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Agdals

Pablo Dominguez and Gary J. Martin

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‘Agdal’ – plural Igudlan/Igdalen or more commonly ‘agdals’ in English – is a term of Tamazight origin, that is, of the Amazigh/Berber language family of North Africa. It primarily refers to a type of communal resource management in which there is a temporary restriction on the use of specific natural resources within a defined territory, with the intention of maximizing their availability in critical periods of need (Auclair et al. 2011). Pastoral agdals in the High Atlas mountains of Morocco, where pastoralists may bring their herds only during a communally agreed period of time, are a salient example. Agdals may also be arboreal areas, such as the argan – *Argania spinosa* – woodlands in western Morocco, where access is prohibited as fruits ripen before harvest. Agdal restrictions are more broadly applied to agricultural fields, algal beds, areas of forage and medicinal plants, orchards and sacred sites, among other places in coastal lowlands, mountains, oases, and even urban areas. Analysis of agdals reveals both biological and social advantages over other approaches to landscape management. They favour relatively equitable distribution of benefits from natural resources through collective decision-making and recognition of common access rights, and are governed by local institutions that establish use rules. Agdals maximize the annual production of culturally important biodiversity and maintain the viability of resource extraction over time, resulting in ecosystems that are more biodiverse and resilient than others in similar geographical contexts that are not communally managed. For example, pastoral agdals are typically opened to herds of domesticated animals in late spring to early summer when most grazed plants have completed their reproductive cycle, thus avoiding the degradation witnessed in the Maghrebian open access pastures. At the same time, focusing solely only on the productive side of agdals would not present a complete picture. Beyond an agro-economic tool, the agdal is a cultural element around which turns a whole system of sacramental, ethical, aesthetic and other symbolic references that transforms the agdal in a faithful reflection of a mountain Amazigh culture and raises it to a total social fact. Indeed, ritual regulation used to comprise a strong share of the agdal system. Such rituals would include having the annual agdal prohibitions often announced and legitimized by saint descendants or even offerings such as bags of grain, butter, couscous, and cattle sacrifices given to them, who, in turn, would share the products with all the visitors and distribute baraka among the ritual holders. The existence of agdals is putatively ancient, with its origins being traced back to the Amazigh societies that have been present in the region for many thousands of years (Auclair et al. 2011; Navarro Palazón et al. 2017). They

have presumably persisted and recreated themselves continuously over time in North Africa and the Sahara, having adapted to diverse economic, environmental and political situations. The term 'agdal' has also been used in new contexts, even in urban centres of rapid demographic expansion such as Rabat or Marrakech. In the latter, the term could have started to be applied to the real estate located south of the medina after the Alawite restoration (seventeenth century), which in turn was founded by the Almohade dynasty in the twelfth century (Navarro et al. 2017). Although the agdal garden of Marrakech has attained an enhanced public profile – it was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1985 – rural agdals have greater contemporary relevance despite a general lack of awareness about their existence. They are the prototypical Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs) of the Maghreb. They play a fundamental role in maintaining both intangible and tangible cultural heritage, ranging from ritual ceremonies to traditional agro-ecosystems, while enhancing the resilience of social-ecological systems in diverse environments. Following intensive academic study in the early twenty-first century, they are regularly evoked as a model of conservation and sustainable use based on knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles, as defined in the Convention on Biological Diversity and other international environmental agreements. Agdals are significant biodiversity hotspots, not only as rich reservoirs of fauna and flora, but also as areas highly threatened by expansion of privatized agricultural frontiers, grazing intensification, rural exodus, transition in cultural beliefs, and climate change. Pastoral and forest agdals have gained particular prominence as Important Plant Areas in the Moroccan High Atlas as they harbour a large number of endemic, endangered and useful plant species. Increased awareness of such importance is leading to their inclusion in community-based projects of cultural and ecological restoration. This is piloted, albeit with funding and support from external institutions, by community associations that seek to either defend existing agdals or apply the principle of communal management to degraded areas, based on temporal prohibition of resource use. The motivation for this incipient renaissance is drawn from practical concerns about erosion and other environmental challenges, and broader interest in recovering cultural identity and landscapes. Although agdals typically lack explicit governmental recognition – and are scarcely considered in national agricultural and conservation plans – awareness of the biocultural benefits of these communally managed areas has the potential of influencing public policy on sustainable land use. In their multiple manifestations as cultural fact, communally managed territory and even urban green space, agdals remain anchored in a specific human and geographical context. Initiatives to recreate or impose them outside this realm would be inappropriate, but they do remain a viable alternative in specific areas across the Maghreb, and are an inspiration to advocates of community management of natural resources in the Mediterranean Basin and worldwide.

Further Resources

Agdal, Voices of the Atlas, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMOfQXzImDI&feature=youtu.be>, a documentary, through a prior request for authorization to Pablo Domínguez.

Auclair, Laurent and Mohamed Alifriqui (eds) (2012), Les Agdals du haut Atlas marocain: savoirs locaux, droits d'accès et gestion de la biodiversité. Rabat: IRCAM/IRD, http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/divers13-07/010059469.pdf.

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Auclair, Laurent, Patrick Baudot, Didier Genin, Bruno Romagny and Romain Simenel (2011), 'Patrimony for Resilience: Evidence from the Forest Agdal in the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains', Ecology and Society. 16 (4): 24, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-04429-160424>.

Domínguez Pablo, Francisco Zorondo-Rodríguez and Victoria Reyes-García (2010), 'Relationships between Saints' Beliefs and Mountain Pasture Uses', Human Ecology. 38 (3): 351–62, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10745-010-9321-7>.

Navarro, Julio, Fidel Garrido and Íñigo Almela (2017), 'The Agdal of Marrakesh (Twelfth to Twentieth Centuries): An Agricultural Space for Caliphs and Sultans', Final Report of the Research Project Almunias of Western Islam: Architecture, Archeology and Historical Sources. 106. The Global Diversity Foundation, www.global-diversity.org.

Pablo Dominguez, an environmental anthropologist, has studied High Atlas Amazigh populations and their systems of communal natural resource management. He now focuses on how the concept of heritage can promote or devalue agdals and other commons in Spain, France, Italy, East Africa, and Latin America. He teaches in the Geography of the Environment Laboratory, Université Toulouse, France, and at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain.

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