Roger Joseph and Terri Brint Joseph. *The Rose and the Thorn: Semiotic Structures in Morocco*

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LOCAL RITUAL IN GLOBAL CIVILIZATION


This well-wrought, slim volume explores the meanings of marriage rituals in Morocco among Berber tribal peoples collectively known as the Rifi. With a combined population of over 100,000, the Ibuququyen and Aith Waryaghar tribes reside contiguously in the Province of Alhucemas, east of Tangier, along the slopes of the Atlas Mountains. Primarily agriculturalists, the Rifi Berbers were considered autochthonous by Arab invaders of the 7th century. They were Islamized, according to chronicles, by the 14th century, but not under direct, that is taxable, control of the Sultan or the French or Spanish Protectorates. Due to their remoteness, tribes of the Central Rif (Rif, or rif, Arabic etymology: = edge, suggesting marginality of these peoples in Moroccan history) worked out their blood-feuding politics at a local level. The title's analogy, rose as female symbol, thorn as male, organically wedded in the same plant, mirrors the ambivalent, fragile coexistence of female/male alliances in the human realm. The Josephs, a fieldwork couple, Roger an anthropologist, Terri a comparative literature specialist, studied among the Rifi people in the 1960's and have returned apparently for later ethnographic updates. They have written a close semiotic interpretation of Clifford and Hildred Geertz and other practitioners of "thick description" or hermeneutical anthropology. In this approach the culture serves as sets of overlapping symbolic contexts, simultaneous in their dialectical presencing. The job of the ethnographer is to interpret or "read" the cultural con-texts, and their intertextual implications, and to articulate the cultural codes that constitute the meaning of being Rifi.

Being Rifi is to live in what the Josephs and some ethnographers of the Berbers have called "an agonistic culture." Rifi culture is characterized by suspicion and distrust, even among lineages, to such an extent that solidarity and loyalty is a constant theme. The chapter arrangement reflects how ritual and belief integrate with social organization, or in the flow of the text, how natural and social organization unfold into or are embedded with ritual, aesthetics and myth. These embodied meanings, with a closeup, detailed focus on the alliance rituals of marriage, are pictured as symbolic codes in open systems, dialectical, with a double code of agonism and solidarity. The marriage rituals (p. 81) "traversed the themes of fertility, death and rebirth, initiation, and the suspension of categories of maleness and femaleness. . . . [and] certain kinds of expectations and responses within the ceremony which, if they are different from everyday life, nonetheless can be fitted into a larger semiotic design of Rifi life. . . . there are disruptions, manipulations, and passions which cause the wedding "text" to appear, at least momentarily, unstable [and that] . . . one of the functions of the ritual is to stabilize the text."
For the global civilizationalist, this volume provides a glimpse into how outside forces are impinging on what were once relatively isolated tribal peoples. Television and radio have had a significant impact on expanding awareness of international cultural diversity. In the 1960s the Rifi thought California, the Joseph’s home, was a place somewhere far away in the south of Morocco; today, California through the mass media is a familiar geographical and cultural entity. The modern world’s impact on marriage contrasts sharply with the traditional code manipulated publicly by the male family heads (privately by females) exchanging females through dowry payments from groom’s father to bride’s father and family. However, traditional patterns are changing due to the effect of cash-earning markets through migrant labor in Moroccan and European cities. Whereas traditionalism integrates status relationships into a tenuous whole, the penetration of cash-earning capitalism replaces status-respect hierarchies (father/son) with the fluidity and obviating power of cash capital. Young men with the power of migrant-labor capital do not have to rely on their fathers for approval of their marriages, an almost incomprehensible possibility to traditional members of Rifi culture. Reaffirming the frequently heard sympathy with the problematic preservation of authentic traditional cultural rituals, the Josephs point out this disintegration (p. 132) “. . . has happened elsewhere when the essence of ritual has disappeared, its remnants to be displayed from time to time by bureaucrats for the edification and amusement of tourists.” The fact is fieldworkers globally are reporting similar phenomena of relativization of social meaning and ritual value. One of the challenges to civilizationalists is the integration of these field studies into our studies of the transformations of local knowledge into global civilization, grounding the micro into the complex dynamics of the open systems of the modern world. The Rose and the Thorn gives us a finely etched picturing of the dynamics of a traditional culture on the liminal edge of this uncertain future.

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