

**The Burqa Face Cover:
An aspect of dress in southeastern Arabia**

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LANGUAGE OF DRESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST VOLUME

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More than twenty years ago, Hilda Kuper (1973:348-367) wrote about the indiscriminate way in which anthropologists dealt with clothing. Some focused on the origin of items of clothing, and the modesty and vanity of human beings. Some (Kroeber, 1919; 1940) looked at the relationship between changing fashions and social upheavals. Others, in the Malinowski tradition, described the clothing worn by different people in different situations, and the meaning of changes in clothing styles over time in the colonial situation. What emerged from all these writings was a concept of clothing as a "universal and visible cultural element consisting of sets of body symbols deliberately designed to convey messages at different social and psychological levels" (1973:348). The parts of the total structure of personal appearance were consciously manipulated to assert and demarcate differences in status, identity, and commitment.

In recent years, the renewed popularity of the face covering (*hijab*, *niqaab*, *burqa*), worn by increasing numbers of women in the Middle East, has received a great deal of attention. Much analysis has lately been directed at linking the face covering with the resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the rapidly changing and confused Middle Eastern social world. The actual significance of facial covering in the context of the totality of those societies is being lost in popular justifications and political explanations of fundamentally social phenomena.

This study begins with a brief historical review of head covering and veiling in the Middle East. A short summary follows of the major trends in the analysis of the phenomena of female covering. This summary primarily draws on the substantial body of gender studies available on women in Egypt. The centuries of Mamluk rule, and subsequent colonial encounters with France and Great Britain, put Egypt at the forefront of the major historical movements which were to affect women, their status, their dress and their deportment throughout the Arab World. Finally, this study concentrates on face covering in southeastern Arabia particularly among the remote and marginal pastoral populations of the Sultanate of Oman. It will isolate those personal factors that women consider, individually and on a personal basis, before they decide how to dress and cover themselves. It will also show the significance of their decisions, on the larger social groups and will relate these to the major political, economic, and social issues facing their society today.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

The origin of face veiling lies obscured in prehistory. What is certain is that it is pre-Islamic in origin, and appears to have been occasionally in use among the peoples of the southern Mediterranean rim from the Greeks to the Persians. The only exceptions to this generalization were the Egyptians and the Jews (Ahmed, 1982, 1992). " The conquest of Egypt by Persians and Greeks ... relegated ... aristocratic Egyptian women ... to an inferior position like their counterparts in Hellenic society: they were introduced to the customs of seclusion and the veil around the third century B.C." (Marsot, a. quoted in El-Guindi, 1981:475). All historical accounts point to the fact that women just prior to and in the early days of Islam in Arabia, and in the countries that came under the influence of the Arabs,

played an active role in the social and political life of the community (Ahmed, 1992). A study of the Koran and the Hadith of the Prophet Mohammed (pronouncements or traditions attributed to Mohammed) show that there is no specific injunction indicating that women should be veiled or secluded from participation in public life (Abdel Kader, 1984). However, unwritten tradition does indicate that Mohammed asked his wives to wear face veils to set them apart, to symbolize their special status, and to provide them with some social and psychological distance from the throngs that regularly congregated at his homes. The spread of the practice of veiling and general seclusion of women was initially a matter of personal choice, in emulation of Mohammed's wives. Although originally a private matter, which some people adopted and others ignored, it became a widespread custom as the number of slaves and concubines increased (Nelson, 1972). It was about one hundred and fifty years after the death of Mohammed that the system of veiling and the associated practice of seclusion of women was fully accepted among the wealthy classes. Seclusion was the practice of confining women, after puberty, to their own company. Thus women as wives, concubines, and slaves were shut away from other households and watched over by eunuchs (Levy, 1965). Veiling, the wearing of a head and face cover in public, thereby became the symbolic expression of the seclusion of women. It was more an urban than a rural phenomenon, as only the wealthy ruling and merchant families could afford a system that regarded women as property, a wealth to be hidden away and kept for private viewing and pleasure. The majority of the population, the working classes and the rural, agrarian population, could put neither veiling nor seclusion into practice. Female labour was too important for the survival of the simple family group and neither seclusion nor veiling could be entertained.

What was clearly encouraged in the Koran as regards the appropriate dress of good Muslim men and women was to be modest in dress, and to cover the head. Thus both women and men were enjoined to cover their hair. In addition, women were expected not to reveal their jewellery when out of their domestic environment. For many this meant covering the upper chest, neck and ears which were typically adorned with jewellery. Throughout the centuries and across the Islamic world this tradition was variously interpreted by different cultures and ethnic communities subsumed under the greater Islamic civilization. In some regions a total and all encompassing body covering was required of women. In other areas a full face veil was considered appropriate. In certain areas and at certain times only a lower face covering was required, while in a few places the complete covering of the hair with a totally exposed face was considered normal dress.

MAJOR TRENDS IN THE ANALYSIS OF FEMALE COVERING

Social Status and Economic Privilege

During the early centuries of Islam, head covering and seclusion was an overt indication of the economic success of a woman's family. Only the urban rich could afford the luxury of removing their women from economic toil outside of the household, thus creating - if only in image - an 'idle', leisured sub-class of people. Veiling as an element of dress clearly demonstrated elevated social class, and the practice of seclusion, symbolized by the veil, became a custom to which a few upwardly mobile families aspired.

