

ISLAM, TRANSNATIONAL CULTURE, AND MODERNITY IN RURAL SUDAN

VICTORIA BERNAL

Global cultural flows are usually presumed to originate in the West. Islamic culture, on the other hand, is often seen as static and monolithic (Said 1979). Islamic cultural flows, thus, have been rendered invisible within the world system. While the so-called Islamic revival has commanded much attention, this has centered on political groups and the state. Less recognized is the cultural component of global Islamic trends and the changes taking place among ordinary Muslims in ritual practice, expressions of identity, and consumption patterns. Muslim societies, in particular, are often simplistically seen as resisting "Westernization." It has been assumed, moreover, that to be modern is to be secular. Islam has been cast as the authentic and indigenous, while foreign often is equated with Western. This has led many observers to misunderstand the contemporary Islamic "revival" as a rejection of modernity and the West.

This chapter explores the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in a Sudanese village (Wad al Abbas) where the course of change runs counter to established assumptions. Foreign influences in Wad al Abbas are as likely to be Islamic as they are Western, and Islamic culture blurs the distinction between foreign and indigenous, because it is both. Western and Islamic cultures, moreover, are closely intertwined in villagers' experience, rather than appearing as irreconcilable opposites. Furthermore, for the villagers of Wad al Abbas, the fundamentalist forms of Islam that predominate in the global Islamic revival are not traditional; they represent a cosmopolitan, modern Muslim identity (Bernal 1994). Local rituals and religious practices are seen as deviating from orthodox Islam, which in the 1980s was largely represented by Saudi Arabia (McDonnell 1990). Thus, modernity enters in the guise of (Islamic) tradition, and foreign ways claim an authenticity denied local practices. New understandings of Islam and new styles of Islamic dress are appealing to villagers in part because they are associated with sources of power and prestige abroad, rather than rooted in local social formations.

Through practices of sex segregation and female seclusion, gender is a central organizing principle of social life in Wad al Abbas. Gender plays a significant role in the intersection of local and global cultures in Wad al Abbas, where women are cast as custodians of local tradition and men represent modernity. The behavior and appearance of women have assumed particular significance for villagers in the process of reevaluating their way of life.

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This essay explores the complex processes shaping the ways villagers reproduce and transform gender, culture, and identity in a global context.² The first section, "Labor Migration and Transnational Culture," explores the significance of villagers' relations with Saudi Arabia. The next section, "'Westernization' and Islam," explores the ways in which Western and Islamic cultures are fused in the global culture reaching Wad al Abbas and in local practices; "Ambivalence, Modernity, and Gender" turns to the contradictory character of villagers' integration into global circuits and explores the ways in which women come to represent local identity and tradition, and become the symbolic focus of fundamentalist reform. The final section, "Forging Modern Identities and Folkloric Traditions," considers the ways in which culture becomes style in the expression of individual identity, and folklore replaces tradition as a symbol of communal identity.

The global Islamic revival is, among other things, a movement from local particularized Islam to Islam as a world religion. Certain forms of religious practice, identified as truly Islamic because they have roots in the holy texts, are gaining ascendancy over other, localized Islamic traditions. This clearly is a modernist project if we accept, for example, Rabinow's definition of modernist as "the attempt to efface history and cultural specificity through universal formal operations which are ultimately their own referent" (1992:249). Thus, in one sense globalization is contributing to cultural homogenization, as has so often been predicted, but for some people this homogenization does not mean Westernization but rather becoming more like their fellow Muslims elsewhere. As Hefner (1987:75) points out, the concern of world religions with

formal education, the written word, abstract ethical codes, universal prophets, and holy lands for all of humankind serves to elevate their appeal above more restricted terrains. They provide the discourse for the elaboration of a secondary moral and ideological identity beyond that given in the immediacy of local groupings.

The villagers of Wad al Abbas have always identified themselves as Muslims. Their community was founded by a Sufi holy man for whom it is named. But, in the 1980s, local practices such as the veneration of holy men and their tombs increasingly came into question. A growing number of villagers began to argue, in keeping with fundamentalist ideas, that worship of holy individuals or sites contradicts the monotheism so central to Islam. Thus, the network of local allegiances and regional loyalties, the veritable religious landscape of Sudan, was being transformed as religion was mapped along a much more international axis. At the national level, Sudanese politics shifted from the decentralized system of parties connected with Sufi orders that participated in various ways in the apparatus of the state (Al-Karsani 1993) to the formation of a centralized Islamic state under the influence of the fundamentalist

National Islamic Front. At both the local and national levels the move toward a more scripturalist Islam is a movement away from local parochial identities toward perceived conformity with a more universal set of beliefs and practices. Fundamentalist Islam appeals to the villagers of Wad al Abbas as a solution of sorts to the challenges posed by their growing social integration into the world system.

