

# **Excerpts from “Issues of Autonomy in Southern Oman**

Dr. Marielle Risse

# Contents

Abstract . . . . . 3  
Introduction . . . . . 3  
Women’s Choices – Examples from Political Science and Anthropology Texts 4  
Women’s Choices – Examples from Dhofari Stories . . . . . 7  
Links between Women’s Worlds and Men’s Worlds . . . . . 10  
Having Power/ Showing Power . . . . . 11  
Making Personal Choices . . . . . 12  
Conclusion . . . . . 13  
Bibliography (of Complete Paper) . . . . . 14

# Abstract

Gibali (also known as Jibbali, Şheret, Shari and Eħkili) is a non-written, Modern South Arabian language spoken by several groups of tribes in the Dhofar region of Southern Oman. While teaching in Salalah for more than ten years, I have been working with several Gibali-speaking men researching the culture and life-ways of one particular group of tribes, the Qara. Gibalis, both in interviews and from my long-term observations, see their culture as giving both men and women opportunities to craft their own lives and, specifically, to gain a positive reputation for wisdom.

This paper will explore how the Gibalis create and maintain an atmosphere in which both men and women are seen as having access to positive virtues and some control over their own lives. In addition to my observations and interviews, I will include examples from the fields of political science and anthropology, as well as stories from the first set of written texts in the Gibali language

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explain how the options for autonomy are perceived by both men and women in a tribal, Arab, Muslim culture in Dhofar, Oman. As seen by outsiders, tribal, Arab, Muslim cultures might be described as confining and restrictive. These types of communities are often seen as allowing fewer freedoms for women than men. One of the unique aspects I bring to this discussion is long-term friendships and work-based relationships with both men and women in the Qara group of tribes.

Dhofar is the southern region of the country of Oman, bordering Yemen, Saudi and the Indian Ocean. Arabic is the official language of education, government and business but many Dhofaris speak a non-written, Modern South Arabian language called Gibali. Gibali as a noun refers both to a language and the groups of people who speak it. It is from the Arabic *jabal*, mountain, and can be spelled in English as Gebbali, Jebali or Jebbali, the most common spelling for linguists. The word can also be used as an adjective, as in “a Gibali house.” Other non-written, Modern South Arabian languages, especially Mehri/ Mahra, are also spoken.

Gibali is also referred to as Şheret/ Shari which is an approximation of the word ‘mountain’ in the Gibali language, but the people who I know/ work with/ interviewed refer to themselves and their language as Gibali.<sup>1</sup> Within Gibali speakers there are linguistic and cultural divisions, for example between Qara, Al Sheri, Al Yafi, and Al Kathiri groups of tribes.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I use “Gibali” (not Jibbali) because, in the accent of my Gibali-speaking friends and informants, the Arabic letter Jeem/ Jim is pronounced as ‘g’; ‘university’ for example is pronounced ‘gamma’ not jamma.’

<sup>2</sup> There is some intermarriage between Gibali and non-Gibali Dhofaris; an easy way to differentiate is by the tribal name of a person because women keep their own tribe name (used as their last name)

## Women's Choices – Examples from Political Science and Anthropology Texts

“Women have been relatively freer in Oman than elsewhere in the Arab world” and Gibali women perceive themselves as having more freedom than other Omani women.<sup>3</sup> One of the pamphlets by the rebels during the Dhofar War explained:

Women were entitled to own and inherit cattle – the main resource; less stigma was attached to divorce and remarriage than elsewhere; women were relatively free to travel and work within Dhofar without sexual segregation.<sup>4</sup>

In the same pamphlet, there is a negative example is given of a woman forced by her father to marry, then forced to pay back the bride-price so she could marry the man she chooses. Although set out as an example of oppression, the story can be also viewed as a Gibali woman who defies her father and husband to settle with the man she loves.<sup>5</sup>

Yet even as Dhofar/ Oman developed and changed from a herding society, women still worked outside of the home. In 1988, Eickelman noted that “Recently, a woman was appointed head of research at the Omani Central Bank”.<sup>6</sup> Further:

In Oman, women work professionally as lawyers, doctors, dentists, engineers, economists, bankers and university professors... All told, in the mid-1990s, 40 percent of the economically active women, whether currently employed or not, were in professional job categories.<sup>7</sup>

---

when they marry. The visible differences in terms of personal appearance, dress and clothing between Gibalis and non-Gibalis are slight but recognizable. Usually the correspondence between language and culture is automatic, but a few people who do not identify themselves as Gibali/ are not from a Gibali tribe speak the language. All the examples I know of are men who had Gibali neighbors and learned the language from playing together as children. There are very few Westerners I know of who spoke/ speak the language.

