

**Women of Fes: Ambiguities
of Urban Life in Morocco**

Rachel Newcomb

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 248 pages.

The city of Fes, the once “bourgeois citadel” (J. Berque’s words) of Morocco and once the world’s most populous city (1170-80), has in modernity been unhappily bypassed for coastal trading hubs and global mega-cities. Material and symbolic elements of Fassi power persist, however, and anthropologist Rachel Newcomb’s finely researched and written ethnography identifies

them in upper-middle-class women's gender identity. In so doing, *Women of Fes* helps the fields of anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and Islamic studies to illuminate the often-neglected power of class to shape gender in the Muslim Middle East and North Africa, demonstrating, not pointedly, that class divides women within as much as across cultures.

Newcomb's book concerns women *of*, not merely *in*, Fes, namely, a class of women of "original" Fassi families navigating the social ruins and new opportunities of daily urban life. Its disparate topics – urban rumors, women's NGOs, reforms of the Moroccan Muslim family code (*mudawanah*), flexible kinship, public space, a *dépassé* lounge singer – shift the book's center from class to gender and public life. Her skillful identification of class issues within the latter, however, gives the book a necessary coherence.

The first post-Introduction chapter examines some rumors of violent Islamists and secretly wealthy slum dwellers by which Fassi women (and men) in the early 2000s distinguished themselves from the city's non-elite. Analysis of the rumors (or, perhaps, urban legends) gives readers a clear sense of the class ethos: claims that Islamists are violent or that poor rural migrants in fact have money means they lack not the resources, but rather the gentility, of a Fassi.

The third and fourth chapters draw on the author's observations of an NGO's legal efforts to combat, amidst state reforms of the Maliki-based *mudawanah* and the socio-economic chaos of market liberalization, violence against women. Chapter 3 argues quite persuasively that, contrary to what one might think, the "traditional" (post-independence) family code does not challenge, but rather supports, Fassi women's class identity – indeed, that the women who "rarely felt the full brunt of the law's negative effects" are the "most vocal about maintaining" (p. 6) the patrilineal regulation of un-moored underclass and rural migrant women. So, concludes Newcomb, women of Fes and the Islamic family code "protect the ideals of patriarchal social organization even where ... the mode of social organization has collapsed" (p. 63). The fourth chapter discusses the obstacles that such class and structural conditions present to national and international efforts at women's solidarity. In a strong contribution to global gender studies, Newcomb demonstrates that despite Fassi women's efforts, the subaltern woman cannot speak, providing vivid portraits of that silence.

Chapter 5 looks at two late-twentieth-century developments in Fassi kinship systems: the symbolic aura of family names and their decreased – but still potential – material use, and women's appropriation and extension

of kinship forms (patron-client relations especially) to extra-familial relationships. With more readily apparent public roles, Newcomb writes, “women incur prestige not only through their family names but also through their own social networks (extending beyond the family), management of property, and resourcefulness” (pp. 125-26).

Chapters 6 and 7 focus specifically on women in public space, drawing on the author’s continuous involvement in minutiae of daily life. Gender is the focus, but, as in the book’s first chapters, class is never excluded – indeed cannot be ignored. Observing a veiled beggar exposing her breast for her child on busy street, Newcomb perceives it as a transgression of gender and shame (*hshuma*); her middle-class interlocutors, however, draw her attention to class, and she rightly follows their lead:

Most stated that the woman’s actions, both the breast-feeding in public and the begging, indicated that she was “beyond shame” to begin with. People hypothesized that the woman probably came from a small village and now lived in one of the outlying neighborhoods in Fes. She was a rural-to-urban migrant, they imagined, who had gotten pregnant without a husband. Maybe she had tried to find work as a maid and ended up as a prostitute. (p. 147)

Newcomb’s summary of middle-class assumptions may strike readers as too general, but her close attention to her interlocutors’ interpretations, evident throughout the book, leaves no doubt as to its, and indeed all of her observations’, representativeness. The subsequent chapter is also a gem: a biographical sketch of a lounge singer (*shikhah*) and her fading dreams – too young to retire, too old for “Moroccan Idol” – linking general social conditions with the incomparable, and therefore irrevocable, particularity of a single life.

Women of Fes is an outstanding contribution to Muslim world anthropology and gender studies; a careful ethnographic work attuned to large-scale forces and their capillary saturation of daily social arrangements and innovations. It very skillfully draws on canonical studies of Morocco (e.g., Abdellah Hammoudi on patriarchy, André Adam on class, Hildred Geertz on kinship, and Fatima Mernissi on gender) to fully contextualize her own luminous ethnography. Its main weakness is the theoretical articulation, which needs elaboration, of cultural ethos and socio-historical change. On occasion, she suggests that culture remains solid, coherent:

The currents of Moroccan culture may exhibit dramatic surface changes, wrought by processes such as modernization, structural adjustment pro-

grams, massive rural-urban migration, and emigration, yet underneath, the waters are still and unyielding. (p. 5)

To reduce social collapse to surface phenomena counters the book's otherwise impeccable historicism, for what Newcomb often beautifully demonstrates is that culture persists not despite of, but due to, novel national and global frames of reference. My introductory anthropology students certainly grasped the book's message of continuity and change, as they did its view of Muslim women divided by class in a modern city.

Emilio Spadola (espadola@colgate.edu)

Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Colgate University, Hamilton, New York