

4-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Wheeler, Stacy, "Soulaliyate Women's Fight for Inheritance Rights" (2012). *Morocco: Field Studies in Journalism and New Media*. Paper 2.

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Soulaliyate Women's Fight for Inheritance Rights

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Major: Philosophy

Africa, Morocco, Fez/ Kenitra

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Field Studies
in Journalism and New Media, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2012**

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The Pitch/ Abstract

In Morocco, thousands of women cannot inherit land. These women, called Soulaliyates, live on communal land governed by tribal laws. When the land is sold, the proceeds go to the men who have been living on the land, but these men typically give none of the money from the sale to their female relatives, especially single women. Hundreds of Soulaliyate women, unable to make ends meet, have had no choice but to move into urban slums where they endure terrible conditions. Some women have even been forced to live with animals.

Rkia Bellot is one of the Soulaliyate women. In 2004, she had had enough and began protesting for her right to own land. Bellot began a movement, capturing international attention. Bellot won title to her land. But for many other women in rural communities—where illiteracy rates are over 80%—the fight is not over. I tell Bellot's story and the story of Aziza Innouch, a Soulaliyate woman who is still fighting for her rights.

Development & Evolution of the Story Idea

I was first introduced to the Soulaliyate women's movement by Professor Taieb Belghazi, who knew that I was interested in gender and women's studies. After researching the movement in French and Moroccan newspapers, the topic piqued my interest, mainly because of the intersection of women's issues, human rights and international development that it presented.

As it turns out, quite a bit has been written about the Soulaliyate women's movement in French-language Moroccan newspapers. The more I read, the more questions I had. Why weren't these Moroccan women allowed to inherit land? How could their brothers kick them out of their childhood homes? How had they been able to organize when many of them apparently couldn't read or write? Of particular interest to me was the situation in Kenitra. I read about a large shantytown in Kenitra, and I wanted to find out if it still existed.

At first, I hit several walls. The shantytown in Kenitra had been cleaned up, there were no recent Moroccan articles on the Soulaliyate women's movement and the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM)—a national NGO that works with the Soulaliyate women—wouldn't give me any information except for their promotional brochures on the subject.

But finally, I was able to get an interview with both Rabia Naciri, the former president of the ADFM, and Rkia Bellot, the woman who started the Soulaliyate women's movement. After this, the ADFM became more cooperative. They let me know that there were still Soulaliyate women who are in the process of fighting for their land rights and that there is certainly still a story with these women. From here, I began my research and was able to start my pitch.

Because the story relates very closely to my personal interests, it was exciting to work on it throughout the entire six-week ISJ period. I am interested in most gender and women's studies, but I am particularly interested in women's human rights and also women's development. In almost every interview I had, these two themes featured prominently.

Ultimately, I produced the piece as print journalism because I wanted the story to be published and I felt that it would be easiest for me to accomplish this by producing in print. Although this story also would have been good as a short radio piece, I did not have the equipment to produce an air-quality piece and did not have time to get it by the time I started my first interviews.

Sources, Interviews, Scenes

I learned quite a bit about the history of the Soulaliyate women's movement from Moroccan newspaper articles written in French. All of them confirmed the same facts, so I was able to use what they had reported for background information. However, these newspaper articles were all from 2010 or before, and I wanted to report about the what was happening with the Soulaliyate women's movement today.

I decided to construct my article in several parts: first, I needed to explain the problems—who are the Soulaliyate women and why can't they inherit land? For this section, I relied on interviews with expert Rabia Nacirias well as the information that I eventually found out from the ADFM.

The second part of my article details how Rkia Bellot began a movement. This part came almost entirely from my interview with Bellot, and somewhat from the information the ADFM provided me. Finally, my article ends with two stories—the personal story of Aziza Innouch and an example of a community (Ain Chekaf) that no longer faces problems with Soulaliyate women's land inheritance. I included Innouch's story because it is dramatic and shows that Soulaliyate women still face problems. However, I included the community of Ain Chekaf because I wanted to leave the reader with hope. Some places in Morocco really have changed, I and wanted my piece to reflect this.

What follows is a bulleted list of my interview subjects. I conducted many more interviews that I list here, but these are the ones that appear in my article.

In general, the only difficulties I faced in getting sources were language barriers. Because I only speak basic French, I needed interpreters for all my interviews. Some interpreters were better than others, and this certainly affected which individuals I included in my story.

