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# Gender, Culture, and Capitalism: Women and the Remaking of Islamic “Tradition” in a Sudanese Village

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Have women in third-world societies been made second-class citizens by colonialism, incorporation into the capitalist world economy, and class formation? Or are women relegated to less prestigious and less economically rewarding roles by patriarchal ideologies and practices the origins of which lie in indigenous cultures? Much of the anthropological scholarship on women can be divided between those who emphasize the relative importance of capitalism (for example, Leacock 1981; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Boserup 1970) and those who emphasize culture (for example, Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Schlegel 1990; Rosaldo 1974) as determinants of gender roles and relations.

In few areas of scholarship has the view that culture is the overriding determinant of women's lives so predominated as in the case of North Africa and the Middle East. Islamic culture is often perceived as somehow frozen in place where women are concerned. Friedl, for example, sees Iranian women as constrained by vestigial traditions:

Women have a lot of free time at hand and few acceptable ways of spending it productively because the parameters of good conduct are still defined by the traditional, now dysfunctional, labor-divided mixed agricultural production ethic (1981:16).

And Fatima Mernissi (1985:218) asks, “Why is the very dynamic Arab world so static when it comes to sex roles?”<sup>1</sup> Observers of North African and Middle Eastern societies generally see Islam as the primary determinant of women's status and the obstacle to social and economic changes which might

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<sup>1</sup> Mernissi's latest book conveys a similar sense of timeless invariability when it asks, “How did *the tradition* succeed in transforming *the Muslim woman* into that submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and only goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils? Why does the *Muslim man* need such a mutilated companion?” (1991:194, emphasis added).

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benefit women. Thus, for example, the author of a recent review article on women and development dismisses out of hand the suggestion that institutions be developed to protect the interests of rural Egyptian women, asking, "But how can they when the Islamic cultural ideal for women is non-participation in public life?" (Glazer 1991:14).

This perspective, which I call Islamic determinism, stems largely from the misapprehension of Islam, as well as from the failure to place Islamic cultures adequately within historical and material contexts. This article aims to enrich our understanding of gender and religion in the Muslim world through identifying connections among religious transformations, gender relations, and the integration of Muslim communities into the capitalist world system. The first part advances general arguments about the cultural construction of Islam and the world economy. It argues that the contemporary Islamic revival should be seen as a facet of modernity, rather than the resurgence of tradition. The second part, which draws on data from field work in 1980 to 1982 and in 1988 in a northern Sudanese village (Wad al Abbas), explores the ways in which economic development is associated with new understandings of what it means to be a Muslim as well as with new cultural constructions of gender.

#### THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF ISLAM

If scholarship on women has achieved anything over the last two decades, it is the recognition that gender is not a given but is historically and socially constructed according to particular local realities. In the case of Muslim women, Islam generally is seen as the primary agent of their definition. Many scholars of women in Islamic society partly define their mission as one of debunking orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women—whether as erotic harem girls or as obedient wives. Yet this scholarship itself is shaped by orientalist views of Islam as a timeless, monolithic, rigid system. According to the orientalist view, "Islam does not develop, and neither do Muslims; they merely are" (Said 1978:317). There are underlying assumptions that Islam is doctrine and that doctrine defines people's lives. Western and Middle Eastern feminists alike seem to have fallen unwitting prey to the orientalist truism that Islam is about texts, rather than about people (Said 1978:305). Thus, much of the debate concerning women in Islamic societies focuses on interpretations of classical texts such as the *Qu'ran*, the *Hadith*, and Islamic laws (*shari'a*) (for example, El Saadawi 1982; Hassan 1987; Smith and Haddad 1982). If textual meanings are situated in a historical context at all, too often it is that of early Islam (for example, Mernissi 1991; Stowasser 1984).

The ahistorical model of a text-driven society distorts our understanding of how Muslim women and men actually live and obscures the processes through which Islamic traditions are invented and transformed. Rather than being immutable, Islam continues to be renegotiated under changing historical circumstances (Gilsenan 1982). As Eickelman and Piscatori point out:

Eternal religious truths, like other beliefs, are perceived, understood, and transmitted by persons historically situated in “imagined” communities, who knowingly or inadvertently contribute to the reconfiguration or reinterpretation of these verities, even as their fixed and unchanging natures are affirmed. (1990:20).

Once we recognize the fluidity and malleability of Islam, the notion that Islam determines women’s position in society becomes meaningless. (In fact, Islamic beliefs and practices may themselves be governed at times by gender relations, as women and men understand their faith differently and engage in divergent religious acts.) Just as gender is socially constructed and reconstructed yet somehow always appears primordial and constant, Islam is reinvented to meet new needs.

### *Islamic Revival and the World Economy*

In many societies around the world, Islam is taking on new meanings as Muslims assert the centrality of Islam in public and private life (Goldberg 1991; Antoun and Heglund 1987; el-Guindi 1981; Voll 1983; Keddie 1986). This trend has been labelled the revival or resurgence of Islam—terms suggesting that this is essentially a return to an Islamic way of life, an assertion of tradition. And this is how most scholars have approached it. As one typically puts it, “The resurgence is a genuine movement of ordinary people who in their insecurity turn back to the old religion” (Watt 1983:6). Another writes that Islamic revival means “the restoration of original and traditional patterns and the elimination of alien influences” (Austin 1983:45). This may be the case in some social contexts. In other contexts, however, Islamic revival is a misnomer that masks the degree to which embracing orthodox<sup>2</sup> or fundamentalist<sup>3</sup> Islam constitutes a break with tradition for many Muslims.

Understanding Islamic fundamentalism as an expression of modernity rather than tradition yields insights into its powerful appeal and draws attention to the social and economic processes associated with its spread. It is only when Islamic fundamentalism is recognized as a facet of modernity that we can

<sup>2</sup> The whole notion of orthodoxy is itself problematic and contested as Asad (1986), Ibrahim (1989), and Holy (1991), among others, point out. It is also the case that Islam often is said to have no orthodoxy so much as orthopraxy. I wonder if this is not simply another example of how Islam is set apart and defined as essentially different from other religions. The distinction between belief and practice is in any case extremely fluid. For example, fundamentalists object to praying at the tombs of saints and consulting holy men, “saint worship,” because such practices, in their view, compromise the belief in one god which is central to Islam. Practice is thus at issue precisely because of what practice implies about belief.

<sup>3</sup> My use of the term fundamentalism generally corresponds with what Haddad (1985:277) calls “Islamism” and defines as “a scripturalist form of religious piety, affirming the relevance of the Qu’ran for everyday activity and insisting on its regulation of all aspects of life.” I use the term fundamentalism in its broadest sense, including within it both organized Islamic movements and the more private beliefs and practices of individuals. Moreover, I view fundamentalism not so much as a particular set of beliefs or practices, but as a process—an attempt to move society or oneself in the direction of greater conformity with textual understandings and practices within Islam.

understand, for instance, why its earliest and strongest proponents in many societies are urban and educated (Mernissi 1987:xviii; Munson 1988:107; Riad 1990). Modernity, in the era of postmodernism, is itself a contested, ambiguous term (Turner 1990); here it refers to the process of incorporation into the nation-state and the capitalist world economy. These processes are multi-faceted, involving transformations not only of societal institutions but also of identities. Central to the individual's experience of modernity is participation in social life, organized to a significant extent by people, institutions, and processes based outside the kin group and immediate community. Technological developments in transportation, communication, and media (especially forms accessible to non-literates) have altered the character of social relations on a global scale (Giddens 1991). Contemporary Islamic fundamentalism arises out of, and is nurtured by, these conditions. The conditions of modernity, moreover, distinguish contemporary trends within Islam from Islamic movements of past eras.

