

Modernization and Individualism in the Ayt Merghad Community

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Abstract. *In an attempt to build a modern state, Morocco has embarked on a process of social, economic and political development since its independence in 1956. Numerous projects of development have been implemented both at the national and local levels. These projects have produced new patterns of life which are governed by new values and ideals. In the Ayt Merghad community, values of mutual help and sacrifice for the benefits of the community, which were once defining features of this tribe, have begun to erode. These values are gradually being lost and replaced by more individualistic features. New ideals of individual success and personal achievement have become dominant aspects of the present-day Ayt Merghad community. Therefore, this paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon. On the one hand, with a special reference to the Ayt Merghad community, it provides a portrayal of people's attitudes towards collectivism and individualism. On the other hand, it attempts to shed light on the different attributes that reflect Ayt Merghad's tendency towards individualism and the factors behind such orientation. It can be concluded that under the pressure of socio-economic development, the Ayt Merghad community is moving towards a more individualistic side of the collectivism-individualism continuum.*

Introduction

It has been noticed that the adoption of a more individualistic life pattern in the Ayt Merghad¹ community is made necessary by the exigencies of a modernizing society. As a result, values of cooperation and interdependence are being abandoned. In this regard, this paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon. It tries to account for such a change in the community members' repertoire of values. Emphasis is put on the gradual loss of collectivism as a significant aspect of the Ayt Merghad culture. From an ethnographic perspective, the researcher attempts to elicit the target community's attitudes towards the transition from collectivism to individualism. The paper also highlights the factors that have contributed to the spread of the individualism principles.

Ayt Merghad: A Brief Overview

Ayt Merghad is an Amazigh tribal group whose native language is Tamazight. This community is located in Errachidia, which is situated in the south-east of Morocco. The Ayt Merghad area is bordered by the province of Figuig to the east, Beni Mellal, Azilal and Khenifra to the west, Boulmane to the north and Algeria to the south. A profound reflection on the past of the Ayt Merghad tribe makes it easy to note the community's excellence in many fields. From an economic perspective, Ayt Merghad were active participants on the economic front as they inhabited Sijlmasa. The area was a source of wealth for numerous other nations while its merchandise assured it penetration into many foreign markets.

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1 The phonetic transcription adopted in the present study conforms to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Geminate sounds are indicated by means of doubling the consonant. Emphatic sounds are indicated by means of a letter with a dot underneath.

A close look at the history of Morocco offers evidence for the heroic participation of the community in the war against colonization. This tribe reacted violently to the French occupation and showed a strong courage to defend their territory. Under the leadership of influential figures, the Ayt Merghad community participated in various battles against the French army and managed to inflict historic defeats on the colonial soldiers. Their role in the resistance against colonization was a major contribution to the end of the French penetration in the southeast Morocco.

Recently, the Ayt Merghad area has undergone a number of socio-economic mutations. Today, the community members benefit from a number of services and infrastructure which was not the case a few decades ago. Road connections and transport facilities to destinations outside the area have improved during the last five decades. The area is also characterized by a good access to communication devices. Urbanization, immigration, the decrease of illiteracy, and the diversification of the economic activities are all prominent aspects that have marked the process of socio-economic development in the Ayt Merghad area.

Methodology

The data collection technique used in this study is the focus group. In the literature, there are many definitions of a focus group. For example, Powell et al. (1996: 499) define a focus group as “*a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research*”. Besides, characteristics like organised discussion (Kitzinger, 1995), collective activity (Powell et al. 1996), social events (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) and interaction (Kitzinger, 1995) clarify the contribution that focus groups make to social research. The focus group method is sometimes referred to as ‘a focus group interview’, ‘a group interview’, or ‘a group depth interview’ (Ritchie, 2003). Focus group participants are encouraged to voice their opinions and perceptions about a study topic in a non-threatening and comfortable environment (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Litosseliti, 2003; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997).

The importance of recruiting focus group participants cannot be underestimated. For the information generated to be useful, purposive sampling was opted for in the present study. The focus groups recruitment was conducted mainly through direct contact with people. The three focus groups were composed of a roughly equal mix of males and females, and varied in size from six to eight participants. Nine participants were males whilst eleven were females. The participants’ age ranged between twenty-four and eighty. The researcher acted as a moderator during the focus groups. She tried to keep the participants focussed on the topic of interest and encouraged them to interact and voice their opinions and attitudes. Tamazight was used as it is the language of the target community.

