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Between Qur'an and Custom

Gendered Negotiations in Contemporary Sana'a

By

Anoush Tamar Suni

Thesis submitted to Pomona College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

April 24, 2009

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This thesis is dedicated to all of the women in Sana'a who took me into their homes and shared their lives with me, especially to Amira, who was my friend, confidante, and teacher throughout my time in Sana'a, and whose resilience continues to inspire me.

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Chapter One

“Don’t Dance, Learn Islam!”

Fieldnotes June 8

My first day in Sana’a

Today I knew I was leaving Egypt with all of its colorful “*hijab*¹ fashion” when I arrived in the boarding area for my flight to Sana’a. There were mostly men there, businessmen, and a few women in black clothing. When we boarded the plane, it was clear where I was going. Along with the businessmen and one Scandinavian couple, there were men in *thobes* [white, ankle-length men’s garment] and *kufiyes* [men’s scarves] on their heads, and women in all black and *niqab* [face-veil], all chattering away in the Yemeni dialect...

First Observations in Sana’a:

The scene on the street is the same as last year. There are a lot of men in Yemeni clothes running around, and women going to and fro. The men sit on the street and hang out and chew *qat*², but the women don’t. There are a lot of women outside, but they’re all going somewhere; I never see women stopping to chat on the street or waiting anywhere. They’re always in transit and usually not alone. They’re either with a man, with another woman, or with a child. Almost all of the women wear all black, to varying degrees of covering. They wear an *abaya*³, either looser or tighter, with or without designs, *hijab* or *khimar* [a cape-like covering for the torso], *niqab*, and maybe gloves. Then there are the older ladies who wear the traditional black face wrap [*lithma*], with a colorful cloak with a blue and red design [*sitara*], and then a red cloth with black and white spots on their heads. Young girls wear whatever they want, and then between the ages of seven and ten, they start covering their heads as well and/or wearing a black *abaya*. A lot of pre-teens wear an *abaya* and a loose, colorful scarf.

The first day in my Arabic language institute:

After lunch, my favorite teacher, Amira, and another teacher came over and hugged me and kissed me. I was happy because I thought Amira had forgotten me since last year, but I was wrong! She was as warm and as sweet as ever! Amira and I sat together and chatted for a little while. The whole time she was so excited and squeezing my hand and sitting close to me. She is a wonderful teacher and speaks so clearly. First I asked her about her daughter; she said she is bigger now. I asked about her mother, and she said she went back to the village; her father she said is still in Sana’a, living in her brother’s house, but he is old and sick and has an injured hip. Then she asked about Egypt, and I told her it is crowded and full of people and that the culture is very different. I told her about the “*hijab* fashion” in Egypt, and how while there are some women who, like in Yemen, wear all black with *niqab* and all, there is also the other extreme of ladies who wear fancy, sparkly, colorful, and elaborately tied *hijabs* and very tight clothes and lots of makeup and so on! She found this very surprising, and said that this is no longer religion, now its just for beauty and for fashion. Then we walked back to the *markez* [the central building of the institute], holding hands and talking about how fun it is to be together again and how we will trade English/Arabic lessons, *inshallah* [god willing].

¹ *Hijab* refers to a headscarf worn by Muslim women.

² *Qat* is a mild stimulant that is ingested by chewing the fresh leaves of the *qat* tree. It is commonly used in social gatherings, and is chewed daily by many Yemenis, both men and women, though more often by men.

³ An *abaya* (also known as *balto*) is a long overdress worn by women in many Arab and Muslim societies. In Yemen it is usually black.

When I first arrived in Yemen in the summer of 2007 as a student in an Arabic immersion program, I was overwhelmed with trying to learn and understand a language and culture that were completely new to me. When I returned in the summer of 2008 to continue my Arabic studies and to carry out research for my senior thesis, I was already familiar enough with the language, culture, and landscape of Sana'a that I could finally begin to explore deeper questions concerning the interconnections between history, politics, economics, religion, gender, and social change.

For a first-time visitor, life in Sana'a looks to be homogeneously bound to tradition. Inside the old city and in the surrounding neighborhoods, most Yemenis still live in seemingly ancient mud brick buildings, built up to seven stories high by hand, with winding staircases that open into tiny rooms, and ornate hand-painted decorations adorning the outer walls. Many Yemeni mothers still bake fresh bread on the roofs of their houses in the early morning, and families take several hours to linger over the customarily large lunch consisting of the national dish, *Salta*, a spicy meat and fenugreek stew served in a hot stone bowl. At first glance, it seems that Sana'ani men and women dress uniformly in traditional garb. For men, this consists of a long white dress known as a *thobe*, worn with a Western-style suit jacket, a *jambiya*, or curved dagger, tucked into a gold-embroidered belt, and a *kufiye*, or scarf, over their shoulders or wrapped around their head. For women, it is a costume entirely in black, consisting of a black *abaya* or *balto*, a black headscarf, or *hijab*, and a black *niqab*.

As I began to carry out research on gender and social change in Sana'a, learning more and more about the intricate details of Sana'ani culture and of my informants' lives, these initial general impressions faded away to reveal the complex reality of interwoven

social, religious, political, historical, and economic factors that affect and create the great diversity of thought and behavior that exists in Sana'a. While Yemeni women are traditionally portrayed, both in the Western media and in Yemen itself, as silent, uneducated, veiled women who stay at home, modern Yemeni women are increasingly challenging this stereotype. Though many women both in the cities and in the rural regions remain mostly uneducated and often illiterate, an increasing number of women are attending school up to the level of master's and doctoral degrees. With this shift in the education level of the female population, women's ideas on gender roles, propriety, and religion are also changing. As they gain the tools of literacy and are able to read the sacred texts of Islam as well as gain access to information about human rights on the international level, many are questioning and reevaluating their society's traditional mores in regards to women and gender.

Just as Muslim women in the United States, Europe, and many majority Muslim countries are doing,⁴ women in Yemen are educating themselves in their faith in order to more fully understand their rights and status within Islam. They are comparing their findings with the reality of women's lives in Yemen and beginning to strive to realize the lofty egalitarian goals that they see enshrined in the holy texts of Islam. They are also realizing the need to base their struggle in the context of religion in order more effectively to oppose conservative groups within Yemen who seek to roll back women's achievements in reclaiming public space. It is these changing views of society and religion that I sought to explore through my research, and which I hope will be expressed in the chapters that follow.

⁴ For more on this, see Deeb (2006) and van Doorn-Harder (2006).

Historical Background

In order to understand the reality of the gendered effects of social change in Sana'a today, we must first examine the history that forms the foundation of Yemeni women's contemporary life. When discussing Muslim women's history, or the history of women in the Middle East, historians and anthropologists often begin in the colonial era, in order to examine the impact that colonial rule had on Muslim society and to illuminate the ways in which women's roles, legal status, and clothing were politicized in the process of colonization, the anti-colonial struggle, the establishment of post-colonial nation states, and the formation of contemporary identities.⁵ While exploring Muslim women's history through the lens of post-colonialism is salient for many Muslim majority countries, such a model does not apply as fully to the history of the women of Sana'a, as they never lived under European colonial rule. Their history, however, remains inextricably linked with broader regional trends, including the recent rise in Islamism. In the following pages, I will present a brief overview of the recent social and political history of Yemen in order to familiarize readers with the character of the history that has shaped the world in which my informants live today.

Until 1990, Yemen was divided between North and South. North Yemen was comprised of the Western region of what is now Yemen and included the major cities of Sana'a, Ta'iz, Ibb, and Al-Hodeidah. South Yemen included the Southern port city of Aden, as well as Wadi Hadramawt, al-Mukalla, and the entire eastern section of the country up to the border with Oman. North Yemen was ruled by the Ottoman Empire until 1918, at which time it became an independent kingdom ruled by three successive Imams of the Zaydi sect of Shi'a Islam, who made up the al-Qasimi dynasty. The dynasty

⁵ For more on this, see Ahmed (1992) and Scott (2007).

was overthrown during the North Yemen Civil War that began in 1962 after the death of the third Imam, and ended in 1970 with the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in all of North Yemen. This war, in which both royalists and the republicans were backed by outside forces, is argued to have been “a battle by proxy between Saudi Arabia and Egypt,”⁶ as the Arab nationalist, Gamal Abd al-Nasser confronted his Saudi rivals on Yemeni soil. After the departure of Saudi and Egyptian forces, the new Yemen Arabic Republic was led by five successive presidents, ending with Ali Abdullah Saleh, who took power in a military coup in 1978 and has held the position of presidency since that time. Thus, though North Yemen has experienced foreign influence and control, through Ottoman, Egyptian, and Saudi interference, the region was never under European colonial dominance.⁷

While North Yemen has been independent of direct occupation for nearly a century, South Yemen only recently emerged from colonial control. Due to the strategic position of the city of Aden on Indian Ocean trade routes, South Yemen was a valuable asset of the British Empire until 1967, since the capture of Aden in 1832 by British East India Company forces. Shortly after independence, a radical Marxist group gained control of the new state, renamed it the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, and created a one-party system with close ties to the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Thus, from the 1960’s to the 1990’s, North and South Yemen existed as two separate political entities, the North in the hands of Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the South in the hands of Ali Salim al-Bayd.⁸

⁶ Paul Dresch, A History of Modern Yemen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89.

⁷ Dresch (2000).

⁸ Ibid.

After the collapse of Soviet Union and the subsequent loss of economic support for South Yemen, the outside impetus for the continued separation of the two Yemens disintegrated. The two presidents agreed to unification in order to ensure the survival of both fragile states, and the Republic of Yemen was established on May 22, 1990. The first years of unification seemed promising, with Ali Abdullah Saleh assuming the role of transitional president with Ali Salim al-Bayd as vice president until formal elections could be held. The rough agreement between the Northern and Southern forces stipulated that a multiparty system would be established, but that real power would be held by a ruling coalition formed by the ruling party of the former North, the General People's Congress (GPC) founded by Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the single party of the former South, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), headed by al-Bayd. In addition to these two dominant parties, smaller parties included the Yemeni Ba'ath party, a Zaydi Shi'a party known as al-Haq (The Truth), and lastly and most importantly, the Saudi-backed Islah (reform) party, which is Yemen's Islamist party and enjoys a wide support base both in urban and rural areas. Islah is the party most strongly associated with the Saudi brand of conservative Islam known as Wahhabism, which was introduced into Yemen in the past twenty years by Yemeni men who had studied in Saudi Arabia and by those who had volunteered as soldiers fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.⁹

Despite the promising beginnings of the 1990 unification, hope soon faded as the GCP brought Islah into the ruling coalition, marginalizing the YSP and moving towards the concentration of power in the hands of one authoritarian party. Al-Bayd, who was the head of the YSP and Saleh's vice president, quickly recognized the gravity of the

⁹ Jillian Schwendler, "Yemen's Aborted Opening," *Journal of Democracy* 13-4 (2002), and Shelagh Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen," *Middle East Report* 204 (1997).

situation and attempted to secede the former PDRY. President Saleh immediately declared the secession illegal, and fighting between the government and secessionist forces began. The Southern forces were quickly crushed, and the defeated Southern leaders fled abroad.¹⁰

Thus, by 1994 President Ali Abdullah Saleh had destroyed the major challenge to his power and become the de facto dictator of Yemen. Only Islah had enough popular support to pose any challenge to Saleh, but it was thoroughly incorporated into the governmental machine, and its leaders were sufficiently appeased to the point that they do not push for any real change. While Saleh and the GPC handled issues of military and foreign policy, Islah was allowed to implement their desired reforms in areas such as education, “the control of which they saw as decisive to building a “purer” Islamic society from the ground up.”¹¹ Thus, in the years following the 1994 civil war, “the public school curriculum was reformed, numerous Islamist teachers were hired, the class time allotted for Koranic studies was increased, and new school texts were issued with expanded Islamist content.”¹² Another Islah accomplishment was in “changing the wording of the 1994 Constitution to stipulate Islamic law as its “unique” source, overturning the language of the 1991 Constitution, which had Islamic law as its “principal” source.”¹³ Thus, while Yemen is by no means a theocracy, Shari’ah is, at least officially, the basis of the law, and Islamists continue to hold considerable political clout.

In “Unifying Women: Feminist Pasts and Presents in Yemen,” Margot Badran explores how Yemen’s two separate histories and ultimate unification have impacted the

¹⁰ Shwendler (2002),
Sheila Carapico, “Elections and Mass Politics in Yemen,” Middle East Report 185 (1993).

¹¹ Schwendler 50.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

situation of Yemeni women. She explains that “Yemeni women today are heirs to two separate feminist pasts,”¹⁴ building on both distinct histories of women in the South and in the North. In the South in 1967, “the new socialist state embarked on the most progressive social programme in the entire Arab world. The PDRY Constitution of 1978 made it a state responsibility to deliver rights to women within a framework of equality.”¹⁵ In the North after 1962, though women were granted legal equality in the constitution, “the state never made gender equality part of a vocal discourse.”¹⁶ Northern women did, however, fight for increased educational opportunities and witnessed an increase in primary and secondary school education for women, as well as higher education after the 1970 opening of Sana’a University. Badran explains that while “women from the north received limited help from a state, which was unable and unwilling to play a prominent role in their support..., they had few illusions about the power or endurance of patriarchal relations and beliefs,”¹⁷ and thus have been able to effectively and practically rely on themselves to achieve their goals. Southern women, however, “as beneficiaries of gender gains within the project of the socialist state, were stranded with its decline...[as] the ‘state feminism’ of the PDRY did not penetrate very deep into the patriarchal bedrock, nor very far from Aden into the hinterland.”¹⁸

With the creation of the Republic of Yemen in 1990, a new unified constitution was written which “explicitly stipulated that all citizens had ‘equal political, economic, social, and cultural opportunities’”.¹⁹ However, Badran describes the reality of women’s legal

¹⁴ Margot Badran, “Unifying women: feminist pasts and presents in Yemen,” *Gender & History* 10-3 (Nov. 1998): 501.

¹⁵ Badran 502.

¹⁶ Badran 503.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Badran 504.

¹⁹ Ibid.

position through an examination of the new Personal Status Law of the Republic of Yemen that was crafted in 1992.

The gender-egalitarian model of the PDRY Family Law of 1974, that was by-passed, had included such provisions as: minimum marriage ages for females and males of sixteen and eighteen, respectively; free choice in marriage for both women and men; the abolition of polygamy, except under extreme conditions; divorce to be initiated by either spouse in front of a judge; and court-determined child custody. Instead, the 1992 Personal Status Law of the united Republic of Yemen, a slightly improved version of the 1978 Family Law of the YAR, affirmed an ideology of gender inequality within the family, stamping a conventional patriarchal model of the family upon the new statutory law. The law set the minimum marriage age at fifteen for females. The law did not enunciate the principle of free choice of spouses but simply declared that marriage by force was invalid. Polygamy was allowed, but the existing wife was to be informed of her husband's intention to marry another woman. A man's ability to end a marriage by repudiation was still possible, but a woman could obtain financial redress only if a judge considered the repudiation to be unfair. A woman could also petition a court to end her marriage.²⁰

While the legal position of women in the former North Yemen was somewhat bettered by the new law, Southern women lost considerable legal protection from what they had been afforded previously. This post-unification loss of government support for progressive family law is linked to the increase of Islamist power in the ruling coalition and the subsequent concessions made by the dominant party to Islamist factions.²¹ In order to understand this trend of the growing power of Islamist parties, we must examine the ways in which broader regional social movements affect local Yemeni trends.

While the history of North Yemen is one of self-determination largely free of foreign intervention, Yemeni society was not immune to the greater social trends in the Middle East, including the rise of Islamism that began in the 1980's and prompted an increased emphasis on religion in public life throughout the Muslim world. While the government of South Yemen directly opposed Islamist tendencies, in North Yemen, Islamists enjoyed a more harmonious relationship with the authorities. Paul Dresch, in *A*

²⁰ Badran 506.

²¹ Badran (1998), Schwendler (2002).

History of Modern Yemen, explains that, “everywhere within the region Islamist ideas and groups were spreading... In the North, with Saudi encouragement and funding, Islamists had been used to oppose the left.²² Margot Badran suggests that this politically motivated Islamist influence eventually spread into the cultural sphere as well, as “signs of incipient conservatism began to appear in Aden as women’s dress grew more modest.”²³ The expression of this social change through sartorial practices and mandates was noted by Dresch as well, who explains that, “segregation of the sexes was an issue much promoted by Islamists, and at Sanaa University an attempt was made not to ban Islamic dress, as in Aden, but impose it.”²⁴

The importance of this simultaneous shift of women’s dress in the South and North in keeping with the Islamist trend of the day was noted by my informants as a key moment in Yemeni social history. One such informant was Karima, my co-teacher at the institute where I volunteered. Karima, 25-years-old, was born and grew up in Sana’a, but her parents were both from Aden. During one of our mid-morning breaks from teaching we were conversing over a snack of guava juice and sesame candy when I asked her about clothing practices in Aden. She related the following story.

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I asked her about the *hijab* in Aden. How did things change there? She said that under the British occupation, which lasted until 1967, the *hijab* was forbidden in school and in work, so nobody wore it. Even under the socialist government, people didn’t start wearing it until the 1980’s. Women would wear tight trousers and blouses and even bikinis, and it was accepted by the people and it was ok. She says that her mother and mother’s friends feel sorry about that time, they regret it. She told me that when she asks her mother about it, her mother says, “I feel sorry about that time, it was wasted time. So many years that I didn’t wear the *hijab*, so many years that I didn’t keep the holy Qur’an. I wasted that time, don’t let yourself waste that time like I did.”

²² Dresch 173.

²³ Badran 504.

²⁴ Dresch 175.

Karima always dressed in the black *abaya*, *hijab*, and *niqab* when outside of the house. On that day we were working together in a women's institute, and she wore a blue and red striped *hijab*,²⁵ in keeping with the advice her mother had imparted to her. Karima's mother's narrative illustrates the ways in which the drastically disparate social histories of the two Yemens began to merge with the rise of the Islamist influence throughout the region in the 1980's, and was solidified with the 1990 unification.

Today, Yemen remains the economic "odd man out" of the Arab Gulf states. Among its neighbors, Yemen has the smallest oil reserves and, as number 37, is just above Denmark on the list of oil producing countries.²⁶ This disparity in natural resources makes it among the poorest in the Arab world, with 45.2% of the population living on less than \$2 per day.²⁷ This unfortunate economic situation negatively affects women's position in society both in terms of employment opportunities and in terms of the ability of the government to actively support projects for women's development. According to the UNDP 2005 Common Country Assessment of Yemen, "although right to work is recognized as a basic entitlement of all citizens irrespective of gender, gender disparities in employment prevail,"²⁸ with women making up only 21.8% of the labor force. In terms of political participation, though Yemen has regular elections and candidates of both genders are free to run, women only make up 0.5% of elected officials and less than

²⁵ Since there were only women in the institute, many of the teachers and some of the students changed from their black *hijabs* and *niqabs* into colorful *hijabs* while inside the institute, and changed back before leaving. Others simply removed the *niqab* but left on the black *hijab*, while others kept the *niqab* tied on, but flipped the portion covering the face back over the top of the head. Only a small minority who wore a colorful *hijab* outside of the institute did not change their head covering when entering the building. The variety of sartorial practices and choices will be further explored in the third chapter.

²⁶ "Yemen." *The World Factbook*. 22 Feb, 2009. The Central Intelligence Agency. 10 Feb. 2009. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html>>.

²⁷ Country Profile, March 9, 2009, United Nations Development Programme: Yemen, 1 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.undp.org/ye/y-profile.php>>.

²⁸ UNDP, United Nations Common Country Assessment: Republic of Yemen (2005): 29.

4% of civil servants.²⁹ The UNDP demonstrates that “gender inequality in education is shown by the significant gender gap in primary and secondary education (24.8% and 51.6%, respectively) and the high percentage of girls’ dropout especially after grade 5 of primary education.”³⁰ This is mostly due to the unfavorable conditions of rural schools and the high incidence of early marriage. The effect of the lack of support for female education is a 34.7% adult literacy rate for women, compared to a 73.1% adult literacy rate for men. Finally, concerning reproductive rights, “women are denied the right to control their reproductive functions as shown by a considerable gap between desired and actual fertility rates.”³¹

Due to the low levels of literacy and material development in Yemen, and a culture of gender relations dominated by a narrow conception of a woman’s role in society, young Yemeni women today are growing up in a heavily traditional and patriarchal environment that questions their individual agency and their right to choose their own futures and to control their own bodies. The economic state of the country, gender discrimination in the law, the lack of educational opportunities, and traditional attitudes and expectations in their families and in society create a challenging situation for young women who have the ambition to improve themselves and the vision to reform their society. It is these young women, who have the access to education that affords them the ability to challenge cultural norms and choose their own way, whom I will introduce in this study.

Theoretical Background

My original research question for this study was “How do the intersections of social change and gender norms in Yemen affect attitudes among young Sana’ani women

²⁹ UNDP 30.

³⁰ UNDP 29.

³¹ UNDP 29.

towards their lives, their society, their religion, and ideas of modernity?” As I spoke with various women about their families, their work, their education, their aspirations, and Yemeni social norms, I discovered that among all of my informants there was a basic assumption concerning the categories of “tradition” and “religion.” Distinctions and comparisons between these categories were common during interviews, as my informants tried to convey to me the way in which they view their society. Time and time again, they created a binary between “tradition,” which referred to all practices that were old, out-dated, and negatively linked to ideas of misogyny and sexism, and “religion,” which was defined as a modern, progressive phenomenon that held endless possibilities for women’s empowerment.

This definition of religion as modern and in opposition to tradition squarely contradicts the common assumption that both religion and tradition are at odds with modernity. Dale Eickelman describes this attitude by exploring Western approaches to development in the Muslim world. He explains that, “the idea that Islam is a hindrance to the process of development...owes its currency to the persistence of modernization theory.”³² Modernization theory describes the evolution of societies from “traditional” to “modern” and links economic and political development to increased secularization. Eickelman explains that “according to this formulation of modernization theory, superstition wanes and religion recedes from a role in public life.”³³

Despite modernization theory’s claim that religion will fade as modernization takes hold, in the context of many Muslim, and indeed non-Muslim societies, just the opposite has been observed to be true. In recent decades, as the emphasis on religion in Muslim

³² Dale Eickelman, and James Piscatori, Muslim Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 22.

³³ Eickelman 23.

societies has grown, Islam had come to be defined not as a hindrance to development or a mere remnant from the past, but rather as the very vehicle of progress. Eickelman explains this renewed emphasis on Islam as resulting from a questioning and reassessment of religion, which he calls “objectification.”

Objectification is the process by which basic questions come to the fore in the consciousness of large numbers of believers: “What is my religion?” “Why is it important to my life?” and “How do my beliefs guide my conduct?”...These explicit, widely shared, and “objective” questions are modern queries that increasingly shape the discourse and practice of Muslims in all social classes.³⁴

This questioning was encouraged by the recent advances in mass education and mass communication, which have only recently become widespread in the Middle East, and which afford increasing numbers of people access to first-hand knowledge about their religion, and thus the ability to engage with the texts and traditions on an individual level.

Eickelman suggests that one “facet of objectification is that authoritative religious discourse, once the monopoly of religious scholars who have mastered recognized religious texts, is replaced by direct and broader access to the printed word: More and more Muslims take it upon themselves to interpret the textual sources, classical or modern, of Islam.”³⁵ Indeed, many more Muslims today have access to the education that allows them to reclaim interpretative authority, and are thus equipped to use religious arguments “as a corrective to current “un-Islamic” practices,”³⁶ such as traditional misogynistic customs. John Esposito describes the way in which this new access to interpretative authority serves to allow women to reclaim agency through religious discourse in the following terms:

Today, Muslim women, representing many ideological orientations, are increasingly writing and speaking out for themselves on women’s issues. They seek to empower themselves not

³⁴ Eickelman 38.

³⁵ Eickelman 43.

³⁶ Eickelman 44.

just as defenders of women's rights, but also as interpreters of the tradition... Women scholars and activists draw on the writings and thought not only of male scholars but also, and most importantly, a growing number of Muslim women scholars and activists who utilize an Islamic discourse to address issues ranging from dress and education to employment and political participation.³⁷

Both Eickelman and Esposito demonstrate that religion in general, and Islam specifically, cannot be categorically branded as antithetical to modernity, and that in fact it can be seen as an essential factor in modernization.

