A Community of Secrets: The Separate World of Bedouin Women

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The terms "harem" and "seclusion," so intertwined with popular and scholarly conceptions of Arab women, are in most respects grossly misleading. Conjuring up provocative images of groups of idle women imprisoned in sumptuous quarters awaiting the attentions of their master, or submissive veiled shadows scurrying down alleys, confined behind high walls, and excluded from the bustle of the public male world, these terms suggest the nadir of women's status and autonomy. They also suggest male initiative in the creation of separate worlds and direct male control over groups of women. Although these interpretations misrepresent reality, the images evoked by the terms, which indicate that women spend much of their time apart from men living in a separate world and form some sort of community within the larger society, capture an essential truth of social life in the Arab world, if not in other Muslim societies as well. By shifting our gaze and assuming the perspective of those for whom this community of women is the primary arena of social life, we get a more

The research on which this article is based was conducted in Egypt between October 1978 and May 1980. I am grateful to many who facilitated my research there but most of all to the community of Awlad 'Ali Bedouins with whom I lived. For financial support for my research in Egypt and writing at Harvard, I am grateful to the National Institute of Mental Health and the American Association of University Women. For encouragement, comments, and help in preparing this paper for presentation at the conference on "Communities of Women" I want to thank Barb Smuts and John Watanabe. For inspiration and critical response I must thank the organizers of and participants in that conference sponsored by Signs and the Center for Research on Women at Stanford University, and for thought-provoking comments, the anonymous readers of the manuscript for Signs.
accurate and nuanced view not only of its connection to the men's world, but of the nature of women's experiences and relationships within the community.

Although the generalized principle of mutual avoidance applies in many traditional Middle Eastern societies,¹ the degree to which sexual segregation structures people's lives and the actual patterns it creates vary considerably depending on how it articulates with social and economic organization and historical circumstances. Lumping rural and urban groups; pastoral, peasant, and mercantile economies; or different geographic and cultural areas only confuses the issue. Thus I confine my description to one society in the Middle East, that of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins of the Egyptian Western Desert.² I know this case intimately because I lived in an Awlad 'Ali camp made up of the households of my host, his brothers and cousins, some distant relatives, and some clients. The role of adoptive daughter within the household was open to me because of my Arab and Muslim background and the circumstances of my introduction to the families,³ and I embraced it for the acceptance it provided in a society in which, first, kinship defines relationships and, second, young women never live alone. Thus I traded access to a wide network for the advantages of close relationships within the smaller community in which most people lived their lives. Although in the first phase of my fieldwork I moved back and forth from the men's world to the women's, I soon realized that my contact with men—boring and frustrating because of barriers to conversation about personal matters created by the rules of propriety and the formality of men's gatherings—also foreclosed the possibility that the women would trust me. Since I wished to study interpersonal relations (those between men and women in particular) and the ideology of social life, topics that could not be


3. These circumstances and the consequences of having been accompanied initially by my father are detailed in the first chapter of Lila Abu-Lughod, Veiled Sentiments: Honor, Modesty, and Poetry in a Bedouin Society (Berkeley: University of California Press, in press).
studied without people's willingness to talk openly about their personal lives and feelings, I chose to declare my loyalty to the women.

In this article I explore in detail the sense in which the Bedouin women with whom I spent nearly two years live in a separate community—a community that could also be considered a subsociety: separate from and parallel to the men's, yet cross-cut by ties to men and encompassed in the larger world defined by kinship in a tribal structure; characterized by complex and intense interpersonal relations; and maintained by shared secrets, conveyed most poignantly through poetry. More importantly, I consider the women's attitudes about this community and about their separation from men, and the apparent consequences of such arrangements with regard to women's autonomy, personal development, and interpersonal relations. This study will also contribute to our general understanding of the forces that create and shape communities of women and the advantages and dilemmas that face women who live in separate communities.

**Sexual Segregation among Awlad 'Ali**

Living in camps and towns scattered throughout the coastal region of the Egyptian Western Desert, the Bedouins known collectively as Awlad 'Ali are seminomadic pastoralists in the process of sedentarization. Their traditional economy was based on sheep and camel herding, supplemented by rain-fed barley cultivation and trade (recently replaced by smuggling and legal commercial ventures). Arabic speakers and Muslims who migrated from Cyrenaica (Eastern Libya) at least two hundred years ago, they proudly differentiate themselves from the peasants and urbanites of the Nile Valley by the tribal ideology that shapes their social and political organization, not to mention their interpersonal relations, and by their stricter adherence to a moral code of honor and modesty. A key entailment of this code is sexual propriety facilitated by sexual segregation.4

The Bedouins' everyday social world is divided in two. In one half are adult men, in the other are women and children. The division does not take the form of a rigidly demarcated ecological separation between home, or the private sphere, and public space, as it does in other parts of the Middle East, particularly in urban areas. The locus of most activities for both men and women was, until recently, the camp and its environs. The division of space is relatively informal and flexible, segregation depending on mutual avoidance and the separation of activities that

4. The analysis of the code of honor and modesty on which the arguments of this article hinge is far too complex to present here. For elaboration, see ibid.
results from the sexual division of labor. Yet even when they are not working, men and women rarely socialize together. Indeed, my host's senior wife confessed to me that before I had come to live with them and to spend time chatting with my host in her room, she had never spent an entire evening in his company.

