

Murshidat: Female Primary Health Care Workers Transforming Society in Yemen

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A Guide to *Murshidat* to be used on college campuses and in community organizations

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Murshidat:

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Introduction

Yemen consists of strikingly beautiful landscapes, a richly complex intermixture of people, and myriad sights, colors, and sounds to punctuate daily life. Yet, the news media in the United States afford readers an extremely limited opportunity to learn about the complexities and contrasts which characterize this Arabian Peninsula country. Yemen is considered newsworthy primarily when human or natural disasters occur. Since the tragedies of September 11, 2001, the massive effort to locate the bin Laden “terrorist” network dominates reporting on the region. Even before 9/11, however, most coverage consisted of dismal stories including the bombing of a United States war ship in Aden in 2000; the reluctant admission by Yemen that it purchased missiles from North Korea in 2002 – disappointment to the U.S. who counted Yemen as an ally in “the war on terrorism.”¹ These stories received popular media attention, if not front-page headlines.

Perceived defense threats are the focal point of American media reporting on the Middle East. Even the violent Arab-Israeli conflict, a persistent headline in the news, typically is portrayed as a military rather than a human subject.² Prevailing images of Yemen in the print media tend to be dark and foreboding even when the focus is a human-interest one. For example, an article in the *National Geographic* (April 2000) entitled, “Yemen United,” merely hints at the vibrancy of Yemeni society. The text is accompanied by photographic images that reinforce a sense of danger, difference and remoteness. Yemeni women clad in black covering lined up to vote, are “exercising a right not always granted in the Arab world.” Similarly, the ceremonial dagger (*jambiyyah*) is an ever present symbol of manhood in the Yemeni highlands, “although it is almost never used as a weapon.” The article’s slant toward the unfamiliar and ominous obscures the depth, vitality and stunning contrasts of Yemen’s cultural landscape. Consequently, there is little to dispel American readers’ largely uniformed, negative views of Yemeni people.

Yet, the Middle East in general and Yemen in particular afford students the opportunity to examine a complex society that dates back over millennia. Known as the land of the Queen of Sheba, a reference to the queen’s visit to King Solomon in 950 BC, Yemen throughout its history, has had continual cultural exchanges with Africa, Asia and its Arab neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula.³ Significantly, these exchanges have shaped various aspects of Yemeni social identities. Thus, distinctions based on gender, race, ethnicity and various social categories have a profound impact on development programs in the region.

I began working in Yemen in the 1980s as a cultural anthropologist. Despite numerous challenges, I have experienced the warmth, generosity and gracious acceptance

of the Yemeni people. As a researcher, I have had the opportunity to examine a culture very different from, yet in certain respects similar to my own. Both Yemen and the United States afford individuals who are relegated to the bottom of rigid, racialized social hierarchies some latitude to negotiate their social and economic advance. However, in both societies, eliminating institutional barriers to equality is a slow process. As an African American woman who has navigated race and gender relations in my own country, my doctoral research led me to consider how identities were constructed and negotiated in less familiar cultures. This exploration has culminated in a video collaboratively produced with the female health care workers known in Arabic as “*murshidat*.” It is my hope that the video will stimulate viewers’ questions about self and Other: What are the circumstances or conditions which guide social definitions in various cultural contexts? How are these definitions related to the development process in such matters as health care delivery? This study guide is meant to increase viewers’ awareness of a particular cultural context in which women are empowering themselves and their community. It should be used prior to and after screening “***Murshidat: Female Primary Health Care Workers Transforming Society in Yemen.***”

Monitoring an Infant’s Weight: A routine duty of the *Murshidat*



Video Synopsis

“*Murshidat*” is a 35 minute documentary with English voiceover (original in Arabic) which tells the story of the twenty women who have revolutionized health care and social relations in the coastal plains community of `Abs. This video is the culmination of collaborations with the *murshidat*, which began twenty years ago with my dissertation study.

Featured are the *murshidat*'s home visits and their daily routines in the immunization, prenatal, nutrition, birth control, well baby monitoring and malaria treatment rooms in the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Center. Largely as a result of their outreach, the *murshidat* have transformed a health facility which was dormant in the early 1980s when I first visited `Abs, into a thriving center for an entire community. Furthermore, the women's outreach often includes the most ignored members of Yemeni society, those African-identified outcastes (*akhdam*) and former slaves (*abid*) who also attest to the significance of what the *murshidat* have accomplished. The *murshidat* speak out on their own changing roles and identities as well as their aspirations as Muslim women. They thereby dispel prevalent misperceptions of women in Islamic societies that are held not only by western viewers but also by other Yemenis as well.

Clinic, Women's Entrance



Uses for Murshidat

The video is intended to generate a dialogue on three main issues:

- 1) Education and utilization of community women to deliver health care throughout Yemen.
- 2) Integration of the African-identified outcastes who were known as *akhdam* in order to establish better Yemeni social relations.
- 3) Cooperation between outside organizations and the Yemeni government to promote more widespread sustainable development programs.

“Doctura” Delores in a Yemeni Village, 1996



The Making of “*MURSHIDAT*”

Duration of Project: January, 1996—December, 1998

The story of “*Murshidat*” began in the early 1980s when I was conducting ethnographic field research for my doctorate in anthropology. My focus was on peoples who formed the lowest strata of Yemeni society, the *akhdam* (menial workers), and who were thought to have origins in Africa. Although they were considered to be Yemeni, they were treated almost as outcasts. Nearly twenty years earlier a rigid religious monarchy had been overthrown in North Yemen and the British had been ousted in South Yemen. Yet, Yemeni society remained rigidly divided along social and gender lines in defiance of the abolition of slavery and the guarantee of equality for all citizens, including women. This was the setting in which I began my research into the social hierarchy in what was then North Yemen.