<sup>3</sup> J.E. Peterson “Oman (1990),” Online edition from <http://www.JEPeterson.net> (posted October 2001).

<sup>4</sup> “Women and the Revolution in Oman,” (London: Gulf Committee c/o ICDP, 1975), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Another section reads: “rural women... have a less oppressive moral and social position... They are free from some of the traditions which paralyze and weaken women when they are imprisoned at home... Here women walk unveiled and mix freely with men... Women play a positive role in the economic life of the society and participate in all vital work... Women are relatively free from the spiritual domination which gives men absolute privileges over women. For instance, it is acceptable for rural women to divorce their husbands. (“Women and the Revolution,” 32)

<sup>6</sup> Christine Eickelman, “Women and Politics in an Arabian Oasis,” in *A Way Prepared: Essays on Islamic Culture in Honor of Richard Bayly Winder*, ed. Farhad Kazemi (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 209.

<sup>7</sup> Dawn Chatty, “Women Working in Oman: Individual Choice and Cultural Constraints,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (2000): 248.

At universities in Oman men and women are in the same classes, although they do not sit next to each other; men and women are in all levels of faculty and administration. Women own their own businesses and work in all capacities from clerk to manager in stores. Some fields and some jobs are off-limits, especially in the oil industry, but there are women in the police, military, security, embassies and not just appointed to higher levels of government, but also elected to office. This is the public side of women's use of/ involvement in power within society.

The more private side is that in daily life, women's lives are mostly separate from men's which is often perceived as women lacking power. In an early article about ethnography in the Middle East, Nelson highlights several key points to understanding the role of women: first, the "crucial role women play as structural links between kinship groups in societies where family and kinship are the fundamental institutions of everyday life. Simultaneously the woman as daughter, sister, wife and mother acts as an 'information-broker,' mediating social relations within the family and larger society."<sup>8</sup> Second, "The ethnographies do support the idea of segregated social worlds but rather than seeing this as a severe limitation on women, the evidence suggests that the segregation of women can alternatively be seen as an exclusion of men from a range of contacts which women have among themselves... and that it that women form their own exclusive solidarity groups and that these groups exercises considerable social control."<sup>9</sup>

Lienhardt reiterates this point:

In the Trucial States, as in numerous other places, men are not as dominant in society as they claim to be. The difficulty here lies in gathering other information with which to compare the men's generalizations... the fact of the seclusion of women can be seen to exclude men from a range of contacts which women have among themselves.<sup>10</sup>

About Oman, Eickelman says that women often "downplay their involvement in decision-making in order not to appear to transgress into a domain that is officially" male but "Omani women remain principal actors in the political arena and cannot be excluded from the political world."<sup>11</sup> As I will explain below, not publicly claiming credit for influence is not the same as not having any influence.

This, although there are strong emotional ties between Dhofari men and women, these connections are rarely visible in public or discussed so looking from a distance,

---

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Nelson, "Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World," *American Ethnology* 1, no.3 (1974): 559.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Lienhardt, "Some Social Aspects of the Trucial States," in *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics* ed. Derek Hopwood. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), 220.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Eickelman, "Women and Politics in an Arabian Oasis," in *A Way Prepared: Essays on Islamic Culture in Honor of Richard Bayly Winder*, ed. Farhad Kazemi . (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 203, 205.

men and women live totally separate lives.<sup>12</sup> This misperception is reflected in most of the writing about this area as outsiders usually only have connections to informants of their own gender.<sup>13</sup> Most exceptions are written by a husband and wife working together with the husband reporting on the male side and the wife reporting the female side, for example in James and Mabel Bent's *Southern Arabia* (1900/ 2005). More current wife and husband research teams include Wikan's *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (1982) and Fredrik Barth's *Sohar: Culture and Society in an Omani Town* (1983), as well as Christine Eickelman's *Women and Community in Oman* (1984) and Dale Eickelman (1985 and 1989).

A common trope in these books is going "behind the veil" to show Arab/ Muslim/ tribal women as they really are – and the general consensus of how they really are oppressed. In two fairly recent books on Yemen (Steil 2011, Shelby 2011) and one on Saudi (Le Renard 2014) the western women become close friends with Arab women who are in difficult circumstances. Shelby's Arabic teacher lives in a different city from her family with a husband who is often gone, her sick child and difficult in-laws. Steil's close friend and colleague comes from a family who refused for years to let her attend college. The pain of these women is real, their stories are haunting but by having such women as these at the center of the books, and few or no scenes of women in situations where they are content or joyful, the impression is that the general situation of all Arab, Muslim women is miserable.