The two worlds coexist side by side, a function not of the wishes and power of particular men, but of the sexual division of labor and a social system structured by the primacy of agnatic bonds (those between male and female paternal kin) and the authority of senior kinsmen, and maintained by individuals whose attitudes and actions are guided by a shared moral ideology. This code of honor and modesty discourages expression of sexuality because it constructs a set of personal ideals revolving around notions of independence and autonomy in which a person's status depends on his or her distance from social and natural sources of weakness and lack of control. The denial of sexuality is best expressed by avoiding members of the opposite sex with whom one might have a sexual relationship, and deferring, through modest avoidance, to those senior kinsmen who embody and represent the social ideals of independence and the triumph of agnation. Hence develops the system of sexual segregation, upheld equally by men and women who wish to be respectable members of their communities and who derive their social positions and support through family and tribe.

The degree to which contact between men and women is determined by their social categories is evidence that this separation of the sexes has to do with the avoidance of sexuality and deference to senior kinsmen. The boundaries between the men's and women's worlds are no more impermeable than the woven blanket that in the past used to divide the Bedouin tent into women's and men's sections. Men may more easily enter the women's world than vice versa, but the men who do so are those considered neither sexual threats nor authority figures. They are young kinsmen or household members and low-status men of the community. In fact, interactions between individual men and women range from relaxed familiarity to extremely formal avoidance, marked by women's veiling and men's aversion of gaze. Kinship relation, relative age, and

5. In the traditional economy, subsistence depended on the joint labor of all members of one or more households. Men now travel a great deal and much of their work takes them outside the camp. What may have been a more informal separation of men and women on the basis of separate tasks has become rigid and extreme. For a similar case, see Lois Beck, "Women among Qashqa'i Nomadic Pastoralists in Iran," in Women in the Muslim World, ed. Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 351–73.

6. In this article references to sexuality are to heterosexuality, which is in keeping with Awlad 'Ali ways of thinking about sexuality.

7. See Abu-Lughod.
social status determine the types of interaction. Sons, nephews, and younger kinsmen are greeted warmly and engaged in lively conversation. Fathers, paternal uncles, or fathers-in-law radically transform the atmosphere of the women’s world; their intrusions bring a sudden hush to a roomful of garrulous women and boisterous children. Men who are not kin, especially those of high status, would not even come close to an area where a group of women was gathered.

**Structural Dependence and Cross-cutting Ties**

The character of the community of women is shaped by the same social system whose by-product it is. Kinship is the primary idiom of social, political, and economic relationships in this tribal society, and the women’s community is embedded in that society and cross-cut by numerous ties. Structurally, the community is by no means autonomous; it is neither self-contained nor economically self-sufficient. It controls no particular property or space, has no formal political presence or representation within the larger system, nor even an informal means of acting as an interest group. It is fragmented because its members define their primary ties and allegiances not to one another but to their kin groups.

The community is composed of individual women, all of whom are economically dependent and each of whom derives her right to support through links to kinsmen or husbands or both. In this, women are not much different from other dependent persons, including poor and young men. Among Awlad ‘Ali, senior men of each lineage control the resources and are responsible for supporting kin, male and female. Dependents face serious restrictions on their autonomy in decision making. Senior kinsmen arrange marriages for daughters (and sons) and can order a young kinswoman to abandon a marriage, for example, if her own lineage and that of her husband have a serious fight. A woman who wants a divorce depends on the cooperation of senior male kin or senior males forced to take on the role of kin.8 Given these facts, it should not be surprising that kinship bonds are affectively charged. In a very real sense, a woman’s interests are one with those of her kin group, as her reputation and status are linked to theirs.

Thus kinship creates structural pulls that divide the women’s community. Solidarity and identification with agnatic kin override bonds based on gender, common experience, or a shared daily life. One of the first questions asked of any stranger is “Where are you from?” The

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8. The customary procedure for obtaining a divorce is either to return to one’s natal home and have one’s father or older male kin negotiate the divorce, or to “throw oneself” at the mercy of a tribal leader or religious figure. See Mohsen (n. 2 above), esp. pp. 163–65.
answer is not, as one would expect, a geographic area, but rather a tribal or lineage affiliation. Women retain their tribal identity even after marriage, although their children belong to the husband's tribe. More importantly, the ideology of the unbreakable and special bond among patrikin pervades the Awlad 'Ali's vision of their social relations. This is as true for women as for men, which means that women conceive of their primary bonds as those to kin, not to one another. In short, the women's community is encompassed and penetrated; it has no structural independence, and its members have their primary structural ties to those outside the community.

A Women's Society

In day-to-day life, however, sexual segregation effectively separates the social worlds of men and women. Women constitute a separate society, which has an internal structure that ranks women and defines their relations, both within the residential unit and outside the camp, in an often wide network maintained by reciprocal visiting and gift exchange. Yet women's social links are not defined independently. The same system that structures the social relations between men determines those between women. Personal networks depend on the principles of kinship, coresidence, and affinity. Rank and residence depend on a woman's relations to men, either kin or spouses. Thus while the women's society functions separately, its structure is derivative. In the women's own experience, it is not subordinate, however, but parallel.

