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### Article abstract

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# The Symbolic Landscape of the Berber Cemetery <sup>(1)</sup>

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The village cemeteries of the Berber-speaking inhabitants of the High Atlas mountains of Morocco are overgrown with untended masses of vegetation which are allowed to disturb, and indeed, eventually, to obliterate, the graves. The resulting landscapes are not, however, simply areas "abandoned to nature" because, in a heavily overgrazed environment like the High-Atlas, such an overgrowth of vegetation requires the systematic exclusion of goats and sheep and the prohibition of wood-gathering, and hence is the result of human choice and deliberated action. In other words, what appears to be a "natural" landscape is in fact an artifice, a "made" landscape, and, as such, is capable of being deciphered. The paper explores various dimensions of this "symbolic landscape" by situating it within the everyday habits and practices of village life.

*Les cimetières des villages des berbérphones du Haut-Atlas du Maroc ne sont pas entretenus et consistent des masses de végétation luxuriante, même chaotique, qui est permise à pousser au point où elle désajuste et, finalement, où elle efface les tombes. Mais les paysages qui résultent de cette pratique ne représentent pas nécessairement des terrains «abandonnés à la nature», parce que, dans une environnement déjà fortement dénaturée par la pâturage des moutons et des chevres, une telle luxuriance de végétation ne pourrait pas se produire que par l'exercice délibéré du choix humain. C'est à dire, malgré son apparence «naturelle», la cimetière berbère est vraiment une artifice, le produit de la volonté humaine, et par conséquent, capable d'être déchiffré. Dans cet essai, l'auteur explore certains dimensions de ce «paysage symbolique» par le moyen de le situer analytiquement dans la pratique de la vie quotidienne villagoise.*

Cemeteries in the Berber villages of the High Atlas mountains of Morocco present a striking contrast to the rest of the village landscape. Whereas most of the vegetative land cover in and around villages has been stripped clean by the endless grazing of sheep and goats, and the earth trampled into an adobe pavement by the constant traffic of human feet and animal hooves, the village cemeteries stand out as unkempt masses of overgrown vegetation, the tombstones barely visible beneath the weeds, bushes and trees which grow in wild profusion. The vegetative luxuriance of Berber cemeteries is the result of prohibitions against grazing livestock and gathering firewood and against casual entry by villagers. In cemeteries, the grasses and bushes grow tall, and trees which anywhere else in the mountains would have been chopped down or denuded for firewood are allowed to grow to their full height.

Berber cemeteries are, thus, in effect, botanic reserves or "parks", in which small examples of the montane vegetation are preserved in their more or less pristine state. Standing in a cemetery, one realizes how thoroughly the surrounding mountain landscape — which appears wild and natural when one is out in the middle of it — has in reality been shaped by the incessant grazing of goats and sheep and by the

wood-collecting of its inhabitants over centuries of occupation and use. Only a small number of species of thorny, goat-resistant bushes survive on the mountain slopes, and, with the exception of the ubiquitous argan tree (*Argannia spinosa*), which seems to thrive on goat browsing, it is rare to come across trees taller than two and a half metres in height. In the cemeteries, by contrast, from the examples of full-grown oaks and thuyas which grow there, one can see that the restricted height of trees in “the wild” is largely the result of goat grazing, firewood-collecting and timbering, and that the natural vegetation which would exist but for the hands of humans is much more diverse and luxuriant than it appears.

When villagers are questioned about the prohibition against entry and grazing, they explain it in terms of the application of a category of legal prohibition in Berber customary law called *ag<sup>w</sup>dal*, a sort of taboo on entry<sup>2</sup>. *Ag<sup>w</sup>dal* is most often invoked in relation to grain fields and is typically proclaimed by the village elders in mid-summer when the barley heads begin to form, for the purpose of keeping individuals out of the fields (including their own) at a time when there is little field work to be done. The manifest function of the prohibition is to minimize the number of claims of theft<sup>3</sup> or damage which the village elders have to sort out, an exhausting task for them in the mid- to late-summer period. The proclamation of *ag<sup>w</sup>dal* eases their burden of work by the simple expedient of requiring everyone to stay out of the grain fields. *Ag<sup>w</sup>dal* remains in force in the grain fields until the first-fruits ceremony, following which every able-bodied person in the village can be expected to be out in the fields, harvesting from dawn until long after dark, and the likelihood of accusations of theft diminishes since, at harvest time, it would be nearly impossible to steal grain from the fields without being witnessed. Separate proclamations of *ag<sup>w</sup>dal* may be made for the olive, almond and maize crops as well in areas where they grow under conditions of interspersed ownership.