The common assumption that modernity requires westernization and secularization has led scholarly and popular observers to view Islamic fundamentalism as inherently traditional. Religion, however, is not disappearing even from such post-industrial societies as the United States; and religious fundamentalism is a global phenomenon not limited to Muslims (Sahliyeh 1990). Secularism is not inexorably supplanting religion. What appears to be happening, instead, is that the content of religious beliefs and the forms of their expression are changing. In the case of Islam, the revival is not necessarily an increase in the religiosity of Muslims or in their expression of religiosity; rather, certain forms of religious practice and belief, identified as truly Islamic because they have roots in the holy texts, are gaining ascendancy, while other Islamic practices are on the wane. This reconfiguration of religious practice and belief is connected to the socio-economic transformations taking place in the Muslim world.<sup>4</sup>

Up to now, much of the Muslim world has not lived solely according to text-based understandings of Islam. This is evident in the social and religious practices of Muslims in Malaysia (Ong 1990) and in Madagascar (Lambek 1990), for example. Antoun (1989), among others, recognizes this fact when he speaks of the "Islamicization process" within Muslim societies. Gellner (1981) sees the tension between urban, literate, orthodox Islam, and "tribal heterodoxy" as a major feature of Muslim societies. However, such notions as urban orthodoxy versus tribal heterodoxy, big tradition versus little tradition, or orthodox versus popular Islam capture neither the syncretic dynamism of Islamic discourse and practice nor the extent to which scripturalist interpretations and vernacular understandings are socially constructed and contested.

<sup>4</sup> There may be, in fact, as Gellner (1981:61) suggests, an "affinity of scripturalist rigorism or fundamentalism with the social and political needs of the period of industrialisation or 'development.'"

That which constitutes orthodoxy is not fixed and is perceived differently by different social actors (Ibrahim 1989; Holy 1991). Many conditions have contributed to diversity within Islam. Throughout much of their history, Muslims in different communities were cut off from each other to a considerable extent. Communication between the centers of religious learning and believers in the hinterlands was much more difficult than it is today, and the holy texts have been inaccessible to the many illiterate and semi-literate Muslims. Local history and culture thus contribute to the religious practices and beliefs of Muslims around the world. The line between custom and Islam often is ambiguous.

As a result, the scripturalist/fundamentalist versions of Islam that predominate in the current Islamic revival are new to many Muslims. It is, therefore, a mistake to equate fundamentalism with unchanging tradition or to assume that fundamentalist Islam represents the expression of authentic identity for all Muslims. Indeed, as the Sudanese case discussed here illustrates, fundamentalist Islamic influences are as likely to be foreign as they are authentic or indigenous. Nor do all fundamentalist practices necessarily have roots in Islamic texts. Some practices introduced as orthodox in the context of the revival are essentially novel, contemporary Islamic creations. One notable example is so-called Islamic dress for women, which entails innovation in both form and use (Keddie 1990; MacLeod 1991; Hijab 1988; Cantori 1990; Ahmed 1992).

Islamic fundamentalists, thus, are not so much reasserting past practices as contesting prevailing Islamic traditions and creating new ones. In Sudan, for example, Islam was first spread by Sufi holy men and has flourished there through Sufi orders for the last five centuries (Al Shahi 1983; Kheir 1987). As one Sudanese scholar writes, "the intellectual austerity of orthodox teaching has always paled beside the emotional vigor and vitality of the Sufi orders" (Riad 1990:40). Ordinary Muslims in Sudan look to the *shaykhs* (holy men) of their order for help in many matters and pray at the tombs of dead shaykhs. Fundamentalists, however, hold that veneration of holy men, alive or dead, contradicts Islam's essential monotheism. Fundamentalism, then, is hardly a return to tradition for Sudanese but, in fact, expresses a rupture in the established social and religious order.

In Sudan, fundamentalism also is transforming rather than reinforcing the traditional political order, as the decentralized socio-political system of the Islamic shaykhs and political parties rooted in the Sufi brotherhoods is challenged by the formation of a centralized Islamic state. As Voll (1986:174) points out, revivalists are proposing radical change in the socio-political order. We, thus, cannot accept at face value the idea that fundamentalists are champions of tradition (even if cultural actors themselves make such claims).

For many Muslims, like the Sudanese, new, scripturalist understandings of Islam are part of the process of their incorporation into the world system. The

world system gives rise not only to new material relations but also to new ideological and symbolic ones. Muslim communities are transformed by their growing integration into particular nation-states and their increasing responsiveness to the demands of the world economy. Muslims, along with everyone else, are increasingly exposed to global culture(s) and ideologies. New notions of what it means to be a Muslim accompany transformations in the organization of social, economic, and political life. In this context, embracing Islamic fundamentalism represents a move away from local, parochial identities toward perceived conformity with a more universal set of beliefs and practices.

The cosmopolitan aspect of Islamic fundamentalism has been obscured by the common assumption that fundamentalism can best be understood as a rejection of modernity and a reaction against the West. Papanek (1988:60) reflects this view when she characterizes the adoption of veils and modest dress by Muslim women as "a reaffirmation of national identity . . . in the idiom of a revitalized Islam, a rejection of values perceived as 'Western' and alien to the nation's needs." Similarly, Antoun (1989:237) states that Islamic fundamentalism is "driven by outrage at Western cultural and economic penetration." In this view, Islamic fundamentalism gains its meaning from what it is not. But, in adopting fundamentalist beliefs and practices, Muslims are not simply reacting *against* the West; they are following a course of action with its own inherent meaning.

For Sudanese and for many third-world Muslims, Saudi Arabia (and to a lesser extent the other wealthy Gulf states) are sources of ideological and cultural influence as well as centers of economic and political power. Malaysian Muslims, for example, learn much about Saudi perspectives through the media, and Malay pilgrims are "predisposed to absorb the symbols, feelings, and ideas prevalent in Arabia" and to be "good Muslims" by emulating Saudi Arabian practice (McDonnell 1990:117,118).<sup>5</sup> As the home of Mecca, site of the pilgrimage (hajj), Saudi Arabia has long exerted influence over Islamic practice. Today, Saudi influence extends well beyond the hajj. Since the oil boom of the 1970s, many Muslims travel to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf for other than religious reasons—they go as migrant workers.<sup>6</sup> Saudi influence also is transmitted through Saudi-owned Islamic banks, private investment, and Saudi government funding of religious organizations, schools, and mosques around the world. In some ways, the incorporation of poorer Muslim populations into the Western-dominated capitalist world system is mediated through this regional power center. (This may be particularly true for Muslims in a poor country, such as Sudan, which neighbors the Gulf.)

<sup>5</sup> Saudi cultural authority may be especially significant for Muslims located in the Islamic periphery.

<sup>6</sup> The Gulf War displaced many labor migrants and interrupted the flow of migration. The long-term consequences of the Gulf War for patterns of labor migration are not yet clear.

In this context, the Islamic revival is not a return to tradition nor simply a rejection of the West. Fundamentalism may, among other things, express resistance to Western domination. But Islamic fundamentalism is much more than a reaction; it embraces a positive identity and, for many Muslims like those I knew in Wad al Abbas, a vision of prosperity and civilization more compatible with their own identities and culture than the West can offer. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism is not a reaction against change, but change itself.

By recognizing the dynamic nature of Islamic tradition and by situating religious ideology and practice in the context of the world economy, we are able to see the relationship of religion and gender in Muslim societies in a more revealing light. The following case study illuminates some of the complex transformations in gender relations and religion taking place in one Muslim community.

#### GENDER, CULTURE, AND CAPITALISM IN WAD AL ABBAS

The village of Wad al Abbas, population 7,500, is located on the bank of the Blue Nile river in the Blue Nile Province of northern Sudan. Its inhabitants are Muslims whose mother tongue is Arabic. The people of Wad al Abbas can be described as Arabized Nubians (Holt and Daly 1979; Hasan 1973); most claim *Ja'ali* ethnicity. Villagers are part of the sedentary riverain population of northern Sudan that has dominated the country since independence. In this sense, villagers share in Sudan's national culture and are among those who consider themselves the quintessential Sudanese, defining others, such as the Nuer, Dinka, Nuba, and Fur, as ethnic minorities. Wad al Abbas was founded by a Sufi holy man (*faki*) in 1808 (Holt 1969), and its inhabitants have always practiced Islam. This does not mean that villagers' religion has remained the same; for the spiritual and material life of villagers has changed with the times.

