PREFACE

One early morning in the summer of 1976, Warda calls for me. A few minutes after six we leave the small oasis in Algeria's eastern sand desert to walk the two kilometers to the municipal centre. There will be an instruction session for the heads of the female polling-committees, for the National Charter will be put to the vote. Warda represents her village. She is an illiterate, old peasant woman, married to a man who is mentally handicapped. She lives with her eldest son and his family.

Warda is a forceful character. For the last seven years she has been a member of the FLN, Algeria's only political party. At the request of the party-cell leader of her village she became the representative for the national women's organization (UNFA), and for the last few years she has been a member of the municipal council. Yet she is dissatisfied with her political influence. In the council the men will not listen to her, she says, because "men don't like it if women want freedom. They don't like the truth here and I like the truth." She also complains about the village women who do not want to talk with her about socialism and politics. "They only ask what they will get in return." Yet, she has managed to win the confidence of a number of women because of her other skills: she is well known as a midwife and as attendant to the dying.

Fatima, another woman at the meeting, has a similar story. She is a sturdy, illiterate, unveiled woman in her fifties. Since her husband divorced her and her married sons moved away, she lives alone, which is exceptional for a woman in Algeria. Like Warda, Fatima has been a longtime member and representative of the party and the women's organization. She was Warda's predecessor on the municipal council, and thinks that she was turned out because she was too troublesome. The male members of the council say that she was a lesbian but was redeemed by her pilgrimage to Mecca. She has quarrelled with the local party-boss because he refuses to hire a girl to write and read for the women. Fatima has another running dispute with the municipal secretary because he

> forced the poor to pay for the whitewashing of their houses when the President paid a visit to the region. Fatima protested and refused to pay. At this meeting she starts another dispute, now with Warda, about the futility of working any longer for the FLN or the UNFA. She says the village women are right not to join the party or the women's organization. She has worked for years for the party and has never seen anything in return.

I met Warda and Fatima while preparing my master thesis in a small Algerian oasis. Their personalities and the matter-of-course way in which they went about doing things Algerian women normally are not supposed to do fascinated me. They moved freely through public space, they went unveiled, they were politically active, they talked to (and even argued with) men who were not their relatives in meeting halls and they earned money. They seemed less hampered by the fact that they were women than one would expect in a society where strict sexual segregation and seclusion and veiling of women are still the dominant norms. I decided then that in my next study I would focus on all those women who do not fit in neatly with the standard picture of Algerian women as demure, secluded, veiled, and powerless victims of men.

This thesis is the final result of that decision. It describes the lives of women like Warda and Fatima; only they do not live in a small oasis but in a large, rapidly developing town. These women described here all differ from gender norms. Concomitantly, they all occupy a marginal position in the family structure and kinship relations: they are widowed, divorced, or orphaned. They are *women without men*. Also included are those women who are virtually in the same position because their husband or father is ill, absent or incapacitated.

The biographies and other material for this study were gathered from June 1981 to June 1982 in Maimuna, a large town in northern Algeria. To understand the lives and thoughts of Algerian women it is necessary to consider carefully their relations with men. I have studied Algerian men not so much as a group in themselves, but with women in mind. An equal focus on both women and men is hardly feasible for a female researcher in a segregated society like Algeria, at least not on this subject.

The fieldwork

Many of the subjects treated here are taboo, and in my research I encountered many formal and informal obstacles. Other authors have noted the suspicion and ambivalence of Algerians towards social research in general as done by foreigners (Ottoway 1970:49; Zartman 1970:44). But apart from the normal bureaucratic red tape my own work was hampered by the political sensitivity of a study of women, the more so in a year in which the new Family Code was drafted and to be voted on. The power-holders had no interest in an exposure of the problems of women, especially not by a foreign woman. The less powerful however did. It was this perception and the support of many individual Algerians that helped me to continue the project.

Hard data remained especially difficult (at times impossible) to elicit. In Algeria much basic information was treated as classified by lower level civil servants with no interest in taking responsibility. For example, I was denied permission to read the official journal. Fortunately, the results of the national census of 1977 were open to the public. Local population data of subsequent years and some of the statistical data presented in chapter X had to be gathered informally and from the bottom up. To know how many women were working in an institution or plant I had to ask the cleaning woman instead of the director. I do regret, however, that due to opposition to my research a chapter on the participation of women in the military and in government had to be dropped.

In conducting the fieldwork I mainly used informal methods. The nature of the subject and the opposition of authorities precluded the use of more open and formal procedures like a large scale survey with questionnaires and structured interviews. In any case my own preference, given that the subject was so little studied, was to investigate in depth a set of plausible hypotheses rather than to test them statistically. Most of the information presented here was given in spontaneous conversations. Working through the extended networks of three families I spoke with 50 women without men from all the social strata except the elite. My contacts with them varied considerably in length, intensity and frequency. They all knew that I was writing a book. Conversations with their relatives, friends and neighbours, both male and female, provided the rest of the information.

