

## Gift-Giving as Social Capital: Changing Customs of Ṣaḥrāwī Women's Gift Exchange in Laayoune

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**Abstract:** Since the seminal work of Marcel Mauss<sup>1</sup> on the social functions of gift-giving, anthropologists have held a long interest in the symbolic, economic, and social importance of gift exchange. Anthropologists working in the Maghreb and the Middle East have examined various ways that gift prestations and forms of reciprocity build social capital and prestige. This article draws on anthropological studies of reciprocity and hospitality in the wider region to consider changing customs of gift-giving for Ṣaḥrāwī Arab communities in northwest Africa. Pressures have increased for women to provide higher value material goods and cash gifts at weddings and social occasions to maintain their social standing through a gift-giving practice among women known as *tarziḥt*. Moving from a communal expression of social solidarity toward a signifier of socioeconomic status in the contemporary wage labor economy, gift-giving has become an increasing source of financial and marital distress between Ṣaḥrāwī women who manage reciprocal gift relationships and their husbands who financially support them. This shift may reflect wider social changes in the region, including the breakdown of tribal affiliation as the basis for exchange, increased involvement of women in household financial management, and loss of male status in the move from pastoral nomadism to sedentary, urban livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Gifts, Reciprocity, Hospitality, Marriage, Gender, Social Capital, Prestige, Nomadic Peoples.

### Introduction

“*Waḥed! Ithnayn! Thlātha!*,”<sup>2</sup> shouted the raspy, middle-aged Ṣaḥrāwī woman animating the public counting of Rweiya’s cache of wedding gifts as they were delivered in multiple blue aluminum trunks by a procession of her groom’s male relatives into her parent’s crowded living room. I sat on carpets alongside dozens of Ṣaḥrāwī women in their multicolored *malaḥfa*<sup>3</sup> veils as we observed the wedding festivities that unfolded in the Saharan city of Laayoune in June 2009 during a visit to meet the family of my research

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1. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Forms and Function of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000 [1954]).

2. “One, two, three” in Ḥassāniyya Arabic.

3. A *malaḥfa* is a traditional garment worn by Ṣaḥrāwī and Mauritanian women that has gained more popularity throughout Morocco as well. It consists of a meter of fabric that is secured in knots at the shoulders and wrapped around the woman’s body and head. For more discussion about the *malaḥfa*, see Katherine Ann Wiley, “The Materiality and Social Agency of the Malaḥfa (Mauritanian Veil),” *African Studies Review* 62, 2 (2019): 149-74.

assistant.<sup>4</sup> Summer is prime wedding season and my visit coincided with the wedding of my host's cousin, where I was escorted on a summer night to sit among the women and partake in local wedding customs, music, dance, and a traditional meal of stewed camel served with round loaves of bread.

One by one, Rweiya's paternal aunts took public inventory of the *ṣadāq* (bridewealth) offerings from the groom as they held up each item to the room full of female wedding guests offering frequent ululations in admiration of the spoils that came in equal numbers:<sup>5</sup> 40 variations of the long cotton *malaḥfa* wraps worn daily by Ṣaḥrāwī<sup>6</sup> women from southern Morocco to Mauritania, 40 large plastic bottles of pungent perfume used for liberally dousing houseguests as a sign of hospitality, 40 pairs of store-bought shoes, 40 bars of soap, and a selection of imitation gold and diamond jewelry, handbags, cosmetics and luggage in which to store the new collection of bridal possessions.

Once the groom's contributions had been exhausted and several rounds of tea and sweets consumed, the female guests present at this women's-only phase of the three-day Ṣaḥrāwī wedding festivities began ushering in their own collection of wedding gifts: piles of synthetic blankets made in Spain, boxes of sugar cones for tea-making, cooking pots and housewares, and more ostentatious, high status offerings made by close friends and relatives: a portable electric washing machine, three large synthetic carpets, a large-screen color TV, satellite dish, video-CD player, and envelopes stuffed with bills of Moroccan dirhams. By the end, the running tallies had been temporarily reconfigured: gifts offered and received, prestige gained and lost, and debts owed at the next friend's social occasion. Into the folds of their artfully draped *malaḥfas*, the older women in the crowd tucked away plastic sacks filled with leftover hunks of camel meat, dates, peanuts, and pastries as the guests began taking their leave, spilling out into the city streets at dusk.

This scene was typical at numerous weddings that I attended during my initial fieldwork in 2006-2007 with Ḥassāniyya-speaking communities of Ṣaḥrāwī Arabs in southern Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. During my first introduction to Ṣaḥrāwī families living in Akka (Tata region) in 2004, I was

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4. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Sidi Bachir El Rahmou for this project, along with the research participants and funding organizations that supported my first phase of dissertation research in the region in 2006-07 (Fulbright-Hays, American Institute for Maghrib Studies, and the PEO Foundation).