It is rare to find writing like Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, 2011, 2008, 1989, 1985a, 1985b) in which the Arab women are simply women, complex and multi-varied, not victims in a gilded cage (*n.b.* the *Princess* books by Jean Sasson) suffering from poverty, tyrannical husbands, their religion or all three. While I agree that in Western media, Arab women are usually either "victim," "escapee," or "pawn" I think there needs to be a lot more

---

<sup>12</sup> Jones and Ridout venture that "perhaps women in Oman have found a way of speaking both politely and directly, while men tend to prefer to veil their meaning more fully when speaking publicly or to non-intimate interlocutors." I think this is very true and have often thought how women are more physically covered (by clothing) but easier to understand, while men are more visible (both in that the faces are always showing and they are out of the house/ moving in society) but are much harder to read. Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, "Democratic Development in Oman," *Middle East Journal* 59, no. 3 (2005): 392.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas' *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia* (1931) and *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia* (1932) and Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* (1959) have few mentions of women. Modern male travel writers, such as Jan Morris's *Sultan in Oman* (1957/ 2008), Nicholas Clapp's *The Road to Ubar: Finding the Atlantis of the Sands* (1999) and Ranulph Fiennes' *Atlantis of the Sands: The Search for the Lost City of Ubar* (1992) are not able to see/ talk to/ learn about women. In Janzen's *Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman: Tradition and Development in Dhofar* (1986), one can get glimpses of how women live, but again, there are few personal encounters with women. The only male who has significant access to women's lives is Salim Bakhit Tabook's unpublished dissertation *Tribal Practices and Folklore of Dhofar* (1997).

attention of the differences between Arab countries and the choices/ restrictions women have.<sup>14</sup>

As anthropologist Lisa Yoneyama warns, “[O]nce feminist emancipations is envisioned in such a single, linear trajectory, it creates a hierarchy among the more and less advanced women according to the unitary ladder of feminist progress;” the universal prescription for women’s liberation “can easily lead to the capitulation of certain feminist positions to practices that would extend U.S. [or more generic Western] dominance through the rhetoric of liberation, freedom, and democratic rights.”<sup>15</sup> Further,

if we continue to allow popular and academic discourse to equate gender subordination with a traditional culture, then cultural shifts that we would mark both as ‘modern’ and gender subordinating remain hidden... and the existence of feminist movements within communities marked as ‘traditional’ are denied... When culture and feminism are believed to be opponents in a zero-sum game, women will be presumed to be emancipated when they have abandoned their cultures.<sup>16</sup>

An important facet of my research is that I have been able to spend a lot of time in formal and informal settings with Gibali men as well as women in their homes and taking part of daily activities such as fishing, milking camels, and having picnics. I have seen countless everyday kinds of conversations between wives and husbands, brothers and sisters, parents and children and we have had many discussions about how their view their culture.

Although Arab, Muslim, tribal women are sometimes seen as belonging to a cultural system in which they are enmeshed in rules while men have all freedoms, Gibalis perceive both men and women as negotiating the, sometimes conflicting, demands of supporting their tribe and living as they wish. In my research I have collected stories, for example, of a man being forced to marry a female relative he was not in love with, a man who was not allowed by his family to take a job overseas, of a man whose father and uncle would not allow him to marry a female cousin he was in love with who didn’t love him, nor could the cousin prevent her from marrying the man she wanted to marry.

## Women’s Choices – Examples from Dhofari Stories

Given that Gibali is a non-written language, it is difficult to assess cultural norms and expectations in the past as previous events are filtered through modern percep-

---

<sup>14</sup> Mojha Kahf, “Packaging Huda: Sha’rawi’s Memoirs in the US Reading Environment” in *Going Global: The Transitional Reception of Third World Women Writers*, ed. Amal Amireh & Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York: Garland, 2000), 149, 150.

