

VULNERABILITY AND THE
ART OF PROTECTION

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Vulnerability and the Art of Protection
Embodiment and Health Care in Moroccan Households
Marybeth MacPhee



VULNERABILITY AND THE
ART OF PROTECTION

*Embodiment and Health Care in
Moroccan Households*

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

WIVES, RESTLESS SPIRITS, AND PROTECTIVE DEVICES

*Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart**

Most medical anthropology books begin with the phenomenon of illness and go on to discuss at length how it is treated, and how such treatment relates to ideas of the body and morality, politics, identity and the like. In this book Marybeth MacPhee takes a different tack. She concentrates on “the art of protection”: how the people she studied in Morocco seek to protect themselves against illness conditions, seeing these as often caused by unruly spirits

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(*jnun*) or the envious and malicious dispositions of neighbors. The focus of the study is on the agency of women, in their role as wives/housewives, who exert their efforts to protect themselves and their children. Men's agency appears in the background of the study, either designed to protect themselves or to ward off bad effects that threaten their wives and children. A hierarchy of spiritual forces is called upon. At the apex of the hierarchy is Allah himself, and Allah may be invoked as the ultimate protector or guardian in both minor and major circumstances of perceived danger.

Based on her ethnographic fieldwork and her personal experiences in the field, Dr. MacPhee identifies a major cultural theme around which she integrates her analysis. This is the theme of vulnerability, the continuous perception that people need to protect themselves against the possibility of misfortune through illness. Gender issues certainly enter in here, centered on sexual relations and reproduction, starting with engagements to marry, marriage itself, pregnancy, birth of children, and the health of young children exposed to the danger of diseases such as diarrhea. MacPhee devotes a whole chapter in this book to mothers' breastmilk, how it can become "bad" or insufficient, and what mothers do to optimize its virtues.

It emerges from the account that in sociological terms there is a great sense of distrust and edginess between women regarding child-bearing and marriage arrangements. Although MacPhee does not discuss this in great detail, the theme appears clearly. Perhaps there is an emphasis on reciprocity surrounding marriages via a pattern of marrying kin. Or perhaps there are tensions over polygyny in this Muslim society. In any case, people try to set up marriages for purposes of alliance. Yet divorce is apparently frequent, and men seem to be frequently away on work elsewhere. Married women are expected to be modest and not seek to be conspicuous in public; yet at marriage celebrations young women may openly display themselves in dancing for the wedding.

Neighbors are expected to be jealous. Compliments to a woman or her baby are considered dangerous as possible invocations of the "evil eye", which MacPhee refers to simply as "the Eye": like a transcendent force of ill-wishing, compounded out of individual dispositions. These observations fit well with the widespread Mediterranean theme of the evil eye, and on a much broader front with comparable data from New Guinea (explored in our book, Stewart and Strathern 2004). MacPhee explains that unbalanced humors in the body, envious neighbors, *jinn* spirits, sorcery, and microbes are all matters of potential fear and danger for people. The prevalence of humoral ideas of the body, correlated with careful attention given to the foods that new-born babies are fed, underlines the point that such foods (like herbs in other cultural contexts) function as kinds of medicines.

Cultural reasons for action are expressed often in striking images, such as the notion that excessive worrying leads to a pounding in the heart like spice pounded by a pestle in a mortar. Images of this sort correspond, in local usage, to the theoretical approach that MacPhee deploys in her study: cultural phenomenology. Steering a careful pathway between an emphasis on culture as collectively shared and implemented and a stress on culture as a framework within which individual make negotiations and compromises and balance complex issues and concerns, MacPhee decides that these two approaches can be seen a complementary. As we have noted, "culture" is abundantly evident in her data, but in a pluralistic form resulting from the historical admixture of diverse influences in the area.