5. This is a common tradition to offer the same number of items in the *ṣadāq*, which is also the case in Mauritania, see Katherine Ann Wiley, *Work, Social Status and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

6. The term Ṣaḥrāwī means "Saharan" in Arabic.

initially surprised to receive an impromptu invitation to attend an overnight wedding in the *bādiyya* (desert) held in several large cloth tents set up by the family hosting the festivities. I had come to Akka to explore preliminary research on the impacts of the recent 2004 reform of the *moudawana* law (Personal Status Code) on rural perceptions of marriage, divorce, and women's legal rights. That first wedding I attended as a guest revealed that song and poetry performance, as well as gift exchanges in social ceremonies, played a central role in Ṣaḥrāwī identity, and I was intrigued by these forms of artistic expression in this understudied area of Morocco.

When I returned to the area in 2006 to embark on my dissertation fieldwork, my research had shifted to focus on the performance of oral poetry as expressions of cultural identity and social memory, and my search for Ṣaḥrāwī poets frequently took me to wedding celebrations.<sup>7</sup> I spent a good portion of my time in the field hearing about friends' wedding plans, attending them during long days and nights, or watching locally produced home videos of past weddings that friends shared as a form of entertainment, bonding, and proof of their social standing acquired through having a 'good wedding.'

For Ṣaḥrāwīs, especially women, weddings comprise the central social event in their lives, and they are a central venue through which women meet outside the home, share news and information, and reinforce social networks and relationships vital to their sense of self and their accrual and maintenance of social capital<sup>8</sup> in the wider community. Weddings also provide opportunities for single men and women (and their family members) to scope out and court potential marriage partners. The institution of marriage is integral to fulfilling the social and religious expectation of heterosexual marriage and parenthood, which confers significant status in Ṣaḥrāwī society. The very transition from being designated as a girl or a woman is contingent on attaining married status rather than age, work, or other signs of maturity. The Ḥassāniyya word for being married (*mutakhayama*) refers to a woman's establishment of her own family tent, or *khayma*. Tent-dwelling was the norm in the nomadic society based on camel herding in which sub-units of tribes moved around the Saharan region and set up groupings of 50-100 tents known as a *frig*

7. Tara F. Deubel, *Between Homeland and Exile: Poetry, Memory and Identity in Ṣaḥrāwī Communities*. Phd Dissertation, (University of Arizona, Tucson, 2010); Tara F. Deubel, "Poetics of Disapora: Ṣaḥrāwī Poets and Postcolonial Transformations of a Trans-Saharan genre in North West Africa," *The Journal of North African Studies* 17, 2 (2011): 295-314.

8. The term social capital in Pierre Bourdieu's original formulation refers to the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition." See, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, eds. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1985), 248.

(plural: *firgān*).<sup>9</sup> Mobile pastoralism remained the dominant livelihood until more widespread sedentism resulting from political upheaval and degrading environmental conditions caused large numbers Ṣaḥrāwis to settle in urban areas from the 1970s onward.

The broader social meanings of Ṣaḥrawi marriage and weddings, and the recent socioeconomic changes that have affected them, have been explored in recent ethnographies in the greater Ḥassanophone region both in the refugee camps in Algeria<sup>10</sup> and among Ḥarātīne women in southern Mauritania.<sup>11</sup> In this article, I consider the intersection of weddings and other social ceremonies with the custom of reciprocal gift-giving, which has garnered anthropological interest in the Maghreb region over time. Gift distribution and exchange was an integral part of the nomadic customs of the Beni Ḥassān arabophone tribes<sup>12</sup> that migrated from areas of the Arabian Peninsula to northwest Africa from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>13</sup> Intermingling with indigenous Amazigh (Berber) peoples in the region, the tribes based their pastoral livelihoods on the camel caravan trade and gained a presence across the Saharan region of present-day Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Niger and Mali.

Within the larger context of Ṣaḥrāwi gift exchange that includes the marital traditions of *sadāq* (bridewealth gifts from groom to bride), *faskhah* (dowry gifts from bride to groom), and *rḥil* (household gifts for the bride from her family before she moves into the husband's family),<sup>14</sup> I focus on a custom among Ṣaḥrāwi married women that is known in Ḥassāniyya as *tarzift*.<sup>15</sup> On behalf of their family, women offer gifts to their relatives and friends at social events and ceremonies (*munāsabāt*), such as weddings,<sup>16</sup> naming ceremonies for new babies, and boys' circumcisions. In urban areas such as Laayoune, Ṣaḥrāwis have noted that the emphasis of *tarzift* is

9. On the centrality of the tent in Mauritanian society, see Sébastien Boulay, "La tente dans la société maure (Mauritanie), entre passé et présent: Ethnologie d'une culture matérielle bédouine en mutations," Ph.D. dissertation (Paris: Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, 2003).

10. Alice Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile: A Saharan Liberation Movement Governs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Konstantina Isidoros, *Nomads and Nation Building in the Western Sahara: Gender, Politics and the Ṣaḥrāwī* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

11. Wiley, *Work, Social Status and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*.

12. Wilson notes that in the period prior to 1975 when mobile pastoralism was the main livelihood, the *frig* (group of tents) was the main unit of social organization and each *frig* was able to "rely on the labour and resources of its own members for production and consumption, with stylized reciprocity between *firgan*." See, Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*.

