Living Hierarchy in Yemen

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Abstract: This article investigates how unequal material relationships permeate the "lived identities" (Williams, 1977) of subordination and domination in the forms of concepts about and enactments of personhood, emotions, piety and propriety among Muslim women of Zabid, Republic of Yemen. I discuss how the gender hierarchy is entwined with wider forms of hierarchy between the elite and a servant class of people, known as the *akhdam*. Dominant ideas about "appropriately behaved," moral, pious women can serve to make "commonsense" the domination of others who do not constitute themselves in such ways. In short, "moral selves" are created at the same time as "legitimate hierarchies." Styles of female deference to men (control of body and emotion, veiling and avoidance behaviour, which are thought to demonstrate Muslim piety) ensure the subordination of women to men at the same time they legitimize the superiority of elite women over their servants, who do not comport themselves in such ways. Consumption practices are significant as well for the elite as it consumes its wealth in ways that "signify" for reputations: it is channeled into the elements of gracious hospitality or consumed rather than hoarded.

Résumé: Cet article fait ressortir les manières dont la distribution inégale des richesses envahit les «identités vécues» (Williams, 1977) de subordination et de domination sous formes de perception et d'affirmation de la personnalité, des émotions, de la piété et des convenances chez les femmes musulmanes de Zabid, en République du Yemen. J'essaie d'établir comment la hiérarchie sexuelle est enlacée dans des formes plus globales de hiérarchie établies entre l'élite et une classe de serviteurs connue sous le nom de *ahkdam*. Les idées reçues sur les femmes au comportement approprié, morales et pieuses peuvent aussi servir à constituer en «sens commun» la domination sur les autres qui ne se constituent pas de cette façon. Bref, le «soi moral» est créé en même temps que les «hiérarchies légitimes». Les modes de déférence féminine envers les hommes (contrôle du corps et des émotions, port du voile et retrait, qui sont censés démontrer la piété musulmane) assurent la subordination des femmes aux hommes en même temps qu'elles légitimisent la supériorité des femmes de l'élite sur les serviteurs, qui ont d'autres modes de comportement. Les pratiques de consommation sont aussi significatives, car les élites consomment leurs richesses de façon à «signifier» leur réputation: la richesse est utilisée pour donner des réceptions, elle est consommée plutôt que thésaurisée.

Introduction

A prominent (and worthy) goal of much Middle Eastern anthropology is to challenge popular Western conceptions of the "passive, veiled Muslim woman," to acknowledge their agency while also noting the constraints placed upon them by the system they help to reproduce. Yet the danger of this otherwise laudable goal, as Lila Abu-Lughod notes, is that the time spent arguing against these "shadow stereotypes" often prevents the production of sophisticated feminist critiques, stopping instead at a mere documentation of the "rich variability" of Muslim women's lives (Abu-Lughod, 1988: 104-105). Deniz Kandiyoti cautions us of the dangers of being caught in an Orientalist discourse, of keeping "our gaze fixed upon the discursive hegemony of the West" (1996: 16). We must, these scholars argue, focus not only on the various misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the East-West encounter, but go beyond them to investigate how local gender hierarchies are reproduced in various institutions within complex, heterogeneous Middle Eastern states, states which are themselves situated in wider political and economic relationships in the global system.

Considering the complexity of social hierarchies—that is, gender hierarchies between men and women *and* those amongst women—is a goal espoused by Micaela di Leonardo in her article "Women's Culture and Its Discontents" (1991). Here she argues for both a greater appreciation of women's agency as well as recognition that within any one culture women are not necessarily homogeneous in terms of their social identity (age-group affiliation, class, ethnicity, race). Given this heterogeneity, we must recognize, she argues, that political and social interests among them may conflict as well (1991: 231). Taking these issues into account, I examine in this article how gender hierarchy in Zabid, a small town on the coast of the Republic of Yemen, is entwined with wider forms of hierarchical relationships and suggest ways that

women might be particularly central in reproducing these.

I am concerned here with how social hierarchy in Zabid is embedded in quotidian, "commonsensical" (Williams, 1977) bodily practices which form the basis for moral personhood. Working primarily with elite Yemeni women, I explore how women's practices—such as those related to proper comportment (including veiling), the enactment of emotions, consumption and exchange, and sociability or visiting practices—are especially salient for maintaining local hierarchical relationships among women. Elite women are involved in complex relationships of power: they are subordinate to their husbands and male kin, yet advantaged with respect to the poor, especially the *akhdam* or servant class. Practices of these elite women with regard to moral comportment are central to reproducing relationships of domination between women in Zabid. Yet acknowledgement of women's engagement in oppressive relationships should not obfuscate how they themselves are constrained by them.

Marcel Mauss' generative essay on "techniques of the body" (1973) provides an inspiration for my thinking here, as does Talal Asad's more recent reading of Mauss in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993). Pierre Bourdieu's elaboration upon Mauss' notion of habitus, a set of implicit practices which form the basis of commonsense understandings and shape the possibilities for action (Bourdieu, 1977), and his application of these practices in terms of domination and hierarchy, make his work an enduring touchstone for considerations of bodily practices and the formation of hierarchies in Middle Eastern anthropology.

A central goal of this paper is to unpack the hegemony of the habitus. Raymond Williams' discussion of hegemony suggests how hierarchies are made to seem "commonsensical" by their situation in all manner of everyday practices:

> It [hegemony] is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear reciprocally confirming. (1977: 110)

Bourdieu's formulation (1977) of the habitus as providing a small range of implicit "moves" or "strategies" does not allow much place for a sense of moral personhood, which is both constituted by appropriate practice, and provides an impetus for it. Asad's reading of Mauss, which suggests that the training of bodies develops capacities for particular forms of virtues which underpin moral personhood (1993: 72-79), is drawn upon in my interpretation of the propriety of Zabidi bodily practices. In this analysis, I explore the *practical knowledge* of hierarchy, whereby through "techniques of the body" (Mauss, 1973) aptitudes for "modes of emotional being" and "kinds of spiritual experience" are developed (Asad, 1993: 76). Taking inspiration from Asad's reading of how moral states are inculcated in social persons in situations of power, I argue that definitions and practices of "morality" come to naturalize, as well as reproduce social hierarchies at the same time as "moral selves" are constituted (see also Yanagisako and Delaney [1995] on gender and the "naturalization" of power).