The fact of pluralism also lends itself to the prevalence of choice-making and eclectic ways of dealing with contingencies in life patterns. The availability of biomedical options such as contraception or hospital birth simply adds to the plurality of choices women have. MacPhee's stress on the contextual constraints of decisions-making corresponds to what we in our work on conflict and peace-making have called "actionscapes". The frameworks of these actionscapes lend themselves to useful generalizations, of which the most notable in the study is the tension between closure and openness or interiority and exteriority. Protective devices safeguard interiority. They come into play particularly, as we might expect and MacPhee points out, at liminal moment of transition in the life cycle, pregnancy, birth, marriage—and surely, we might suggest, death, although this phase of the life cycle does not enter much into the account we are given. In some ways, a sense of liminality, and therefore vulnerability, pervades the whole life-cycle, because of the ever-present consciousness of the evil eye. People are cautious about letting neighbors know the good news of the birth of a son. Words of the Q'ran are written on slips of paper and dissolved into liquid for infants to drink. Women try to treat minor ailments with herbal remedies at home rather than taking children to hospital. Mothers try to conserve and maintain the quality of their breastmilk to feed their babies, and they are afraid that other women in the neighborhood may steal their milk. To prevent this happening, they have an interesting strategy: they try to behave well towards the women they suspect by offering them food, expecting that this positive act of generalized reciprocity will neutralize the specific negative reciprocity of the alleged theft: a neat extension of exteriority in order to protect interiority.

At several points we were reminded of emotive themes from an area of the world where we have done long-term fieldwork—that is, the Pacific. For example, pregnant women who develop cravings for a particular food should be

listened to and satisfied, for otherwise the child they bear is said to develop a blemish like the food denied to its mother. This notion is like the notion in Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea, that a woman who is *popokl*, resentful about some refusal to satisfy her needs, must have those needs attended to, because otherwise she will fall sick and pigs have to be sacrificed to make her well. The idea that breastmilk may be stolen by an envious neighboring woman is similar to the idea among the Wiru people of Pangia in Papua New Guinea that one woman may use magic to steal the sweet potato tubers from a garden strip of a rival within a polygynous household. While the Berber Moroccan women whose lives MacPhee portrays exert magic to protect their milk, in one Pangia village studied in the 1970s–1980s people secretly adopted a range of magical means to stop the envious ghosts of dead marital partners from coming back and claiming them to join them in the land of the dead (see Stewart and Strathern 2003): each culture to its own heart-pounding anxieties. Finally, MacPhee notes a practice whereby children at weddings were protected against the evil eye by dressing them in rags rather than fine clothes. In a village among the Duna people of Papua New Guinea in the 1990s we found that both adults and children intentionally wore poor, patched and torn clothing in order to avoid inciting the jealousy of local “witches” (see Stewart and Strathern 2004). The shared sociological context in all of these examples is the fear of competitive envy and the necessity to counteract this in one way or another.

In summary here, Dr. MacPhee’s study contributes to the advancement of medical anthropology in a number of ways. Ethnographically, her focus on women and their sense of vulnerability gives a convincing note to her discussions. Theoretically, her adoption of cultural phenomenology and with it the recognition of individual variability and choice among complex alternatives fits with the current recensions of theories of culture. And in comparative terms, parallels with other ethnographic contexts show that concrete circumstances of competition and jealousy, often exacerbated by rumor and gossip, lead to both suspicions of “witchcraft” and ritualized efforts to counteract it by protective devices.

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- Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew J. Strathern 2004. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*. No. 1 in the New Departures in Anthropology Series, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION

This manuscript includes terms from the Colloquial Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight Berber languages. The system of transliteration that I use to represent these words for readers of English derives from two sources: *Historical Dictionary of Morocco* (Park 1996) and *A Dictionary of Moroccan Arabic* (Harrell and Sobelman 1966). The aim of this combination is to minimize the use of diacritical marks.

With a few exceptions, the chart below outlines the symbols I use to represent Arabic letters. The sound of words in the Moroccan dialect, which is primarily a spoken language, diverges from Modern Standard Arabic. As such, the representations I use have different spellings from similar words in dictionaries of MSA. For Moroccan place names and personal names, I use the French transliteration (without diacritical marks) that is used in Morocco. These nouns appear with standard capitalization to avoid confusion with the transcription code. A notable exception, however, is the term *ksar* (qSaar), which I write as it is written in Moroccan place-names.

ب	b	ع	e
ت, ث	t	غ	gh
ج	j	ف	f
ح	H	ق	q
خ	kh	ك	k
د	d	ل	l
ذ	dh	م	m
ر	r	ن	n
ز	z	ه	h
س	s	و	w
ش	sh	ى	y
ص	S	آ	'
ض	D	a, i, u	short vowels
ط, ظ	T	aa, ii, uu	long vowels