers depends on a matrix of practical and cultural logics that integrate various temporal patterns and social levels of inequality.

Theoretically the *kham*s division provides us with a lens through which to view two sets of issues of scholarly contention, the vexed but essential integration of equality and inequality (especially across time), and the practical importance of accounting for this (in development schemes, for instance). As Amartya Sen has argued, questions of equality always concern the equality of some particular thing: equality of some sort is accompanied by inequality of another (1992:viii). The *kham*s is no exception to this rule, and I will argue that the socially just, integrative functions of the institution are accompanied by a consolidation of power in the hands of the best-situated members of the most fortunate lineage. The way this is accomplished – the combination of several different logics of equality and inequality – suggests that the *kham*s is both the product of, and framework for, practice.

This is of more than academic significance. Because the *kham*s is now being encouraged as an efficient and equitable system by 'outside' actors, there are material and theoretical issues at stake that extend beyond this small corner

of Morocco. The World Bank, the Peace Corps, and Moroccan national agencies are working with the people of Tadrar on projects ranging from school construction to the creation of a potable water system. In these projects the outside agencies generally provide most of the money and supplies, while the people of Tadrar provide the labor. Not surprisingly, villagers use the *kham*s divisions to allocate responsibilities for this labor. Such interventions amplify the local effects of the *kham*s, skew its long-term function of equalizing some household differences, and lend a transnational dimension to the arranging of the bones. The *kham*s is a case study that reveals a way that different notions of in/equality are integrated. It shows how political and economic processes are driven by the temporal rhythms of social life, but are actualized through cultural valuations of different kinds of fairness. The *kham*s thus affords an opportunity to ventilate academic discussions of inequality with ethnographic data and examine the operation of culture in practical life.

Equality and Authority

The ethnographic core of my argument involves a single village, a social unit important because it functions as an irrigation collective. This is not to deny the porous nature of village boundaries or the importance of migrants to the economy of Tadrar, but for the purposes of canal maintenance the village is the relevant social unit.⁴ Importantly, the village is constituted by other, even more fundamental social units – households, or *tikat*in (sing. *takat*). Most *tikat*in have a nuclear family at their core and 'because people accept the meaningfulness of the family, they enter into relations of production, reproduction and consumption' (Rapp & Ross in Lem 1999:105). Family is a larger category than *takat*, however, and the latter term presumes people who share an oven (literally a *takat*), which is to say specifically the people who pool their labor and have a share in the rewards. Sometimes family members live in different *tikat*in and sometimes *tikat*in contain individuals who are not family members. Most often *takat* members live together, but shepherds or migrants outside the village are still considered part of a *takat* if they return their wages to the village and if they can rely on their *takat* for support in the event they lose their outside work. Everybody in Tadrar knows who belongs to which *takat*.⁵ It is not an ambiguous category.

The central dilemma in organizing communal labor for the requirements of the canal system lies in the dynamics of households. Households are not isomorphic or static. They are shaped differently and have different needs and abilities at different points in their lifecycles – like the individuals who

constitute them. Just as we cannot ask young children to do the same work as teenagers or adults, households at their inception cannot contribute to the village as households in their prime can. Simply, households cannot contribute equal amounts of labor because they do not have equal amounts to contribute; indeed, some have absolutely nothing to contribute *at a particular time*. The transfer of labor across time for the purposes of communal projects requires social institutions larger than the individual household. This is not unique to Tadrar.⁶

Cultural understandings of equality and authority facilitate this fundamental household labor exchange, and these lie at the base of the *khamis* system. Ideally, all adult men are thought to be 'equal' to one another. Each should have an equal weight in village affairs, but should also be master of his own household. This is not to say that women and younger men lack their own domains of control, or that such relatively disempowered people lack ingenious forms of resistance to various types of authority.⁷ The point is that men within a household are organized in a clear hierarchy according to age (especially fathers over sons), while adult men in general are seen to exist in hypothetical equality to one another.

This is partly what has allowed Berbers to be celebrated as 'egalitarian'.⁸ There has traditionally been little sense of overall village 'authority', nobody to force men to toe any particular line, though this is not to say that there were not political powers beyond the village level.⁹ Today, it is important to note, the central state is (seemingly) omnipresent in Morocco and its influence extends into the most remote corners of the kingdom. The region of Tadrar has a *caid*, the local representative appointed by the government, and he is the final arbiter of disputes, with the power to fine and even jail those he determines to be in the wrong. There are also various elected and appointed officials and assistants to the *caid* who are sometimes sought to adjudicate disagreements.

Still, intra-village conflicts invariably involve related men whose relatives are not keen to allow powerful, but largely ignorant outsiders to intervene. Villagers are especially reluctant to seek outside intervention in delicate, highly localized and ethically complicated labor exchanges. The *caid* may be called to deal with theft or disputes over rights to land – which usually involve clearly specifiable property, contracts or ownership. The *caid* is unlikely to be called to pass judgment on labor relations within a village because these involve what James Scott terms 'métis', ad hoc and malleable forms of knowledge embedded in local experience and, in this case, kinship dynamics (1998:311).