The *ag<sup>w</sup>dal* in respect to cemeteries is a specific prohibition of the village congregation<sup>4</sup> of the mosque which controls the cemetery, and not a general state of cemeteries. This is clear from the fact that the village congregation may lift the prohibition on firewood collecting in the cemetery in certain unusual circumstances. Normally, firewood for heating water for tea in the mosque is provided on a rotational system by each family in the village in turn, but on

special occasions — such as when there is an important visitor who arrives on a damp, chilly day — whichever young boys may be in the vicinity may be mobilized and sent into the cemetery to collect firewood if there is none handy in the mosque. Normally, mountain folk prefer to sit shivering in the cold rather than waste scarce firewood on such an extravagance as heating the air in a room, but the obligations of hospitality when a guest of the village is present are such that they override the norm of thrift, and in this case a fire is built to take the chill out of the air. The sight of the boys collecting the firewood in the cemetery invariably provokes angry shouts from passers-by, who are duly informed by the lads that the collecting is by order of the elders of the mosque and thus the presence of a guest is made known. Very occasionally, then, firewood is collected in the village cemetery by order of the elders of the congregation, but under no circumstances whatsoever are animals allowed to graze within its confines.

The legal status of the *ag<sup>w</sup>dal* prohibition derives from the fact that the cemetery is an extension of the village mosque (*timezgida*), and hence falls under the direct jurisdiction of the assembly of village elders — lineage heads — who, together, are the voice of the congregation. If the village cemetery runs out of burial land, the village congregation has the power to condemn adjacent land and take it over in order to expand the cemetery. In principle, cemetery land is not supposed to be re-used, no matter how ancient the previous usage, and so cemeteries are always growing in size.

Cemeteries tend to be separated from public areas, roads and pathways by fences or walls of one sort or another, most often the ubiquitous North African fence of dried jujube brush, although sometimes a stone wall will be constructed to discourage livestock from nibbling on cemetery vegetation. Where they abut onto the wild or onto fields, they are often without any sort of formal separation whatsoever, although in such cases there will sometimes be one or two cairns erected to indicate the limit of permissible grazing.

Cemeteries are not considered particularly “spooky” or eerie places by the village inhabitants and the paths which run past them are not avoided. People passing by will sometimes utter a quick *salām* upon the dead, but the fears and superstitions associated with graveyards in Western folklore are absent.

In the High Atlas the only incidence of haunting is associated with the belief in *jnūn* spirits, who are believed to inhabit wet or boggy locations out in the wilderness, but are in no way connected with dead ancestors, whether as ghosts or animated souls. Many harrowing tales of personal encounters with, and narrow escapes from, the *jnūn* can be collected and particular individuals will often travel miles out of their way in order to avoid having to go near their haunts, but the damp-loving *jnūn* are never to be found in and around graveyards since villagers are always careful to situate graveyards in well-drained localities.

Except for saints, the dead are in no way venerated nor is any attempt made to communicate with them spiritualistically. The operative concepts in connection with the village dead are "remembering" and "respecting". Children are taught that it is important to remember and to acknowledge (*at-t'aaqelt*) those who struggled hard to leave them land and livelihoods to inherit and a religion "to differentiate them from the animals" and they are taught to show respect (*at-t'htarem*) for the graves of the dead. However, excessive dwelling on death and the fate of the body is considered suspect, even "pagan", and, as one would expect in Muslim eschatology, emphasis is placed on the fate of the soul.

When news of a death in the village circulates (which it does with great rapidity), friends and relatives, especially females, visit the bereaved whereas males will generally stop by the cemetery, where they take turns digging the grave. Although it is by no means a formalized arrangement, it is considered a gesture of friendship and respect to dig a couple of dozen shovelfuls of earth on behalf of someone one knew, and rarely is there any shortage of labor. These informal work parties in the graveyard are one of the characteristic informal loci of communal solidarity — the male equivalent of the gathering of women at the clothes-washing rocks in the river — and they tend to transcend any quarrels and disputes that may be ongoing. The practical cooperation which they enforce is, in fact, an important source of reconciliation and conflict resolution in everyday village life and political impasses which would otherwise prove intractable sometimes dissolve when discussed between elders whose legs are dangling into a grave being shovelled out under their direction by their sons and grandsons.