13. Harry T. Norris, *The Arab Conquest of Western Sahara* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986).

14. Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*.

15. The pronunciation is *tarzeeft*. This term may have its etymological origins in Amazigh (Berber) languages that mixed with Ḥassāniyya over time. *Tarzeeft* means gift in Tashelhit.

16. In Mauritania, *Biḍān* women commonly hold "divorce parties" as well that include lavish gift-giving.

changing from a communal form of solidarity that strengthens long-term ties of affinity and indebtedness between tribes or families toward a marker of individual social status. Women frequently engage in friendly competition with one another to offer increasingly higher value goods and amounts of cash at social ceremonies, which reveals differences in their socioeconomic status and access to social capital.

For urban married couples, the pressure for women to maintain their reputation as generous gift-givers has become a new source of marital strife between Ṣaḥrāwī women who are responsible for managing the exchange relationships and their husbands who provide the majority of the financial resources to fund them. This shift in the nature of gift-giving and its marital repercussions relates to larger phenomena occurring in urban Ṣaḥrāwī society; notably, the breakdown of tribal affiliations as the basis for reciprocal exchanges, the loss of male status in the shift from livelihoods based on livestock wealth to the urban wage labor economy, and increased involvement of housewives in the financial matters and management of the household.

### **The Urban Setting of Laayoune**

The area where contemporary Ṣaḥrāwī Arab communities are located in northwest Africa extends from southern Morocco into northern Mauritania and southwestern Algeria, as well as some areas of northern Mali and Niger where Hassāniyya speakers also reside. The city of Laayoune is situated on the Atlantic coast and Saguiat-el-Hamra River and inhabited by roughly a million people, including indigenous Ṣaḥrāwīs and Moroccans of Arab and Amazigh descent who have migrated into the area in large numbers over time, especially since the termination of Spanish rule in the Spanish Sahara and Moroccan annexation in 1975. Since decolonization, Ṣaḥrāwīs have experienced a series of political disruptions<sup>17</sup> that have hastened a sharp decline in mobile pastoralism, which continues to exist as a complementary livelihood strategy, especially on the outskirts of urban settings and in undeveloped desert spaces (*bādiyya*), but no longer comprises the main livelihood strategy for the

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17. These disruptions include 16 years of armed conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front (1975-1991), the displacement of roughly 150,000 refugees to camps in Algeria, and a series of failed international diplomatic interventions to resolve the conflict since the 1990s. Ṣaḥrāwīs currently reside in four main zones: (1) non-disputed areas of southern Morocco with Moroccan Arab and Berber communities, (2) the Saharan provinces of Morocco (Western Sahara territory) that remain under dispute, (3) five refugee camps in southwest Algeria administered by the Polisario Front state-movement that declared the government-in-exile of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976, and (4) northern regions of Mauritania (such as Zouerate) where many Ṣaḥrāwīs also have family and tribal affiliations. For further background, see Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

majority of the Ṣaḥrāwī population.<sup>18</sup> Since 1975, a massive influx of settlers speaking Moroccan Darija<sup>19</sup> and Tashelḥit (to a lesser extent) has populated Laayoune, attracted in part by government incentives for employment and housing opportunities. The city of Laayoune has also been marked by several periods of civil unrest during the uprisings against the government in 1999, 2005, and 2010 with the installation of the Gdeim Izik protest camps outside of the city.

In the movement from nomadic to urban livelihoods over time, Ṣaḥrāwī communities have grappled with changing notions of tribal, ethnic, and national identities, the rapid decline of mobile pastoralism, and language shift from Ḥassāniyya to the increasing dominance of Moroccan Darija in urban spaces. Despite the loss of nomadic ways of life in the *bādiyya*, Ṣaḥrāwīs take great pride in maintaining the elaborate customs of hospitality and *karam* (generosity)<sup>20</sup> that were integral to survival in the desert environment as nomads traversed harsh terrain in search of pasture and water for herds and safe places to set up their camps. As a particularly gendered form of this pervasive and revered sense of Ṣaḥrāwī hospitality, the contemporary practice of *tarzift* is often managed by women who take charge of circulating gifts to one another at social occasions, accruing both social and economic capital in the process.

### Anthropology of Gift Exchange

As Marcel Mauss argues in his classic, seminal work on the anthropology of gift-giving, forms of exchange constitute social relationships and operate according to implicit, culturally specific parameters that determine how seemingly voluntary gifts are to be given and repaid under obligation.<sup>21</sup> In Lévi-Strauss's view of gift exchange,<sup>22</sup> he describes it as a “skillful game

18. Tara F. Deubel and Aomar Boum, “The Rise of a Saharan City: Urban Development, Tribal settlement and Political Unrest in Laâyoune,” in *Routledge Handbook on Middle East Cities*, eds. Haim Yacobi and Mansour Nasrasra (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2019).