<sup>15</sup> cited in Leti Volpp, “Framing Cultural Difference: Immigrant Women and the Discourses of Tradition,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 101.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 105-106.

tions. One glimpse into the past is offered by a series of spoken Gibali interviews which have been transcribed and translated. In the 1970s Dr. Tom Johnstone began the first systematic documentation of the Gibali and Mehri languages. During his research in southern Oman, he tape-recorded speech samples including many spoken by Ali Musallam Al-Mahri. In 2014, Dr. Aaron Rubin published *The Jibbali Language of Oman* (2014), a book on Gibali grammar based on his own research, data from Gibali speakers living in America, and Johnstone's notes/ recordings. Rubin's book includes 70 texts (taped speech transliterated into a written form of Gibali with an accompanying English translation) which cover a variety of genres including fairy tales, autobiography, grammar exercises, and folk tales.<sup>17</sup>

The texts are included in the book as sample language texts; they are not presented in any specific order or with commentary. These texts are among the very few documents written in Gibali and help illustrate ways in which the Dhofari culture has, and has not changed, since the rapid modernization after the 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

In all, 39 texts make explicit reference to a woman; there are 6 stories in which a woman's good behavior is the focus of the text: a clever woman tricking a man who wants to have sex with her (text 2), a medicine woman (38), a wife revenging her husband's death (25), a daughter demanding that her father's death be revenged (46), a mother giving good advice (57), and a wife tricking her mother to protect her husband (60). All of these texts are realistic and centered on Southern Arabia, if not Dhofar.

There are a further four stories in which women are acting against religious and cultural mores, but with a reason, either fighting for their own interest or their tribe. The short text SB2 has a beautiful woman sending a letter to a writer suggesting they marry as she is pretty and he is intelligent, "Our children, their appearances will be beautiful like me, and (they will be) clever and intelligent like you."<sup>19</sup> He responds by

---

<sup>17</sup> 61 of the 70 were collected by Dr. Thomas Johnstone in the 1970 and 80s; the rest by Rubin. The vast majority were spoken by Ali Musallam Al Mehri for Johnston, although Ali sent one to Rubin in 2013. Two of the texts are by women and four are by a young Gibali (Kashoob) man who was an informant for Rubin while living in the States. In citing the stories I use the designation numbers Rubin uses (*n.b.* there are missing numbers and some numbers are preceded by letters to identify the speaker). All the texts are written in Rubin's English translation and Rubin's system of transliterating Gibali. All the texts are also extant in different formats: taped, written in Gibali, Mehri, and/ or Arabic by Johnston and/ or Rubin.

<sup>18</sup> These texts are not the first written Gibali texts, but they are the first collection of fiction and non-fiction texts published in English specifically from the Dhofar region. The previous examples of written Gibali texts were used for grammatical purposes. Johnstone wrote several articles and books about Gibali, and other Modern South Arabian languages, which include quotes/ sentences in Gibali but he was concentrating on grammar issues, for example his "A Definite Article in the Modern South Arabian Languages" (1970) and "The Language of Poetry in Dhofar" (1972). His article "Folk-Tales and Folk-lore of Dhofar" (1983) references several of the texts although he states that his "primary purpose in collecting them was as example of texts for linguistic analysis" (123).

<sup>19</sup> Aaron Rubin, *The Jibbali Language of Oman: Grammar and Texts* (Brill Publishers: Leiden, 2014), 573.



upending her argument saying they should not marry as perhaps their children will get her intelligence and his (ugly) looks. In text 28, a wife argues with her husband as she needs his help in moving the settlement. In the example text 47, a woman argues with her husband, trying to convince him not to ride an untamed camel. He refutes her advice, gets thrown, curses her but then they reconcile.<sup>20</sup> In the text 15, a woman uses a wolf to attack the goats of a group of people who are on land under the control of her tribe. The men of the visiting tribe say to their women, “If any one of you knows anything, you should keep this wolf back from us.”<sup>21</sup> One woman is a witch and tells her leopard to attack the wolf. When the wolf is killed, the witch who controlled it comes to the tribe and says, “I am a witch, and I owned this wolf that you killed.”<sup>22</sup> Then she gets her revenge by naming four women of that tribe who are witches and tells the men how to release a curse one of the four has put on a man.

On the other hand, there are 7 stories in which a woman acts with evil intention, three are Ba Newas texts, three are fairy tales and in the remaining story, the woman with bad behavior is a foreigner (10). Against this general Gibali understanding of seeing women as positive/ independent agents, the negativity of the fairy tales and the Ba Newas stories clearly stands out. In one Ba Newas story, he uses the body of a dead woman as a prop in one of his tricks (18); in another, he causes the death of an older woman (AM1).

Thus, texts which are clearly not Dhofari-based have harmful women who act in selfish and greedy ways while most of the women in texts that have Dhofari/ South Arabian markers have positive behavior, acting in the best interest of their children and husbands, or in an independent manner which does not go against tribal or religious norms.

