

FRATILE AND POLITICS: THE POSITION OF
WOMEN IN DOSHMAN-ZIARI

In the world-wide debate on the position of women, Middle Eastern anthropologists have been attempting to discern the role of women in societies with a predominantly 'patriarchal' ideology, in which, it is assumed, women have no influence in economic and political decision making. Most of the ethnographic studies on the Middle East have been made by men, and, in Islamic societies in particular, it can be suggested that their ~~access~~ access to information from women has been restricted, and that their understanding has been shaped by the male perspective. C. Nelson in a review of the literature makes a similar point and then proposes that:

From the ethnographic literature on nomadic society there is ample evidence to support the idea that the woman defines herself and her position in terms of values centred about the man. She then uses the male centred value system to attain her own ends by way of manipulative techniques that force man to recognize female power without losing his self esteem (C. Nelson 1973:56).

While Nelson's use of 'manipulative techniques' and 'female power' implies a female conspiracy, her suggestion of the pivotal role of the value system between the position of the two sexes is important. From my material collected during fieldwork¹ in one section (ta'ifeh) of the Doshman-ziari division of the Mamasani tribe in Southern Iran, I would like to advance on Nelson's position by arguing that two models of society are being used, and are connected by the common adherence to a set of concepts. The clarity of the dual models centring on a common interpretation of these concepts is becoming clouded with the changes that are occurring with the introduction of teaching as a profession for both men and women. However, the present paper is limited to a discussion of the traditional structures which are still evident in the behaviour and attitudes of the majority of the villagers. One model of society is used by both sexes, especially when addressing outsiders, and can be termed the 'dominant model'.² The concepts which structure that model are accepted by the women, but by employing the obverse implications of their meaning and their interlinking, women obtain a degree of freedom of action and influence in social affairs from which the dominant model theoretically excludes them.

During several conversations with both male and female informants the attitude was often expressed that male children are much preferred, and the birth of a daughter is not a cause for celebration. The explanation given by male informants for this preference was that 'sons always stay with you, daughters leave'. Women on the other hand often remarked that their married daughters kept much closer contact with them and helped them more than their married sons. This was an obvious indication that while both men and women might express the same attitude, their stances might differ.

Men often validated the above statement by saying that as residence is patrilocal (that is, on marriage a son will build his house in his father's yard), and as rules of inheritance exclude women, men stay closer together, have common vested interests, and will support and protect each other. In contrast a woman may join the household of another agnatic set on marriage. One man explained this attitude more fully by saying that while all children are called descendants, sons are classified as oulad. My informant said that

the strength of a man is related to the number of members in his oulād. By this he was referring to the intensely competitive atmosphere in the community wherein, in order to survive, a man has to gain a reputation for his ability to defend himself and his possessions. The aridity of the land and the scarcity of resources mean that if a man wishes to retain his holdings (his land, vineyards, and herds), utilize them to best effect, and if possible expand them, he has to have a dependable labour force. Moreover, where political strength is still on occasion assessed in terms of the number of males a man can gather to fight for him, sons again can be depended upon for support more than any other relative or friend. Once a man has gained respect from the community he will then be valued as a political supporter, or might even be able to attain such a position of influence that he can gather a sufficiently large personal following to form the core of a factional grouping. With this in mind, my informant, only half-jokingly, said that 'a man who has five sons can become king'.

Within the prevailing conditions of competition, the oulād, the set of male siblings, is the only group within which it is possible to create an atmosphere of cooperation, confidence, and discretion. Male siblings try to work cooperatively. Even after the father dies, the brothers try to act together, retaining their father's holdings in common and presenting a united front to the community. Cooperative exploitation of resources used to be much more common than it is now, as none of the traditional economic activities (agriculture, grape production and animal husbandry) would alone provide a sufficient income. The economy therefore had to be mixed, and the most efficient method of attaining this was to divide the labour between brothers who held all the resources and the income in common. The eldest brother would then try to be a surrogate for the father, organizing the economic activities, the division of the income, and acting as guardian for his unmarried siblings. Nowadays, the expansion of the market economy along with low prices gained from the sale of food products, and the high rate of inflation, has meant that traditional economic activities have been devalued. People are beginning to look for a personal annual cash income they can invest, in trading or transport, or are leaving agricultural activities altogether to gain a salaried post as a teacher or gendarme. However, while joint economic enterprise between brothers is declining, it is still understood that if an elder brother publicly states an attitude or position it can be assumed that his brothers will concur. Thus the oulād is still considered a united group in political affairs and in the context of community decision making, even if the brothers' economic interests might be diversifying.

A man would not therefore expect his brothers to break the confidence and discretion obtaining between the members of the oulād. He would expect his brothers not to tell anyone about his affairs, reveal his interests, or disclose any information about the siblings which others could use to belittle or defeat him.