The Transition from Collectivism to Individualism in the Ayt Merghad community

Generally speaking, individualism and collectivism reflect different social values, attitudes, behaviours and relationships between people in different cultures. It is commonly acknowledged in the literature that individualist and collectivist attitudes are not mutually exclusive but can coexist in different communities (Kim, 1994; Singelis et al., 1995; Sinha & Tripathi, 1994; Triandis, 1995; Triandis et al., 1986). These two concepts are complex constructs and have both been defined in numerous ways by different researchers (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Kagitçibasi, 1997; Kim, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2002). Hofstede (1991: 260-261) points out that:

“Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family only. . . . Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.”

Accordingly, individualism encourages independence and autonomy; whereas collectivism favours interdependence and loyalty to the group.

In the present study, the loss of collectivism is a theme that was strongly debated amongst the participants. Although the Ayt Merghad culture exhibits elements of both individualism and collectivism, the participants

made it clear that there is a tendency towards gradual individualistic attitudes in the community. This individualistic orientation has brought about various changes in the cultural values of the Ayt Merghad community, especially among the young generation. Values of mutual help and sacrifice for the benefits of the community, which were once defining features of the community, have begun to erode. These values are gradually being lost and replaced by more individualistic features. New ideals of personal achievement and success are adopted. Undoubtedly, education has contributed to the spread of the principles of achievement and competition among the young generation. Today, members of the Ayt Merghad community pay utmost effort in order to achieve high levels of education. This indicates that individual competition with the others and ambition, which are at the core of the individualistic view of life, has made their way right into the Ayt Merghad community. The following quote reported by a 40-year-old man summarizes some general features of the Ayt Merghad community which can serve as indicators of their individualistic tendency.

“ayuln mæddæn uwint bæzɣaf g lhmum nsæn. uwint bæzɣaf g ttərbija d tɣuri n warraw nsæn. ayuln awd mæddæn uwint g lxdami nsæn. ur jad sulan mæddæn.”

“People have become more concerned with their personal matters. They focus more on educating their children and following their studies. Also people are preoccupied with their jobs. They are all the time busy.”

With the modernization and urbanization processes, the Ayt Merghad community is moving towards a more individualistic side of the collectivism-individualism continuum. The family structure provides a concrete example of this tendency. The traditional extended family is being replaced by nuclear units with parents and their children. The Ayt Merghad community was characterized by the coexistence of several generations within the household and stronger ties towards the larger family. Today, most couples find it more convenient to live separately from their parents. The appearance of nuclear families has, in fact, paved the way for child-raising by parents in a more individualistic manner. This is clearly discussed by a 37-year-old man in following lines.

“juf is ɣɔdɣ ɣir nççin d tarwa nuw afçu nkkin d tmættut inuw nra an sɣjær almæssi nəɣ imædunɣ bla aday issxub awd jan aɗu. nra ad nsxitr arraw nəɣ s ttariqa ta3srijt. mæç llan didnɣ mæddæn jadn ur nənni adi nsagəm arraw nəɣ s imçi nna nra.

“It is better to live in a nuclear family because my wife and I would like to manage our family alone without any disturbance from anybody. We want to raise our children in a modern style. If other relatives live with us we will not raise our children the way we want.”

The individualistic orientation of the Ayt Merghad community has not only affected the family structure but the decision-making process within the family has also been altered. The role of the extended family and the elders has reduced. The family elders' opinion used to be highly respected if not sacred. They used to have the final say in all family matters and were a source of authority and knowledge. Younger family member were supposed to obey without questioning. It was disrespectful for the young to express their opinion or contradict the elders. Instead, they were expected to listen carefully and do as they were told. The decision-making process also used to be a purely males' domain while women were totally excluded. Today, the elders are still treated with special consideration; nevertheless, the individualistic approach adopted in the community offers the young generation more freedom of decision making. Commenting on this state of affairs, a 31-year-old woman notes that:

“mæç izɔdɣ urgaz d tmættut nəs d ixatarn g juwt taddart da ttubuɣn ad tɣurn ajnna nnan ixatarn. ajnnaɣ as da ttirin mæddæn ad stin. urid is ur 3mmirn ixatarn ɣir ran ad 3ifn imçinna ran.”