In the 1980s when I first went to Yemen, no centralized system of health care existed. The community, which is the location of the video story, possessed a health facility staffed by an international health team, but it was rarely used. Most development strategies failed to adequately address the needs of the socially outcast *akhdam*.

Ten years later, in 1994, when I returned to Yemen, some of the women I had known earlier had become *murshidat*. These were the female primary healthcare workers, who essentially ran the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) addition to the

facility that was barely used before. No longer were people walking up to me or other foreigners, and holding out an infant nearly comatose from dehydration. Instead, women were bringing their babies for checkups and they themselves were getting pre-natal care. Everyone, including the social outcasts was participating. A remarkable transformation was occurring largely as a result of the tenacity of a few women who were committed not only to changing their community, but also to changing themselves. Such a compelling story needed to be told.

The women enthusiastically embraced the idea of videotaping their story. Since a video documentary would be ideal for training purposes, it was originally produced in Arabic for use by the *murshidat*. My collaboration with the women on the video began in 1996 after receiving Fulbright and American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS) grants. A four-month study was conducted initially to determine the feasibility of the project. I shot the original footage at that time using a Sony Hi8 video recorder. A fundraiser in Syracuse, New York organized by the Women's Showcase Productions helped to launch the project. After obtaining funding for producing the video under the small projects division of the Royal Netherlands Embassy, I hired a professional videographer. AIYS travel grants financed my trips to Yemen.

In 1997, using Sony digital equipment, we obtained background shots. Additional interviews were also conducted and the rough-cut was critiqued by the *murshidat* with the assistance of a social scientist from the Women's Studies Unit of Sana'a University. The women's suggestions were incorporated into the final videotape. Using the Media 100 system at Colgate University, we completed the revisions and online editing. Colgate students were involved in the editing process, including recording the voiceover. I delivered the completed video to the *murshidat* at the end of 1998.

Reactions to the Video at the Local, Regional and Government Levels

It was essential that the *murshidat* who run the `Abs Maternal and Child Health Center receive the video to successfully complete the collaboration. The women were obviously pleased and excited at seeing themselves on the video. The *murshidat* supervisor envisioned screening the video for the women, children and men who visit the MCH Center. The Center director and the general director of the administrative health district, both of whom are men, shared the women's enthusiasm. A women's social organization had recently been formed which included a number of the *murshidat*. The organization, which is supported by Oxfam, was interested in implementing educational and economic goals for women. Ideally, the group will also have a positive impact on *murshidat* activities, particularly on the elimination of discrimination against formerly outcaste town residents.

During the making of *Murshidat*, it became apparent that various government officials, especially in the Ministry of Health and local health districts were also important audiences for the video. Implementation of regional health services by the Ministry and the feasibility of a cost-sharing outreach program for *the murshidat's* home

visits were under discussion at the end of 1998. In addition, I shared the video with other officials, both in local and central government and in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as with the then U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine.

Viewing the Day's Shooting of "*Murshidat*"



Popular and Scholarly Reactions

Murshidat's intended audience was originally the women themselves who would share their experiences, skills and accomplishments with their peers and potential recruits. Another objective was to influence favorable support from Yemeni health officials for the continuation of *murshidat* initiatives. However, it is also clear that the video is applicable to the needs of a broader spectrum of potential viewers, including college students, community organizers, policy makers and anyone interested in building healthy, inclusive communities.

In the presentations I gave at the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS), the audience included students, teachers, development workers, researchers, NGO leaders and *akhdam* shantytown dwellers. After viewing the Arabic version of the video, most of the considerable discussion focused on improving the quality of life among the *akhdam*. Viewers recognized that raising the self-esteem of the social outcaste group was crucial. Likewise, education was considered essential for all Yemenis, especially future mothers.

The most thorough critique of the video was provided by viewers in a Women's Studies class at Sana'a University. One of the professors, Dr. Ra'ufa Hassan was among the first female media professionals in Yemen. She challenged her students to think about the diversity of Yemeni society as conveyed in *Murshidat*. She then asked the students to consider how film might be used in their own studies. As with the AIYS

viewing audience, students focused on the status of the *akhdam* and whether their situation was improving.

**Screening “*Murshidat*” at the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS),
December, 1998**



Video Applications

As a result of women’s roles as providers of primary health care, Yemen is moving toward becoming a more egalitarian society in accordance with the precepts of Islam. Improving health care delivery is occurring simultaneously with modifying rigid gender and social hierarchies in a manner that will be applicable to solving other social dilemmas. While it is a model for implementing a women’s health agenda in impoverished communities worldwide, the *murshidat* phenomenon is not unique. Similarly, video documentation of techniques for incorporating marginalized persons in small-scale projects such as the MCH Center in the coastal region of Yemen is applicable beyond the local level. In Yemen as elsewhere, the *murshidat*’s encouragement of basic hygiene regardless of distinctions related to class, race or nationality will likely be more effective in alleviating social prejudices than legal bans or edicts. Still, while changes are occurring in Yemeni attitudes toward illegal social categorization, including their racial and ethnic connotations, the outcome of this process is uncertain.

What is certain is the significance of women-centered approaches to community development. The women are astute observers of their roles as agents of change. As one of the *murshidat* observed, “Before, I was like any girl who does not understand anything --- now (women) can know how to take care of their children in a healthy way.” According to the *murshidat*, gaining control over their lives and those of their families will lead to the development of healthier communities. The video aids in the women’s strategies toward empowering themselves and others. Toward that end, the video documents women’s changing attitudes towards gender boundaries as they enter formal labor markets. Further commenting on what a woman who has been trained as a

murshidah (sing.) now “knows,” the same woman said, “now she can spend on herself, and her family like a man.” Obviously, such observations are not limited to Muslim communities.