Burials in the High Atlas follow standard Islamic religious prescriptions<sup>5</sup>. No coffins are used. The body is shaved and washed, following the standard order of ablutions for the daily prayers, rubbed with leaves of the wild pistachio (*Pistachier lentiscus*), which exude a pungent oil similar to that of camphor or eucalyptus. The orifices are stopped up with plugs of cotton and the body is then wrapped in a white shroud. It is transported to the cemetery on a communal litter and is placed directly in the grave, the face turned toward Mecca.

In cemeteries of any size, there will always be one area which is currently being used for burials. New burial grounds are cleared of shrubbery and stones, using a corvée imposed by the village congregation which typically requires each lineage to send one able-bodied worker for the task every couple of years or so. The fresh graves are obvious from the high piles of raw earth heaped over them. Graves are arranged in more or less straight rows, each one being dug about a meter distant from the edge of the previous burial and about two meters deep. New graves are covered with large, flat rocks to prevent jackals from unearthing the corpse. A year or so after the interment, the flat rocks are removed and reused for later burials, the site is levelled, and the grave markers proper are installed. These are ordinary rocks, weighing between 50 and 100 kg, which are neither hewn or dressed in any way, one placed at the head and one at the feet of the grave for males, one at the head only for females. The grave markers are only set in the soil a matter of a few inches. No names or marks of identity are incised into the stones or placed on the graves.

A few years after the installation of the grave markers, the graves begin to become overgrown with grasses and shrubs and only the more or less regular pattern of the rocks in it enables one to distinguish the cemetery from any other stretch of rough, rocky countryside (of course the fact that there is such a tract of shrubby, overgrown land inside of the village makes it stand out from its immediate surroundings). After fifty or so years, the growth of bushes and trees in the graveyard begins to disrupt the pattern of gravestones. Trees grow up between and within graves, their roots dislodging the grave markers. Despite this, there is no tending of the grave, nor any attempt to frustrate the gradual obliteration of the site by the growth of vegetation. After a century or so has passed, the "naturalization" of the site is virtually complete. Perhaps if the

vegetation were stripped away it might still be possible to detect some regularity in the layout of the grave markers, but the vegetative cover is so thick that it is barely possible to make out the markers underneath it. By this time, the actively-used part of the cemetery will have moved some distance away.

In most villages, members of the congregation of the village mosque are buried in whichever section of the village cemetery is currently being used for burials, rows of graves being filled up randomly according to the order of deaths. In a few village cemeteries, there are separate sections for the various named lineages and clans which make up the village, but this system is apparently difficult to keep up indefinitely, since one or another of the clans will sooner or later run out of burial land and, having no authority to condemn adjacent land for burial use, will have no option but to join together with others for burial purposes in a common burial ground.

The most common pattern, then, is for villagers to be buried together in the main village graveyard which is the common property of the village mosque. The only segregation which exists in the burial of the dead serves to keep apart the social estates, of which there have, historically, been five in this part of Morocco (Montagne 1931:44ff), the first four being markedly endogamous in their marriage arrangements:

- 1 *Shurafā* (descendants of the Prophet), and *igurammen* (hereditary saints or marabouts) together are at the top of the social hierarchy and are frequently buried in their own graveyards, marabouts, in particular, preferring to be buried near the tomb of their saintly ancestor.
- 2 The vast middle of the social hierarchy consists of *imazighen*, i.e. the free, white, Muslim land-owning tribesmen who constitute the great majority (90 percent or more) of the population.
- 3-4 Next in the social hierarchy in previous times, and of roughly equal standing to one another, were Jews (*wudayn*) and Blacksmiths (*imzilen*), both being practitioners of occupational specializations, being geographically dispersed, and having caste-like organizations. Both maintained their own cemeteries, to which bodies might have to be transported some distance. Since the mass emigration to Israel in the 1950s, no Jewish communities remain in the High

Atlas. I know of two instances in which blacksmiths have been buried in the cemeteries of the villages where they reside, so this segregation may be breaking down, although the blacksmith cemetery near Argana continues to be used by blacksmiths from the entire region.