19. The colloquial Moroccan dialect of Arabic spoken throughout the country.

20. In Shryock's description of *karam* hospitality traditions among urban Balgawi Bedouins in Jordan, he notes that “acts of *karam* are meant to create an ambiance of privileged inclusion and (no less pronounced) a precise containment. Among Balgawi guests are called ‘prisoners of the host’ (*usira al-mu'azzib*)... When released, they spread news of the house; they praise and criticize it in the larger world.” See Andrew Shryock, “The New Jordanian Hospitality: House, Host, and Guest in the Culture of Public Display,” *Journal for Comparative Study of Society and History* 46, 1 (2004): 37.

21. Mauss's theory drew on prior studies of reciprocity conducted by Franz Boas's research on the potlatch tradition among the Kwakiutl in the Pacific Northwest and Bronislaw Malinowski's analysis of the kula ring in the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia.

22. Lévi-Strauss's examples referred in part to the exchange of women through marriage alliances. See, Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Principle of Reciprocity,” in *Sociological Theory: A Book of Readings*, eds. Lewis A. Coser and Bernard Rosenberg (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957).



[that] consists of a complex totality of maneuvers, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and fortify oneself against risks incurred through alliances and rivalry."<sup>23</sup> As he points out, there is much more involved in giving than mere generosity; skill and strategy inform how the giver positions herself. In this way, gift exchanges, as well as hospitality, function as a form of balanced reciprocity<sup>24</sup> or insurance in times of insecurity when reliance upon the generosity of those in one's social network is vital for well-being and daily survival.<sup>25</sup>

Ethnographers have argued that formalized gift exchanges, hospitality, and visiting patterns in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) societies, as elsewhere, function as a form of "currency"<sup>26</sup> to establish and reinforce status positions within social hierarchies and foster various forms of social cohesion.<sup>27</sup> Among the Balga Bedouins in Jordan, Andrew Shryock's research in Amman emphasizes the centrality of urban Bedouin hospitality customs in establishing and maintaining good social relations between hosts and guests.<sup>28</sup> A popular saying alludes to the guest's ability to enhance or diminish the reputation of his host: "The host must fear the guest. When he sits [and shares your food] he is company. When he stands [and leaves your house] he is a poet."<sup>29</sup> Hospitality thus treads upon hazardous terrain as the reputation of the hosts is at stake, and their obligation to protect guests from harm and treat them with honor and generosity is taken very seriously.<sup>30</sup>

23. Lévi-Strauss, "The Principle of Reciprocity," 86.

24. Sahlins discusses how balanced reciprocity entails exchanging gifts of equal or greater value over time. See, Marshall Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

25. Lawrence Rosen, "Social Identity and Points of Attachment: Approaches to Social Organization," in *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society*, eds. Clifford Geertz, Lawrence Rosen, and Hildred Geertz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 102.

26. Anne Betteridge's work in Iran demonstrates that formalized gift-giving functions as a form of currency in which formulaic, stereotyped gifts express a status within a relationship, in contrast with more personalized exchanges between social intimates that allow for more diverse forms of self-expression and individuality. See, Anne H. Betteridge, "Gift Exchange in Iran: The Locus of Self-Identity in Social Interaction," *Anthropological Quarterly* 58, 4 (1985): 190-202.

27. Barbara C. Aswad, "Visiting Patterns among Women of the Elite in a Small Turkish City," *Anthropological Quarterly* 47 (1974): 9-27; Homa Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Diane Singerman, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

28. Shryock, "The New Jordanian Hospitality."

29. *Ibid.*, 36.

30. Guests in Jordan are also referred to as "prisoners of the host" (*usira al mu'azzib*) as they are subject to elaborate etiquette and idealized rituals of hospitality. Shryock extends his discussion of everyday hospitality in the domestic sphere to the ways in which references to *karam* (generosity) appear in Jordanian public and commercial settings, the heritage industry aimed at tourists, and national frameworks of power that draw on the notion of hospitality as part of the national Jordanian character.

For many ethnographers, understanding reciprocity customs in host communities takes on a very personal dimension as all fieldwork requires reliance upon the hospitality and generosity of others. In her ethnography of gendered household management in low-income families in Cairo, Homa Hoodfar mentions how she was personally drawn into fraught gift relationships with her participants:

“A constant source of anxiety was not being able to afford suitable gifts for members of my very wide network when there was news of a wedding engagement, childbirth, or trip. The gift exchange is an important means of reaffirming one’s membership in a network (...) the gifts and their material worth became common knowledge, and depending on how the community had assessed my financial means, this would signal the value I gave to my friendships.”<sup>31</sup>

Similar to the Ṣaḥrāwī wedding described above, Hoodfar also observed at Egyptian weddings that one or two designated female relatives are placed in charge of collecting these gifts and making careful mental notes so that the contributions could be reciprocated at future occasions according to the relative financial means of the family. She notes that “this institution served as a means of reinforcing social cohesiveness, strengthening the vertical as well as the horizontal social ties of household members, and reinforcing the feeling of belonging to a community.”<sup>32</sup>

In contemporary Ṣaḥrāwī communities, several anthropologists have analyzed the salience of reciprocity and gift exchange, especially in the context of hospitality traditions,<sup>33</sup> marriage celebrations,<sup>34</sup> and in understandings of humanitarian aid distribution in the Ṣaḥrāwī refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria.<sup>35</sup> Alice Wilson’s research in the Ṣaḥrāwī camps<sup>36</sup> revealed that during the early period of revolution that produced the Polisario Front as a “state-movement” in the 1970s, the massive disruptions of pre-exile tribal identity and social relations of the tribe (*qabīla*) also affected practices of wedding gift reciprocity. In the early days of the state-movement from 1975 through

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31. Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market*, 28.