Social Hierarchy in Zabid

In 1989-90 and again briefly in 1999, I conducted participant-observation research in Zabid, a small, but highly stratified predominantly Shafa'i Muslim town in the Republic of Yemen. I worked mainly with elite women, adopting a veil, observing gender segregation and participating in everyday activities, which among the elite Zabidi women consisted of cycles of daily hosting and visiting, governed by an elaborate etiquette. Zabid is an ancient town in the former North Yemen, which unified with the former socialist South Yemen in 1990. It is located on the Tihamah, the sweltering coastal plain that borders the Red Sea, a region that is agriculturally rich in the river valleys where water is available. The Tihamah region as a whole is distinct from (and subordinate to) the highland region, where the capital, San'a' is the locus of power in contemporary Yemen. The social hierarchy in Yemen, as explained below, has notable regional variations, but has long been evident throughout Yemen.

Historically, Yemen has been a highly stratified society. At the top were the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*sadah*), who had formed the ruling dynasty in the highlands in earlier centuries, the tribesmen (*qaba'il*), the butchers, barbers and circumcisors (*mazayanah*), the former slaves (*'abid*) and at the very bottom, below even the slaves, the servant class, the *akhdam* (masc., sing., *khadim*, fem., sing., *khadima*). These categories were marked by occupation, and solidified by intra-category endogamy. Some anthropologists, notably Gerholm (1977) and Bujra (1971), have drawn analogies to the caste system of Hindu India, yet as Messick suggests, hierarchical as well as egalitarian principles are embedded within the historical and contemporary practices of Yemeni Islam (1993: 159-166).[1] These ancient status categories and their associated sartorial markers were officially banned after the Republican Revolution

(*al-thawra*) in 1962, as the government tried to implement a "nation" (*watan*) based on equality between citizens. In North Yemen, as in other Middle Eastern states, attempts were made to alter long-standing forms of social identities in hopes of instilling a sense of a citizenly affiliation with the nation-state.[2] Yet inequalities between these status categories, although technically illegal under the laws of the Yemeni nation state, continue to pervade everyday life in Yemen.

During my research, this was made clear to me before I had even left Yemen's capital city, San'a'. One day, a British-educated professor in Sociology at the University drove my husband and myself to the passport office, so we could arrange our residence visas. As we were deep in conversation, he rear-ended a butcher's truck full of sheep. The butcher was understandably agitated, as were the sheep; his invective was audible even above their bleating. The police officer at the intersection rushed to the scene, although fortunately, neither person nor sheep had been injured. The professor, calm and self-possessed, urged us to go about our business, while he dealt with the repercussions. We went, wondering guiltily if we had been distracting him with our talk, enough, perhaps, to make him commit that inexcusable crime of rear-ending someone. It was with some trepidation that we met up again with our professor, who announced that the trouble had been sorted out. We asked how he had been penalized, and cheerfully, he pointed to a fat pocketful of cash. He said the man he had hit had paid him rather well for his broken headlight. Captives of our own traffic regulations, we exclaimed "But you rear-ended him!" He said, with only a hint of irony, "But I am a university professor and he is a butcher."

This early glimpse of how hierarchy permeates everyday behaviour in Yemen's capital sheds light on the distinctive evaluations of persons that I encountered in Zabid. Elite and "respectable" Zabidis are referred to as "*al-nas,*" literally, "the people," but from the perspective of the elite, the meaning is "the socially significant people," a category from which the butchers and the *akhdam*, or servants, are excluded. Within those considered of "the people," the salient identity in everyday life is the family (*bayt*) to which one belongs. A wealthy, influential family is referred to as a "great family" (*bayt kabir*). Collectively, the great families of Zabid are known as "the great" (*al-kibar*); they are the most prosperous and respected families in Zabid. They own large estates in Wadi Zabid, the river valley surrounding the town, or in one of the other river valleys. Tobacco, limes, bananas, mangos, melons and dates are among the cash crops grown on the estates, while on drier land, sorghum, a staple grain, is often grown. Members of the elite do not work the land they own; the rural people (*riffiyyin*) sharecrop the land, giving the landowner 2/3 to 3/4 of the produce. The profits from this unequal relationship are often channeled by the elite into practices like adornment, and exchanges of hospitality, gifts and *qat*, a leaf containing a mild amphetamine-like substance that is chewed daily by Zabidis in sociable contexts.[3]

My primary concern in this article is to trace how social hierarchy is embedded in several of these practices, especially those related to proper comportment, emotions and consumption and visiting practices. Through examining these quotidian practices, I illustrate how inequality comes to seem ordinary through the permeation of everyday "lived identities" (Williams, 1977).

The great families dominate Zabid not only politically and economically, but also morally. Zabid's is a face-to-face elite; its members are not separated socially or physically from the rest of the community, but rather encounter those lower than themselves in the social hierarchy on a daily basis. Local conceptions of moral virtue—shared, at least partially, by all members of society—are involved in the constitution of hierarchical relationships. The central values by which morality is constituted are generosity, propriety, and Islamic piety.[4] Yet "goodness" is defined in such a way that it is much more accessible to the rich than the poor, as it is they who have the resources to offer generous hospitality and charity; to uphold the standards of gender segregation by which propriety is partially constituted; and to gain access to education and training in Islamic comportment.[5] My data from Zabid suggests that "appropriately trained bodies" (Asad, 1993: 72-79) constituted and presented to others through quotidian practices which signify moral personhood, serve to normalize and justify the domination of others who do not live up to hegemonic standards of comportment.

