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Transforming Cultural, Racial and Gender Categories: An Ethnographic Update on Social Relations in Two Northern Yemeni Communities

In the last two months of 1994, after postponing my trip due to Yemen's civil war, I revisited the two communities where I had conducted fieldwork ten years ago. Between 1982 and 1984 I lived in Wadi Dhabāb, (still) a poor village just south of Ta'izz; and in 'Abs, a (now) burgeoning town in the northern Tihāma. Funded by an American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS) fellowship, I was able to return to 'Abs and Dhabāb and to visit Aden for the first time. This research is an update of my earlier study (1987) which focused on the menial laborers, *akhdām* (literally servants), whose position in Yemen's social hierarchy ranks even lower than that of [ex-] slaves, *'abid*. My previous analysis of marginalized Yemeni groups of known or reputed African descent was situated in the post-revolutionary period during which all social categories had been officially abolished. The present study re-assesses the socioeconomic status of women generally and the manipulations of social roles and identities by *akhdām* women specifically in post-reunification, post-civil war Yemen. Here I focus on the impact of socioeconomic, educational and occupational changes on social status.

Upward mobility aptly describes the changes occurring in both Dhabāb and 'Abs. Yet, it was also evident that women's outlooks on their lives and future prospects in Dhabāb and 'Abs markedly differ. The perspectives of women in the village and the town, both areas in the North, contrast with the views of women in the city of Aden in the South. These regional variations in gender and social relations must also be viewed in light of the Northern government's backing of conservative, at times repressive, policies since its victory against the South in the mid-1994 civil war. Presently, these policies are an implicit confirmation of extremist Islamic views toward women's status and in direct contrast with reforms to grant equal rights to women under the South's socialist regime.

Further, it was also evident that occupational positions are being redefined in a time of renewed conflict over racial and national identities. Thus, while discrimination against *'abid* and *akhdām*, both African-identified, is not primarily based on race, discrimination against other Yemenis whose mothers are of East African origins (*muwalladīn*) clearly involves ethnic criteria. The social and gender transformations occurring in Yemeni society of the mid-1990s are too complex for a mere two-month study.

Given the opportunity to pursue my analysis, I am confident that it will highlight diverse women's contributions to the overall development process. Ultimately, the process of alleviating poverty and social exclusion are also key to establishing the democratic ideals envisioned by many Yemenis.

Returning to the Village: An Overview

The Birbasha depot for transport to Wadi Dhabāb has become a major thoroughfare. Here the Ta'izz-Turba Road to Wadi Dhabāb, the Hujariyya and other points south intersects with the road to Mokha to the west. The intersection itself is lined with roadside vendors. Heading south, factories, other commercial buildings, and a new prison have been constructed in the last ten years. Similarly, new buildings are evident in Wadi Dhabāb, including the shell of a future clinic. In the village, larger, uniformly-cut stone houses in pastel shades have replaced a significant number of the crudely-constructed rock and thatched-roof homes. The older houses often have new additions; many now have a *ḥammām* (outhouse). Thus, in a few cases, substantial investments have been made in the construction of housing exteriors. In general, the fields and wadis appear well cared for, and new crops are being grown. The proliferation of such crops as *zaytān* (pear-like fruit), *ambr* (melon), and henna is attributed to the resumption of farming by men returning from Saudi Arabia during the Gulf war. However, despite the well-tended farmlands, villagers cited the animal contamination of irrigation water as a source of health problems.