- 5 At the bottom of the hierarchy traditionally were black slaves (*isemgan*), a number of whom chose to remain in the mountains following liberation. *Isemgan* are generally considerably darker in skin pigmentation than Blacksmiths and were often of recent West African origin. *Isemgan*, freed or not, were in the past, and their descendants are in the present, generally treated as *imazighen* and buried in the main part of the village cemetery. Wealthier *imazighen* often took daughters of *isemgan* as co-wives or concubines, something which would never happen in the case of Blacksmiths. As a rule, the montagnard Berber social system tends to be fairly rigid when it comes to formal interactions between the social estates, but is little concerned with color.

The social segregation *between* cemeteries almost exactly mirrors the pattern of endogamy: traditionally, segregation was strongest in the case of *shurafā*, Jews, and economically successful marabouts, but tended to break down in the case of economically unsuccessful marabouts and blacks, who, if it was inconvenient to do otherwise, were, and still are, often buried alongside of *imazighen*. Strangers to the village who die while visiting it are likewise buried according to their social estate: if they are *imazighen* (freemen / commoners) and in any way connected to the village (e.g. as in-laws) they may be buried in the village cemetery; otherwise strangers tend to be buried in separate graves on the periphery of the cemetery.

In the ideal pattern of social life in montagnard Berber culture, *imazighen* males born in High Atlas villages will grow up, live and die in the same village in which they were born, and hence most are destined to be buried in the same village cemetery in which they have worked, clearing land and digging graves, all their lives. For a male, to be buried elsewhere is likely to be a sign of some misfortune or calamity such as dying unexpectedly in a distant land, or being forced to move away because of poverty, disgrace or quarrels with kin. Females who live to a

marriageable age, on the other hand, are likely to be buried in a village cemetery other than that in which their male agnates are buried, since there is a fairly strong pattern of village exogamy, and the custom is for in-marrying wives of the village to be buried in the same cemetery as their husbands and in-laws.

Most villages have a section at the edge of the main burial area where stillbirths and infants are buried in graves which are not marked in any way. The criterion by reference to which it is decided whether a child's body is placed in a marked or an unmarked grave is whether or not the child had begun to keep the fast during Ramadan<sup>6</sup>.

In a society in which burials are public events which are almost always attended by the entire village, the village cemetery is a major focus of communal life. In large villages not often does a month to pass by without at least one burial. By the age of fifty a man will have been present to observe countless burials in the village cemetery. He will have dug graves for many of his own kinsfolk, will have helped to wash and wrap the corpses of a number of his friends and kinsmen, and will have helped to transport many bodies to the graveyard on the communal litter which is stored in a corner of the village mosque.

In the Muslim tradition, death, the preparation and wrapping of the corpse, the summoning of friends and relatives, the procession to the graveyard and the burial, with its almost perfunctory ceremonial, are all complete within twenty-four hours at the longest. During the time elapsed between the death and the burial, among the close kin of the deceased, the sexes are contrasted by extremes of expressive behaviour: female kin of the deceased often engage in ear-splitting shrieking and wailing and rending of garments, while males act in an exaggeratedly genteel and reserved manner, speaking softly and behaving calmly and deliberately. Following the burial, there is usually a meal to which the extended family and friends bring cooked dishes, but life returns more or less to normal very quickly and it is not until the commemoration ceremony (*ma<sup>c</sup>rūf*) forty days following the death that gatherings take place involving expressive grieving and the sharing of reflective memories of the deceased. Because the Moroccan Atlas is a major supplier of unskilled labor for the mines and factories of Europe, sons, unable to return home in time for the burials of their parents, invariably fly home from France, Belgium, or the Netherlands in order to attend the forty-day commemoration.