Members of a residential community do not choose to live with one another but are thrown together by their ties to men who live together. Camps or settled hamlets are usually formed around a core of agnates and their dependents. Unmarried or divorced sisters and daughters of the core men, and often their mothers (who if widowed usually provide the social and emotional focus of the whole camp), are the core of the women's community. The prevalence of endogamous marriages assures that many of the wives of men in the community are also related to the core women. Unrelated wives fill out the ranks. Most camps also include permanent or temporary client households. The men of these households have contractual ties to individual core men or nonspecific ties of clientship, often for generations, to the core lineage; their female dependents join the women's community.

9. Polygyny, usually initiated by men, swells the women's community both by increasing the actual number of women in a household and by enabling individual women to participate more in the women's world. Co-wives spend more time with each other than either does with the husband, and they are also free to mingle with other women more often since they split the work and the time involved in meeting the husband's demands.
Within the community of women hierarchy is not pronounced, perhaps because all women lack access to resources. The patterns of formality and ritualized avoidance that mark deferential behavior toward men occur in only the most attenuated form among women, who never veil for each other. Hierarchy is expressed in who performs services for whom, who greets versus who serves guests, and who has more freedom to move around and outside the camp. Kinswomen of the core agnates are in positions of strength. A kinswoman has rights, through her father, to all lineage property, while a wife is not entitled to much. The camp is the kinswoman’s home; a wife can be divorced and sent home to her family. Senior women, even if of a different tribe, gain status in the camp not only because of old age but because of their relationship to adult sons. A woman’s status is also tied to that of her husband. Younger wives of core senior agnates, for example, have higher status than do older wives of less important men.

In relations with the larger community of women outside the camp, a woman’s status rests more on seniority and the reputation of her lineage or tribe, or on her husband and his. Within these constraints, personal qualities such as character, intelligence, wit, humor, and talent, and moral qualities such as generosity can make a big difference, if not for status then for centrality and influence. They certainly affect popularity. Women’s social positions may be enhanced, but never transformed, by the adoption of specialized roles.

The women’s community is not only internally structured by the same principles—primarily kinship and seniority—that structure society as a whole, but in many ways replicates and parallels the men’s community. Since identity is defined by kinship, men and women represent their kin groups in the separate spheres. This can be seen most clearly in the way high-status guests are received in the camp. Men go directly to the men’s section, are greeted and entertained by the senior agnates, while younger men and clients serve them and remain quiet on the fringes. High-status women visitors, coming alone or with the men, go directly to the women’s quarters, where they are entertained by the senior core women; younger women prepare the food and tea, sometimes participating in the conversation, sometimes not.

10. Ursula Sharma, in “Women and Their Affines: The Veil as a Symbol of Separation,” Man 13, no. 2 (June 1978): 727–56, esp. 226, cites Doranne Jacobson, “Hidden Faces: Hindu and Muslim Purdah in a Central Indian Village” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1970), who shows that women veil for certain female affines. Like the North Indian villagers studied by Sharma, Awlad ‘Ali women veil only for men, although, in contrast, they veil not only for affines but also for kinsmen of certain categories.
11. Nancy Tapper, “The Women’s Subsociety among the Shahsevan Nomads of Iran,” in Beck and Keddie, eds. (n. 5 above), directed my attention to issues of rank and network in the women’s community.
Women have their own social networks and obligations, established on the same principles that organize the society as a whole. Persons in a network offer condolences at funerals and attend celebrations of weddings, boys’ circumcisions, and feasts that mark the return from the holy pilgrimage to Mecca, the building of a new house, or the release from prison or hospital. A smaller network of closely related persons pays sick calls, and only women, mostly those living nearby, go to see one another after childbirth. Visits on most of these occasions generally include the exchange of gifts and services. Since socializing, particularly at formal gatherings where nonkin are present, is a single-sex activity, men and women visit and exchange gifts with different individuals. However, most of these occasions are considered family affairs, and so related men and women usually attend the same functions. In general, while the dominant links for both men and women are those of kinship and affinity, the structure of women’s networks differs because in them coresidence and neighborhood are also highly valued.

**Autonomy and the Women’s World**

When one turns one’s attention from structural concerns to women’s day-to-day activities and their experiences of living together within Awlad ‘Ali female society, the women’s community takes on a more independent appearance. The community regulates its internal affairs free from the interference and often the knowledge of men. Sexual segregation is also a source of personal autonomy for women. Rather than feeling deprived or excluded from the men’s world, women are oriented toward each other and concerned to guard the boundaries of their exclusive world. Adult men’s intrusions are infrequent and for the most part unwelcome; women are always anxious to shake off husbands and their male guests. When men are about, an often-heard question among the women is, “Have they gone?” The relief at their departure is palpable. One of the complaints I most frequently heard from a particular group of women concerned the layout of their new house. They thought the men’s and women’s sections were not sufficiently far apart, and they resented the way this interfered with their privacy.