- **The Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM)**—The ADFM is a national Moroccan NGO that works with the Soulaliyate women's movement, and I spoke with them so that I could be put in contact with Soulaliyate women who are currently fighting for their rights. At first, the ADFM was reluctant to speak with me, even when I went with my Moroccan journalism partner. However, my persistence ended up paying off. After visiting their office six times in one week, they finally gave me the contact information of three Soulaliyate women. During this time period, I also made friends with the ADFM office secretary and she was able to put pressure on her boss to call and inform Soulaliyate women that I wanted to come speak with them.
- **Rabia Naciri**—Naciri is the former president of the ADFM and I wanted to contact her to get an expert opinion on the Soulaliyate women. Naciri also ended up giving me the official stance of the ADFM. Although she was quite friendly, it was difficult to get in contact with Naciri because she traveled often and her schedule was very full.
- **Rkia Bellot**—I read about Bellot in every Moroccan newspaper article about the Soulaliyate women's movement, and I wanted to speak with her because she was one of the women who began the Soulaliyate movement in the first place. After the ADFM gave us her phone number, my journalist partner and I had no difficulties getting in touch with her.
- **Lamlih Benaissa**—Most of my story focused on women and I wanted to include a man's perspective as well. Benaissa, the secretary of a local NGO in Kenitra, is a very

liberal Soulaliyate man, and I liked that he was working specifically to sensitize other men to the idea of Soulaliyate women being allowed to own land.

- **Aziza Innouch**—Aziza Innouch was part of a group of six women that I spoke with about Soulaliyate inheritance rights in Ain Cheggag, near Fes. Her story is dramatic, and furthermore, she is still fighting for her right to own land. The only difficulty I had was getting her name from the ADFM in the first place. She was very willing to speak with me, and very focused on affecting change.

Journalism Ethics

One of the biggest ethical issues I encountered was getting accurate quotes from my interviews. I worked with a translator for every interview I did, since all of my interviews were in a foreign language. Generally, this worked well, but several times, I found sections of the interview where I needed direct quotes and my interpreter had merely paraphrased the interviewee's words. It was often tempting to simply use the paraphrased words, but I knew that it was important to quote the interviewee as carefully as possible. This meant that sometimes I had to hire a second interpreter to listen to the interview tapes and translate word by word.

In addition, it was often tempting to write the most dramatic story, not necessarily the story that was exactly true. For example, although many of the women who participated in the Soulaliyate women's movement are illiterate, Rkia Bellot, the leader of the movement is very educated and has even worked for the Ministry of Finance. In addition, the ADFM—a national NGO—played a significant role in advancing the Soulaliyate cause. However, although very dramatic stories are most interesting to read, I decided that I had to report what was actually the case.

The only ethical issue I encountered that was (somewhat) unique to Morocco was the fact that many Moroccans would not speak to me after I explained that I was a journalist. Once or twice I was tempted to tell people that I was simply a student and not inform them that I was intending to write a piece for publication. However, I found that if I was persistent enough—whether I was persistent and polite or just persistent and annoying—even the most hesitant sources would agree to talk to me.

What Journalism Outlet Do You Hope Will Take Your Story?

My ultimate dream would be for the *New York Times* to take my story, but I think that it might have more success in a newspaper or magazine with an international focus, like the *Global Post* or the *Christian Science Monitor*. If I were to do the project over again, I would also be interested in producing it for radio, with NPR in mind. The women I talked to all had very moving stories and radio is a format that allows interviewees to tell their own stories.

Because the story touches on both human rights and women's issues, I believe that it is attractive to a wide range of audiences. However, I wrote my story with an American audience in mind. One thing that makes it particularly interesting to an American audience is that it is somewhat of an underdog story. Rkia Bellot was able to start a movement with women who hadn't had ever had political training and most of whom were illiterate, and I think that this kind of story about overcoming the odds is something that is interesting to Americans in general.

The story is long, and in order to keep my audience engaged throughout the piece, I made several adjustments to make it easier to understand. Initially, I included a lot of information about specific laws, but I simplified these sections whenever possible. In addition, I reduced the number of times I used foreign words for things. For example, I changed the Arabic word “*nouab*,” which doesn’t really have a direct translation in English, to “village chief,” which is a very close approximation. Finally, I changed all units of measure to American units of measure (e.g. I changed hectares to acres and kilometers to miles).

The Story

Rabat, MOROCCO—Rkia Bellot, 66, says she originally took up activism at the age of 58 out of necessity. When her family sold their communal land in 2004, each of her seven brothers received compensation, but Bellot, a woman, got nothing.

Bellot is one of the *Soulaliyate*, Moroccan citizens who live on communal lands which cover over 37 million acres and are home to about 10 million Moroccan citizens. Tribal leaders are given power over this land and the *orf*, or tribal law, excludes women from inheriting land or receiving benefits when the land is sold.

“Morocco finds itself in a very contradictory position. On one hand the kingdom has signed all of the international conventions that call on men and women’s equality. And, on the other hand, we still encounter cases like this where women have no right to their own lands,” said Bellot.

Bellot supported her entire family after their father’s death when she was 20, and she expected her brothers to give her at least something. But they said their hands were tied by the tribal law. Bellot says that for her, being excluded from the land sale was merely an injustice. But for other women in her community, there were more dire consequences.