32. *Ibid.*, 222.

33. Vivian Solana, “Hospitality’s Prowess: Performing Sahrāwī Sovereignty in Refugee Camps,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 42, 2 (2019): 362-79.

34. Alice Wilson, “Households and the Production of Public and Private Domains: Revolutionary Changes in Western Sahara’s Liberation Movement,” *Paieduma* 58 (2012): 19-43; Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*.

35. Isidoros, *Nomads and Nation Building in the Western Sahara*. Aomar Boum, “Refugees, Humanitarian Aid, and the Displacement Impasse in Ṣaḥrāwī Camps,” in *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms and Geopolitics*, eds., Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Rousselier, 261-75 (Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 2013).

36. Wilson, “Households and the Production of Public and Private Domains;” Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*.



the early 1990s, the state banned the custom of providing bridewealth gifts (*ṣadāq*)<sup>37</sup> from the groom's family to the bride's family during weddings.<sup>38</sup> This ban removed material and social barriers to marriage and ultimately helped to promote the movement's ideology of social egalitarianism and to expand intermarriage between tribes, which increased a sense of belonging to the emerging nation-state.

In the period post-1991 (when active conflict with Morocco ended and a cash economy was established in the camps), Wilson notes that households in the camps have become even more individualized but refugees commonly practice reciprocal exchanges of household goods to compensate for frequent market shortages. Over time, the growth of the cash economy and influx of shops and merchants has created larger expectations in providing hospitality for guests and visitors and purchasing more lavish wedding gifts. This shift has diminished ties of reciprocity by making people more reluctant to visit one another or attend weddings if they feel it will unduly burden their hosts or if they cannot afford to furnish a proper wedding gift.

Vivian Solana considers the "political prowess" of Ṣaḥrāwī hospitality acts in the refugee camp community and argues that "practices of hospitality cultivate the status and reputation of households, persons, and families; and they constitute a mode of political action that produces political legitimacy for the Ṣaḥrāwī political movement as a whole."<sup>39</sup> The duties of hospitality in the camps fall disproportionately on the women who reside more permanently than men in the camps and whose "affective labor" in opening their homes to visitors becomes a form of ambassadorship for the nationalist cause that guests are expected in return to support and publicize to wider, international audiences.<sup>40</sup> In this way, acts of hospitality are scaled up to constitute "performances of Ṣaḥrāwī popular sovereignty."<sup>41</sup>

37. The gifts typically consisted of camels from the groom's father's herd, cloth and jewelry, and slave women in earlier times. Wilson's discussion of the pre-revolutionary *ṣadāq* gifts refers to the work of Julio Caro Baroja, *Estudios saharianos* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1955), Sophie Caratini, *Les Rgaybat (1610-1934)*. Vol 2. *Territoire et société* (Paris: Harmattan, 1989).

38. Of note, the related customs of *faskhah* (gifts from the bride's family to groom's family) and *rḥil* (gifts of household good to the bride from her own natal family) were not banned by the state at that time but were not normally practiced at the time due to widespread material dispossession and the lack of need to reciprocate the banned *ṣadāq* prestations, Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*, 155.

39. Vivian Solana, "Hospitality's Prowess: Performing Sahrāwī Sovereignty in Refugee Camps," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 42, 2 (2019): 363.

40. Konstantina Isidoros (2018) also discusses how the customary rules and practices of indigenous reciprocity from refugees' pre-flight pasts affect the forms of exchange in camp settings. She noted that forms of humanitarian aid provided to Ṣaḥrāwī s are also bound by certain rules of reciprocity and that "aid goods are expected to be passed on...they are both shared across kin groups and resourcefully traded in order to acquire good that will make a harsh life better," by obtaining preferred food items, marriage gifts, mobile phones, and toiletries. See, Isidoros, *Nomads and Nation Building in the Western Sahara*.

41. Solana, "Hospitality's Prowess," 367.

Scholars of neighboring Mauritanian societies further south have also considered the social importance of gift traditions in other Ḥassāniyya speaking communities. Katherine Wiley's<sup>42</sup> study of gender and work in southern Mauritania describes the importance of exchange among Ḥassāniyya-speaking Ḥarātīne<sup>43</sup> women who descended from families of former slaves in Arab Biḍān<sup>44</sup> society.<sup>45</sup> In particular, she discusses how wedding exchange creates new forms of social value and reworks social hierarchies. In the circulation of material goods through the bridewealth (*ṣadāq*) prestations (half of which is usually offered back to the groom's family the next day), she argues that "for many Ḥarātīne, exchange not only generates social and economic capital, but contributes to redefining what constitutes social status in this context."<sup>46</sup> Through *ṣadāq* gifts that include equal numbers of items like traditional *malahfa* cloth veils, shoes, blankets, jewelry, household goods, cosmetics, and higher-priced electronic goods like cell phones and boom boxes, people publicly display their social worth "as valued persons" and perform their generosity.<sup>47</sup> When part of the *ṣadāq* is offered back to the groom's family, this practice bestows amplified ("bigger") value (*maqḍār*) on them, thereby increasing the family's social prestige in the community.