A few centuries later, during the Mamluk era, veiling and seclusion came to also represent a

very real political statement. At the head of Mamluk Egyptian society were the ruling families and their Turko-Circassian military defenders. The Mamluk slaves (both men and women) were imported as children from the area surrounding the Caspian sea, and were then brought up as Muslims. The men were trained in military academies and became soldiers in the different private armies of Mamluk princes. Those who showed promise were given positions of importance in the armies and in the government. But it was not uncommon for a Mamluk to turn against his master. By killing his master, a Mamluk could take control of the master's other slaves and begin to acquire his own. The Mamluks were a racially distinct military caste. Their reign in Egyptian history was distinguished by its brutality and constant internecine fighting (Hatem, 1986:256). It was of utmost importance to maintain their distinctiveness from the rest of the population. In order to do so the Mamluks had to keep a constant supply of slaves coming in from the outside as well as maintain large female courts (harems). These were the households in which the upper class women were kept. Most of these wives and concubines were Turco-Circassian, although Ethiopian and African slaves were also part of these princely courts. The particular form of sexual relations these women had with the princes determined their class standing, and women's sexuality became highly politicized within the harem (Hatem, 1986:257). Wives, of which four were permitted by Islam at any one time, had a status higher than a concubine (slave). However the concubine's position changed once she had children. She would ordinarily become free as soon as she bore a son for the master, and often she also was taken as a wife.

Purity and Virginity: Honour and Shame

By the eighteenth century, women's position in this patriarchal system began to change and

veiling became more than a symbolic statement of economic and political status; it took on the representation of purity and virginity. Prosperous middle class households by this time were not very different from those of the ruling Mamluk upper classes, in that they contained both wives and concubines. Middle class women joined upper class women in the elite group who were veiled and secluded. For the Turco-Circassian and Ethiopian slaves seclusion and veiling previously had been a statement only of their status as the valuable property of men. But when veiling was extended to free middle class women it assumed an entirely different rationale. Whereas virginity had not been particularly important in the decision to marry or purchase a slave, it became a central concern in marriages of free (middle class) women. Veiling, seclusion, and restricted physical movement were the expressions of male fears that women's chastity might be endangered and with it the family honour. The association of the veil with a woman's chastity was such that men came to fear contact with an unveiled woman. Ahmed (1992:113) repeats the story of Hajar (b. 1388), which was recorded by Al-Sakhawi. Hajar had been educated at home by her father and was among the foremost Hadith scholars of her time. But she did not wear the veil when she taught, a practice common among many old women. Al-Sakhawi disapproved of this and refused to study with her.

A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to studying these interrelated concepts of honour, shame, and female virginity (e.g. Schneider, 1972; Peristiany, 1956; Campbell, 1964; Antoun, 1968). It is not possible here to do justice to this field of debate; what is important to this study is the justification these cultural concepts gave to the practice of demanding modest dress and head covering for women. In Islam, men and women are regarded as sexual beings and sexuality is highly desirable (Mernissi, 1977) as long as it is enjoyed in a socially approved marriage (El Guindi, 1981). Over time these ideas became distorted, and women

came to be viewed as highly sexed and lacking in control; men's sexual transgressions were seen as due to the *fitna* (temptation; enticement) a woman possessed and displayed.

Conservative Islamic literature regarded the woman outside her home as *fitna*, and a source of social anarchy. When a woman failed to wear the veil she became guilty of corrupting all the males who came into contact with her, and whose unbridled lust she incited (Al Sha'rawi quoted in Stowasser, 1993:17). Only modest deportment, and clothing which covered and blanketed the female shape, could bridle and control this male lust. Together with the practice of clitoridectomy, seclusion and veiling came to be used as defensive measures to ensure the virginity of the female and thus protect the honour of the family group. As Jowkar (1986:61) points out, the fear of loss of female virtue in the Middle East has led to the unidimensional presentation of women as sex objects and the eroticisation of their total identity .

Rising Feminist Consciousness and Development of a World Market System

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the veil and seclusion had taken on a new political dimension of global scale. The century opened with the French colonial encounter in the Middle East. It lasted for only three years, but set into motion, first, a relaxation of the restrictions on women, their dress and their movement, and, second, a native backlash after the french departed. During this brief period of time "many French officers converted to Islam to marry middle-class women and did so with the consent of the Egyptian patriarchs, who used this traffic in women to cement their social and political ties with the new French ruling authorities" (Hatem, 1986:265). These French husbands asked their wives to unveil in public. This act in itself was not an act of women's independence or defiance, but simply a

response to the wishes of their husbands. Egyptian men, however, regarded it as further evidence of the loosening of (French) male control over women. When the colonial encounter with the French came to an end, under the pressure of a British naval blockade, there was a strong patriarchal backlash against those Egyptian women who had consorted with the colonists. Some European travellers reported massacres of women who were associated with the French in different parts of the country (Gran, 1979 as quoted in Hatem, 1986:267). Zaynab al-Bakri, who was rumoured to have had an affair with Napoleon, was executed as an adulteress despite the fact that there were no witnesses - contrary to the requirement in Islamic law for four witnesses to an adulterous act. The execution of al-Bakri as well as the massacres of other women was, in Hatem's interpretation, a warning and a disciplinary measure. Egyptian women were being reminded that they could not lightly challenge the gender rules of veiling and seclusion.

