

Women and Community in Oman

by Christine Eickelman

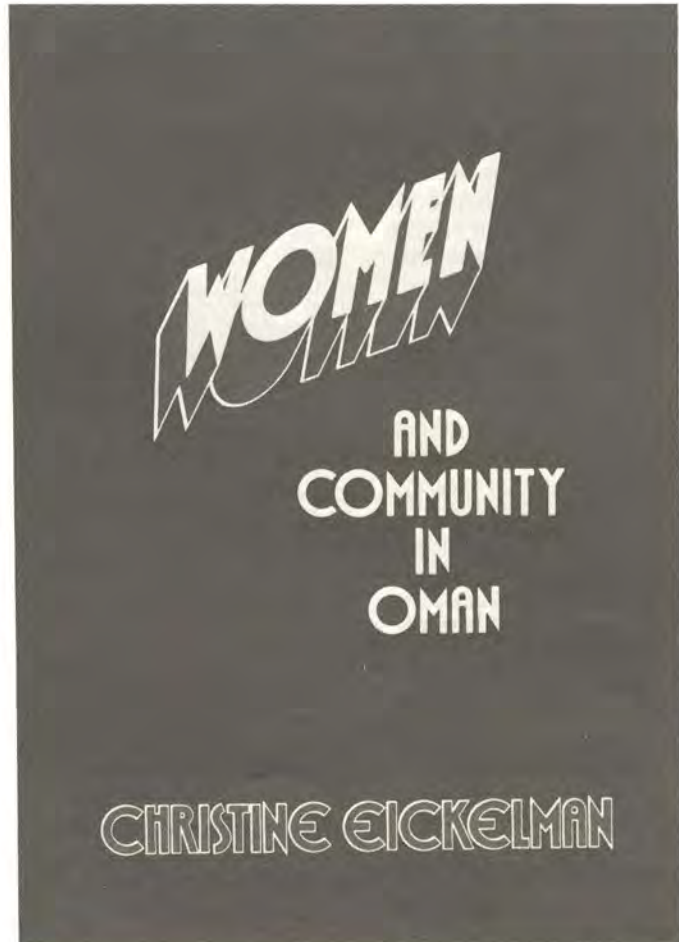
Despite its contemporary strategic significance, Oman remains less known . . . than neighboring states, such as Saudi Arabia (1). This was exactly why I picked this book. It seemed to me that many tend to generalize whatever knowledge or information they have about women in the Arab Gulf to all the countries of the region.

Christine Eickelman gives a vivid anthropological account of women and the community in Oman. The Omani women of her book are from Hamra, an oasis in the interior, where she lived with her husband (who was there on a research grant) and their five year old daughter. She introduces her book, and her chapters with brief and explicit descriptions of *the people, the topography of the cities -of Muscat and Ruwi during the first few days before moving into the interior -* and the oasis, in addition to daily chores and sex-roles in the Omani society. Omani women are then placed within context with more elaborate details about habits, patterns of speech and conduct, domestic chores and social rituals and customs. The analyses and observations are complimented with the personal contacts and experiences of the author with the women, dated and written in the form of a personal diary. Even the smallest details are depicted: such as coffee-drinking, a primary social ritual of Omani society, as well as customs related to the organization of domestic work like fetching drinking water, washing, cooking, hospitality, eating, visitation, invitations; and marriage; birth; death; social space; family clusters; neighbors; motherhood; children; education; gossip; etc. . . .

Eickelman outlines her chapters into basic social units, i.e The household, the Family Cluster, Sociability, Neighbors, the Community, Children, and the Hamra Oasis: past and Present.

Hence, in the introduction, while still in Muscat and Ruwi, Eickelman reviews ethnical and religious backgrounds, noting the prevalence of *Ubadism* (2), the first difference

between Oman and other Muslim countries in the Gulf and North Africa. Then, she distinctly describes the city of Ruwi noticing the absence of street vendors, blaring radios, the crowds of men, the prayer calls, and the women on their balconies or roof terraces so characteristic of neighborhoods in other Middle Eastern and North African cities. Furthermore, unlike the other countries, there was no bargaining in the market. Omani



men wore long white tunics, *Dishdasha*, and covered their heads with turbans. Yet, not all Omani women were wrapped from head to toe in long black *abayas*, some wore a shawl and patterned tunic over embroidered pantaloons. Women in the city did not socialize openly with strangers and therefore, it was a while before Christine Eickelman and her daughter were accepted in the playground near their temporary apartment in Ruwi. Eventually, Eickelman was invited to coffee-drinking visits (dates were served with coffee) where she understood the importance of the ritual in creating and strengthening social bonds. She also describes the variations in hospitality, such as what was served with coffee and the other women invited, depicting family and socio-economic status.

The other eight chapters of Eickelman's book examine in length

the rural community of the oasis and its women. Noticeably, the women were friendlier and more inquisitive than their urban sisters. Furthermore, Eickelman was distinctly aware of status variables among the women of Hamra, i.e. the *Shaikhly* women (related to the Shaik, leader of the oasis) and *nonshaikhly* women. As status increases she noticed more jewelry and herb coloring on their faces and foreheads. The *Shaikhly* women visiting patterns were more formal and numerous in the oasis and they tended to do their washing and chores more privately than women of the lower classes. *Shaikhly* and *nonshaikhly* households organize domestic work differently. Furthermore, *nonshaikhly* women in the oasis carry mini-business to supplement the money of their husbands, such as sewing and embroidering pantaloons, children headcaps, and making rose water among other small tokens. It is not

suitable and acceptable for women of the *Shakhly* families to engage in such trade.

Probably, the most important aspect of the lives of women in the oasis is managing water. *In a country where water is scarce and running water was still unavailable, the Falaj (the river) is essential to most household tasks.* For most of the day, the head of the *Falaj* is reserved for women⁽³⁾. Eickelman elicetly describes the fetching of water, the washing of pans and pots and clothes, the socialization and conversation of the women along the *Falaj*. Social space in the house and the segregation of the sexes also follows elaborate patterns dictating architecture of the houses, separate entrances, separate guest rooms for male and female guests.

Family Cluster, Hayyan, are the basic social unit of Omanis.

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