While oulād refers to the sons of a man who is still alive or who has only recently died, the word oulād can also be used for the male descendants of a man who was alive two or three generations ago. This is merely an extension of the meaning of the word. Agnatic cousins are the descendants of brothers who in their own time were sharing the greatest cooperation and confidence. There are very few descent groups of greater depth than three deceased ancestors, so by using brother in a metaphoric sense, oulād can generally refer to agnates.

Thus, after the sibling set, it is among agnates that the next level of confidence and solidarity can be hoped to be achieved. Beyond the agnatic set no confidence or solidarity can be depended upon, and very often it is accepted that between men who are not agnates there can rarely be more than distrust and rivalry.

Therefore, a man in search of security in this competitive society must attempt to maintain solidarity between his male siblings, then between his agnates, and then try to gain a following of others who look to him and his oulād for protection and who, by giving him their support, promote him to a position of influence within the community.

However, while all will applaud the ideal of oulād solidarity, it is precisely within the oulād that the greatest competition over resources can occur. While the eldest brother is acting as surrogate for the father, his brothers might feel that the division of income is unequal. After the division of the holdings, which is made with elaborate precautions to ensure equality, if one brother makes more of a success of exploiting his resources than another, claims will be made that the division was unfair. Even if a set of brothers can resolve internal differences, there are pressures from outside which produce friction. A set of brothers who can work effectively together will rise in prestige and gain political followers. They will then be a target for attack by similarly constituted groupings. An opposed group will sow discord between the brothers, and try to attract one brother into their camp, thus splitting the oulād and weakening it. When such a situation arises, others will say that the offender is 'not behaving like a brother', again referring to the ideal of fraternal solidarity.

The most important means by which they try to maintain oulād solidarity and attract the confidence and support of the other agnates and followers is by the choice of marriage partners for their agnates and their female siblings. Indeed, when an important oulād declined in importance in the village, it was said that this was 'because they had not sold their women wisely'. From a study of the most successful sibling sets, a pattern emerges from the distribution of their marriages.

Most often the eldest and most able member of a set of agnates will be married to the sister or daughter of a man who is more influential than himself. He will then support his father-in-law, in the hope that his father-in-law will protect his interests. Such protection from an influential man will then hopefully attract other men to him for protection. Then each of the sets of his agnatic cousins will usually be interlinked by marriage. If there are three sets of cousins, then three FBS-FBD marriages will effectively tie all the sibling sets together and reinforce the ideal of agnatic solidarity with affinity. The remaining brothers and sisters will be married to outsiders. These outsiders will either be people of the same standing as themselves who have interests in common with them, or people weaker than themselves who are looking for protection and from whom this agnatic set can expect support. Disaster begins to set in if one of these marriages to an outsider is to a man who becomes more influential than themselves, as they have then engaged in two such marriages. As a result the two sets of influential in-laws will both require support and might well be pulling the agnatic set in two different directions, thereby putting strain on the ideal of agnatic solidarity.

The choice of marriage partners is thus a constant preoccupation. There is a need to make an appropriate selection of in-laws which provides a balance; if one is more influential and offers protection, and others are less influential and offer support in return for protection then the agnatic set can maintain its solidarity and rise in influence within the community. If the selection of marriage partners, with time, does not provide such a balance of affinal ties, then not only does the strategy for gaining influence fail, but the position can be reversed, and the brothers themselves can be split by their mutually incompatible affinal alliances.

Thus from one point of view, the society can be seen as constituted of groups of males professing solidarity, but riven with potential frictions and hopefully held together by the careful choice of marriage partners, especially for their women. Women are excluded from membership of the oulād, which is a male unit, and are the responsibility and under the protection of their eldest brother. Thus according to this model, women do not stand as independent beings.

Complimentary to the idea of oulād, or perhaps on occasion in contradiction to it, is the idea that 'milk is dear'. That is, those who shared the same milk are cherished and close to each other. Thus while the idea of oulād emphasizes exclusively male membership and solidarity, the idea of milk-relatives ties members of both sexes into a matrilineage. The mother is treated with great respect even by her married sons, and often she acts to keep her sons and their wives united after their father has died. It is generally believed that sons who have mistreated their mothers will find that their life is not acceptable when they reach the afterworld. Perhaps the fact that sanctions for good behaviour towards one's mother are only enforced in the afterworld may be taken to indicate that the links uniting the matrilineage are weaker than those of the oulād. While matrilineage relationships are often called 'dear' and 'close', I never heard matrilineage associated with the idea of solidarity, which was expressed very frequently as one of the ideals of the oulād.

However, while milk-relatives are often talked of in affective terms, in practice men might look to their MBS or ZS for cooperation in a joint economic venture--and this is not always because their own agnatic set is small or weak. Indeed if we return to the oulād, and the sensible distribution of marriages for an agnatic set, the marriages with outsiders, and especially with those who are of equal standing, are often with matrilineal kin. Thus, in the model based on the oulād, the choice of marriage partners assumes some importance for matrilineage, even though it might not be clearly stated as such.