Background Essay

Location, Climate and Geography

Yemen is an Arab country occupying the southern portion of the Arabian Peninsula. To the north, Yemen is bounded by Saudi Arabia; to the east by Oman; to the west by the Red Sea; and to the south by the Gulf of Aden. Yemen’s closest neighbors across the narrow Red Sea strip are Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. Bordering the Red Sea are the lowlands -- a coastal plains tropical region with low rainfall called the Tihamah where temperatures often reach above 100 degrees F., even during the winter months. The highlands divide the low-lying Tihamah on the west and a desert region that stretches into the Empty Quarter on the east. Extending further east is a fertile region called Wadi Hadramawt. Extending along the north central region of the country, the highlands reach elevations of over 12,000 feet. Midlands areas consist of wadi-s and foothills, up to about 300 ft. in the north, which slope down to the lowlands. Temperatures in the midlands and highlands generally stay around 70 degrees, dipping into the 40s on winter nights.

Sana`a is the capital; Aden is a commercial hub and major port.

Vital Statistics

Population: between 18.7 and 19.9 million (2003).⁴

Population growth rate: 3.8% per annum -- making Yemen one of the fastest growing countries in the world (1997).

Fertility rate: 7.4 children per family; 8.2 in rural areas

Contraceptive prevalence rate: 21%⁵

Infant deaths/ 1000 live births: 73.8⁶

Life expectancy: 61.9 years⁷

Literacy rate: 45.5%, broken down as follows: 54% for girls; 84% for boys in urban areas; 15.4 % for girls; 64.6% for boys in the rural areas.⁸

Per capita GNP: \$527⁹

Dwellings: 75 % rural

Access to adequate sanitation and safe water: Only half of Yemen’s water supply is considered safe and less than half of the population has access to safe water and sanitation. Over 90% of people in cities have adequate sanitation, but only 43.2% of people in rural areas do.¹⁰

Most Yemenis live in hamlets and villages, scattered throughout an extremely varied terrain where sanitation and knowledge of basic hygiene has been very limited.

Although major strides are being made, in 2002, ready access to primary health care supervision continued to show a huge gap between urban and rural dwellers.¹¹ The high incidence of infant and child deaths in Yemen is directly attributed to the absence of nationwide medical and sanitation delivery as well as lack of awareness regarding health matters. Moreover, access to health care remains uneven despite international assistance in building and running health centers.

The Two Yemens: Politics and the Economy

The Republic of Yemen is comprised of North and South Yemen, the former Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), and the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), respectively. North Yemen emerged as a modern state during the 1970s following the 1962 overthrow of the thousand-year-rule of conservative imams and a subsequent civil war. Relative stabilization was finally achieved in 1978 under the president of the republic, Colonel `Ali Abdullah Salih who remains in power. The national liberation forces in South Yemen won independence from Britain in 1967 and established a socialist regime.¹² Thus while colonization in South Yemen was externally imposed, in North Yemen restrictive policies were maintained by indigenous monarchs.

Despite the discovery of oil in both the North and South, and a billion dollars in remittances annually from a million labor migrants during the 1980s, both countries remained amongst the poorest in the world at the time of unification in 1990.¹³ The joint government unifying the two struggling economies opposed externally imposed resolution of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991. Yemen's "opposition" resulted in the expulsion of Yemeni migrants from Saudi Arabia, and other Arabian-peninsula allies of the United States during the Gulf war. Unresolved ideological divisions between the North and South were exacerbated by the multi-party, popular parliamentary elections in 1993. Civil war erupted in 1994; it lasted two months, and ended when Northern forces seized control.

Significantly, the civil war resulted in the rise of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) Party -- a coalition of conservative tribal and Islamist interests. Islah aligned with Ali Abdullah Salih's General Peoples' Party (GPC) against the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) in the 1993 parliamentary elections resulting in considerable gains over such key government ministries as the Ministry of Health. However these gains were not maintained relative to the GPC, which won two thirds of the seats in the parliamentary elections held in April 1997.

Women's Participation

Women's roles in society have been influenced by differences in the political stance taken by the two Yemeni regimes. Since the Northern victory in the 1994 civil war, conservative influences in the government have led to reversals in Southern policies that effect women's participation. Under the socialists in the South (PDRY), women were granted full citizenship under the Constitution. The PDRY Constitution specifically referred to women in its guarantee of gender equality. Provision was made in the South

for equalizing women's status through education and employment, both within and outside of the home, while subsequent legal reforms also included advances toward equal rights in marriage.¹⁴ The YAR on the other hand referenced Shari`ah (Islamic) law as the basis for women's rights and obligations. Currently, in united Yemen, under the Northern-dominated, more conservative regime, women, both North and South, are subject to the prospect of polygynous marriages while male dominance over female family members has been restored.¹⁵ This curtails women's advance toward professional roles in the public sphere, but there are other factors to mitigate male influence as will be discussed.