Bedouin women collude to erect a barrier of silence about their world. Information flows unidirectionally from the men’s arena into the women’s and not vice versa. Since women become deferentially silent in the presence of most adult men, men generally do not overhear the

natural conversations of women.\textsuperscript{13} Young and low-status men have easy access to the women’s community, and they bring information to the women about what goes on in the male world. But such men, because they are circumspect in their own community and must be deferential to senior males, do not report back about what goes on among women. The extent to which women collude to keep men out of their world is apparent from the reaction of one Bedouin woman who discovered that her brother-in-law had gotten wind of something she had said about him. She guessed that the comment must have been passed on to him by his new bride. She fumed: “We [the women in the core community] have lived together for seventeen years and never has any woman brought women’s talk to the men! In our community we have one way. Women don’t tell the men what goes on between women. Even the old women—why, they talk to the men, but they don’t expose the secrets.”

In her analysis of urban Moroccan women, Daisy Dwyer notes that women support men’s avoidance of them in part because it offers the women opportunity for independence and defiance.\textsuperscript{14} Bedouin women appreciate this aspect of sexual segregation as well. When men are absent, women can engage in activities that are forbidden in men’s presence. Smoking, for example, is considered improper for women, but most Bedouin women like to smoke cigarettes and do so whenever they can. When a child or someone’s loud throat clearing warns them of a man’s approach, they hide the cigarettes. Similarly, when men are not around, women go places without permission. Often they visit local healers to get treatments or holy men to get amulets and charms. Other women cover for them if spouses or male kinsmen return unexpectedly.

\section*{Social Responsibility}

The separation of male and female worlds grants women more than freedom to indulge in minor defiances of the system and the men in control. It allows for the development of social responsibility. Within their community, women run their own daily affairs. They manage their households with little interference from men, dividing up the tasks and seeing to it that the necessary work that is women’s province gets done each day. During slack periods, women occupy themselves as they wish.

\textsuperscript{13} For a similar situation among peasants in southern France, see Susan Carol Rogers, “Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: A Model of Female/Male Interaction in a Peasant Society,” \textit{American Ethnologist} 2, no. 4 (November 1975): 727–56, esp. 741.

weaving, paying visits to neighbors, or just sitting around. Since men are gone for much of the day, seeing to the sheep and to business concerns, they impose themselves on women only rarely, usually at mealtimes.

More importantly, women are the arbiters of women's morality. Social control over women is in the hands of other women and is guided by a set of moral ideals that girls learn as they grow up in the women's community. Women correct one another well into adulthood through gossip, teasing, and other forms of indirect criticism, even poetry. Men interfere only when serious infractions of basic norms occur—particularly those of sexual propriety. They have no direct authority over the community as a whole, and their legitimate control over individual women derives from their kinship ties. Husbands have limited authority because wives have recourse to kin for protection. And because the worlds are so separate, men are generally ignorant of what women do, which also effectively restricts male control.

Children are socialized into Bedouin society by women. Women teach children to be modest or deferential in the proper situations. Girls are more harshly criticized for immodesty and insubordination, and heavy pressure begins to fall on them as they reach puberty. Girls watch and listen, learning a great deal about moral standards from women's conversations. Neither punishment nor force is used, although threats abound. Often, older women show their disapproval in a humorous way. The following incident illustrates such indirect social control. Female peddlers in the desert areas had just begun to carry western-style negligees. The adolescent girls were enthralled and, in one camp, two of them had bought negligees for their trousseaus. Their grandmothers were outraged. As she sat with a group of women, one grandmother demanded that the negligée be brought to her. She showed it to the other women, asking if indeed this wasn't the most shameless thing they had ever seen. She then pulled the sheer lime-green nightgown over her bulky dresses and danced provocatively around the room, threatening to go outside and show it to the men. The women wailed with laughter and dragged her away from the doorway. The other grandmother then threatened to take a match to the negligées and suggested that the girls return them to the peddler.

Adult women are more tactful in criticizing one another. Much of the frequent teasing among women serves to highlight societal standards, since it involves joking accusations of behaviors and desires that are contrary to the ideals. For example, women often tease each other about sexuality, which above all else violates concepts of propriety. A woman will respond instantly with vehement denials to the accusation that she enjoys sleeping with her husband, or even the insinuation that she does. One woman, teased about her closeness to her husband, protested that she much preferred it when he slept with her co-wife because then she
could surround herself with her children who kept her warm. When a second woman agreed with the first, the others interrogated her about what in the world could account for her obviously pregnant belly.

When someone has actually done something wrong, the women of the community let her know that they disapprove, often through oblique references. On one occasion a new bride ran away from her husband without complaining first to her husband's kin or returning directly to her family; instead she took refuge among some neighbors of a different tribe. Everyone disapproved. After she was persuaded to return to her husband, each of the women in the community came to see her. They recounted stories about their own and others' experiences of running away in the proper manner. With a kind smile and a twinkle in her eyes, an older woman in the bride's household told the young woman she deserved a good beating. The women joked about "evil spirits" a good deal, because the bride had claimed that her husband suddenly looked like an evil spirit and frightened her.