My vantage point for the study of these relationships is elite women, with whom I did the majority of my research. I had originally intended to work equally with members of all status categories, yet, like many anthropologists, I found myself with less control over whom I could talk to than I would have wished. It was difficult for me as a fieldworker to get the same kind of information for the *akhdam* as I did for the elite, because I was associated, albeit ambiguously, with them, and because my elite informants often tried to direct my social contact toward those that they considered appropriate interlocutors, namely, their peers.

I offer as an example of these constraints one of my own engagements in the exchanges by which social posi-

tion is enacted. Before a trip to the capital, when making the expected farewell visit to the neighbours, although we were only leaving for a few days, I asked if I could bring anything back for them. Usually they insisted, in the polite formulaic, "I only want your safety!" (*ashti salamatik bas!*), but this time they requested some special incense for scenting water which could not be purchased in Zabid. As I was leaving, their elderly servant, who lived with them in their house, followed me home and asked for some incense too. This servant rushed to my door when I returned from the capital; I gave her the incense. Hiding it in her dress, she kissed my knees and begged in a whisper for me not to tell the family or my landlady about my gift to her. When I visited the neighbouring family in the evening, they responded to my gift as elite women often do, by sharply asking why I had troubled myself (*laysh ta'atibi nuffsik kitha?*). We received gifts of lime and bananas from their farms for days afterwards, and the women insisted on scenting our water with the incense we had brought for them. Their servant did not even attempt a return gift to us. She clearly did not see me entirely as one of the elite, or she would not have asked me to bring her the incense or assume that I would keep her secret, which I did. Yet she also kissed my knees, a gesture of deference which made me uncomfortable and hardly seemed an appropriate prelude to an anthropological chat, especially since the woman seemed terrified to be discovered in my house clutching the gift I had given her. I suspect that my neighbours discouraged this servant and other lower-status women from visiting my home. My landlady (whose own high social position had become increasingly tenuous as her son rashly sold off all their landholdings) seemed particularly concerned that I make social connections which enhanced her own reputation. When I met the *akhdam* in elite homes, I was not in a position to elicit *akhdam* perceptions about the social hierarchy, and the ways in which they may contest or subvert the meanings of the elite.[6] As Williams (1977) notes, hegemonic meanings are not all determining, and there is no good reason to suppose that those in an inferior position necessarily *agree* with the negative stereotypes of the dominant.[7] Therefore, the silences on *akhdam* perceptions in this paper should not be read as an implication that there are not any differing perceptions, but rather that I was not able to investigate this important issue as much as I would have liked.

Talking about Hierarchy

The *akhdam* live on the outskirts of Zabid, in small concrete houses or in huts with thatched or corrugated iron roofs. They are not as isolated from the other members of the community as are the *akhdam* community in San'a'. Other Zabidi *akhdam* live in the elite households where they work; these are usually older men or women who do not have children or who have been separated from them when they have gone elsewhere to seek better employment.[8]

Elite Zabidis were often vague and contradictory in their statements about the position of the *akhdam* or servant class. Some Zabidis merely say that the *akhdam* are "black" (*aswad*), although it was virtually impossible to determine someone's social position by skin pigment. There is a wide range of skin pigment even among the elite families, as Zabidi women are well aware.[9] Similarly, non-prestigious origin (as an African origin is locally said to be) was occasionally cited unreflectively as the reason for the inferior position of the *akhdam*, who were said to be from Ethiopia, although they claimed to be as Zabidi as anyone else there. Some elite women merely declared that the place of the *akhdam* was "from God" (*min Allah*), implying it was therefore immutable because it was God's will. What was not mentioned as an explanation was the role of relative wealth, and the patently unequal access to resources between the two: the elite deriving their income from landed estates, and the *akhdam* surviving on their meager wages, a slight fraction of an elite family's daily income. The most common explanation that elite women gave for the inferior position of the *akhdam* was their lack of conformity to elite standards of bodily comportment. And it is the comportment of *women's bodies* that is salient in the differentiation of the elite from the *akhdam*.

The Moral Body: Cutting, Covering and Separating

The processes of gender segregation are so deeply embedded in Zabidi social life so as to appear a "natural" aspect of the habitus to the participants, yet they require constant enactment in everyday life. Gender segregation in Zabid depends on a range of modesty practices that include female circumcision, veiling and the avoidance of non-related men.

Female circumcision as practised in Zabid comprises the removal of a baby girl's clitoris when she is a few weeks old; no ceremony or celebration accompanies it. This practice is part of the many ways in which women's sexuality is controlled and through which the gender hierarchy is enacted in Zabid, but in this context I highlight how women view this practice in light of wider social hierarchies.[10] Female circumcision does not guar-

antee women's chastity or modesty, rather it provides a precondition for it, at least according to some Zabidis.[11] Significantly, female circumcision is *not* a practice that signifies for hierarchical relationships between the elite and the *akhdam* as it is practised by all classes of Zabid. The operation of female circumcision is thought to facilitate an aptitude for modest comportment, but the enactment of modest comportment as a young woman is conceived of as an expression of virtue which she produces *of her own will*. As Abu Lughod (1986) has so convincingly argued for the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin of Egypt, it is the expression of women's agency through the *voluntary* production of a modest demeanour which creates their honour. In Yemen, a similar understanding of the connection between women's agency as exemplified in modest behaviour and their honourable identity was also evident. As the *akhdam* have the same precondition for honourable behaviour as do the elite—provided through infant circumcision—the fact that they do not behave modestly is perceived as a lack of "will" or "social sense" (*'aql*). The display of *'aql* is central to adult personhood; its absence is associated with children and the insane.