Murshidat Trainees



A more proactive regime in the South allowed women to assume active roles in politics and in the economy. For example, women in South Yemen exercised their voting rights, whereas in North Yemen, women had the right to vote, but failed to do so in substantial numbers until after unification. Women's participation as campaigners, monitors and voters (25% out of a total of 4.6 million eligible voters) in the 1997 elections was impressive. In fact, women educated other women on their voting rights. Yet, fewer than 20 women ultimately ran out of a total of over 2,000 persons of both sexes for 301 open seats. Fielding of women candidates occurred only in the former South Yemen, but not by either of the two major political parties. Women, for the most part, ran as independents, and only two of them won seats. One of the elected women was from the Hadramawt, and the other, a medical doctor was from Aden.¹⁶

Cultural restrictions limit women from participation in the educational and medical care systems. However, Lackner found that the South was significantly more advanced with respect to policies aimed at including women particularly in health care. Thus the South's more progressive policies were reflected in the number of women medical school graduates -- 41percent of students at Aden University by the early 1990s, as opposed to 14 percent of enrollment at Sana`a University. Accordingly, while neither the PDRY nor the YAR had trained enough primary health care practitioners who could

be deployed to the rural areas before unification, PDRY's policies resulted in more female doctors being available to women, including in the rural districts.¹⁷

Although many Yemeni women are enrolled in medical schools, and technically medical facilities are free, female health practitioners are few thereby reducing women's access to health care. The *murshidat* report that in the past women refused to be seen by doctors who most likely were men and who moreover were from outside of Yemen. One of their main roles as health providers is convincing women clients that it is acceptable to be seen by a male doctor for medical problems that exceed the *murshidat*'s expertise and knowledge. Another notable limitation to women's (and men's) access to health care is the inability to pay for medication. Currently, private pharmacies compete with the state medical system.¹⁸ While many Yemenis are able to travel to a medical facility, they are unable to afford the cost of prescribed medicines available only from private pharmacies.

Social Hierarchies and Racial Consciousness

In the 1970s, the constitutions of both North and South Yemen proclaimed the equality of their Yemeni citizens, thereby officially abolishing all social categories, including slavery. The PDRY government took a more proactive stance than the YAR in promoting inclusion of its most oppressed citizens. As a result, the South was more effective in eliminating popular use of derogatory labels for menial servants and formerly enslaved persons. Education was encouraged and members of demeaned groups were hired both in rural and urban settings in civil service jobs, and as soldiers, policemen and teachers.¹⁹

Grandmother & Granddaughter



Another outcome of the victory of the North in the civil war was the tacit reinstatement of social inequities. Yemenis, especially in the North, still adhere to a system of intricate, ranked, ascriptive categories to define social relations -- despite being banned.²⁰ Most Yemenis claim identity as tribespersons (*qaba`il*), especially in the highlands; or as farmers (*ra`iyah*) in the southern midlands; or as “people” (*nas*) in southern portions of the coastal plains (Tihamah).²¹ The important common element is the ability to trace one’s origins to a respected, named ancestor. For most individuals, including members of servant groups, to be Yemeni means that one is an Arab.

The highest ranking is reserved for the elite who are known as *quda* (sing. *qadi*), or in the highlands, as *sada* (sing. *sayyid*). The latter claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Members of elite groups typically serve as tribal mediators, Islamic scholars and village administrators. They share these functions with *shaykh*-s (or sheiks as is more familiar in English), who are principal tribal leaders of *qaba`il* status.²²

The lowest ranking category consists of several servant groups who perform tasks that are considered too demeaning for those in respected social categories. Such tasks include work as crafts persons, as musicians or as ritual specialists at weddings and other occasions. Included in the servant category are *khadam* or *muzayyin* who possess neither a recognized tribal affiliation nor an African ancestry, and the African-identified *`abid* and *akhdam*. Unlike respected groups, the genealogies of Yemenis in the servant categories are not similarly acknowledged either by other Yemenis or by scholars. Nevertheless, servant affiliations with territorial or tribal domains were often maintained for generations. The *akhdam* who are relegated to the occupation of street sweeping are assigned a position even lower than formerly enslaved persons who were the personal militia and commercial agents for prominent families. Economic survival for many in servant groups often necessitates continuing their relationships of servitude.

Discrimination against the *`abid* and *akhdam* is not primarily a matter of skin color or race, but involves one’s inability to claim an honorable lineage which others acknowledge. While *`abid* (ex-slaves) may be able to specify their East African country of origin, *akhdam* can neither confirm nor deny the accuracy of popular belief in their pre-Islamic origins in Yemen which is described below. Both groups are considered Yemeni, but are denied the benefits of respectability in their society. One of the few means of escaping debilitating categorization is labor migration outside of the country.²³ However, it is unlikely that the number of Yemenis who took advantage of this strategy will ever be known. Nor will the percentage of the population who are designated as *akhdam* or who were enslaved (*`abid*), be documented as such since enumeration violates official conventions barring categorical designations as previously mentioned.²⁴

Tihamah Crossroads

As a coastal plains (Tihamah) town, `Abs is situated at a crossroads of Arab-African cultural exchanges. Contacts between Southern Arabia (present-day Yemen) and East Africa date to antiquity. The thatch-roofed dwellings found on both sides of the Red

Sea, and the physical appearance of `Absi residents attest to these interchanges. Aesthetically, Yemenis prefer lighter skin, but that ideal is less attainable for Tihamah residents than for Yemenis living in the mid- and highlands. Skin color is a prominent marker of one's identity in `Abs, especially for the `abid whose sub-Saharan origins are more recent and more readily identifiable. According to popular belief, the *akhdam* originated from Ethiopia arriving in Southern Arabia in the sixth century. Historians attribute `abid ancestry to Ethiopian "slave" dynasties in the Tihamah during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, although pre-Islamic forbearers cannot be ruled out. Overlapping histories and intermarriage has meant that the two groups have not always been distinguished from one another. Still, the `abid tend to be darker skinned, taller and of a heavier build than fellow Yemenis (including the *akhdam* despite intermarriages). In contrast, members of elite or majority groups who have emigrated from the mountains tend to be lighter skinned.