“When a couple lives with other family members in the same house, they are forced to follow the decisions made by the old members. That's why people prefer to live in a separate house. This does not mean that they don't respect the elderly; they just want to live the way they

desire.”

The participants also claim that the Ayt Merghad community exhibits other typical attributes associated with individualism, namely independence and self-reliance. With the diversification of the economic activities in the Ayt Merghad community, the importance of collective work has faded. This is because different individuals possess different jobs, a matter which makes them capable of achieving their self-sufficiency independently from the other members of the community. In the past, the economic system of the Ayt Merghad community was based mainly on agriculture. There was little differentiation between the members of the tribe; they were quite egalitarian. Cooperation and interdependence were dominant principles. In such a traditional community, there was no room for individualism. The following quote, made by a 29-year-old man, indicates that working in different sectors is a major factor promoting the shift from collectivism to individualism.

‘ayuln madaän da xaädmn g wabli n iaxdami ur jad da t3awmaln xaf lflaba addi rarn t3arf n uyrum. zman kkanian madaän da t3am3awan g igran. iaxdami n luqta ur htadzant am3awan gr mdaän. cu juwn juwit g tywuri näs.’

‘People work in different jobs. They no longer depend on agriculture to earn bread. In the past, everybody used to contribute to perform different tasks in the fields. Nowadays, the nature of most of the existing jobs does not require the collaboration of the community members. Therefore, everyone is concerned with his job.’

The relatively high levels of individualism of the Ayt Merghad culture today is also made possible by the improved standard of living that allows the members of the community to be self-sufficient and independent from the others as the following quote, produced by a 46-year-old woman, explains:

‘ayuln mdaän xj3arn. yijn addi çrun imfyaln ad xaämn g lflaba. ilin winna jyjn add isyin lmwakn n t3allabt. addag llant lmunasabat, itsant Bawilat da çrrunt tiwtmin issannwan d tinna jt3awan g taddart. ur jad da t3aqqaln madaän s waa3arn atni 3awnän.’

‘People’s living conditions have improved. They can hire workers to perform agriculture-related-activities. Some can even buy machines to use in the fields. Moreover, in ceremonies, families hire cooks and maids to help with the housework. People no longer wait for their neighbours to offer their help.’

A 52-year-old woman expresses a similar view. She insists on the fact that:

‘zman iekkatn ttaadamun dilliy bat bla t3ta33at at yart i jawd jan bat ddand maddän sawa? g u33u3d ula maj sf3anf3atn g ufrab. näyd g lmut. illa majdn juwin awwær, illa majdn juwin igffidn. di mç immut daj t3addu juwn g ajt taddart ad isy ayrum g ufraran.’

‘In the past there used to be so much solidarity. You didn’t need to ask people for help, they would automatically come during both the preparation period and the celebration days to take part in the happy event. As for funerals, people would bring flour and wood. Today as soon as a person dies, a member of the family buys bread from the baker’s.’

A 46-year-old woman further highlights the individualistic tendency among the community members. She explains that:

‘tayul luqt if3aqqä, ur jad sulan mddän bax3af. llan winna jxdddämn bax3af afad bær3n ix3awn nsän; ur jad da t3aggan mddän gir ajinna jgan daruri. ur jad tqiqimi luqt çur mddän afad m3awan gratsn, çin ad 3awn çir wunna sn imsän çä.’

‘Life has become difficult; people no longer have much free time. Some people work a lot

because they want to live a luxurious life they no longer limit themselves to necessary things. People no longer have much free time to help other community members; they would provide help only to close relatives.”

Of special note here is that the tendency toward the individualistic orientation is manifested in the community members' daily life and has brought about profound transformations in their repertoire of values.

Conclusion

The aim of the present paper has been to account for the gradual transition from collectivism to individualism in the Ayt Merghad community. It is of import to recognize that values of individualism and collectivism fall all along a continuum and under the pressure of modernization and urbanization, members of the target community are developing a tendency towards a more individualistic orientation. This has, in turn, led to the gradual disappearance of the traditional values of mutual help and cooperation and the adoption of values of independence and self-reliance.

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Endnote

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