In *An Enchanted Modern*, Lara Deeb investigates the way in which notions of modernity interact with religion in the context of the Shi'i community in the Southern suburbs of Beirut that she represents in her work. Deeb argues against the idea that "Islamism is static and monolithic, and that Islam and modernity are incompatible," as she presents the idea that modernity can be built on and shaped by faith.³⁸ She suggests that "there exists a value-laden and historicist assumption in many Western academic and media discourses that views the West as the universal example for all that is modern," and that there are possibilities for multiple meanings of modernity that include non-Western and non-secular traditions.³⁹ Her informants posited that modernity was inextricably linked to spiritual progress, which "depended upon the formulation, practice, and institutionalization of a new "authenticated Islam," and which would move the community "forward," away from "tradition" and into a new kind of religiosity, one that involves conscious and conscientious commitment,"⁴⁰ and away from a past of traditional backwardness and spiritual ignorance.

³⁷ John Esposito, and François Burgat, ed., *Modernizing Islam: religion in the public sphere in the Middle East and Europe* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 97.

³⁸ Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4.

³⁹ Deeb 14.

⁴⁰ Deeb 5.

Deeb uses the idea of “authenticated” Islam to describe Eickelman’s concept of “objectification,” meaning “a process involving a conscious community engagement with basic questions about religion and its importance to one’s life and behavior, facilitated by direct access to texts and, therefore, religious knowledge and interpretation.”⁴¹ Deeb explains that this authenticated Islam was the framework through which the ideal modernity was articulated by the members of the community that she studied as well as a means to strengthen and reform their society. Deeb’s work thus serves a testament to the idea that modernization does not necessarily mean secularization, and instead that faith can be an integral part of modernity.

When discussing ideas of “authenticated” versus “traditional” Islamic practices, Deeb is careful to note that all understandings of Islam, including those of her informants, are “constructed and contextual.”⁴² Here she draws on Talal Asad’s article “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” in which he critiques various anthropological approaches to studying Islam as a theoretical category. Asad argues that “Islam as the object of anthropological understanding should be approached as a discursive tradition,”⁴³ and that all interpretations of Islam must be understood within their specific historical circumstances. The work of both Asad and Deeb serves as a foundation for my approach to my informants’ relation to and definition of ideas of “correct Islamic practice” as contextual.

The processes that Deeb and Eickelman describe of individuals questioning and reassessing their cultural norms in terms of a new understanding of “correct” Islamic

⁴¹ Deeb 20.

⁴² Deeb 21.

⁴³ Talal Asad, The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986).

practice are being echoed across the Muslim world, not least by Muslim women working towards gender justice. Margot Badran explains that, “women from within Islam and Islamist movements in far-flung places around the globe—from Malaysia, to South Africa, to Iran, to the United States—have begun to articulate a holistic gender egalitarian construction of citizenship within the framework of an Islamic modernity.”⁴⁴ Badran’s work focuses on the trajectory of feminist activism in Yemen, and she describes the unique position of Yemen in the context of the global debate over secularization and modernization.

The Republic of Yemen (ROY), which is neither a post-colonial secular state nor an Islamic republic, offers a different political and cultural space for feminist expression. In the new unified Yemen, the constitution and all laws--civil, personal status, commercial, and criminal, are based on the shari`ah (Islamic law) and consequently all the courts are shari`ah courts. There is no secular/religious dichotomy and no related public/private distinction. This, of necessity changes the nature of the gender debates. Yemeni women in their gender activism are not bogged down in public/private and religious/secular debates (as are women from post-colonial Muslim societies); rather, as Yemenis, they articulate their feminism from the location of ‘integrated space’. Yemeni women do not have to justify their feminism as culturally authentic, as most women in post-colonial societies feel compelled to do. Positioned within a (national) religious culture but not from within a (national) Islamic republic, Yemeni women activists, and others, take ‘Islamic embeddedness’ for granted... Yemeni women as ‘feminists’ are pointing to contradictions in men’s discourse and practice of citizenship—within a culture of religious modernity—and exposing their patriarchal politics.⁴⁵

In essence, Badran is suggesting that since Yemen was never colonized by a secular European power, the current moment is not a “return” to Islam from a position of secularization, but rather a reassessment from within the indigenous tradition in which “gender issues are debated within a holistic Islamic framework.”⁴⁶

My informants’ idea that the locus of women’s empowerment lays within the religious tradition rather than with a movement towards secularism contradicts both

⁴⁴ Badran 500.

⁴⁵ Badran 501.

⁴⁶ Badran 505.

modernization theory and Western portrayals of Islam as the ultimate cause of women's oppression in Muslim societies. Mainstream Western portrayals of Muslim women, and particularly women who cover, often focus on the veil and traditional practices such as early marriage and gender segregation as hallmarks of women's subordination. Muslim women are stereotyped as powerless, uneducated pawns of male control, who have little choice and little capacity to think for themselves due to the traditional strictures on their lives and the male dominated hierarchies that characterize their societies. Islam is often identified as the source of such oppression, and defined as a system of power that legitimizes male control of women and with which women themselves have minimal interaction and little understanding. Media sources as well as those who attempt to approach Muslim women with "liberation" in mind have been guilty of these generalizations as they rely on Western conceptualizations of empowerment and agency that do not necessarily translate effectively into a context shaped by nonliberal traditions.⁴⁷

Saba Mahmood provides a constructive approach to this problem in her article entitled "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." In this article, Mahmood examines the issue of female agency within the Mosque movement in Egypt in order to problematise the feminist concept of agency as "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles."⁴⁸ Mahmood complicates this definition by questioning "the universality of the desire... to be free from relations of subordination

⁴⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist*, 104 (2002): 783-790.

⁴⁸ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16-2 (2001): 206.

and, for women, from structures of male domination,⁴⁹ and by presenting the example of the women of the Egyptian mosque movement who represent “women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions.”⁵⁰ Thus Mahmood attempts to transcend “the binary terms of resistance and subordination”⁵¹ in favor of a more context-based approach and a conceptualization of “agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.”⁵² Mahmood’s idea that female agency can exist within a “nonliberal” society without overt resistance echoes the view of my Yemeni informants, who seek to locate the basis for female empowerment and women’s rights within their religious tradition instead of in a challenge to that tradition.

In this study of gender and social change in Sana’a, I will build upon the framing of the possibility of a modernity predicated upon faith, as described by Eickelman, Esposito, and Deeb, upon Asad’s idea that all interpretations of Islam are a particular construction emerging out of a particular context, upon Badran’s explanation of a holistic Islamic discourse that exists in Yemen in the absence of a colonial legacy, and upon Mahmood’s conceptualization of the possibility of female agency enacted within a non-liberal tradition. In order to explore the particular ways in which my informants construct their idea of modernity as defined by a new understanding of Islam that opposes their conceptualization of “tradition,” I will explore the varied ways in which they relate to and approach the many gendered issues that they grapple with as women in Yemen, on the personal, familial, societal, and national levels.

⁴⁹ Mahmood 206.

⁵⁰ Mahmood 203.

⁵¹ Mahmood 209.

⁵² Mahmood 203.

Methodology

Fieldnotes June 16

My first day volunteering as an English teacher

When you enter the building there is a secretary's reception desk, and today there was a cluster of women around it laughing and joking. The whole time I was in the institute, there was always a cluster there. The building is beautiful, very clean, nice, neat, all run by women, beautifully decorated and furnished. The walls are all decorated either with posters for learning English, or with paintings done by their students. Ghayda, the director, left me in one of the meeting rooms while she went to take care of some things, and then she came back and sat across the table from me. I was embarrassed because my *hijab* was slipping (I'm really terrible at tying it when it comes to slippery fabrics). She began giving me a very formal, but warm, introduction to the NGO. First she welcomed me, then listed all of their programs and explained what my duties would be as a volunteer English teacher. Ghayda is a very strong character! She is a perfect director, tall and clear and serious. Still warm and friendly, but very efficient and commanding respect... We went downstairs back to the gaggle of women who were chatting and giggling around the secretary's desk. The employees were all wearing black *baltos*, but about half of them were wearing colorful scarves. Almost all of the students were wearing black *hijabs* or *niqabs*. Then Karima, one of the teachers, came to talk to me about co-teaching a class. She is also a very exciting person! She wore a black *balto* and black and white scarf, and she is bubbly and smiley and enthusiastic and speaks very good English. She was laughing and telling me what I could do and how I could help, and gave me English-teaching books to read. The whole organization is so wonderful. In a country where everything is run by men, this NGO is like a little haven where women are in control. It's all women, women teaching women. Women employees and women directors. Wonderful!

Fieldnotes June 17 10pm

Today was another big day! At 9:30 I headed off to [the NGO] by taxi, and had trouble finding it, but finally arrived! I was 5 minutes early and was greeted by Karima, who was standing around the secretary's desk with the usual gaggle of ladies. Today there was a new secretary. There are too many new names and faces to remember! Ack! Karima is great, she bustles around very confidently, hustling here and there and seeming very on top of things. We went upstairs to the meeting room and she showed me all of the various books we'll be using. We'll be co-teaching a class, and my task is to cover the grammar and reading. I am a little nervous about this, since I have never taught English before, but Karima comforted me, saying, "If the grammar is too hard for you, tell me! Say, "Teacher! This is too much!" and I will make it lighter for you." And at random times she bursts out saying, "I like you! You seem kind." And then I'm awkward and don't know what to say.

After our meeting we headed downstairs and Karima let me observe a class taught by Teacher Sawsan. Sawsan and her students were all dressed similarly. All were in black *abayas* with black *hijab* in varying degrees of looseness and falling-off-ness. I thought their dress looked severe until I saw the next class, who were all wearing *niqab* but had them flipped back so their faces were uncovered. Sawsan's class had four students. Salma, Hala, Manal, and Hagar. When Sawsan was introducing them she said, "Hagar is married and she's pregnant, but she's still studying, isn't that great?" She then introduced me, saying, "This is Teacher Anousha! I hope you like her!"

When I arrived the class had been discussing dating. Teacher Sawsan explained this by saying, “We’re talking about dating! We don’t have this in Yemen, but *ya’ani*,⁵³ we have to talk about it!” I think she meant that even though there is no dating in Yemen, they discuss it in the abstract, since it is one of the topics in the book that they use and, it seems, a topic of great interest to the students, even though its *haram* [shameful], and “a waste of time.” Teacher Sawsan asked what the students thought would be fun to do on a date: “Renting a movie and watching it at home? Would that be fun?” “Boring,” answered pregnant Hagar, who seemed somewhat sullen throughout the class. “How about going to the museum on a date? Or how about with your fiancée, walking around the museum with your fiancée and looking at old things, would you like that?” Sawsan tried to make it more culturally suitable by substituting a fiancée instead of a date.

Then we discussed the gerund. Sawsan put an example on the board: “I don’t mind being asked out at the last minute to exotic restaurants.” She asked for sentences, and pregnant Hagar offered, “I love cooking with my husband.” “Your husband cooks?!” Sawsan asked incredulously. Hagar nodded! Sawsan looked at me, “He’s a civilized Yemeni man! Most Yemeni men don’t cook.” Sawsan seems to be something of a jokester. Hagar offered another sentence, “I like traveling with my parents.” Sawsan shouts, “You’re married! Is your husband going to allow you?!” Apparently Sawsan likes to pick on pregnant Hagar! Then the students asked me about dating.⁵⁴ “Why do you have dating in the US? Isn’t it a waste of time?” They all agreed that in their culture dating is considered a waste of time since it doesn’t end in marriage. I guess it is interesting that the culture most well known for being obsessed with time (time is money), is the one that “wastes time” the with dating. I asked them what they thought of dating and they said it was shameful. They said there’s no dating in Yemen, they skip that step and go straight to marriage.

I carried out the ethnographic research for this thesis in 10 weeks between June and August 2008 in Sana’a, Yemen. My fieldwork consisted of participant observation and in depth, semi-structured interviews. I met potential interview participants both at the Arabic language school where I was living and studying, as well as at the NGO for women’s development where I volunteered as an English teacher. With the preliminary contacts that I made with women from these two locations, I was then able to network to form connections with other circles of women.

The variety of subjects I was able to interview was necessarily circumscribed by the language barrier. My command of the local dialect was weak when I arrived in Yemen,

⁵³ *Ya’ani* means “It means” in Arabic, and is an equivalent expression to the English, “I mean/you know,” or “that is/i.e.”

⁵⁴ Dating in this context simply meant going out with an unrelated man, which is culturally taboo in Yemen.

so I was limited to interviewing women who could speak to me in *FusHa* (Modern Standard Arabic), or in English. Thus, my group of participants was generally made up of younger, urban, educated women. I realize that this small privileged group does not represent the majority of Yemeni women, but I attempt to analyze my findings with this in mind and within the larger context of the factors affecting the majority of Yemeni women who are less educated and living in rural areas.

For each potential interviewee, I approached her to ask for an interview only after a preliminary relationship was established, in an attempt to ensure that they felt comfortable and safe either granting or declining my request. I had each interviewee read and sign an Informed Consent form, either in Arabic, English, or both, depending on their preference.⁵⁵ The consent form contained the Purpose of Study (including that the research project would be the basis for a senior thesis and that information shared by subjects would be used to create a final ethnographic report); the Duration and Elements of Study (including interviews and participant observation as my fieldwork); Risks and Compensation (ensuring that the interviewee was free to terminate her involvement or to abstain from answering a question if she felt uncomfortable); Confidentiality (ensuring that their identity and personal information would be fictionalized in the final write up); and the Contact information both of myself as the principle investigator, and of the overseeing faculty member, Professor Pardis Mahdavi. Each interviewee signed the form to consent both to the interview and to having her voice audio recorded.

By beginning each interview with the Informed Consent form, I strove to be as transparent and as responsible as possible throughout my research, making sure that each participant fully understood the purpose of my project and taking the time to answer all

⁵⁵ Informed Consent form attached as Appendix A

questions they had for me, whether about my project, American culture, or my personal life. This way, I was able to build more meaningful and long lasting relationships with my participants, who continued to help me after they completed their interview by inviting me to women's events and referring me to other possible interviewees. Additionally, in order to ensure that I would conduct my research with methods appropriate for human subjects, I obtained official approval from the Pomona College Institutional Review Board before beginning research.⁵⁶

I conducted the interviews either at my Arabic school, at the NGO where I volunteered, or at the homes of my interviewees in order to ensure that we would have a private, safe, and comfortable space in which to talk. I carried out 25 recorded interviews that generally lasted one hour. My questions were divided into three categories, the first concerning personal and family history and educational levels, the second concerning ideas about gender roles and religion, and the third concerning issues specific to women in Yemen, such as early marriage, polygamy, and clothing.

The second aspect of my research consisted of participant observation. Living in Yemeni society and spending most of my time with Yemeni women, I was able to immerse myself in their everyday activities. I attended 13 weddings, women's parties in private homes, lunches, birth celebrations, outings to the public baths and parks, and other events during which I was able to participate in and observe the everyday lives of Yemeni women as well as meet and network with more potential interviewees. I spent as much time as possible going with my new Yemeni friends wherever they went and doing whatever they did so that I could get a thorough impression of their lives.

⁵⁶ IRB # assigned by the Pomona College Institutional Review Board on June 2, 2008: 06022008AS-CS.

When I was alone I would wander the streets of the old city and the newer neighborhoods to get a sense of the public face of women that I could then contrast with the private face that I was getting to know through my new friends. I stayed in Sana'a for the entire 10 weeks except for a three-day excursion to a small village in Northern Yemen where I was able to attend a triple wedding and get a glimpse of village life. Throughout my research I spent time every evening writing detailed fieldnotes about what I saw, heard, and experienced that day in order to record the impressions I had about Yemeni society. Ultimately, the data that I collected consisted of over 30 hours of recorded interviews and over 100 pages of fieldnotes.

It is important to emphasize that my informants were not representative of the "average" woman in Yemen. All are urban young adults who now reside in the capital city and enjoy middle to upper class status. All were either university students at the time of the interview, or had already graduated from university, and thus were among the 34.7% of literate adult women in the country. Though I focused my research on young, educated women, I also spent considerable time with older women, less educated women, and illiterate women, whose experiences and opinions are essential to understanding the general position of women in Yemen. While my group of informants cannot be said to represent all Yemeni women, they are representative of a new generation of urban young women who are increasingly graduating from high school and attending university, and who are finding employment outside of the home, using the skills that they gained through their education. Their behaviors, ideas, and the issues they face are indicative of the new generation of Sana'ani women, which reflects in many ways the social change taking place today. Thus, the young women whom I present in this study demonstrate the

changing ideas and behaviors among a new generation of women who have the educational resources necessary to reevaluate their own lives and their society and to imagine and enact change.

While I point out the commonalities and shared experiences among my informants, I also must note the diversity within the group. While all of my informants are young, educated Sana'ani women who identify as Muslim and are firmly committed to their faith, there is by no means a homogeneity of behavior or opinions amongst them. Not only do they differ in personal experience, educational level, age, and occupation, but they also differ in terms of dress and views concerning social norms such as marriage. It is these similarities and differences that I explore in this study, taking care to maintain the individual distinctions between them while connecting the shared experiences of the group.

Reflections

Throughout my time in Yemen I attempted to remain aware of the ways in which my identity and my role as a researcher affected both my view of Yemeni culture and the way in which my informants related to me and responded to my questions. Most Yemenis saw me first as an American, and thus an intriguing novelty in their world. This was evident by the most common response that I elicited when walking down the street in Sana'a: "Welcome to Yemen! I love you!"⁵⁷ Despite the fact that I have darker hair and complexion, and dressed as much as I could in line with local sartorial norms, I could not avoid being viewed as a foreigner. I was always kept aware of the fact that I represented

⁵⁷ This response to my presence on the street marked me not only as a woman, due to the sexual nature of the catcall, but also as a foreigner, as it would be considered extremely rude and even shameful for a Yemeni man to interact with an unfamiliar Yemeni woman in this way.

America, and had to remain prepared to talk about politics and explain that I did not share the views of then-President Bush or support the war in Iraq. Besides political discussions, reactions to my American identity were generally positive, and most of my acquaintances proved to be extremely curious about me, my family, my relationship status, my age, my education, my plans for the future, and how much my university tuition cost. One of the conversation topics that came up frequently with older women was whether I was looking for a Yemeni husband and if so, that their sons were available, very handsome, and well employed.

Another favorite topic among both my informants and anyone I happened to sit next to on a bus was my religious beliefs. Some assumed that since I was American, I was automatically also Christian, and would immediately ask why I had not yet converted to Islam. Others would challenge me to defend my beliefs, insisting that if I “learned Islam,” I would spontaneously want to convert. Ironically, though I was baptized in the Armenian Orthodox church, I do not consider myself a practicing Christian and have spent considerably more time studying Islam than I have spent studying “my” religion. Many Yemenis expressed the hope that if I “learned Islam” in Yemen, then I would serve as a missionary once I returned to America. As one of my informants, Hayat, expressed, “I would like to say that the American woman should enjoy the traditions of Islam, the religion of Islam, prayer, fasting. She should get closer to Allah, because these things are not present in America. They are present in Yemen. I would love America to learn to enjoy the religion of Islam.”

Another tactic used by my Yemeni acquaintances who were trying to encourage me to embrace Islam was the giving of gifts. I was relatively often given reading material on

“Women in Islam,” and tapes of Qur’anic recitation. My favorite such incident took place at the institute where I volunteered as an English teacher. One day as I was leaving the courtyard to take the bus home, Ahmed, the guard and only male employee at the institute beckoned me over to his desk. I was surprised because he had proven himself to be extremely shy and polite, which in Yemeni terms means that he does not look a woman in the eye or speak to her unnecessarily, and in the month that I had worked there he had never before initiated an interaction. As I approached him he handed me a small brown paper package, saying, “Someone left this for you.” Curious, I inquired who it was. He told me, “I don’t know, she was wearing a *niqab*!” Confused, I asked again, “Who could it be?” Ahmed replied, “I asked her, but she just gave me the package and didn’t say.” Wondering if perhaps I had a secret admirer, I opened the package to find a silk beige *hijab* with black polka dots and two booklets in English, entitled “Hijab, a view from the inside,” and “A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam.” The irony of the situation was that I already was in the habit of wearing *hijab* when I came to volunteer at this particular institute, but perhaps my secret benefactor was hoping that I would continue the practice when I returned to America.

Thus, at the same time that I was attempting to ingratiate myself with my Yemeni acquaintances with the hopes that they would help me in my research, they too were endeavoring to win me over to their cause. This dynamic did create a few awkward moments, such as when I was attempting to learn a traditional Sana’ani dance during a get-together at friend’s house, and an older woman pulled me aside and said “Don’t dance, learn Islam!” and promptly started lecturing me on the miracle of the Qur’an. However, most of the time this situation created a vibrant set of interactions of mutual

interest between my informants and myself and helped me in the process of recruiting potential interviewees.

When I arrived in Yemen in early June and prepared to begin my research, I was nervous about the reaction I would receive if I talked about my project or approached women for interviews. I knew from my previous sojourn in Sana'a that Yemenis are extremely hospitable and curious people who love to bring foreign guests into their homes, but I was less confident about their reception of a foreign guest who wielded a tape recorder and wanted to ask about their personal lives. I was especially nervous because I had encountered many Yemeni women who shied away from having their pictures taken, and I feared that they would object to having their voices recorded as well. Luckily, as all of the women whom I interviewed were well educated and understood the nature of academic research and confidentiality, voice recording was rarely a problem. Only once did this issue present a considerable challenge during my research, when I was attempting to complete an interview with Nawal, a 20-year-old university student who lived in my neighborhood.

I met Nawal through her 17-year old brother, Muhammad, who worked in his uncle's grocery store near my school. We often chatted while when I came in to buy cookies or juice, and one evening he invited me to meet his family. I was skeptical at first and wary to accept such invitations from men, but I decided to trust him and accompanied him to his family's house above the store, where I met his mother and two sisters, Nawal, 20-years-old and Noor, 18-years-old. They were very sweet and welcoming, insisting that I join them for a dinner of beans and bread, and demanding to know why I had not come

over before. Throughout the next week I visited them often and told them about my research, finally setting up an official interview appointment with Nawal.

Fieldnotes August 2

This morning I went to Nawal's house for an interview. She was still asleep at 10:30 because she had been awake until 4am talking to her fiancée. She woke up and we sat together with her younger sister and ate a nice little breakfast she had prepared. Bread baked by her mother in the courtyard, little triangles of cheese, a small omelet, and tea. Her father and mother and sister were all there and she told them all that we were going to go do our interview and they all seemed fine with it...but I guess they didn't realize that it would be a recorded interview, because two days earlier they had invited me over for dinner and afterwards Nawal had said, "Why don't you interview my mother while I do the dishes?" Her mother and I then had a nice, casual conversation about her life, but I hadn't even bothered to ask if I could record at that time, because I knew I wouldn't be able to understand the recording. Her mother only speaks the colloquial dialect with a heavy accent, and even when speaking with her in person I can only understand her when watching her gestures and asking for repetition a lot. Even then I only get part of what she says.

Nawal and I went into the living room and sat on the soft golden pillows next to the window. Above us on the wall was the family tree carved into the plaster, with the grandfather at the top, his 5 sons, and their sons. It was only the boys there because, as Nawal explained, if their father invited men over to sit and talk or chew *qat* and the girls' names were also there on the wall, the guests would say "*Ayb, haram* [Shame, Shame] to have girls names there in public for all to see!"

We began the interview, trying to talk over the noise from the traffic and the motorcycles blasting by in the street outside the window. We got through about 15 minutes when her mother came in and sat in the corner of the room, behind Nawal, watching us intently and counting her prayer beads. Every now and again she would interrupt, saying "What are you talking about?" then, "Why aren't you writing anything down?" and finally, "Let me see the recorder! Where is the recorder?" I showed her the consent form and the recorder and explained that it was all confidential, but she continued to interrupt. Finally she came and sat next to us and kept interrupting, saying "Faster! Finish up! Can't you finish faster?" At first I had thought that she was simply interested and wanted to participate, then I thought perhaps she wanted Nawal to finish so they could eat lunch, but finally it became clear that she was nervous about the recorder. After we had been interviewing for an hour and had finished 3/4 of the questions, Nawal's mother called her to the kitchen. I thought she was asking for help with the lunch preparation, but it turned out that she had called her husband, who had gone to work, to ask about the recorder. He also didn't like the idea, and told her that Nawal shouldn't record her voice. Nawal came back into the living room and apologized as she asked me to erase the entire recording. I did, but I was extremely disappointed. Her mother came back in and seemed very content and satisfied with the whole situation and chided me a saying "*al-musagila ayb fi'l-yemen!* [Recording is shameful in Yemen!]"

While this incident was the only example of such an extreme expression of the idea that it is shameful for women's voices to be heard in public, I did encounter many women who were slightly uncomfortable with the recording and required lengthy assurances that no men would hear it and that it would not be circulated on the Internet.

