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# Multi-agentive transformations of rural livelihoods in mountain ICCAs: The case of the decline of community-based management of natural resources in the Mesioui agdals (Morocco)

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## ABSTRACT

Numerous authors from various disciplines have underlined the importance of Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs) for assuring the livelihoods of local populations whilst conserving the environment. The agdal is probably Morocco's best example of such an institution. Nevertheless they have always existed within the context of change and currently are experiencing major transitions. Detailed ethnographic studies of the socio-ecological drivers of these processes of change in agdals are scarce. Based on the particular case of the agdal of Yagur in the Mountain Mesioui tribal territory (High Atlas of Morocco), this article will analyse contemporary transformations. These dynamics are inherent to small-scale societies' ICCAs, even if they have most often been described as isolated, autarchic and mutable only under external pressure. From the case of the agdal of Yagur, we show how non-local processes are only part of the picture, and that the transformation of agdal forms are also related to key internal drivers, entailing a greater degree of agency by local actors than is usually given in the literature. At the same time, placing our analysis within a broader social anthropological framing, we provide a detailed actor-centred analysis that situates agents and local power relations within their institutional and cultural context while explaining how these same micropolitics of natural resource management articulate with and within wider global scales.

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## 1. Introduction

By the 1950s common property regimes and the communal management of natural resources, often referred to as the commons, was already being challenged by numerous scholars (Alchian, 1950; Demsetz, 1967). Yet it was Hardin's 'Tragedy of the commons' in particular (1968) that had the most impact, serving to justify strong top-down state management and privatisation. Much empirical and theoretical work has been done in recent decades to rectify this erroneous and damaging assumption (McCay and Acheson, 1987). As shown by others since, Hardin's assumption was based on the mistaken conflation of common-property with free open-access (Berkes et al., 1989). As Ostrom has demonstrated (1990, p. 65), common-property can encourage relatively

egalitarian access to natural resources while assuring their sustainable governance and use.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, further discussions took place within the World Commission on Protected Areas ([www.iucn.org/WCPA](http://www.iucn.org/WCPA)) of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) on the need for looking at Community Conserved Areas (CCAs) as a new approach to protected areas within the IUCN's Protected Area categorisation system. Around the same time WCPA brought a strong focus on CCAs at the 5th World Parks Congress held in 2003. The Congress issued 32 recommendations related to protected areas, including several regarding CCAs. Recommendation V.26 recognized that a considerable part of Earth's biodiversity survives in CCAs, and called for their recognition and promotion as a legitimate form of biodiversity conservation. Since these initial years, the IUCN has reiterated and nuanced its recognition and support of CCAs (Kothari et al., 2012: 34) which later became ICCAs (Indigenous peoples and local Communities Conserved Areas and territories).

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Today the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and the CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity) encourage all countries to recognize and provide support for ICCAs, due to their importance for sound management of biodiversity and ecosystem services, minimizing environmental hazards, and mitigating climate change. This relatively new formulation of ICCAs, whose usage has increased over the last decade with the creation of the ICCA Consortium (<http://www.iccaconsortium.org>), includes a greater degree of identity, territoriality and heritage to the more general notion of the commons or CCAs. In fact, ICCAs typically concern indigenous peoples and local communities with important cultural and historical roots, often rather isolated and small, thus requiring special considerations that differentiates them from the management of other types of commons that may not have such attributes (e. g. the oceans or the atmosphere, neo-rural co-operatives, creative commons organizations, new urban collective orchards, the internet, etc.).

In this context, [Borrini-Feyerabend \(2010\)](#) asserts that ICCAs are central to community empowerment, livelihoods and socio-ecological resilience as well as ensuring the well-being of millions of people and the conservation of about one third of the global ecosystems (terrestrial and aquatic), and [Corrigan and Granziera \(2010\)](#) have highlighted the need to integrate ICCAs within comprehensive strategies for sustainable development. ICCAs should not, however, be regarded either as a universal panacea for conservation or development, for there are many cases where existing ICCAs have ended up transforming to unsuccessful forms of management ([Ruiz-Mallen and Corbera, 2013](#)). In explaining the failing drift of such ICCAs, authors have often pointed to 'external' forces (e. g. colonisation, postcolonisation, cultural globalization, global market expansion, etc.) as the main source of this problem ([Auclair and Allfriqui, 2005](#), p. 71; [Beyene, 2010](#), p. 485; [Chuluun and Ojima, 2011](#), p. 368; [Benmoussa, 2013](#); [Haller et al., 2013](#), p. 4). Nevertheless, little scholarly work has been done to understand how the internal dynamic webs of power relationships play out and are navigated within ICCAs by actors that are embedded within the tensions between pre-existing local sociocultural structures and collective agencies.