LABOR MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL CULTURE

The villagers of Wad al Abbas have long been linked to the world economy—as producers of cotton since the 1950s and as consumers of imported goods (Bernal 1991). But international labor migration and improvements in transport and communications over the past two decades have altered profoundly the character of villagers' participation in the world system. Information about chances of employment in Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, Iraq, Yemen, and other locales circulates continually in the village, as does news from relatives and fellow villagers working or studying abroad. From the mid-1970s through the 1980s the incorporation of Wad al Abbas into the world system was mediated to a great extent by Saudi Arabia.³ The national economic and identity crises of Sudan and the labor migration of villagers to urban Sudan and Saudi Arabia were catalysts of change, stimulating the rise of "fundamentalist" Islam in the village.

The most significant source of global Islamic culture reaching Wad al Abbas during the 1980s was Saudi Arabia. As guardian of the holy cities to which Muslims the world over make pilgrimages, Saudi Arabia has long wielded worldwide influence over Islamic practice. The wealth of the 1970s oil boom, however, gave Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states and individuals the economic means to support various Islamic endeavors and organizations around the world (Hijab 1988; Sand and Tessler 1990; von der Mehdien 1993). It also brought Muslims from many lands to Saudi Arabia as migrant workers. Saudi Arabia exerted influence on Sudan at the national level, pressuring then-president Numeiri to institute *sharia* law in 1983, for example, and funding fundamentalist opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Rad 1990; Voll 1986; Warburg 1991). At the same time, Saudi Arabia drew ordinary Sudanese from all walks of life to its shores as labor migrants. While in past generations some villagers from Wad al Abbas had made the Hajj, in the early 1980s every villager knew someone from Wad al Abbas working in Saudi Arabia.

There was a steady traffic between the village and "al Mamlaka" (the kingdom), as some local cognoscenti liked to refer to it. Moreover, as one villager explained, "Before, people went to Saudya just for the Hajj. They didn't see anything else. But now they go everywhere." Even in the 1980s it was common practice for villagers making the Hajj to travel as a group and to bring with them most of the supplies they expected to use on the pilgrimage—dried meat, clarified butter, spices, and various ingredients for meals and drinks. Labor migrants, who usually stay for a year or two

and are generally employed in urban areas, experience life in Saudi Arabia much more fully than pilgrims, shopping in the markets, riding public transportation, interacting with Saudi employers and the public. While the majority of Wad al Abbas households own land and continue to do some farming, none of the villagers employed in Saudi Arabia worked in agriculture. They performed such jobs as truck drivers, electricians, factory workers, and shopkeeping. Migration abroad drew villagers into international culture as never before. In the 1980s the movement of people, ideas, and things between the village and Saudi Arabia touched the lives of all villagers whether they traveled themselves or not.

Villagers encounter new things and ideas from other parts of Sudan, of course, most particularly in the capital city, Khartoum. However, the primacy of Saudi Arabia was evident in a number of ways. A ten-year-old girl remarked in surprise, "I thought Khartoum was in Saudi Arabia," a telling statement revealing how national boundaries are blurred by the flows of people and culture, and indicating at once both the relative remoteness of Khartoum and the proximity of Saudi Arabia. An older woman said her relative went to "some place near Saudiya—what's it called?—London," her statement reflecting a Saudi-centered geography in which divisions between East and West are not significant. Indeed, from villagers' standpoints such divisions may pale beside the glaring differences in wealth that separate Sudan from the Gulf States and the West.

Migrants brought home clothes, shampoo, tape decks, TVs, VCRs, and even refrigerators (years before the village was electrified). Through migrants' purchases abroad, new products and things unavailable in Sudan circulate in the village. Local consumer culture is shaped in part by what men bring back, but having seen what neighbors have, women also make specific requests. One adult married woman recounted with pride how she had continually repeated her demand that her brother bring her a watch, until he finally did. In the village, a woman has little practical use for a watch—since time is not reckoned by minutes or even hours, but by markers such as dawn, lunchtime, evening prayer, and the like. Yet by the early 1980s watches had become a fixed part of the groom's "traditional" gifts to the bride. These gifts, called *shabka*, include a gold wedding band, a watch, and sometimes other gold jewelry as well.

The watch, like the jewelry, is an ornament and a luxury consumer good symbolizing affluence and well-being. But the watch is also a symbol of modernity, harkening to the rhythms of urban life and formal employment. That the watch is a symbol of a certain world order rather than a true timepiece is illustrated by an exchange I had with a young man. Noticing he sported a watch, I asked the time. He indicated his watch and replied offhandedly, "Oh, it doesn't work." It was clear from his manner that this was of little consequence. The image of this man dressing in the morning and strapping on his stoppered watch in some way encapsulates the dynamic of northern Sudan in the 1980s, where development was deadlocked and people could do lit-

tle to satisfy their aspirations but embrace icons of progress. Women's desire for watches is one testament to their participation in the mystique of modernity, even if they have little opportunity to experience urban life or travel outside the village.