The assumption of social control by women, particularly senior women, could be viewed as an expression of false consciousness. One could argue that when women enforce societal standards that support the male-dominant status quo, they help to maintain the system that keeps them subordinate. On the other hand, by regulating their own affairs rather than letting men do so, they avoid direct experiences of their own subordination and dependency. By participating equally in the maintenance of cultural ideals and social standards, women can come to see themselves as responsible moral beings, not powerless pawns whose only hope for gain lies in manipulation and subversion. They can have honor and command respect just as men do. And within their own supervised and autonomous arena, managing their own affairs allows women to develop both competence and dignity.

**Personal Development**

These observations regarding the effects of women's social responsibility raise other questions about the relationship between sexual segregation and female "personality" or the cultural construction of the ideal woman. Perhaps most critical to Bedouin women's personal development are their minimal interaction with those to whom they are subordinate and the de-emphasis of sexuality as an orientation in social life. These two circumstances encourage women to develop in terms of the cultural ideals of pride and independence.

The ideals of feminine personality are context dependent in Bedouin culture. Both men and women agree that women should be "modest," but this only applies in certain social situations. Modesty is a complex
A Community of Secrets

cultural concept that refers to both an internal state of embarrassment and shyness, and a repertoire of behaviors indicative of this state, including downcast eyes, silence, and a general self-effacement, made literal among married women by use of the veil. It relates in a sense to sexual propriety in that it indicates respect for a social system threatened by sexual bonds and for those who are most responsible for upholding such a system (kinsmen and elders). Modesty is thus the spontaneous and appropriate response to encounters with status superiors and is the path to honor for the socially weak.

In interactions among women, modesty is not an issue since neither sexuality nor hierarchy (except in the most understated form) are relevant. There is another set of standards at work in the separate women's world. The attributes Bedouin women value in one another are not those of passivity or delicacy often associated with the feminine ideal in the West, but rather those of energy, industry, enterprise, and emotional and physical toughness. Wisdom, intelligence, and verbal skill, exemplified in storytelling and singing, are also much admired. The active capabilities of women are even celebrated in the ideals of feminine beauty. For the Bedouins a beautiful woman has a robust build and shines with the rosy glow of good health. They abhor slenderness, weakness, or sickness as much in women as in men.

Like Bedouin men, women are expected to be proud, bold, and assertive, responding angrily to insults or affronts to their dignity. Within the limits set by their actual dependence on men, women are also expected to be independent. They express this quality mostly through vehement denials of attachment or vulnerability to others, particularly the spouse. They respond to major and minor personal losses with defensive stances, anger at others, or stoic denial of concern.

Pride is antithetical to subordination. To realize the culturally shared ideals of the code of honor, including pride, women must avoid situations in which their capacity to act in accordance with the ideal is compromised. This means avoiding confrontations with status superiors or persons on whom they are dependent, since either could undermine their sense of independence by coercing them or directly asserting authority over them. Living in their sex-segregated world, women can, for most of their lives, manage to keep such encounters to a minimum. The separate community of women provides a social environment in which women can develop personal qualities which would be stifled were they always in situations that called for subordination and deference.15

Modesty, or the denial of sexuality, is the way that women demonstrate their morality in order to gain status within the system (sexuality representing the potential for both vulnerability to others and defiance of senior kinsmen). In concert with the ideal of pride, the emphasis on modesty profoundly shapes women's personal development and social style. Flirtation, display of sexual charms, pandering to men, or any sign of orientation toward men achieve little for women besides a bad reputation. Rather than using sexuality as a tool for personal gain, women in Bedouin society must deny it. The basis for a woman's good reputation and her sense of self-worth is a respectability that centers on her modest behavior. A girl's chances of marrying well have more to do with her kin group's reputation and their connections than with her attractiveness to men, especially since the best thing that can be said of her is that she has not been seen by men.

The consequences of this orientation away from men and sexuality are sometimes ruefully noted by Bedouin men. One husband who was acquainted with non-Bedouins complained that his wives were coarse and "unfeminine" and that going to bed with one of them was like going to bed with a man. A bold and outspoken old aunt teased her nephew, a distinguished middle-aged man with three wives, for living a dog's life. She observed that his wives ignored him, that they were too busy to take good care of him. Her own son had recently married a city girl and she described with amusement how the young woman prepared his clothes for him, dressed him, and pampered him in many ways. She joked that the nephew should get himself a nice city girl who would spoil him. Given that the Bedouins consider non-Bedouins morally inferior, this was not a serious recommendation. But the story does highlight Bedouin women's independence from men, which can be characterized by contempt or hostility or merely respectful distance depending on the woman and the relationship in question.

Social Intimacy

Having examined the individual woman's development, we now turn to interactions within the women's world. Here we can see most clearly how the separate sphere of Bedouin women forms a genuine community. My field journals are punctuated with notes to myself about the importance of remembering the texture and tone of interpersonal relations among women. In every description of a women's gathering, I note the relaxed informality, the physical intimacy, the warmth and animated conversation. Lounging against each other in close, disorganized circles, veils in disarray, bodies touching—a head in another's lap, an arm draped around a shoulder, a child clambering on a back or tugging on an earring,
an infant being nursed casually—a group of women with expressive voices interrupt each other, break into laughter, and absentmindedly respond to demands of children in the midst of intense discussions. Even in encounters with strangers, women bridge the distance by talking about common acquaintances, exchanging life stories, or offering small services like braiding or grooming hair.