One of the reasons why contact with the mother's relatives is maintained is that women make the initial arrangements for a marriage. In the selection of marriage partners, just as the men are acting on considerations about how to maintain their economic resources and exploit them effectively, the women are faced with the problem that many of their domestic tasks need cooperation between two or more women. An isolated woman is faced with great problems. She cannot find a baby-minder when she makes her daily trip to collect water or when she does the washing in the stream. The weekly tasks like making bread, or the jobs of feeding her husband's guests are much more efficiently accomplished when done cooperatively. Thus, as residence in the village is mainly patrilocal, so that the village consists of clusters of houses of agnates, and as visiting between women is usually between neighbours, the desire of the women to stay close together is concordant with the idea from the oulād model that some marriages should be with agnatic cousins. Beyond

this the alternative marriage pattern, which would not leave the woman isolated, is with her maternal kin.

Thus when the women are making the first overtures for a marriage between their children, they have two considerations in mind. A wife knows where her husband's interests lie and what would be an acceptable marriage to him in terms of his economic and political designs. Secondly, a mother ensures that her daughters stay near her, and near each other, and that contact is maintained with her own kin. While a marriage between matrilineal relatives might be seen as such by the women, a man might consider a marriage between his daughter and his wife's relative as an affinal link with another set of agnates to establish the possibility of closer cooperation in economic and political affairs. Thus a marriage between two matrilineals is also a marriage between two oulāds. In this way, a mother is initiating a marriage tie in terms of her own interests, but her perception of her husband's interests usually makes the match acceptable to him, although he might have a different interpretation of the nature of the link.

The complication of this duality between the ideas of oulād and of milk-relatives is seen in the position of a woman on marriage. She is not a member of an oulād, as that is constituted only of males, but she is a member of a sibling set. Moreover, she does not lose that status on marriage. When she marries, she is joined to her husband's descent group, but she never breaks her ties with her natal group. This can be seen most clearly from the fact that even after she has had children, her brother is responsible for her protection, and if she behaves badly her brother's name, as well as the name of her children, is blemished by her act. It is just these dual ties of a woman which underlie the importance of marriages as a way of making alliances. A woman is the pivot between two descent groups--hopefully pulling them together. However, it is also this which makes the position of a married woman difficult, especially when she is married to a matrilineal relative of equal standing to her natal group. Her husband wishes her to attract her brothers into his support group while her brothers want her to draw her husband and his brothers towards support for themselves. She is between two oulāds, and is a member of neither, but associated with one by birth and the other by marriage. Her position is thus ambivalent. The strains on the oulād from the latent competition between brothers, and from threats to its coherence from outside, are augmented by the ambivalence of the position of a married woman. She has knowledge of the affairs of both oulāds which are both ideally the focus for secrecy and discretion, yet she is expected by both her brother and her husband at the same time to exercise discretion over the affairs of their own oulād, and to 'leak' on the affairs of the other. Thus by the nature of her position in terms of the ideal of the oulād she must be considered 'irresponsible' and 'unreliable'.

While her position between two oulāds leads a woman to be considered irresponsible and a source of discord, her position in her husband's descent group has the same effect. Women are blamed by their husband's brothers for the ultimate defeat of the ideal of fraternal cooperation, when they finally decide to divide the holdings inherited from their father. When brothers decide to establish their households as separate economic units there is a great disquiet, as the material base for cooperation between brothers is thereby removed and a new relationship of cooperation and trust has to be established between them on a less concrete foundation. Women are blamed for creating this situation.

One man explained the rationale behind this attitude by saying that whilst all his brothers were unmarried their interests were concordant, but when they all had wives and two or three children their interests diverged. Each brother became concerned with his own household and the interests of his children. One brother had fewer children than all the others so his consumption was less, and

he wanted cash for an investment which the other brothers could not afford. Then he had to choose between maintaining solidarity with his brothers against the interests of his own household, and dividing their property so that each household could manage their own affairs in the best interests of their children. Thus the wife becomes the key element in the contradiction between these two ideals. On marriage she is the member of her husband's descent group with the weakest ties to the oulād and she is only gradually bound to it through the birth of several children.

However, it is just the birth of these children which causes her to be the pivot around which the husband turns from his concern for oulād solidarity to a desire to act in the best interests of his own children, and thus to create a new oulād. Thus in the context of the oulāds, both as a sister and as a wife, a woman is necessarily in an ambivalent position, and will be considered 'irresponsible' and 'unreliable'.

Following the internal logic of the oulād model, if women are necessarily unreliable, the areas in which women can operate and be influential should be restricted. In this context, one often hears that 'women have no ekhtiār! This word has a multiplicity of meanings, but probably the best translation is that women have no choice or right to independent action. Complementing that phrase is the assertion that 'a woman's ekhtiār is in the hands of her husband'. Thus the husband takes responsibility for all affairs concerning the public face of the household, and his wife is theoretically excluded from exercising any responsibility or independent judgement in economic and political affairs. These are denoted as male domains; the wife's role is restricted to that of running the household, and she is thus theoretically restrained from acting in public in a way contrary to the interests of her husband and his oulād.

