

SHE WEARS A FOREHEAD BROACH FOR HER SON

As soon as the midwife has cut the umbilical cord and told the mother "It's a boy" she places a broach on the mother's forehead, a sign of honour. This jewel, worn on the forehead, tells all who come to visit exactly how happy the mother is to have brought a boy into the world.

A local elder said to us: "Before displaying that broach the mother should wait for her son to grow up and be known as a man." There's some truth in that assertion, but from the day she is blessed no woman has the courage to acknowledge it. Whether, once he has grown up, her son proves himself a man or not matters very little to her. She understands only one thing: she has given birth to a man and in her joy she should shout about it and pin on the symbolic broach. For the rest, the future is known only to God. Whatever happens, even if this child turns out badly, his arrival guarantees boundless joy.

The young mother was of course herself born a girl. That's not important. She will have forgotten, and she understands only one thing: if she'd given birth to a baby girl she would have to breast-feed her, raise her and educate her at great personal cost, only to lose her when a husband comes along to take her daughter away.

A WOMAN CARRIES A MAN'S LIFE IN HER BOSOM

The day when the father tells the boy's mother to go and find a wife for his son the matrimonial dance is under way. It's all a matter of relationships and men don't have the know-how: there's a network of women for women. It's the mother who, when her child is just getting going, and while she's raising him, says to another woman, the mother of a daughter: I'm earmarking your girl for my son! Just talk? Maybe, but that's often how things start.

From the moment she gives birth to the little boy, her heart's desire, the mother does nothing but search for and select a wife. She marries him off a hundred times in her imagination before the real event.

In the first place, the impulse is too strong for her to control. Happiness, pleasure, celebrations succeed each other freely in her

imagination. She can dream of 77 girls as daughters-in-law. That's the number of possibilities that arise from having a son.

Secondly, women can spend ten or 15 years with a certain girl in mind at the cost of countless ruined omelettes and couscous meals, but in the end they will have to look elsewhere.

Whatever the case, the day the mother really sets out to find a match for her son she will have been casting around for at least 20 years. In the street, at village fêtes when young women pretty themselves to dance, or while presenting condolences, on pilgrimage – she's always on the look-out for a possible bride, by sight or in the mind. So why is it that, from the hundred or so young women she knows and meets, as well as the widows and the spurned, she has yet to find a bride for her son?

That's clear as day. She has found one. Only she's said no; the family is not thought respectable enough or rich enough, or because of some fault of character. Or else she's found someone but is reluctant to make an offer; for all the above reasons or a hundred others. That's why, particularly between villages, it takes a deft and intelligent woman to arrange marriages – someone who knows the trade. When those who repulse her enquiries are locals she must know what to say and be able to prove, logically, that her family is respectable – convincing whoever she talks to. If it's her own family which local people are looking over, she should not seem unduly impressed. She mustn't promise anything that could bind her in an alliance which could turn out worse than others she might have rejected. That explains why a Kabyle who had travelled a bit in France was told that being a matchmaker involves diplomacy.

Nothing is easy. If she doesn't understand all the potential risks her husband runs, the wife can – in her own region or her own village, in just one day – bring quarrels, enmities, even death to him. It's said that whoever climbs a tree to pluck the leaves bears death in his hood. A woman carries the life and honour of her husband, brother or father in her bosom. Were she to return from drawing water at the spring or collecting firewood with a miserable face or her hair in a muddle, and tell her husband that someone had hit or insulted her, he would not wait to hear more. He'd take his gun and sort things out with the other man. Only then would he bother with the details.

Happily, the girl from a good family thinks first and is cautious by nature. That way she avoids trouble. If something bad transpires despite her efforts she takes care not to risk her husband's life. Before returning from the spring or from the fields she tidies her hair, re-knots her scarf, and puts on a brave face as if nothing had happened. And even if the man suspects something he pretends to see nothing. For death is also a terrible thing to those who cause it. What if the mother must travel to an unknown village? What if she has to go from house to house seeing, assessing and choosing the daughter of strangers of whom she will have to say good or bad things? It's claimed there's a tribe in the Igawwen mountains whose people won't eat animal's tongues, for the tongue brings bad news. The woman who's searching, herself from a good family and – as was said – a 'diplomat', aware of all the pitfalls, will even know when to go against her own wishes. It's her duty to hold herself more or less apart from the people she's visiting to gain their respect.

So, what's the solution? How do you hold out a promise to one person without offending another? How, for instance, do you leave a mother with a smile, with dignity, wishing her health and happiness, when she has just turned down your approach for her daughter? How do you not make enemies when you reject suitors? That's the time you see who is a real woman and who knows her job.

These extracts are taken from "Démarches matrimoniales", in *Tisuraf*, n° 4-5, 1979, Groupe d'études berbères. Université Paris VIII.

BELÂID AT-EALI (1909-1950), whose real name was Izarar Bélaïd, was a founding-father of modern Berber literature. His mother was one of the leading Berber teachers; he annotated his own system of writing the Berber language in Roman characters. His work includes poetry, short stories, novels and autobiography.

«Les deux Vénus». Tamrit, Tassili. In *À la découverte des fresques du Tassili*, Henri Lhote, Artaud, Paris 1958.