The easy familiarity in interactions between women of various ages and social statuses in all-female gatherings contrasts sharply with the formality that characterizes their interactions with men. In mixed-sex groups women are usually restrained and unexpressive. The only exceptions are settings that involve young unmarried kinsmen, whom aunts and mothers adore and treat with affectionate ease. Young and low-status men often find relief in the women's world where deferential behavior is unnecessary. Yet even their entrance into a group of women changes its tone and reorients conversation. The interlopers rarely stay long, moreover. Men appear in the women's world as periodic disruptions of the ongoing flow of daily life. Men spend their time with other men, in a social world that is more hierarchical and less intimate than that of the women.

The relaxed closeness of female community is epitomized in the gathering that follows the birth of a child. Pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum recovery are women's affairs in which men play no part. Midwives or other women in the community assist with delivery, and men stay as far away as possible. Following Muslim custom, the Bedouins observe, at least in theory, a forty-day postpartum sex taboo. During this period, the husband should not even share a room with his wife. In practice, husbands rarely stay away for the full forty days, but they do always sleep elsewhere for the first week of the wife's confinement. During that week she does not leave her room but rests, recovers, and receives her visitors. All the women in her social network visit her, bringing obligatory money gifts and also chickens, eggs, soaps, incense, and sometimes handsewn clothes for the newborn. Each guest receives a special meal, kohl (eyeliner) for her eyes, and aromatic olive oil for her hair. Close friends and relatives who can be spared from their own households assist with the delivery and stay for several days, bringing their youngest children with them. They take over the new mother's household chores, make her special drinks for cramps, care for her children, and keep her company.

In the evening, when all the work is done, the women and their children squeeze into her room to sleep contentedly on the straw mats that line the floor. Throughout the day and late into the night, the women gossip, exchange news, joke and tell stories, sing and smoke cigarettes. They show their concern for the new mother, who is often too weak to participate much, through the favors they do for her, the stories they tell
of their own birthing experiences, and the advice they offer. In this female community, women are free to do as they wish with no fear of sudden intrusions or interruptions. Bedouin women enjoy these periods, cherishing the atmosphere of companionable warmth and even raucous good spirits.

Women are most at ease in the company of other women, but individual relationships among women are not always harmonious. Because the female community is not merely a residual arena where women pass the time while waiting for spouses, but rather the social and emotional world in which women live out most of their lives, the relationships within it are emotionally charged and invested with meaning. Interactions between women are intense—if not quick-paced teasing and banter, then urgent confidences or heated arguments complete with insults, tears, and stony silences. From intimate sharing to hostile avoidance, the relationships span the range of emotions and can change from day to day.

The closest relationships in the women's world are those between kinswomen—sisters and cousins who grew up together, aunts and nieces, and mothers and daughters. Particularly when they marry kinsmen or neighbors and thus remain in the same camp or nearby, kinswomen stay in close, if not daily, contact all their lives. They have much shared experience, not to mention the shared interests and concerns created by membership in the same kin group or tribe. They attend all the same functions, since any time there is a wedding, funeral, or even an illness in the lineage, they must all be there, no matter where they live.

Mothers and daughters are particularly close and interdependent. Of all women, they spend the most time together, especially as daughters are growing up. Daughters remain emotionally dependent on their mothers all their lives. As adults they treasure their mothers’ visits to them, at childbirth or other special occasions. They confide in their mothers and appeal to them for advice. Whenever I looked sad, the women asked me if I missed my mother, and they assumed that my greatest hardship during fieldwork was my distance from her. Mothers rely heavily on their daughters for help with work, for companionship, and, later in life, for care. They speak openly in front of their daughters, if not directly to them, so there are few secrets between them. Daughters rush to their mothers’ sides in any crisis, leaving husbands and children behind. Even if they want sons for social security, mothers have a special place in their hearts for their daughters. This was brought home to me one day when, in a discussion of the relative value of sons and daughters, an old woman told me the following folktale:

There once was a woman who had nine daughters. When she became pregnant again she prayed for a boy and made an oath to give up one of her daughters as an offering if she were granted a son.
She did give birth to a boy. When they moved camp, riding off on their camels, she left behind one daughter.

Soon a man came by on a horse and found the girl tied up. He asked her story, untied her, took her with him, and cared for her.

Meanwhile, the boy grew up and took a wife. His wife demanded that he make his mother a servant. He did this and the old mother was forced to do all the household work for her daughter-in-law. One day they decided to move camp. They loaded up the camels and traveled and traveled. The old mother had to walk and drive the sheep. She got tired and eventually was left behind. Lost, she wandered and wandered until she came upon a camp.

The people in the camp called to her and invited her in. They asked her story. She told them she had not always been a servant and recounted her tale. When the people in the camp heard this story they went running to tell one of the women. It turned out that she was the old woman’s daughter who had been abandoned as a child. She came, questioned the old woman, and was convinced that she was really her mother. She embraced and kissed her, took her to her tent, washed her clothes for her, fed her, and cared well for her.