The agdal system is Morocco's primary traditional form of Berber (Amazigh) ICCA which [Gellner \(1969\)](#) and [Ilahiane \(1999\)](#) have described have been well established in the High Atlas Mountains for several centuries at least. In fact, an even earlier origination (potentially millenary) may be established through the linguistic analysis of the agdal term ([Auclair and Allfriqui, 2005](#)), especially when considering the extensive use of the root *gd*, which ranges 2000 km in the four cardinal directions; from Tunisia to the Moroccan Atlantic coasts of Essaouira and from the North of Algeria to the Ahaggar in the southern Sahara.

In agronomic terms the agdal can be defined as a collectively agreed prohibition on the extraction of a given (generally vegetative) natural resource within a delimited space, during a certain time frame. The aims of the agdal are: 1. maximizing annual production, and assuring the reproductive cycle of certain favoured plants, and hence, the continuity of the extractive activity; and 2. relatively equal access to natural resources through collective decision-making, as all users have same rights to the common pool. Hence, the agdal can be conceived as a collective agreement, reached through the tribal council or assembly (JMAA) comprising all male household heads in a given community, to seasonally restrict access to a given natural resource. But beyond being an agro-economic management tool, the agdal is also a cultural institution with deep historical roots around which pivots a whole system of religious and symbolic referents through which we may view mountain Berber culture and thus constitutes a "total social fact" as defined by [Mauss \(2002, p. 100\)](#).

There are many approaches within general social science that have endeavoured to solve the tension between structure and agency within social change, as for example [Parsons \(1949\)](#), [Habermas \(1991\)](#) and [Giddens \(1984\)](#). Nevertheless, perhaps Bourdieu has made the most advanced proposals in overcoming this tension through his concept of the 'habitus' (1980). Social transformations that have occurred in marginal socio-ecosystems such as the agdals may be understood through the habitus framework, as we discuss later. The replication of nature-culture relations inherent to agdals may be indeed viewed through the reproduction of the habitus; not in fixed sense, but a dynamic one as defined by this author.

Agdals and other types of similar institutions elsewhere in small-scale societies and marginal human-ecosystems, have generally been regarded as rather conservative ([Berque, 1978](#)) in the sense that they tend to reproduce themselves, despite relations inherent to agdals may be indeed viewed through the reproduction of the habitus; not in fixed sense, but a dynamic one as defined by this author. We argue, by contrast, that the collective habitus of these societies, structural and agential, has in fact been continuously reformulated through such interactions, in both explicit and implicit ways, through innovative paths to readdress the constant socio-ecological imbalances generated by the ever changing moment, be they political or environmental in origin ([Gomez-Baggethun and Reyes-Garcia, 2013](#)).

Even though the agdal system has long been in contact with wider regional influences, its presence is still widespread across North-West Africa, as can be counted in over a hundred thousand of examples concerning a myriad of natural resources such as algae, cereals, pastures, tree leaves, fruit trees, wood trees and water. Nevertheless, overall this cultural form of governance has become increasingly weak over the last century, as is occurring with other ICCAs under threat worldwide ([Borrini-Feyerabend, 2010](#), pp. 8–9). Detailed ethnographic studies on these processes are still lacking. Dominguez has undertaken intensive field investigations over the last decade ([Dominguez, 2010](#)), particularly among the Mesioua Berber community of the High Atlas of Marrakesh, Morocco, who manage the Yagur territory by means of the agdal institution.

The aims of the case of the Mesioui agdals presented here are:

1. To contribute to general conceptual understandings of the problematic nature-culture dynamics inherent to small-scale societies within ICCAs.
2. To challenge the idea that the agdals have been isolated and autarchic systems, mutable mainly only under the influence of external forces. In contrast to this perspective, the present paper will argue that this is a partial view and that in reality the transformation of agdals is the result of both 'external' and important 'internal' factors, by presenting a view of local actors that concedes them a greater degree of agency than is usually given in the literature referring to such transformational processes.
3. To contribute to a broader socio-anthropological conceptual framework of natural resource management by providing a detailed actor-centred analysis that situates agents and local power relations within their institutional and cultural context while explaining how these same micropolitics articulate with and within wider global scales.

## 2. Regional setting

Despite varying territorial distributions throughout their history, the people of the Maghreb have generally mainly concentrated in its less arid regions. Analogies between the type of natural resource use, population density, topography and rainfall patterns

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