I would like to highlight one specific cultural marker. Five texts give general or specific examples of the Gibali tradition of women having the option to choose their partner if they remarry (45) and to stay with her family after marriage, to the point of asking and receiving a divorce so that she does not have to leave her family (7,13, TJ2, TJ3). In text 45, the speaker gives the example of a man asking to marry a divorced woman and her father saying, “She is not a girl, so speak with her.”<sup>23</sup> In Gibali culture, a father can arrange a first marriage “even if she has no knowledge,” although she is usually consulted, but if she is divorced or widowed the second marriage is entirely in her hand.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, in text 13, a wife refuses to leave her family and go with her husband. The same situation occurs in texts TJ2 and TJ3.

Johnstone mentions that having a distinctive language “has tended to preserve their beliefs by insulating them from certain old-fashioned influences, namely religious and

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 435.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 501.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 503.

legal structures.”<sup>25</sup> The ability of Gibali women to choose partners is one of these beliefs that has been largely preserved until the present day.

## Links between Women’s Worlds and Men’s Worlds

Within the Gibali community there are many chances for men and women to communicate. Male cousins and even unrelated males can come and sit in the *majlis* (living room for men and visitors) to visit and/ or talk to young women if they are looking for a wife. The ‘town’ (*hadr*)/ Salalah community usually enforces much stricter limits. Usually brothers and sisters can create much closer links than in Western culture; the emotional ties that Western women develop with male friends and boyfriends are cultivated with brothers. As most Gibali families have over four children, usually each child will have at least one sibling or cousin of the opposite gender who s/he is close to.

Abu-Lughod puts it that “Men can get by with less knowledge about the doings of women; women need to know what goes on in the men’s world.”<sup>26</sup> I agree but it’s far easier for women in Dhofar to know what is going on the “men’s world” than for a man to know about the women’s world. If a man goes to a tribal meeting, he will come home and explain what happened and who said what to a trusted female relative. If a woman goes to a wedding, she will share details with other close female friends, but give far less information to a male relative.

Men speak to men about men and are judged by both men and women for their actions. A woman is judged by her own actions usually by a smaller group of only women. As Wikan writes,

Whereas a woman can associate with all kinds of women, secure in the conviction that ‘people know us and they know her,’ the man is painfully aware that this is not the case for him. He is being observed and assessed by numerous people who do *not* know him and who form their impression of him on the basis of fleeting and fragmentary glimpses.<sup>27</sup>

With female Gibali acquaintances, I have a pretty good idea of the personality of their fathers, brothers and husbands from repeated comments such as “I can’t stay late, my brother is waiting and he will be angry,” “My brother does not want me to but my father gave me permission” “It is ok, my husband will wait for five minutes,” and “I

---

<sup>25</sup> T.M. Johnstone, “Folklore and Folk Literature in Oman and Socotra,” *Arabian Studies*. 1 (1974), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “Anthropology’s Orient: The Boundaries of Theory in the Arab World,” in *Theory, Politics and the Arab World: Critical Responses*, 35-48, ed. Hisham Sharabi (New York: Routledge, 1990): 109.

<sup>27</sup> Wikan, “Shame and Honor,” 642 (*italics in original*).

convinced my brother to...”. Whereas I know nothing about their sisters and mothers. Information about men is passed along; information about women is held secret.

Although women have more limited mobility, they still have a great range of people they are close to and/ or can get information about. The mobility issue is important and often misleading. A man will usually go to the same places with the same group or groups of people, so even if they are out of the house, they are not necessarily moving in new circles. Men at work rarely talk about personal issues. A woman at home may appear to have a limited scope but she will be visited by and go to visit her sisters, mom, aunts, cousins and children. A woman can pick up information from school-aged relatives as many Dhofari women are teachers, girls at a school will know not simply about their classmates but a series of other women who are their teachers. She will also know her neighbors and then, often, meet their extended family.

If a man wants to have insights into women’s lives, he must have good relations with his female relatives; a man with no close relationships is flying blind. And even if there are no close emotional relationships, a man must show in public that he is caring for female relatives in order to be judged as “good.” This means making sure the women have money for new clothes, phone cards, food for the house, transport to visit relatives/ hospital visits, new outfits for *Eid*, new decorations for the house for *Eids*, etc.

This sort of effort is vital because information gets circulated. For example, a girl who says, “My new phone is a gift from my older brother” spreads a positive reputation about herself (she is valued by brother), her brother (he is generous) as well as her family (the parents raised him to take care of his sister). Each small piece of news slowly builds up an image of a man and the family.