Socioeconomic Status in Dhabāb

Like the changes in Dhabāb's landscape, changes in women's lives appear to be merely superficial. As in the past, women routinely mentioned the higher cost of establishing and maintaining their households relative to an earlier time. Now, the expense of basic necessities (thermoses for tea, food items, dresses [*qumsān*], land, bride wealth [*mahr*], etc.) is compared to their cost in *riyals*, which have depreciated drastically since reunification.¹ While women reported that grinding mills have made their lives easier, they continue to collect and carry heavy loads of water, firewood, and fodder as well as engage in

every aspect of agricultural production. Similarly, hot plates run on butagas (propane) now accompany the traditional *tannūr* (clay oven), but most women still prepare meals in unhealthy, smoke-filled kitchens. *Akhdām* women are the exception because invariably they cook outdoors. All of these tasks are performed while combating malaria which is a severe, and sometimes fatal, disease not only on the Tihāma (coast) but in Dhabāb as well. It is difficult, therefore, to measure real improvement in women's work load in practical terms.

I attempted to assess the impact of recent changes in educational opportunity on the career goals of women and members of Yemen's lowest ranked social group. Ten years ago, virtually no girls in any social category were attending school. Now, girls throughout the social hierarchy, including the *akhdām*, have access to a modern education. This is not to say that poverty has been removed as an obstacle to education. Despite a free educational system, many families, even those in respected social groups still fail to send their daughters to school due to economic reasons. Financial constraints remain a factor in non-school attendance among the children of either sex in low status families. Yet, access to the benefits of education seems limited less by economic factors than by social ones. For example, some villagers also cited the lack of female teachers as a reason for girls not attending school. Parents were concerned that girls would be unable to complete their education in sex-segregated classrooms in accordance with customary values. Consequently, it is not surprising that young women with elementary school education, and even those who will have the opportunity to attain advanced degrees, ultimately expect to assume the same roles in village and family life as their mothers and grandmothers.

The availability of schools has not greatly altered women's thinking about their social roles and identities. Most responded that their lives are as they should be, that they are in a state of well-being (*murtāh*). Arranged and even forced marriages are seen as normal (*ādī*) even though, as a result of the merger of North and South, women were exposed to more liberal ideas regarding women's status via Adeni TV. To women in Dhabāb, a more liberal society meant license for promiscuity and insobriety. Others felt that they did not have the power (*mush qāwi*) to change their lives. The impact of education seems a rather insignificant factor in village women's outlooks, which may be expected given female non-attendance.

Women's attitudes toward their roles, identities, and expectations vary considerably throughout the country. In marked contrast to the village in Dhabāb, women on the campus of the University in Aden,

which I visited briefly, reported dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their lives. Retaining their relative freedom to choose marital partners is not enough. They adamantly disapproved of limitations on career options sanctioned by the more conservative (former Northern) government. To many of these Adeni women, the return to the veil is less of a burden, and certainly less urgent, than the acquisition of adequate food, water, and housing, for example — problems which many felt are being overlooked under the present political regime.² On the other hand, women in Dhabāb, like in other villages, did not accept veiling for their daily attire. Even in the hottest cities in the country, Aden, Hudayda, and other coastal towns, the all-black robe (*balto*) or similar outfit in grey with head scarf were the habitual costume for school girls.



Members of the lowest status groups, *al-akhdām*, in particular, have maintained and in some cases improved their economic status; but unlike those in higher status groups, these achievements are not necessarily attributed to educational opportunities. The sons of the village administrator (*qāḍī*) were able to take full advantage of the university when it opened in Ta'izz and now hold various teaching posts. Similarly, young men in respected social categories (*qabā'il/ra'ya*) routinely are studying for their teaching credentials. Advancement through education for *akhdām* males, on the other hand, seems more individualistic. I encountered only two members of an extended *akhdām* family in a neighboring village who were pursuing college degrees in the School of Education in Ta'izz. Education is viewed as a means to advance by most Yemenis, but for various reasons, including economic, successful outcomes are less consistent for the *akhdām* (and for women) than for males in the more respected classes.

Like members of other social categories, most sons in *akhdām* families tend to follow the same occupations as their fathers. For most men this means combining menial jobs in the city with day labor in the fields. The *akhdām* continue to be associated with the growing and selling of certain crops, especially leeks (*kurrāth*). As in the past, women and men grow *kurrāth* and sell it in the

weekly *sūq* in Dhabāb and daily in Ta'izz. Thus, for some *akhdām*, *kurrāth* is a lucrative crop, especially if land acquisition through purchase or rental has resulted in increased productivity. One elderly *akhdām* farmer has more than doubled his acreage. The women in his household and a male hired hand work both on a rental plot and on land that the farmer owns.