The contingency of Islamic practice became most evident to me when I returned to Wad al Abbas, where I had lived and conducted field work from 1980 to 1982, after a five-and-a-half year absence. Not only were practices once exalted now condemned (and vice versa), but villagers themselves saw no contradictions between their not so distant past and their present, blithely pronouncing new standards as if they had always been. (It is important in this context to realize that Muslims may have their own reasons for subscribing to a view of Islam as constant, rather than in process, and unambiguous rather than contested.) Finally, when pressed by me about the past I knew, villagers dismissed it with casual remarks, such as, "We were ignorant then."

It is significant that in talking about this, more than one villager used the term *jahliin* for ignorant—a term that harkens to the period before Islam was revealed to Mohammed, the *Jahiliyya*. Thus, a parallel is implied between fundamentalism and the coming of Islam; villagers' past (however

recent) is being redefined in light of the emerging orthodoxy as having been outside of Islam. In this way, practices now seen as deviant and inferior are symbolically removed from lived history and experience. Such linguistic devices allow villagers to talk of change and mask change at the same time by locating change outside Islam. Similarly, when villagers talk about someone embracing what villagers understand to be more orthodox beliefs and practices, they say "so and so became a Muslim;" and villagers refer to fundamentalists simply as *al muslimiin* (the Muslims), despite the fact that the distinction they are making is between Muslims, not between Muslims and non-believers.

During the course of the 1980s, villagers were moving toward a more scripturalist construction of Islam; and this movement brought a new perspective to many social and ceremonial activities. Funeral practices, marriage rituals, and reverence for holy men (*fakis* or *shaykhs*) were particularly singled out for reform. All of these are central traditions, not in the sense that they had heretofore been impervious to change but in the sense that they form an essential part of how villagers define themselves—"this is who we are," "this is what we do." Yet gradually these practices lost their quality of being taken for granted; their morality and legitimacy were thrown open to question; and a growing number of villagers began to alter their behavior.

The process of religious change is connected to other upheavals in the villagers' lives. Particularly since the 1950s, the villagers of Wad al Abbas have experienced profound economic transformations involving increased production for the market, dependence on the market for basic consumption goods, and the sale of labor on national and international markets. Gender roles and the relations between women and men have been reordered in complex ways. The social relations of kin and community that once structured many aspects of villagers' lives have been increasingly subordinated to, or supplanted by, relations with the market and the state. The social map in which villagers locate themselves and others now includes not only Khartoum and many other Sudanese towns where sons of the village live and work, but also Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi and Yemen, among others; and it is expanding.

#### WOMEN AND CAPITALISM IN WAD AL ABBAS

The lives and livelihoods of the men of Wad al Abbas have changed dramatically since the 1950s, when an irrigated agricultural scheme was established at the village. Most households grow cotton for export (cotton production is mandatory in the scheme) and cultivate their staple food crop, sorghum. Cotton offers insignificant profits, however; and the sorghum yields of most families are below subsistence levels (Bernal 1990). Agriculture, thus, is no longer the mainstay of village economy. Starting in the 1960s, villagers intensified their trading activities and sought employment elsewhere. Since the mid-1970s, growing numbers of village men have migrated to work in Saudi

Arabia and other Gulf states.<sup>7</sup> These international labor migrants are part of a national (northern Sudanese) exodus. By the mid-1980s, the number of Sudanese working abroad was estimated at over one million, perhaps exceeding Sudan's total urban labor force (ILO/UNHCR 1984). Like their compatriots, the greatest number of villagers working abroad in the 1980s were employed in Saudi Arabia.

By 1980, the typical household in Wad al Abbas combined farming in the scheme with wage-employment and commercial activities in order to survive (Bernal 1991). Households depend heavily on cash to fulfill their daily needs, and labor migration has become a condition of villagers' existence. Farming, trade, and wage-labor are almost exclusively male activities. Virtually all labor migrants are male, and most men leave their wives and children behind. Some of the most successful traders have relocated their entire households to the towns in which they trade, but the vast majority of men continue to move between their village homes and their places of business or employment. The village is becoming a labor reserve with few opportunities for production or means of generating wealth.

Many women generate no income of their own; others earn small amounts of cash through picking cotton, performing such services as braiding hair, engaging in petty trade from their homes (usually of household staples such as charcoal or onions provided by a male relative), or weaving the colorful fiber disks (*tabaq*) that villagers and other Sudanese use to cover trays of food before eating. While men's lives have taken distinctively new directions, women's lives and their roles in local and regional economy have changed in more subtle ways.

Today the women of Wad al Abbas are primarily engaged in food preparation, child care, and other domestic tasks. This work has long been part of women's contribution to the division of labor by sex; so there is considerable continuity in women's activities. However, women have been progressively circumscribed to these domestic tasks.<sup>8</sup> The establishment of the irrigated scheme in 1954 was a watershed after which the participation of women in family farming decreased markedly (Bernal 1988). Few women in Wad al Abbas own land or take part in family farming these days. Their involvement in agricultural production is limited to that of old women and young girls from poorer households who harvest cotton a few months of the year as paid laborers.

Despite much continuity in their economic activities, women have become more economically dependent upon men as the village has become integrated

<sup>7</sup> The severity and duration of the Gulf War's repercussions and Sudan's declaration of support for Iraq remain to be seen. But, as Sudan's national leaders find new patrons, so too will the less fortunate chart new patterns of international labor migration.

<sup>8</sup> Spaulding (1982:18) notes a trend beginning as early as 1700 in northern Sudan toward the "exclusion of free women from productive labor and exercise of land ownership."

into the regional and international economy. Men's incomes are now the major determinant of family well-being, overshadowing the importance of women's domestic labor contributions. Women lack an independent economic base because their work is based on commodities (food, clothing, furnishings, and utensils) purchased with men's money. In fact, virtually every item in the household is a commodity. The important exception is women's labor, which is the underpinning of the domestic economy. Women's labor is almost exclusively available through kin and community relationships, and few women earn wages or regularly produce anything for sale.

Changes in the basis of village economy have further removed from women the resources that are vital to the household. And women have little opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills that equip people to compete for and manage resources in the regional economy. As men's horizons and occupational choices widen, women's remain comparatively narrow. What has kept women from moving into the new activities opened up by the market?

#### WOMEN AND CULTURE IN WAD AL ABBAS

Villagers cite Islamic norms of sex segregation and female seclusion to explain the division of labor by sex whereby women of childbearing age generally are excluded from most activities that generate income. The views of villagers, thus, are in accordance with the views of those scholars who see Islam as the barrier to women's participation in the market economy or public life. But traditions and beliefs are not maintained monolithically, nor are they independent of history and economy. The appearance of continuity (and assertions about unchanging tradition by cultural actors themselves) often mask subtle or not-so-subtle historical adjustments. Hobsbawm (1989:2) points out that it is precisely the "constant change and innovation of the modern world" that gives rise to "the invention of tradition" in an attempt "to structure at least some parts of social life . . . as unchanging and invariant." As the unpredictable forces of the world economy create flux in villagers' (particularly men's) lives, control over women, made possible by their restriction to the domains of home and family, which are less directly organized by the market and the state, is assuming new material and symbolic significance.

At Wad al Abbas, the seclusion of women increased during the course of the 1980s. For example, dramatic changes in housing construction occurred which produced an unprecedented separation of domestic and public space within neighborhoods. In the early eighties, few village houses had walled courtyards. Most achieved some semblance of a domestic enclosure (*hosh*) with low mud walls, sticks, or thornbrush fences. Women working or socializing in their domestic space at home, thus, were often in full view of passersby, even if they were in private space. By the late 1980s, some villagers had constructed new houses with massive, six-foot brick or cement walls (as is common in urban Sudan). Other villagers had added new walls of this type

around older dwellings. Villagers who cannot afford such edifices are building their stick or mud walls higher or even adding burlap screens on top of the mud walls they have. Such changes are making female seclusion a material reality, where it had been more symbolic in nature. Between 1982 and 1988, some women in Wad al Abbas also made significant modifications in their attire. In place of the usual short, sleeveless smocks (*showal*) under their *towbs* (body veils), these women began to wear ankle-length robes which conceal most of a woman's body, even underneath the towb. In the words of one young woman: "People became Muslims. They used to go with short dresses, and the top [was] naked [underneath their towbs], but now they have learned better."