Since women do not have direct access to employment abroad or in most cases much cash income from any source, they are reduced to satisfying their demands for consumer goods through male relatives whom they can pressure for things. Women are in that sense the quintessential consumers: men experience them as a drain on their resources. While in the West, the image of women eating men's leftovers signifies an extreme form of subordination, one local man expressed the image of women as voracious consumers jokingly, saying, "They eat their own food and ours, too!" (He was referring to the fact that at big feasts, women eat leftover delicacies from the men's trays when they are sent back to the kitchen.) The image of woman as consumer is not particularly new in Wad al Abbas, but it takes on new meanings when production, the generation of wealth, and the sources of consumer goods are so removed from the village.

Migrants bring back not just consumer goods, but also new understandings of what it means to be Sudanese, to be Arab, and to be Muslim. Travel abroad is transformative. One way this is symbolized in Wad al Abbas is through dress: people returning from abroad often dress differently, at least in the initial period upon their return. One migrant, for example, sported a tailored Western-style suit jacket over his *jalabiya* when he got back from Saudi Arabia. An older woman who had traveled to Saudi Arabia to visit her migrant sons and also made the *umra* pilgrimage⁴ received the guests who came to welcome her home attired in a long shocking-pink nightgown, a brightly patterned *soub* (the head-to-toe cloth wrap worn by adult women), Dr. Scholl's sandals, and a lime-green string of prayer beads around her wrist. Her choices were a striking departure from the simple, austere clothing such as beige or black *tambis* usually worn by senior Wad al Abbas women.

Travel abroad is a special category of experience and labor migrants who go abroad are referred to by the special term *mukhbirihin* (singular, *mukhbirih*), unlike men who work outside the village within Sudan. *Mukhbirih*, furthermore, is a social status and an occupational category in its own right—the actual work that the person does abroad is secondary. Children and even wives might describe their father or husband as a *mukhbirih* without knowing exactly what work he does. In contrast, labor migrants from Wad al Abbas who work elsewhere in Sudan are described simply in terms of their occupation or by their occupation and place of work, such as "he is a reader in Renk." The gendered nature of *mukhbirih* status is captured in the fact that I never heard anyone utter the hypothetical feminine form of *mukhbirih*—*mukhbirihia*. Through the 1980s Wad al Abbas men were highly mobile, while women remained basically immobile.

Since salaries are much higher abroad, *mukhbiris* are associated with wealth and luxury consumption. A returning *mukhbirih* is greeted like a king. The celebra-

tion of a *mukherrib's* return begins with an impromptu parade from his disembarkation point in the village as news spreads and people begin to flock over. Ideally a sheep is slaughtered before the migrant's foot crosses the threshold of his home. A *karama* (a feast with an animal sacrifice) is performed if at all possible to give thanks for the safe return. Through the ritual of *karama* the occasion is invested with religious as well as social meaning. The whole village is alerted to an important event as men shoot off rifles and women ululate, attracting even more people. Migrants usually spend a week or more at home greeting guests and making the rounds to offer condolences to those families that lost loved ones during the migrant's absence. Migrants spend much time recounting their experiences.

In the early 1980s it was established practice for migrants to bring back suitcases loaded with gifts to distribute among relatives, neighbors, and anyone who came by to welcome them back home. Through the accounts of *mukherrib's* and the wealth and goods they brought back, Saudi Arabia captivated the imaginations of villagers. *Mukherrib's* arrived in the village with savings amassed from their wages, consumer goods purchased abroad, and a new sense of the world and their place in it. New sources of wealth, consumption patterns, and new understandings of what it means to be a Muslim were intertwined.

One way that villagers (migrants and others) articulated the changes in their lives was through pronouncements about Islam and what was and was not truly Islamic. Thus, after describing in detail the pattern of funeral and mourning practices (*bika*) in Wad al Abbas, a villager ended his account with the caveat "but in Islam and *shari'a* there is no *bika*." Village wedding practices, funeral rituals, and reverence for holy men were particularly held up as examples of local deviation from true Islam. When I began fieldwork in the early 1980s most villagers I spoke with understood being Muslim to mean being like, and living like, them. For example, before new notions of "Islamic" dress came to the village, a woman described the *tomb* to me as "from God." By the time I returned to the village in 1988, the locus of moral authority had shifted. Islam clearly had its center outside the community; local culture and behavior were now being measured against new standards derived from external sources.