In Abu-Lughod's important reformulation of the issue of veiling, so long simplistically understood as iconic of the oppression of Muslim women, she argues that voluntary modest comportment is how women gain honour in a situation of inferiority (Abu-Lughod, 1986). Modesty (*istihya'*) is considered a positive quality which is perceived as a personal virtue, achieved through an act of will. It is the voluntary aspect of veiling which indicates how Zabidi women perceive themselves to be active, responsible, honourable and sane members of society. Women, like men, ought to be capable of producing appropriate actions; the failure to do so connotes a moral flaw. Veiling on the streets in a black, enveloping *chador*, avoiding interactions with non-related adult men and avoiding male domains like the local market (*suq*), mosques and government buildings, are requirements of modest women.[12] The modest comportment of women is also intrinsic to a family's honourable reputation. A "good" woman respects herself and her family through modest behaviour, constituting in part the worth and honour of her family. In Zabid, women see their proper behaviour as something they produce proudly to uphold the social standing of their families.

In contrast, the *akhdam* seemingly flaunt the dominant conventions of gender segregation. *Akhdam* women do not wear the *chador*, for which they are stigmatized, wearing instead colourful gowns with wide sleeves. They enter male domains like the *suq* to make purchases or sell small items, like clay jugs. No respectable woman would breach the domain of the *suq*: nor have they need to. The shopowners are male, and Zabidi men are responsible for the shopping for food and *qat*.[13] *Akhdam* women sometimes work as servants in male gatherings or enter the moral spaces of others' houses to work when their male family members are present. The movement of these women into the domains of the opposite gender are perceived by the elite as a sign of moral inferiority. There is a silence about the fact that *akhdam* women must enter the homes of others and the *suq* in order to eke out a meager existence. Rather, they are said to be different from the elite because they do not know what is "shameful" (*'ayb*) or "respectful" (*ihtiram*). The dominant perceptions of modesty suggest that individuals enact it as a result of the personal qualities of self-respect, reason and self-control, stressing the voluntary aspects of proper comportment. The inferior position of the *akhdam* can thereby be perceived by the elite as due to the lack of moral qualities that mature adult Muslims are supposed to possess.

I was told that in the past, if a couple had been found to be engaging in adultery, which the system of gender segregation is designed to prevent, they would be drummed by the *akhdam* into Zabid's central square to receive—in full view—the prescribed lashings as punishment. The adulterers' fall from moral comportment is underscored by their public accompaniment by the lowest strata of society—those who are alleged not to know shame from honour—to face public humiliation.[14]

The concept and practices of modesty create a sense of superiority relative to those who do not "act properly." Children who have yet to be properly socialized, the insane, Westerners and the *akhdam* are categories of inferior beings who do not behave properly. Little girls are not bound by the conventions of gender segregation. They start wearing a headscarf around the age of four or five, although they are not criticized if the scarves slip off, as they will be as they get older. By the time they are eight or nine years old, however, they are encouraged to avoid the men's reception rooms, and sharply criticized or shamed for inappropriate behaviour.[15] An older girl whose head scarf has slipped off will be chastised by the rhetorical question "Why is your hair like that? Are you a crazy woman?" (*majuna*). The practices of modesty are made yet more binding and persuasive by their association with sanity. When telling stories about women who had lost their reason, the first signs of insanity were always that they went outside without their hair covered.

In Zabid I had not initially intended to wear a *chador*, although I wore clothes that covered me entirely, leaving only hands and feet exposed, covering my hair with a

scarf, but after a few weeks I caved under the insistent questioning as to why I was *not* wearing one. My own position as a non-Muslim Westerner was a matter of considerable concern, as Westerners are presumed to have promiscuous lives. The first three months in Zabid featured urges to convert as a characteristic of almost every conversation. My eventual adoption of a *chador*, and my adherence to the standards of gender segregation and comportment, on which I was constantly coached, did much toward convincing people that although not a Muslim, I was possessed of *'aql* and was a "good" person. In vouching for our decency to a Yemeni visitor to Zabid, one man explained that we were "good" (*tayyibin*) since the Zabidi men had not seen so much as my fingernail: my conformity to dominant standards, therefore, helped to establish our respectability.

The veiling of women creates the social status of men; not veiling from them marks them as immature (boys), irrelevant (foreigners) or inferior (the *akhdam*). As noted above, my adoption of a *chador* did much to establish my husband's respectability in the community. The only adult men who are allowed into women's gatherings, from whom adult women do not veil, are *akhdam* men who also work as servants in elite households. Their low social position is continually re-enacted by this withholding of recognition of adult male status; they are not considered manly enough to besmirch the reputations of higher-status women. Non-*akhdam* teenaged boys who are struggling to assert an adult identity will be most careful about not transgressing female gatherings, in an attempt to claim that they are now adult enough to be veiled from. One young neighbour of ours demanded from age 10 (usually puberty is the time when compliance to gender segregation is absolutely required) that women treat him like a man and veil from him, to the vast amusement of his mother, aunts and the neighbourhood women who had known him since birth. Yet despite their amusement, they respected his claim, and seemed almost proud of his precociousness. A contrast can be seen with how the same family and set of neighbours treated their male servant, who lived in their house and did odd jobs for a tiny salary. This man occasionally walked through women's gatherings clad only in a loincloth. The other neighbourhood women and I would routinely exchange greetings with him, whereas we would not even glance at our host's husband or adult sons, nor they at us.