Throughout both of the summers that I spent in Sana'a, not only did I deepen my understanding of the language, culture, and gender dynamics, but I also found that my own ideas, habits, and behaviors were affected by my time there. My project was not simply a static relationship between an objective researcher observing a culture, but rather a relationship in which the object being studied had an effect on the researcher as well. When I first arrived in Yemen in the summer of 2007, I was intimidated by the women I passed in the street, who were completely covered in black and had only their eyes exposed. Framed by the black fabric, the expression in their eyes always seemed angry and disapproving, and it took months for me to understand that the squinting eyes that I had taken for a scowl were in fact a revealing smile.

During my first visit I knew very few Yemeni women apart from the teachers at my Arabic school, simply because I was too nervous to speak with women whose faces I could not see. At first, I assumed that women who wore *niqab* were complicit in the heavily patriarchal culture in which they lived, and were in fact perpetuating their own subjugation. After months of getting to know these women, I came to understand that there are as many reasons for their dressing in a certain way as there are individual women and that their sense of empowerment does not necessarily come from fighting their society's clothing norms.

As I began to become more comfortable in Sana'ani society and joined the local rhythm of shopping in the street vegetable markets and taking public buses from home to work, I began to appreciate the value of my informants' habits of conservative dress. The more time that I had to spend outside of my home, traveling to and from work and meeting new informants, the more conservative my dress became. When I first arrived in

Yemen in 2007, I wore a long skirt, a long sleeved shirt, and a scarf loosely draped over my hair. By the time I finished my research in 2008, I rarely left the house without a black *balto* or *abaya* over my indoor clothing, and a tightly pinned *hijab* covering my hair. Adopting a more locally acceptable form of dress made traveling in public considerably simpler, and drawing less attention to myself made me much more comfortable as a young single woman in a city full of seemingly idle men looking for entertainment.

I became used to this style of dress and began to appreciate the simplicity and ease of wearing one outdoor uniform and never thinking about my hair. When I finally returned to the United States after spending seven months in the Middle East, I was shocked to see the way American women were dressed. Though it was August in Michigan, it took me a few days before I took off my long pants and long-sleeved shirts and stopped feeling embarrassed when I saw midriffs and cleavage in public. This experience proved to me that no social conventions are as simple as they may seem, whether clothing, marriage, or gender relations, and all have various competing and conflicting factors that influence individual choices and behaviors.

Throughout my time in Yemen I struggled with ways to give back to the community and the individuals who provided essential assistance during my research. One attempt that I made to show my appreciation was by volunteering as an English teacher at a women's institute whose staff was very supportive in helping me contact women to interview. This was both in order to aid the institute and to contribute my time to other women in the community with whom I would not have interacted otherwise. In addition to the hours that I spent volunteering, I tried to help my informants in any way I

could, practicing English with them, helping them develop their computer skills, and simply spending leisure time with them and indulging their curiosity about American culture. Through my research and volunteer work, my informants became my close friends, and we spent many wonderful days together, in their homes or going to parks, weddings, parties, public baths, and on trips inside and outside of the city.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the details and complexities of the social and political history that shapes the contemporary lives of Yemeni women. The converging societies of North and South Yemen and the unique situation of North Yemen as a state free of a colonial history produce a dynamic and complicated set of factors that today's Yemeni women are navigating in their daily lives. This chapter has also suggested the possibility of multiple fluid meanings of such categories as "tradition," "religion," and "modernity," and that "modernization" in Yemen does not necessarily entail a rejection of religion. These issues will continue to be explored further throughout this study.

In the next chapter I will explore the ways in which my informants construct "tradition" and "religion" as opposite categories. In the third and fourth chapters I will examine the ways in which this distinction is expressed and defined through views and practices of clothing and marriage, two gendered institutions which serve both as two of the defining factors in the lives of my informants as women, and as markers of gendered social change. Now we turn to the ways in which my informants conceive of, define, and use the fundamental binary of "tradition" and "religion."

Chapter Two

Between Qur'an and Custom: Agency through Interpretation

In the past, Islam respected the woman. It increased the role of women in the community. It respected the woman in terms of education, in terms of participation in the family, but the traditional ideas overcame this. So, the perfect roles for both men and women come from Islam. We have to go back to Islam. It's the most appropriate thing to continue life in a peaceful and happy way. Otherwise, if you listen to traditional ideas, it will be always "our tradition says, our tradition says," and you will not feel free. You will always feel constricted. And it's worse for women than for men because tradition helps the man, not the woman. When you compare it with the rules of Islam, it's completely different.

- *Ghayda, age twenty-seven*

As I began my research in early June I was anxiously trying to formulate interview questions that would be pertinent to my informants lives and that would encourage them to express their views on gender and society. As I considered various possible topics I worried that they would find my questions irrelevant or that they would not want to share their views with me at all. In fact, not only were my informants willing to discuss the topics I introduced and to share their personal experiences with me, but the great majority of them had very strong opinions that they were eager to expound upon, many of which were expressed through the dichotomization between the categories of "religion" and "tradition."

In this chapter I will explain my informants' constructions of these two categories of "tradition" and "religion" as oppositional and explore the ways in which they conceive of, define, and employ that distinction. In many ways my informants eschew conventional expectations that their families or society may hold for them, by pursuing higher education, working outside of the home, pushing the boundaries of "appropriate" dress, choosing their own marriage partners, and claiming increased independence in many other ways. However, while my informants do challenge the social status quo and

the position of women in Yemeni society on many levels, they are not calling for a complete rejection of social norms. Rather, they argue for a reevaluation of their society based in their belief that Islam is the ultimate protector of women's rights. As Margot Badran suggested, "Yemeni women as 'feminists' are pointing to contradictions in men's discourse and practice of citizenship – within a culture of religious modernity – and exposing their patriarchal politics."⁵⁸ Instead of looking to the outside world, the West, or some other foreign agent, they attempt to return to an "indigenous" tool for women's liberation in order to expose and fight misogynistic practices in their society. Here we return to Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of "agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create,"⁵⁹ and that agency can exist within a "nonliberal" tradition. Thus my informants turn to the texts and history of Islam, tools very much central to Yemeni society and culture rather than outside of it, to find a foundation for female empowerment.

In order to employ "Islamic" arguments to justify their behavior and attitudes, my informants construct a distinction between the categories of "tradition" and "religion." As Talal Asad and Lara Deeb argued that all interpretations of Islam are "constructed and contextual,"⁶⁰ so this distinction is also a constructed binary. Both the terms "tradition" and "religion" carry with them a multitude of meanings, each with its own historical and social background and specific connotations. It is the particular meanings and uses of this construction that I will explore in this chapter in order to illuminate what my informants perceive as tradition relative to their perception of "correct" religion. This dichotomy will

⁵⁸ Badran 501.

⁵⁹ Mahmood 203.

⁶⁰ Deeb 21.

then serve as a lens to explore the ways in which young Yemeni women use Islam both to challenge traditional practices and to justify their own non-normative behavior. This process relies heavily on individual interpretation of religious texts and history, and thus my informants' appropriation of interpretative authority serves as an essential foundation for their explanations and justifications of their behaviors and views.

Khadijah was one of my informants who serves as a key example of a young woman who rejects “traditional” social expectations by pursuing higher education, working professionally, maintaining financial independence, and rejecting family pressures to get married. I met Khadijah on my first visit to the office of an organization that works to promote media autonomy, protect freedom of speech, and provide female journalists with training to increase their skills. I had met the director of the organization the previous week, and she had invited me to visit their offices. That morning I dressed in my magenta *hijab* and long black *balto*, in an attempt not to draw attention myself, and took a taxi to a quarter of the city I had never been to before. After spending half an hour wandering confusedly through a vegetable market crowded with children, wheelbarrows, and overly-interested men, I finally found the building I was looking for, and was grateful to leave the hectic bustle of a street full of honking cars behind me as I passed through the gate into a quiet courtyard. Hala, the director, graciously received me in a small meeting room and offered me orange juice and chocolate chip sweet bread as she explained the goals of the organization to me. She was a glamorous woman who wore eyeliner and red lipstick, and allowed her black *hijab* to slip back as she relaxed into her chair, smoking a cigarette as she spoke. She was explaining the difficulties facing female journalists in a male dominated society when a secretary entered the room and reminded

her of an appointment that she had apparently forgotten. Flustered, she excused herself and called in the project director, Khadijah, to talk to me instead. I had hoped to request an interview with Hala, and was disappointed that our meeting was cut short. As she left I wondered what I should do now that my host had disappeared, and whether it would be unseemly to have another piece of cake.

As Khadijah entered, I stood to shake her hand and she greeted me warmly. Unlike Hala, she wore no makeup and her grey *hijab* was tightly pinned in place around her face. She spoke in a low, friendly tone, and immediately began sharing her thoughts about democracy in Yemen. We spoke at length that day and I returned the following week for an official interview. Throughout our time together, Khadijah struck me as a very intelligent, self-assured woman, who was both dedicated to her religion, her independence, and her ideals of gender equality. In many ways she embodies the ideal of a “modern” woman who is highly educated, gainfully employed, and religiously committed, and she justifies her “non-traditional” behavior and life-choices through her knowledge of Islam and her ability to interpret sacred texts and histories in support of her gender-egalitarian worldview.

During our interview she explained that she was from Ta’iz, a city a few hours south of Sana’a. Her father had very little education, but was a successful businessman nonetheless and married fourteen women throughout his life, though only four at a time. Khadijah was one of twenty-six of his children, nine of whom were from her mother, who married Khadijah’s father at the age of thirteen and never attended school. Khadijah grew up and went to college in Ta’iz, but came to Sana’a to take a course on finances and

to visit her sister who was living there with her husband. She explained that this was the moment that changed her view of gender issues and of her own potential.

I was surprised because in college in Ta'iz I never thought about what happened with freedom of expression, about women, about gender, I thought that we had a little space of freedom and this is enough. But when I came here I saw the woman who is working, I saw the woman who travels and comes back, who has an identity. They affected me with their opinions and I really changed. I thought my mother was oppressed, that I myself would be being oppressed if I stayed at home in Ta'iz.

Khadijah's story mirrors that of many of my informants whose mothers married at very early ages and had little education, but who themselves now have the opportunity to study in the university and are delaying marriage and childbirth until after they complete their education.⁶¹ Since the realization that Khadijah describes in the above quote, she took it upon herself to become educated and self-dependent in her religious understanding, and to question her society's expectations and views of women. Now, as a woman who both believes in gender equality and embodies independence in her personal life, she constantly needs to justify her non-normative lifestyle to her society. For this justification, she turns to Islam, using her knowledge of religious texts and independent interpretation to argue both for women's rights in general as well as for increased mobility and independence in her own life.

This tension between "traditional" expectations of a woman's role and individual desires for more autonomy was visible even within Khadijah's own family, as her more conservatively minded brothers challenged her right to live independently. One particularly contested topic was her desire to travel without a male guardian. As the

⁶¹ Though my data on the age of marriage and educational level for the mothers of my informants is incomplete, it does provide an indication of the changing norms in women's education and marriage. Concerning those mothers on whom I have information, the range of age at the time of marriage is thirteen to seventeen, and the educational level ranges from no education and complete illiteracy, to completion of secondary school. The majority of mothers were married by the age of sixteen and were educated through the early teenage years, but stopped schooling due to marriage.

member of a media-based organization, she has had the opportunity to travel on her own internationally, which is relatively unusual for Yemeni women, especially since women are generally expected to have *mahram* (a close male relative) with them if they travel outside of their city or further. Khadijah addressed this issue by calling upon an example from Islamic history to support her unusual behavior.

Women in Yemen can travel to any country with a good reason. I traveled alone since I was in college, inside Yemen, and no one said, “No, don’t go.” My brother is very conservative, he is extremely religious and the first time I traveled alone he said “Why? Not outside Yemen! Why? She has to take *mahram* with her!” In our religion we have a hadith that says that women should travel with *mahram*, but that was in the past. It was just for safety. It was not safe traveling by camel for three or four months or something like that. But I asked one person who knows a lot about religion and he said that A’isha, who is the wife of the prophet Muhammad, A’isha traveled alone 14 centuries ago, in our prophet’s life, so it’s ok! There were problems in those days, but it was ok if she traveled alone. So it was just for safety, but my brother used to say, “No! You can’t go!” But now he’s used to seeing me coming from Hadramout, coming from Aden, one time coming from Cairo, another time from Italy, from Jordan. So he’s used to seeing that. And now when I get my visa I go to him and he says “Hm. Well, God help you.” So, he’s used to seeing that. So there’s no big thing in the religion that says no, she can’t travel. So, there is a very bad idea about our religion. You know, all of the people who explain religion are men, so most of them explain it to their advantage.

In her last point Khadijah points out that men have traditionally held interpretative authority in terms of religious texts, and thus that their interpretations may be biased. Not only does this statement illustrate the gendered inequality of the distribution of religious knowledge, but it also recognizes that interpretations of religious texts are not necessarily objective or immutable, but rather that they are affected by the individual interpreter’s subjectivity and historical context. Here Khadijah demonstrates that she understands the ways in which interpretation has been used to perpetuate patriarchal power dynamics, and through both her actions and her reclaiming of interpretative authority she is directly challenging this historical inequality.

When discussing marriage, polygamy, and gender roles with her brothers, Khadijah refers back to the same tools, again citing the Qur’an and explaining it in a gender

egalitarian framework, and again pointing out the biases that result from the male-monopolized interpretative tradition.

In the Qur'an it says, "You can marry one, two, three, or four. If you can't be just with them, only marry one, and you will not be able to be just."⁶² Our religion says you will not be able to be just. If this *ayah* [verse] is read by women, they will say, "See this last *ayah*? It prohibits the first. It [abrogates] the first." But because it is read by men, they forget the last one. It says that if you will not be just with them, so choose just one, and at the end of the *ayah* it says, "and you will not be." You can't be just, because one is more beautiful than the other, one is more friendly, so he can't be just. You see, my brother is married to two, and he can't be just, he can't be. We tell him, "You are against *shari'ah* and Islam, because you are not just with them."

Also we have a very interesting *ayah*, I like it so much, that discusses men and women. It says "*arRijaal Qawamun 'ala anNisaa*."⁶³ Men are the leaders of women, according to their features and attributes. So if I am better than him, richer than him, and can understand more than him, I can be the leader! This is in my Qur'an. When my brother and I discuss, he doesn't like to discuss with me, because I give him proofs from my religion. He said to me, "Come on, you should get married." I told him "I will marry someone who will stay at home, who will take permission from me to leave the house, because I choose to be the leader." This is just for discussion, because I don't want a husband, but I told my brother "I'll bring the money for the home, I'll solve the problems, I'll do everything to be the leader, like my Qur'an says."

The second verse that Khadijah cites here is one of the most commonly used verses to justify women's subordination, including by women who believe that the man should be the head of the household. Khadijah's conclusions concerning the gender dynamics intended by the verse are thus relatively radical in the Yemeni context and directly contradict traditional interpretations of the verse. In both of the above arguments, Khadijah is reclaiming the authority to interpret Qur'anic verses in order to justify her radical challenge to accepted gender norms in Yemeni society. Khadijah's ideas in terms of marriage are particularly subversive as while many of my informants presented a

⁶² Qur'an 4:3, translated by Pickthall

"And if ye fear that ye will not deal fairly by the orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (the captives) that your right hands possess. Thus it is more likely that ye will not do injustice."

Qur'an 4:129, translated by Pickthall

"Ye will not be able to deal equally between (your) wives, however much ye wish (to do so)..."

⁶³ Qur'an 4:34, translated by Pickthall

"Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)..."

critique of some aspect of conventional marriage practices, most expressed a desire to get married eventually. Khadijah, on the other hand, eschews marriage all together, thus completely rejecting one essential aspect of the “traditional” Yemeni gender paradigm, while still remaining within an “Islamic discourse.”

Zahra, a 23-year-old secretary, offered similar views on gender issues and called upon the same verse to justify them. Zahra was an English student at the institute where I volunteered, and we became fast friends from the first time we met. We conducted an interview on a sunny morning in the garden of the institute, where we sat at a white plastic table and drank carrot juice while we talked. She remained in her *niqab* throughout the interview, though she flipped back the face veil and draped the extra fabric in an attractive way so that it framed her face. During our interview Zahra explained that Yemenis were slowly beginning to realize the necessity of a return to Islam and a rejection of tradition, and she cited the Qur’an in order to explain her view that Islam affords women their rights.

Islam gives women her rights, but some people don’t understand them. There’s an *ayah* in the Qur’an *Kareem* [the Holy Qur’an]: “*arRijaal Qawamun ‘ala anNisaa.*”⁶⁴ People understand it in a wrong way. They say it means that the man can do whatever he wants toward the woman, he’s free. This is wrong. It means that the man should be responsible for the family, not that the woman should work and then the husband relaxes at home and orders her around. This is not his right. Because in this situation, she’s the one who is responsible! As I told you, the man should be responsible, he should spend his time with his family and spend his money for his family, not play outside and then come to his wife and demand his needs from her when doesn’t care for her and doesn’t do anything for her. He doesn’t work, he doesn’t do anything for his family, and he wants everything from them. That’s not his right. For example, if I work, and my husband doesn’t work, he has no right to order me. Why should he order me? I am the one who works, I am the one who is tired.

Here Zahra echoes Khadijah’s interpretation of this verse that is traditionally employed to justify male dominance in the family and society. Like Khadijah, Zahra understands the

⁶⁴ Qur’an 4:34, translated by Pickthall

“Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)...”

significance of this verse in terms of power struggles within her family between herself and her brother, and thus she uses this verse to question what are traditionally considered to be absolute gender roles in light of her personal experience.

Here, both Khadijah and Zahra demonstrate Mahmood's argument that female agency can be enacted within a non-liberal tradition without necessarily rejecting the framework of that tradition. They are both working within an "Islamic" framework, using the tools provided within the sacred texts, in order to combat social inequalities. They also illustrate Badran's explanation that Yemeni women are not dealing with a secular/religious dichotomy, but rather that they are fighting for women's rights within a holistic Islamic discourse. Finally, their comments signal a radical shift from one generation to the next in women's views of appropriate gender relations, ideas of a husband's power over his wife, and a woman's right to independence. Throughout my interviews, these "progressive" views were echoed to a greater or lesser degree among all of my informants.

Months after our interview, I emailed Khadijah with some follow up questions. Because of the time difference, it was late at night in Yemen when I wrote the email, yet Khadijah replied promptly, answering my questions as well as happily reporting that since our last meeting she had been promoted to the position of executive director of her organization. In my email I asked her how her brothers have reacted to her discussions with them and to the choices she has made in her life and she responded with the following thoughts:

At the beginning, as I told you, it was not allowed for a woman or a girl [to be independent] in our family, until I made [the men] used to seeing me do [new] things within the Islamic frame and against the traditions... Islam requires me to respect my family and take care of them. That is why I discuss with them and persuade them. At first my older brother, the conservative one, would never discuss with me or anyone else about these issues. Even me; I

never cared to discuss such issues with him. My mother raised us to be free and she didn't let the men of the family interfere in our affairs. But then I thought that we should make [the men understand] because I do not commit mistakes, I am just practicing the rights that are given to me by Islam and by the law. So I started to take the cover off of these issues and we began to have real debates about them and I read more to justify my point of view more and more. These discussions made the distance smaller between me and my brothers and they started to totally trust me and my mind. Now, they stand step by step next to me and encourage me to go ahead.

In the context of her family, Khadijah's persistence in confronting her "traditionally" minded brothers and her dedication to "correct" religion has met with success. Not only has she gained her brothers' trust and confidence, but she has also managed to change their insistence on strict gender roles. She has proven that knowledge of Islam, and the effective use of that knowledge, can be used to fight for gender justice in the face of "tradition."

The second question I posed concerned where and how she gained her knowledge of Islam. She explained the following:

I studied Islam for 14 years; it is a required subject in our curriculum up to the first two years in college, no matter what you study. But our curriculums are, unfortunately, for people who never think but just memorize. And all these years of study focus on beliefs and morals. The ideas that our society allows to be thought about and the *ayaat* and speeches of the prophet that are taught were chosen within this frame, except for the biography of the prophet that includes many great roles of women and ideas of equality. So these years are not good enough to give a Muslim good knowledge of Islam.

Five years ago, I agreed with a number of my classmates in college to read the whole holy Qur'an during the month of Ramadan (the holy month of fasting). I read the Qur'an with all my heart and I bought a CD that explains the whole holy book. When I faced a difficult word or sentence I turned to the CD to know the meaning. The meaning becomes clearer when it relates to a story or an attitude in the prophet's life. And I have a good mind and am able to judge the meaning of an instruction by comparing it with the actions of our prophet (PBUH).⁶⁵ Also there are many moderate Islamic preachers who focus more on the role of women and the positive aspects of life in their speeches, like Mr. Amer Khalid⁶⁶ and Mr. Algefri.⁶⁷ They know more about the religion. And I still learn and read about Islam to become stronger and more right in my debates. And everyday I discover many new stories and *ayaat* that support me in my battle to free other women.

⁶⁵ "Peace Be Upon Him" is said after the name of the prophet.

⁶⁶ Amr Khaled (Amer Khalid) is a popular television preacher and Islamic activist from Egypt.

⁶⁷ Al-Habib Ali Zain Al-Aabideen AlJifri (Algefri) is a contemporary Muslim scholar based in Saudi Arabia who heads the Tabah Foundation that promotes Islamic discourse in society.

Here Khadijah both criticizes the “traditional” method of the transmission of religious knowledge while also demonstrating her own independence and confidence in her understanding of Islam. She explains that because the public school curriculum of religious education is narrowly focused and based on memorization instead of on critical reasoning, it is inadequate to provide a holistic understanding of Islam and cannot equip a Muslim with the tools necessary to engage with his religion. In contrast, she demonstrates by her own experience that individual initiative is necessary in order to gain deeper insight into religion both through personal study as well as by seeking out alternative voices among religious scholars and activists.

Khadijah provides a prime example of what Margot Badran describes as a Yemeni woman exposing men’s patriarchal practices from within a holistic religious framework.⁶⁸ During our interview she described an incident in which she was able to point out the double standards and hypocrisies of her classmates using her knowledge of religion in the following anecdote.

In my college, when we had debates and discussions, the men would say, “We consider women as our daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, we respect you like that.” But as another thing, as colleague, chairwoman, they can’t imagine it. One student said, “I can’t imagine a woman driving a car,” and he is an educated person. When I talked to him I said, “You never respect us as a sister or a mother. We never find this respect in the street. Even this small respect, we don’t find it, so we will work, we will take this respect from you by force.” And about the car, I told him, “You envy her. You envy her because you don’t have a car.” I saw this person at the French Embassy during the *Fete Nationale*. I saw him there and he was drinking wine. So the ideas that he was talking about were not from religion, they were just tradition. So people now are mixing tradition with religion. So this person is talking about women like that and he is drinking wine. I accept the people who drink wine, it’s ok with me. But they never talk in the name of religion. This person from my college really annoyed me. He says, “God said this!” I told him, in the embassy, “Never talk in God’s name. You can say your opinion, but not the opinion of God.”

Here she both exposes the obvious sexism of her classmates and criticizes them for their ignorance of their religion. In her criticism, she returns to the dichotomy of “religion” and

⁶⁸ Badran 510.

“tradition,” clearly labeling her classmate’s behavior as “traditional” and thus illegitimate.

Throughout our discussion, Khadijah utilized these two categories to illustrate her attitudes towards her society and her own life. She continually referred to “religion” as an ideal framework for gender equality and the full realization of women’s rights, and “tradition,” to describe current and past Yemeni practices that curbed those goals. In describing her conception of “religion” as the protector of women’s right to independence and mobility, Khadijah shared the following details from Islamic history.

Our prophet said that women are sisters of men. In our Islamic history we have a woman trader [i.e. business woman], Khadijah, peace be upon her, she was our prophet’s wife. We have a warrior, she was going out with her sword, you know? We have a preacher; we have different kinds of women. Even in our Qur’an...we have a lot of *ayaat* [verses] that encourage women to work, like men, exactly like men. We don’t have any *ayah* or any proof in our religion that prevents women from political participation. The people here use religion wrongly, because they don’t know a lot about religion, unfortunately, so they use it to put chains upon women...We need to do something. We need to fight the tradition by Islam. Because when you talk with the men they say, “No, you have to stay at home!” We don’t have this idea about staying at home and never working in our religion...The prophet never said to stay at home.

Here Khadijah recalls examples of women from the prophet’s time who were publicly active in society in order to argue for more progressive roles for Yemeni women today, and in order to illustrate her understanding that “religion” is the solution for gender inequality in her society.