Because habitation sites in mountain environments are largely governed by the availability of water, particularly springs, many of the larger villages in the High Atlas have been in continuous existence in the same locality for many hundreds of years, and their cemeteries have grown to cover huge areas. Sometimes, particularly when the village is located on steeply sloped land, and hence where building sites are at a premium, the area of the village cemetery greatly exceeds the area devoted to the dwellings of the living. It is in such situations — particularly if one takes cognizance of the density of burials per hectare — that one is led to see by what a sobering proportion the village dead outnumber the living. And this thought is reflected in explicit comments which villagers occasionally volunteer on this subject, e.g. "you see, we're almost as numerous as the Americans, only most of us are dead<sup>7</sup>."

What I am here calling a village is a social unit defined by the congregational membership of a common village-mosque (*timezgida*). There is a considerable variation in the pattern of aggregation of houses from one locality to the next. Some villages consist of a single huge agglomeration of houses in one site; others consist of clusters of houses or hamlets spread over a large area. Whatever the pattern, however, all villages have to reconcile the conflicting claims of lineage ownership of productive land with communal ownership of irrigation systems. Much of village life is geared to resolving the tension between these two principles. The religious authority of the mosque congregation (*jema<sup>c</sup>t*) is one important resource in achieving a modicum of communal solidarity to offset the antagonisms generated by the fact that the property-owners share many property boundaries, each one a potential locus of conflict. The *habitus* of the village cemetery — the various practices associated with clearing land, digging graves and interment — is the other great source of communal solidarity.

The unity of the village is thus not an abstraction to the villager, not a disembodied moral precept acquired through learning, but rather a lived reality in which the communal ritual in the village mosque and the communal symbolism in the village cemetery are key elements. In particular, the gradual process of obliteration of the grave and its covering over by the enshrouding vegetation, has the effect of blurring the personal identity of the village dead, stripping them of their individuality and merging them with one another. Whereas at death, they were individuals and members of particular descent

groups, and thus structurally opposed to one another, with the passage of time they take on more generalized identities.

The process of naturalization of the grave, which I have suggested takes about a century to complete, closely parallels the fate of the memory of the deceased as individuals in the agnatic descent system. Excepting those individuals who were famous or notorious (e.g. those who were chiefs or who have become revered as saints<sup>8</sup> or those who were engaged in memorable acts of violence) or founders of social units such as hamlets or named lineage segments, the effective social memory of most individuals who died as adults seems to be about fifty years following death. By this time, hardly anyone is still alive who knew them as a colleague or age-mate; the only people who preserve the social memory of the dead are those who remember them from their childhood and hence who have a distorted perception of them as persons. After a century or so has passed, almost nothing distinctively individual remains of an ordinary male save his name, which will be more or less accurately preserved in genealogical chains. With the exception of a small number of female saints in the region, women are merged completely into the anonymous mass of the village dead.

Despite the fact that no names or personal information are incorporated into the grave markers, adult villagers can often place names to practically all the graves in that part of the cemetery which is not overgrown, testifying to the close web of social relations and interpersonal relatedness which characterizes even relatively large villages. Beyond that, the ability to match names with particular graves falls off quickly, and people are often unable to point specifically to the graves of their great-grandfathers.

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This subsuming of the individuality of the deceased into the anonymous mass of the long-dead is further reflected in the curious word for cemetery in Tashelhait, *lemdint*, a loan-word which is the standard Arabic word for “city” or “town”<sup>9</sup>. In Tashelhait, when a person “moves to the city”, it may be a very permanent move, and many a Berber joke hangs on the cemetery/city homonymy.

Tashelhait-speakers tend to explain this usage in terms of a straightforward visual resemblance: cemeteries, they say, remind them of cities. In order to grasp the similarity, one must picture a North

African town: row upon row of two- and three-story buildings, whitewashed and gleaming in the sun, sticking up out of reddish earth, with little if any surrounding vegetation. With this image in mind, the actively-used portion of a Berber cemetery, which has not yet been overgrown with vegetation, with its row upon row of grave markers sticking up out of the raw soil, does, indeed, look like a scale-model of a Moroccan town.

But in addition to the straightforward physical resemblance, there is, I think, another semantic connection, namely the idea of the urban crowd which the metaphor of the city evokes: the faceless impersonal mass of the *Gesellschaft*, in contrast to the close, personalized and kin-structured familiarity of the village way of life. The cemetery is a “city” because those who move there are swallowed up in an anonymous “crowd”. Their individual personalities are effaced, but they persist nevertheless, “citizens” of the village where, if all goes well, their descendants will live for centuries to come, inheritors of its traditions and of its common wealth.