The idea that women have a restricted role in society is seen in many behavioural patterns. Within the household, when male guests arrive, the man acts as the public face of the household while the women remove themselves from the room and prepare tea and food outside. Often the women will not enter the room at all, and will engage a younger male relative to carry in the tea and serve the meal to the guests.

In the household division of labour the same impression is given. All the factors of production and all work and decision-making concerning the earning of the income are in the hands of the husband. Once the products have been brought to the house they come under the control of the wife. She is responsible for processing the agricultural and animal products, she can decide whether products set aside for domestic consumption can be given to neighbours in need, and she tells the husband in no uncertain terms what he must buy on his next trip to town. The collection and use of firewood can exemplify the demarcation line between the man's work outside the house and the woman's work inside the house. Men collect the firewood from the forests, and also break it up and stack it near the house ready for use. Women use the firewood, and if they find it insufficient or not broken up can refuse to cook bread for the household.

Thus the wife is in complete control of the domestic affairs of the household, including the upbringing of the children until they are of an age to move around independently outside the house and the yard. Meanwhile, the husband will only in periods of extremely intensive labour request assistance from his wife in any of the activities outside the house and the village. It is entirely his responsibility to provide an adequate income for the household.

Thus there is a demarcation of areas of responsibility: while women are not expected to engage in public affairs, men are not expected to interfere with the women's running of the households. Perhaps this latter aspect can be most clearly indicated by the fact that when the husband is at home, he occupies the place in the house on the side of the fireplace farthest from the door, which is on other occasions where guests are seated.

Although such behavioural patterns give the impression of a division between male/public and female/domestic, the oulād model demands more than this, for, if the woman is to be prevented from exhibiting the irresponsibility and unreliability inherent in her ambivalent position in the oulād model, then she should be prevented from having any independent social activity. That is, a woman should not be a social being. Even in societies where women are physically restricted by being in pardah this degree of seclusion from social activity cannot be achieved because the women still have their own kin, and concomitantly their own interests and desires, which at the very least they can pursue through contact with other women.

In Doshman-ziāri women are not so physically restricted. Rather, it is the men who, during the agricultural seasons, are isolated on their own land outside the village. The women stay in the village and are in touch daily with their female kin and can come into contact with unrelated males -- travellers, visitors, and village men who have not gone to work. The oulād model requires a degree of male control of the public activities of their female kin which cannot be achieved. The wife's ekhtiar can never entirely be in the hands of her husband: she is left with a responsibility not to behave irresponsibly. Among all the areas of social activity, the one where a woman can most clearly demonstrate this shortfall between the logical implication of the concept of male responsibility and the practical limitations of male control, is in sexual matters. Here a woman can most forcefully exhibit her independence and accordingly her 'irresponsibility' and 'unreliability'.

Thus the structural position of women in the oulād model seems to accord with the male opinion about woman's sexual nature - that she is prone to irresponsibility and deceit. From a functional point of view, a man's repeated homilies to his female kin enjoining them to protect their sexual shame (nāmus) might be seen as a wish to control woman's child-bearing capacities to maintain the clarity of descent in the oulād. However, the concern expressed by men seems to refer more to the nature of women, and especially to their sexuality.

One informant elaborated this attitude by telling me the story of Eskandar. Eskandar lived with his mother, and as he grew up he became aware that all women are deceitful. In answer to statements to this effect, his mother would reply, 'Yes, all women but me'. One day Eskandar left home, and quite some time later he returned disguised as a Darvish.³ He knocked at the door of his mother's house and said that he was very thirsty and hungry. He persuaded his mother to let him in, and sat down and engaged her in conversation and stayed for dinner. When he was still there by night-fall, the mother was forced to ask him to sleep there, and she laid out the bedding either side of the fireplace. He continued to chat to her, until he finally persuaded her to lay out the bedding side by side. At this point he revealed his identity and said 'Yes all women are deceitful, including you'.

This story was taught to my informant as a young boy at the village religious school, and not only demonstrates that women can never be trusted, but also indicates the difference between the status of men and women. Eskandar was the one who, in our terms of reference, engaged in deceit by disguising himself and tricking his mother. However, when I maintained that his behaviour was at fault, I was informed that his behaviour was not unreasonable because 'men are free'. It was the mother who was being deceitful because she allowed the man to enter her house when there was no man there to entertain him. She entertained him herself, and, if this was not sufficient transgression, she at the end made it obvious that she did not protect her sexual shame.