By and by, the son came looking for his mother. He rode up to the camp and asked people, “Haven’t you seen an old servant wandering around?” The woman who (unknown to him) was his sister invited him into her tent. She demanded that a ram be brought and slaughtered in his honor. She then asked him, “Where is the rihm [womb] of the ram? I want it.” The brother looked at her in surprise, answering, “A ram has no rihm [womb], didn’t you know?”

She then revealed her identity and told him her story. She refused to let him take his mother back and scolded him for having mistreated her.

The moral of the story turns on the double meaning of the triliteral root rahama from which the word “womb” is derived. Another word from the same root means “pity, compassion, or mercy.” Thus the story links the womb (femaleness) with compassion and caring. The old woman who told me the story added the following commentary: “You see, the male has no womb. He has nothing but a little penis, just like this finger of mine [laughing and wiggling her finger in a contemptuous gesture]. The male has no compassion. But the female is tender and compassionate. It is the daughter who will care for her mother, not the son.”

Close relationships also develop between coresident women, whatever their kinship ties. In the community in which I lived, there were at least two adult women in each household and usually several adolescent girls as well. They worked together most of the day. Once they finished their share of the household work, most visited with women in other households, using an excuse like the need to borrow or return something, or the appearance of a guest in the camp. Close neighbors usually spent
the evening hours chatting companionably around a lantern as the children dropped off to sleep on their laps.

Many women in a community have known one another all their lives. They have seen each other through all the major and minor events that have touched them; they have celebrated joyous occasions together and known each other's grief. Those who share circumstances such as divorce or widowhood often develop special friendships. The women of a community tend to know every detail of one another's lives, down to when they are menstruating. In general, their most frequent and preferred topic of conversation is other women. They recount life histories for the benefit of those who do not know them, and they discuss recent news of other women brought by visitors or garnered during trips to distant camps. Women talk about themselves, explaining their actions, detailing their responses to things, and sharing their experiences and knowledge.

**Shared Experience**

The greatest sense of community is created through the shared experience of being women in Bedouin society. Most women's lives follow much the same pattern: they grow up with kin, marry (sometimes moving to another community, sometimes not), have many children, and grow old. With luck, they are given to a good husband who does not mistreat them, their husband's kinswomen are kind, their kin support them, and their children are healthy. Most likely, however, they will face a number of difficult experiences in the course of their lives. Women agree that their lives are not easy. They work hard, often handicapped by poor health due to inadequate nutrition and constant childbearing. Even more trying are the hardships in the interpersonal sphere. Separations from loved ones are a fact of life, especially in a society that was until recently nomadic. Children and loved ones fall ill. More than anything, though, women seem troubled in their relations to men. However much women try to minimize their importance, love and marriage are matters of deep concern and often sources of unhappiness.

One of the ways women share their sentiments is through a particular genre of traditional oral lyric poetry.¹⁶ They often punctuate their conversations with spontaneous recitations of short poems or break into song when alone or with a few close companions. Through these poignant poems, women communicate their responses to situations that arise in

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¹⁶. Called the *ghinnaawa*, this type of poem or song is marked by its length (only one line) and its lack of rhyme. Longer rhyming poems are recited mostly by men. The structure of the genre and the role of poetry in Bedouin social life are the subjects of my forthcoming book (n. 3 above).
their personal lives. Although it was my impression that women experiencing crises tended to sing or recite more often than others, Bedouins do respond with poetry to all sorts of meaningful events.

Those who hear the poems appreciate them for what they reveal about the experiences of those reciting. Despite the intrinsic ambiguity of such condensed and formulaic poetic statements, for those in the community they are easily interpretable because women have such intimate knowledge of the particular circumstances of one another's lives. The poems are moving because the contours of women's experiences are so similar; women empathize with other women and are moved by their sufferings. They try to offer comfort, either through understanding, advice, or words of wisdom about the virtues of patience and trust in God. A woman who feels wronged or mistreated by her husband often appeals to her mother-in-law or her husband's kinswomen, whose loyalties are with the husband, confident that the bond of common womanhood will prevail and that these others will sympathize, if not intervene on her behalf.

Poems are considered both revealing and confidential, and women are especially concerned that men not hear them. Men too recite this poetry among themselves, but there are social taboos against mentioning the very word for this type of poem (ghinnaawa) in mixed-sex company. Thus the poems can be viewed as secrets, which, as Georg Simmel observes, function to exclude those who do not share them (in this case, members of the opposite sex), to bind closely those who do, and to give special value to that which is hidden. Thus, like the conspiratorial silences about what goes on in the women's world, the sharing of poems enhances the cohesion and sense of community among Bedouin women.

More often than not, the poems voice sentiments of sadness, unfulfilled longing, or suffering caused by painful losses or sense of abandonment. What is striking is that most often, the poems seem to concern love relationships with men—the very relationships whose importance is continually minimized in ordinary social interaction. Women—who otherwise vehemently denied attachment to their spouses, seemed unconcerned with their marriages, and admitted no interest in sexual matters or in members of the opposite sex—recited poems that expressed their vulnerability to and emotional dependence on men.