These new forms of female seclusion and modesty are part of a long-term process of change that had been unfolding more gradually in preceding decades. As recently as the 1950s, villagers lived in mud and straw huts. (Some villages in the area still consist largely of such huts.) Women's clothing also has undergone successive modifications. Girls in Wad al Abbas once wore the *rahad*, a string skirt that left most of the body uncovered. Even today, some older women in Wad al Abbas still wear only baggy shorts (*sirwal*) under their towbs, leaving their breasts and torso bare underneath. (Because the towb is draped, not fastened, it often slips, exposing whatever is underneath.) Similar changes in women's dress and in housing styles have occurred throughout northern Sudan (see particularly, al-Tayib 1987 on dress; Boddy 1989; El Bakri and Kameir 1990).

In various ways, new understandings of Islam are being expressed through the redefinition of appropriate feminine behavior. Wedding celebrations are another example. In the early 1980s, a public dance by the bride in a revealing dress and without a towb (body veil) before a mixed audience was an indispensable feature of weddings. Along with other ritual activities, such as a series of animal sacrifices and feasts, the bride's dance was not simply part of the celebration of a marriage but an intrinsic part of concluding the marriage itself. The image of the bride in the special dress and ornaments for this dance was a symbol of beauty, wealth, and vitality in which villagers took great pride. Indeed, the bride in her regalia is a central theme of northern Sudanese art (al Tayib 1987). The marriage of a virgin bride at Wad al Abbas without this dance was virtually unthinkable. There was, however, one case involving the marriage of a village girl to an exceptionally orthodox man who had studied at the Islamic University in Omdurman and who set himself (and his wife) apart from other villagers in many ways.<sup>9</sup> At his marriage in the 1970s, he reportedly had forbidden his bride to dance. Her failure to perform this dance was often told to me in tones of scandal in the early eighties, and some

<sup>9</sup> This man was one of the earliest proponents of fundamentalist Islam in the village and grew to be very influential by the late 1980s.

villagers found it so hard to believe that it was rumored that the bride had managed to dance, at least before a gathering of women, unbeknownst to her menfolk. By the late eighties, the pride of some villagers in the marriage ritual of the bride's dance was being eclipsed by doubt; and women as well as men expressed the view that it was *haram* (forbidden and sinful) for a bride to dance before men.

Traditional rituals such as the bride's dance are not reproduced statically over generations, however. For example, in one of the dances often performed in the early 1980s, the bride imitated the movements of a Toyota pick-up truck (then, the vehicle of choice among the Sudanese bourgeoisie) while the chorus of unmarried girls sang about it. Similarly, one of the *zar* spirits observed in northern Sudan is a lorry driver (Boddy 1989). It would be, therefore, a mistake to understand the process of religious change at Wad al Abbas as one in which a dynamic Islam overturns static customary rituals and beliefs.

The examples of housing, dress, and wedding celebrations suggest that the notions of Islamic propriety now current in Wad al Abbas could not have given rise to present gender roles nor the division of labor by sex. Rather, new religious sensibilities and traditions are emerging to institutionalize new gender relationships that are largely the unplanned outcome of economic changes, such as the agricultural scheme and labor migration. Confronted by pressures and opportunities for change arising from their shifting places in the world economy, villagers are developing new understandings of what it means to be a Muslim. This process cannot be reduced to a simple trajectory from ignorance (of Islam) to knowledge. Rather, as the following section reveals, certain kinds of knowledge (and expressions of piety) are coming to be valued over others, in accordance with local and global hierarchies of power and prestige.

### *The World System and Islamic Fundamentalism in Wad al Abbas*

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Wad al Abbas is part of the process whereby villagers are incorporated into a national and world system. Villagers are not simply integrated into this system as peasants or workers. They participate in the wider network of relations beyond their village as Sudanese, as Muslims, as Arabs (or Africans), and as men and women, among other identities. Economic activities involve villagers in social transactions that are transformative, and villagers are affected by the Sudanese state's efforts to create a national culture and by Saudi Arabia's efforts to extend its ideological influence. Cultural communication takes place through the extension of bureaucracy and public education to rural areas, labor migration, and the ever-increasing role of media in presenting the world to villagers.

As they enter into relationships beyond their kin and community, both in concrete and imagined (Anderson 1991) ways, villagers encounter new perspectives on their religion and way of life. Beginning in the 1950s, the

urban, educated Sudanese personnel of the irrigated scheme, who live with their families in a compound near the scheme offices, exposed villagers to some new behavioral patterns. Villagers associate the lifestyle of these families with positions of authority, a higher standard of living, and with new understandings of what it means to be Muslim. Some villagers say it was scheme personnel who first revealed to them how “sinful” and “backward” village life was. One striking example of change is that alcoholic drinks were publicly produced and consumed in the village into the 1950s and featured prominently in such key ceremonial activities as weddings, a practice unthinkable today. The current trend toward fundamentalist Islam is closely tied to national politics and the labor migration of villagers to the Gulf.

Neither opposition to change nor nostalgia for a social world governed by tradition draw villagers to what they understand as more orthodox Islamic practices. On the contrary, for the people of Wad al Abbas, much of Islamic fundamentalism’s appeal stems from its association with modernity. To adopt more fundamentalist practices is to assert a degree of sophistication, urbanity, and material success. The rising standards of housing and dress at Wad al Abbas, for example, are associated not only with new interpretations of Islamic propriety but also with new consumption patterns. The materials and skills for building houses, once shared by all, are now commodities; the most prized (and costly) towbs are imports from England, and the new robes some women wear are brought back from Khartoum and Saudi Arabia or purchased from local tailors who fashion clothes after imports. Fundamentalist Islam, thus, is identified with economic development and prosperity.

The incorporation of villagers into the world system is not only an economic but a cultural process. Once religion was learned at home and in the village *khatwa* (mosque school); today, children study religion in school from government text books. Religious programs on the radio, indeed the forms of speech and ceremony on the radio, each newscast begins with *bismillahi* (in the name of Allah), assert a national Islamic identity. Currently, in fact, Sudanese radio not only broadcasts the call to prayers but actually ceases transmission during an interval to allow for prayer (Abdalla 1991). Villagers not only receive new understandings of Islam from travelling holy men who speak at the mosque but from cassette tapes of sermons given elsewhere.

In the early 1980s, then-President Numeiri adopted Islamic dress, *jellabiya* (robe) and *aimma* (turban), for many public appearances, instead of the military uniform he wore in the official presidential portraits visible in many public places. Numeiri also had new Sudanese currency printed which featured his image in Islamic attire, thus appropriating and (literally) creating cultural capital at the same time. Such acts assert Sudan’s Muslim and Arab identity while associating Islam with power and nationalism. In 1983, Numeiri decreed Islamic law (*shari’a*) to be the law of the land. Though only selectively implemented, its imposition was represented by powerful symbolic acts. For

example, much ado was made of banning alcohol and emptying the wares of bars and liquor stores into the Nile. To this day, shari'a has never been fully implemented by the Sudanese state and remains a central issue in the civil war now waging between northern and southern Sudan.

Numeri's actions were partly in response to Saudi pressures on his regime and to pressures from Sudanese fundamentalist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The dire economic situation of Sudan, coupled with Numeri's political vulnerability, made aid from Saudi Arabia particularly important to the Numeri regime (Warburg 1991). Through the 1980s, political discourse in Sudan took on an increasingly fundamentalist Islamic character as opposition groups to Numeri and to his successors criticized the government from fundamentalist positions. Today, fundamentalists are in power, and dissent is treated as an assault on the faith (An-Na'im and Kok 1991).<sup>10</sup> Since the early 1980s successive Sudanese regimes have emphasized not only Sudan's Muslim identity, but its Arab identity, in efforts to garner support from the oil-rich Arab states, particularly for the costly war against southern Sudan (Warburg 1991).