States and state agents are infamously clumsy handlers of the rights and responsibilities connected to such localized practical knowledge. The *khamis* is enforced through social pressure, especially the dominance of elder men, and is significantly bolstered by appeals to the fairness of the operation.

Bones and Fifths

The villagers of Tadrar organize communal labor by putting a set of cultural concepts to work, by employing what they see as the natural basis of gerontocracy and patriarchal authority to preserve an egalitarian ideal between household heads. In schematic terms, this involves arranging the village households into five groups and charging each with providing four men for the duration of any communal project.¹⁰ The particular men representing any group may come and go during a day or over the duration of a project, but the group as a whole must provide four adult men for the job until the work is completed. The negotiations over which men will represent each fifth (and who will do what job) are conducted within the fifth. The main complicating factors are thus who is grouped with whom in a fifth, and how to exercise authority within it.

Ideally each fifth would comprise an *ighs*, a lineage, and the patriarch of the lineage could decide which of his sons and grandsons was going to work on any given day: which man to send shepherding, which to irrigate, and who would attend to communal canal maintenance. In this way the *khamis* frees patriarchs from having to compel fellow patriarchs to work – an unacceptable and largely impossible task – and allows each man to lord over his own descendents, a perfectly legitimate exercise of authority. Unfortunately, biology and history have not cooperated. As Table 1 shows, the three lineages, the *ighsan* in Tadrar, are so demographically unequal as to require significant rearranging for any practical purpose; we cannot simply ask that each *ighs* provide a given number of workers without eliciting claims of unfairness.

Table 1: Lineages (Ighsan or 'Bones') in Tadrar

Ighsan (sing. Ighs)	# of Households
Ait Yous	18
Id Hamad	5
Idzdo	4

However, even if *ighsan* themselves cannot be used to divide labor, the ideas that underpin them are still useful. As we will see, the logic of the *khamis* divisions is congruent with the 'natural' organization of the bones, or lineages, of the village. The analytical issue is the extent of the match between the *ighsan* and

the *khams*, one dependent on the political skill of the men negotiating the organization. Viewing Table 1, and given the goal of 'fairness' in communal labor allotment (among equal household heads, at least) the question seems to be what to do with the Ait Yous. Dividing them into thirds would bring the average number of households in line with the other two *ighsan*, and would yield the fifths that are culturally desirable,¹¹ but which Ait Yous households should be grouped together? The question is not purely mathematical, but partly genealogical and most centrally political. Today nobody in Tadrar readily describes himself as being Ait Yous, but rather as a member of the Ben Oushen, Lukstaf and Arbuz families. Nobody I questioned could specify the exact point of division between these three branches of the Ait Yous, but all asserted they were separate. Only one man was interested enough in the connection to explain that the Ben Oushen, Lukstaf and Arbuz families were in fact related, and to speculate how.

Table 2: Historical *Ighsan* and Contemporary Lineage Affiliations

Historical <i>Ighs</i>	Contemporary Lineage/Family Name	Sublineage Affiliation (if any)	# Households
Ait Yous	Ait Ben Oushen	Ait Ali	3
Ait Yous	Ait Ben Oushen	Ait Hussein	3
Ait Yous	Ait Ben Oushen	Ait Bil Qas	1
Ait Yous	Ait Ben Oushen	Ait Haj Ouahman	7
Ait Yous	Lukstaf		1
Ait Yous	Arbuz		3
Id Hamad	Id Baj		3
Id Hamad	Ohomo		1
Id Hamad	Belaid		1
Idzdo	Idzdo		4

As Table 2 demonstrates, dividing the Ait Yous into Ben Oushen, Lukstaf and Arbuz families helps, but does not solve, our problem. The three families remain manifestly unequal in terms of labor power. Even lumping the Lukstaf and Arbuz together and opposing them to the Ben Oushen still leaves us with too many Oushen for a balanced division of labor. Somehow, to get anything like equality in the *khams* labor groups, we will need to do more than lump people together who may not feel related (such as the Arbuz and Lukstaf families). We need to create a division *within* a group of people who do view themselves as related, people who can and do trace their ancestry to

a single man only a few generations ago, and who all have the same last name stamped in their government identity cards. We have to divide the Ben Oushen.

The sublineages listed in Table 2 are the obvious choice for such divisions, but before examining how the people of Tadrar – and most especially the Ben Oushen – actually undertake to divide themselves, it is worth acknowledging that the Id Hamad *ighs* is also conceptually partitioned. The Id Baj, Ohomo, and Belaid lineage members could not confidently explain their connection as Id Hamad, but they do accept themselves as related. The Id Hamad have the right basic demographic dimensions to form a fifth in the *khams* divisions, and so the question of the fairness of an internal division (or a larger association with another lineage) does not readily arise. Simply, a lineage that is conceptualized as such – as biologically integral, however vaguely – needs no justification in the minds of the people of Tadrar. It is when known lineages are subdivided along lines that follow one branch of a genealogical tree rather than another that charges of unfairness and political opportunism arise. This will become clearer in a moment. For now, note that only the Idzdo remain both an undivided *ighs*, an acknowledged lineage, and a viable *khams* group for the purposes of communal labor.