Yemeni Girls – Yemenis may have African as well as Arab Ancestry, especially in the coastal region



In Yemen, skin color and ethnicity do not correspond precisely to social status. However, Yemenis often perceive each other in racial terms. Thus members of all servant categories, regardless of their ancestry or skin color are labeled as "black" (*aswad*) -- despite the fact that Yemeni complexions range from the extremes of light and dark brown (*samra*). Furthermore, as if to confirm such popular perceptions, `Absi residents in the *qaba`il* category readily report having legendary Ethiopian ancestors. In reality, the Tihamah's proximity to East Africa has resulted in intermarriages and other sexual unions.²⁵ Regional factors also play a role in how Yemenis identify themselves and others. For example, non-Tihamah residents denigrate all Tihamis regardless of skin color as "black." Therefore, the correlation between race and social status is imprecise. There is no question, however, that sub-Saharan Africans were targeted for enslavement

in Yemen and elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula.²⁶ Nevertheless, Arab identity supercedes real and imagined Arab \ African interrelations. Particularly in the Tihamah which was a center of the slave trade,²⁷ race is a more overt factor in peoples' lives, including the launching of professional roles by `Absi women.

Women, Culture and the Veil in Yemen

Yemeni women express their commitment to the cultural ideals of modesty by wearing the veil; but their adherence to those ideals transcends the mere costume. Although Islam remains the rationale for veiling in Yemen, as elsewhere in the Islamic world, the practice is not specifically prescribed in the Qur'an.²⁸ Thus, Yemeni women's interpretation of religious guidelines for veiling is multifaceted. For the women who tell their stories in *Murshidat*, veiling is relatively new. The *murshidat* report that `Abs has grown beyond its village-like state where everyone was like family. This change necessitates that women who work and go to school in the public arena must conceal themselves from the increased number of male strangers. In the video both veiled and unveiled women are present. The differences are indicative of status and regional variations; and women's attempt to maintain cultural/ religious ideals while also participating in a changing political economy.

Murshidat on a Home Visit: Veiled and Unveiled Yemeni Women



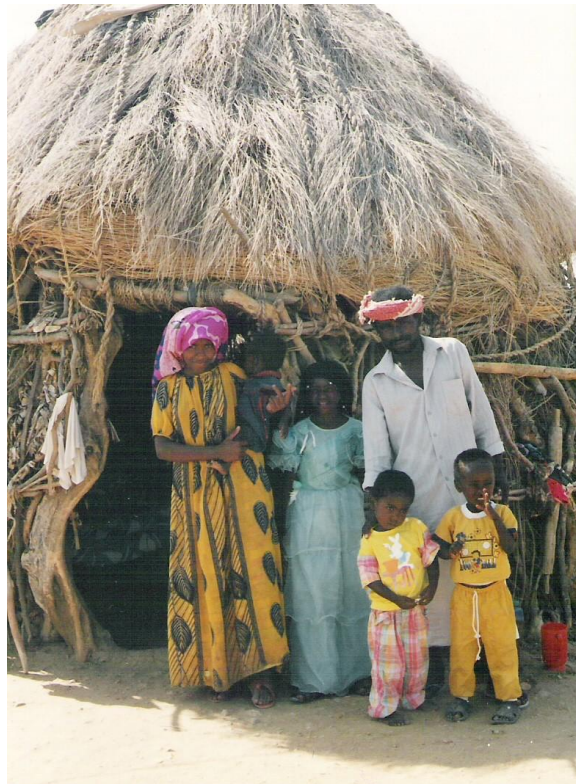
Regional Differences in Veiling

Conformity with cultural and religious guidelines for women's dress is influenced by regional variation. Yemeni women cover themselves as an expression of Islamic ideals of modesty both in dress and comportment, but full-body covering is not worn uniformly throughout the country. In the past, wearing the black face-to-feet covering called the *sharshaf* applied mainly to the northern highlands regions of former North Yemen (YAR). Rural women in the midlands still wear a dress (*qamis*), over baggy pants (*sirwal*), and a headscarf (*masarah*) under a head wrap (*makramah*), but no face

veil (*lithma*). Women in the villages around Ta`izz, in the midlands do not veil. In the 1980s a woman donned the full-length black garb on two occasions: on rare visits to the Northern capital of Sana`a, and on her wedding day as part of her ceremonial attire.

Similarly, the women who have become *murshidat* and their clients who reside in the lowlands (the Tihamah) also did not veil. In the early 1980s, women wore a loose fitting garment (*qamis*) without pants. The *qamis* exposed arms and neck as a concession to the hot, semi-tropical climate. Like virtually all women in Yemen, Tihami women wear a head covering -- usually a straw hat (*kufiyyah*) -- but no face covering. In the past, only women from the highlands who typically were from prominent families wore the full-length garments after relocating to the Tihamah. Since the Gulf war, Yemeni women whose formative years were spent in Saudi Arabia have returned to Yemen adhering to the strict veiling practices of that country. In the former South Yemen (PDRY), the majority of village women in the tribal category (*qaba`il*) also are not veiled. As new professionals, many women wore the loose cloak-like *abaya*, rather than the more limiting *sharshaf* of the North (Carapico 1996: 95).

Returnees from Saudi Arabia in a Settlement Camp



Changing Political Economy

Why are women choosing to wear the veil nowadays? It must first be understood that men and women occupy different social spaces in Yemen as in other Muslim and/ or

Arab settings where segregation between the sexes may be more or less strict. Veiling, therefore, improves the chances that male relatives will accept women's participation in the public (male) arena. Thus, in Yemen today, women veil as an expression of their identities as Muslim women and as an expression of their growing autonomy in public work and educational spaces. In so doing, they are insuring their modesty and privacy within those spaces. Now that women and girls are going to school and working outside of their homes, they have adopted the full-length coat-like garment, called a *balto* and the scarf, called the *hijab* as a way to gain mobility and approval. Concealing themselves from the glare of outsiders affords women greater privacy and reduces harassment from men on the streets. This is called the "new veiling." In agricultural regions where modernity touches women's lives to a lesser degree, traditional dress prevails.