Like Khadijah, 27-year-old Ghayda used her knowledge of Islam to confront Yemeni patriarchal practices. Ghayda was one of the founders and the executive director of the institute where I taught English, and she served as another prime example of a “modern” woman who rejected traditional limitations and expectations of gender roles by remaining unmarried, traveling abroad, seeking education, and pursuing an ambitious career. Additionally, she wears colorful *hijabs* without a *niqab*, and is bold enough to drive her

own car while dressed this way (a behavior that is rarely seen in Sana'a, and thus invites harassment). Because her lifestyle serves as an obvious challenge to "traditional" Yemeni social norms, she has found it necessary to educate herself in her religion in order to justify her choices and behavior. In order to argue that Muslim women have the right to public participation in the politics of the community, and to criticize her own society for its lack of respect for women's intellectual value, she draws on the example of the prophet's wives:

In terms of participation in the community, in the past, during the prophet Muhammad's life, the woman was very strong and she could make a lot of decisions. For instance, prophet Muhammad's wives. They could speak with a man, respectfully, and give him advice, even if they didn't know him. He could come to their door and speak to them, very politely, and they could answer from behind the door, and they could give him very strong advice. But here in Yemen, the man would never listen to the woman, never. So there is no respect for their ideas. Another thing is that there are a lot of stories from prophet Muhammad's life that prove the big roles in society for women. For instance, Khawla, she was a poet.⁶⁹ She was one of the greatest poets. When she wrote poetry, all of the men respected it and listened to it and said, "She was really right about this and about this," but here in Yemen you will never find this respect for women and for their ideas and for their freedom to speak. During the life of prophet Muhammad, a woman would come as the leader of a group of Muslims and sit with him and discuss issues and raise her opinion and maybe even say, "No, you are wrong on this point." Yeah, she could discuss a lot of things and negotiate with him and he really respected this. But here in Yemen you cannot find a minister or a president who will let a simple woman come to his office to speak with him. He will never listen to her. They think that women cannot do anything for the community.

Here Ghayda turns to the sacred narratives of Islamic history not only to argue for women's participation in society, but also to expose the sexism that exists in Yemeni culture. Additionally, her knowledge of Islamic history allows her to justify her own independent lifestyle by employing the dichotomy of "tradition" and "religion," in which "religion" represents the ideal society that existed at the time of the prophet, and "tradition" describes the negative aspects of contemporary Yemeni society.

⁶⁹ Khawla Bint al-Azwar was a famous female warrior and poet from the early days of Islam.

Khadijah further elucidated this dichotomy between “tradition” and “religion” through her discussion of violence against women. Here she labels all negative practices as “traditional” and suggested that increased knowledge about “religion” would serve as a cure for the issue.

Yemen is very rich in [violence against women], you will find a lot of kinds. Hitting, abusing, taking rights... There is not a lot of awareness among women about their rights. They can't ask for their rights... But if they know more about their rights. If the men know more about the religion. Our prophet said, “Be kind to women,” in his last speech, before he died. This is one of his very famous recommendations. Our society says we are a religious society but we are not really. We have the big sins in our society, killing, lying, and they do this everyday, they do *tha'r* (revenge), they kill each other, they abuse each other. They do the seven sins every day. We are not really a religious society. We just have the name because we are conservative.

Here Khadijah utilizes the negative connotations of “tradition” to criticize those practices in her society that are both “un-Islamic” and harmful to women. Khadijah’s construction of the categories of “religion” and “tradition” and her use of this dichotomy both to criticize her society and to justify her own life choices were echoed throughout my interviews.

Sawsan, a 25-year-old teacher, similarly used arguments based in religion to address the issue of domestic violence. I met Sawsan at the beginning of the summer of 2008 in the Institute where we both taught English. She was a pretty, moon-faced young woman, who always dressed in a plain black *abaya* and *hijab*. Though her dress looked severe in contrast to the purple and orange *hijabs* of some of the other teachers, Sawsan proved to be the most boisterous and humorous woman in the institute, and she could always be found laughing and cracking good-natured jokes. Though she was usually quite jovial, when I brought up the issue of violence against women during one interview, she grew quite serious and firmly expressed her conviction that since the prophet abhorred violence

towards women, then the high incidence of violence in Yemen was the direct product of an ignorance of religion.

Nowadays I hear about men who beat, hit, slap their wives, though Islam said not to do that. Prophet Muhammad said, “Never beat your wife because it’s difficult to beat her and finally go to her bed at night and ask her for something, after you beat her. It’s very very difficult if in the day you beat her and then you come at night and tell her, “Can I kiss you?” You know, she hates him, how can she allow him to do such things? So that’s what Prophet Muhammad said. If you want her to respect you, respect her in return. If he wants her to respect him, he has to respect her... They’re Muslims, but they don’t know a lot about Islam. They look like Muslims, but what do they know about Islam? They know nothing. Then they beat their wives and they do bad things, shameful things.

Here Sawsan draws on her knowledge of the hadith to argue against current social ills in her society. By citing the example of the prophet, she is able to present an argument for female empowerment that is located within a culturally respected and recognized source, thus strengthening her argument and lending sacred legitimacy to her claim. Additionally, here Sawsan demonstrates her conviction that “real” Islam serves to protect women from violence and other social ills.

Among all of my informants, the concept of “real” or “correct” Islam was generally understood to be a religious framework in which women’s rights were safeguarded against oppressive “traditional practices.” The variety of these breaches of women’s rights were illustrated time and time again by reference to “traditional” practices that occur frequently in Yemen, such as forced marriage, early marriage, withholding of inheritance, and denial of education. Habiba and Farida were two of my informants who explained two such practices that are, in their eyes, contrary to Islam. Habiba is a 23-year-old English teacher who spoke about the problem of denial of education to Yemeni girls. As the daughter of an illiterate mother who never had the opportunity to attend school, Habiba understands the impact of this “traditional” devaluation of girls’

education, and as a university graduate and teacher herself, she is working to reverse this trend.

Habiba: The rights of the woman in Islam are that she can study, she can work, but actually, some fathers don't let their daughters enjoy what Islam says. Some of them say, "She is a daughter, she should stay inside the home and work inside the home. She doesn't have the right to go outside, she should stay at home until a man comes to marry her."

Farida, also a university graduate, is similarly striking against "traditional" ideas of a woman's rights and role in society, as she works as a university lecturer in the department of pharmacy. In the following quote, she explains the ways in which "tradition" deprives women of their right to inheritance.

Farida: In the village, especially in very old villages, they take the inheritance of the woman. They don't give her anything. Islam gives her inheritance, but in the old villages they don't believe in the rights of the woman, so they oppress her, but it's not related to Islam.

These two women express the common idea that oppressive and sexist practices that are common in Yemen not only are not part of Islam, but in fact are antithetical to its teachings. Farida expounds upon this point by explaining that while Islam provides women their rights, an unheeding society takes them away.

You know, Islam gives the woman freedom, but nowadays you will be shocked by society. It's not from Islam. What you see in society is not the real Islam. We go far away from the real Islam. Our religion gives all the rights to the woman, the man, and the kid. Islam speaks about everything, everything in your life, but nowadays some people, and I am so sorry for this, they are Muslims just because their family is Muslim, it's not that strong of belief. And some of them started to behave in a bad way, it's not Islam. Islam is a religion of peace, but some people do things that are against Islam because their nature or their behavior is against Islam, but it's not the real Islam.

Here Farida emphasizes the difference between "the real Islam," and the practices of society, which she attributes to an ignorance of "true" religion. "Real Islam," she argues, provides all rights to every human being, while those practice that are harmful stem from a lack of knowledge of Islam

Amira was one of my teachers at the Arabic school, as well as one of my closest friends and a key informant throughout my time in Yemen. When she was fifteen-years-old and living in her parent's village, she was taken out of school and sent to a distant town to become the second wife of a cousin who was forty years her senior. Though he allowed her to complete her schooling by studying at home, in other ways he restricted her mobility and limited her choices, and she spoke very unfavorably of her years with him. Seven years ago he died of heart trouble, leaving her with a two-year-old daughter and an unknown future. Despite the insistence of her family to return to her village and remarry, she chose instead to move to the capital city of Sana'a and to enroll in university. Now she is 34-years-old, working full-time and financially independent. Additionally, she refuses to live in the house of her relatives in Sana'a, and insists instead on living alone with her now 9-year-old daughter – a very rare situation for a Yemeni woman of any age. Throughout my time with her, Amira insisted that Islam provides women with their rights, and explained that in fact women's rights could be obtained only through an Islamic way.

The Yemeni woman can demand her rights through the Islamic *shari'a* (*min khilal al-shari'a al-islamiyya*). That is important. If she asks for her rights in a non-Islamic way, she won't be able to take her rights. But through the Islamic way, she will take her rights. It's the best way for the woman to ask for her rights.

Amira presents an unusual example of independence and resilience, and she understands from personal experience the importance of knowledge of women's rights in Islam, as she constantly has to use her knowledge of religion to justify her lifestyle choices to her critical family. Additionally, her exclusive emphasis on Islam as the vehicle towards women's empowerment echoes Badran's explanation of Yemen's holistic Islamic discourse.

Many of my informants expressed that Islam, in addition to protecting women's rights, enshrined gender equality in its message. In contrast to contemporary Yemeni society, in which men and women are visibly unequal, Islam provides a framework in which women can progress beyond "traditional" roles and strive towards their full potential. Sawsan (introduced above) argued that gender equality is enshrined in Islam and that it was "tradition" that posed the obstacle to women's rights.

There is no differentiation between men and women in Islam. We pray the same way, we do the same things. Men are forced to respect women, that's what Islam came to say, because in the past, they used to bury girls alive, but Islam came to say that men are like women and women are like men and maybe can be better than men. That's what we are proving now. Many women have high positions and have a high salary and are so respectable and intelligent and ambitious.

Here Sawsan explains uses a comparison between the suffering that women endured in pre-Islamic times and the gender equality that came with the founding of Islam.⁷⁰ This comparison between the time of ignorance before Islam known as *al-Jahiliyya*, and the coming of Islam echoes the dichotomy of "tradition" and "religion" that characterizes the worldview of my informants. Within this framework, Sawsan explains that Islam encourages women to excel in the public sphere and to pursue education and gainful employment, and she herself serves as an example of the realization of those "Islamic" rights for women.

Sawsan's logic was shared by Intisar, a 24-year-old teacher at the same institute. Intisar taught the introductory English classes and was a patient young woman who always wore a black *balto* with a large orange and yellow star embroidered on the front and a matching star on her black *hijab*. She spoke thoughtfully and slowly throughout our

⁷⁰ This binary between a wholly "backward" period before Islam and the knowledge and progress brought by Islam is contested by scholars such as Leila Ahmed, who seek to complicate and challenge the mainstream narrative of Islamic history and present a more subtle understanding of the changes and continuities that occurred in Arabian society before and after the coming of Islam.

interview, and genuinely seemed to enjoy reflecting on and discussing her experiences. When discussing gender norms and women's rights, she explained that a woman can achieve greater mobility by behaving in a religiously appropriate way: "If women do things in an Islamic way, they can do everything. If you are wearing your scarf and you respect yourself, you can do anything." Thus, following the norms of propriety and morality defined by their understanding of "correct" Islamic practice provides women the freedom to improve themselves, follow their ambitions, and develop their society.

After discussing the negative aspects of traditional Yemeni practices and the wonders of the Islamic message, many of my informants insisted that the solution to women's problems in Yemen was a return to Islam. In order to prove this conviction that Islam was the ultimate cure for gender inequality, they cited the Qur'an, the hadith, and Islamic history, and demonstrated the ways in which the message inherent in Islamic teachings encouraged gender justice. Rawda, a fiery 26-year-old woman, who worked as a lab technician, demonstrated this position, as she argued passionately that women's rights must be gained through a return to Islam. I met Rawda at the institute where I taught English to her younger sister, Semira. Semira was one of my students in the grammar class, and I had requested an interview from her, but she was shy and reluctant to talk, and thus offered up her more outgoing older sister in her stead. Rawda was more than willing to be interviewed, and seemed to relish the chance to expound upon her opinions concerning gender issues in Yemen. We conducted our interview in the teacher's lounge at the institute, and as she had many points she wanted to discuss, our interview took longer than expected. Semira came in to hurry us along a number of times, but Rawda laughingly chided her for her impatience, sent her away, and then launched into another

spirited discussion. Throughout our interview she emphasized that Islam was the answer to women's issues in Yemen, and she supported her position by explaining that the ideal of gender equality was enshrined in the Qur'an, as in the following:

We have a quote in the Qur'an that says, "There is no difference between you all except the good merits, that's it. That is the only difference between you. In front of me you are the same. In front of the law you are the same. In front of society the same. In front of duty you are the same."⁷¹ That's in Islam. No difference between me and you. Between me and him. Between her and him. They are all the same. They carry the same responsibilities. They have the same duties and the same rights... But here in Yemen we don't follow religion; we follow traditions. But in equality in Islam we are all equal.

Here Rawda both demonstrates her awareness of "correct" Islamic practice and "authenticated" tradition by directly citing and interpreting the Qur'an, and attributes the inequality in her society to a lack of adherence to Islamic principles, thus further emphasizing the importance of a "correct" understanding of religion.

Another source that my informants drew upon both in their explanation of Islam as the provider of women's rights, but also in their criticism of their "traditional" society, was the hadith literature and anecdotes from Islamic history. Karima, the teacher who was introduced in the last chapter, drew on Islamic history in order to point out the contradictions between her society's practices and the example of the prophet.

Sometimes I think that our traditional ideas are stronger than what our prophet taught us, because when you read the histories you learn that he was dealing with women, speaking with them, laughing with them, but in an appropriate, friendly way. And that is how all of the men were dealing with women then. We even have a story that after one of his wives died he saw one of her friends after 15 years and he sat down with her and asked to hear her news. So this was not forbidden. Our community forbids it even while our prophet did not. As long as it is an appropriate relationship, without touching, and wearing appropriate clothing (I'm not telling you to be dirty), so deal with the opposite sex, but in an appropriate way. But sometimes we understand our religion in the wrong way... In the histories we read that the

⁷¹ Qur'an 3:195, translated by Pickthall

"And their Lord hath heard them (and He saith): Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. Ye proceed one from another.

Qur'an 49:13, translated by Pickthall

"O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware."

prophet helped his wives in cleaning and sewing, and some people in our society say that women should not go out and should not run, but our prophet had a race with his wife, and his wife won the race! So don't be so strict, just follow the rules in a good way. Our religion is not so closed, but some people do not understand it correctly.

Here Karima is citing Islamic history in order to argue for greater mobility for women and for a relaxing of what is, in her view, an unnecessarily strict segregation of men and women in public. She refers to specific incidences recorded in the biography of the prophet and in the hadith that recognize that the prophet, who serves as the ideal example for righteous behavior, interacted with women who were not in his family. Thus she concludes that the Yemeni customs of gender segregation and the taboo forbidding relations between unrelated men and women are not Islamically sound, and are rather a product of “tradition.” She explains that Muslims should not live according to such “strict” traditional customs, but rather should practice their religion after the example of the prophet.

Intisar, a teacher who was introduced above, also drew on stories of the prophet in order to demonstrate Islam’s care for women and to criticize her society’s ignorance of religion.

The tragedy is that we don’t understand Islam very well. But you know, Islam made the woman equal to the man, in everything. Except in some things that need [physical] strength and in inheritance, because maybe Islam gives the man more in inheritance only because the man is responsible for his family, he has to give them money. But in everything else they are equal to each other. Even Prophet Muhammad did a lot of things for women. In his last lecture before he died, he told the men that they had to take care of their women. He said it three times. It means that the women are the center of the society. They are your mother, your sister, your daughter, your wife. You have to take care of them. But of course some Yemeni people do not understand Islam in its target.

Though Intisar is aware of the few structural and biological differences between men and women in religion and in life, she insists that the example of the prophet encourages gender equality. She applies her understanding of the gender egalitarian message in Islam

to her own life as she addresses the issue of traditional gender roles in her relationship with her fiancée.

Prophet Muhammad, he washed his clothes. He sewed his shoes. He cooked. He did a lot of things for his wives. So I always say to my fiancé, “No one is better than Prophet Muhammad, and Prophet Muhammad did a lot of things for his wives.” So now men think that they can’t clean with their wives, but if prophet Muhammad did it, why can’t you do it?

By grounding their arguments in the accepted narratives of Islamic history and in the sacred text of the Qur’an, my informants are able to justify their fight for gender equality and to expose the religiously unfounded patriarchal practices of their society.

My informants make use of their knowledge of “authenticated” Islam and their belief that Islam provides women with their rights to address many of the societal problems that Yemeni women face. From issues of domestic violence to political participation, Islamic arguments provide the basis for my informants’ attack on the “traditional” obstacles that confront Yemeni women today. Discussing the issue of women’s driving cars, Intisar demonstrates that while Islamic limits for the protection of morality are valuable, unnecessary auxiliary limits on women are harmful: “If it’s according to Islam, it’s good. But if it’s according to traditional things... for example, driving the car. In Islam, it’s not *haram*, of course. But in society, it’s something weird. If it’s a limit according to Islam, I like it. But if it’s according to tradition, I think it’s bad.”

Throughout my time conducting research in Sana’a, my informants continually drew upon the categories of “tradition” and “religion” to justify their arguments and their own life choices. Many of the women that I interviewed rejected social expectations that they defined as “traditional” as they pursued higher education, worked outside the home in offices or institutes, rejected numerous marriage proposals in favor of continuing their studies, and achieved a degree of financial independence. Despite pressure from their

families and society to conform to these “traditional” conceptions of a woman’s role, my informants were able to defy these expectations and pursue an independent course, and sought to justify this defiance by citing the most respected of cultural texts, the sacred narratives of Islam. By educating themselves in their religion, my informants were able to directly cite the Qur’an, the hadith literature, and Islamic history to justify their arguments. Their confidence in their understanding of their religion then allowed them to interpret the texts independently, and thus to break away from traditionally male dominated interpretations and to arrive at new conclusions based on a conception of Islam’s fundamentally egalitarian message. Through this process, my informants were able not only to justify their own views and behaviors, but also to ground their fight for gender equality and to expose the patriarchal practices of their society.

Chapter Three

Authenticated Aesthetics and Material Meaning

Fieldnotes June 24 10 pm

Today over lunch I asked Amira if she makes her 9-year-old daughter, Azhar, wear the *balto* and *hijab*. She laughed as she explained that she had bought her a *balto* and *hijab* and that Azhar was very proud and looked nice in it, but that after a day she got bored and took it off. Amira asked her, “Where’s your *balto*? Why don’t you wear your *balto*?” Azhar replied, “*Mish kul yom balto!* (Not everyday with *balto*!)” Amira said that later she bought a new *niqab* and Azhar was very excited and asked, “Is the old one for me?!” Amira inquired, “Why do you want a *niqab*?” I could just imagine Azhar squealing with excitement, “It will make my eyes look very pretty!” Amira said that Azhar put it on and admired herself in the mirror, and was happy because she looked just like her mother, with the same eyes. Amira says that Azhar wants to be just like her and to look like her. They went to the suq together, both dressed in *balto*, *hijab*, and *niqab*, totally matching, but with one a head taller than the other, with Azhar looking like a mini-woman. She was enjoying herself but then she got hot and felt like she couldn’t breath under the *niqab* and said “*Mumkin arfa’hu?* (Can I lift the veil?)” “*Na’am, mish mushkila, irfa’ee!* (Yes, no problem, lift it!)” Then later “*Mumkin id’ahu fi shanta?* (Can I put it in the bag?)” “*Na’am, mish mushkila!* (Yes, no problem!)” So she got tired of it quickly. Amira was laughing hysterically when she told this story. I asked her if she would make her daughter dress a certain way when she got older, and she said she would make her wear the *hijab* but not the *niqab*, that was her own choice.

For Yemeni girls like Azhar, adopting the *balto* and *niqab* is a clear marker of maturity and womanhood. Across the world dress serves not only an obvious marker of age, gender difference, economic class, religious affiliation, and regional identity, but also an indicator of social change. This is equally true in Yemen, where women’s dress has been a site of contestation on the national level between political groups, as well as on the personal level between individual women and their families. I will begin this chapter by outlining the recent historical developments in women’s dress, explore the ways in which my informants relate to and define dress practices, and discuss how this institution feeds into their understanding of the distinction between “tradition” and “religion.”

The issue of Muslim women's dress is necessarily a sensitive issue by virtue of the historical politicization of "the veil." While in Egypt, Algeria, and other Muslim countries that were previously European colonies and where the significance of the veil is often clearly tied to the history of colonial domination and local resistance, Yemen presents a different case.⁷² Because South Yemen was under British colonial control from 1839 until 1967, a discussion of the significance of veiling, unveiling, or re-veiling in the context of colonial rule and resistance would be pertinent there. However, North Yemen, where my study is located, gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1918, and was never under direct European colonial rule. Veiling practices there were thus less affected by European influences and pressures, and developed more or less along with local and regional trends. However, women's clothing in Sana'a has nonetheless undergone considerable changes in the last half century as economic development has encouraged women to work and study outside of the home, and the rise of Islamist influence has generated a regional trend in women's dress. For a background on women's sartorial practices in Yemen I rely on Annelies Moors, Anne Meneley, and Gabriele vom Bruck.

In "Fashionable Muslims: Notions of Self, Religion, and Society in San'a," Annelies Moors presents the details of women's outdoor dress in Sana'a, and describes the ways in which modes of dress have shifted throughout the last half century. She explores the historical development of various clothing styles in relation to the increase in the influence of Islamists and the ensuing debate over such issues as the face veil and

⁷² The significance of veiling practices varies across cultures and eras, and while colonialism presents one element in the issue of veiling, it is by no means the only factor that defines the meaning of veiling, nor is it present in every context. There are many circumstances in which veiling has held religious, social, or political importance before or without the influence of colonialism. For more on this see Leila Ahmed (1992).

other degrees of covering. Moors is careful to differentiate the meanings that various modes of dress held in the specific context of Sana'a from other Arab countries, explaining the differences between the "reveiling" that is going on in Turkey and Egypt, and the changes in forms of veiling that is going on in Yemen. In discussing the particularities of Yemeni clothing practices, Moors analyzes the perception among Yemeni women between veiling for "cultural" reasons and veiling for reasons of religious conviction. Moors' historical analysis allows us to question the concept of "traditional" in terms of dress, as dress practices are constantly being shaped and reshaped as social, economic, political, and religious conditions change.

In "Fashions and Fundamentalisms in Fin-de-Siecle Yemen," Anne Meneley examines the changing relationships between commodities, consumption, and religiosity in Zabid, Yemen, through ethnographic fieldwork that she undertook in 1990 and 1999. She discusses social changes taking place in Zabid, and focuses on the increasing influence of Islamists on both the public character of the city and on what was traditionally "women's space." She examines the historical foundations of the current rise of the Islamist party (Islah) and the factors leading to the increased conservatism and intensification of veiling practices among Zabidi women. Though Meneley focuses on women in Zabid, the processes she describes echo social movements taking place in Sana'a as well, especially in terms of the increasing power of Islamists in public space, and thus her analysis serves as a frame for the particular experiences of my informants in Sana'a.

In "Elusive Bodies: The Politics of Aesthetics among Yemeni Elite Women," Gabriele von Bruck analyzes the ethnographic fieldwork that she carried out in Sana'a

and the Sa'ada region of Yemen in 1982 and 1986. She examines several aspects of women's lives in Yemen, focusing on the politics of body decoration and marriage practices. She details the ways in which Yemeni female bodies are conceived of as taboo in and of themselves, and the various societal taboos that Yemeni women must observe around naming, education, dress, jewelry, social interactions, and dancing. She examines the historical processes that led to the certain styles of dress at the time of her writing and examines the meaning and cultural value of various garments and veiling choices. Von Bruck's work provides essential background information concerning the social value of various clothing practices.

Vom Bruck describes the social and gender-specific importance of veiling in terms of Zaydi religious law, which defines a woman's body as '*aurah*. Vom Bruck explains that "on attaining physical maturity, a woman is said to be 'aurah, literally, "that which is indecent to reveal.""⁷³ She explains that the reason for veiling is to prevent "the sexual interest of non-mahram and to give women freedom of movement."⁷⁴ According to vom Bruck, learning to conceal one's body from non-*mahram* men is an intrinsic part of learning to be a woman and achieving adulthood, and thus that young girls "take great pleasure in trying on parts of their mothers' *sharshaf*,⁷⁵ presenting themselves proudly and shyly," as we have seen in the case of Amira and Azhar.⁷⁶

The theoretical and historical analyses of these three authors are grounded in the tangible material practices and sartorial choices of Yemeni women today. In

⁷³ Gabriele vom Bruck, "Elusive Bodies: The Politics of Aesthetics among Yemeni Elite Women," *Signs* 23-1 (1997): 186.

⁷⁴ Vom Bruck 187.