The sources of Sudan's Islamic revival are as foreign as they are domestic. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, was founded in Egypt; and its rise in Sudan in the 1980s is partly attributable to financial backing by the Saudis (Riad 1990). Just as Saudi Arabia once eclipsed Egypt's influence in Sudan, since the rupture of Sudan's relations with Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War, Iran is emerging as an important new patron (at least of the ruling regime). (These most recent developments are, however, beyond the scope of this essay.)

The reconstruction of Islamic identity in Wad al Abbas is linked to national and international politics. But what happens in the village does not simply reflect the successful manipulations of symbols of legitimacy by ruling Sudanese regimes or the exercise of Saudi clout. Ordinary Sudanese, such as the villagers of Wad al Abbas, interpret national and foreign forms of Islamic ideology and culture in ways shaped by their personal experiences and positions in the world system. For villagers, much of the attraction of fundamentalist Islam stems from its perceived association with elites and with an emergent vision of the good life—not just the morally good life but also the good life in its earthy material sense—particularly the life of leisure, technological advancement, and material comfort that Saudi Arabians have come to represent. (The preeminence of Saudi Arabia in villagers' social imaginations in the 1980s was illustrated, among other things, by one woman's query to me about America's location relative to Saudi Arabia, as if America must be a lesser-known emirate of some sort.)

The spiritual and economic dimensions of villagers' lives are intertwined in many ways. For example, villagers use the occasion of the hajj (and the lesser

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that there is nothing particularly Islamic about brutal dictatorship.

pilgrimage, *al umra*) to enter Saudi Arabia in order to look for work. Those who make the pilgrimage, moreover, recount in detail not only their experiences at Mecca but also their encounters with airplane food, the trays that fold out of the back of the seat in front of you, and the array of goods available in Saudi markets (compare Antoun 1989:166; Metcalf 1990). A greater awareness of orthodox Islam is linked in the minds of villagers to a greater awareness of the modern world and the sophistication required to operate in it.

Labor migration and long-distance trade unsettle villagers' convictions about proper ways of living and thinking. When they return home, villagers report what they have seen in other places and, in some cases, alter their own standards of behavior. The hajjis and the even more numerous labor migrants to Saudi Arabia return with new understandings of Islamic culture and Arab identity as well as with new material goods and desires. Wealth and piety are interconnected in the stories villagers tell about Saudi life. For example, to illustrate the absence of theft, one villager recounted that he saw gold merchants leave their shops unlocked and unattended when they heard the muezzin's call to prayer. Such stories are repeated knowingly by migrants' wives and other villagers who have not themselves been abroad. Thus, even people who do not leave the village now inhabit a much larger world than ever before.<sup>11</sup>

The association of material comforts with religiosity was particularly highlighted for me by one villager's remark. Looking for stolen livestock, a search party had gone from Wad al Abbas into the hinterland away from the Blue Nile. The villagers consider the nomads and other inhabitants of these areas uncouth rural folk. On the villagers' return, however, a member of the search party, recounting what they had seen, exclaimed, "There are very religious people there! The way they live, the televisions they have, and the way their houses are fixed up!" His assumption was that people who possess consumer goods and modern conveniences, who are civilized, must also be proper Muslims. The association of luxury goods and consumption levels with piety and morality is significant not only in terms of the relation of villagers to national and international hierarchies but also in terms of the relations of villagers to one another. Differences in wealth among villagers are growing, and these differences are directly related to the participation of villagers in work outside the community in Sudan and in the Gulf. New consumption patterns in housing and dress are largely made possible by remittances from Saudi Arabia. Villagers who build high hosh walls and adopt new forms of dress are making statements about their wealth and their piety. Just as Saudi wealth and Saudi orthodoxy are intertwined from the villagers' perspective, so

<sup>11</sup> With improvements in transportation, greater numbers of villagers also now are able to make the hajj.

is the economic success of some villagers coming to be seen as linked to their moral superiority.

While contestors for state power may assert Sudan's Islamic and Arab identity for strategic political and economic reasons, villagers are responding to profound and personal encounters with relations of power in global hierarchies. Their growing participation in the world economy confronts villagers not only with new material needs and wants but also with questions about culture and identity. The process is sometimes a painful one. Labor migrants from Wad al Abbas to the Gulf report humiliating experiences, such as being called *abid* (slave) by the Arabs there. Sudanese themselves use this term to refer to the descendants of slaves in Sudan, a stigmatized group with whom other Sudanese do not intermarry. While Gulf Arabs may call Sudanese *abid* because of their dark skin and African ancestry, the term connotes both religious and racial inferiority, since Islam forbids the enslavement of fellow Muslims. The experiences of villagers in the Gulf reinforce the prestige associated with the Arab component of their Sudanese heritage.

Self-identification as Arab takes on new significance in the encounter with Gulf Arabs. Because it is contested, Arab identity is not so much a natural or ascribed status but rather one the Wad al Abbas villager must assert or achieve. Sudanese can assert their Arab identity (which for villagers, as for many Sudanese, is synonymous with Muslim identity)<sup>12</sup> by embracing Arab cultural forms, such as orthodox Islam as practiced in the Gulf.

The changing configuration of Islam in Wad al Abbas is thus linked in complex ways to the experience of economic development and state building, to the attempts of elites to define a national culture, as well as to the experience of international labor migration and the resulting importance of such supra-national identities as Arab and Muslim. Within the village, however, these world-scale transformations are embodied and enacted in microcosm, in terms of local social relations, particularly in terms of gender.

#### SOCIAL CHANGE AS GENDER DIFFERENCE

The economic and cultural changes underway in Wad al Abbas affect men and women differently. Moreover, these changes have themselves come to be represented by villagers in terms of differences between women and men.<sup>13</sup> As encounters with the world beyond the village highlight and challenge what is distinctive about villagers' way of life, Wad al Abbas women have come to

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, the move toward new patrons like Iran apparently has been accompanied by a shift in the rhetoric of some elites toward assertions of Sudan's distinct African heritage.

<sup>13</sup> This is not unlike the way social upheavals and the changing positions of women and minorities in the United States in the 1960s were popularly represented in terms of a generation gap.

be seen as traditional, both in the sense that women have special responsibility for maintaining the social order and in the sense that women are thought to be resistant to change.<sup>14</sup> Examples of the association of women with tradition (that which distinguishes and defines local identity) are men's references to colloquial Sudanese Arabic as women's talk (*kallam al niswaan*) and to many northern Sudanese customs as women's affairs (*haq al niswaan*). The warm regard and affection so many men and women have for their grandmothers (*habobas*) is partly connected to the view of women as guardians of local culture. (I felt particularly complimented when a young city dweller responded to my rural Sudanese manners and speech with a wistful, "You remind me of my grandmother.") Indeed, the high status of the *haboba* has been noted by numerous observers of Sudanese culture (Boddy 1985; Cloudsley 1983). Tringham (1965) goes so far as to describe the typical Sudanese household in the first half of this century as being headed by a grandmother.

Women's association with tradition, while a source of power in some contexts, increasingly plays a part in their subordination, however. Women have come to stand for the fading cultural order, while progress and modernity are male. Wad al Abbas women are not seen simply as repositories of valued cultural knowledge. As circumstances alter the status and relevance of village customs, social conflicts and moral ambiguities sometimes are expressed as negative attitudes towards women. Women are regarded by men and women alike as "backwards," "ignorant," and irreligious (compare Bedri 1987). Men are seen as the legitimate possessors of orthodox Islamic knowledge and of the worldly knowledge necessary to insure economic well-being. The knowledge women possess is of declining spiritual and material significance; it is now being redefined as folk knowledge or simply regarded as nonsense.