Furthermore, a woman's chances of receiving the approval of husbands, brothers and fathers, is increased considerably when, as in the case of many of the *murshidat*, their wages will contribute to financing the household. Such was the case in `Abs when the population swelled with labor migrants returning to Yemen after their expulsion from Saudi Arabia during the Gulf war. Large-scale unemployment of male returnees resulted in considerable economic hardship. In the same time frame, the unification of Yemen was also taking place. Consequently, the political and economic climate helped to ease restrictions on women's wage-earning options in the public domain.

Changing Social Status

Veiling is an expression of another important cultural value: the demarcation of social status. Until recently, even women at the top of the social scale routinely maintained the household, tended the children, hauled water, fodder and firewood, and engaged in agricultural production. Few families could afford to sequester women and thus seclude them from agriculture and marketing. Often, unveiled women in respected groups sell home-made goods and produce in outdoor markets. But only women in the most subordinate groups, the *`abid* and *akhdam* were prevented from dressing in accordance with ideals of female virtue.²⁹ Scholars reason that because women in these low status groups have fewer cultural restraints and expectations, they also have greater freedom to engage in economic endeavors.³⁰ *`Abid* and *akhdam* women may use their uncontested mobility to economic advantage, but male relatives often force women to comply with strict cultural definitions of female gender roles. Still, many view low status women's behaviors as merely a contradiction to the moral strictures that guide other Yemeni women.

Contrary to others' expectations, however, women who are perceived as low status, hence lacking in honor also aspire to respectability. Adopting the veil signals their advance in accordance with the values held by their society. For previously ostracized women, wearing the veil also symbolizes their assertions of equality and their resistance to status hierarchies. Particularly in the mid- and highlands, the veil signifies honor and self-respect as much to women of lower rank, at least in their own eyes, as it does to women of prominent status. Unveiled women, however, are no less circumspect than

veiled women in their commitment to protecting their own and their family's honor. Therefore, one should not assume that veiling is synonymous with constraint on women's activity, nor equate the absence of veiling with an absence of morality. Such equations minimize the complexities involved in the phenomenon of veiling in Muslim societies.

Women and Children who live in the Market



Negotiating Separate Gender and Social Spaces

The *murshidat* in `Abs wear the veil as a symbol of their Muslim identity which they can now rationalize in religious terms. Due to growing school attendance among girls, more women are able to read the Qur`an, and reassess relevant scriptural doctrines for themselves. Thus, in explaining why women in `Abs did not veil in the past, the *murshidat* supervisor replied, "Before we were ignorant of Islam." Nowadays, women, as a newly educated class of workers, comply with Muslim ideals in order to participate in the public arena.

Finally, the *murshidat* are also seeking to apply their new understandings of religious guidelines to health concerns, especially family planning. Wearing the veil, specifically the modernized *balto*, has become the dress of choice for women in the public sphere in Yemen. By entering these generally male-centered domains, women thereby are increasing their participation in the expanding Yemeni economy. Rather than connoting liberation, however, the veil more accurately signals the demarcation of woman-centered spaces. Yet, in delivering effective health care to women, such spaces may not strictly conform to Yemeni cultural ideals of separation between the sexes. On the one hand, the *murshidat* regularly defend the clinic space against the incursions of male doctors. On the other hand, they also realize that success in serving women's health

needs may mean inviting husbands into the exam room to discuss the justifications for contraceptives within Islam – even if men’s presence in the clinic violates the principle of separation between the sexes. For many of the *murshidat*, their commitment to long-term goals of serving their women clients means becoming skilled doctors and nurses. Far from being passive agents of change, the *murshidat* have gained a foothold in the local economy and in the health and social consciousness of their community as well.

Racism and Feminism in the Yemeni Context

Advocates for women’s socioeconomic or political parity with men are the exception rather than the rule in Yemeni society. Still, many Yemenis, including men, have long advocated a democracy that permits women's full participation. Similarly, Yemenis, both women and men recognize the advantages of educational and employment opportunities for women. Comparatively few Yemenis would term themselves feminists, however. Rather, the goals of women’s activism in Yemen typically center on improving the standards of living for one’s family and community.³¹ As Badran succinctly observes: “In Yemen, women practise feminism. They do not label it.”³² Her statement refers to women’s political pragmatism, especially as it pertains to gender equality.³³ Yet, such pragmatic activism also applies to Yemeni women’s family-oriented social change in work that traditionally is viewed as female. In other words, Yemeni women are reforming their society within female-defined and female-oriented work domains.

Yemeni society would also not be characterized by many as racist. Despite constitutional and Islamic egalitarian ideals, Yemen’s rigid social hierarchy is based on birth and occupational status rather than race. However, implicit in the categories that Yemenis use to identify themselves and others are racial and ethnic ideologies. Yemenis with known African ancestry, ex-slaves (*`abid*) and Yemenis with reputed African origins (*akhdam*) are relegated to the bottom of the social scale. Moreover, Yemeni servant groups with no known or presumed African ancestors (*khadam*) are considered black and thereby racialized. While the terms feminist, and racist do not fit precisely in the Yemeni context, the female primary health care workers, known in Arabic as *murshidat*, are not only effectively delivering health services, but are also helping stigmatized African-identified groups gain access to rights and privileges they previously were denied. In so doing, they are promoting social integration and reducing the barriers that have long divided Yemenis of different social status.

Murshidat Returning from a Home Visit



Previewing Activities



1. Give students a map of the Middle East, pointing out the dominance of Saudi Arabia on the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen's proximity to the oil-rich states of the Gulf and also its proximity to East African countries. Together point out former South and former North Yemen., Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Israel.