Even after the marriage of a girl, her brother, father, and husband will continue to insist that she protect her nāmus: since the woman has no ekhtiār, her male relatives are responsible for her, with the corollary that if she misbehaves her actions affect their reputation. While illicit affairs and adultery are the ultimate sign of a woman acting independently, in practice it seems that the incidence of such affairs is low. However, the implication behind the demand that women protect their nāmus is that they should behave in such a way that not the slightest hint is given of any inclination to behave in an inappropriate manner. Thus the woman's behaviour is prescribed. She should be modest and demure. She should be quiet and not engage in quarrelling with the neighbours; she should be deft at completing the household tasks; and should be kind yet unobtrusive in the way she treats guests. In every aspect of a woman's behaviour nāmus is at issue and she should demonstrate her good character through her retiring behaviour in public.

Such demeanour is usually associated with the wearing of the chādor, a cotton cloak which covers the head and goes down to the ground. But this is usually only worn by women when they are moving outside the territory where their male kin live, and especially when they are visiting another village or the town. This cloak veils the entire body, and besides that, the woman holds one side of the chādor across her face and averts her face to that side, so that men cannot see her profile. Within the village, although the chādor is not usually worn, a woman, in the course of her work to collect water, wash clothes at the stream, or visit the trading shop, has to pass through alleys where non-relatives live. Then, if she passes a man, she similarly averts her face. If a man addresses her, wanting news or information, she averts her face, drops her head, answers quickly and quietly, and moves on.

Any consistent failure in her character or behaviour will invite the comment that she does not protect her nāmus. Moreover, such comments would more often be made by a woman than a man, as it is the greatest insult for a man to refer to the nāmus of another man's women-folk. Such an attack by one woman on another in the course of a quarrel indicates great tension in the relations between the households. It invites an escalation of the conflict, since, if it is taken seriously, an attack on the woman brings her brother in to support her husband and thereby protect his sister. Indeed, during the war which preceded my fieldwork, one man had persuaded the political faction he belonged to not to attack a certain house because 'his nāmus was there'. A man does not have nāmus; what this meant was that his daughter was the wife in that house, and he was trying to protect her nāmus in order to maintain his own respectability and reputation.

Thus, while a woman might be considered to have no right to independent action (ekhtiār), the obverse of this is that the reputation of her husband and especially of her brother and sons rests on their ability not only to control her, but to defend her. Making reference to the very beginning of the paper, this is the reason why women prefer to have sons. A mother without a son, or a sister without a brother has no one to defend her. A woman who has no protector is open to attack, but one who has a male relation with a good reputation knows that she has much greater freedom of action, as the brother or son has to defend her to protect his own reputation.

While ekhtiār is theoretically in the hands of a woman's male kin, for the woman this has the practical implication that any accusation of misbehaviour levelled at her, rebounds on their reputation. Their reputations and hers are interwoven. The woman can therefore expect her male kin to defend her, in the defence of their own reputations. This gives the woman a certain freedom of action as a social being.

The reputation of a man is vested in his ābroo. The basis for a man's ābroo is the size and strength of his oulād, but beyond that, his own personal character and acumen are taken into account by the community, as are those of his wife, in the assessment of a man's social standing. A man has honour and a certain level of standing in the community, and while this can be increased over time, it is the 'loss of ābroo' which is most often a source for concern because it can happen as the result of one encounter. ābroo can be lost by a man who is placed in a situation where he is belittled by others. ābroo is thus at the centre of the competitive atmosphere of the community. But while the man can lose ābroo through his own actions or those of his adult son, his ābroo can also be lost by the actions and behaviour of the women for whom he is responsible.

Thus while the woman might have interests in complying with the behaviour stipulated by her husband or brother in order not to put her nāmus and his ābroo under attack, equally her husband or brother might be persuaded to act in a way which complies with her interests in order to protect his own ābroo. Here we are beginning to consider the obverse of the oulād model. If a woman has no rights, and her reputation is intertwined with that of her husband and brother, she has greater means to manipulate her menfolk, albeit with great tact, than their presentation of the situation might imply. It is just this room for manipulation which allows her to take advantage of her ambivalent position in the structure of the oulāds, not only to work for the interests of a husband against a brother or vice versa, but also to represent to them the interests of her matrilineage.

This implies that, as opposed to the formal position of the woman, being restricted to the household and excluded from influence in the male social activities of politics and decision making, she can have great influence - so long as she does not act overtly, as that would invite attacks on her reputation and bring her husband's ability to control her into question. This influence can even extend into the essence of the male domain: political decision making.

Community decisions are formally made in a series of male meetings lasting about a week. Decisions have to be made on any issue which involves more than one oulād: they might include such matters as to how to arrange the communal purchase of a tractor, how to avoid the resurgence of the war in the village, or how to resolve a quarrel that has arisen over the purchase of a cow. The

meetings take place between men after dinner when they have returned from their work. Debate on an issue usually starts informally, when a person who wants advice or assistance goes to the house of an influential man, and most evenings there will be gatherings in the houses of such men. If a situation develops into a crisis and a decision has to be made, the meetings then become formal, and one influential man invites others to dinner. The women are nowhere to be seen on these occasions, although they always manage to hear what is said.