There is nothing inherently oppressive or emancipatory about the fact of gender segregation itself, as Kandiyoti notes (1996); the meanings and ramifications of this practice can only be understood by contextualizing how it is supported, in each ethnographic case, by other institutions and practices. Gender segregation in Zabid articulates with the institution of the *bayt* (the term refers both to the family and house they inhabit) in several ways. Among the elite and the ordinary people, the *bayt* as a physical space houses the multigeneration family, usually, but not exclusively, constituted by patrilineality. It is understood as a moral space, the locus of familial identity. In Zabid, the salient group is the family; both male and female members co-operate in actively maintaining the reputation of their family through appropriate public comportment. An important dimension of a family's "goodness" is whether or not they live up to the standards of gender segregation. Wealthy families have the space and financial resources to have at least two reception rooms to host male and female visitors, facilitating the simultaneous hosting of male and female guests while maintaining the separation of unrelated men and women. Male members must respect women's spaces within the household, never entering the female spaces of the house during the regular formal visiting hours, from around 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.[16] Men in poorer families, without separate reception rooms, will arrange to be out of the house during the women's reception hours. Ethnographic accounts of honour and highland tribal Yemeni men describe how women must be "controlled" lest their improper sexual comportment bring shame onto their male relatives (for instance, Dresch, 1989: 44). The understandings are different in Zabid. Zabidi women do not regard their behaviour as arising from male "control" but rather from their own self-control. Although women bear the greater burden for establishing the respectability of the family through modest behaviour, men also co-operate in gender segregation by lowering their eyes from women, avoiding their spaces and avoiding conversations with non-related women, especially young women. In Zabid, both male and female proper comportment is necessary for establishing one's family as an honourable one, and one's house as a respectable space.

Hierarchy, Personhood and Social Exchange

The style of life of the elite is made possible by the domination of other people's labour, and their monopoly over productive resources and prestigious occupations. Most of the fertile land in the surrounding river valley, Wadi Zabid, is owned by elite Zabidis; as noted above, the landowners receive between 2/3 and 3/4 of the produce. These sharecroppers may or may not be *akhdam*, al-

though the *akhdam* have a lower status even if they are not poorer than other sharecroppers. As Raymond Williams has noted, processes of hegemony include forms of leisure. Wealth in Zabid, to "signify" for honourable reputations, must be deployed in a certain style as the mere possession of wealth is not enough to guarantee social position. The elite, as noted above, are not aloof from the rest of the community, but rather encounter others in the course of everyday interactions. To maintain their position, they must display, consume and distribute their wealth in a way that indicates willingness to engage with others in the community, through acts of generosity and hospitality. To paraphrase Williams, "good income must be transformed into good conduct" (1973). Generosity, hospitality and charity are values shared by all, part of the Islamic notion of "correct comportment" (*adab*) as it is understood in Zabid. Wealth without generosity is condemned; charity is stipulated as one of the five mandatory obligations ("pillars") of Islam.[17] Being a good Muslim is a central tenant of social personhood, and generosity and hospitality are religious obligations that will be rewarded both in the afterlife and in the contemporary social world. Yet this particular structuring of value means that moral comportment is much more accessible to the rich than the poor.

The consumption practices by which social and moral value is endowed include an elaborate series of competitive hosting and guesting, which take place on a daily basis. Elite income must be turned into the visible accoutrements of their moral superiority: into grand houses where guests are entertained in separate male and female reception rooms, and clean, well-adorned, but modestly dressed family members who represent their families in their respective publics. Proper adornment is important: a wealthy man whose family members are poorly adorned will be criticized as a "miser" (*bakhil*). Hosts honour their guests by providing clean and comfortable spaces for their entertainment; guests honour their hostesses by appearing clean and properly dressed.[18]

As noted above, gender segregation means that women and men have separate public spheres. The male public sphere includes the local market, the mosques and the government buildings; they also meet daily in the afternoons and early evenings to chew *qat*, in the male reception rooms adjoining wealthy houses. Women too have a public sphere, despite the fact that it is enacted in private homes: a circuit of visiting and hosting which takes place daily during the formal visiting hours. In this sphere, women act politically on behalf of their families, the chief political unit in Zabid. Women's generous comportment in their public sphere creates the reputation of the family for wealth appropriately consumed through generosity.

Visiting is one of the types of exchanges by which social position is constituted. As Mauss recognized long ago, exchange can create moral personhood and the moral identity of the groups persons represent (1970). The familial identity is recognized as honourable by guests who pay visits and attend the familial social functions. The morality of a family is implicitly recognized by women's visiting. If a family has a reputation for being morally sound, other women can enter their home without fear of taint to their reputations.

Although elite and non-elite women may work outside of their homes, the primary occupational option being schoolteaching in one of Zabid's gender segregated elementary or high schools, I have argued elsewhere that their "hospitality work" must be considered as labour on behalf of their families.[19] The political competition between elite families takes place to a great extent in both the male and female sociable spheres.[20] A family's network of social ties is part of their patrimony. The honourable identities of families are created in the process of the competitive exchange of visits. The exchange of hosting and guesting is very much involved in defining distinctive identities; who one *is* depends very much on who one *knows*. To be socially significant in Zabid one must be recognized by others. As I argue at length elsewhere (Meneley, 1996), this form of women's labour is often overlooked in accounts of politics in gender-segregated societies.

Giving, from the perspective of the Zabidi elite, is always the preferable action. As Mauss notes, exchange can be used to assert superiority. In much of Zabidi sociality, elite women prefer to be the hosts, the generous givers, rather than the recipients, of hospitality. However, elite women insist on reciprocity in visiting. They have to visit their peers, or their peers will refuse to visit them. As Mauss says "To refuse to give, or to fail to invite, is—like refusing to accept—the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse (1970: 11). Women's visiting has great significance for the family's reputation as a whole for two reasons. First, elite women visit much more frequently than men. Elite male landowners tend to host daily *qat* chews in their own reception rooms; women as representatives of their families, are primarily responsible for maintaining the social ties with other Zabidi families. Second, women's reputations, especially those of unmarried women, are the most strictly guarded because any hint of sexual misconduct can harm the reputation of the family as a whole. Therefore, women, especially unmarried women, should avoid spaces where their reputations

may be threatened. Women's visiting acknowledges the homes of others as moral spaces, inhabited by trustworthy, respectable people. Their presence in the home of another family acknowledges the host's worth and honourable status; it signifies that the woman's reputation will not come to any harm by entering one's home. One must offer hospitality to any guest in one's home, even if they are of poor repute; neglecting a guest in one's own home only hurts one's own reputation. Refusal to visit is taken very seriously; it is the source of daily negotiation, contestation, and competition. In this logic of sociability, honour accrues to those who are visited, who are thereby acknowledged as socially significant and morally sound, and those who are allowed to give (or give back) rather than receive.