The Colonial Experience and the Symbolism of the Veil

By 1892 a new colonial experience commenced, the British occupation of Egypt. British interests lay in promoting and developing the country's potential as a supplier of raw materials for British factories. The reaction in Egypt was complex, and in many ways reflected the Egyptian class structure. A new upper class, educated in Western-type schools, became the civil servants and intellectual elite. These modern men displaced the traditionally and religiously trained *'ulamas* as administrators and civil servants. It was in this setting that the work of Qassim Amin was published (1899). Amin advocated primary school education for women, reform of the laws on polygamy and divorce, and, as the ultimate symbolic reform, the abolition of the veil. The ensuing debate constituted an important moment in

history. A new interpretation was coming into being in which the veil came to encompass far broader issues than merely the position of women. It now included the widening cultural gulf between the different classes of Egyptian society, and, as the result of the colonial experience, the conflict between the colonized and colonizer. It was here, as well, that the two issues of women and culture became fused in Arabic debate, discussion, and writing (Ahmed, 1992:145).

In order to understand why the contest over culture in Egypt should have centred on women and the veil, one needs to look at the ideas that were imported into the local situation from Great Britain. The centrality that the issue of women occupied in the Western and colonial narrative of Islam was the result of the mingling of several strands of thought. There was the largely negative medieval interpretation of Islam based on tales of crusaders and travellers (which Edward Said details in *Orientalism*). And there was an all-purpose narrative of colonial domination regarding the inferiority of all other cultures and societies. Appended on to this discourse was the language of feminism which had developed its own vigour in Europe at that time, in opposition to the Victorian theory of the biological inferiority of women and the Victorian ideal of their domestic role. At home the Victorian male establishment derided and rejected the ideas of feminism, and dismissed the notion that men oppressed women. But overseas, in the colonies, the idea that other men - men in colonized societies - oppressed women was used by the colonists as rhetoric to morally justify their intent to wipe out the cultures of colonized people. Their position regarding the Middle East was that Islam innately oppressed women, that the veil and segregation epitomized this oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the backwardness of Islamic societies (Ahmed, 1992:152). These views are particularly transparent when the

statements of Lord Cromer are examined. Cromer believed that Islamic religion and society were inferior to the European ones. He reasoned that "Islam as a social system has been a complete failure because it degraded women". He felt it was important that Egyptians "be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of western civilization", essentially by changing the position of women in Islam, for it was Islam's degradation of women as expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion, that set a fatal obstacle to elevating native thought and character (Cromer, 2:538-39 quoted in Ahmed, 1992:153). Even as he expressed such views, he pursued policies that were detrimental to Egyptian women. He held back girl's education by placing restrictions on government schools and raising fees. He discouraged the training of women doctors, and downgraded the existing women's medical school to a school of midwifery. His paternalistic views about the subordination of women were most clearly expressed back in England. The great advocate for the unveiling of women in Egypt was, back home in England, the founding member of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (see Rover, 1967:171-73).

Qassim Amin's campaign to Westernize Egypt and to liberate women by removing their veils was adopted by Egyptian feminists as a first step in their quest for true liberation. Led by Huda Al-Sha'rawi as early as 1923, Egyptian women began to unveil in public. But this action reflected little more than the substitution of a Western-style convention for an Islamic-style patriarchy. The way in which the colonial narrative of women and Islam (the veil and seclusion) became the focus of the nation was more profound. In reaction to Amin and his supporters' modern intellectual movement a nationalist conservative response arose to defend and uphold Islamic practices. Both sides affirmed that the wife's essential duty was to attend to the physical, mental, and moral needs of her husband and children. Their

recommendations for women differed, literally, only in the matter of clothing. The nationalist conservative intellectual tradition argued that women must veil, and the modernists' that they should unveil. The veil quickly came to symbolize the colonial resistance movement, rather than the inferiority of the local culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favour of those of the West. Particularly those customs that had come under fiercest colonial attack, customs relating to women, were tenaciously affirmed by the nationalists as a means of resisting Western domination. It was the Western discourse, ironically, that determined the new meanings of the veil and gave rise to its emergence as a symbol of resistance.

Sexual Feminism and the new Islamic Fundamentalist Movement

By the second half of the twentieth century, three main ideological orientations could be isolated in the Arab world regarding 'women in Islam': the modernist, the conservative and the fundamentalist.

The modernists regard Islam as a dynamic, open religion. They perceive original Islam, as legislated in the Koran and Hadith, as a flexible blueprint for contemporary life. They see reform on women's issues as central to reform of society as a whole, particularly in terms of women's participation in the public sector.