## Having Power/ Showing Power

When female power is discussed in the anthropology literature for the Middle East, it is often linked to family issues, such as Altorki’s (1982) marriage article. I have seen women pressuring brothers to get married (and specially who to get married to) in conversations and interviews with Gibalis, but there is a lot of other kinds of work going on which is not generally known. For example, in Dhofar, women give active support for political candidates, through sending messages and visiting other women, even strangers, to try to convince them how to vote.

Gibali men talking to other Gibali men do not say that they were persuaded into a course of action by a (especially younger) female in order to keep a calm and in-control public persona; women will rarely, and only to close relatives/ friends, admit they influence men as they are also invested in portraying their male relatives as responsible, intelligent and able to make decisions.

In good marriages, husbands and wives make joint decisions how to spend money, where to live, whether to go on vacation and where, and about children’s education

but this is often presented by the wife as, “My husband decided we will go to Dubai.” Thus, a whole series of relationships and opportunities for influence are not discussed/acknowledged except among close friend and relatives.

Gibali men who I have worked with for ten years will openly explain how decisions are influenced by female relatives and their wives. Several times Gibali men, including the husband of a female friend, have asked me for advice relating to specific fields where I have extensive experience (for example where to study abroad). I know none of them ever told other men, “Marielle told me to...”

What is said in public is more for signaling than for conveying information. What might be coded by as outsider as a loss of power can actually be a claim for a different kind of power. For example, men will state that they are undertaking or not undertaking specific courses of action to please their mother, signaling not that they lack agency, but that they are a good son. Thus, in the above example in which a woman stated, “My husband decided we will go to Dubai;” those close to her will know she has been pressuring him for months to go and that she was the prime mover, but *in public* she will support the image of him as the sole decider.

## Making Personal Choices

In Oman, the corollary to “I want to keep my self-respect” is “I must respect others.” Wikan argues that “The person’s own honor, in the sense of value both in own and others’ eyes, in fact requires that she or he honor others.”<sup>28</sup> Her example was one of her married neighbors who was a prostitute. Despite the woman being picked up and dropped off from her house (i.e. flagrant behavior), her neighbors imposed no sanctions and did not discuss her transgressions.

As Wikan sets out, “virility and manliness are minimally associated with the callous conquest of women, and maximally associated with being in command of oneself and one’s situation and acting with grace and integrity towards all – women and men, slaves and sultans.”<sup>29</sup> Men who violate this norm are seen as not respecting themselves and open themselves up for retribution. I once saw a remarkable example of this reprisal when an older, married man started screaming at a young, unmarried woman. The, usually quiet, Gibali woman lay into him, giving as good as she got and eventually beat him back into silence and retreat. It was like watching a panda take on a grizzly and win. “Wow,” was my only comment when he left. She shrugged, “He does not respect himself. He is old and he should be quiet and serious.”

Thus, Gibali women can fight for self-respect both with strangers, as above, and within their family units. Being female is not automatically linked to lack of power or

---

<sup>28</sup> Unni Wikan, “Shame and Honor: A Contestable Pair,” *Man* 19 (1984): 641.

<sup>29</sup> Unni Wikan, “Man becomes Woman: Transsexualism in Oman as a Key to Gender Roles,” *Man* 12 (1977): 315.

self-autonomy. For example, Sultan Qaboos' public statement is clear about employed women is clear:

There should be no discrimination against working women. They should have the same job titles, salaries and benefits. The problem now is that more and more ladies want jobs. So men are feeling the heat. They're competing with us! I say, why not! We have senior ladies in government, I hope we'll have some more senior women in government soon. We're making progress, but quietly. Slowly. I believe in evolution, but not a sudden evolution. But the progress we've made is irreversible.<sup>30</sup>

My female Dhofari friends who work don't feel the time pressure to balance work/ family/ housekeeping as they have with support both in terms of in-house child and generous leave for taking care of children. Personal life/ family/ health is more important and, since the whole Dhofari society recognizes that, there's no tension. Examples I know of include a woman deciding to have an elective medical procedure in the middle of the busiest time for her job; she took two weeks off without recrimination. A woman who had a difficult pregnancy stayed home for 6 months, secure that her job was safe. A woman who became sick took 3 months un-paid leave; her job waiting for her when she returned.

One friend who works has her husband drop their young child at her sister's house every morning. The sister doesn't work and has two young kids the same age as her niece. This arrangement has gone on for three years and will continue until the girl is old enough to go to school. No one comments on it as no one thinks it is worth commenting on; it's what sisters do.