To understand why the montagnard Berbers might think along these lines, it is important to keep in mind that, though they live in tribally-organized rural societies, these are not isolated tribal societies but rather tribes which, for two millennia, have been marginal to the civilizations of the Mediterranean (Gellner 1969). Thus their “tribal” character is not an innocent fact of nature but rather a role specialization within a larger pattern of relationships within a complex society. Montagnard Berbers are not city-folk, by definition, but their societies exist within social formations in which cities have been crucial, and thus we should not be surprised to find the urban metaphor being milked for its evocative force. Contrasts between *ishelhyn* (Berbers) and city-folk — depicted as clever and rich, but also heartless, self-seeking, and lacking the rudimentary sentiments of generosity, hospitality and bravery in defense of kith and kin which the Berbers see themselves as possessing — are endlessly reaffirmed in jokes, poetry and proverbs.

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Berber cemeteries stand out from the remainder of the montane landscape as vividly as modern cemeteries do from their urban environment, but for opposite reasons. Modern European and North American urban cemeteries stand out from their

surroundings as oases of park-like features in the midst of an obviously constructed world of concrete and steel and glass (Ragon 1983:293). To be sure, they are not actual *bits* of nature; if they were, they would look more like Berber cemeteries, all overgrown with weeds and shrubs. They are, rather, tame *models* of nature — deliberately landscaped, planted, mowed, trimmed, pruned, tended, weeded and watered — evocations of a certain orderly conception of nature, but certainly not nature in the raw. There is no attempt to conceal the artifice by which they are created and they serve as formal settings for the perpetuation of the identity of the individuals whose names are inscribed on the grave markers and whose bodies moulder underground, each discrete and separate from the next, in its lead-lined and often steel-encased coffin. Berber cemeteries, by contrast, are genuine microcosms of nature, although paradoxically, they only exist as such by virtue of human fiat. They are achieved, not by means of proactive artifice — planting and mowing or watering — but rather by allowing natural processes to work over time, in effect, a sort of “passive artifice”. But even this passive artifice is an accomplishment, and requires legal statutes and the expenditure of significant amounts of energy to keep the village livestock from straying into the confines of the cemetery. The Berbers live, if not in an overtly human-made environment, then in a largely human-shaped environment. The cemetery-reserves are examples of nature, but — and this is the significant point — not nature as the Berbers of today know it from the “wilderness” (*lekhlā*) which surrounds their villages, but of a nature which was prior to the experience of anyone now living.

Both Berber and urban European and North American cemeteries are human-created landscapes which, each in their own way, produce a surrealistic variation on the nature observable by members of their respective societies. That is, each produces, through systematic practice, a model which exaggerates certain features of the natural landscape. These “symbolic landscapes” are, to be sure, consonant with the respective technological capacities of the two societies. The European cemetery is the result of a more powerful technology and economy, one capable of earth-moving, levelling and contouring on a large scale, whereas the Berber cemetery is shaped, to the extent it is shaped at all, by pick-axes and shovels. More importantly, these two symbolic landscapes are also consonant with the most basic social and cultural patterns of the two societies:

individualistic, legalistic, contractual and literate, in the one case, and group-oriented, kin-based and oral in the other. The European cemetery is an aggregation of strangers who have paid to be there, whereas the Berber cemetery is, literally, a community of kinsfolk and neighbors who have lived their lives together and whose *personae* are merged in death under its canopy of vegetation.

The overt artifice of the modern European cemetery is in a state of perpetual tension with nature. The express concerns of the grave being overrun with weeds, of the invasion of unwanted bushes, and of the tombstone falling over and its link with the grave being lost, are answered with commercial gardening services — “perpetual care” — which strive to maintain a static, unchanging appearance, to serve as a frame for the perpetuation of the individual identities proclaimed by the text inscribed on the grave marker. “Death,” as S.C. Humphreys has observed (1981:278), “presents problems of time management”, and the European cemetery “manages” the problem through material constructions which have the effect of arresting time, a tangible symbol of humankind’s dominion over nature.<sup>10</sup>

In the more subtle artifice of the Berber cemetery, by contrast, the very things which perpetual care is meant to stave off are taken for granted, in particular the effects of time. The eventual overgrowth of the site by shrubs and trees and its bioturbation by roots, mice, worms and insects, are the mechanisms whereby the village dead are transformed from a collection of individuals into a homogeneous mass. However, this mass is not, in turn, swallowed up by its environment to the point of being indistinguishable from it. On the contrary, thanks to the proclamation of *ag<sup>w</sup>dal*, the cemetery stands out as a patch of “hyper-nature”, distinct from ordinary (i.e. human-and-goat-shaped) botanical nature by its unusual density, height and luxuriance.