The *akhdam* women are largely excluded from this daily cycle of recognition: they are not considered of the "socially significant people" who must be acknowledged through visiting. The honour and respectability of the host family are acknowledged through a return visit. Although they may be present in elite households occasionally as guests, the *akhdam* are never given a chance to reciprocate. Elite women are not obliged to return these calls.[21] They enter elite homes to work, and to pay respectful calls on the religious festivals, when they receive a few *riyals* of charity. At weddings, *akhdam* women beg, receiving a few *riyals* from the guests, in return for their labour at the wedding parties. Neighbours and kin also help with the considerable labour involved in throwing a wedding, but the difference is that they can expect to be helped in return with their own ceremonies, whereas labour is not returned to the *akhdam*.

The exchange of greetings is extremely important in Yemen. As a mimimal acknowledgment of the personhood of another, it is a right which is owed a fellow Muslim.[22] I was told that in the past, elite women would not have been obliged to shake hands with an *akhdam* woman, although now they do. Yet although an *akhdam* woman kisses the hand of an elite woman, the elite woman does not kiss her hand in return. And although a Yemeni proverb notes "A kiss on the hand means hatred of it" (Messick, 1993: 166), implying a knowledge and resentment of subordination, it is also true that politeness always contains political concessions, as Bourdieu notes (1977: 95). Sometimes *akhdam* women even kiss the knees of a higher-status person. Among the non-*akhdam*, I only saw such deferential greetings between young girls and their older female relatives of the grandparental generation. On formal religious days, younger family members may kiss the knees of the patriarch of the family. Subordination is constituted in the physical lowering of oneself in front of a dominant other, embodying the hierarchical relationship.

Gift-giving follows the same logic as visiting. In my vignette above, the elite family was reluctant to appear as a client asking for a gift from me; as a consequence, I am sure I received more in return than the incense was worth. Their servant, on the other hand, never made any attempt to return my gift except in the form of extremely respectful, self-effacing greetings. Non-reciprocal gifting was the norm between elite and the *akhdam*; I never saw a servant try to return a gift of *qat*, a common practice at women's parties, to a higher-status woman. Making a return gift is a quest for equal status, and it runs the risk of being brushed off as impertinence. Exchange is a process creative of value, as Simmel notes (1971: 42-69) and the value of persons is constituted in even such quotidian exchanges in Zabid.

The Politics of Emotions

It is often said that the taboo on marrying *akhdam* women is because of the reputation of their families—deserved or not—for being riven with violence between female family members. One *akhdam* woman, a servant in an elite family, reported daily on her physical altercations with her co-wife, which the elite family was both disdainful of and amused by. Rather than taking this statement as reflecting some kind of truth about all *akhdam* families, I suggest it is an index of the concern elite families have for presenting a unified face to the rest of the community, untarnished by discord. For instance, if women in elite families are quarrelling, they may be hushed with a hissed question "why are you behaving like the *akhdam*?" Modesty in Zabid underlies the enactment of other emotions: one ought to be embarrassed to express desire, anger or grief without restraint. As Abu-Lughod and Lutz note, "emotion discourses establish, assert, challenge, or reinforce power or status differences" (1990: 14). Displays of emotion are also said to be related to *'aql*, reason, which is linked to the formation of mature persons and to social status.

Metaphors of "hotness" and "coolness" are drawn upon in emotion discourses. Elite Zabidi women are ideally supposed to be "cool" (*barid*) in their display of emotions. The "hotness" of anger ought to be muted by the exercise of self-control, as must any intimation of sexual interest. Even the expression of grief at funerals is chastised. As a consequence of their lack of modesty, the *akhdam* are said to lack control over the strong negative emotions of anger and grief. Again, the question of self-control is central to social status. The women are said to be inclined to physical violence with peers on the

streets, which the elite would consider an action that would bring shame on an entire family. The *akhdam* are said to wail and beat the body of the deceased at death, an uncontrolled expression of grief which is considered not only immodest but also religiously "forbidden" (*haram*) by the Zabidi *nas*. This comportment is in contrast to the controlled mourning of the elite, where any ritual keening, even on the first day after a death, is considered a questioning of the will of God.

Muslim Piety

The practices of modesty in Zabid are continually negotiated with reference to local understandings of Muslim piety, in that modest comportment is thought to demonstrate piety. This is not to suggest that the position of women is completely determined by Islam, but rather that what is "proper" Islam is shaped in relations of power whereby certain practices and interpretations become authorized in particular Muslim communities (Asad, 1986). As modesty is thought to indicate piety in Zabid, modest women ensure the reputation of their families as devout Muslims. This fusion of propriety and piety lends persuasive force to the hierarchical relationships in the community. Individual elite women often claim a serious commitment to the principle that all Muslims are equal in the eyes of God, despite awareness of the social hierarchy in the Zabidi community.[23] However, the lack of modesty of the *akhdam* throws into question, from the perspective of the elite, whether or not they are truly Muslims, an important factor in this deeply religious community where Muslim piety is so inextricably linked to moral personhood.[24] Religious knowledge is linked to social hierarchies, and the ignorant are assigned a child-like status (Messick, 1993: 154-155). The *akhdam* have less access to religious education and state schooling; they are forbidden from neither in contemporary Yemen, but through poverty and prejudice tend not to be educated as are most Zabidis.[25] One time when visiting an elite family, I saw an older servant do her prayer postures. My elite host chided her on having not performed the required ablutions before prayer, a requirement, as Reinhardt persuasively argues, fundamentally about subordinating the body to the will (1990: 19-20). The servant was not able to produce a "prestigious imitation" (Mauss, 1973), as she had not been properly trained to do so. "The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies" (Asad, 1993: 77) and elite families consider it their responsibility to ensure that their children are taught to pray properly.[26]