Compared to other areas in Yemen, occupational categories, like gender roles, are static entities in Dhabāb. Despite the potential returns for cultivating and marketing *kurrāth*, these are still considered lowly endeavors that remain relegated to the *akhdām*. Elsewhere, *kurrāth* has become a more diversified crop, i.e., persons in the *qabā'il/ra'īya* categories are involved in its production.³ This shift also is probably attributed to the return of unemployed labor migrants from Saudi.

Re-entry into 'Abs

In both Dhabāb and Abs, the return of male labor migrants during the Gulf War has had a significant impact on the local economy. In 'Abs, the impact of the returnees (*muhtarribin*) is even more dramatic than it is in Dhabāb. The surrounding communities on the approach to the town of 'Abs are now congested with commercial and residential establishments, including restaurants and temporary settlements for the families of returnees. Ten years ago, I described 'Abs as a thriving town where fish and meat were readily available and often a routine part of the diet, unlike in Dhabāb. The mud-walled and thatched-roof huts (*'ushash*) that are also found in parts of Africa were interspersed with new concrete and cinder block constructions. At that time, I had imagined that an aerial photo would reveal an equal division of the two types of houses. Now, the open spaces and airy compounds surrounding each home have almost been obliterated by new buildings. Also, as a result of the population expansion, an African presence typically conveyed in the dark skin hues of residents in Tihāma towns like 'Abs has become less prominent.⁴

Socioeconomic Status in 'Abs

The district and the town of 'Abs have probably more than doubled in size over the last ten years. It was nearly impossible to find people and houses that I once knew amid the jumble of new homes. Still, I was most impressed with the transformations presently occurring in various women's lives. In marked contrast to the women in the villages in Dhabāb, certain women in 'Abs are redefining their positions via new work opportunities. The women health guides (*murshidāt*) with whom I stayed at the Inter-

national Cooperation for Development (ICD) hospital typically combine the responsibilities of homemaker, student and health worker in ways that are extremely exciting and merit further examination.

The work of *murshidāt* at the ICD hospital in 'Abs exemplifies the integration of various work roles routinely undertaken by Yemeni women. In combining their hospital and household duties, many of the women are supporting entire families. At the same time, most are completing a basic education while a few are acquiring more advanced medical training. Women's engagement in intersecting work domains is not a phenomenon unique to Yemen. However, the overlapping roles of the health workers in 'Abs are key to understanding how new economic and social relations are developing in many communities in Yemen and elsewhere.

Future Study and Its Implications

I believe that transformations of and within occupational categories are integral to eventual solutions of the problems of social exclusion and gender inequality. Even though the return of labor migrants has had a profound impact on the local economies in both Dhabāb and 'Abs, the restructuring of occupational categories is more apparent in the cities. Jobs, such as barbering, that were formerly considered unacceptable and thus assigned to a non-tribal group have been upgraded, enabling urban males, especially those of tribal origins, to earn a living. Women, on the other hand, particularly ones I spoke to on the campus of the university in Aden, for example, resent the limitations on their career options imposed by the present political regime. These Adeni students indicated that they were limited to the medical and teaching fields. Whether these restrictions will be realized in practices and whether women who are currently engaged in such public domains as communications and politics will be removed from those positions is not yet certain. It is ironic, however, that as occupations are expanding for men, careers for educated women are being restricted.