⁷⁵ The *sharshaf* is a long skirt worn over indoor clothing, but here refers generally to the covering clothing of adult women.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

contemporary Sana'a, the dominant form of outerwear among women consists of a long, loose black dress that is worn over indoor clothes known as *balto* or *abaya*. In addition to this long black dress, Sana'ani women generally wear a lightweight black scarf to cover their hair, known as a *maqrana*, coupled with a *niqab*, or two-layered face veil, which is tied at the back of the head so that one layer is thrown back over the head and hangs down the back while the other layer covers the nose and mouth, leaving the eyes exposed. In addition to the *balto* and *niqab* style of dress, two other visible styles in the capital city are the *sitara* and the *sharshaf*. These two styles are “considered traditional San'ani styles of dress, in spite of the fact that the former is imported from India and the latter was introduced to Yemen by the Ottoman Turks.”⁷⁷

The *sitara* is a large cloth dyed in red, blue, yellow, and green that is thrown over the head and wrapped around the body to obscure the indoor clothes from view when a woman leaves the house. Moors explains that “the *sitara* in its present colors (blue with red) was prevalent in San'a from the 1920s,”⁷⁸ and is still worn today, though it has come to be viewed as an old-fashioned style generally worn by older, rural, or poorer women. The third style of dress consists of the *sharshaf*, a long, loose skirt that is worn over indoor clothing and coupled with a cape, both usually in black. Moors explains that “whereas up till the 1962 revolution, which turned the northern part of Yemen from an Imamate into a republic, the *sharshaf* had only been worn by a very small number of women closely related to the Imam...in the course of the 1960s it rapidly gained popularity amongst the middle strata as the more formal style of dress.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Annelies Moors, “Fashionable Muslims: Notions of Self, Religion, and Society in San'a.” *Fashion Theory* 11-2/3 (2007): 322.

⁷⁸ Moors 323.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Today, the *sharshaf* is the dominant form of dress in many Northern villages, and though it is still visible in the capital city, like the *sitara*, it is generally only worn among older and poorer women. Those who wear the *sharshaf* or the *sitara* generally cover their faces with a *lithma*, which is a long black cloth that is tightly wrapped around the face, covering the nose, mouth, forehead and hair, but leaving the eyes exposed. The *lithma*, similarly, is associated with lower class, older, or rural women who have not adopted the newer, urban style of the *balto* and *niqab*.

Moors describes the waning of the *sharshaf* and *sitara* in Sana'a, saying "by the early 1970s, young San'ani women interested in wearing fashionable dress introduced a new style of outerwear, the *balto*, a long overcoat... The first to introduce this style of dress were those from high-status families that had been abroad."⁸⁰ This was taking place during the "heyday of labor migration of Yemeni men to the Gulf States, especially to Saudi Arabia,"⁸¹ which led to an increase in cash flowing into the Yemeni economy and a subsequent increase in consumer goods, including new fashions. Thus, Moors suggests that the *balto*, which more resembled styles worn throughout the Arab world, came to represent a new "fashionable modernity,"⁸² in contrast to the older styles that were viewed as more rooted in Sana'ani tradition.

In addition to having a new "international" element of appeal, the *balto* also appealed to many as an expression of Islamist sympathies, as "it also was an acceptable style of dress in the eyes of the conservative Islamists, who, in the course of the 1970s, started to gain influence in North Yemen and were supported by the regime against the

⁸⁰ Moors 325.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

more left-wing nationalists.”⁸³ According to Anne Meneley, this shift in political power dynamics in favor of the Islamists occurred owing to the fact that “after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, what was then North Yemen was the recipient of considerable Saudi aid in the form of sponsorship of informal religious colleges.”⁸⁴ Meneley explains that this increasing presence of the Islamists “had the most impact on the public sphere that women share with men, primarily schools and hospitals, settings where women are veiled.”⁸⁵ Thus, the trend in outdoor dress in Sana’a began to resemble Islamist fashions appearing across the Islamic world. Moors points out that the Yemeni *balto* resembled the clothing that Islamist women in Egypt and Syria were beginning to wear (known there as the *jilbab*) at that time as well, thereby increasing its global appeal. Thus, by the 1990’s the *balto* had come to replace the *sharshaf* among younger and more educated women, a trend that would continue to today, as most women now opt for the *balto*.

Moors describes another trend that began at the turn of the century, which saw the introduction of a new outdoor style, the *abaya*. Similar to the *balto* as a long, usually black over-dress, the *abaya* was somewhat lighter and “because of this thinness of the material...had a more distinctively elegant and feminine look.”⁸⁶ During my fieldwork I found it to be true that many women are today wearing light, more form-fitting over-dresses, but most women did not make a distinction between the terms *abaya* and *balto* in practice, using them interchangeably to refer to any of the varieties of long black dresses worn by most women over their clothing.

Another variation in Sana’ani dress began in the 1970s when a small group of female

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Anne Meneley, “Fashions and Fundamentalisms in Fin-de-Siecle Yemen,” Cultural Anthropology 22-2 (2007): 229.

⁸⁵ Meneley 230.

⁸⁶ Moors 326.

students began to attend their school or university with their faces uncovered, the first of whom were “girls from the more progressive families amongst the religious elite.”⁸⁷

These girls justified their actions based on “the arguments of Islamic scholars that covering the face is not obligatory in Islam, an argument similar to that made by modernists such as Qasim Amin in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century.”⁸⁸

This change began in the same period in which the Salafis, a highly conservative group of Islamists, were gaining influence in Yemen. Moors relates that the Salafi publications of the time “call for women to stick to the strictest forms of Islamic dress. In contrast to the majority view amongst Islamic scholars that holds it permissible for a woman to show her face and hands, they stick to a minority point of view that considers face-veiling obligatory.”⁸⁹ The Salafis went as far as to espouse the need to cover the eyes, as they are the most attractive aspect of the face. While most Yemeni women find it too cumbersome to cover their eyes, “the various styles of face coverings they wear usually include a layer of thin material that enables them to cover the eyes”⁹⁰ in case that they are wearing heavy eye makeup or want to achieve total anonymity.

Thus, Yemeni culture and women’s dress was moving in two somewhat divergent directions. On the one hand, conservative Islamists were gaining sway and increasing their religious and cultural influence, and thus encouraging a trend of increasing the covering dress of women. On the other hand, other groups were arguing for an increased public role for women and for the retirement of the *niqab*, which “ties into international

⁸⁷ Moors 330.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Moors 328.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

trends in dress among Muslim women.”⁹¹ Thus Yemen gradually became more integrated into the religious, cultural, and sartorial trends going on in other Arab countries as some women began to wear *hijab islami*, a style of Islamic dress that allows the face and hands to remain uncovered. In Yemen, the trend towards *hijab islami* represented a move away from conservatism, as the face would be uncovered, “whereas elsewhere, in countries such as Egypt, starting to wear *hijab islami* in the 1970s meant that women would wear more covering styles of dress, such as long-sleeved blouses, full-length skirts, and a headscarf that covered all of the hair.”⁹²

Moors analysis of the introduction of the *balto* and *niqab*, and more recently the *hijab*, as a “modern” phenomenon resulting from Sana’a’s integration into broader social trends in the Arab world serves as an example of the ways in which ideas of an “Islamic modernity” are overtaking what are considered to be outdated, traditional practices. As was discussed earlier, just as Yemeni women are increasingly entering the workforce and gaining higher education as part of a “modernizing” trend throughout the Arab world, here the *balto* and the *niqab* or *hijab* represent a “modern” replacement for the “traditional” *sitara*, *sharshaf*, or *lithma*. And, as we have seen from Moors’ explanation that the first women who removed their face coverings in Sana’a used religious arguments to justify their actions, these new “modern” dress practices are intimately linked with ideas of a new educated religiosity in which action is predicated on faith. Indeed, as my informants discussed their own dress practices and broader clothing trends in their society, they repeatedly returned to this distinction between “tradition,” which

⁹¹ Moors 330.

⁹² Ibid.

referred to outdated and often unnecessary practices, and “religion,” which indicated modern and religiously justified behaviors.

In discussing dress with my informants, I attempted to approach the subject from as neutral a position as was possible. As an American I was obviously coming from a way of life and dress that was very different from theirs, which may have influenced their responses to my questions in some ways, but I was met equally with responses trying to convince me of the merits of Yemeni dress (including the *niqab*) as I was with criticisms of it. For most of the interviews that I conducted at my school I wore very conservative clothing, usually consisting of long, loose skirts and long, loose, long-sleeved blouses. When I conducted interviews either in the homes of my informants or in the women’s institute where I volunteered, I generally wore a *balto*, and sometimes covered my hair, in an attempt to match the style of my informants and reduce the visible markers of my outsider status.

In most of my interviews I broached the subject of dress by asking what clothes were important for a Muslim woman. These questions were most often answered by an explanation that the Islamically prescribed dress for women is to cover their body completely with modest clothing, except for their face and hands, an idea that they expressed as part of their understanding of “authenticated” Islamic practice in contrast to traditionally mandated styles of dress. This definition automatically called into question the religious validity of wearing the *niqab*. As I probed this issue further among my informants who wore the *niqab*, some of my informants, who held a positive view of the *niqab*, explained that though covering the face was not necessarily a religious obligation, it increased a woman’s modesty and thus could be a virtuous practice. Others, who had

more of an ambiguous relationship to the *niqab*, explained that it was simply a “traditional” social practice, but that they felt obliged to wear it in order to fit in with their social surroundings, to avoid drawing unwanted attention to themselves, or due to pressure from their families. Finally, a small minority expressed that they wore it because they felt it was a religious duty.

Throughout my conversations with my informants, many of the women I interviewed who indicated the value that they placed on correct understanding of religion discussed the *niqab* by explaining the great variety of opinions that exist among scholars of Islam on the issue. This fact, they argued, was reason enough to choose either view, since both had considerable scholarly backing. Farida, the 26-year-old university lecturer who was introduced in the last chapter and who changes out of her black *hijab* and *niqab* into a colorful *hijab* when she arrives at our institute in the morning and changes back before she leaves, explained the following:

It’s ok whether you cover your face or not. In Islam we have different opinions about this. Different *sheikhs*⁹³ have different opinions, and in Islam if there is more than one opinion then you can choose whichever you want. This is a mercy of our God, to have different opinions. If there are different opinions, then you can choose whichever is more suitable, or more comfortable, or whichever you believe in. I wear the *niqab* because I feel more comfortable. I like it. It’s ok if I don’t wear it, but I like it. I feel more comfortable with it.

Farida is one of the women who genuinely prefer to wear the *niqab*, though she recognizes that it is an individual choice that can be made either way. Farida’s emphasis on the importance of scholarly opinion and religious justification for clothing practices serves as an example of the increased interest among young women in an “authenticated” understanding of Islam

⁹³ Islamic religious scholar

Karima, another previously introduced teacher, echoed Farida's sentiment that though the *niqab* is optional, she herself chooses to wear it. She demonstrates the value that my informants place in individual knowledge of religious texts as she cites a Qur'anic verse to justify her behavior.

We have an *ayah* in the holy Qur'an that says, "When they know you, they will hurt you."⁹⁴ That is why we wear the veil. Until now they say that covering the face is optional. God didn't say "must." but in our community it is appropriate to cover your face, then no one will harm you, no one will gossip about you. And I find that our *balto* is very comfortable, especially when you are not ready. It's just one thing to wear. But sometimes, unfortunately, we have here in Yemen a "sexy *balto*" that shows all the features of the body, but the point of the *balto* is not to attract the others, it's to let them concentrate on their own business. I believe that the *balto* is a wonderful thing, and it saves you money, because you don't have to buy a lot of clothes. I believe that the *balto* is a very good invention.

Karima wears the veil though she expresses that it is not necessarily a strict religious requirement. Rather, she explains that it is a socially mandated practice that serves to diffuse unwanted attention from the wearer. In addition to the speaking about the *niqab*, or veil, Karima expressed appreciation for Yemeni dress in general, not only for its ease and simplicity but also for its innate modesty. She also takes this opportunity to criticize those women who misunderstand the goal of Islamic modest dress and wear a formfitting outfit.

Sawsan, one of the more enthusiastic teachers, illustrated Karima's reasoning that the *niqab* protects women from harm. Though she explains that she used to feel comfortable wearing only *hijab*, she now understands that the *niqab* is useful for minimizing the harassment she experiences on the street.

I think the *niqab* is great. I like it... I wear it and I believe it protects me from others. I would like to wear just a scarf, but I wear the veil because even though Yemeni people are very nice, they will harass you wherever you go. So that's why I wear the veil. I used to wear a

⁹⁴ Qur'an 33:59, translated by Pickthall

"O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful."

scarf and I felt so free and happy. I wore it in an Islamic way; I didn't show any of my hair, just my face. I didn't put on makeup; this is the Islamic way. But, because of the irritation from people in the streets I didn't feel comfortable. I thought there must be something better. When I put on the veil I felt happy, I don't know why. I just felt so happy and overwhelmed, and since then I never took it off. It's been 3 and a half years since I put it on and I don't want to take it off.

Though Sawsan explains that the *niqab* is not in fact a necessary article of the “Islamic” way of dress for a woman, she concedes that in certain situations it provides added benefits. Unlike other women who felt pressure from their family to wear the *niqab*, Sawsan adopted the veil at a relatively late age and solely of her own will.

Hayat was 20-year-old woman who studied business accounting in university and whom I met through her cousin, a secretary at the institute where I volunteered. She was a very polite young woman who prided herself on her commitment to religious ethics and who never lost an opportunity to explain to me the benefits of Islam and to display herself as a model of female modesty. As we spoke about clothing during our interview, she echoed Sawsan's sentiment that while she appreciated a woman's ability to choose among various clothing options, she herself chose the *niqab*.

The appropriate clothing for a Muslim woman is that she covers her beauty (*zinataha*) completely. The *niqab* is the choice of the woman. There are women who think the *niqab* is appropriate, and there are women who prefer the *hijab* only. The *niqab* depends on the woman's preference. I wear the *niqab* because I like it. I don't want to have my face bare and for everyone to see it.

Here Hayat illustrates the concept explained by vom Bruck that a woman's body is '*aurah*, and thus should be concealed from the gaze of non-*mahram* men. Though Hayat concedes that the *niqab* is optional, her personal choice is to be as modest as possible by covering “her beauty” (i.e. that which is '*aurah*) as much as she can, in keeping with her understanding of correct religious practice.

Firyal was a middle-aged woman who worked as a gynecologist. She was a very elegant and dignified woman, and was wearing a sequined pink *hijab* when I met her at a family gathering at Karima's home. As a doctor, she had extensive experience with health issues in Yemen, and throughout our interview she focused on the medical side of the topics we spoke about. When discussing dress, she expressed a similar notion of what was required of a Muslim woman as Hayat, but added an element by explaining that the health benefits of "Islamic dress" had been scientifically proven.

Our Islam said to cover all of the body, and some of our scholars say that it is good to cover the face, and some scholars say never mind. But all the body is covered, and now the scholars say that the cover of the body is good for preventing sunlight from affecting the skin and for preventing cancer. And the cover of the face prevents air pollution and inhalation of the leads from the air around us, and the cover of the head prevents the dust from concentrating in the hair. Now it's scientific.

Firyal's insistence that the norms of women's Islamic dress had been empirically proven to be valuable for the health of the individual not only corroborates the idea held by all of my informants that Islam is the ultimate source of women's rights but also demonstrates the emphasis my informants placed on individual reasoning and rational analysis of religious claims, what Eickelman and Piscatory called "objectification."

When I asked Firyal to explain her personal opinion on the *niqab* she then expressed that wearing the *niqab* was not only a virtuous act, but that it could also alleviate some of the social pressures created by a heavily patriarchal society and could be used by women as a tool to achieve greater mobility and access to public space.

I think in Islam it is necessary, but here the face cover is more necessary to prevent men walking in the street and recognizing me if I am from his family. I don't want him to know that I am in the street. Our men refuse to let us go with a taxi or something like that. They are jealous (*gheyur*), they are afraid that other men will see their sister or wife.

Here Firyal refers to one of the patriarchal elements of Yemeni society, in which a man's honor is defined to a degree by the modesty and public invisibility of his female kin. This

phenomenon partially accounts for the many instances in which brothers pressure their sisters to adhere to stricter degrees of covering in public space.

Firyal and the other women represented above all wear the *niqab* out of the personal conviction that it is a beneficial institution, either in religious or social terms, and all justify their behavior through reference to ideas about “correct” Islamic practice, scholarly sources, and religious texts. Even though these women might be viewed by some as “traditional,” simply because they cover their faces, their own discourse demonstrates that they are in fact engaged with their choice of clothing practice both on an intellectual and spiritual level.

A second opinion among my informants concerning the appropriate clothes for women is represented by those who reject the *niqab* and prefer instead to wear the *hijab* along with a black *balto*. Amongst them are women who reject the *niqab* entirely as religiously unfounded and unnecessary, as well as women who see it as a legitimate individual choice, but not required. In both groups there are those who, despite their own preferences, feel compelled to don the *niqab* at times due to social pressures and to make themselves less conspicuous.

Rawdah, the 26-year-old lab technician, expressed her opinion that Islam gave women considerable room for choice in their dress and thus she criticized those who wore what she viewed as unnecessarily restrictive and conservative clothing. Here she refers to a long cape worn over the *balto* that hides the shape of the shoulders and torso, called alternatively *jilbab* or *khimar*. At the same time as she criticized those who dressed

in what she perceived as an extreme fashion, she proposed an argument for the importance of modest dress, which Moors refers to as *hijab islami*.⁹⁵

According to Islam, we have two rules. Not transparent, not too tight. Those are the rules and you wear whatever you want. Whatever design and whatever color. That no one can see your body and that it's not too tight so that everybody sees what is underneath...

Sometimes you see women wearing *jilbab*. I don't like it, but as long as she likes it, I respect that. I cannot tell her that it's bad. I respect it. But for me, it's not comfortable. If I work, if I go out, why do I have to bury myself that way if Islam gives me space? Why are you making it hard for yourself? God said that religion is something easy, not complex, so take it as it is, don't make it complex. Everything is clear. So the proper thing for a woman, for me, is a *hijab* and something that covers your body. It shouldn't be that heavy, it shouldn't be that big. It should follow the two rules, that's it...

But the most important thing is to not show your body. It's for you. It's not for somebody else. Your body is valuable. You don't want to share it with everyone, right? You know the shell with the pearl? Where is the pearl?

ANOUSH: In the shell?

RAWDAH: And where is the shell?

ANOUSH: In the ocean?

RAWDAH: Why? Because it's valuable! If everybody can touch it and take it, sometimes it loses its value. The same thing with the woman. She's valuable, nobody can mess with her, nobody can touch her.

Here Rawdah illuminates two commonly expressed views. Firstly, that Islam provides the best for women, and that the *hijab* is not a restriction, but rather a protection of the individual and an affirmation of the value of the woman. Secondly, she expresses the view that the rules of religion should be logical, rational, and easy to comply with, and thus that Islam would not be overly restrictive or limiting, thereby supporting her argument that *hijab* is the only clothing requirement of Muslim women.

Among some of the women who wore *hijab*, many explained that they were sometimes compelled to wear the *niqab* as well. These women were firmly committed to their understanding that "correct" Islamic practice dictated the wearing of the *hijab* only for women, but that the *niqab* was a tool needed to mediate the pressures that arise from the heavily "traditional" society in which they lived. Ghayda, the institute director who

⁹⁵ Moors 330.

stands out particularly because of her unusual decision to drive her own car and wear brightly colored *hijabs* most of the time, expressed her disappointment that she felt the need to wear the *niqab* at times in order to mediate negative responses from men in the street.

Sometimes, myself, I have to wear [the *niqab*]. To be honest with you, I have to wear it in some situations. When I wear makeup. When I go to the *suq*⁹⁶, to the mall, I have to wear it. When you are having your daily work, you are dealing with professional people, but when you go in the streets, when you are wearing makeup, you are dealing with a lot of people. They are not respecting you, so when you would like just to protect yourself, it is better to wear the *niqab*, in some situations. But for myself, I can't stand the *niqab*, I would like to fight this issue, but when you fight this issue, you have first of all to fight the way that the men deal with the women, especially in the street. There's a phenomenon here in Sana'a, and in a lot of cities, that is harassment against women. So this is the issue behind the women having to wear the *niqab*, because a lot of men, they bother women by words, by hands. So it's really too bad for the woman. She has to protect herself by wearing the *niqab*, in some circumstances.

For Ghayda, the issue of the *niqab* is not one of personal religious conviction or even of modesty, but rather it is a response to the level of harassment that she experiences in the street. Thus, for her, the *niqab* becomes a tool for mitigating the consequences of the patriarchal attitudes that result in hostility towards unaccompanied women in public places.

Fadwa was another young woman who practiced a similar tactic in terms of selectively wearing the *niqab*. I met Fadwa through a student discussion organized between my Arabic school and an English language institute for Yemeni students on the topic of "Yemeni family and society." During that discussion, I requested an interview with her, and she returned to my school two days later. She arrived at our interview appointment wearing a black *hijab* decorated with green flowers. When I asked her if she ever wore the *niqab* she replied with the following.

⁹⁶ The *suq* refers to a public market that is often crowded with men and generally an unfriendly place for an unaccompanied, uncovered woman.

I wear it but I took it off when I arrived. I do that in my institute also. I wear a *niqab* because I live in a public zone, you know, people are *qaba'il* (tribes/tribal), and they don't see women a lot, and when I go out they look at me, so my dad said "ok, you can cover, but when you go anywhere you want, far away from our home, you can take it off."

This young woman conversed with the male teachers and employees at my school with her face uncovered, but when her driver called to pick up after we had finished our interview, she tied her *niqab* on over her *hijab* and left. Like Ghayda, though Fadwa prefers to wear *hijab* only, she demonstrates the ways in which the *niqab* can be used selectively in order to facilitate her active lifestyle.

Amongst those girls who were critical of the *niqab* but wore it regularly, most did so due to pressure from members of their family. Some then became used to it and now continue wearing it of their own volition, while others continue to resent the imposition and denial of choice. Amira, the 34-year-old teacher who defends the importance of the *hijab*, donned the *niqab* originally due to her mother's insistence, though now she concedes that she has grown accustomed to wearing it and does not consider it a burden. However, she still feels ambivalently towards the *niqab*, and does not wear it where she does not feel that it is necessary, such as inside our institute or outside of the city.

One of the rights of women is to walk around without wearing the *niqab*, but without wearing *hijab*? No. I think that this is not one of her rights because in Islam that is fundamentally *haram*. That's *haram*, you see?...

When I grew up it was required that I covered my hair and my face. My father was more open than my mother, for him it wasn't a problem if I went out only wearing *hijab*, but my mother would say, "cover your face! You're a girl! Men will see you!"...

I got used to the *niqab*, so for that reason I like it. I don't have a problem with it, but sometimes I want to take off the *niqab* and feel the fresh air on my face, so it's not a big deal for me if I take off the *niqab* if I feel like it. If I go on a fieldtrip with the students to some village outside of Sana'a, sometimes I take off my *niqab*, because they don't know me there. They don't know whether I usually wear *niqab* or not.

As we saw in the fieldnotes at the beginning of the chapter, Amira now has her own daughter, 9-year-old Azhar, who she does not force to wear the *niqab*. The difference of opinion between Amira and her mother serves as an example of the shift in attitudes

towards propriety and religious practice among the new generation of Sana'ani women. While Amira's mother married early, remains uneducated and illiterate, and subscribes to more conservative ideas concerning dress, Amira had the opportunity to complete her bachelor's degree, works as a teacher, and entertains more lenient ideas about appropriate "Islamic" dress.

While in Amira's case it was her mother who pressured her to wear the *niqab*, for many of my informants the pressure came not from older women, but from young men in their families who felt ashamed to be associated with unveiled women. Zahra, a jolly young student, laughingly told me the story of how she began to wear the *niqab* due to pressure from her brother after he feared for his reputation among his friends for having an "exposed" sister roaming the streets.

There is a difference among various *sheikhs*: some say that the face and the hands are ok to appear; others say, "No, she must cover everything!" Some accept it and some refuse it. For me, I don't know, but I wear the *niqab* because of my brother, my older brother. I finished high school just wearing a scarf, but after that, because of his friends, *hasbi Allah!*⁹⁷ You know, they say, "You have a sister." He says, "No, I have no sisters." His friends say, "You have a sister, we see one like you!" He says, "I have no sisters!" One day I was walking home from school and he was sitting with his friends and they were saying, "There is one that looks like you! This one! This one! She is like you!" He cried to my mom, "Let your daughter cover her face!" and then, ok, I wear it.

Though Zahra explains that she does not consider the *niqab* to be a religious requirement or a requisite for modesty, she wears it due to pressure from her brother, who feels that his social standing is compromised by the presence of his unveiled sister in public.