Westerners, who the Zabidis see primarily when their tour groups stop for brief visits to Zabid, are thought to be morally inferior because of their immodest dress. Many tourists I encountered had strong negative reactions to the veiling of Yemeni women, yet the Zabidis have their own set of stereotypes about unveiled Western women, who are presumed to be decadent and morally unsound. Recent work on the practice of veiling in the Middle East, Ahmed (1992) and the essays in Kandiyoti's *Women, Islam, and the State* (1991) and Abu-Lughod's *Remaking Women* (1998), articulate the complex ways in which practices like veiling are shaped by relationships of power with Western nations and indigenous anti-colonial and nationalist projects. The government of North Yemen did not institute a period of mandatory unveiling of women, where unveiled women were to convey "modernity" as did the governments of Iran (Najmabadi, 1991) or Turkey (Kandiyoti, 1991). Yet contemporary veiling in Zabid is an assertion of Zabidi "goodness" with respect to the Western world. The most common way of expressing the moral superiority of Zabidi society over "Westerners" is to say that Western women do not behave modestly. The stated moral depravity of the West is given a physical encapsulation in *unveiled women*; the garb of male tourists is not remarked upon, although they may well be wearing clothing, like shorts or sleeveless t-shirts, which are also considered inappropriate. Zabidis after encountering Western tourists will note the supposed lack of intellectual capacities of unveiled women, as well as relationships between the West and Yemen. I was often told that the scantily clad Western tourists who periodically tour Zabid were said to frighten children who think, because of their immodesty, that they are insane. The hegemony of morally sound comportment in Zabid operates in opposition to the more powerful as well as the less. What is particularly important here is that it is the comportment of women that determines how claims to status, always argued in moral terms, are made.

Conclusion

I am suggesting that hierarchical relationships are lived through everyday practices. Dominant conceptions about what constitutes moral and mature persons serve also to create "legitimate hierarchies." The enactment of morality, through such ephemeral gestures as kissing a hand or refusing to, veiling a face or giving a gift or hospitality without allowing an opportunity to reciprocate, has to be seen as part of the relationships of domination and subordination. In Zabid, the practices of female modesty are a locus for both personhood and hierarchy, embodying personal virtue and piety, as well as the moral worth of families. The deference shown by Zabidi women to men

through veiling creates male honour. Systems of moral value are never neutral, of course, and the ways in which virtue is defined means that women bear more of the responsibility for determining a family's moral goodness, often in ways that constrain them.[27] The subordination of elite Zabidi women to their male kin is ensured by the same processes that constitute the elite as a dominant class.[28] The imputed failure of the *akhdam* to uphold the dominant standards of comportment connotes flaws in moral personhood, and lends persuasive force to these hierarchical relationships. However, the focus on virtue elides the material distinctions between the two. There is silence about the fact that the *akhdam* need the few *riyals* they receive daily for working in elite households, while the elite, living off their land which the sharecroppers work, channel their energy and resources into gracious hospitality and consumption by which they create their own social worth and justify their social position. What comes through quite forcefully in the Zabidi case is the role played by the *akhdam* in elite women's imaginings and enactments of themselves as moral persons: the power of people enacting certain definitions of "goodness" renders those unable to reach them "less good," that is, morally flawed.

My relationship to my elite informants was necessarily ambivalent. The days of uncritical cultural relativism are gone, yet one still owes those who have helped one a respectful attitude, yet one which does not condone the hierarchical relationships our informants help to reproduce. In any event, my elite informants are complexly situated: they are subordinate to their husbands and male kin, yet advantaged with respect to the *akhdam* and poorer Zabidis. And in wider spheres, my elite informants, read as "Muslims" or "oppressed Muslim women," may themselves be exposed to prejudice. How anthropologists write about Muslim women is shaped by an awareness of a North American context in which there is much hostility to Muslims (Kadi, 1994; Said, 1997). I have often been asked by students (and occasionally even colleagues) how I managed to live in a society so oppressive to women. Yet we must always contextualize our hopefully more sophisticated analyses within explanations of highly stigmatized and misunderstood practices, like veiling and gender segregation.

Thus, while striving to acknowledge Middle Eastern women's agency, the roles they play in reproducing the system that constrains them need also be noted.[29] But this means that we must also see women as integral in the process of reproducing the wider hierarchical relationships in their communities.

Acknowledgments

The research in Zabid (1989-90) on which this paper is based was funded by the American Institute for Yemeni Studies and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as was my later research (April-May 1999). I thank Claudie Gosselin for her input on this paper. A version of it was presented at the 1998 CASCA meetings in Toronto, at a session entitled "Gender and the Politics of Culture," organized by Pauline Aucoin. Pauline deserves special gratitude for the considerable care she invested in editing this paper. Camilla Gibb read a later version with her usual care and insight. Thanks are also due to the editor, Sally Cole, for her detailed commentary, and to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

Notes

1 Messick's book (1993) is a complex analysis of the articulation of Islamic legal texts, their scholarly interpreters, and ordinary petitioners who appealed to the scholars for religious/legal advice on their everyday affairs. In this way, he avoids a vulgar position which would suggest that Islamic texts determine the reality of Muslims.

2 After the 1962 revolution that overthrew the Imamate, a civil war in Yemen ensued from 1962 to 1968. In 1967, a socialist regime was established in South Yemen. The transformations in practices and social thought in North Yemen are described insightfully in Messick (1993). The South Yemeni regime, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, made much more trenchant legal reforms concerning women and the family (see Molyneux, 1991) than did North Yemen. For fascinating discussions of nationalist projects and gender in the Middle East, see Kandiyoti (1991) and Abu-Lughod (1998). In 1990, the two Yemens agreed to reunify, and despite a bitter civil war in 1994, the unification is still holding.

