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Networks: North Africa

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In North Africa, a person's network consists of a web of social ties with kin, neighbors, friends, and (less commonly for women) co-workers maintained primarily through face to face interactions. Due to Arab-Islamic cultural norms segregating the sexes, men generally socialize with male network members in non-domestic spaces: in cafes, playing board games on street corners, at work, or at public celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions. Likewise, women typically interact with network members in female spaces: paying visits to each other's homes, and taking group female trips to the public baths (hammams), local shrines (marabūt), and even the beach. While Western ideals of companionship between married couples are reflected today in the increase of mixed-sex socializing at weddings and family events, the majority of men's and women's network interactions continue to be sex-segregated. It is not surprising, therefore, that husbands' and wives' networks are often distinct and separate. There is some evidence to suggest that women's networks may cross-cut the more rigid patronage and political lines of men's networks, creating a more diverse and flexible base of female alliances and loyalties.

Despite women's increasing education and entrance into the workforce (Tunisia leads the region in this regard), women's networks continue to be predominantly kin based. Friends, neighbors, co-workers, and other outsiders form a relatively small portion of the networks of rural and lower-class women's networks. In contrast to prevailing assumptions that the Arab patrilineal family severs women's natal ties, a number of studies demonstrate that after marriage North African women continue to visit and remain close to their natal family, reflecting a female bilateral pattern. This pattern is particularly pronounced among the Berber populations of Morocco and Algeria.

Class, region of origin, and a woman's education all play a role in the composition of networks. After migration to major urban areas, or even internationally, women and their husbands maintain strong ties to their home communities, preferring to interact with, marry, and live near others from the same region and social class. Since membership in a network requires frequent reciprocal exchanges of visits, gifts, and services, networks typically delimit social and class boundaries. A family's social status is defined by its ability to afford to provide the lavish food and hospitality expected by guests in the upper and even middle classes. “Keeping up with the Joneses” (or Abdurahmans in the North African case) is not defined by the size of one's house or car, but by the generosity of one's table and the ability to provide equally valuable social connections and services.

Consequently, visiting networks play a critical role in the economic success and physical survival of a woman and her family. Social networks provide access to goods and services that are difficult to obtain – ranging from foreign electronics to skilled medical care – and provide critical information, whether about jobs, ways to circumvent government regulations, or even the whereabouts of a new shipment of Adidas sneakers in the nearby market. In a region where social welfare programs are limited and poorly implemented, a woman's social network may be her only source of assistance during a serious illness, the death of her husband, or the sudden loss of her father's job.

Although the advent of cars, electronic mail, and cellular phones, and increasing female literacy rates has made communication with network members easier for a small segment of the population, in North Africa hospitality, visiting, and face to face interactions continue to be the primary means of maintaining network ties. Whether daily drop-in visits to a neighbor, or a formal visit at a religious holiday, women's visits are essential in confirming ties to network members. Daily visits to nearby kin and neighbors are generally an informal affair. Visitors may be offered a simple glass of tea, but otherwise are expected to join in the household tasks on hand, whether it be shelling nuts, knitting and sewing, or tending the children. On weekends women and their families make more formal visits, dressing in their finest clothes to pay a call to friends and family not seen during the week. Frequently, weekend visits take on the appearance of large family reunions as relatives from the surrounding area congregate at an older parent's or grandparent's home to eat dinner, drink tea, and watch television together. These visits cultivate intimate ties with a group of close network members who may be counted upon for assistance during life crisis events.

Visits at religious celebrations ('ayād) and life cycle events (munāṣabāt) play an important role in reaffirming ties with a larger group of useful connections who can provide information and practical help: obtaining jobs, circumventing government red tape, or locating services such as mechanical repair. Arab tradition requires that friends and relatives visit a woman on the seventh day after the birth of a child. Following a death, a formal visit to bereaved family members is also expected during a seven- to ten-day mourning period. And, depending on the region and local cultural traditions, weddings, engagements, and circumcisions are celebrated over a one- to seven-day period, during which network members visit and attend parties, bearing gifts of food, money, or household items.

Muslim religious holidays also require the exchange of visits and food to maintain network ties. Although there are numerous small religious holidays and special regional saints' days that vary throughout the area, the four primary holidays observed are: Mawlid (the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad), Ramadan (the month of fasting), 'Īd Ṣaghīr (a two-day holiday following Ramadan), and 'Īd Kabīr (commemorating the prophet Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac). During each of these holidays, women prepare special dishes and cakes, each region proud of its own unique foods. In most Arab communities in North Africa these dishes and cakes are served during formal holiday visits to as many as several hundred network members. Barring extreme illness or age, failure to visit during these life cycle events and holidays can be sufficient justification for terminating a relationship.

Visiting, exchanging gifts, and maintaining network ties form a central part of Muslim North African women's daily lives and experience. Given the social, practical, and economic importance of women's networks, a woman's daily world of interacting with and visiting female kin, friends, and neighbors, not only provides companionship and joy, but solace and support throughout her life.

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