The modern European or North American cemetery proclaims and perpetuates the individuality of its inhabitants through commercial contracts which are imagined to extend into “eternity”. The Berber cemetery, by contrast, transforms individuality into a collectivity whose continuation in time depends, not on an imagined contract of doubtful perpetuity, but upon the continuity in a locality of a substantive way of life in which each villager, living and dead, is an essential link.



What I have attempted to establish here is that, although the Berber cemetery takes on its characteristically overgrown and unkempt appearance through forms of inaction and “non-maintenance”, this inaction is not merely a form of non-involved passivity or indifference. On the contrary, here is a form of passivity not unlike that of a calculated understatement which, in its relevant context, communicates very clearly indeed by playing on the signalling power of contrast. Because the effect of the *ag<sup>w</sup>dal* prohibitions causes the vegetation of village cemeteries to grow taller and more luxuriantly than the surrounding goat-browsed vegetation, it stands out to the eye, but only if one knows to look for it.

Standing on a mountain pass in the High Atlas, and surveying the montagnard valleys which stretch out below, it is often difficult to discern the dozens of hamlets and villages which usually lie in the distance below, partly because the earth-colored Berber houses are built from the mud and clay of the earth itself and hence do not stand out, particularly in the middle of the day when there are few shadows. But, if one has the habit of looking for them, these little blobs of vegetation that constitute the cemeteries, subtly denser and slightly darker than the surrounding vegetation, can be picked out from afar and used to lead the eye to the tiny cluster of houses nearby. In their way, these cemeteries are more reliable markers of village sites even than the whitewashed and tile-inlaid minarets which proclaim villages from afar in the plains regions of Morocco, or which serve to distinguish quarters in the massed cities, but which have been, until quite recent times, rare in the mountains. Viewed from a distance, from without, so to speak, the Berber cemetery is a sign, a proclamation to the effect that “this is a habitation”, not wilderness.

But viewed from within, it is not merely a sign, it is part of a system of practical logic, a symbolic landscape. And the “view from within” is literally the view from inside the grave — for males at least — for, as I have suggested, most village males will jump down into the grave and dig at least a few shovelfuls of earth for the majority of fellow villagers who die, from the time they are sixteen or so, on to the time of their own deaths. By the time of their own death, most Berber men have looked up at the sky from the bottoms of many dozens of graves, and will have reached up as the shrouded bodies of many of their relatives and neighbors and comperes are handed

down by next-of-kin to be laid in the ground, and will have shovelled in the backfill for countless unrelated villagers, as a kindness to allow the bereaved families to file back to their house to mourn.

The unity and equality symbolized by the village cemetery, then, does not reside in some abstract landscape of the mind, but in the concrete praxis of the graveside itself, as the villagers come to know it, from within and without. The look and the smell and the feel of the cemetery ground, the stratigraphy of its layers of soil, the action of roots and burrowing rodents and insects and worms, all these things are almost as familiar to the villagers as their own stables and chicken coops, and hold for them neither horrors nor morbid reflections.

Given that the etiquette of communal gravedigging requires the temporary suspension of quarrels and political wrangles, and given the powerful emotional associations of death, it is probably the case that the graveyard is the setting of the warmest, most extensive and most unifying fellowship which the villagers ever know, exceeding even that of communal prayer in the village mosque which is, perforce in highland Berber society, a highly politicized institution, riven with segmentary oppositions. The symbolic landscape of the Berber cemetery, then, is not a setting to which one comes to imagine a world more perfect or eternal than the everyday social world, but rather a place, the very construction of which transforms the constructors.