The conservatives view Islam as an inherited, balanced system of faith and action based on the Koran and Hadith, interpreted by the verifying authority of community consensus. For the conservatives, women's work is in the home. They unconditionally and categorically reject

demands for women to work in the public sector, and consider female domesticity as God given duty.

he fundamentalists insist on a static and immutable Islam as legislated in the Koran and Hadith. Everyday realities can be judged as either right or wrong. Social reality and social development have no influence on religion. Religion unilaterally shapes and guides fundamentalists from above. Like the conservatives, they emphasize woman's natural domesticity, glorify the status awarded to her in Islam, and predict certain doom if she deserts or is lured away from her traditional place in society (Stowasser, 1993: 1-28)

Towards the end of the twentieth century the modernists became the minority voice, and both conservatives and fundamentalists dominated political and philosophical activity. During the 1970s feminism reappeared in the public arena. It coincided with the renewed open door capitalism of President Sadat. It also coincided with a second wave of Islamic fundamentalism, which rose up after the 1967 war especially among university students. This religious revival was directly related to the surprising and sudden defeat of Egypt in the Arab-Israeli war. Egyptians at all levels felt humiliated, cheated, and threatened. Disbelief gradually turned to disillusion, anger to depression, and discontent to resignation. The local interpretation for the defeat was put to the general decline of religious faith among Egyptians in recent years (El Guindi, 1981:469). Among this group, a return to the veil and the home was a symbolic reassertion of the traditional notion of women's exclusive sexual and family roles. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the veil of this contemporary Islamic movement was not a return by women to the 'veil of past times'. That veil was discarded by Egyptian feminists as far back as 1923 as a symbol of their liberation and emancipation. From that time up to the present women who previously veiled have not returned to the veil

again. That veil was used only by urban society and nearly exclusively by upper class women. The recent veiling by Islamic fundamentalist females is occurring among different strata and classes, mainly lower and lower middle class women who are nearly always of rural origins (El Guindi, 1981:475; Hatem, 1986:34; Macleod, 1991: 125-127).

Oman and southeastern Arabia

Before 1970, Oman, occupying the southeastern corner of Arabia, was as geographically and psychologically isolated from the rest of the Middle East as Tibet had been from the rest of the world. It was ruled by a sultan who was intent on drawing the country up from abject poverty, but also on protecting his people from too rapid change or modernization. It was a society living in past centuries. The Sultan himself decided which individual foreigners could travel into the country. He personally granted permissions for the importation of a very limited number of private vehicles. And he alone determined the few dozen pupils who were admitted into schools, while the unselected others had to be smuggled out of the country for education abroad. Oman has a land mass of nearly 275,000 sq kilometres, at least 80 per cent of which is harsh desert, and another 14 per cent bare and rugged mountains. Its population was estimated in the 1970s to be between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people (Townsend, 1977:15-23). Raw figures from the first national census in 1993 indicate a native population now of about 1,500,000 and 5000,000 foreign guest workers.

Geography conspired to turn Oman's public face to the east. The western boundary of the country - the Empty Quarter, or Rub' al Khali - formed a nearly insurmountable barrier to the

exchange of ideas or people overland. Earliest historical records show that Oman long ago turned to the sea for most trade and cultural exchange. The northern part of the country, particularly the Batinah coast, has traditionally looked to the Indian sub-continent for trade in material culture and people. Over the centuries communities of Persians, Baluchistanis, and Hyderabadis have settled in Oman and become part of the cultural mix of the country. The East African coast and the island of Zanzibar were originally important settlements for Omani merchants and sailors, and subsequently became integral territories of the Sultanate. The African immigrant element is now especially well pronounced in Salalah, the capital of the southern region, Dhofar. Large numbers of African slaves were imported there to serve in the Palace compounds throughout the country. During the 1950s slaves were officially manumitted. Some remained attached to their former masters while others left and created their own distinctive culture and society in a number of urban and agrarian settlements.

The population of Oman was converted to Islam in the seventh century A.D. during the lifetime of Mohammed. By the eighth century Oman had adopted Ibadism, a sect which developed in Basra as a faction of Kharijite extremists. Although there are significant differences (the election of an Imam, community consultation), in general, the dogma and politico-religious theories of Ibadism closely resemble those of Sunni Islam (Wilkinson, 1976; Peterson, 1978; Eickelman, 1981). As early as the ninth century Omani merchants were preaching Ibadism in East Africa and elsewhere. By the twentieth century, the population was nearly 50 per cent Ibadi, 40 percent Sunni and 10 per cent various Shiite sects.

Women, Dress and Community

Mountains ranges separate Oman's coastal plains from the interior of the country in both the north and the south of the country. Many communities therefore live isolated existences with little external exchange of people or ideas. Furthermore, encapsulated ethnic and religious minorities often live side by side in single villages, where female dress is the most obvious, immediate visual badge of identity, status and class. In part of the interior, for example, Sunni Baluchi communities share villages with Ibadi Omani tribes. Dress identifies women as belonging to one community or another. The distinctive signs are sometimes as simple as length of dress, colour of head covering, or type of embroidery on trouser cuffs, but they are sufficient for local inhabitants to 'read' in order to place an unknown person into her ethnic, or community context.

In Ibadi mountainous communities of northern Oman women wear full-length, loose baggy trousers (*sirwall*) under long sleeved shifts which are often mid calf or knee length. The head and neck are covered with a long rectangular scarf (*laysu*) which is wrapped around the head and neck, leaving the face fully exposed. This reveals the hair of the crown of the head, which is ideally parted in the middle and slicked down with perfumed oil. The fabric of the dress and trousers is bright and multicoloured, contrasting primary colours being favoured (e.g. orange or yellow trousers with green or purple shifts). The wealth or status of the family is revealed in the additional decoration - usually in gold or silver thread - on borders of the shift, the scarf, the *sirwall*. Women's dress is similar to this among the Sunni communities along most of the Batinah coast, but with a tendency to match the fabric of the shift with the head scarf. Again the face is fully open, but the hair and neck are completely fully covered.