The poems betray the fact that many of the most significant crises in the lives of Bedouin women revolve around marriage. Marriage itself can be traumatic, the more so if the husband is a stranger and the new bride must move to a distant area far from her kin. Women are sometimes forced to remain with a husband they do not want in order to refrain from

defying and hence losing the support of their kin. Many men are difficult and temperamental, causing their wives (and others) endless agony. But the most poignant poems come from women who have lost their husbands' affections. These expressions have little to do with women's dependence on the marital relationship for social status. The sadness, bitterness, and pain conveyed through their poems attest to the importance of heterosexual love and the depth of the affective bonds that can develop over time between husbands and wives.

Although space constraints prevent me from elaborating on the nature and use of this poetry in social life, a few brief examples will suffice to convey its flavor. One unhappy bride whose kinsmen insisted that she accept the marriage they had arranged for her could not express her objections without alienating her kinsmen or insulting the women in her new community, kinswomen of her husband. She rarely said much but recited numerous poems and often sang to herself while she worked. One of the poems she recited was the following:

Without being dead I placed
a tombstone on my breast, dear one . . .

A young widow whose husband had been killed in a fight did not speak of him. She was cheerful and her sense of humor endeared her to the community. She seemed content to forgo remarriage, preferring to remain with her children and the women among whom she had grown up. One night she recited a number of poems, including the following, that saddened and moved the women who heard them:

Drowning in despair
the eye says, Oh my fate in love . . .

A married woman whose husband of fifteen years wished to take a second wife admitted no concern, expressing only anger at his failure to buy her the proper gifts and his unconventional decision to hold the wedding in his brother's house rather than her own. Yet she indicated her sense of hurt by myriad poems including:

Long shriveled from despair
are the roots that fed my soul . . .

Patience is my mourning for the loved one
and your job, oh eyes, is to cry . . .

Other women in the community tried to console her by comparing her fate to that of other women ("Do you think you are the first woman whose
husband ever took a second wife?”), cynically commenting that men are all “like that” (as soon as they can afford it, they seek another wife and more children), or telling her to be grateful for her six wonderful children. They indicated empathetic concern by reciting in her presence poems that voiced what they assumed she was feeling:

Despair of them, dear one, left you
abjectly turning a water wheel . . .

At midday in the eye of the murdered
they were but a trace, a caravan moving off . . .

In the second poem “midday” refers to a wedding and “the murdered” to a person betrayed (the first wife who watches her husband go off with another woman). By expressing sentiments from her point of view, rather than offering advice, her companions emphasized the sense of community and commonality of experience among women.

Another woman had recurring problems with her moody and poverty-stricken brother, who lived with her. Her marital history was sad. Her husband had taken a dislike to her shortly after their marriage and become abusive, later divorcing her. To make matters worse, she had a painful skin disease that had first manifested itself during the difficult period before the divorce and had broken out periodically since. She also recited many poems, one of which perhaps many women could understand all too well:

I wonder, is despair
a passing shadow or a companion for life . . .

Conclusion

Awlad ‘Ali women live neither in harems nor in seclusion. But like their sisters in societies or classes that can afford to keep women indoors, they live in a world where the general principle of sexual segregation structures social life. Rather than assuming the male perspective and viewing one-half of the bifurcated world as residual or even excluded, we saw, by looking closely at actual lives, that two coexisting communities are created when persons associate primarily with members of their own sex. Even if cross-cut by various ties, each has its integrity and must be examined in its own right. Among Bedouins, the ideological predominance of patrilateral, patrilineal kinship in economic and social relationships and its impact on identity and identification necessarily preclude the structural independence of the women’s community. Further, a
woman's economic and social dependency severely curtails her autonomy, particularly in making major life decisions.

Yet sexual segregation is not inherently bad for women. In this case, it seems clear that the separation of the worlds mitigates the negative effects of sexual inequality and women's dependence. By taking responsibility for regulating their own conformity to social norms and by avoiding encounters with men who have authority over them, women escape the direct experience of their subordination and gain the respect accorded those who do their share to uphold the social order. Women enthusiastically support the segregation that allows them to carve out significant fields for autonomous action in their relatively unsupervised and egalitarian world. In the women's community, they have an arena for self-assertion. Individual development among women does not occur in opposition to male development; indeed cultural ideals of the feminine "personality" resemble the masculine and include enterprise, boldness, pride, and independence. Because of the denial of sexuality among Awlad 'Ali, women do not orient themselves toward men or try to please them. Instead they value competence, self-sufficiency, and respectful distance. They orient themselves toward other women.

The community of Bedouin women is, above all, a rich world of close ties, intimacy, and shared experience. Because power and authority are hardly at issue in the relations among women, their world is one of relaxed informality, familiarity, and a certain honesty. Although not the result of a self-conscious feminist separatism or a deliberate fostering of bonds of sisterhood, the tone, intensity, and closeness of relations within the Bedouin women's community approach those idealized by feminists. Yet the poems through which women share many of their most intimate sentiments reveal another dimension of experience. Not all women's poems describe love and attachment or concern relationships with men. Nor are all as tragic as the ones presented above. But enough of them revolve around such themes to suggest that women develop deep affective bonds with men—lovers and husbands as well as kin. For the Awlad Ali Bedouins, the bonds of womanhood that integrate the world of women have much to do with shared suffering and longing for those outside their community.

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