## Conclusion

The reasons given by Gibalis for a variety of practices and beliefs that give women chances to determine their lives are a combination of related cultural practices: valuing self-control, allowing society members to make their own choices, and believing that each person holds their own honor. In terms of marriage, Gibali women are almost asked about a future husband and given the right of refusal, they are allowed to ask for divorce and return home if they wish and, as a society, discussion of sexual activity is not condoned. Gibali women drive; they own land, houses, animals and businesses outright and have the right to free university education if they score well on high school exams. "Female" in Gibali culture is not correlated to lack of knowledge or power or self-determination.

---

<sup>30</sup> Sultan Qabus and Judith Miller, "Creating Modern Oman: An Interview with Sultan Qabus," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 3 (1997): 17.

## Bibliography (of Complete Paper)

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- . “Seductions of the Honor Crime.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 17-63.
- . *Writing Women’s Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley: University of CA Press, 2008.
- . “Anthropology’s Orient: The Boundaries of Theory in the Arab World.” In *Theory, Politics and the Arab World: Critical Responses*, 35-48. Edited by Hisham Sharabi. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . “Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 267-306.
- . “A Community of Secrets: The Separate World of Bedouin Women.” *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10 (1985): 637-57.
- . “Honor and Sentiments of Loss in a Bedouin Society.” *American Ethnologist* 12 (1985): 245-61.
- Altorki, Soraya. “The Anthropologist in the Field: A Case of “Indigenous Anthropology” from Saudi Arabia.” In *Indigenous Anthropology in Non-Western Countries*, 167-75. Edited by H. Fahim. Durham, NC: Carolina Acad. Press, 1982.
- Barth, Fredrik. *Sohar: Culture and Society in an Omani Town*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
- Caton, Steve. *Yemen Chronicle: Anthropology of War and Mediation*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2005.
- . “Power, Persuasion and Language: A Critique of the Segmentary Model in the Middle East.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987): 77-102.
- Chatty, Dawn. “Rejecting Authenticity in the Desert Landscapes of the Modern Middle East: Development Processes in the Jiddat Il-Harasiis, Oman.” In *Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa*, 145-164. Edited by Sherine Hafez and Susan Slyomovics, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- . “Women Working in Oman: Individual Choice and Cultural Constraints.” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (2000): 241-254.
- . *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Eickelman, Christine. “Women and Politics in an Arabian Oasis.” In *A Way Prepared: Essays on Islamic Culture in Honor of Richard Bayly Winder*, 199-215. Edited by Farhad Kazemi. New York: New York University Press, 1988.
- . *Women and Community in Oman*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- Eickelman, Dale. “National Identity and Religious Discourse in Contemporary Oman.” *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies* 6, no.1 (1989): 1-20.

- . “From Theocracy to Monarchy: Authority and Legitimacy in Inner Oman, 1935-1957.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 1 (1985): 3-24.
- Janzen, Jorg. *Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman: Tradition and Development in Dhofar*. London: Westview Press, 1986.
- Jayyusi, Salma Khadra. “Introduction.” *On Entering the Sea: The Erotic and Other Poetry of Nizar Qabbani*. Translated by Lena Jayyusi and Sharif Elmusa. Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 2006.
- Johnstone, T. M. “Folk-Tales and Folk-lore of Dhofar.” *Journal of Oman Studies* 6, no.1 (1983): 123-127.
- . “Folklore and Folk Literature in Oman and Socotra.” *Arabian Studies*. 1 (1974): 7-24.
- . “The Language of Poetry in Dhofar.” *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 35 no. 1 (1972): 1-17.
- . “A Definite Article in the Modern South Arabian Languages.” *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33, no.2 (1970): 295-307.
- Jones, Jeremy and Nicholas Ridout. *History of Modern Oman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- . *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- . “Democratic Development in Oman.” *Middle East Journal* 59, no. 3 (2005): 376-392.
- Kahf, Mohja. “Packaging Huda: Sha’rawi’s Memoirs in the US Reading Environment” In *Going Global: The Transitional Reception of Third World Women Writers*, 148-72. Edited by Amal Amireh & Lisa Suhair Majaj. New York: Garland, 2000.
- Le Renard, Amélie. *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power and Reform in Saudi Arabia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Lienhardt, Peter. “Some Social Aspects of the Trucial States.” In *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics* (School of Oriental and African Studies on Modern Africa and Asia, No. 8), 219-230. Edited by Derek Hopwood. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972.
- Miller, Anthony, Miranda Morris, and Susanna Stuart-Smith. *Plants of Dhofar, the Southern Region of Oman: Traditional, Economic, and Medicinal Uses*. London: HarperCollins, 1988.
- Morris, Miranda. “Dhofar – What Made it Different” In *Oman: Economic, Social and Strategic Development*, 51-78. Edited by B.R. Pridham. London: Croom Helm, 1987.
- . “A Poem in Jibbali.” *Journal of Oman Studies* 7 (1985): 121-130.
- Nelson, Cynthia. “Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World.” *American Ethnology* 1, no.3 (1974): 551-63.
- Peterson, John. 2004. “Oman’s Diverse Society: Southern Oman.” *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 2 (2004): 254-269.
- . “Oman (1990)” Online edition from <http://www.JEPeterson.net> (posted October 2001). Originally published as “Oman” (part article of “Arabia”) In *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1990).