Wiley also points out the importance of discourse and talk as a way to "supplement or enhance the social value that family ceremonies generate,"<sup>48</sup> especially in the absence of a high value *ṣadāq* in leaner economic times. Attendees who speak favorably about the food and drink, music and dancing, and gifts bestowed at weddings help to magnify and circulate the social capital and good reputation of the families involved far beyond the life of the event. The material exchanges that occur at weddings are particularly important for Ḥarātīne communities in Mauritania as they transition from a system in

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42. Wilson, "Households and the Production of Public and Private Domains;" Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile*.

43. The Ḥarātīne are a class of people with sub-Saharan African origins who are ex-slaves and descendants of former slaves held by Arab families in Mauritanian society where slavery was officially abolished in 1981. Wiley's work focuses on the economic strategies of Ḥarātīne women in Kankossa, a town in southern Mauritania, and the social implications of women's entry into the wage labor economy in post-slavery society. In southern Morocco there are also Ḥarātīne communities with a similar history as those in neighboring Mauritania, see Hsain Ilahiane, "The Social Mobility of the Ḥaratine and the Re-working of Bourdieu's Habitus on the Saharan Frontier, Morocco," *American Anthropologist* 103, 2 (2001): 380-94.

44. Also spelled Bizan, Katherine Ann Wiley, "Making People Bigger: Wedding Exchange and the Creation of Social Value in Rural Mauritania," *Africa Today* 62, 3 (2016): 49-69; Wiley, *Work, Social Status and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*.

45. Wiley, "Making People Bigger;" Wiley, *Work, Social Status and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*.

46. *Ibid.*, 51.

47. *Ibid.*, 49.

48. *Ibid.*, 51.

which their ascribed (genealogical) status as slaves determined their place in the social hierarchy to a society in which economic mobility and generosity through gift-giving contribute to their newer achieved status. Wiley notes that “the ability of exchange to create or magnify a person’s value is essential to historically lower-status people, since it helps them secure and advertise their improved social rank.”<sup>49</sup>

This brief overview of anthropological perspectives on gift-giving in the wider region demonstrates that material exchanges for social occasions and other forms of hospitality are integral to creating and reinforcing social ties between tribes, families, and individuals. The circulation of gifts and hospitality incurs social debts that are repaid in kind to maintain balance and enhance reputations; the proper fulfillment of these material and emotional obligations is integral to building social capital and prestige over time as a member of society. There is a need for more analysis of the gendered dimensions of exchange and the ways in which reciprocity can both reinforce and transgress dominant gender norms in the Maghreb region. The following discussion of the *tarzift* exchanges among *Ṣaḥrāwīs* presents some evidence for the ways in which women are using gifts to negotiate larger shifts in their status, visibility, and ability to wield social capital.

### Contemporary Contexts of *Ṣaḥrāwī* Women's *Tarzift* Gift Exchanges

Throughout my fieldwork experiences in the region, conversations with *Ṣaḥrāwī* women and men often alluded to the social importance of gifts and the rising sense of marital tension that often accompanies women's engagement in gift obligations of *tarzift*. To pursue the topic further, I conducted interviews<sup>50</sup> in Laayoune in 2009 with married men and women regarding their views of *tarzift* and its effects on their marital relationships and friendships. The majority of the women who participated were housewives without formal employment, and they spoke about using the intense social pressures of *tarzift* to control portions of their husband's income and establish new ties of reciprocity with families with whom they share friendships but not family or tribal affiliations. These changes may also reflect wider shifts gender relations between husbands and wives as they participate in urban wage labor economies and deal with the stresses of unemployment and low wages in the region.

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49. *Ibid.*, 58.

50. These interviews built upon long periods of participant observation living with *Ṣaḥrāwī* in other parts of the region further north (including Goulmim, Tantan, Akka, and Agadir) between 2006-2007. The interview sample for this study was small (approximately ten people) and the findings suggest areas for further research with a larger sample.

According to elder Ṣaḥrāwis who retain active memory of tribal nomadic lifestyles prior to the move toward sedentary, urban lifestyles from the 1970s onward, typical goods that people exchanged as gifts in the past consisted of simple, practical goods that people had on hand in their mobile camps, such as wheat, couscous, sugar, and houseware utensils. For more important occasions, such as tribal weddings, small livestock (goats and sheep) were commonly offered. The thrust behind giving was to provide forms of material assistance that represented solidarity in the social bonds between the giver and receiver and served to strengthen ties between relatives, tribal affiliates, neighbors, and friends. As a fifty-four year-old Ṣaḥrāwi man explained:

“A gift is a bond between people. For example, if I know you and you have a ceremony, I must bring you a gift, whether it’s cheap or expensive, whether I am poor or rich. Before it would be a camel, sheep, goat and today a suitcase or even a television if you can afford it.”

