

## Culture



**Soraya ALTORKI, *Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behavior Among the Elite*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986. 183 pages, US \$30.00 (cloth) / Christine EICKELMAN, *Women and Community in Oman*, New York, New York University Press, 1984. 251 pages, US \$32.50 (cloth), \$12.50 (paper)**

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mythique. La même objection vient d'être formulée, non par un structuraliste mais par un historien (Darnton 1985), au sujet de l'analyse que font les psychanalystes des contes populaires. La critique parisienne rendant compte du présent livre a surtout mis l'accent sur cette discussion terminale, mais celle-ci ne me semble certainement pas plus importante que les multiples autres problèmes abordés, qu'ils soient d'ordre purement ethnographique, comme les questions d'ethno-histoire, ou de la logique des transformations mythiques. Lévi-Strauss ne nie pas que ce livre soit une suite, ou plutôt un accompagnement, à la série des *Mythologiques* mais je me demande s'il n'est pas plus proche que les autres volumes de la série de *La pensée sauvage* dont il serait lui aussi une suite. Ce n'est peut-être qu'une impression mais ce livre est un traité des affinités sensibles que l'imaginaire tisse entre un nombre impressionnant d'animaux et de catégories d'êtres humains. Il va aussi très loin dans l'exploration de ce qu'il faut bien appeler l'entrecroisement des observations empiriques et des déductions dictées non par le sensible mais par un schème précontraint. En ceci, l'auteur reste fidèle à son projet d'analyse du fonctionnement de l'esprit humain et ce livre ajoute encore des pierres nouvelles à l'édifice commencé il y a quelque trente ans. Un livre à lire et à relire en attendant le suivant, comme Lévi-Strauss nous l'a promis.

#### RÉFÉRENCE

Darnton, R. *Le grand massacre des chats. Attitudes et croyances dans l'ancienne France*, Paris, R. Laffont : 1985 (édition originale américaine : 1984).

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The Western press is fond of depicting contemporary Arabia as existing in a time-warp, where twentieth century technology and First World affluence are overborne by a Third World social

system tyrannized by white-robed shaykhs and unchanged since mediaeval times. The popular image of Saudi women captures the apparent incongruity: seen as prisoners of their menfolk and bound by a rigid set of rules reinforced by strict religious tenets, they carefully don their veils before stepping into chauffeured Jaguar XKEs for the trip to Gucci Lane. Orientalism, it seems, is difficult to dispel; however much recast in the shape of capitalist modernity, Arabia remains socially and ideologically Other, and Arabian women least scrutable of all.

Truth to tell, few informed accounts have appeared to alter Western stereotypes. The two books under review are therefore timely additions to the growing ethnographic literature on Muslim women: Soraya Altorki writes of urban elites in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, and Christine Eickelman describes the lives of women residing in Hamra, a desert oasis and tribal capital in the interior of Oman. Until recently neither group was accessible to anthropological investigation.

Despite a superficial likeness these books are quite different and close comparison threatens to distort them both. For one thing, their geographical and politico-religious locales contrast significantly. Hamra lies in an area of the peninsula which, in 1913, successfully revived the Ibadi imamate, an Islamic state founded in the century after the Prophet's death by secessionists closely aligned with the Sunni branch of Islam, but adamantly opposed to dynastic rule. This is a village of mud-walled houses, orchards and irrigation ditches; a former caravan *entrepôt* supported by agriculture and labour emigration; a community relatively isolated from the world outside and, at the time of Eickelman's fieldwork (1979-80), still dominated by the Shaykhly lineage of the Abriyin.

Jiddah, on the other hand, is a cosmopolis: principal port on the eastern Red Sea coast and landing point for pilgrims enroute to Mecca, it has a centuries old mercantile tradition and heterogenous population. The city was subsumed by the fundamentalist Saudi state in 1926 and, with the start of oil drilling nine years later, became its link between the desert interior and the global economy. The lifestyle of Altorki's elite families reflects Jiddah's prosperity: it is they who own Rolls Royces, live in palatial homes, wear Paris designs, and vacation in Europe. In Jiddah financial wealth is fast replacing descent as a criterion of social status.