Zahra's story was echoed by Nawal (introduced in the first chapter), who began wearing the *niqab* when she was 15 years old, at the insistence of a male cousin and her mother. She related a story in which her cousin hassled her mother to force her to wear

⁹⁷ "*Hasbi Allah*" literally means "God will take care of me," but is often used to express exasperation or frustration with someone. Here, Zahra uses "*Hasbi Allah*" to express negative sentiments directed towards the friends of her brother.

the *niqab* after his friends saw her in the street a number of times and he felt ashamed. Now that she is 21 and engaged, her fiancée told her that she could take it off after they're married, but she refused because she fears it would tarnish her reputation to remove it after wearing it for years. However, Nawal encourages her sister, who is 18 years old and about to finish high school, to resist their mother's pressure and to avoid adopting the *niqab*.

This phenomenon in which young men espoused more conservative attitudes than their sisters or parents was commonly described by my informants, for while their parents' opinions were affected and shaped by traditional social norms, the new generation has been affected by an increased emphasis on "correct" religious practice, an influence which often comes from one of the more religiously conservative groups with Wahhabi or Salafi tendencies who argue for a decrease in women's public presence.

One extreme example of the increasing conservatism of many young men is demonstrated by the family of Sumayya, who was the academic director of the Arabic language institute where I studied. Sumayya was 26-years old, held a master's degree, and was ambitious to pursue doctoral work as well. She had applied for and received four grants to study outside of Yemen (in Britain, Egypt, Iran, and America), but her family refused to allow her to go and she was forced to turn down each one. We conducted our interview one summer afternoon in a sun-filled classroom overlooking the neighbor's yard where a rooster was crowing and children were playing. During our interview, she removed her *niqab* (which she referred to as a "veil") and wore simply a black *hijab*, which slipped off multiple times due to the silky fabric. Each time she would nonchalantly slide it back onto her hair and continue to describe her restrictive home life,

where she experienced pressure from her brothers to conform to their limited idea of a woman's role. It was only due to her father's lenience, she explained, that she was able to work and study at all.

They force me to wear the veil. If I don't wear it, I cannot go outside. So I had a difficult choice. I decided to wear it, not because I believe in it, not at all, but because I want to go out, I want to work, I want to improve myself... I hate it. I hate the veil so much. What I want to do one day [she laughs] is to make a big hole with fire and gather all the veils in Yemen and burn them and any women who want to wear it, I will burn them too, because I hate it so much!

Though Sumayya was clearly joking when she expressed a desire to burn women who like the *niqab*, and is really a sweet and gentle young woman, her words accurately reflect the vehement anger that she feels towards being forced to wear the *niqab* against her will.

Sumayya supported her somewhat radical attitude by explaining that both the *niqab* and the patriarchal environment that obliges women to wear the *niqab* are religiously illegitimate and solely based in misogynistic "tradition." Here Sumayya returned to the familiar dichotomy between "religion" versus "tradition," in which ideas of "authenticated" Islam are used to justify an attack on the religiously unfounded customs that define the category of "tradition." In order to justify her rejection of the *niqab*, Sumayya returns to the text of the Qur'an and explains the context of a hotly contested verse.

We have some scholars who say that you have to cover all of your body, even your face and hands. So you do not have the right to go just with the scarf, you have to wear the *niqab*, but I believe that you have to cover all of your body without *niqab*. It's not logical. How can I breathe, how can I eat, how can I talk to others, how can I know you and you know me? It's so difficult. So I think that the people who say without *niqab*, they are correct. And there is a verse in the Qur'an *Kareem* which says "*wa liyadribna bikhumurihinna 'ala juyubihinna*"⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Qur'an 24:31, translated by Pickthall

"And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment... ."

and some of them interpret this as that you have to cover your whole body, even your face. But the other ones say no, because the women in the time of the prophet wore something which exposed their breasts, so everyone could see their breasts, and A'isha, his wife, asked him to say something so that they would cover their breasts.

By demonstrating her knowledge of sacred Islamic sources and relating it to her own experience, Sumayya is reclaiming interpretative authority as a tool for justifying her own non-traditional opinions. This tactic was repeated by many of my informants, who returned to the categories of “religion” and “tradition” to justify their non-normative views and behavior.

Some of my informants who couched their critique of the *niqab* in terms of “correct” Islamic practice and understanding of sacred texts used the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, as justification for their conclusions about clothing. They reasoned that since the *Hajj* was a requirement for all able Muslims, and since women were required to wear only the *hijab* during the *Hajj*, at which time all pilgrims, both men and women, stand equal before God, then the *niqab* could not be a religious requirement. Amira expressed this opinion in the following words

In the religion of Islam the *hijab* is more important than the *niqab*. There are sayings that Islam requires only the hair and the body to be covered, and that the face and the hands are not a problem. I am not sure if these sayings are true or not, but I see that the women who go on *Hajj* are required to wear only the *hijab*, so I think that these sayings are correct, because on the *Hajj* there are men and women from all over the world, and Islam commanded the women to not cover their faces on the *Hajj*. So I think that according to Islam the uncovered face is not *haram*. That’s my opinion, but the customs in Yemen require that the woman covers her face.

Here Amira demonstrates her understanding of the distinction between “religion,” which here is manifested by the practices dictated by the universally accepted *Hajj* rituals, and “tradition,” which she calls “customs.” In order to corroborate her explanation that the *niqab* is fundamentally a traditional custom, Amira discussed the idea that the practice of

face veiling was not originally Yemeni, but rather a remnant of the Ottoman occupation of North Yemen that lasted until 1918.

Most Yemeni women are convinced that the *niqab* is a religious duty. That is the most important conviction for them. But I think, in reality, the idea came from Ottoman rule in the past, from the Ottoman Empire. They were the ones who brought the *niqab*. In the past it wasn't very important. But after Ottoman rule, the *niqab* spread and the complete covering of the body came as well. I think it isn't religious. It's just traditional, from the Ottoman period.

Khadijah, who enjoyed demonstrating her knowledge of French during our interview, agreed with this idea, pointing out the irony of the contemporary disparity between Yemeni and Turkish sartorial practices, and again displaying her knowledge of “authenticated” Islam by referring to the hadith literature, or the sayings of the prophet.

In Islam we have a very clear hadith of our prophet that said a woman should be covered except her face and hands... Our religion never determined colors, never said black, *noir*, *aswad*. We don't have this in our religion. It is just tradition. It came from Turkey, the Turkish tradition, you know. We called it *sharshaf*. It was two parts.⁹⁹ It was from Turkish people. Now the Turkish people are walking in the streets freely and we are wearing this. So, if I leave the country, I can take the *balto* off and wear trousers or something.

Rawdah further expounded upon the distinction between “religion” and “tradition.” She compared the Yemeni outfit to the *burqa* worn by women in Afghanistan in order to further emphasize the non-Islamic nature of these “extremes” in covering practices.

About these things they wear in Afghanistan, or here, that's not what Islam says. See, we follow traditions. We don't follow religion. Even if we claim that we follow religion, we lie to each other...because in Yemen traditions are stronger than religion.

By referring to the rituals of the *Hajj* pilgrimage, the sayings of the prophet, and historical accounts of Turkish colonialism, the women quoted above clearly demonstrate their understanding of which kinds of clothing constitute “correct” Islamic practice, and which they consider to be remnants of “tradition.” Through this distinction, they are able

⁹⁹ “*Sharshaf*” here refers both to the long skirt worn over indoor clothing and the veil that covers the head and the face.

to justify their rejection of certain clothing practices, such as wearing the *niqab*, while upholding the legitimacy of others.

Some of the women who criticized the *niqab* as a religiously unfounded practice explained that it was not only “traditional,” but that it could be morally counter-productive as it could be misused to allow girls to behave in “un-Islamic” ways. Many women commented on the fact that the *niqab* could be used to hide physical imperfections, and thus increase the beauty of the wearer rather than making her more inconspicuous, or else that many women wore a formfitting, or “sexy,” *balto* and a *niqab* with decoration, such as a visible name brand written in rhinestones on the front.

20-year-old Fatima was one such young woman who expressed a criticism of such clothing choices. Fatima worked as the accountant for the institute where I volunteered, and both she and her younger sister, who worked as the institute secretary, preferred to wear *hijab* in light muted colors, instead of *niqab*, whether in the institute or in public. Only when we attended weddings together, and the two of them were wearing makeup, did they put on the *niqab* in order to deflect unwanted comments and attention. I interviewed Fatima in her office during one workday, and when her sister interrupted our interview multiple times by calling her office telephone, Fatima would pick up, shout “*Haram ‘alayk!* (Shame on you!),” and hang up. When we reached the topic of clothing in our interview, Fatima expressed the following critique.

Some woman are not so very beautiful but maybe they have big, beautiful eyes, and when they wear the veil they look just so so beautiful, but when they lift the veil you are surprised because they are not so beautiful...And there are some veils that I don't like, they are so small or there is *naqsh* (design) on it. It is not a cover, it is just *zina* (decoration). Islam said to cover, don't show your beauty, but now they wear a veil in a beautiful way and with eyeliner. This is a problem! It's not a covering. It is not a *sitr* (cover). If you are with *hijab* and you are not wearing something showy and attracting people when you walk, it is ok in Islam, but the veil with decoration is forbidden in Islam. For me, I wear something formal

without a lot of decoration. This is better. For me it's ok. For me it's better for someone to see my face than to wonder, "Oh, what does this girl look like?"

Here Fatima expresses an idea that initially seemed counterintuitive to me, that in some situations the *hijab* could be more modest and more Islamically appropriate than the *niqab* when it is worn with good intention and in modest manner.

Ghayda, who wore a purple silk scarf to work on the day of our interview, articulated the concern that an increasing number of young women today use the *niqab* selectively as a tool to hide immoral behavior from their parents.

It's like a secret, unfortunately, because they can cover a lot of things behind the *niqab*. If she would like to do a bad thing, she can use the *niqab*. For instance, if she would like to go to the street to hang out with boys, she can wear the *niqab*, and no one will recognize her. If she would like to wear makeup, heavy makeup, and she would like to go to the street and meet her boyfriend, she can cover this by wearing the *niqab*. But if you see the same girl in the college or in the work, she doesn't wear the *niqab*. So these are bad uses for it. So there are a lot of negatives, there are a lot of positives, but it's the way that you are using it. It's like a tool. It's traditional. If you use it in a good way, it's for your benefit, if you use it in a bad way, it's not for your benefit. So it's like a tool.

Both Fatima and Ghayda echoed a sentiment that was shared by many of my informants, that while the *niqab* was not a religious duty, it could be beneficial if used with good intention, but as an inherently "traditional" institution, it held equal potential for harm and misuse.

While most of my informants argued that the *hijab* was the only religious duty, and a minority argued for the *niqab* as well, on only two occasions did I meet women who insisted on the most conservative style of dress common in Yemen. Unfortunately, I do not have any formal recorded interviews with women who wore the most conservative style of dress, what Moors refers to as the style of the Salafis. However, on these two occasions I had the opportunity to speak with such women at length and to observe their sartorial practices. In both instances, I was visiting one of my informants (Safiyah and Habiba) at their homes when a considerably more conservatively dressed neighbor came

to visit. Despite the fact that both of my informants wore the *balto* and *niqab* only (in contrast to the more conservative style of adding more loose layers on top of the *balto*), they both expressed great admiration and respect for the more conservative neighbor, who was presented as a model of ideal female piety.

On the first occasion I had gone to the house of 22-year-old Safiyyah, one of my potential interviewees, for lunch. I ate with her mother, younger sister and brother, and her infant son. Afterwards the brother left the house and we sat in the living room on the floor drinking tea and eating sweets, when a neighbor came to visit. She was introduced as a very religious woman, which was indicated by the fact that she attended a Qur'an class every morning, did not listen to music, and wore very conservative dress. She stayed for a few hours, during which time we discussed her children, her education, and the issue of women's lack of purity during menstruation, on the subject of which she was regarded as an authority by the other women present. A Qur'an was brought in and she read to us for a while, then it was time to leave.

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Safiyyah introduced her by saying she is a very good and religious woman, more religious than they. She wore a red and yellow loose dress and a yellow and pink *maqrana* [a long rectangular headscarf] while she sat with us, even though all of the men had left the house...

The neighbor was getting ready to leave, and she had a lot of clothes to put on. First a black *balto*, then in place of a *niqab* she wore 2 triangular pieces of cloth, one tied around her head like a bandana, and one tied over her nose and mouth. Then she put on the *khimar*, which went over her head and then buttoned down the front. It had two layers. One large cloak-like layer that went almost to her knees, and a shorter top layer that went over her shoulders and chest, and was slightly ruffled. Safiyyah slightly ashamedly explained that this was "from the Qur'an" and was "the true Islamic *khimar*", but that she herself only wore the *balto* and *niqab*. She explained the Qur'an tells us to hide our beauty. She said that in the past, Muslim women used to only wear *hijab*, but the face is beautiful too, and sometimes if men see your beauty they will think bad things. She seemed to enjoy this idea, saying that the reason they cover themselves is because they are valuable, they are special, and they should protect and keep their valuable beauty only for their husbands to see. It's a thing to be proud of and to keep safe. Why should anyone else have the right to look at and enjoy her beauty?

After the neighbor had finished arranging her many layers of clothing, she proudly stood up to show us how modest she was. She lifted up her *khimar* and pointed to the outline of her chest, saying, "See, without it, you can see this...and this!" She turned around and pinched

her backside! She laughed as she dropped the *khimar*, saying “But with it, no one can see anything! Nothing at all!” She was having a great time demonstrating the effectiveness of a *khimar*.

[a few days later...]

While we were eating lunch, Habiba’s neighbor came to visit. When Habiba introduced her to me she mentioned that “*Masha’allah*,¹⁰⁰ she’s very religious.” She was wearing the same outfit as the woman at Safiyyah’s house. The two pieces tied on the head, the *khimar* over the head, all on top of a *balto*. She remained in her *khimar* the whole time while we ate and chatted for 3 or 4 hours, though she uncovered her nose and mouth in order to drink tea with mint.

Although it was not overtly stated, I suspect that on both occasions the neighbors were specifically invited over in order to demonstrate the ideal of modest behavior and dress, as well as of an exemplary knowledge of Islam, to the curious foreigner. I imagine that because I had already had initial conversations with both Safiyyah and Habiba about Islam, they felt they should take advantage of the opportunity of having me at their house to expose me to the example of their local “expert” who was introduced as very pious and knowledgeable, thus embodying the ideal “modern” woman who is both strong in her faith and educated about “correct” Islamic practice. The fact that both of these women and my other informants view themselves as striving towards “correct” practice, but behave and dress in vary different ways underscores the diversity that exists among them as individuals, and the multiplicity of “Islams” that exist in Sana’a, in Yemen, and globally.

Thus, clothing practices serve as a lens to examine social trends among young women in Sana’a, and a concrete expression of their creation of a binary between the categories of “religion” and “tradition.” The *niqab* in particular, as the main focus in the debate over women’s clothing in Yemen, provides a useful indicator of the wide variety of practices and opinions among Sana’ani women. While some view it a religious duty, others

¹⁰⁰ *Masha’allah* is a phrase which literally means “What Allah wishes,” and is used as a to express praise or appreciation and/or to protect the individual being praised from jealousy or the evil eye.

consider it an outdated tradition that has no moral value. In addition to exploring the differences between women who reject the *niqab* and those who embrace it, a discussion of the *niqab* produces additional layers of meaning that illuminate other aspects of Yemen society beyond clothing practices. Not only is the *niqab* simply a traditional social custom or a religious requirement, but it becomes a possible fashion accessory, or a tool which can be used to facilitate social interactions, increase public mobility, or provide the wearer useful anonymity in public spaces. While some find the *niqab* to be a repressive institution, and others feel ambivalent towards it, almost all of the women I spoke with recognized that the power of the *niqab* could be appropriated by the wearer for their own purposes, whether to increase personal safety and comfort, or to provide them with otherwise impossible autonomy.

Chapter Four

Redefining Relationships: Marriage and Social Change

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During class today Amira was talking about one of her friends who is older and still unmarried. She is the only one of her sisters who is unmarried. I asked why she isn't married and Amira said that she wants to be but that it's hard because all the men her age are already married, and only men who are already married ask for her hand. The poor thing, and no younger man wants to marry an older woman. I asked if maybe her mother could go look for a husband for her and Amira laughed and said "*Ayb! Hatha ayb!* (Shame! That's Shameful!)" She thought this was a hysterical proposition. She explained that it is shameful for a girl to look for a husband herself. I asked, "But what if her mother does it? Can't her mother go talk to other mothers?" "*Ayb!* They would laugh at her and say, 'What is wrong with your daughter that you have to go looking for a husband for her? Doesn't anyone want her?' It's *Ayb* even if the father goes asking, they would laugh at him!" She really got a kick out of this idea. Apparently it's only appropriate for the man to go looking, the women must just sit and wait.

Then I told her that some of the women who I have been interviewing seemed ok with having male acquaintances from work or university, and who hope to find a husband that way. Amira was totally shocked and scandalized by this idea! "You mean she will tell her father that she's been talking to boys at school?? No no no, this is *ayb!* They would say, 'You've been talking to boys? You know boys?! This is a big problem!'" She said this is definitely not the norm, and that the best way, the most appropriate way for matchmaking to happen is at weddings, where girls get all dolled up and dance and strut around and try to display their beauty and also their good character in front of mothers who are shopping for a wife for their sons. Then the mother will approach the girl and ask, "What's your name? How old are you? What house are you from? Who is your mother? Do you know how to cook?" and then she will contact the girl's mother and it will go from there.

This short conversation with Amira underlines many of social changes that are affecting marriage in contemporary Sana'a, as well as the obstacles and issues that my informants and other young Yemeni women are facing due to changing expectations and lifestyles. In this chapter I will explore the ways in which gendered social change is affecting the institution of marriage in Yemen, and how my informants interact with and conceive of this change as a reflection of the constructed dichotomy between "tradition" and "religion." First, I will examine the recent changes in marriage practices in Yemen in relation to trends across the Arab world, in order to put my informants' views and practices in the context of broader regional shifts. Then I will explore my informants

ideas concerning marriage in light of their construction of “tradition” and “religion.” Through their discussion of marriage, my informants engage with issues of changing gender roles and expectations and restrictions on women’s independence, choice, and mobility. They express their understanding and valuation of these issues through the lens of the dichotomization of the categories of “tradition” and “religion.” Again, it is important to note that just as the definitions of “Islam,” “tradition” and “modernity” are fluid, so the categorizations of marriage practices are also flexible and vary among my informants.

Throughout the Arab world and elsewhere, marriage has traditionally been one of the major factors that shapes society, family structure, and individual lives. As globalization and economic and political transformations spur societal change, the institution of marriage is affected and altered. In “Marriage in the Arab World,” Hoda Rashad, Maged Osman, and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi outline the major changes that are taking place in Arab society in marriage patterns. Rashad et al. explain that, “families in the Arab world are undergoing major changes as new patterns of marriage and family formation emerge across the region.”¹⁰¹

The authors begin by establishing the importance of marriage in the Arab world and the integral role of the family in the marriage process by defining marriage as “both an individual and a family matter.”¹⁰² For the individual, marriage serves as “a well-defined turning point that bestows prestige, recognition, and societal approval on both partners, particularly the bride. . . it is also a rite of passage to a socially, culturally, and legally

¹⁰¹ Hoda Rashad, Maged Osman, and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, “Marriage in the Arab World.” (Population Reference Bureau: 2005): 1.

¹⁰² Ibid.

acceptable sexual relationship.”¹⁰³ The authors explain that the changes occurring in marriage patterns can be explained in part by the shift to an urban-based economy from the agrarian system that was more conducive to early marriages and large families. The migration to cities and the resulting increase of education and employment opportunities for both men and women has created a new generation with radically different expectations than those of their parents or grandparents. Rashad et al. argue that one such change is that “universal, early marriage is no longer the standard it once was in Arab countries: The average age at marriage for both men and women is generally rising, and more Arab women are staying single longer or not marrying at all.”¹⁰⁴

Among the new trends that Rashad et al. indicate are the increased autonomy of the individual in choosing his or her marriage partner and the decrease in early marriage as well as the increase in marriage age across the Arab world due to increased educational opportunities. The authors explain that, “traditional values surrounding girls’ virginity and family honor play a major role in Arab families’ decisions to marry off their daughters at young ages.”¹⁰⁵ Increased education throughout the Arab world has helped to reduce the number of early marriages, and Rashad et al. argue that, “more-educated women...generally marry later than their less-educated counterparts.” This increasing education seems to be the driving force behind many changes in gender dynamics in the Arab world today. Indeed, the authors suggest that increasing school enrollments for both boys and girls help to lessen the educational gap between husbands and wives.

In addition to gaining educational opportunities, young Arab women are increasingly present in the workforce and challenging ideas about the appropriate role for women and

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

the “traditional” expectation that women should remain at home. The growing number of educated women employed outside of the home corresponds with another phenomenon indicated by Rashad et al, which is that “increasing numbers of Arab women are single, forcing their societies to grapple with a “new” category of women. Successful career women are more likely to escape from the traditional stereotype and find opportunities for self-fulfillment beyond the roles of mother and wife.”¹⁰⁶ These women are directly challenging “traditional” gender roles and societal and familial expectations of them and assumptions about their abilities and potential as women.

Many of the trends in marriage practices that Rashad et al. suggest as indicative of the social change that is taking place across the Arab world are demonstrated in Yemen, but often to a lesser degree. Compared to other Arab countries, especially to its oil rich neighbors, Yemen is one of the poorest states with the least economic growth, and the highest percentage of the population below the poverty line. Its slow economic development and thus limited funding for education is one of the factors that Rashad et al. suggest contributes to its relatively strong adherence to traditional marriage patterns, in comparison with other countries.

The authors present data that compares marriage ages across the Arab world that demonstrates that Yemen continues to preserve traditional practices including early and nearly universal marriage. In Yemen, 17% of women are married between the ages of 15 and 19 years old, compared with 5% in Kuwait, 4% in Lebanon, and 1% in Tunisia. 59% of Yemeni women are married between the ages of 20 and 24, compared with 42% in Kuwait, 30% in Lebanon, and 15% in Tunisia. The authors show that only 3% of women in Yemen have not married by the age of 39, compared with 11% in Kuwait, 15% in

¹⁰⁶ Rashad et al. 5.

Tunisia, and 21% in Lebanon. Finally, among women who have been married for 5 years or less, only 5% in Yemen are more highly educated than their husbands, compared with 20% in Egypt and 35% in Lebanon. These statistics demonstrate that while Yemen may be experiencing some of the same trends as its Arab neighbors, in general it represents an example of the most traditional of the Arab countries regarding marriage practices.

During my research I encountered many of the trends discussed by Rashad et al, especially concerning the effects of increased education on marriage practices and perceptions of marriage. Especially among my informants, who were relatively privileged and had access to university education, attitudes towards marriage varied widely and were markedly different from those of their parents and the still widely held “traditional” ideas towards marriage and gender roles. In discussing the issue of marriage with my informants, I attempted to gain a sense of the broader patterns in marriage practices in Sana’a, as well as their personal experiences and perceptions of marriage.