Bellot lives in Kenitra, a port city 25 miles north of the capital of Rabat. In Kenitra, men began selling their communal lands in 2004, but gave none of the proceeds to the widows and unmarried sisters in their families. Men used the money to buy homes in Kenitra for themselves, but their sisters could not do the same. After brothers moved to their new homes in the city, many women were homeless and a large shantytown sprung up on the periphery of Kenitra.

In the shantytown, conditions were bad, and homes there—built out of mud and reeds with corrugated metal roofs held down by cinderblocks—were unstable. One spring, when there were heavy rains, several collapsed.

“Then women had to live with animals!” said Bellot.

Bellot says that at one time men provided for their female relatives, even if the women were single. But now, she says men in rural communities have replaced traditional family values with individualistic mindsets.

“I remember my father providing for my aunt and her children, but today people are selfish, individualistic. Men will take the land and you’ll end up with nothing,” says Bellot.

After she got nothing from the sale of her family’s land, Bellot went to the tribal leaders, but says she was disappointed by their response.

“They would say, ‘Well, we can’t do anything, it’s the tribal law.’ I researched until I was 100% sure that this was just a brazen injustice.”

Bellot sought help from a lawyer in Rabat, but he told her that chances of success through the legal system were slim.

So Bellot, along with a small group of women from Kenitra, sought help elsewhere—from the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM), a national NGO that advocates for the advancement of women’s human rights throughout Morocco.

The ADFM adopted Bellot’s cause and began training the women from Kenitra in civic leadership and public speaking. In addition, the ADFM covered the cost of transportation so that the Soualalyate women could afford the 50 Dh (about \$7USD) trip to Rabat to participate in sit-ins and demonstrations in front of Parliament. As the ADFM learned the extent of the Soualalyate land problem, they expanded their efforts to include Soualalyate women from all areas of Morocco.

In a country where illiteracy rates among rural women are over 80%, this often presented a challenge.

“Most of the women are illiterate so these communication tools had to be adjusted to each case,” said Khadija Ouelammou, who is in charge of handling all Soualalyate issues at the ADFM’s Rabat office.

But although they provide considerable support for the women, the ADFM makes it clear that they are not speaking for the women, nor will they do all the work. In each village, they identify one Soualalyate woman who can act as a liaison between the ADFM and the community, and they leave most of the organizing to the local leader.

Rabia Naciri, former president of the ADFM, is proud of the progress rural women have made.

“We informed them before, but now it is they who inform the others,” she said. “They have taught us a lot.”

With the help of the ADFM, Bellot organized a protest of 500 women in front of Parliament in 2007. Finally, three years later, she saw results when the Ministry of the Interior issued a circular—a government order—that instructed tribal leaders to recognize the rights of Soualalyate women to receive money when their family’s communal lands were sold.

Bellot and her colleagues’ successes have drawn international attention. On a recent visit to Morocco, Michelle Bachelet, the Executive Director of the UN Women’s Program, delivered a special address to the Soualalyate women.

“You the Soualalyates succeeded in mobilizing the media and public opinion against the violation of your rights. I congratulate you for obtaining official recognition of women’s rights,” she said.

But according to many Soualalyate women, there is still much more to be done. Many communities have ignored the circular from the Department of the Interior that instructed tribal leaders to compensate women when land is sold.

Aziza Innouch is one of these women. She has lived in the village of Ain Cheggag, 16 miles outside of Fes, for her whole life. Like many women in the village, she isn't sure how old she is, but she estimates that she is about 45 years old.

When her father died, distribution of family lands began. But when Innouch, a widow, attempted to get her share, her brothers denied all her requests.

The family land is fertile, and Innouch, who lives in a two-room cement home she purchased from her parents, says she hoped to sell her portion to provide for her children and herself. However, without the land, she was forced to take any work she could find around the village, usually weeding and picking crops in a neighboring family's fields.

The work is hard, Innouch explains, showing her brown, calloused hands with swollen fingers that could be mistaken for a man's. But the worst part is that farmers like to hire the youngest women to pick crops, so she often has trouble finding any work at all.

Innouch and other women from the tribe, some of whom have received death threats or even been put in jail for demanding rights to their land, have tried taking their case before the town council, but all their written requests have been ignored. When they go to confront the *caid*, or village chief, in person, they say the response is not much better.

"The *caid* uses big words and then we can't understand what he's talking about," Innouch explains.

Innouch said she believed she might have more success by appealing to the Moroccan court. But on April 13, 2012, the day she was supposed to present before a judge in Fez, her brother arrived at the hearing with a document stating that Innouch violently beat their mother.

The court said that the document, which had been signed by a local doctor, was grounds for imprisoning Innouch. However, Innouch's brother agreed to drop the assault charge if she would also drop her case demanding land inheritance, so she did.