Along the northern parts of the Batinah, however, among communities of settled nomadic pastoralists, Baluchi farmers, and others with close ties to the Trucial coast (United Arab Emirates and Qatar) and to the Baluchistan coast of Makram (which stretches across from Persia to Pakistan), dress is similar to that described above, but with the very noticeable addition of a short face mask called the *burqa*. Wikan (1982:88-9) writes that the "... *burqa* dominates the woman's face, though it covers only minor portions of it. Hidden are, as a minimum, the upper lip, the central part of the cheeks above a line extending from the corner of the mouth, the front part of the nose and the lower third or fourth of the forehead, including the eyebrows. Left uncovered are the eyes, the upper and lower parts of the cheeks, the sides of the nose, the upper part of the forehead, and all of the chin. Thus enough of the face is left open to give the Western observer the impression that the Sohari *burqa* resembles most of all a bikini version of a one-piece bathing suit, thelatter being the Bedouin *burqa*: a full mask covering all of the face, with the exception of the eyes, which peer through small slits in the mask". Women in this northern Batinah area are very conscious of their face mask's difference from those which the Bedouin women wear, but I would suggest that both styles of masks derive from the same tradition, probably introduced into Oman and the Gulf states from the Makram coast several centuries earlier during a period of Baluchi emigration into the Gulf.

Among the Shiite communities, concentrated mostly in the trading towns of Matrah, Muscat and Ruwi, women are completely covered, but the style of dress is more Western in design. The gown is long sleeved, and is often fitted in the torso with a floor-length, full skirt. The head cover is often a thin chiffon rectangular scarf of the same colour as the dress. The face is totally uncovered and the head scarf may be tightly wrapped around the face or left lying

loosely over the head and shoulders. When leaving their homes, these women don the black shapeless cloak, called *abbaya* which throughout most of the Middle East is closely associated with women's proper public presentation of their bodies. Until recently in Oman, the *abbaya* was the item of clothing which identified and separated a Shiite woman (e.g. Khoja, Persian, Bahrani) from the rest of the female population.

Among the pastoral tribes of the interior deserts of Oman (e.g. Duru, Wahiba, Harasiis, Mahra, Beit Kathir) dress is more homogeneous. Women wear long-sleeved shaped dresses that are generally ankle length (*thawb*). These often have waists or are constructed in what is called a princess line in the West. *Sirwaal* accompany the dress and black muslin lengths of cloth generally 2-3 metres long, are wrapped around the head over the *burqa* - a full face, black or deep blue fabric mask dyed in natural indigo or a chemical equivalent. For special occasions a sheer, black gauze overdress is put on giving the *thawb* a black sheen. Dress fabrics are generally black or sombre in colour. The total image is of a black apparition, its head and face totally covered except for two small eye holes or slits. Occasionally a hint of jewellery is glimpsed through the black neck and head covering of younger women. But it is only a hint. In young adulthood women are known to choose vibrant, strong colours for their clothes. So, too, the *burqa* tends to show some of the chin in young adulthood, progressively lengthening as the woman ages, until it completely covers the face and reveals nothing whatsoever.

The style of dress in Dhofar differs significantly from that of the north of the country. The dress is cut in a long, rectangular shape, and just the hands extend from the two ends of the top of the rectangle. a square cut neckline and a hem as much as twelve inches from the

ground in the front, but touching or sweeping the floor from the back, make this a most distinctive tent dress. It is worn with *sirwaal*. The head is covered in multi-coloured cotton prints which are drawn up to cover the lower part of the face, or sometimes more when a woman feels socially uncomfortable in the presence of men or strangers. Women of formerly slave stock now also wear a full face *burqa*. Female slaves were not permitted to wear the mask in Oman prior to their liberation in the 1950s. Only free women could do so only.

The significance of facial covering in the deserts of Oman

In order to explore the significance of facial covering I will focus on the Harasiis tribe and other pastoral communities of Oman's deserts. For although the *burqa* is also found in other parts of Oman, the remote, isolated pastoral communities present a less complicated social picture. The pastoral tribes of Oman make up between 6 -7 per cent of the total population. These communities are very thinly spread over the desert regions. They have much in common. All are camel and goat raising subsistence pastoralists, with men responsible for the management of camels, and women responsible for the care of goats. Their households are based on the extended family group - generally a three generational family, but other kin related households are also common. Families are patrilineal, children generally belonging to the father's line. This pastoral society is basically egalitarian, classes do not exist, and most statuses are achieved rather than acquired by birth. Women and their labour is extremely important for the group's survival, and relations between men and women reflect this mutual dependence. If Arab society is defined as patriarchal in general, then its pastoral communities have modified relations so as to give women a large voice and appearance of near equality (Chatty, 1995; Lancaster, 1981). Marriage for the most part is monogamous,

and serial monogamy is common. The celibate state is very rare. Divorcees, widows, and widowers nearly always remarry . The demands of life in the desert are such that the single person cannot survive on his or her own. Humans can only survive in the desert by close cooperation, and thus positive and effective social relations are extremely important for the well-being of the community.