The influential men are the most respected members of each set of agnates, and they act as spokesmen for their agnates and others who have associated themselves with them by marriage or economic ties. They gain influence by being able, through a series of meetings, to demonstrate their political acumen--their ability to keep unity among their supporters by defending their interests, and their ability to win over other groups to their own point of view.

Any meeting is between recognized men of influence, others who have an interest in the issue, and anyone else who feels he has a right to be there. Thus few men of very low status would attend as it would be taken as unwarranted forwardness, and they would lose face. These people depend on an alliance with a man of influence for the protection of their interests.

The meetings are ranked, with the man of greatest influence sitting by the fireplace on the further side from the door where the best carpet has been laid. Others sit in order, from him ranged round the front of the fireplace, to the door. Thus the men of lowest rank are seated with the draught from the door on their backs. On the opposite side of the fireplace sits the house owner and his brother or other close relative. They are effectively out of the pecking order whilst they are hosts, and are occupying the side of the fireplace where the wife sits when the family is along. He also undertakes the tasks which are recognized as pertaining to the wife within the household when there are no guests: making the tea, cutting the sugar loaf into lumps, and serving the tea.

Both the seating order and the tea drinking order are ranked, and are the occasion for much formal etiquette. When a man enters the room, he pauses to remove his shoes. If he is important all will rise, and those who know they are of the same standing as the new entrant will offer him their place, and move one place round the arc. He will refuse and try to sit by the door. While he is crouched and about to sit down, others will grab him and pull him into a higher position. In contrast, a man of low standing will enter the room with subdued greetings and sit down immediately by the door. The other men in the room might return the greeting, or might ignore him completely, not even making eye contact. Nobody will stand up.

When tea is served, the host places three glasses on a tray and pushes it over the carpet to the man opposite him in the highest position. The man will then push the tray to the centre of the gathering and say to the company in general, 'After you'. Everyone replies, 'No, after you', and he then takes a glass and some sugar and pushes the tray to the man sitting next to him. This continues, each man repeating the procedure twice, and drinking two glasses of tea, until all have drunk.

In these assemblies, the ranking order of the males is established and reassessed. All will speak when they have something to say, but when two people wish to speak at once, deference is made to the man seated in the higher

position. If the man in the highest position wants to retain his place, he will say most. He, like every one else, will try to demonstrate his wisdom and his personal ability to understand the different interests and to reconcile them by tactical poses. The subject of his speech is only part of this demonstration of ability and wisdom. The manner in which he speaks is also assessed. He must ensure that he does not offend anyone present by making indiscreet reference to anyone's relative, and the purport of his speech should be revealed only by direct statements and the use of innuendo and sophisticated hinting. In these meetings, over time, the consistent exhibition of these abilities, or lack thereof, establishes a man either higher or lower in the ranking order, and with his position goes his prestige and reputation (äbroo). The form of communication between males, as well as the whole tenor of their meetings is formal and structured, and the ranking order is flexible, but public.

Women are not usually seen in this public debate. The next afternoon however, the women are gathered in one person's yard, engaged in spinning or other portable household tasks, and enjoying the sunshine. However, these gatherings only take place in certain yards: those where the wife of the household belongs to one of the biggest matrilineages, whose brothers form an influential agnatic set, and possibly, although not necessarily, those whose husbands are also influential. This means that the women are not always meeting in the yards of the houses where the male meetings are gathered.

In the women's meetings the seating pattern is not usually well organized, nor is there such an elaborate display of etiquette as seen in the men's meetings. The main difference from the male meetings is that if a carpet is laid out, the woman of the house will sit on it along with other women from important families who are recognized to have personal ability and understanding. Others sit in the dust. This is in great contrast to the form of the men's meetings, where the householder plays humble host. Also, unlike the male gatherings, the conversation will rarely be directly focussed on a certain issue. To an outsider it appears that the women are engaged in idle chat. However, in the course of the conversation, one of the women who is most respected will drop some oblique comment that, for example, the wife of a certain person cannot control her chickens and they are constantly excavating somebody else's yard. From this it can be gleaned that the two wives or their husbands are at odds. Issues either concerning the women themselves, or pertaining to the men's debate are therefore discussed in a very convoluted manner. Women are presenting their attitudes through inferences made in the course of a conversation about matters concerning the woman's domain. Thus their conversation will be about, for example, how the behaviour or character of another woman does not meet the generally accepted standards: that she is lazy or unable to fulfil a particular household task, or that she quarrels, or that her child misbehaves; or it will be about some other aspect of a woman's household responsibilities, and here chickens are most frequently the subject matter. Sometimes a large gathering of women assembles in the yard of a house where the male meeting took place on the previous evening. The issues that were discussed in the male meeting have to concern a clear division in the village or involve relations between the village and outside, before they are expressed in anything but a very circumspect manner by the women.