Alongside the growth of salaried jobs in urban environments such as Laayoune, women’s expectations for *tarzift* have increased and people tend to routinely spend more than they can afford to maintain their reputation for *karam*. Laayoune is known in the region for its extravagant *tarzift* practices, and recent pressures to increase gift values have been a source of growing social tension and backlash from Ṣaḥrāwi husbands against their wives’ insistence in engaging in these exchanges. As Rweiya commented on the *tarzift* she personally benefited from at her wedding described earlier,

“It has become such a big problem nowadays that some people want to ban it. The pressure has gotten so extreme that we may have nothing to wear, eat or drink but we will go to any length to furnish the greatest gift possible. This is a source of our pride and hospitality. If someone offers you a camel, you will surely bring him a camel for his wedding even if you can’t afford it. It would be good for us to stop *tarzift* altogether, but we would never say it. We would not encourage our daughters to do it. I myself swore to stop *tarzift* but I cannot. Even when people are poor or mean-spirited, they can’t refuse. It’s in our blood now.”

The role of women is central in maintaining *tarzift* etiquette and gift accounting. In each family, designated women of the house are tasked with mentally recalling gift tallies between female household members and their relatives and friends. Generally, women have refrained from documenting these gift inventories in writing, which would imply a more formalized system of indebtedness. However, the practice has recently expanded to such a degree that some women are starting to keep written lists to consult when

they receive an invitation to an event from another family. The dominant strategy is to offer a gift of greater value than what has been received in the past. As a Ṣaḥrāwi man explained, "I couldn't accept a gift from you without striving to bring you a better one in return." Female friends of the bride tend to give the most lavish household gifts for weddings while men prefer giving amounts of cash. For weddings, the highest value *tarzift* gifts are commonly offered by the bride's close female friends who often gather beforehand to organize gift assignments as an informal 'registry.' Nora, age twenty-two, commented on the benefits of her participation in *tarzift*:

"If you have good relations with other women and bring them good gifts, you will receive everything. The best gifts you receive nowadays are from close friends, not family. If you don't bring gifts to anyone, no one will bring you anything. If it is a family member, you are obliged to give even if they don't give good gifts."

Women who opt not to participate in *tarzift* are described as "mean, unpopular and self-interested." As one woman explained, "These people are excluded from events and have no guests at their own. Their own tents are empty."

A group of five middle-class Ṣaḥrāwi women friends aged 20-45 that I interviewed together in Laayoune in June 2009, reported that wedding gifts that they received from their friends ranged in value between 20 and 500 USD and women reported receiving an average total of 700 USD in cash gifts at their weddings, which represents slightly less than one-third to half the total cost of a typical wedding. With an average total monthly expenditure on *tarzift* of 50 USD (roughly 15-20 percent of the average monthly household income of women interviewed), the financial strain leads to excessive informal borrowing of cash or making store purchases on credit to obtain gifts. Seeking credit is especially common during the height of the wedding season in the summer months when Ṣaḥrāwi migrants return to the region from abroad to participate in multiple weekly ceremonies. Inability to repay debts incurred by *tarzift* has emerged as a growing source of marital discord in Laayoune and other cities that has led men to vocally critique the excesses of the practice, as one man lamented:

"For men, we loathe *tarzift*. It has become the biggest problem in marriages of young people due to the financial strain it causes in the household. A group of young men gathered in Laayoune two years ago to create an organization to stop *tarzift* but it didn't work because of social pressure from women. Sometimes a woman can attend up to four

ceremonies in one day depending on how many friends she has. If the husband refuses to give her money for *tarzift* or restricts the amount she can spend, it causes problems. The wife will claim that she was doing it before getting married and must therefore continue. This leads to quarrels and divorce. The husband has to take loans and you will see wives who give washing machines and refrigerators to others when they don't even have their own. It is a matter of generosity and pride for us. You can wait to get something for yourself, but it is shameful not to give to someone else."

Some new trends observed in *tarzift* practices in Laayoune illustrate its expanding dynamic in Ṣaḥrāwi society. First, forms of *tarzift* have expanded beyond the traditional realm of married women. Although men are quick to criticize the burdens of *tarzift*, they also benefit from a parallel system recently observed in Laayoune, referred to simply as *mu'āwana* (assistance), in which the peers of a groom-to-be pool their funds to purchase a significant portion of the gifts he is required to offer his bride, especially if his financial means are not sufficient. In addition, younger, unmarried girls are also getting involved in *tarzift* exchanges as "a way of being accepted as an adult woman." In the past unmarried girls did not participate and those that do now generally obtain money for *tarzift* from their mothers who act as an intermediary with her husband and or from older siblings who are working.