Among the Harasiis tribe, who are perhaps the most remote and most isolated of all the pastoral groups in Oman, residence after marriage is often matrilocal, becoming virilocal once the nuclear family is strong enough to split off and set up on its own. When serial monogamy characterizes an individual's marriage history, and when the woman's character is strong and self-sufficient (the Harasiis would use the terms honourable and admirable) the offspring are often known by both the mother's and father's name. Therefore, a son, Salim, would be known both as Salim bin Hamad - Salim son of Hamad - and, significantly, also as Salim bin Huweila - Salim son of Huweila (the mother).

As with all the pastoral tribes of Oman, the Harasiis consider themselves Muslim and follow the pillars of their faith as best they know. Men and women pray regularly, they fast, and undertake the Pilgrimage to Mecca often more than once in their lifetimes. They also follow the social rules laid down in the Koran and the Hadith as well as they can. Their entire life cycle is structured by their understanding of Islam. This is particularly obvious in regard to the female life course. Like her male sibling, the young female child is not considered to be of the age of reason until near the age of nine. By that age she will be expected to pray with her mother and sisters, and be careful to keep her hair covered. She will have had long experience wearing a black scarf around her head, as would a male child have been taught to

wrap a large square cotton cloth (*imama*) around his head. The Harasiis, like pious Muslims everywhere, regard the uncovered head as improper and mildly irreligious. The same applies to exposure of the female ankle and face.

There are three important stages in the life of a female. The first is marked by ceremonial behaviour and a dramatic change in dress. The latter two are socially rather than physically obvious. The first ritual is a combined rite of passage into puberty and marriage. This, the Harasiis say, occurs around the age of twelve, but my own material suggests that late onset of puberty (fourteen or fifteen years of age) is more common. Occasionally puberty will precede marriage, but this is probably due to an early menarche rather than actual planning. In late childhood and early adolescence a girl will start to make face masks for herself. She will have a free hand in deciding the length of the mask and the size of the eye holes. She will try on her masks for months, in preparation for the day she will be permitted to wear one. That day can occur with little ritual if her first menarche precedes her marriage. Generally though, her taking on the *burqa* will occur during her marriage ritual, a celebration of three or four days duration held at her parents household. The entire community is invited to participate in this event, which is marked by male dancing, female singing, and the ritual slaughter and preparation of meat for all guests.

The second important ritual occurs when she adds to her wifely status that of mother as well. It is marked by a lying in period of forty days during which time she is set up in her own shelter within the compound and is meant to take absolute rest. She purifies herself and her infant during this time. This is repeated after the birth of every child. The third major transition in the life of a female Harasiis occurs more gradually, starting at about the time she

becomes a grandmother and stops bearing children herself. Gradually she grows into the role of the household matriarch and takes on the status attached to that role.

The Harasiis explain the importance of donning the head scarf and *burqa* in terms of female modesty, that requires both men and women to cover their hair. That women should also cover their faces is explained in terms of the changed status of the female from girl to married woman. It is believed that women should remove their masks in only two situations: when they pray, and when they are in the presence of their husbands and other male kinsmen who they are prohibited to marry by the Koranic incest taboo (e.g. her sons, father, brother, father-in-law, father's brother, mother's brother, husband's brother and husband's son from a previous marriage). Like the women of Sohar described by Wikan, pastoral women in Oman keep their masks on far more often than required by custom. One Harasiis woman brought to live in Manchester for two years, while her husband was being trained as an engineer, resolved the cultural conflict in her own way by wearing her mask at home (her husband often arrived home with male friends) but removing it when out shopping on the high street or elsewhere so as to avoid people noticing her and staring.

The *burqa* or facial mask among the Harasiis is symbolic of womanhood. Like the red belt among the Awlad Ali (Abu Lughod, 1986: 136-137) it symbolizes the fertility of the woman. It is worn from the onset of puberty, even when that precedes marriage. Women should therefore be free to remove the mask once menopause has occurred. But I suspect that, as with certain other items of clothing, it is hard to break habits of thirty or forty years duration. Thus, except when there is a real physical disability, women keep wearing the *burqa* long into their old age. I only came across two very old Harasiis women who did not wear the veil. One was so crippled with arthritis she could hardly move her arms. Her children simply

draped a cloth over her head. The other woman, also very old, wore thick prescription glasses and could not manage to wear a burqa over her glasses. She covered as much of her face as she could with a head scarf. When young girls first start wearing the mask they occasionally display some awkwardness. On a number of occasions I have been pulled aside by a recently masked girl so that she could lift her veil to be better able to speak to me. Their initial awkwardness strikes me a bit like the excitement and mixed emotions that a Western girl feels when she is given or insists on being bought her first bra. She loves wearing it because it means to her that she is 'grown up', and by wearing it she feels she is announcing to the world that she is a mature female. At the same time she doesn't like the binding nature of the garment, and often moves her shoulders awkwardly trying to adjust herself to the binding contraption that she so eagerly had taken on. Among the Harasiis the obvious difference is that the girl has no choice but to wear the mask once puberty has occurred. And after maturity has been achieved, there is only one path to follow: marriage. But marriages are arranged with her consent, and as she is generally still part of her father's household, unhappy arrangements are easily broken in the early years. Even when the young wife has separated from her father's household and is established elsewhere, she can initiate a divorce or separation simply by leaving her husband's household and returning with her herd of goats to her father.