Locate the following cities, towns and regions: `Abs, Sana'a (capital); Ta'izz; Hudaydah (port city); Aden (former capital of South Yemen, also a port city); the Hadramawt.

2. Explain that Yemen is a country with ancient origins; refer to the biblical queen of Sheba (A.K.A. the ancient kingdom of Saba). Point out that Yemen, known in the past as Arabia Felix ("Happy Arabia") has had intercultural exchanges with the eastern coast of Africa, particularly with Ethiopia since at least 1,000BC when it was called Axum then Abyssinia.

3. Have students list the images that come to mind when they hear the words Arab, Muslim or Middle East. Write these images on the blackboard. Begin a discussion of the list by asking:

- ❖ Explain what you mean by (e.g. "secluded" or "veiled")
- ❖ What is the source of your information? Does it come from the media?
- ❖ Is this your opinion, someone else's, or a widely held viewpoint?

Ask the class for a definition of "stereotype," or define the word for the class.

- ❖ Which of these characteristics are stereotypes? Why do stereotypes exist?

4. Ask students whether they have seen any of the recent Hollywood films, “Sinbad,” “Rules of Engagement,” “The Lion King,” “Aladdin.” Did they see any stereotypes portrayed in those films? What were they? From whose point of view was the story being told?
5. Are they aware of any Arab-Americans or people of Middle Eastern backgrounds in their community at home or at their school? What could they do to make those classmates feel more accepted?

Post-viewing Questions & Discussion Topics

Health Care

1. Describe the health care system in your community at home.
2. Does everyone in your community have equal access to preventive health care?
3. Do poor people in the U.S. use health care facilities differently from those who are middle and upper class? Describe the health situation for elderly citizens.
4. How do class, gender or racial issues have an impact on who becomes a health care professional in the United States? In Yemen?
5. Have the *murshidat* been able to adapt their own cultural values, religious beliefs and attitudes to Westernized medical practices? Comment on what you observed in the video about this question.
6. How have men responded to the work that the women in Yemen are doing?

Social Relations

1. Describe subtle and more overt forms of racism and discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation and disability in your school and/ or community? The profiling of certain groups in the United States based on their race or ethnicity for example.
2. Have you observed or heard about people of Middle Eastern, Arab or other backgrounds being discriminated against or harassed by their neighbors due to the implementation of “homeland security”?
3. What can the targets of racial discrimination do (or have they done) to counteract this behavior?
4. What can you do when racism or the other “isms” (sexism, ageism, able-ism, and homophobia) occur in your presence? Have your strategies worked?

5. Can racial and other differences play a role in unifying various Americans, including students?
6. From what you observed in the video would you characterize Yemen as a diverse society? What were the differences you observed?
7. To what extent have the *murshidat* been successful in overcoming social differences in your view?

African Diaspora

1. Can African Americans trace their ancestry before their arrival in the United States?
2. What role has migration from African and other countries played in American society, in Yemeni society?
3. What are the affects of cross-cultural influences on the United States -- and on Yemen?
4. Are there similarities and differences regarding the integration of outcastes, ex-slaves and other African-identified peoples in Yemen and the United States?

Women, Education & Development

1. Discuss the ways in which women have been able to exert an influence in Yemeni society.
2. Discuss the ways that the film has challenged your perceptions of Arab Muslim women in general and Yemeni women in particular.
3. Describe a project, a job or career choice that you feel passionate about.
4. What messages do the *murshidat* have to tell us about commitment to building community?
5. Is it a contradiction that the women are implementing a Western-oriented health care system in light of what is known about colonial domination elsewhere? In other words can progress (medical or otherwise) arise from relationships that have been oppressive in the past?
6. The veil and women's empowerment – a contradiction or a reality? Explain.

Gender Relations

1. Describe male vs. female domains in Yemeni society.

2. How does strict separation between the sexes affect health care for women and men?
3. In what ways are rigid sex segregated domains being breached?
4. What do men think about the work that women are doing?
5. How do the women avoid threatening male authority?

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¹ An example, is “One Man and a Global Web of Violence,” The New York Times, 14 January 2001, p. 1.

² David K. Shipler, Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land, New York: Times Books, 1986. He is also producer of a PBS documentary and background essay with the same title.

³ Sheba, who reigned over Southern Arabia’s Sabaeen Kingdom when she visited Solomon (Sulayman in Arabic) is known as Bilqis in Yemen and Makeda in Ethiopia.

⁴ Population Reference Bureau (PRB), a Washington, D.C. based statistical source (see [www: prb.org](http://www.prb.org)); UN Population Information Network (POPIN) (www://undp.org/popin/wdtrends.htm) and <http://www.undp.org/ye/health>, 2002.

⁵ UN Population Information Network (POPIN) (see www://undp.org/popin/wdtrends.htm).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yemeni Women in Figures, Amat Al-Aleem as-Suswa, Yemeni Women in Figures, Sana`a: UNICEF (1996), 13-14.

⁹ The State of the World’s Children 1997, UNICEF, Oxford University Press (1997), p. 88; Al-Aleem as-Suswa; 1996, pp. 13-14; Human Development Report 1999, p. 136. The State of the Worlds Children 2001, reports a rise in annual growth rate to 4.6 percent www.unicef.org/sowc1/tables, UNICEF, Dec 2000.

¹⁰ See <http://www.undp.org/ye/health>, 2002.

¹¹ 75% and 24% respectively, <http://www.undp.org.ye/health>.

¹² The two Yemens are not easily characterized by the labels "socialist" and "capitalist" as Sheila Carapico discusses in "The Economic Dimension of Yemeni Unity," Middle East Report, 1993, no. 184, vol. 23, #5, pp. 9-14.