If I asked one woman directly what was happening, she would give me an account which indicated that even the least influential of the women had a full picture of the issues under debate. However, the women would rarely give an exposé of this kind to each other. Their knowledge would be gleaned from sitting in a number of people's yards and, from a series of obscure comments on apparent non-issues, they would arrive at an understanding of the strains or accord

developing between different men and the attitudes of different women.

The subject matter and mode of discourse in the woman's gatherings add to the impression that the women are not acting overtly in the male arena. The character of their discourse seems designed to maintain the clarity of a division between the sexual domains: it is possible, too, that the very nature of the women's circles⁴ demands such a complex mode of communication. Maybe the women's discussions are now convoluted than the men's because their ties and interests are not so clear cut. While a man clearly owes allegiance first to his own oulād, the multiplicity of a woman's kinship relations - with her own matrilineage including her brother's oulād, and with her husband's oulād - means that she has to be more circumspect than a man in making a comment about anyone. This form of debate also allows a woman to change her attitude as the discussion progresses and the points of view of other women become clear. It also makes it easier to avoid a direct confrontation between women, which can more easily occur in the style of the women's gatherings, lacking as they are in sophisticated behavioural etiquette. This does not necessarily mean that they are less structured than the men's meetings, although to an observer this might seem to be so. The complexity of their interests and the multiplicity of the ties and roles of women, require elaborate discursive formalities if successful communication is to be achieved within a system that can nevertheless pose to the 'outside', to the 'dominant model', as informal and socially unimportant.⁵

In their meetings the women ranked themselves, principally by one deferring to another in the order of speaking. A woman's ranking in the women's circles arose from the standing of her natal home and was sometimes affected by the position of her husband. It also took into account her own reputation and behaviour as a woman, and her ability to understand village issues, the interests of different parties, and her capacity to convey an opinion through this convoluted means of communication.

Thus it is possible for a woman to hold a higher position in the women's circles than her husband does in the male gatherings, because her personal capacities are greater. No husband would openly admit this, but others might recognize the fact. In the evening, when the husband returns home, the wife might recite a selection of village gossip to him. In the recounting of these incidents, by a series of hints and observations, a woman would put her opinion on an issue across to her husband. In the male gathering later, the husband might present a slightly different position to the one he had adopted on previous occasions. No open debate would have taken place between husband and wife, but the different stances adopted by the man in the course of a series of meetings might show that he was gradually accepting a position which accorded with that of his wife. Thus the debate which is only openly acknowledged to be between men, is also conducted in the women's circles, and the two arenas interlink in the individual households. In the household the wife can influence her husband by the opinion she has formed from contact with other women.

Moreover, the wife often has a greater range of contacts than the husband. Apart from the fact that in the agricultural seasons, the man is generally isolated on his own land during the day while his wife is in contact with other women in the village, the woman's structural position gives her greater access to different opinions. While the man is most concerned with the interests of his own oulād, she is in contact with her natal descent group (her brother's oulād and her matrilineage) and the descent groups to which her female relatives are married as well. Thus it is often the case that a woman has a wider view of the society than the husband has from the restricted perspective of his own oulād.

Individual women varied in their concern to be aware of different opinions, their personal qualities and abilities, and their capacity to influence their husbands. However, most women participated in the women's circles, and had some degree of influence over their menfolk. That this was the case can be seen from one incident when a man broke off his daughter's engagement. The women asked his wife why this had happened, and were astounded when she admitted that she did not know. The wife said that she could not ask about such an issue because she had no ekhtiār and her husband would consider her enquiries out of place and might beat her. The comments which followed this statement indicated that the other woman considered her to be very weak, and ridiculed her use of ekhtiār in this context.

Most women were able to achieve a reconciliation of their husband's and their own interests without putting the concept of ekhtiār into question. The women would not intrude into the public arena and would behave in an appropriate manner in public. No doubts could thereby arise about her husband's control of her ekhtiār. Women then operated through the women's circles and through individual contact with husbands and brothers to achieve a reconciliation of the diverse interests of their kin in the final decision - which was ostensibly made by the men. One incident was recounted in hushed tones of how, about 20 years ago, a group of women had acted overtly in political affairs. The way the incident was recited indicated that those women had shaken the accepted conventions, but at the same time the informant said that they had been justified in so acting.

They were the first and only women to inherit land. Their father was murdered when leading a faction in a fight between the two halves of the village, and left a very able wife with four daughters but no sons, and a great deal of land and gardens. His brother was also killed, so there were no males to inherit the land. The mother gave all the land jointly to the four daughters to be worked in common by their four husbands, in an attempt to keep them together in the absence of brothers. These women had therefore slightly more ekhtiār than normal, as their husbands supplemented their own income with that from their wives' land. Later, two of the husbands supported a headman who was one of their affines but also a relation of the murderer of the father. They did this in the thought that through this puppet headman they could attain the position the murdered man had tried to gain for their half of the village. The four daughters united in their opposition to this move as they did not believe the puppet headman could assert his independence from the established headman who had led the opposition against their father. When they failed to change the decision of the two husbands, the wives left them and, with the support of their sisters, went to another village until the situation was changed.