In the next phase of my research, I propose to examine the work routines of the *murshidāt* who occupy different positions on the social scale. I plan to document changing self-concepts of these women, especially those at the lowest end of the social hierarchy, as they achieve professional status. In conducting the study, preferably with a video camera, it is important not to further isolate persons who are still stigmatized by their low status. Women of former *'abid*, not *akhdām* origins, are included on the current roster of approximately twenty *murshidāt*. However, women of high social standing must confront their own biases when serving (or

refusing to serve) *sūq* residents who are labelled *akhdām*. Mutual adjustments in the attitudes of both low and high status women are anticipated after the successful recruitment of *akhdām* women as health workers.

A study on the incorporation of marginalized persons in small-scale projects such as the one at the hospital in 'Abs would have many benefits. The process of inclusion provides a model for transforming social and gender relations in the larger society. Such a study also has important implications for scholars and officials in various contexts who are interested in promoting inclusive societies. Similarly, in-depth examination of the impact of paid employment on the self-concepts of women throughout the social hierarchy in a developing country has practical significance for conceptualizing interracial, multicultural and gender relations in broader social contexts. Finally, at the local level, such a study would benefit the working women themselves. The *murshidāt* at the hospital with whom I spoke explained that a videotaped documentation of their working day would be a valuable resource in their efforts to improve themselves as health providers.⁵

An examination of transitions in occupational identities only indirectly deals with underlying social attitudes. Perceived differences between *akhdām* and *qabā'il* continue to inhibit intermarriages between the two groups. "*Jins*" in the sense of origins (*ʿaṣl*) more than race as a physical characteristic is the usual explanation for sustained discrimination in marriage. Thus far, escaping to a community where *akhdām* identity will not be recognized is the only possibility for changing the marriage restriction. This remains an option more in theory than in practice. Close intergroup working relationships coupled with the attempt to eliminate use of derogatory labels is a positive step. Such an approach is currently underway in other community projects involving an integrated clientele, such as in Ṣan'ā' and Dhamār. Having recognized that derogatory categorical labels inhibit progress toward inclusion of subordinate groups, both Yemeni and non-Yemeni directors there are devising creative ways to deal with this sensitive issue. My future assessments and analyses of development projects such as these will, it is hoped, reveal that the trend toward recognizing the *akhdām* as persons is becoming more widespread.

References

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Notes

¹ In the mid 1980s one dollar was equivalent to 4.5 *riyals*; at the end of 1994, one dollar was worth between 85-90 *riyals*. The devaluation of the *riyal* was usually the first problem villagers would mention. However, the *riyal's* decline may not be a totally negative occurrence. According to certain Yemenis, as a result of the labor migrants' increased ability to invest, the maher was rising disproportionately to a prospective bridegroom's ability to pay. The falling value of the *riyal* may have slowed this incline.

² Another reason for the return to the veil with perhaps less reluctance than expected has also been suggested: Many of the women may be from wealthier families who left (South) Yemen to live in Saudi Arabia when land reform was imposed under the socialism. Due to their Saudi experience, these women would have grown accustomed to living in an more restrictive social environment.

³ Interestingly, men in the *qabā'il* or *ra'ya* categories, tend to grow *kurrāth* away from their home villages where they are known. This is exemplified by a Ta'izz area farmer who buys land in the Tihāma on which to grow the crop. Therefore, it is not just the *akhdām*, as I later note, who consider a geographical move as the best solution for escaping the confines of the social hierarchical system.

⁴ On the other hand, this impression may contrast with Stevenson's finding (1993:17) that many of the returnees living in settlement camps in Ḥudayda were originally of *akhdām* status, especially if their presumed African ancestry allows them to be distinguished from other Tihāmis.

⁵ I have received support for this work from various Yemenis both before and during this current research, including scholars at the Yemen Center for Research and Study (YCRS) as well as deans, faculty, and students at various branches of the university throughout the country, especially those whose classes I visited in Aden and Ta'izz. All have volunteered to help with the continuation of the research either directly or indirectly. Equally forthcoming is the support of a host of non-citizen Yemenophiles. For their help with this text, both in style and content, I thank Kay Steinmetz and Mahyoub Anaam.

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