- Qabus, Sultan and Judith Miller. "Creating Modern Oman: An Interview with Sultan Qabus." *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 3 (1997): 13-18.
- Rose, Jacqueline. "A Piece of White Silk": review of *Murder in the Name of Honour*, Rana Husseini; *In Honour of Fadmie*, Unni Wikan; *Honour Killing: Stories of Men Who Killed*, Ayse Onal." *London Review of Books* 31, no. 21 (2009): 5-8, 48-49.
- Rubin, Aaron D. *The Jibbali Language of Oman: Grammar and Texts*. Brill Publishers: Leiden, 2014.
- Shelby, Audra Grace. *Behind the Veils of Yemen: How an American Woman Risked her Life, Family and Faith to Bring Jesus to Muslim Women*. Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2011.
- Steil, Jennifer. *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth*. New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011.
- Tabook, Salim Bakhit. *Tribal Practices and Folklore of Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman*. Ph.D. dissertation, Faculty of Arts, Exeter University, 1997.
- Thesiger, Wilfred. [1959]. *Arabian Sands*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Thomas, Bertram. 1931. *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia*. Jonathan Cape: London. reprint.
- . 1932 *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia*. Jonathan Cape: London. reprint.
- Volpp, Leti. "Framing Cultural Difference: Immigrant Women and the Discourses of Tradition." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 90-110.
- Wikan, Unni. "Man becomes Woman: Transsexualism in Oman as a Key to Gender Roles." *Man* 12 (1977): 304-319.
- . *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- . "Shame and Honor: A Contestable Pair." *Man* 19 (1984): 635-52.
- "Women and the Revolution in Oman." Written, translated and edited by the Gulf Committee, London, and the Oman Solidarity Campaign, Leeds. London: Gulf Committee c/o ICDP, 1975.

Modern women writing about Southern Arabia focus almost exclusively on women for example, Le Renard's *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (2014). Mandana Limbert's *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Omani Town* (2010) details interactions with both men and women, but most of her time was spent with women, especially social visits with groups of women.

The two women who have access to men's lives are Miranda Morris and Dawn Chatty. Miranda Morris's "Dhofar – What Made it Different" (1987) shows her experience with all facets of Dhofari life; she speaks Gibali and is continuing to do research and publish on the South Arabian languages. Dawn Chatty is similarly positioned to see both male and female aspects of the Harasiis, a tribe whose land is located to the



north of the Dhofar region. Some of her texts concentrate more on men's lives, such as *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (1997), and some on females' lives, such as "Women Working in Oman: Individual Choice and Cultural Constraints" (2000).

Miranda Morris, who was Johnstone's student and who learned the language while working with Gibalis after the Dhofar War, co-wrote a comprehensive book about plants in Dhofar including information from many Gibali informants (Miller, Morris and Stuart-Smith 1988). She published one article on the life-ways of Gibalis, "Dhofar – What Made it Different" (1987), and "A Poem in Jibbali" (1985) in which Morris transcribes a poem recited by a male poet in praise of a woman. She does a primarily linguistic analysis, noting changes and perseverance of words/ topics/ literary conventions and markers. Janet Watson at Leeds University is also doing extensive research on the Modern South Arabian languages.

The Ted K Archive

Dr. Marielle Risse

Excerpts from “Issues of Autonomy in Southern Oman

<[mariellerisse.com/research-on-southern-oman/excerpts-from-issues-of-autonomy-in-southern-oman](http://mariellerisse.com/research-on-southern-oman/excerpts-from-issues-of-autonomy-in-southern-oman)>

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**