The same process that is highlighting tradition, divorcing the relations of production and consumption from one another, and dichotomizing periods of work and leisure in time and space, also is giving rise to a new understanding of religion as distinct from other cultural practices. The boundary between custom and religion which once was blurred, if recognized by villagers at all, is becoming sharply demarcated (compare Sered 1990). This "disenchantment of the world," whereby religion becomes a specialized, compartmentalized aspect of life, is part of a modernizing process. There is some irony in this case, however, since Islamic fundamentalists wish to assert the all-encompassing breadth of Islam. Yet by juxtaposing correct Islam to life as lived by ordinary Muslims, fundamentalists actually are helping to effect a break between life and faith. In the village this is reflected in discussions of what is and is not Islam. Through such discussions, which range in topic from the use of hair dyes to the proper ways of mourning the dead, Islam is being

<sup>14</sup> The association of women with tradition probably well antedates the 1980s but clearly has taken on added significance with rapid social change.

reconstructed. Villagers who in the early eighties tended to assume that to be Muslim was to be like them, now increasingly see their own way of life partly refracted through the (critical) gaze of others, such as urban Sudanese, Gulf Arabs, school textbooks, and religious authorities on the radio.

As the divide between established practices and the new orthodoxy grows, women are becoming associated with the former and men with the latter. The Sudanese Islam of the Sufi orders is in the process of becoming associated with women who continue to venerate shaykhs, while some men now propound the fundamentalist view that only God should be worshipped. The spirit possession cult, zar, regarded by both men and women as non-Islamic, is almost exclusively a female activity.<sup>15</sup> Women, thus, are seen as less in conformity with what is now defined as true Islam than men. And, in fact, women have much less access to knowledge about orthodox Islam than men do. I encountered women who did not know even the words to the daily prayers but simply performed the prostrations and other motions. In the early 1980s, moreover, it was rare for women to perform daily prayers. (Nor did all men do so by any means, but men generally took the obligation of daily prayer more seriously than did women. Furthermore, men often pray in a group if they happen to be with others at prayer time and generally conduct their Friday midday prayer publically at the mosque.)

The ideological construction of women as traditional shapes their definitions of themselves and plays a part in keeping them from readily embracing new ways, thus contributing to a cultural divide between men and women. There are in fact, growing socio-cultural differences between the women and men of Wad al Abbas, reflecting their increasingly divergent life experiences and circumstances. For example, many village women have never even been to the nearest town, Sennar, or have only gone to the hospital there; while some village men commute daily to Sennar, and many men have travelled widely in Sudan or abroad. Teen-age boys are more skilled than their mothers at operating in the world beyond the village. New patterns of sex segregation and female seclusion not only mark gender differences but give rise to them.

However, significant disparities also are emerging among the men of Wad al Abbas based in their divergent experiences and positions in the regional economy. Unlike women, who share much common experience across families and generations, men are increasingly differentiated by variation in education, work history, urban and international experience, and income. In particular, men who have the skills or luck to obtain employment in the Gulf often enjoy economic and social status far above what their age or place in kinship networks would accord them. In contrast to the differences between the sexes, however, which are recognized and represented symbolically as the contrast

<sup>15</sup> Even by the early 1980s, zar practices were repressed in the village; and women had to travel to neighboring villages for large zar ceremonies.

between tradition/female and modernity/male, the growing differences among men are not symbolically elaborated upon. Villagers primarily experience social and religious change as a gender gap.

Moreover, tensions between the kin/community-based social order and social relations increasingly structured by the world economy are sometimes expressed in terms of gender conflict. One of the most dramatic manifestations of this occurred at the funeral of one of the more orthodox village men in 1982. In the early 1980s, funeral customs were the target of criticism by some villagers with more fundamentalist views, who wanted to replace the established practices of wailing and expressive mourning with restrained prayer and to limit the length of funerals to three instead of forty days, in accordance with Qu'ranic prescriptions. (Not incidentally, truncated rituals also are more compatible with the capitalist work discipline to which village men are increasingly subject.)

I arrived at this particular funeral to find women wailing, some shrieking. Some chanted poetic outbursts about their feelings of loss and praised the dead man; others, moving as if dancing with rhythmic, jerky motions, appeared nearly entranced and hysterical. Women and girls threw themselves on the ground, rubbing dirt on themselves, pulling their hair. All was frenzy, chaos, hysteria. Yet this behavior was, nonetheless, culturally patterned and sanctioned. Women were carrying out the early stages of mourning behavior which villagers had so often described to me but I had not witnessed firsthand before.

Apart from the women, but within sight of them, as often is the case in sex-segregated social gatherings at Wad al Abbas, sat the men. They presented a very different picture in their white-robed finery, sitting quietly on mats and occasionally praying.<sup>16</sup> Suddenly, a group of young men left the men's gathering and came running toward the women, shouting angrily. Armed with sticks, the young men chased and beat the women mourners who fled some distance from the funeral. I was caught in the terrified, terrifying stampede of women, along with a young village woman who was nine months pregnant. The men seemed so heedless and the women so desperate, I feared my friend would be trampled and hurt, but fortunately no one was injured. Nor are Wad al Abbas women so easily controlled or deterred from acting upon their own beliefs. The women simply rushed back to the funeral the minute the men had returned to their places.

This was perhaps a kind of ritual in its own right, albeit a spontaneous and novel one.<sup>17</sup> In it men expressed their own piety and orthodoxy through

<sup>16</sup> Abu-Lughod (1986:250) mentions similar tensions between women's mourning and correct Islam among the Awlad Ali, although she presents the relationship as static rather than in process.

<sup>17</sup> This was essentially a unique event—nothing similar occurred at the many other funerals and ceremonial gatherings I attended. Generally, at such gatherings there is very little interaction or communication of any kind between the separate groups of men and women who are supposed

castigating women, surely knowing that their efforts would not really be successful in ending the mourning; while women expressed their own moral authority and autonomy by persisting in their mourning. While the assertion of male authority may have been immediately prompted by a feeling that female relatives were undermining the claims of orthodoxy asserted by the men in this family, the action also served to translate the social tensions of change and the controversies over correct practice and belief into a conflict between male and female.

By representing the dynamic, open-ended process of social change in terms of static "natural" gender differences and by expressing societal conflict in terms of a battle of the sexes, villagers in effect domesticate conflict, rendering it familiar and manageable, perhaps even trivial. To recognize differences between men and women is far less threatening to the social order than to acknowledge that men are being divided by economic inequality and ideological differences. Inequality among men cannot so easily be represented as part of the natural order in this comparatively egalitarian society.

#### WHY SOME WOMEN EMBRACE FUNDAMENTALIST ISLAM

Women are neither passive objects nor merely symbols given meaning by men, however. In the shifting, contradictory, and ambiguous field of values, some women in Wad al Abbas continue to command respect on the basis of local knowledge and customary practice. Others, however, are reacting against the notion that as women they must be traditional. Such women are responding to the devaluation of women's social and ritual knowledge by seeking to embrace practices associated with the new orthodoxy. This accounts in part for the willingness of some women to adopt new forms of Islamic dress, thereby literally cloaking themselves in orthodoxy and modernity. These sources of prestige are particularly important to younger women whose honor, modesty, and reputation remain open to question, whose status and identity have not yet been clearly established, and for whom the issue of self-presentation, and therefore dress, is highly significant. As they mature, women gain status and personal autonomy; they are less subject to social surveillance and suspicion. For these reasons, as well as the association of the new Islamic outfits with a trendy kind of sophistication (seen as frivolous and unbecoming in a senior woman or man), it is mainly women of the younger generation who have adopted Islamic dress. While mature *habobas* command a certain respect, due to their age and their extensive knowledge of village social organization, young women have yet to acquire such lived cultural

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to behave as if sex segregation were complete and avoid looking at or acknowledging the presence of the opposite sex. It is perhaps significant that this public confrontation between men and women took place at a funeral, as funerals are themselves rituals that deal with continuity and discontinuity in social life and in the social order.

knowledge or status. The opportunities to express personal identity and assert status through the medium of Islamic practice thus hold particular appeal for younger women. Younger women, moreover, who have received part of their religious knowledge from formal schooling also have already been exposed to a different form of Islam than their elders.