## NOTES

1. An earlier, abbreviated, version of this paper was read at the session Ideology of Death/ African Ideology at the 1990 Chacmool Conference and appeared in the Proceedings of that Conference (see Hatt 1992b).
2. Laoust (1920:260) provides an extensive etymological survey of the word *ag<sup>w</sup>dal* in a variety of Moroccan Berber languages. The root meaning appears to be an enclosed flat place (pasture or field depending on whether the group is oriented to pastoralism or cericulture), the private exploitation of which is forbidden or limited by the community.
3. Unripe barley has several uses in highland Moroccan cooking and so is not without value.
4. The village congregation (*jema<sup>c</sup>t*), consisting of the assembled married, male, landowning, freemen (*imazighen*), is the *de jure* decision-making body of the village on a wide range of matters, both religious and secular (Montagne 1931). In practice, the elder males

constitute a sort of "executive council", each elder speaking with a voice weighted by the number of successor-households (*takatin*) nested within his own (Hatt 1974).

5. For a general outline of Moroccan mortuary customs, see Bourilly (1932:108ff). Bourilly's description would come quite close to describing the practices of the Berber-speakers of the High Atlas, with the exception that most of the "folk customs" Bourilly mentions (e.g. throwing stones in the direction of the house from which a corpse is being removed), are omitted. As a generalization, one may say that rituals connected with circumcision and death (i.e. entering and leaving society) have been stripped of all "folk" elements and are hardly different in structure or detail from core-Islamic rites anywhere. By contrast, weddings and agricultural rites are highly elaborated with distinctively Berber folk practices.
6. Many people encourage children to fast at a very early age (six or so), but are very lenient in enforcing it, saying that fasting is a habit best learned early. Others condemn this practice, saying such children are too young to fast and that fasting is something too serious to be undertaken without total commitment. This is one of a number of practical religious questions which are endlessly debated and upon which there seems to be perennial disagreement. It spills over as a matter of public policy when a child dies and a decision needs to be made where to bury the body. It seems however that, confronted with the prospect of having to tell grieving parents that their dead child cannot be buried in a marked grave in the main part of the cemetery because of a contested interpretation of the age at which one can properly fast, even diehard opponents of early fasting relent and so, in practice, even quite young children are buried in the main section of the cemetery with marked graves.
7. Village *tolba* (Qur'ānic instructors) from this region, who are famed throughout North Africa for their arcane numerological arts (Doutté 1908), have in certain villages worked out calculations based on the area of the village cemetery, of the date of founding of the village. They work with numbers of bodies per hectare and rates of death (both derived empirically) and, making the unstated assumption of uniformity in death rate and burial practice, confidently pronounce on the date of first settlement of the village, invariably around "the time of the Prophet". The proposition that burial practices might have been different in the past or that the rate of burial might have changed over time strikes them as quite absurd.
8. For an account of the development of the social memory of a saintly personage who died in 1937 and the ritual elaboration of his grave, see the biography of Sidi al-ḥajj Leḥsen al-Kazūwi (Hatt 1992a).

9. Etymologically, there is no question that we are here dealing with the Arabic loan-word for "city". Although this usage (for cemetery) is not standard in Moroccan Arabic (Harrell 1966:76), it is standardized in Tashelḥait, in which the term *lemḍint* means both "cemetery" and "town". In cases where there might be a confusion between the two usages, Tashelḥait-speakers can always resort to the standard Moroccan Arabic word for cemetery (*rawḍa*). On the general semantic connection of cemeteries to cities, both in the Muslim world and Europe, see Ragon (1983:39-56).
10. Any systematic comparison of forms of cemetery maintenance, beyond the simplistic comparisons I draw here between European middle-class graveyards and highland Berber graveyards, is beyond the scope of this paper, although it may be apposite to note that the deliberate non-maintenance of burial grounds is far from unknown in world ethnography, being characteristic of, for example, orthodox European Jews and Hutterites and other anabaptist sects in North America (Stephenson 1991:197). Viewed in contrast to Maurice Bloch's suggestions about the relationship of funerary architecture to states and stratification (Bloch 1981:145ff), it might be suggested that what all these cases, including the highland Berber one, have in common is a determined negation of materialism in the "vegetal setting of death" (cf. Ragon 1983:113ff), which has the effect of building the spiritual bonds of local communities in contrast to a wider, and more complex, world outside.

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