This freedom to act, however, all presupposes that she has adopted the behaviour which her mask requires. I am told that the mask along with the black hair covering is a statement of the sexual modesty of the woman. Also tied up in this interpretation is the matter of personal dignity and the honour which decorous, generous, and stoic behaviour bestows on the family. An unmasked woman is unthinkable. Even in situations of serious illness, I have

observed women and their kin struggle to keep their faces and hair covered. One serious asthmatic labouring for breath in a hospital bed insisted on keeping her mask on, even though this seemed to seriously impede her ability to get oxygen to her lungs. After long minutes of discussion, she was finally convinced to draw her black gauze head scarf across her face and remove her mask. To be maskless was to be not fully dressed, and thus to be socially and sexually compromised.

In this discussion of the Harasiis it is also important to raise the subject of seclusion. In most of the Arab world, the veil is associated with the seclusion of women and their segregation from men. In many areas physical segregation still occurs, particularly in public and formal spheres of human activity. The veil is a symbol of their universe. It sets women apart and creates a barrier around their person as though they were in seclusion. Among the pastoral communities in Oman this element does not enter significantly into the analysis. Men and women simply cannot live their lives segregated from each other. The basic requirements of life do not permit such a luxury, nor is it sought. Their communal lives could not continue without the full labour of all members of the household. Furthermore, in a society where there is no private space, and where there are no walls, it is simply not possible to maintain segregated lives. The onus of modest behaviour, sexual decorum, and honourable decorum falls upon both men and women without the crutch of physical sex segregation or actual barriers.

Significance of Head Covering in Urban and Agrarian Oman

The concept of social classes is not relevant among the pastoral tribes of Oman. Though some families are more equal than others (e.g. lineages from which leaders tend to be chosen), the prevailing ideology is that the tribes are made up of free and equal men and women. Female dress as such cannot be used to distinguish one strata of the society from another. With the exception of hired male foreign labourers, they are all of the same ilk. The situation in the urban and agrarian centers of Oman reveals a very different picture. Class distinctions do abound there, and society is stratified socially, politically and economically. Women's head covers in those social contexts do indicate the rank and status of its wearer as well as her family. The example of Sohar is particularly appropriate. Until recently the wearing of a *burqa* in Sohar, was a statement of belonging to the 'middle class' of successful merchants and traders. Upper class women and the families related to the Sultan (e.g. Omani royalty) did not veil, but they did maintain a careful distance, if not actual seclusion, from men unrelated to them. Slaves - according to Wikan (1981:96) once 15 per cent of the female population of Sohar - were prohibited from veiling, that being the uncontested prerogative of free women. Peasant or farming women did not wear any face covering, probably because it would interfere with their work.

With the abolition of slavery in the 1950s many ex-slave women adopted the *burqa*. Initially a statement of their newly experienced liberation, it rapidly became symbolic of their having moved upward socially. Wearing a *burqa* was a symbolic attesting to the new found leisure that only those of some wealth could afford. The *burqa* not only indicated a free woman, but one whose husband's or family patriarch's wealth could allow her some leisure instead of keeping her fully occupied working in agriculture. This phenomenon is strikingly similar to that described by El Guindi (1981: 475) during the first half of the twentieth century in Egypt.

There, "... when unveiled peasant women ventured to the city ..., they were eager to wear a veil as a symbol of urbanizing and 'moving up'". Thus head covering in Oman can be seen as a statement of social status as well as social mobility.

The political climate in the country changed dramatically with the accession of Sultan Qaboos bin Saïd to power in 1970. The tight-fisted, ultra conservative patriarchal rule of the previous Sultan was swept aside by the new ruler. Sultan Qaboos declared amnesties, emptied prisons, and abrogated decades of repressive legislation. Omanis abroad were encouraged to return to Oman, many from lives in exile in Western countries. During the first few years of Sultan Qaboos' reign, there was an atmosphere of rejuvenation, growth, and freedom. Omani women who had been educated abroad returned eager to share in building up the nation. Their positive welcome during the crucial early years was not unlike the situation described by Dodd (1973:40-54), Hale (1993:167) and others when analysing the roles assigned to women in periods of crises (e.g. nationalist struggles or revolutions). Women as well as men were being mobilized to rapidly build up the nation to join the twentieth century. Women were allowed to join the police force, the armed forces, and a range of government ministries as well as private industry. Women were heard on radio and seen on television. They appeared to be, if not equal, at least partners in the building up of the country.

By the end of the decade, however, women's contribution was not as urgently required and returning male university graduates and exiles began to compete with women for jobs.