During our interviews, each of my informants identified marriage as one of the main elements that shapes a woman’s life in Yemen. They described marriage as important both religiously and socially and both as a chance for women to gain new opportunities as well as a potentially restricting system. In *Between marriage and the market: Intimate politics and survival in Cairo*, Homa Hoodfar explores the way in which marriage shapes the lives of women in Arab society through her ethnographic study of neighborhoods in Cairo. Though her study deals specifically with one community in Cairo, the trends that she describes are common across the Arab world, and are particularly salient in terms of Yemeni society, as it is characterized by many of the practices that Hoodfar categorizes as “traditional.” Hoodfar demonstrates the paramount importance of marriage in Arab

societies by explaining that it is “probably the most important social event in the lives of Middle Eastern men and women. It is through marriage and having children that adulthood and self-realization are achieved.”¹⁰⁷ She indicates the practical significance of marriage by explaining that “In Egypt generally, like most other parts of the Muslim world, marriage is the only acceptable context for sexual activity and parenthood and provides the primary framework for the expression of masculinity and femininity and the fulfillment of gender roles.”¹⁰⁸ Finally, Hoodfar illuminates the various legal, social, and religious factors that shape gender relations within marriages in Egypt in the following manner:

Marriage in Egypt is regulated by custom, religion, and the legal system, which dictate different roles and responsibilities for men and women. Muslim marriage gives certain rights to a husband in return for his expected contribution to the family. Men are responsible for providing for their families... In return for these responsibilities, a husband is assumed to have the unilateral right to end his marriage without the consent of his wife. He also has the right to have as many as four wives on the condition that he can provide adequately and equally for all of them and treat them equally. Furthermore, at least according to the cultural interpretation of Islamic marriage mores and the legal codes in Egypt, a husband has the right to restrict his wife's physical mobility. This has come to be understood as the husband's right to prevent his wife from being employed.¹⁰⁹

Though Hoodfar is describing a particular Cairene context, the trends that she indicates above are equally applicable to the context of Sana’a. Just as in Egypt, marriage plays a role of prime importance in the life cycle of both men and women in Yemen, as it marks their transition to adulthood and the beginning of their sexual lives. Additionally, as Hoodfar indicated, marriage provides a framework for gender roles, as men and women have clearly demarcated responsibilities within marriage. Finally, through the structure of

¹⁰⁷ Homa Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 51.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Hoodfar 52.

rights and responsibilities, marriage also places restrictions upon both partners, and especially upon women – a reality that many of my informants found problematic.¹¹⁰

As an important social convention, the institution of marriage reflects the major social changes that are taking place in Yemen today. It was these changes that my informants highlighted as they described the “traditional” structure of marriage and the new challenges that it faces. While some heralded these challenges as bringing a welcome transformation in women’s lives through increased opportunities for independence and autonomy, others defended the value of the more traditional model of marriage. Many of my informants shared personal experiences about the ways in which upheavals in the traditional social fabric are affecting the experiences and possibilities of marriage in their own lives and the lives of their family and friends. It is this variety of opinion concerning the changes in marriage practices to which we now turn.

In the highly conservative culture of Sana’a, marriage represents an integral social practice as the sole sanctioned means for a legitimate relationship between a man and a woman who are not relatives. Additionally, as a woman generally remains in her family home and falls under her father’s responsibility until she moves to her husband’s house, marriage constitutes a potential opportunity for increased autonomy and independence from parental control. Finally, marriage is viewed not only as a social norm and a mark of adulthood, but also as a religious duty. As such, it has paramount importance in the lives of young Yemeni women.

Many of the discussions that I had with my informants about marriage centered on the benefits and drawbacks of what they referred to as “traditional” marriage. This form of marriage was often criticized as a hindrance to women’s personal advancement, though it

¹¹⁰ For more on marriage in Arab communities, see Nadine Naber and Diane Singerman.

remains the prevalent form of marriage in the capital and the almost exclusive form in rural areas. When my informants raised criticisms of “traditional” marriage, they generally meant a marriage arranged by parents or other senior family members between a bride and a groom who did not know each other and often never met until the day of the wedding. Sawsan described this kind of arranged marriage in the following terms.

See, in the past they didn't get to know each other. It was just between families. The mother of the boy likes a girl, so she goes and tells her mother, “We like your daughter, will you allow us to come and propose to your daughter?” The mother goes and talks to the father and says, “This or that family came and they want our daughter to get married to their son.” If the father says yes, then they first go and ask about this family. Ok, they're good. Then the girl's mother calls and says, “How is everything? We like you, you can come and have a party.” So the boy's mother comes and talks to the girl's mother, and they make an appointment where the issues will be discussed, where everything is decided. Then the men come to meet, the fathers and their brothers and their sons. They bring *qat*, they chew *qat*, and they talk about things, how much dowry they're going to pay and what they're going to do, even if the marriage is going to be after 5 years they have to decide on that day. What they have to bring for their daughter's engagement, what kind of jewelry, how much money, who's going to make the party, who's going to take that burden. So they decide all of these things and after one week they make a party, an engagement party. The mother of the groom comes and she puts the ring on the finger of the bride.

Also, he can see her in one way: a picture. A picture of her, after the engagement. a picture while she is wearing a scarf, without makeup, without anything. And the father has to make sure. Sometimes the father doesn't know; it's between the mothers. The mothers have a kind of conspiracy against the fathers for the sake of their daughters and the mother of the groom gives the mother of the bride a picture of her son and they exchange pictures.

In this description, Sawsan highlights the important factors that define what my informants labeled as “traditional” marriages, including the significant role played by the parents and the minimal role played by the bride and groom to be, as well as the necessity of the initial proposal made by the parents of the groom, the background check carried out by the parents of the bride, and finally the *qat* session during which the logistical negotiations take place. Finally, after the engagement, initial contact between the fiancées might begin, in the form of an exchange of photographs.

While this form of marriage was common in the past, the arranged marriages of today are becoming less rigid, illustrating both the dynamics of social change and the fluidity of

the categories of “tradition” and “modernity.” Arranged marriages still maintain the integral aspect of the family as negotiator, but many of today’s brides and grooms usually take on a much more active role and often insist on making the ultimate decision themselves. Sawsan describes the ways in which arranged marriages are changing through the increased freedom of interaction between couples during the engagement period.

Nowadays girls say, “Dad! I want to see him! I have to see him, I have to judge! I’m the one who’s gonna get married!”... If the father is open minded he will allow the groom to see his daughter, after the engagement and sometimes before the engagement... You know, the engagement starts with a ring, and then during the engagement period he can talk with her, and sometimes they make it a long engagement to let them get to know each other... And it differs from one family to another family. In some families the girl is allowed to talk with him using a cell phone after the engagement. Of course, what do they do? They talk during the night. Nobody knows. Well, the mother knows usually, if the father doesn’t. And some other families allow the bride and the groom to go out together, after the engagement, something like a date, but there must be somebody with them, a sister or a brother. ... and if she wants to stay with him and believes he’s a good guy and she decides that she’s going to keep him and he decides that he’s going to keep her (but of course he’s going to keep her because he’s the one who proposed), they continue and they arrange for a day for the wedding and they prepare for everything. But if she doesn’t agree then she returns everything he gave her.

Sawsan’s descriptions illustrate the changing character of arranged marriages, including the increasing freedoms that women are enjoying in their choice of marriage partner, which is a welcome change for many young women from the “traditional” practices of the past. However, despite the fact that daughters’ demands for more say in the matter of their marriage are more often being met, in the cases of arranged marriages it remains the parents who retain the power to screen potential suitors.

As my informants discussed their own experiences concerning marriage as well as the various trends in marriage practices occurring in their society, they continually returned to their construction of a dichotomy between “tradition” and “religion” to illustrate and emphasize their views. They emphasized that many of the conservative and restrictive

ideas around marriage in Yemeni society were a product of “tradition” rather than “religion.” Many of my informants indicated that the practices of forced marriage, early marriage, and the prohibition against meeting your fiancée before the wedding day were effects of “tradition” and offered “religion” as a logical antidote that could combat these repressive practices. Through this distinction in discussions of marriage, they once again affirmed Islam as the ultimate protector of women’s rights and the ideal moral compass for society and for individual behavior. Additionally, they employ the dichotomy of “tradition” and “religion” to justify both their critique of social practices and their own non-“traditional” behaviors and views.

Sumayya, the unmarried 26-year-old institute director who was introduced in the last chapter, explained one way in which the dichotomy between “tradition” and “religion” is expressed through the issue of marriage while also engaging issues of gender roles.

In Islam we don’t have something that says, “Women are like this and men are like this, women have to do this and men have to do this.” But if you read about the history of the prophet, peace be upon him, and everything that happened in that time, you will find stories that prove that women have a role, different than what we have in our society. In our society, I believe that the traditions and customs control us more than Islam. For example, if I’m a man, and I want to marry a woman – imagine I’m a man and you are a Yemeni woman and I want to marry you – according to Islam, according to what the prophet said, I have the right to see you, to look at you, because maybe I will not feel comfortable, or maybe I will like you but you will not feel comfortable with me. But according to our culture they said no, you can’t see her. You have to wait for the wedding day and then you will see her. We have some stories that when they saw each other some of them do not accept each other and they say, “No, I do not accept her, I don’t want her to be my wife,” or “I don’t want him to be my husband.” And then they have divorce. I believe in our society we have two different ways, Islam and traditional customs. Traditional customs control us more than Islam.

Sumayya uses the categories of “tradition” and “religion” to demonstrate the rights given to women by Islam which are often denied in Yemeni society and to argue for a reevaluation of societal customs and gender norms. She continues her explanation of women’s marital rights in Islam by describing a woman’s right to have a contract stipulating her rights after marriage.

The woman has the right to say, “Yes, I want to marry him” or “No, I don’t want to marry him.” I know that if you have some conditions for your marriage, like “I want to study” or live in a separate house, you have this right. So you can write your terms and conditions on paper and have him sign it and then he has to follow these conditions. He does not have the right to say, “You will not study,” because I have a paper that says I have the right to study and the right to live in a separate house.

Here Sumayya demonstrates her understanding of “authenticated” Islam through her knowledge of a woman’s legal rights, and uses this knowledge to support her criticisms of the frequent denial of such rights.

Ghayda, the 27-year-old director of an institute, uses her understanding of “correct” Islam and Islamic history to criticize her society’s neglect of women’s rights in marriage.

A lot of stories prove that the woman could choose her husband, in the past, but the situation changed with tradition. Now the brother or the father can marry off his daughter or his sister without her knowledge. She cannot refuse, she cannot say, “Ok, let me think about it, I would like to know this man, I would like to give my opinion at least.” There are even a lot of cases where the woman gets married without any idea about it. She doesn’t know that they are marrying her off. You cannot imagine. On the day of the wedding, they just surprise her, because there was a rich man who proposed and they accepted. She cannot give any opinion, but in the past she could. Islam really respects the woman, but tradition is really hard on the woman. Tradition is just for the benefit of the man. And this comes generation after generation after generation.

This definition of Islam as empowering for women in contrast to “tradition,” which disregards women’s rights, allowed my informants to critique their society’s practices of marriage and expectations of gender roles while basing their critique in a culturally respected source.

Rawda, the unmarried 26-year-old lab technician, elaborated on this distinction as she explained that Yemeni society follows “traditional” conservative conceptions of appropriate gender roles while “religion” allows for more personal freedoms.

Until now we haven’t reached the level that we can accept that a male will know a female and they will fall in love and get married. No, we cannot accept it in the traditional way of thinking. We should make it clear that it’s not linked to religion. In Islam you have the right to know the person before marriage. You have the right to talk to him. You have the right to go out with him, to sit with him, to understand him. But here in Yemen we think traditionally, we don’t think from the religious point of view. What the society says, we follow it

traditionally. That's our problem I think. Even the religion, sometimes we do not put it as the first priority. No. Tradition first, and then we think of religion, and that's wrong.

Luckily for Rawda, her father allows his daughters to choose their spouses, but many Yemeni girls do not enjoy that option. Rawda once again uses the dichotomy of "religion" and "tradition" to criticize this denial.

My father will not force me to marry. [He says,] "If you want him, just go and marry him." Even if he doesn't agree with my opinion, even if he doesn't agree with me, he will not force me. He will not reach that point. He will say, "Why didn't you accept?" but he will not force. But some people do force, and sometimes they get married without knowing, because parents, or the father or the brother will do it behind her back, she doesn't know, and that is forbidden in Islam. If it is that way, it's illegal. If they force her, it's illegal in Islam. But, as I told you, we follow tradition; we don't follow religion. If we followed religion, we would be better than that.

Rawda's categorization of forced marriage as a "traditional" and thus religiously illegitimate practice was echoed by many of my informants, who used the label of "tradition" to de-legitimize patriarchal customs. 23-year-old Zahra gives an example that illustrates Rawda's criticism of "traditional" forced marriages, and similarly condemns the practice by citing Islam:

My neighbor, her father chose her husband. He said, "He's a good man, he has respect. All the people in his family respect him." She said, "I don't want to marry." He took her out of the university, she was in the first year, and he married her off. I feel sorry for her... She told me that her husband asked her, "Do you like me?" She said to her husband. "No!" He said, "If I die, you will marry again!" "No, I will feel relaxed! I don't want to marry again!" She's my age. In Islam it's not allowed to have girls married by force, but some people have a mind like stone.

Throughout my discussions with my informants concerning marriage, they offered varied perceptions and critiques of the institution, and all of them acknowledged that it was a factor of fundamental importance in the lives of Yemeni women.

When I asked my informants to elaborate on the importance of marriage in Yemen, many of them indicated its multi-layered significance. Hanan was a 20-year-old university student studying civil engineering, a rare subject for a young woman in

Yemen. As one of only 13 girls in a department with 350 male students, she was very proud to explain to me that her department was one of the most difficult and selective in the whole university. I met Hanan at the wedding of a cousin of Fatima, my coworker and informant, and we quickly became friends. I saw her again the next week at another wedding for another of Fatima's cousins, and I requested an interview. She was very excited about the idea, but explained that she was not easy for her to go out whenever she wanted; she first had to discuss and negotiate her plans with her parents. It was three weeks before we were able to make an appointment, and we finally arranged to meet at the Arabic language institute where I lived for an interview. As she was unaccustomed to traveling alone, her younger brother escorted her as far as the gate of our institute. When I came to greet her I was surprised to find her flustered, both nervous to be in an unknown neighborhood on her own and excited to be trying something new. She explained after the interview that since she usually just stays at home and goes to the university, it was something of an adventure to come out to a new area, see a new institute, and do an interview. We conducted our interview in the garden of my institute, where we sat at a white plastic picnic table and attempted to talk over the sound of cars rumbling by outside the garden walls. Because there were male teachers also in the garden, and male employees tending the grounds, Hanan kept her *niqab* on throughout the hour and a half that we spent together. In our discussion about the importance of marriage, Hanan explained the following:

It's actually important not only in Yemen, it's part of our religion. When a person, either girl or a boy, wants to feel comfortable, he must get married. We have an *ayah* in our Holy Qur'an which says... "You get comfort when you get married."¹¹¹ It's not because we are Yemeni, it's because we have to.

¹¹¹ Qur'an 2:187, translated by Pickthall:

Hanan's sentiments were echoed by Habiba, the 23-year-old English teacher:

It's important not just in Yemen. It's important in Islam. We say, "You have to complete your *din* [religion], because this is something important for you to protect yourself from *haram*. When you have a home, you have children, you won't look to do bad things, so it's important in Islam.

Though both Hanan and Habiba are still unmarried, they expressed their understanding that marriage was part of "correct" Islamic practice. In addition to the importance stemming from "religion" however, Habiba also explained that marriage held importance for women due to "traditional" social practices and gendered expectations of them:

The girl should marry so she can leave her father's house because her brothers will get married and their wives will come and they will make her like a maid. Women in Yemen are afraid from this point; that their brothers will marry and their wives will come and make them like a maid. So you have to get married even if, like me, you work and you go out and you have a good father and mother, Alhamdulillah. But I'm afraid of the future, from when my brothers will get married and will bring their wives and we will live in the same home and there will be a lot of problems.

These two women illustrate the complicated and multifaceted nature of marriage for young women in Sana'a, and the ways in which the categories of "tradition" and "religion" are both expressed in overlapping terms through the issue of marriage.

While Habiba and Hanan illustrate the positive aspects of marriage in terms of fulfilling a spiritual duty as well as allowing a woman to gain a measure of independence from her family's control, many of my informants emphasized more negative and restrictive features of married life, which reflect their critique of "traditional" expectations of women. During an interview with Rawda, the 26-year-old lab technician, I asked if she was married. She answered, "No, I'm not. Thank God!" When I inquired if she had had any desire to get married in the future she responded with the following:

"It is made lawful for you to go in unto your wives on the night of the fast. They are raiment for you and ye are raiment for them... ."

For now, no, because I have passion. I have dreams, hopes that I want to follow and accomplish. I cannot do both of them at the same time, I would be lying to myself if I said I could...I'm the kind of person who always likes freedom, but with marriage you would carry more responsibilities that you are bound to. I cannot just leave them behind and go on with my dreams. For example, I like traveling a lot. It enriches my experiences and ideas. But when you are married, no.

Here Rawda expresses her impression of marriage as a restriction on her independence and as an obstacle to achieving her goals and following her dreams. Her sentiment that marriage represented a possible impediment to women's mobility and personal freedoms was echoed by Sumayya, the 26-year-old director of an institute. Sumayya pointed out that it was often the husband's narrow idea of gender roles that posed problems for ambitious women.

For the man marriage is important because he wants someone to help him at home, to wait on him, to serve him. I don't mean that they don't love their wives, but for the men it's so important to have a wife at home to serve them, to be ready for him for different things. Because of that they refuse her if she wants to work or to be outside.

The concerns of Sumayya and Rawda demonstrate that "traditional" expectations of the role of a married woman are often seen as an undue restriction.

This fear that marriage presents an impediment to women's opportunities was expressed by many of my informants, especially in terms of educational opportunities.

Sawsan, the unmarried 25-year-old teacher, related the story of her mother's marriage at the age of 16:

She finished middle school only. She stopped studying before she got married. My grandmother didn't allow her to go to school anymore. That's what happens, you know; families force their girls to get married. They force them to stop going to school and when they stop going to school they don't have any aim to live for, so they get married. They sometimes think that they're going to get rid of their families that way, that they're going to get rid of that prison. Then the disaster comes. Another new prison, smaller than the first one.

Sawsan's mother's story is typical for women of her generation, who rarely graduated from high school due to early marriages. Today, though many more girls are completing their secondary school education, especially in the capital, marriage still poses an

obstacle to the further educational opportunities that are increasingly available to them, due to the “traditional” expectation that a married woman’s role is in the home, caring for her family. Farida, the 26-year-old lecturer at a university, related the story of her younger sister to illustrate this issue:

My youngest sister finished secondary school but she didn’t start to study in the university because of her husband. She stopped studying because directly after the marriage she had a baby, so there was no time to take care of the baby and study.

Farida presented the example of her sister to explain the ways in which marriage can limit a woman’s potential by restricting her educational opportunities and subjecting her to her husband’s “traditional” ideas about the appropriate role for his wife.

Another contested aspect of “traditional” marriages is the heavy involvement of families in the all aspects of the arrangements and proceedings. In such traditional marriages it is generally the mothers who take on the task of matchmaking. Especially during the “wedding season” of late summer in which most marriages take place, mothers are preoccupied with finding suitable spouses for their eligible sons and daughters.

Ghayda, the unmarried, 27-year-old director of an institute, described the process after I inquired about how marriage matches traditionally were made:

At weddings, that’s the best place and time to find a good woman for your son, and to prepare your daughter to have a good husband. It’s from both sides. All of them are preparing for this one goal, both the mother of the son and the mother of the daughter. They work hard during the wedding season, which is the summer time, from July to August. It’s a rush time to find a good daughter for your son, or the other way around.

While some of my informants chafed under the overly watchful eye of their parents, others cherished their family’s involvement in their personal affairs. For these women, their parents served as valuable allies in the sometimes-harrowing process of finding a suitable husband. Karima, the 25-year-old English teacher, viewed the process of finding a suitor as a cooperative effort between herself and her parents.

For me, I prefer the traditional way... The man comes to my parents and he talks about his work and his dreams and I tell my parents my conditions. And my parents tell him "my girl wants her own house, she doesn't want to live with your parents." And for the marriage gift, my parents say, "My girl wants this amount" and he says, "No I can't pay that amount. I can pay this amount." And if he's a good man, you'll accept whatever he pays and if you feel that he is a devil, you tell him so much money that he can not pay, just to get him to go away. Then there is the engagement party and before then he has to see me and I will see him, and sometimes when you see his eyes you will feel that he is your future, and then after that he says "Yes, I want her," and you say "Yes, I want him," So they make an engagement party.

Karima's view of a "traditional" marriage demonstrates the changing nature of these marriages, as she emphasizes that she herself has the ultimate choice in the matter, rather than her parents. Her romantic description of arranged marriages was echoed by many of my informants who understood the value of the traditional system while simultaneously claiming their own authority in the matter, a distinctly "modern" phenomenon.

Farida is another of my informants who insists upon the value of "traditional" marriages. Though she is university educated, ambitious to travel and pursue a master's degree, and employed outside of the home, she remains committed to her preference for an arranged marriage:

My family should be involved in these things; I can't make this decision by myself. I think my family should make a decision, and after that I will make a decision. Even now sometimes people propose to marry me and I don't know them, I just hear from my mother, because my parents have experience. Even if I work and I am open-minded, I don't have the experience that they have, so they should know everything about him and after that they tell me about everything. They should find out everything about him, and if they agree on him then they come to me and ask my opinion. They tell me everything about his life, his work, his family. Then at that time, it's my opinion. I can say yes or no. We have that flexibility in my family. At the end it's my decision because it's my life....

During the engagement period we can meet each other, but the family should monitor this relation, not make it free, no. He can come to our house and see me and I see him, its ok. And even in Islam, in our religion, he can see your face and you should see him before marriage, so its ok if during the engagement period you want to see the groom or he wants to see you, but you should wear something conservative.

Here Farida defends the importance of an arranged marriage in light of her understanding of "correct" Islam, which stipulates the nature of the relationship between the fiancées.

Additionally, while Farida values the importance of the protective involvement of the

family in the engagement process, she is also emphasizes her “modern” awareness of women’s rights in marriage, such as the right to have the ultimate say in the matter of her future husband and to see him and speak with him before the wedding.

Farida’s sentiments were embodied in the experience of Intisar, the 24-year-old teacher, who recently became engaged through the method of family networking. Though Intisar admits that she had previously been against the idea of arranged marriages, she now sees the value of family involvement. When I asked her how she became engaged, she explained the following:

You know, it’s all a coincidence, because his mother knew about me and our family, and she saw me in a wedding. So first his mother came to my family, and then he came to have an interview with my father. You know, my father wants to know a lot of things about them. So he came to my father to introduce himself, to talk about his life, what he does, everything.

I asked if her fiancée was intimidated by this experience and she replied that “Yeah! He said it was worse than an exam.” After this interview her father presented the new suitor’s proposition to Intisar and it was time for her to make her decision.

I had to see him. I had to know a lot of things about him. Then of course, in Islam we have the engagement time to get to know each other very well. Then if you like him and he likes you, then you can complete it, or if not, you can take off your ring... Of course, first of all you have to know that he is a good person, that he is working. You have to ask about his family, his neighborhood, his friends, his job. We even asked his boss, my father’s friend called him. You have to know a lot of things, then you can decide yes or no. Then after the engagement you can talk to him.

Although Intisar was comfortable and confident in her decision to accept this unknown suitor’s proposal, and she explained that in her understanding of “correct” Islam, such a situation was mitigated by the engagement period, she admitted that she was surprised that she had ended up in an arranged marriage considering that many of her friends were married to men that they had met outside of the family.

A lot of my friends get married to men they meet in work, in companies, in university. In the past it was between families, but now, no. I thought before that when I got engaged I would have to see my fiancé before, that we would have to meet each other. But I don’t know, it’s

like destiny... Before I was engaged I thought it was not good between families, because they have to know each other! It's not only to get married, you have to live with this person! He has to be your children's father, everything! It's your future! But now I think that if it's between families and you know him very well before marriage, it's ok.

Ultimately Intisar returned to the importance of families as she made her case for the value of arranged marriages. She explained that an arranged marriage provides the added insurance of the explicit approval of both families, and thus offers a guaranteed system of support for the new couple, saying, "I felt that since his mother chose me, then I would not have obstacles with his family, but maybe if he had chosen me, maybe his mother would say "I do not like this girl, I do not like her sister, her family."

While Intisar considered herself a "modern" young woman who had imagined that she would choose her own husband without the influence of her family, Yemeni customs that my informants defined as "traditional" ultimately shaped her path. Many of my other informants expressed a similar tension within families or between families concerning the importance of arranged marriages. Fatima, the 20-year-old accountant, explained that while her family is accepting of premarital interaction between young men and women, the family of her brother's wife is not, and thus he had to follow "traditional" protocol while courting her.

My brother didn't know his wife before, but she is friends with my sister in school. My sister told her, "My brother wants to propose to you," and she accepted because she loved my sister so much, and my family went to her family and my mother saw her and said ok and asked for an engagement. Her family asked about my brother, his work, everything about him, and they made the engagement. And he saw her during the engagement. But they didn't speak before the wedding. My father is open, but her family is very closed.

Here Fatima explains the difference between her "open" family, who embodies the "modern" qualities of allowing the daughters to study, work, and choose their own marriage partners, and the family of her brother's fiancée which is "closed," and insists on strictly "traditional" gender relations.

Fatima expressed her appreciation that her father was sympathetic to her attitude toward marriage, but not all of my informants found such harmony of opinion within their family. Sumayya, the 26-year-old director of an institute, indicated a conflict of interest between her parents and herself when I asked her how she might find a husband in the future.

We have two ways to talk about. One about myself, the other about my parents. In the opinion of my parents, the best way is for someone who doesn't know me, his parents know me and they say, "She's good, she's beautiful, she works hard, she can be a wife for our son, so we can ask her," but in my opinion this is impossible for me, because I think I have to know him, I have to get some information about him, to know how he thinks.