In addition to dress, women claim space and status in the emerging socio-religious order through more careful observance of certain kinds of religious duties. By 1988, it was no longer so unusual to see individual women saying their prayers at home. The changing attitudes and behavior of women regarding prayer were also evident at public gatherings such as a *semaya* (baby-naming celebration) I attended, in which women interrupted their socializing at prayer time for a kind of public ritual of prayer (although unlike men, the women did not pray in a group but took turns using a prayer mat in the hosh of the host), something not done at any of the countless celebrations of naming, circumcision, marriage, and so forth I observed in the early eighties. Some women, like some men, also are substituting classical Arabic terms for vernacular ones, calling the feast of sacrifice *aeed al adha* instead of *aeed al duhiya*, for example. When I first heard this it smacked of affectation, but such attempts by illiterate women (and men) to claim connection to the kinds of textual religious knowledge (and by implication literacy and education in broader terms) now so highly valued clearly have a deeper significance than simply putting on airs. In these and other ways women are playing their own part in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Wad al Abbas. Gender and Islam intertwine in complex ways as various discourses about power, legitimacy, status, and identity are carried out through the media of Islam and of gender and as women and men manipulate the material and symbolic resources at their disposal.

#### BEYOND ISLAMIC DETERMINISM

If Islam itself is malleable and changing, how can it be the determinant of women's place? Furthermore, if villagers are willing to embrace change in their most cherished ritual and social practices, why do they remain traditional about women's place in the home or the division of labor by sex? We cannot answer these questions simply by recourse to the tenets of Islam.

I have suggested that, at a symbolic level, viewing women as traditional and thus representing social conflict in terms of gender difference helps to maintain social solidarity among men, despite the growing inequality among men arising from their different positions in the regional economy. However, gender is not only a symbol of broad societal changes; the transformations in the Muslim world are, in fact, gendered. Our analyses must, therefore, encompass both the ways in which gender is represented ideologically and the ways in which material conditions shape women's and men's lives. The seclusion of women in Wad al Abbas and their restriction to the home and the

village are not simply symbolic statements but serve key functions in the emerging economic system, benefitting local men and, ultimately, those who dominate the regional economy.

Women's work, like other unpaid subsistence labor, contributes to the larger economy. Their daily domestic labor in cooking, cleaning, child-care, and other tasks is essential to every household. Ultimately, women's unpaid work contributes to the viability of the village as a subsistence base; and through their unpaid labor, women subsidize the cost of the labor that is marketed, as well as the labor-intensive activities of men in the informal sector.

Women's social roles in community organization benefit men as well. Women remain in the village throughout their lives,<sup>18</sup> while men come and go. Women, as de facto representatives of their families, play pivotal roles in maintaining kin and community networks; women act as social place markers, keeping alive the claims of their often-absent male relatives in these networks. Paradoxically, then, in a culture that places much emphasis on patrilineal ancestry and kinship ties among men, men's social ties are to a growing extent perpetuated through women. Women's focus on the family and their traditional orientation make it possible for the men of Wad al Abbas to focus outward, to migrate and return.

Kin and community relationships not only give people's lives meaning but also help to provide the material basis for living. Men rely on these non-market ties, particularly in hard times. Women's subordinate, dependent position and their lack of access to resources or employment help to insure that women will invest their time and labor in family and village social networks, as women are even more dependent on them than men (compare Maher 1978).

The emerging division of labor by sex at Wad al Abbas has institutionalized a dichotomy between the market relationships of production and commerce and the non-market relationships of kin and community that govern reproduction. These take on gender associations of male and female. The cultural association of women with the home and with tradition reinforces this growing dichotomy. As the relations of production have become separated from those of reproduction, women have lost some of their productive roles and are increasingly restricted to the role of consumers. New understandings of Islam and new patterns of female seclusion (themselves expressed in part through new consumption patterns) help to perpetuate and justify these emerging divisions. At the same time, references to Islamic tradition and to the different natures of men and women help to create an appearance of continuity in villagers' lives, despite the great upheavals in them.

In fact, the need to define women's proper place in society may be gaining such importance at this juncture precisely because gender roles are changing.

<sup>18</sup> This is facilitated by a high rate of village endogamy.

While changes so far have tended to enhance men's economic power as well as their worldly and religious knowledge and have reinforced men's roles as producers and women's as consumers and reproducers, there are counter-trends as well. There are processes underway that potentially threaten male authority in the family and in society. Women in Wad al Abbas are receiving education. The early 1980s saw the first few female high school graduates from Wad al Abbas. Several educated village women are now working in white collar (or more accurately white towb<sup>19</sup>) jobs, as teachers in the village schools. By 1988 a handful of women had gone abroad with their husbands, and one woman had even been employed overseas with her husband. A small but growing number of women are thus gaining access to new public roles, sources of economic power, and knowledge. At the same time, men increasingly are absent from the daily functioning of their households and extended kin groups because their work takes them away from the village. Women are the de facto heads of households much of the time, managing the routine economic and social affairs of the family without relying on their husbands. Despite the economic importance of the remittances men send, their social roles are being constricted. Indeed, some men are almost like guests in their own houses. Their brief periods of residence at home are little more than visits, and their presence is a novelty that disrupts the routine, rather than an essential part of the household's day-to-day operation. While by their own accounts many wives miss their absent husbands, such separations give women a certain amount of personal autonomy. Women complain about having to spend more time at home and expend more effort in such chores as cooking when their mate is in residence.

Furthermore, because so many men are away from the village on a routine basis, many rites of passage and other ceremonial markers have become largely affairs of women. By the early 1980s, a division of ritual labor was emerging in which men (particularly those outside the immediate family) take part mainly in major life crisis rituals (sometimes returning over long distances to do so) and Friday mosque attendance, if they happen to be home, while women are the primary participants in many more frequent socio-ritual events, such as *karama* (an animal sacrifice and feast to give thanks to Allah for success in an endeavor or recovery from illness). Fundamentalism may be particularly appealing to village men partly as a way of reclaiming ritual authority and delegitimizing some of women's ritual activities.

Gender relations and the role of Islam in defining them can be understood only within the wider context of economic and social transformation. Neither

<sup>19</sup> Until recently, at least, employed women in Sudan (with the exception of a minority who did not wear towbs) wore white towbs over their other clothes. This was recognizable as a kind of uniform since colorful towbs are preferred for most other social settings. The regime of General Omar Hassan Ahmad al Beshir is apparently promoting or imposing a new form of dress for women modeled on the chador.

the women nor the men of Wad al Abbas are carrying out unchanging traditions, and the form Islam takes in the village is itself in the process of being reconfigured. It is not so much that villagers have remained traditional regarding gender as that they have adopted or intensified traditions that emphasize the differences between men and women and heighten notions of male cultural and economic superiority.

#### CONCLUSION

The divide between the literature on women and development and symbolic analyses of gender has left much work to be done to understand the connections between changes in the material order and changes in ideologies and representations of gender. Muslim women, in particular, often have been simplistically characterized as victims of their culture and religion (see Ahmed's powerful critique [1992]). Transformations in the lives of Muslim women are overlooked or misunderstood when seen solely in terms of Islam or religious revival. The focus on Islam as a determinant of women's place has largely ignored the role of the world system and capitalist expansion in shaping gender relations, emphasizing instead unchanging religious texts and traditions. Studies of women's integration into the world system, on the other hand, often analyze the material changes in women's lives without connecting them to processes of religious and cultural transformation. Ong's study (1987) stands out as an important exception, particularly in the literature on Muslim women.