The authors' backgrounds, intended audiences, and orientations are equally divergent. Eickelman is a Western ethnographer who has lived extensively in Morocco and Egypt. She writes for a general audience, not an exclusively academic one; her account is based on several months observation and interaction with women of all ages and social strata in

Hamra oasis: members of Shaykhly families and non-Shaykhly ones, including clients and ex-slaves. The book's attention to microscopic detail, its fluid style, and its liberal use of journal excerpts where informants are allowed to speak for themselves, vividly chronicle the day-to-day experience of being a woman in rural Oman. Eickelman succeeds best in portraying the subtle gradations of women's rank that are woven from the threads of descent, wealth, age, and position in the socially determined life cycle. Her discussion revolves about women's interactions with other oasis women; these constitute the social field in which a family's most significant resource, its reputation, is reproduced and extended through the mutual interpretation of impossibly fine nuances of comportment.

Altorki's more abstract work complements Eickelman's well. Altorki is a native anthropologist returning home from an upbringing and education abroad; she writes for an academic readership, building a solid argument with a close theoretical focus on the dynamic relationship between ideology and practice. Her fieldwork among thirteen urban families took place at various times between 1971 and 1984 and spans three generations of women; her aim is to analyse changing trends in female-male relationships and in their ideological underpinnings among Jiddah elites, whom she refers to as a "hegemonic group" (p. 20). While one could take issue with such a limited and uncritical application of the concept "hegemony" (Jiddah elites might well be conceived as relaying external hegemonic interests), the book contains many valuable insights into the fundamental indeterminacy of key ideological precepts. Altorki shows how each generation of women, subject to different pressures and having diverse experiences of the world within and outside Saudi Arabia, strategically interprets those precepts to gain or preserve a relative autonomy from men and, so doing, modifies the ideology of domestic life within religiously admissible bounds. Her book testifies to the value of a historical perspective in the study of gender relations and dissolves any lingering misconceptions about their fixity in even the most radical of Islamic societies.

Despite their differences these works occupy some common ground: both forcefully document the inadequacy of the public/private distinction for comprehending gender asymmetries within Islam. Where women and men are segregated, the public realm cannot be considered a single domain but, minimally, a dual one comprised of separate spheres of interaction. Moreover, these have complementary and interdependent implications for the position of the family, here viewed (following Bourdieu) as a corporate unit sharing a fund of prestige derived from

symbolic as well as material assets. Whereas a man's interactions in the public sphere influence his family's political, economic and religious status, a woman's participation in formal visiting networks is an important means to enhance and maintain her family's symbolic capital, its reputation. In Jiddah and Hamra women officially represent their families when visiting other households, as they should regularly do. There they must behave with propriety, tendering an image of collective amity regardless of internal strife, upholding their families' positions while observing, always observing, the comportment of others. But, as with other ambassadors on diplomatic missions, the lubricating oil of etiquette partially obscures these women's underlying agenda; ambiguity, secrecy, and indirection are hallmarks of an interaction whose dual purpose is reconnaissance and information management.

As such, theirs is an explicitly political role, but one with economic as well as symbolic import. Veiling and female segregation, together with a parental authority structure that proscribes individual initiative in choosing a mate, permit older women, especially, to control information about potential spouses for their sons. Possession of such information is particularly relevant in communities such as these, where politically and economically significant social relations are mediated by kinship and reproduced by way of marriage. Segregation therefore gives women a basis of power relative to men. Among Jiddah elites, for example, men's business contacts are often established through female kin and affines. Women's participation in the political and economic life of their communities may be less direct, and their harvest less tangible than men's, but, as these books so ably demonstrate, it is no less public. Nor are women who wear veils so mysterious, submissive, or anachronistic as they might appear.

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Rémi SAVARD, *La voix des autres*, Montréal, L'Hexagone, Collection Positions anthropologiques, 1985, 351 pages, cartes, tableaux.

par Georges Tissot  
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*Tshakapesh* interroge. Depuis toujours sans doute, depuis un questionnement d'outre-frontière dès 1637, jusqu'à aujourd'hui: mise en cause de la religion qui doit se défendre; sondes dans l'imaginaire qui, peureux, semble devoir se protéger. *Tshakapesh* a été classé en regard de la vie dans la « fable ridicule »,