Both Sumayya and others of my informants explained that this unwillingness amongst the older generations to accept the idea of a woman choosing her own spouse is linked to "traditional" ideas about propriety and shame.

The "traditional" assumption is that a girl who chooses her husband without her parents' input admits to knowing men outside of her family, thus suggesting that she might be engaged in improper relationships and calling her morals into question. While many families reject these assumptions in favor of trusting their daughters, such beliefs are still widely held. Amira, the 34-year-old teacher who is widowed and hoping to marry again, explains this view:

Here in Yemen it is not appropriate for a girl to choose the man she loves. Maybe her family will get angry and say, "You know people! You know men! You're not good! You didn't learn well!" So it is never appropriate for Yemeni girls to choose the person they love. For example, if I love someone, I can't go to my family and say "I love this person, can I marry this person?" My family would get angry, "No! He is the one who has to come to us, you are not the one who chooses, he is the one who must come." These are the customs in Yemen.

It is these "traditional" attitudes towards appropriate gender roles and gender relations that many of my informants are challenging through their behavior and reliance on

“correct” religious understanding, despite the opposition they meet in their families and society.

Karima, the 25-year-old teacher explained that those women who attempt to find their own spouses find resistance not only within their own families, but also among men in the community, who view their activities as suspect and inherently untrustworthy. “Some girls here are searching for marriage by themselves, but the girls who get lucky are about ten per cent only because the men here have the idea that a girl who accepts to talk to a man will accept to talk to other men, which is shameful in our community.” Hanan, the 20-year-old university student, explains that even in cases in which men and women meet outside of the family and the man follows the proper procedure for proposal, the fact that the couple met in an unsupervised setting causes suspicion on the part of the parents.

I want to tell you something, for Yemeni people, anytime there is a girl and she is working or she is studying and one of her classmates or coworkers comes to propose to her, I think it’s not very welcome. Maybe he will be a good one, but it’s not that welcome of an idea in her family, they prefer the traditional way.

Hanan’s experience demonstrates that many families still subscribe to “traditional” expectations about gender roles and the proper interaction between unmarried men and women.

Though many of my informants explained that the older generations subscribed more to “traditional” ideas about marriage than they did, it was by no means the rule, and in some cases the roles were reversed. Hanan explained that in her own family her mother seemed to have more “modern” ideas about marriage than her 24-year-old brother who held a good job as an accountant. Hanan explained that her mother encouraged him to find a nice girl to marry on his own, but that he was hesitant to take initiative: “My mother said, ‘If there is a girl, you know her and she has good ethics, and you are

convinced with her, it's ok, no problem.' But sometimes he says, 'I'm depending on you, mom.'”

While some of my informants supported the more “traditional” form of marriages arranged between families, many others were highly critical of such customs and insisted on their right to choose their own spouses. These women represented a new cultural phenomenon in the highly conservative capital city, in which well-educated women are increasingly meeting men through work and education. As they recognized their ability to create relationships on their own terms, many of them grew increasingly critical of what they defined as the “traditional” customs dictating interactions between men and women. 20-year-old Fatima explained her view on the situation, arguing that marriage customs and gender relations should keep up with the changing times, as long as they stayed within the bounds of “correct” morality.

Some girls are against the idea of knowing their husband before marriage. Here in Sana'a, the woman doesn't know the man before getting married. She meets him on the wedding day and sees him for the first time then. But some families today think you should see your husband before the wedding day. Some families keep their ideas in the past, and some families change their ideas in a good way. Because girls are not in the past. Girls now go to school, go to college, speak with guys. It's something different. They go to the internet, chatting. You can't just put her in a prison. It's opening. In the past women couldn't get an education or go to the market, it was more closed. But now the woman goes out and knows everything. How come she shouldn't know her husband? It is not logical. I can go to the market, I speak with male customers, but when I get married I can't speak with my husband? It is not fair or logical.

For me, I have friends. I have boy friends, but I think it depends on the family. I think if your family knows you and knows your morals, they will make you free and encourage you to do anything that you want. But if you behave in a wrong way, your family will have to make some decisions for you. For me, I hope to find my husband in college or work. I don't want my family to try to engage me. I am against this. I want to know him before I get married. I feel it's better to know his personality, what he looks like, his life, everything about him. Not just come face to face on the wedding day and surprise!

Here Fatima is referring to “morals” based in her family's understanding of “correct” or “authenticated” Islam and reiterating the idea that Yemeni women can liberate

themselves from “traditional” restrictions and narrow gender roles, and gain independence and mobility, by adhering to ideas of pious behavior.

Another critique of traditional marriage was offered by Ghayda, the 27-year-old director of an institute. When I asked for her opinion of arranged marriages, she had this to offer:

I don't like it at all. If I did I would have been married 5 or 6 years ago. Because it's really hard to build your life and then let others choose your life for you. It's hard to accept a husband based on the opinion of others, you have to judge for yourself. It's not good to leave your life in the hands of the others, I cannot accept this idea.

Especially for ambitious women like Ghayda who excel in their work and studies, earn an independent income, and see themselves as “modern” and independent, it becomes difficult to accept their family's claim for control over their lives. Thus, many of my informants explored ways to compromise with “traditional” ideas by working within the system to reach their goals of independence. Sumayya, the 26-year-old director of an institute, explained a hypothetical way in which she might overcome the “traditional” rejection of a woman's self-determination in marriage:

According to our culture, traditions, society, it's unacceptable. For my parents, they will not accept this. I think if someone loves me and says, “Oh, she's great, I want to marry her,” I think they would not accept this. They will just think, “Oh, they love each other, they meet each other, they talk together, they will have some ideas in their minds!” So it's unacceptable, but we can have something like an agreement. Like “I love you, you love me, we want to get married, and we don't want to have a relationship without marriage because we respect each other and we want to be together forever, so you go to my parents but don't say that you know me and I will say that I don't know you.”

Sumayya's innovation of a subversive way to bypass family control is only one example of the ways in which societal changes are affecting the institution of marriage. As globalization, increased mobility, and new educational and occupational opportunities affect the fabric of Yemeni society, so do they affect the institution of marriage and the attitudes of young women concerning their future unions.

One major shift that my informants indicated is that education and work experience are replacing marriage as the first priorities in the lives of many “modern” women.

Sawsan, the 25-year-old English teacher, illustrates this phenomenon by explaining the tension caused in her own family by the shifting emphasis on women’s education:

I’m planning to get a masters’ degree and get married... Actually, in the past I refused to get married because of my studies, and this was a reason for my mother’s divorce, because our father wanted us to get married at a very young age, at 9 or 12. When we were born his older brother proposed to me for his son. My uncle said, “Your daughter will be for my son.” And my father said “I give her for you.” While I was still a baby, I was an infant! And my mother said, “You know what? My children are going to study. My girls are going to study and they will be teachers or whatever they want, but they will not get married. They will be the ones who will decide that.”

Sawsan’s experience is indicative of the broader changes taking place and the growing generational gap in terms of conceptions of gender roles, as her mother dropped out of school before she got married at 16-years-old, while Sawsan completed her undergraduate studies, is employed, hopes to continue her education with a master’s degree, and remains unmarried at the age of 25.

Many of my informants echoed Sawsan’s emphasis on education, expressing that, in their eyes, it was a prerequisite for a successful marriage. Ghayda explained that, “If [a woman] finishes her university, she can get married; it’s an appropriate time. Then she can raise her children in an appropriate way; she can deal with married life in a good way.” Farida illustrated this idea as she spoke about her own life, saying, “Every woman wants to get married, but in the proper time. I think now it’s ok for me if I get married because I finished studying in the university and I started working, and if I find a good person, it’s ok for me.” Karima, the 25-year-old teacher, illuminates the practical aspect of this new shift by explaining the importance of achieving the possibility of financial independence in case of divorce, saying, “I don't think that men are devils. Some girls

think that men are devils, you know. But in case my marriage didn't work, I wanted a certificate to work. So I taught myself how to improve myself before I get married. I have a plan to get married and now I feel I'm ready to do it.” Though both Farida and Karima are proponents of arranged marriages, they advocate gaining practical work experience before marriage, thus complicating the dichotomized categories of “traditional” and “modern.”

Another aspect in which attitudes towards marriage are changing is in the qualities that are valued in a husband. Zahra, the 23-year-old secretary expressed her distaste for those girls who only considered money when choosing a spouse, while she, on the other hand, was looking for someone with whom she could connect on a deeper level.

You know, Yemeni girls, some of them are looking for money. They don't care if he's married to 2 or 3 [wives], or if he has children or not. Just money. And lots of girls told me, “If he has money in his pocket, that's enough, what more do you want?” I told them, why are you looking for money? Money can come and go, but the man you will marry, you will spend your life with him. Most of them say, “He has a car!” I told them, “You will not marry the car!” I don't care about money, because if I cared I would have been married already. I want a man who likes me just for me, just as I am.

Many of the women I spoke with expressed a desire to find a husband who would share their “modern” attitudes towards gender roles and encourage them in their education and occupational exploits. Sumayya and Farida, both 26 years old and in the workforce, expressed similar opinions:

Sumayya

He has to be kind, open-minded. He has to accept that I will work, I will study, and I will be an effective woman in the society. I will not be at home. I will not just have babies and wait on him at home. So, if I find someone who thinks this way, who accepts me as I am, I will not hesitate to marry him.

Farida

He should be ambitious and open-minded and flexible and educated and informed, these are the most important, because a lot of men, especially here in our country, they are the opposite of these things. Maybe because I'm educated and informed and open-minded, you know, I would like my husband in the future to be like me... I want him to encourage me to be better,

to improve myself with him, not suppress my abilities. Because of that I haven't gotten married yet.

As Farida noted, these new expectations concerning married life may serve as an obstacle for some women who have difficulty finding such open-minded men in their conservative milieu. As Ghayda suggested, "Here in Yemen it's very difficult to find a good man who is open minded and can accept that you work. Its not that easy to find a good person to marry who will respect you."

This concern that many Yemeni men remain committed to "traditional" gender roles and are unwilling to entertain the possibility of a wider role for women was echoed among many of my informants who explained that not only were many educated, open-minded women frustrated in finding similarly open-minded husbands, but that their education served to compound their difficulty in getting married. This was partly because if a woman waited until after completing her studies in university to get married, she was considered to be past her prime. When I asked 23-year-old Habiba when she wanted to get married, she answered, "After two years or three years, because after that the chance will be gone. Here in Yemen, if you are 25 or 26 or 27, *khalas* [it's over/it's finished]."

Sumayya, the 26-year-old director of an institute echoed Habiba's concerns, explaining that she felt compelled to get married before she came to be considered too old, despite her desires to continue her studies towards a doctoral degree. When I asked her if she hoped to get married in the future, she responded with the following:

Inshallah, I hope so, because now I am a spinster in the eyes of my society, so I have to get married. Not only because of the society, but also because it's my desire now. I finished the university, I got the master's degree, I wish to get a PhD, *inshallah*, but I want to get married in this time, because it is *waqt khateer* [a dangerous time]. Here, after 22 you are a spinster.

In the case of a woman who has completed her studies in the university, not only does her age pose an obstacle to her eligibility for marriage, but her education does as well. My

informants explained that in the “traditional” mindset of many Yemeni men, an educated woman poses a threat to their authority and thus becomes an undesirable bride. Ghayda, as an unmarried, educated, 27-year-old woman, explained this view:

A lot of educated, successful women who are very respectable cannot get married because there are no men who can accept this kind of women. They say, “She will fight against me, she will compete with me. I would like to have a woman who will just say yes to everything and obey my orders.” This is the traditional way. We often say, “The more you get educated, the more your chances for marriage decrease. The more you get involved in work, the more your chances for marriage decrease.” So this is the situation.

Here Ghayda illuminates the way in which some Yemeni men view educated, independent women in a negative light, as the men consider them to pose a threat to their familial authority and societal dominance. Like many of my other informants who expressed disappointment at the lack of open-minded, eligible bachelors, Ghayda is personally affected by this situation, and thus speaks not only from observation, but also from her own experience.

The irony of this situation is that young men and women in Sana’a are both enjoying higher education as the country develops and more opportunities arise. It is now becoming common for young men to complete their university studies, pursue further education in graduate or professional school, gain work experience, and even study abroad before marrying. If the number of educated young men who have traveled abroad is increasing, then why did so many of my informants express frustration with finding potential spouses who share their open-mindedness and who could accept that they also choose to study and work? The answer to this question was suggested by a number of my informants who indicated a new phenomenon that they viewed as the source of their troubles.

My informants explained that many educated men who had studied abroad and then returned home to marry refused to choose a bride from among their educated classmates or coworkers, but rather reverted to “traditional” customs by marrying a less educated girl (often “a girl from the village”), over whom they felt they would have more control.

Zahra, a 23-year-old secretary explained her view on the situation and shared the story of her own cousin as an example.

Today you see that highly educated people don't want to marry an educated girl. Because the people who get scholarships and they study outside of Yemen, and they see a different life outside, educated women, women who are free to have relationships with whoever she wants, outside. When they come back to Yemen they ask their mothers, “Go and find me a girl, I want to marry.” She finds him a girl who is in university. No, he doesn't want a girl who's more highly educated than him. He wants to be the only one who understands everything. So he finds an uneducated girl, who has been to high school, and that's enough... One of my cousins didn't continue her studies. She stopped in the first grade of elementary school. She is now 23 and she married a doctor last year and now she has a baby.

Like Ghayda, Zahra speaks from personal experience, as she remains unmarried at the age of 23.

Sawsan, the 25-year-old English teacher, presented a critique of this phenomenon, explaining that while educated men initially choose uneducated brides so that they could have greater control over them, there soon emerges a lack of understanding between the two spouses, which drives the husband to find a second wife whom he can relate to and who he feels can understand him. I interviewed Sawsan on a sunny afternoon in July in the garden of the institute where we both taught. It was warm out, and we were both in black *baltos* and *hijab*, so we sat under the shade of a tree and sipped carrot juice to cool ourselves as she explained the dynamics of education and marriage in Sana'a.

Most of the time [men] prefer uneducated women, I don't know why. Even if he's educated and he has a master's degree, he prefers to get married to an uneducated woman. There are men who have high education and they go to their mothers and ask them to find a girl from the village.... They say it's difficult to control an educated woman, but after a while he looks for a second wife, and that second wife is educated. Some of my friends, their brothers got married to uneducated girls, and after a while they discover that they cannot deal with them

because it's difficult to communicate with them. It becomes like, only for sex. They discover this in the end because when he talks, she doesn't understand him. He says, "What do you think of this?" and she says, "You're everything, it's only you." And he says, "Hmm, it's only me, nobody's there, so let's get another one." So the first one is the mother of his children and the next one becomes his friend and everything to him.

Like Ghayda and Zahra, Sawsan remains unmarried though she is in what Sumayya referred to as *waqt khateer*, or a dangerous time, due to her increasing age and the accompanying decrease in marriageability. Though she desires to get married soon, she must wait until a suitable man comes to propose. When I asked her about her future plans, she answered over the sound of cars honking on the other side of the garden wall, "You know, I'm planning to get married and then get a master's degree, but up to now there's no special guy... I'm asking Allah, *Wallahi* [by God], I'm calling for a special one." I inquired, "Do you just plan to wait until a suitable man comes to propose?" She replied with a sigh, "*Wallahi*, that's what we do here, we wait."

A number of my informants indicated that one of the unfortunate results of this situation is that some young girls are now voluntarily dropping out of school in order to increase their marriage chances, due to the perception that educated girls are undesirable marriage partners. Khadijah, the unmarried 26-year-old woman who works with the media, had this to say:

In the past we thought that parents prevented their daughters from learning and studying, but now in school I see my sister and her friends. The girls themselves don't want to complete their studies. My oldest sister studied and has a full education, but now she's sitting at home and she's too old to marry, even though she's only 28, but this is the idea. So most of the girls now leave school at an early age to marry, with their consent.

Khadijah found this phenomenon troubling and detrimental, and she emphasized that education rather than marriage was the key to a woman's success in life. In her own case, she had chosen the path of independence and education to the point where she went so far as to forswear marriage altogether.

I think I will never marry because I believe that marriage is the biggest obstacle to women. Most of the working women and women leaders here in Yemen are divorced or widows – I prefer widows – but they have children, 2 or 3. I don't want to be divorced or widowed with children. I feel free, I feel happy, so I don't need men. This should be the opinion of all women in Yemen... I have friends, close friends, who are married and are now regretting it when they see me working, traveling, happy, laughing, like the old days.

Khadijah is a rare example of a Yemeni woman who completely eschews marriage and labels it the prime obstacle for Yemeni women's advancement, though she is not alone in her criticisms of this social institution and the patriarchal norms that often accompany it.

This chapter has explored marriage as one of the major institutions that affects the lives of Yemeni women and that is affected and shaped by contemporary social change. My informants approach and explain issues surrounding marriage by returning to the constructed binary of "tradition" and "religion." As has been discussed in earlier chapters, this dichotomy is founded in the assumption that "religion," meaning Islam, is the ultimate provider of women's rights, and that "tradition," or non-"Islamic" cultural practices that are harmful to women, are illegitimate. In terms of issues of marriage, my informants employ these categorizations both in order to criticize patriarchal Yemeni customs, such as the denial of choice in marriage partner or the denial of the right to see one's fiancée before marriage, and in order to justify their own choices and attitudes towards marriage.

My informants used this dichotomy in order to approach the myriad concerns that they expressed on the topic of marriage, and through their discussion of marriage illuminated the great variety of opinions on this subject. As we have seen, though all of my informants were critical of some "traditional" practices, such as forced marriage and early marriage, many of my informants were proponents of arranged marriages and

marriages with significant family involvement. Others among them insisted on their right to choose their own partner free from family pressure. Many of my informants explained that this variety of opinions often created tensions within their families. This tension also illuminated the ways in which social change, including increased educational and occupational opportunities for women, is affecting ideas about appropriate gender roles and creating a disconnect between parents and children in terms of marriage expectations. In addition to a generational gap, these societal changes are also creating issues for highly educated women who choose to work outside of the home but also hope to get married and build a family. As many of my informants expressed, they are having difficulty finding a man who will accept their “non-traditional” lifestyle. This variety of opinions, experiences, and behaviors further complicates the concepts of “tradition,” “religion,” and “modernity” and serves to underline the fluidity of the definitions of these categories.

Conclusion

Yemen today is in the midst of social change as its economy develops and educational levels rise. Young women in Sana'a are living with this social change as they navigate increasing educational opportunities, new possibilities for employment, and conservative social expectations and gender norms. The focus of this thesis has been the ways in which young Sana'ani women relate to and are affected by these changes in their own lives and in what terms they understand and conceive of them. Though my group of informants was small in number and limited by language barriers and time restraints, the experiences of my informants and their views on the current social situation in Yemen, in addition to the differences between their own lives and the lives of their mothers, is telling of social change and shifting ideas of gender norms throughout Yemen, and indeed throughout the Middle East. Though I do not want to generalize from the experiences of my informants to the lives of all women in Yemen, many of the issues that they face are echoed in the lives of other women of their generation throughout Sana'a and Yemen as a whole.

One of the main aspects of current social change that affects the lives of my informants and of Yemeni women more generally is increased educational opportunities, which result both in a delaying of marriage, as well as increased access to employment opportunities. Additionally, rising literacy and access to educational resources has fostered increasing individual engagement with religion, as women can now attain direct access to sacred texts and thus gain interpretative ability and authority. As we have seen, as my informants achieve higher educational levels, they are able to gain direct access to

religious knowledge, and then to use it to their advantage. In contrast to the argument of modernization theory that modernization and development necessarily result in a weakening of religion in society, my informants demonstrate that, in the context of their lives and society, modernity must be built upon a foundation of religion. Especially in the area of gender and women's rights, they view Islam as the primary medium for achieving the "modern" ideas of gender justice that they hope for and strive to realize in their society.

This phenomenon is evident through their construction and use of the oppositional categories of "tradition" and "religion," which they employ both in order to offer a authoritative critique of the patriarchal practices in Yemeni society, as well as to justify the unconventional choices they have made in their own lives. As we have seen from their explanations, my informants define the concept of "religion" to refer to an ideal "correct" or "authenticated" Islam, which represents the ultimate upholder of women's rights and the source of gender equality. It is to this exemplary model of both morality and social practice that my informants argue that Yemeni society must return if gender equality and women's rights are ever to be achieved.

My informants employed this conception of "religion" in opposition to the category of "tradition," which they defined as encompassing all religiously illegitimate and patriarchal practices that occur in Yemeni society. By creating this dichotomy, and placing patriarchal practices in contrast to "correct" religious understanding, my informants are then able to present a critique of Yemeni customs based in a highly socially respected, even indisputable, source. Instead of turning to a "foreign" discourse

of international human rights or Western feminist ideologies, my informants remain embedded in a locally “authentic” discourse by arguing within the framework of Islam.

Additionally, by employing this dichotomy of “tradition” and “religion,” my informants are able to justify their own unconventional behavior. By delaying marriage and childbearing, pursuing university education, and working outside of the home, my informants are directly challenging Yemeni social norms and gender roles. In this way, the realities of my informants lives stand in stark contrast to the lives of their mothers, who in many cases had little or no education, cannot read or write, married young, had many children, and were never employed outside of the home. The social changes that my informants represent are thus challenging Yemeni assumptions that a woman’s role is to marry early and stay at home with her children. My informants face this tension between social expectations and their own aspirations daily in their relations with their family and community, and instead of shying away from the issues, they confront them head on by drawing on Islam to justify their decisions and attitudes.

In order to be able to use religiously based arguments to fight for women’s rights and to support their own choices, my informants must critically engage with the received traditions that they have been taught in school and in society, and to re-evaluate religious doctrines and teachings in light of their concern for gender equality. It is their education that enables them to pursue this challenge, and as part of a newly literate generation with access to university study, they are able to intellectually engage with and re-examine religious texts. With this new access to religious knowledge and the critical tools they have gained from their higher education, my informants are able to appropriate the authority to interpret religious texts, and thus to formulate their own arguments for

gender justice based in Islam. It is this individual interpretation that ultimately serves as their tool for critiquing societal ills and for justifying their own views through their construction of the binary categories of “religion” and “tradition.”

This study of young women in contemporary Sana’a raises many questions concerning the specific ways in which the new generation of women is changing social expectations around gender in comparison with their mothers’ generation. In further studies of this age group, and with a larger sample size, it will be interesting to explore whether their increasing access to education will change young women’s ideas about how many children to have, or even if to have children at all. Judging by preliminary data from my informants, it seems as though many young, educated women, are indeed planning to have fewer children than their own mothers had, as many of them expressed the desire to have two to four children, while many of them have six or seven brothers and sisters. Another question concerns marriage age: as the percentage of educated women rises, will the marriage age continue to increase and will the number of unmarried women rise? Judging by my informants, who were mostly in their twenties, and very few of whom were already married, it seems that these trends will indeed continue. The final question deals with the fundamental focus of this thesis, whether the use of religious knowledge and argument by young Yemeni women allows them to successfully challenge “traditional” gender roles and ideas about veiling and marriage. Among my informants, their appropriation of “religion” in order to combat “tradition” allowed them to transgress societal norms without compromising their own sense of morality, but it remains to be seen whether their behavior and ideas will affect perceptions of gender within broader segments of Yemeni society.

Appendix A

Statement of Consent

Purpose of Study

In this study, I intend to explore perceptions of gender and appropriate gender roles in contemporary Yemeni society. I am conducting this research project as the basis for a senior thesis, which will be an ethnography focusing on the lives of women in Yemen today. Information shared by subjects will be used to create this final ethnographic report. This project is been supported by Pomona College and overseen by Professor Pardis Mahdavi of the Pomona College anthropology department.

Duration and Elements of Study

The study will be conducted over a period of ten weeks in the summer of 2008, and will include interviews and participant observation as my fieldwork. Your participation will include this interview session, and if you are available and willing, potential follow-up sessions.

Risks and Compensation

The study has no foreseeable risks for participants. However, if you feel uncomfortable with the questions at any time, you are free to terminate your involvement or to abstain from answering that question. Participation in this study will not be compensated financially, although your assistance is greatly appreciated.

Confidentiality

Every effort to keep your personal information confidential will be made in this project. Your name and other identifying information will be changed in the final write-up, and will only be known to me. Recordings of interviews will only be heard by me and will be erased after transcription. Transcripts of interviews will be kept confidential.

Participation

I, the undersigned, have read the above statements. I affirm that my participation in this study is voluntary and understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

Signature

Date

I recognize that this study involves interviews and/or observations that may be audio-recorded and transcribed.

Signature

Date

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Researcher may be contacted by e-mail or telephone for any reason.

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