¹³ See Charles Dunbar, "The Unification of Yemen: Process, Politics, and Prospects," in Middle East Journal, 1992, vol. 46, # 3, pp. 456-476; Fred Halliday, "The Third Inter-Yemeni War and Its Consequences," in Asian Affairs, 1995, vol. 26, part II, pp. 131-140

¹⁴ Maxine Molyneux, "Legal Reform and Socialist Revolution in South Yemen: Women and the Family," in Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism, Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp and Marilyn B. Young, eds., New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, pp. 204-207.

¹⁵ See Helen Lackner, "Women and Development in the Republic of Yemen," in Gender and Development in the Arab World, Nabil F. Khoury, and Valentine Moghadem, eds., Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1995, pp. 76-8. Also See Maxine Molyneux, 1989, pp. 193-214.

¹⁶ Impressive also is the recent appointment of Amat Al-Aleem As-Suswa, the Deputy Minister of Information as Ambassador to Holland. She becomes the first Yemeni woman in modern times to be appointed to an ambassadorship.

¹⁷ Lackner, 1995, pp. 91-2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ More data, albeit incomplete, exists pertaining to the gender of the urban labor force than about the social status of newly educated workers. In general, service and low skilled jobs employ more women than professional jobs. See Helen Lackner, 1995, pp. 86-9. Also, Mouna Hashem, "Patterns and Processes of Social Exclusion in the Republic of Yemen," in Social Exclusion: Rhetoric, Reality, Responses, ed. Gerry Rodgers, Charles Gore and Jose Figueiredo (International Institute for Labor Studies, United Nations Development Programme, 1995), 174-186.

²⁰ Conversely, transition from a subsistence-based to a cash-based economy has reduced certain occupational distinctions. As farmers, members of the tribal social category usually cultivated certain crops, like grains. An extremely limited job market back home has resulted in labor migrants becoming barbers (albeit in their own shops) in the 1990s -- a livelihood that was formerly considered low status.

²¹ See Anne Meneley, Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemen Town, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

²² The words "tribe" or "tribesperson" are direct translations of the Arabic *qabilah* and *qabili* (m.); *qabiliyyah* (f.) which are terms commonly used by Yemenis especially in the Central Highlands (or "Upper Yemen" located in the area south of the Yemeni capital, Sana`a, and extending northwards to the Saudi border.) In Yemen, being tribal connotes a territorial affiliation with a recognized and respected social group. Notably, Yemen differs, therefore, from Africa and the Americas where persons to whom such terminology was applied were deemed inferiors according to colonial perspectives.

²³ See Delores M. Walters, "Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab Republic," Ph.D. Dissertation, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1987, pp. 243-48; and Thomas B. Stevenson, "Yemeni Workers Come Home: Reabsorbing One Million Migrants," Middle East Report, 1993, # 181, vol. 23, # 2, pp. 15-20.

²⁴ According to a survey conducted by Oxfam in 1997, the *akhdam* population is 200,000 (www.undp.org.ye.inequalities.htm). See Afrah Ahmadi, and Sharon Beatty, Participatory Socio-economic Needs Survey of the Sana`a Urban Settlement Dwellers with Special Reference to Women, 1997). This survey was conducted on four shantytowns in Sana`a, each of which was said to have approximately 2,000 people. The overall population in the capital city is approximately one million. Other observers conclude that there are at least one million *akhdam* in the country (Yemen Times, 20 Feb 1994, p. 7) based on the fact that between seventy and eighty percent of Yemenis generally live in rural areas. Actual numbers of African-identified persons in the overall population have yet to be determined.

²⁵ The debate over the citizenship of Yemenis of dual parentage (*muwalladin*), mainly individuals whose mothers are from East Africa, remains unresolved. See, for example, "A New Form of Yemeni Discrimination in the Making," in Yemen Times, 1994, vol. iv, No. 47, 28 Nov.

²⁶ Even until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the importation of enslaved persons from Ethiopia via Jiddah (Saudi Arabia) occurred at the rate of between 1400 and 5000 annually depending on the European source consulted, according to Richard Pankurst, Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935, Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie University Press, 1968, p. 124.

²⁷ See Bernard Lewis, Race and Color in Islam, New York: Harper and Row, 1970:40, and Walters, op.cit. p. 222 for other references to the slave trade in the Yemeni Tihamah, including Arabic manuscripts.

²⁸ Nor is veiling and seclusion unique to Islam as described by Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 55).

²⁹ Just as low status women were denied the expression of female virtue in their attire, low status men similarly were denied a marker of male identity – the ceremonial dagger called the *jambiyah*. Men prevented from wearing the *jambiyah* were thus denied the symbolic expression of self-defense.

³⁰ As Saif discusses, *akhdam* women are under less social pressure to conform to rigid codes of sexual and social conduct. She also explains their racialized status. For her analysis, see Huda Seif, "Contextualizing Gender and Labor: Class, Ethnicity and Global Politics in the Yemeni Socio-Economy," in Women's Rights Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives, Peters, Julie and Andrea Wolper, eds. New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 289-300.

³¹ For example, Islamist women in the Islah political party focus primarily on alleviating poverty, illiteracy, and improving health care, Janine Clark, "Women and Islamic Activism in Yemen," paper delivered at MESA, 1996.

³² Margot Badran, "Unifying Women: Feminist Pasts and Presents in Yemen," Gender and History, special issue: Feminisms and Internationalism, Mrinalini Sinha, Donna J. Guy and Angela Woollacott, eds. Oxford UK and Boston, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 511.

³³ *Ibid.*, Badran, pp. 499-518. Elsewhere, Badran also uses the phrase "gender activism" to describe the pro-feminist behaviors of Egyptian women. See "Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt," in Identity, Politics and Women, Boulder, CO, USA: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 202-227.

Map of Yemen