Here they were employing the most potent sanction available to them. By leaving their husbands they demonstrated that they were outside their control, and this was one way in which their husbands' ābroo was affected. By leaving, they had also removed their contribution to the domestic partnership, and while a single woman, a widow say, can maintain a household, a man cannot continue alone as he has no one to provide tea and food for his guests, and is dependent on other women even to make his bread. A man of influence, in particular, quickly loses ābroo, because he cannot invite a male gathering to his house. These four women had united to defend the name of their father and in so doing, while they had acted against most of the accepted conventions, they were still respected. They are still among the most influential women in the village, as their ownership of land puts them in a position to speak more directly to their husbands.

The four women are often seen as the fore-runners of the women who have recently become teachers. They receive a regular salary which admits the possibility of their having more ekhtiār, and they have a greater directness in their speech which they have learned from their training and their work. Many of them have married men who are teachers and are developing a new relationship with their husbands, based on a more open discussion of village affairs. One has even been given leave by her husband to speak in the male meetings at their house.

The position of both the male and the female teachers is a cause for much discussion in the village, which has only served to indicate more clearly the ideals inherent in the traditional models. The men are most concerned over the fact that the male teachers see themselves as having common interests which, on occasion, may cloud the division of society into oulāds. The teachers' more open relationship with their wives, by which they give them more right to independent action (ekhtiār) further confuses the organization of the society into oulāds, as they are verging on a situation where the boundaries of the male domain might become less distinct.

The position of the women teachers worries both men and women. While the women teachers are at pains to comply with the appropriate pattern of female behaviour, even to the extent of wearing the cotton cloak (chādor) to school, in their life-style - going to work in the morning and returning in the evening and leaving their children in the care of a female relative - they approximate more closely to a male pattern than a female one. The men's worries about the female teachers are intensified by the more open role that a few women teachers are playing in the traditionally male domain of overt discussion and decision-making. The women are equally perplexed, as the more open relationship these teachers have with their husbands, and the more direct manner of speech which they employ in conversation with other women, means that the teachers are not respecting the separateness of the women's model which was the source of their independence. This might ultimately threaten the influence women have traditionally attained through the discreteness of the women's circles and the mode of interaction with the men.

Both the men and women teachers are beginning to confuse the clarity of the structure. The two models depend on a separateness - on a demarcation of household responsibilities, on a recognition of separate domains of responsibility and activity, and on different modes of communication and behaviour. This separateness involved a dual interpretation of key concepts held in common. The concepts as employed in the dominant model excluded women from social activity, which was defined as the responsibility of the men. The obverse of these concepts and the inconsistencies inherent to their interlinkages, formed the muted model which allowed women to establish a female domain and a means of acting in society.

Beyond the separateness, the models depended on an interaction which took place in the individual households. The teachers are establishing a new form of interaction in their households. The similarity of their work and the equality of their salaries are factors which are leading these couples to reformulate the division of responsibilities between husband and wife in the domestic sphere. The greater ekhtiār which the husband then vests in his wife is clouding the separateness of the domains in the public arena. This new form of interaction between the teachers in the household has the repercussion in society that the consensus on the nature and boundaries of the two arenas is being shaken. Ultimately, both the male and female interpretations of the key concepts around which the two models focus, will need redefinition. Maybe this is why the account of the four sisters was rendered in hushed tones and a secretive manner, although the informant considered their behaviour justified: the changes are believed to be positive, but they are stretching the rhetoric, the dual interpretation of the commonly held focal concepts, to the limits of its complexity.

NOTES

1. This fieldwork was undertaken between September and November 1974, and from November 1975 to November 1976. I am grateful for financial assistance from the SSRC, Henrietta Hutton Memorial Travel Award, and the Oxford University Committee for Middle Eastern Studies, and, in the second instance, from the British Institute for Persian Studies, and the Emslie Horniman Anthropological Scholarship Fund. I should also like to thank the members of the Oxford Women's Group for their ideas and criticisms in the seminar where this paper was first given.
2. The use of dominant and muted models is after S.Ardener (1975)
3. A Darvish is a mendicant religious ascetic. It is considered reprehensible to refuse any traveller food and lodging, but this obligation is intensified in the case of a travelling Darvish.
4. 'Women's circles' is used to indicate the overlapping between the women's gatherings which produces a women's forum. This is not as institutionalized as the 'women's sub-society' described by N.S. Tapper (1968) in the Shahsevan of Azerbaijan in N.W. Iran, as there is no comparable institution to the 'xeir-u-sarr' relationships, nor any name ascribed to women leaders.
5. Here the dichotomy male/formal and female/informal roles which is used by S. Tiffany (1978) is avoided, because, as Shirley Ardener has pointed out (personal communication), this could be taken to imply that the muted model is less structured than the dominant one.

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