Innouch's repeated visits to the village chief and town council have earned her enemies in Ain Cheggag. Last year, she decided to send her three children away to stay with distant relatives because she says she feared that they would be attacked by village leaders. She has not seen them in 14 months.

But Innouch says that she refuses to stop working until her story is heard and she receives her share of the communal land. She has been in contact with the ADFM and says she is starting to learn the words she needs to confront the village chief.

In the next months, she plans to start a local association that can organize local Soulaliyate women to meet with the tribal council and secure inheritance rights for themselves in the village.

Stories like Innouch's are what make Rkia Bellot angry and gives her the energy to keep fighting for the rights of Morocco's Soulaliyate women. The solution, says Bellot, is a nationwide law – more compelling than the 2007 circular—to guarantee that Soulaliyate women have inheritance rights to communal land.

The ADFM is currently circulating a petition that demands just that. The law would allow Soulaliyate women who live on communal lands to have equal access to communal property, along with the right to farm the land or otherwise use it for private means, and to receive fair compensation when communal lands are sold.

Bellot says she will not stop until the government acts.

“I hold the government officials, the Ministry of Interior, responsible for our misfortune and they must make up for it,” she said.

Bellot sees some rays of hope. For one thing, some men are sympathetic to their cause. In Mehdiya, a suburb of Kenitra, Lamlih Benaissa acts as the secretary for a small NGO that fights for the rights of Soualiate women to inherit land.

“She is my mother, my sister, my daughter. We are family,” he says of the Soualiate women. “There is the tradition. But in Islamic law, women have a right to inheritance, just like the men have.”

Benaissa is meeting with men in the community to encourage them to accept the idea of women owning land. And he thinks many are becoming convinced.

And in Ain Chekaf, a small community just outside of Fez, a local NGO says that the community has adjusted to life without the tribal law fairly seamlessly. In 2004, Soualiate women began protesting for their land rights. Shortly before the 2007 circular, village leaders received a letter from the government stating that the *orf* was now obsolete and that Soualiate women had the same rights as men to inherit and use communal land.

What led the Soualiate women in Ain Chekaf to protest for their right to own land?

They say they heard the story of Rkia Bellot.

With reporting help from Oumaima Azzelzouli

Conclusion

As I’ve mentioned before, one of the biggest challenges I faced with this particular story was language barriers. If I were to do this story again, I would insist on more word-for-word translation so that I had more quotes available to me. In addition, I would have insisted that my translators interpret shorter sections of speech so that I could have asked follow-up questions. There were at least two times when I left interviews without being able to ask follow-up questions simply because my translator and I weren’t working as a team. When I was able to work with my Moroccan journalism partner, the language barrier was never a problem, especially because she had diligently researched the issue and we could brainstorm together before interviews. The only difficulty with the partnership was that we were unequally matched—my journalism partner is a full time student and I was effectively a full time journalist. This meant that I had infinite free time while she had class, homework and finals. I was able to find my own translators and arrange interviews by myself, but it would have been helpful to travel with her and continue to partner when there were interviews with Soualiate women outside of Rabat.

Another challenge I faced was finding out statistics about Soualiate women. After several days of searching, I didn’t find any scholarly research on Soualiate women in either French or English, but statistics would have really been helpful for my article.

Because this story covers a movement that is still in progress, a follow-up would certainly be appropriate. A logical follow-up would be to interview Aziza Innouch and find out if she has been successful in obtaining property rights, and if not, what she plans to do. In addition, it would be interesting to expand the article to interview public figures like the Minister of the

Interior and the Minister of Economic and Social Development to find out if any progress is being made on a law that would guarantee the right of Soulaliyate women to inherit land. Finally, this article made me realize that in rural Morocco, there is a gap between what the law says and how it is executed. It would be especially interesting to do another article on one Soulaliyate woman who took her case through the Moroccan legal system and see if she was able to obtain property rights through these means.

Writing this piece taught me a lot about rural communities in Morocco in general. I learned about women's daily routines, how illiteracy can affect women's lives and also about the *orf*, or tribal law. Another thing that particularly impressed me was that in these communities, women were certainly engaged in fighting for their own rights. Many of them asked me to help them, but they all understood that they were the ones who needed to fill out paperwork, go to court, etc. to fight for their rights. As a result of these interviews, my perspective on international development has really changed. Before, I supported international organizations visiting communities and changing things from a top-down perspective. But after traveling around rural Morocco, I saw how important it is to empower local women to change their own communities. Finally, in addition to worldview lessons, I also gained very concrete skills from writing this story. Interviewing, working with translators and negotiating logistics were just some of the things I practiced over the course of researching and writing about the Soulaliyate women's movement. And now, at the end of six weeks as a student on ISJ, I can say I know what it is like to be a journalist in a foreign country.