The process of religious change and the repudiation of tradition by the villagers of Wad al Abbas are especially interesting because static Islamic beliefs and practices are so often seen as the barriers to the full participation of women in contemporary society. Based on this study, the answer to Mernissi's question, "Why is the very dynamic Arab world so static when it comes to sex roles?," is that it is not. Female seclusion and contemporary Islamic dress, for example, are not traditional but new for many Muslim women.

While the process through which gender and religion are culturally constructed in Wad al Abbas is shaped by the particularities of Sudan's history and geography, reports from around the world suggest that core elements of the Sudanese experience are shared by other Muslim societies. The financial influence of the Saudi Arabian government, and its backing of fundamentalist regimes and organizations, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, have widespread consequences (Hijab 1988; Sanad and Tessler 1990; Kabeer 1991). As in Sudan, nation-building efforts often entail attempts to foster or impose notions of cultural homogeneity, including "efforts to consolidate standardized, controllable creeds and confessions" (Boon 1987:314). Leaders who have lost popular support, moreover, often seek to bolster their legitimacy through appeals to religion (Hijab 1988). Muslim (and perhaps especially Arab) women commonly have been made the preservers of "traditional

values" (Hijab 1988:11–12; Mar'i and Mar'i 1985:253; Haddad 1985; Kandiyoti 1991). At the same time, women have become key symbols in the Islamic revival. As at Wad al Abbas, conflicts between established and emergent social orders are played out to a large degree in terms of the personhood of women. In Malaysia, for example, "struggles between state power and revivalist Islam over the changing body politic seem fundamentally to depend on controlling the definition of Malay womanhood and the family" (Ong 1990:259).

From the Shah of Iran's prohibition of the chador to Khomeini's prescription of it, to the recent debate over veiling in public schools in France, women's dress, in particular, has been invested with powerful meaning. And, as Keddie notes (1990:101), "the dress adopted by Islamist women is almost as important as a badge of ideology as it is a means to modesty or seclusion." The case of Wad al Abbas shows that Islamic dress conveys not only meanings related to religiosity, modesty, and support for the fundamentalist cause but messages about personal style, identity, class, and ethnicity. It is worth noting in this context that Chanel scarves are reported to be the current veil of choice among women of the Iranian bourgeoisie (New York Times 1992). This study demonstrates that the messages conveyed by Islamic dress (and other symbols of Islamic fundamentalism) are just as likely to be statements about change as they are assertions of tradition.

Clearly, the redefinition by Muslims of what it means to be a Muslim does not mean the same thing for women as for men. This is partly because men's and women's religious lives and religious knowledge differ. There is a growing recognition among scholars that women and men practice Islam differently (Dwyer 1978; Tapper 1990; Mernissi 1989; Holy 1991). Some scholars argue that women have special roles within Sufism (al Hibri 1982; Schimmel 1982). It is not simply that "formal religion and old beliefs and practices continue to exist side by side in the majority of [Muslim] countries" (Mikhail 1979:1). Indeed this essay suggests the reality is much more complex than that. Women and men, moreover, are differently positioned within Islamic traditions and communities. Furthermore, as religion is reconfigured by modern states through such means as bureaucratic regulation, attempts at standardization, systems of mass education and law, men's practices and men's knowledge often become normative (compare Sered 1990).

The changing notions of what it means to be a Muslim are not, however, predetermined or unidirectional in terms of women's rights. Social change in Islamic societies (as in others) is ambiguous and multi-directional. For example, although female seclusion in the home limits women's economic opportunities, Islamic dress may facilitate women's entry into new public domains, such as the university and the office (Hoffman-Ladd 1987). Thus, "the veil itself may be a vehicle for eventual emancipation of women" (Bauer 1984:289). In the Sudan, fundamentalist Islam may help promote a shift from

pharaonic circumcision toward the less injurious *sunna* form, clitoridectomy (Gruenbaum 1991). Increasing numbers of Muslim women (like the young women of Wad al Abbas) are reaping the benefits of mass education and entering the formal paid labor force. Islamic fundamentalist women, moreover, such as the Muslim Sisters in Sudan, are often highly visible in public and may be engaged in creating new kinds of political roles for women (Hale n.d.).

This study suggests that some Muslim women are experiencing what Rogers (1980) has called "the domestication of women," whereby women are increasingly circumscribed to domestic functions, losing their public productive and political roles. This is a global process not unique to Islamic societies. Other Muslim women, however, are moving into new public roles, a movement facilitated in some cases by "conservative" Islamic dress. Underlying much of the discussion of *purdah* and sex segregation as they affect Muslim women is the implicit assumption (going back to Engels [1970]) that women's involvement in public work is either an index of women's emancipation or a prerequisite for it. This may have been true for Western women, but we cannot assume that the Muslim world either is about to, or ought to, follow the same historical trajectory as the West. The assumption that public work promotes gender equality bears questioning in the case of third world women (Sacks and Scheper-Hughes 1987), particularly in light of recent data from areas of high female employment, such as the maquila border industries in Mexico (Fernandez-Kelly 1983) and the export processing zones in South Asia (Ong 1987, 1991).

It should not surprise us, moreover, that rapid social change and economic integration into capitalist relations of production and exchange coexist with conservative ideologies and practices regarding women. In fact, the two are interconnected. In the case of Wad al Abbas, the intensification of social restrictions on women and the emergence of new secular and religious notions of gender difference are direct results of the community's growing integration into the world economy. This study shows clearly, moreover, that the local pattern of gender roles and the ideologies supporting these do not constitute an autonomous cultural system, reproduced by the community. Rather, the realities and ideals governing gender roles and relations are responsive to changing economic, political, and ideological conditions in the world system.

This study also challenges the assumption that to be modern is to be secular. In the case of Islamic societies, this view led scholars to take the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as evidence of Islam's rigidity in the face of change, when in fact it reveals the opposite. Profound religious transformations are part of the social, economic, and political developments taking place in Muslim societies. Modernity is bringing about cultural change but not necessarily to Western cultural forms.

Some of the misunderstanding of the Islamic revival may stem from the emphasis on its political implications. Many studies focus on contests for state

power, legal issues, and unavoidably in the case of Sudan, civil strife. Less attention has been given to the broader socio-cultural ramifications of Islamic fundamentalism, such as changing identities, consumption patterns, and values. The multi-faceted dynamics of Islamic fundamentalism also have been obscured by a focus on organized, usually urban and often privileged, political groups rather than on the general population. Detailed community studies that place Islam in a specific, historical, cultural context are necessary to reveal Muslims as creators of culture, not as rigid believers, and to make visible the evolution of Islamic traditions.

Recognizing the diversity and dynamism with Islamic societies, moreover, reveals Islamic culture as generating change in its own right and not simply as reacting to Western impact. As Eickelman and Piscatori (1990:xv) observe:

Contrary to the conventional wisdom of western social scientists . . . the encounter with the Muslim "other" has been at least as important for self-definition as the confrontation with the European 'other.'

The case of Wad al Abbas illustrates that the cultural learning that goes on with capitalist penetration is not just about the capitalist discipline or westernization that have received much attention from scholars. Such learning is also about exposure to urban national culture and to such foreign non-Western influences as, in this case, Saudi religious practice and other sources of global Islamic culture. In this sense, modernity may be just as likely to have an Arab, Muslim face as a Western, secular one. Studies that do not look beyond the fact of Western domination of the world system, however, may overlook or misconstrue patterns of change influenced by local or regional level powers (Appadurai 1990).

The transformations taking place in contemporary Islamic beliefs and practices challenge the Islamic determinist perspective on women in Muslim societies. It is then possible to envision possibilities for change that would empower women within evolving Islamic traditions which must be recognized as involved in an open-ended, rather than predetermined, process of social construction. Women's social position is not immutable, nor is Islam intrinsically inimical to women's economic and political advancement. It is particularly because Islam can be constructed from local understandings as well as from transnational sources, that it offers ideological resources that can be mobilized to various ends, including the legitimation of new gender roles. In this respect, it is precisely the ambiguous and multiple beliefs and practices within Islam, not its certainty or rigidity, that make Islam an important arena for articulating gender roles and relations under conditions of change.

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