

Christine Eickelman's Fertility and Social change in Oman: Women's Perspectives

In her book Women and Community in Oman (1984), Christine Eickelman discusses women's understanding of family, privacy, propriety, education, work, children and status, based on a field study of a Omani oasis, al-Hamra, undertaken in 1979-1980. She visited al-Hamra again in 1988 and reported observed changes in a recent article entitled Fertility and Social change in Oman: Women's Perspectives (The Middle East Journal, 1993). Having reviewed the book in a previous issue of Al-Raida (#57, Spring 1992), we hereby, still with Eickelman, trace changes in women's perspectives of fertility and family in Oman.

Eickelman notices that the population of the oasis more than doubled between 1980 and 1988. The quarter's composition also changed in that its inhabitants had abandoned their mud homes and moved into cement houses with running water, electricity and telephone facilities. In 1980, water management had been a primary pattern of socialization for women, who were the ones to fetch it from the river. By 1988 the oasis had a bank, a garage, government offices, a house for the governor and his family, two large schools -- one for boys and one for girls -- and shops. Two women worked in the girls' school, a number of others were studying in the capital and planned to return as teachers to the oasis.

Women in 1988 discussed fertility and birth in significantly different ways than they had in 1979-1980. During the earlier period, women often discussed their concerns and anxieties

about fertility-related issues by discussing them in a joking manner. By 1988 ... the most surprising aspect of these conversations were the statements by several women that they wanted as many as 20 children. Young children were everywhere, and many women had given birth to four or five children in eight years (pg.655).

Children are perceived as signs of social strength (pg.657). Women's status is directly related to giving birth to live children on a regular basis with the first born giving the mother the right of passage into adulthood. Postpartum visitations, Eickelman notes, are fundamental representations of status and social strength rendered by having many children. Therefore, the number of people who come, the length and frequency of visits reflect the social standing of the family.

The significance of formal visitations, and notably postpartum visitation, in Omani society has a powerful influence on family size and social contracts. Consequently, Eickelman affirms, any government effort to decrease fertility that ignores the impact of this cultural ritual is unlikely to succeed. Family planning programs and birth control devices *will need to reorient the people toward a transformed lifestyle, where networking is no longer dependent on women giving birth ... Breaking the pattern of multiple births quickly and effectively in Oman requires a program that sensitizes people to the subtle relation between fertility and other aspects of culture and prompts them to articulate issues related to fertility, potency, and family planning (pg.666).*

High birth rates are common in many countries of the Middle East -- namely Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen -- and demographers expect the population to double by the year 2000 (Eickelman's sources: Sultanate of Oman Statistical Yearbook, 1988 and World Population Data Sheet, 1992). Islamic values, according to Eickelman, are not responsible for high fertility patterns in Oman. Rather, these patterns are new, and reflect only a micro-level response to recent economic transformations, notably the oil economy that can still accommodate the increase in population.

Eickelman role as a participant observer, so-to-speak, allows her to notice, inquire, understand and then interpret cultural characteristics that are otherwise distorted in reports. Attention to details in description and particularly in the reporting of change that has occurred between 1979 and 1988 provides substance for analysis. One such analysis is that the increase in the rates of fertility despite the structural changes -- which would otherwise reduce family size -- seem like a counter-reaction to change on a wider level, maybe even a form of cultural determinism. This article is rich in its anthropological and sociological substance. It is written in an objective manner that pleases even the Arab reader who is alert to any racist implications.

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