In general, I did not take notes or tape recordings in the presence of informants, except for some occasions in the three families with whom I lived. All conversations, however, were written down as accurately and as soon as possible after they took place. This means that the quotations in the text may not always have been said word by word, but they are always very close proximates.

As in many anthropological studies, some exactness must be sacrificed to translation. The fieldwork was conducted in Arabic and French, without the help of a field assistant or an interpreter. When information is given in Arabic, explained in French, thought over in Dutch and finally reproduced in English, some fine points are bound to be lost. Whenever possible, I have tried to translate directly from Arabic into English.

Arabic words will be transliterated according to the system in H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. A few Arabic words like Koran, emir, imam, jinn, or marabout have entered the English language and are written as in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Names of persons, groups or places, except for Algiers, will be written as they appear in the Algerian press. In quoting from other works, the author's transliteration is respected. An adjustment to the Algerian Arabic will be the use of "g" (pronounced as in go) for ق. Plurals other than those ending on -ât are formed by the addition of s. The local verbal expressions reproduced here may at times conflict with the rules of classical Arabic spelling and grammar.

Out of respect, and in order to protect the persons who confided in me, I changed the town's name and used fictional personal names.

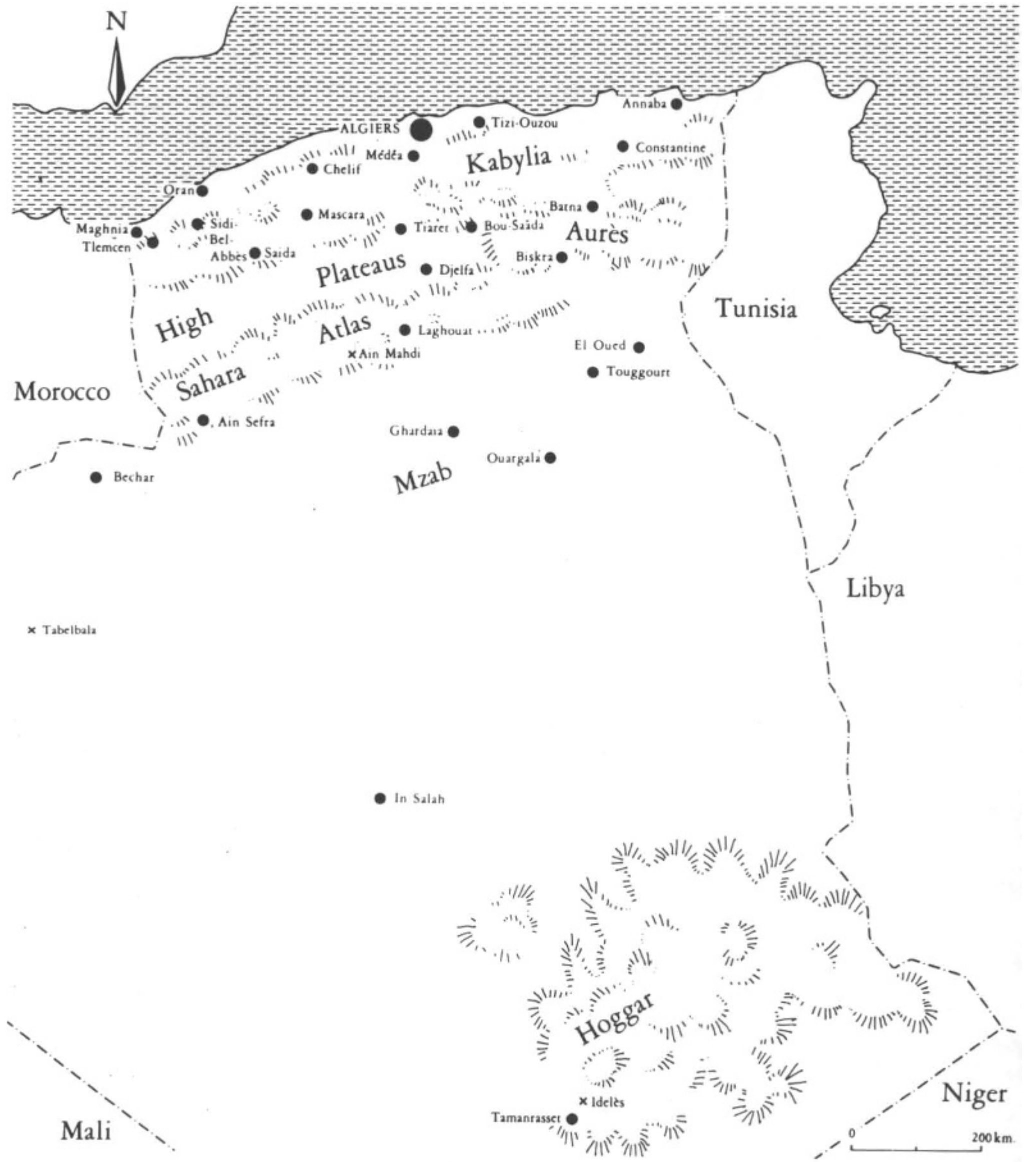

Fig. 1: Map of Algeria