Table 3: The *Khams* Divisions

<i>Khams</i> group	Lineage (or Sublineage)	Total # of Households	Total # of Adult Men
I.	Ait Ali (Ben Oushen)	3	9
	Ait Hussein (Ben Oushen)	3	4
	Total	6	13
II.	Ait Bil Qas (Ben Oushen)	1	2
	Ait Haj Ouahman (Ben Oushen)	7	12
	Total	8	14
III.	Lukstaf	1	4
	Arbuz	3	6
	Total	4	10
IV.	Id Baj	3	7
	Ohomo	1	1
	Belaid	1	1
	Total	5	9
V.	Idzdo	4	9
	Total	4	9

Table 3 illustrates the *kham*s divisions in Tadrar for most sorts of communal labor. In terms of households we see that the five groups are not very equal. The first *kham*s group has six households, the second eight, then four, five and four households respectively. Having one labor group with twice as many households as two other groups would seem to indicate a breach of the main operating principle of fairness. However, this organization has advantages. First, it follows genealogical lines. The Ben Oushen as a whole are bisected, but none of the four Ben Oushen sublineages are internally divided. Since each of these four sublineages descends from one of the four sons of the original 'Oushen',¹² each at least began with approximately one fourth of the original Oushen landholdings. In terms of property, then, the *kham*s division approximates one notion of equality, at least among the Oushen.

Second, the household heads within the *kham*s groups are brothers, half brothers, fathers and sons, or patrilineal parallel cousins – close blood relationships with clear lines of authority over descendents, all of whom are in the same *kham*s group. This means that each subsection of the first two *kham*s groups can operate with the logic of a patrilineal descent group, or very nearly so. Also, if we look at the total number of available adult men in each *kham*s group there seems more balance than at the level of households. This is primarily because the seven Ait Haj Ouahman *tikatin* average fewer than two men per household. Since these seven households have only as much land as the one Ait Bil Qas household, we see that the labor rich/property poor are joined with the property rich/labor poor.

In sum, the *kham*s seems to achieve several kinds of fairness and manages to organize labor groups in ways that make use of culturally naturalized patriarchal and gerontocratic authority. While retaining the logic of the bones, patrilineal relatedness, *kham*s groups are nevertheless organized so as to have approximately the same number of able-bodied men available. All that is necessary is to group some families into putative lineages, and break the one large, intact lineage into a set of sublineages. In some cases, rich sublineages like the Ait Bil Qas (a single household) are paired with fecund but resource-poor households in sublineages such as the Ait Haj Ouahman. In all cases, *kham*s groups allow for labor to be consolidated at levels beyond the household, and thus allow households at vulnerable points in their cycles to be assisted by 'relatives', a category that in Tadrar begins with blood relations on the father's side. This amounts to a sort of labor tax on more powerful households in order to assist people unable to contribute to the communal labor pool at any particular time.

Qualifying Inequality

The *kham*s appears designed to insure fairness over time, and in fact it does ameliorate differences between weaker and more powerful households. However, this does not mean that we ought to categorize it as *essentially* fair or, based on this, characterize Berber culture or society as being 'egalitarian' in anything other than a relative sense. Several forms of inequality remain embedded in the *kham*s and, more interestingly, some forms of inequality are in fact exacerbated by it.

Perhaps the most obvious injustice concerns property ownership.¹³ My neighbors in Tadrar admitted significant differences in the amount of land owned by different *kham*s groups, assertions that seem borne out by the data in Table 4. The parts of the Ait Yous *ighs* who are not Ben Oushen (the members of *Kham*s III), seem to be worst off, with approximately half the number of fields and less than half the total time for irrigation as their fellow *ighs* members (who comprise *Kham*s I and II). Clearly, as a whole the division of the Ait Yous into two Ben Oushen parts and one non-Ben Oushen part, benefits the Ben Oushen. The division follows genealogical lines and is in some local sense 'fair' because of this. In another sense, however, the constituents of *Kham*s III – the three Arbuz and one Lukstaf families – are significantly disadvantaged. They own much less than a fifth of the village fields, but are required to do a fifth of the labor to maintain the communal canal system. They are quite willing to expound on this inequality, which is to say that the members of *Kham*s III are not mystified by their position in the *kham*s system even if they lack an idiom to effectively challenge it.

Table 4: Comparative Land Ownership and Irrigation Time

<i>Kham</i> s	# of Fields	# of Irrigation Days per Cycle ¹⁴
I.	252	95.48
II.	215	90.30
III.	122	40.23
IV.	343	62.28
V.	206	51.76

There are significant differences within *kham*s groups too. We will examine the case of *Kham*s I in a moment, but it is worth noting first that within the Idzdo, who are the only intact *ighs* who comprise a *kham*s (Number V in Table 4), the wealthiest household has 85 fields and over 28 irrigation days, while the two poorest households have half as many fields and a quarter as much