3 The active agent in *qat* is catha edulis. *Qat* consumption is an intrinsic part of sociability in Zabid, as it is elsewhere in Yemen.

4 Neither generosity nor propriety is entirely divorced from a sense of Muslim piety in Zabid, nor is morality in general. For a more detailed discussion, see Meneley (1996).

5 I discuss the consequences, sometimes negative, of particular notions of "goodness" for elite women vis-à-vis the men in their families in Meneley (1999).

6 Sometimes *akhdam* women who approached me out of curiosity were shooed away and told to stop bothering me, as children often were; my protests had little effect.

7 James Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* inspired many to consider "resistance"; Abu-Lughod (1990) cautions us not to "romanticize" resistance; Ortner (1995) problematizes the concept of "resistance" cautioning us that it cannot replace detailed ethnographic description.

8 Some members of the Zabidi *akhdam* were recruited by the government to work as cleaners for the Sana'a Municipality

(al Ahmadi and Beatty, 1997: 33). Many *akhdam* working as migrant labourers in Saudi Arabia were forced to leave, as were many other Yemenis, after the Gulf Crisis and the political difficulties between Yemen and the Gulf States, over Yemen's neutral position on Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

9 Zabidis value lighter skin over darker skin, but there is no radical opposition between "White" and "Black" as there is in American racial ideology.

10 This issue has tested the boundaries of feminism and cultural relativism as Gosselin's paper (this volume) so aptly explains. I am attempting here to understand how this practice fits in with a range of other practices that are linked to female comportment; the politics of the topic are complex and would require further space. I did convey my distress over this practice to Zabidi women, who thought my opinions on practices of modesty were irrelevant, since I harkened from the disreputable Western world. Much more thought-provoking to them were the critiques of the highland women who do not practise circumcision. For further details, see Meneley (1996: 81-98).

11 Not all Zabidis practise it. Those who are not of the Shafa'i legal school, which is the only one of the four Muslim legal schools that condones the practice of female circumcision, do not practise it.

12 Women schoolteachers encounter male colleagues in the course of their work, but are fully veiled, including their faces, and modest women will avoid non-instrumental conversations with men.

13 The local markets are male domains in many Yemeni towns. There are a few shops in Zabid, like fabric, jewelry and clothing stores that women go to occasionally but these are located on the periphery of the *suq* or away from it entirely. Some women sell dress fabric from their homes or small items like soap, shampoo, matches and kerosene. These are frequented by neighbours who stop in to buy something and have an informal visit at the same time.

14 The *akhdam* also drum camels around town to announce that the butchers will be slaughtering them in the morning, alerting people of the opportunity to buy fresh camel meat.

15 Little children are often sent into men's gatherings to deliver messages to their fathers, but after the age of eight or so, girls are no longer assigned these tasks.

16 If there is some emergency, like an urgent telephone call, adult men will warn their wives or mothers, so that female guests will have time to throw *chadors* over their heads or leave the room. Similarly, if men need to do repair work on the roofs of houses, which would allow them a view into neighbouring courtyards where women go about unveiled, they must announce their presence by a loud cry. On my second stay in Zabid, I stayed with three families. All of them arranged to have the men in their families sleep in the male reception rooms or elsewhere for the duration of my stay, to protect my reputation.

17 The other four are: affirmation that there is one God, and Muhammad is his Prophet, five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan and a pilgrimage to Mecca, should health and finance permit.

18 The importance of issues of adornment is argued more extensively in Meneley (1996: 99-117).

19 This work in the sociable realm is similar to another kind of unacknowledged women's labour in North American society, what di Leonardo (1987) calls "kin work."

20 Weddings and funerals are particularly key social events for the constitution of familial position (Meneley, 1996: 118-140). Valuable agricultural lands and the water rights to them are also foci of intense political competition between elite families.

21 The only exception is that an older woman in an elite family may pay a brief call to a neighbouring *akhdam* family on the occasion of a death. The death of a *khadim* who lived for most of his life with an elite family was given a minimal mourning, in contrast to the elaborate and extensive mourning accorded to members of elite families. See Meneley (1996: 137-140) for further details.

22 The importance of greetings is discussed in Caton's analysis of a highland Yemeni community (1986).

23 The tension between equality and hierarchy is drawn throughout every dimension of social life in Zabid.

24 In 1999 in Zabid, I was visited by some dear friends whom I had been very close to on my first visit in 1989. I was leaving the next morning, and my eyes filled with tears when I said goodbye, not knowing when I would see them again. A woman whom I had not known during my first visit was surprised to see me displaying affection and distress at parting, saying that she had always assumed that non-Muslims are incapable of displaying *"rahma"* (human understanding, compassion, mercy); she decided that I must have Islam "in" (*fi*) me to behave in such a way.

25 State schools are free, but books and uniforms must be purchased, a considerable expense for the poor.

26 Once I heard an elite woman asked if it should be their responsibility to ensure that the *akhdam* living in their household also knew how to pray. The elite woman was uncertain how to respond.

27 When I returned to Zabid in 1999, the mother of a friend of mine begged me for pictures of her beloved daughter who had died in my absence. She showed me two very worn photos of her daughter, which were all she had left. I did not have any photos of my friend (which I too regretted) because Zabidi women refuse to let photographs circulate out of the family until they are past childbearing age. The mother knew, of course, that her daughter would have refused to be photographed because of the conventions of gender segregation in elite families, but these restrictions must have seemed so harsh to her after she lost her daughter at the age of 28 (see Meneley, 1998).

28 A similar point was made by Judith Okely (1978) in her examination of women's boarding schools in Britain.

29 Although working with an ethnographic example rather far afield from mine (the sterilization of Puerto Rican women in New York), Lopez (1997) importantly outlines the contours of constraints on women that affect their options, through a critical examination of what "choices" might mean in particular economic and political conditions.

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