Berbers have long provided a crucial ethnographic base for thinking about culture and society. From Ibn Khaldun's theories of civilizational oscillation to Durkheim's notions of mechanical and organic solidarity, from Gellner's arguments about the relationship between liberty and equality in "segmentary societies" to Bourdieu's highly influential "practice theory": North Africans, and Imazighen in particular, have served as the raw material for pondering the largest questions of social order and meaning by some of the world's most eminent theorists. Surprisingly, however, what unites these diverse strands of inquiry is utter inattention to Amazigh women. This article asserts that undervaluing the significance of women to Amazigh social life has led scholars to misrepresent the "traditional" rural situation (in Morocco at least), and has mislead a variety of influential theoretical positions. We make this case by focusing on the dynamics of women's social labor in a particular village in the mountains south of Marrakech, dynamics that demonstrate the importance of women as actors in their own right and as critical facilitators of male social action.

We begin by discussing the central importance of households and how villagers understand women to constitute households, both ideally and materially. Households here are not a "feminine sphere." They are the fundamental unit of production and consumption for all people in rural Morocco, and as such their dynamics undergird the cooperation of villagers for more communal physical and political labor. Second, we outline the role women play in amalgamating property so that men can establish households independent of their male agnates, thus we show how "independent" men are produced by women -- working alone or together. Third, we show how one woman operates a household alone, while men, by definition and in practice, cannot do so. This woman's use of wage laborers and matrilateral family connections to maintain her independence is an illuminating counterexample to the simple "patriarchy" sometimes promulgated by scholars. Fourth we show how women facilitate inter-village social connections for men -- precisely because women transcend the patrilineal social order, moving between highly localized lineages for marriages and other reasons, and enabling men access to a wider social landscape that would be largely alien to them. The fluid, ad hoc nature of these feminine connections makes them difficult to qualify and inelegant to theorize, which may be why they have been downplayed by scholars. Finally we show how rural women establish and maintain social connections outside villages by circulating children through feminine social networks, especially to establish access to urban benefits such as education, jobs, and health care. The importance of this counterpart to male migration has rarely been explored.

These social dynamics point to the centrality of women to Amazigh social organization, and the failure of ethnographers to see beyond constructions provided by male informants, especially elite male informants. Such ethnographic blindness has led to fatal lacunae in the work of some of our best theoreticians (as noted in Goodman 2003) and has opened anthropological inquiry with realist sympathies to devastating critique. Comprehending rural Moroccan Amazigh society requires attention first of all to the production of material life, and in Morocco the concept of "family" and the constitution of "households" are fundamental to such production, and significantly depend upon women. Failure to attend to women has allowed us to privilege patrilineality and tribes over households, and has thus skewed our most basic understandings of the rural Amazigh social order and the grand theories drawn from that order.