Secondly, compared to the earlier focus on engagements, weddings, and naming and circumcision ceremonies, *tarzift* has been integrated into an expanded set of social gatherings, which include: the welcoming home celebration of a returnee from the *Ḥaj* pilgrimage, receiving a visit from a Ṣaḥrāwi from another city, housewarming parties, and for politicized events, such as official UN-sponsored five-day reunification visits of relatives living in the refugee camps in Algeria to Laayoune. Through these new forms of *tarzift*, the practice has expanded women's social networks across the city in its transformation from a primarily intratribal obligation in the past to an intertribal obligation of friendship based on factors such as residential proximity in urban neighborhoods and bonds between female schoolmates or even co-workers.

In conclusion, the current popularity and expanded role of women's *tarzift* exchanges in the urban center of Laayoune suggest that gendered hospitality customs and reciprocal gift-giving have remained central in contemporary Ṣaḥrāwi social life over time. The burdens of increasing unemployment, economic strain, and pressures for Ṣaḥrāwis to adopt more



urban, middle class social norms have made *tarzift* both more necessary than ever (to receive) and more taxing (to provide). Recent transformations of this custom can be considered but one indicator of Ṣaḥrāwī women's growing involvement in managing urban household economies, in this case through the material goods they circulate and the enduring personal relationships that they reinforce through gift exchange.

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### تقديم الهدايا كراس مال اجتماعي: التحول في عادات تبادل هدايا النساء الصحراويات بمدينة العيون

ملخص: منذ العمل الأساسي لمارسيل موس حول الوظائف الاجتماعية لتقديم الهدايا، اهتم علماء الأنثروبولوجيا منذ فترة طويلة بالأهمية الرمزية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية لتبادل الهدايا. وقد درس علماء الأنثروبولوجيا العاملون في بلدان المغرب والشرق الأوسط الطرق المختلفة التي يمكن من خلالها منح الهدية أو الهدية وأشكال المعاملة بالمثل في سيرورة بناء رأس المال الاجتماعي والمكانة. ويعتمد هذا المقال على دراسات أنثروبولوجية حول المعاملة بالمثل والضيافة في المنطقة بمفهومها الأوسع للنظر في تغيير عادات تقديم الهدايا بالمجتمعات العربية الصحراوية في شمال غرب إفريقيا. وازدادت الضغوط على النساء لتقديم سلع مادية ذات قيمة أعلى وهدايا نقدية في حفلات الزفاف والمناسبات الاجتماعية للحفاظ على مكانتهن الاجتماعية من خلال ممارسة عادة تقديم الهدايا بين النساء المعروفة باسم "تاغزيفت"، وذلك بالانتقال من تعبير مجتمعي عن التضامن الاجتماعي إلى دلالة على الوضع الاجتماعي والاقتصادي في اقتصاد العمل المأجور المعاصر، فأصبح تقديم الهدايا تبعا لذلك، مصدرًا متزايدًا للضائقة المالية والزوجية بين النساء الصحراويات اللاتي يقمن بإدارة علاقات الهدايا المتبادلة وأزواجهن الذين يدعمونهن مالياً. وهذا في حد ذاته ما قد يعكس وقوع هذا التحول في شكل تغييرات اجتماعية أوسع في المنطقة، بما في ذلك انهيار الانتماء القبلي كأساس للتبادل، وزيادة مشاركة المرأة في الإدارة المالية للأسرة، وفقدان مكانة الرجل في الانتقال من نشاط الترحال الرعوي إلى الحياة المستقرة والحضرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهدايا، المعاملة بالمثل، الضيافة، الزواج، الجنس، رأس المال الاجتماعي، الهوية، البدو.

**Le don en tant que capital social: Changement des coutumes des échanges de cadeaux des femmes sahraouies à Laâyoune**

**Résumé:** Depuis les travaux fondateurs de Marcel Mauss sur les fonctions sociales du don, les anthropologues se sont intéressés depuis longtemps à l'étude de l'importance symbolique, économique et sociale de l'échange de cadeaux. Des anthropologues travaillant au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient ont examiné diverses façons dont les prestations de don et les formes de réciprocité construisent le capital social et le prestige. Cet article s'appuie sur des études anthropologiques de la réciprocité et de l'hospitalité dans la région au sens large pour envisager de changer les coutumes du cadeau pour les communautés arabes sahraouies du nord-ouest de l'Afrique. Les pressions se sont accrues pour que les femmes fournissent des biens matériels de plus grande valeur et des cadeaux en espèces lors de mariages et d'occasions sociales afin de maintenir leur position sociale grâce à une pratique de cadeaux parmi les femmes connues sous le nom de *tarzift*.

Passant d'une expression communautaire de solidarité sociale à un signifiant du statut socio-économique dans l'économie du travail salarié contemporaine, les cadeaux sont devenus une source croissante de détresse financière et conjugale entre les femmes sahraouies qui gèrent des relations de cadeaux réciproques et leurs maris qui les soutiennent financièrement. Ce changement peut refléter des changements sociaux plus larges dans la région, y compris la rupture de l'appartenance tribale comme base d'échange, la participation accrue des femmes à la gestion financière des ménages et la perte du statut masculin dans le passage du nomadisme pastoral à des moyens de subsistance urbains sédentaires.

**Mots-clés:** Cadeaux, réciprocité, hospitalité, mariage, genre, capital social, prestige, peuples nomades.