Women began to face barriers. They started to be excluded from certain professions that

they had won entry into earlier, and their dress style came under silent scrutiny. Most of these women had returned to Oman after years (sometimes nearly lifetimes) in exile. Their dress was western, and head or face covering was not part of their identity. During the 1970s these modern, educated, middle and upper middle class women gradually began to use the black outer cloak, the *abbaya* (originally only worn by Shiite women) and a loose head scarf when out in public. At first only a few women regularly dressed in this fashion, but over the following decade it became nearly universal. This unspoken pressure to conform, to adopt a more modest and conservative dress was symbolic of the general feeling in the country that women should not abandon their traditional Islamic role in life.

It was as though the 1970s had been regarded as a special period of nation building, when traditional Islamic sex roles and gender segregation had to be abandoned for a higher good. Having attained many national goals, women were figuratively and literally pushed back into what was assumed to be more correct traditional roles (for the analysis of similar phenomena in Algeria and Iran see Moghadam, 1994). For example, the national university which was set up in 1986, initially made all colleges open to all qualified Omani high school graduates. Selection into a college rested upon examination results. The colleges of Medicine and Engineering required the highest scores, followed by Science. During the first few years it became obvious that women, who almost always had the highest high school examination results, were dominating these colleges. Education administrators feared that the preponderance of women would reduce the academic status of the University and that it might gain a reputation for being only a woman's university. They therefore decided to create more favourable admission requirements for male students. Thus by the mid 1990s men outnumbered women at the University, and female entrance into the College of

Medicine required a score in the top 5 percentile, while for male applicants a score within the top 10 percentile was admissible. For the College of Engineering the measures were even more extreme and women were no longer permitted to apply. A decision had been taken within the government to ban female students, as it was no longer thought appropriate for women to work in fields out of doors in mixed company. In dress, this Islamic conservatism was symbolized by the pressure women felt to cover themselves with *abbayas* and to adopt the *hijab* (headscarf). Interestingly, a number of the early female medical students (class of 1986, 1987 and 1989) wore only western dress. Over the following few years they gradually began to wear the *abaya* and the *hijab*; first erratically, and then with regularity, until by the mid- 1990s all the female medical students wore the accepted dress of conservative Islam.

Not unlike the situation described in Egypt by El-Guindi (1981:465-485), fundamentalist Islam made its appearance at the university several years later. Here, the full face covering with a black veil - the *nikaab* - symbolized the female students acceptance of the principle of her dangerous sexuality and domesticity. Those adopting this dress and ideology were originally few, and mainly from poor families or former slave stock (One exception to this class division was the granddaughter of the exiled and now deceased claimant to the Ibadi Imamate, who subsequently decided to withdraw from the medical school rather than give up wearing the *nikaab*). The university administrators did not permit this extreme form of cover and fundamentalist philosophy to take root. Within two years of its emergence the administration prohibited female students were from wearing the *nikaab* on campus - the veil had to be lifted upon entering the campus and had to remain up until they left. Women disobeying this ban were given three warnings after which they would be expelled from the

university.

CONCLUSION

Dress, particularly among women in southeastern Arabia, is many things to many people. It is a badge identifying a person as belonging to a certain community, class, and economic strata. Its meaning can change over time and it can convey a multitude of messages. The modern association of the face and head covering, however, cannot be simply associated to Islamic fundamentalism as appears to be the case in the popular press. In Oman, face veiling does not have that connotation, at least not yet. In the urban and agrarian regions of the northern Omani coast, it identifies a middle class, conservative population. In the south, it is a statement of upward mobility by former slaves or of the new wealth and leisure of the wealthy classes. Certainly in the desert communities where face veiling is considered part of the appropriate dress of a respectable woman, refusal to comply courts social death. The one example in my notes of a young Harasiis woman who refused to don the *burqa* is accompanied by quotes from others about her mental state. Many thought she was crazy as she was refusing to accept that she had physically matured and was knowingly allowing herself to become a burden upon her family. Upon interviewing her myself, I had the distinct feeling that she was merely subnormal in intelligence. She didn't want to wear the *burqa*. She couldn't say why except that she didn't like it and she wouldn't keep it on her face. Her elderly parents knew that by this stance she had become unmarriageable and they requested government welfare assistance for her upkeep on the grounds that she was handicapped and would never marry or leave the family household. Government assistance was granted. Her action was regarded as no different from that of the severely retarded young man who refused to keep his clothes on. In despair his parents took him to the regional hospital where he was

admitted as a long-term patient and kept in a padded room visible only to his male nurses.

Among some of the other pastoral tribes in Oman I have heard of a few divorced women who have removed their burqa's. I am told that they are refusing to remarry and the removal of the veil is their public announcement of that fact. One to whom I did speak informally confirmed what I had heard; she was married once and did not wish to marry again, preferring to remain part of her father's household. Unfortunately, both men and women regard these "rebels" as loose women, suggesting that they may even be engaged in some prostitution among the fish traders that regularly cross their territory from Saudi Arabia to the Indian Ocean. Such a belief, whether true or not, reinforces the association of the wearing of the *burqa* with the sexual modesty, moral excellence, and general honour of a good woman. In the rapidly changing and confused social world of the Middle East, the significance of face covering can only be understood in the context of the totality of the society. Certainly to view face covering as fundamentally a modern political phenomenon, is to fail to understand the way in which the parts of the total structure of personal appearance is consciously manipulated to assert and demarcate differences in status, identity, and commitment. Face and head covering are only part of a much wider social reality.

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