"WESTERNIZATION" AND ISLAM

Globalization means that villagers live their daily lives in a larger world. It is a world in which during the 1980s some villagers were watching *Dallas* on battery-operated TVs and some local young women began to wear new forms of "Islamic" attire fashioned after that worn by women in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Yet the Islamic revival in Wad al Abbas is misunderstood if seen simply as a rejection of all things Western or as a contest between East and West. In fact, contemporary Islam and perhaps its revivalist forms in particular are inextricably intertwined with Western insti-

tutions, technology, and consumer goods. The leader of Sudan's National Islamic Front (NIF), Dr. Hasan al-Turabi, is the product of a Western education. Indeed, it has been suggested that Islamists are simply applying Western intellectual tools to Islam (Simone 1994). Moreover, Simone (1994), referring to the Sudanese case, warns that Islamic movements may become the West in Islamic garb. Rather than resisting the influence of Western culture, the villagers of Wad al Abbas have embraced it through the medium of a modernizing Islam.

Islam and "Westernization" often are presumed to be opposed: the case of Wad al Abbas reveals a much more interesting relationship. The complexity of Wad al Abbas—and Sudan's positions in global circuits—is illustrated, among other things, by the fact that the *tawbs* regarded as the finest by Sudanese (Risala brand) are manufactured in England. Villagers are well aware of this fact, often referring to these *tawbs* as "Risalat London," the *tawb's* provenance adding to its cachet. Photographs brought back by *mukherrib's* show that some of them wear Western dress in Saudi Arabia. Wedding exchanges in the 1980s often included Nivea creme, Prophecy perfume, and Wella shampoo along with the cloth, flour, coffee, and incense given by the groom to the bride's household.⁵

The influence of Western culture reaches into villagers' lives through varied and diffuse means. Western media and Western institutions such as development schemes, public schools, and other bureaucracies communicate (by their very form as well as their content) a particular vision of society (Foucault 1979; Mitchell 1988). The pervasive influence of Western culture within Sudan is recognized by the current NIF-dominated regime in its attempt to "Islamize" knowledge and revamp university curricula, for example. Only three villagers that I knew of in the 1980s had traveled to the West, however, and only one had returned to Sudan by then. In contrast, there was a steady traffic between Wad al Abbas and the Arab world, but most particularly Saudi Arabia.⁶ Travel is especially significant because, despite advances in media and communications technology, new ideas, new styles, and information were largely transmitted to Wad al Abbas by individuals from the community.

Media remained a small fragment of communication. Wad al Abbas was not electrified until 1988, and televisions were rare. A few villagers owned TVs operated by car batteries and shared viewing with relatives and neighbors. Among the villagers with access to television, Egyptian soap operas were popular. These shows embody a blend of cultures since the Egyptian characters are usually Westernized elites. Their allure is reflected in the fact that one village couple named a daughter after a soap opera character. Print media were virtually absent from Wad al Abbas, where literacy was not widespread. Cassettes were used to circulate some things, including music, sermons, and personal correspondence from *mukherrib's* to their families.

Radio was the most important medium and most Wad al Abbas households owned one. Radio programs were highly varied in form and content; among them were some that explicitly sought to teach about Islam. But even in more subtle ways

radio was changing the character of religious life in the village. For example, during Ramadan some families listened to Radio Omdurman for the signal to break their daily fast, while others listened to the village muezzin. The radio formed part of the holiday ritual for many villagers who tuned in and heard chants of "*la alibi ila alibi*" and "*allah akbar*." On the Mawlid⁷ some villagers listened intently to radio programs that taught about the Prophet; Women, in particular, usually cited radio as a source of their knowledge about Islam, because most adult women had received little *khulwa* (or public education).

Transnational culture as experienced by the villagers of Wad al Abbas is a fusion of Western and Islamic. Various Western goods and practices go hand in hand with imports of Islamic ideas and fashions. Many Western products enter the village via Saudi Arabia and some Islamic goods, such as *Risala sawah*, are imported from the West. Saudi Arabia is not a big producer of goods, but itself relies on imports from the world market, many of them Western products.⁸ Thus, Western consumer goods commonly enter Sudan via Saudi Arabia, blurring the distinction between things Western and those Islamic. Villagers, moreover, perceive Saudi adherence to "orthodox" practice, their wealth, and the abundance of goods and modern conveniences in Saudi Arabia as interconnected. Modernity and Islamic orthodoxy are seen now as contradictory (as they appear in the West, where it is assumed that to be modern is to be Western and secular) but as two facets of the same thing. At the national level, Islamic fundamentalist identity is "synonymous with wealth and economic success" (Al-Karsani 1993:152). For many villagers, Saudi Arabia was, therefore, a vision of the future. As one man expressed it, "Before there was no money, now there is some, soon it [Sudan] will be like Saudiya."

In villagers' minds the luxury consumption enjoyed by the Saudis is associated with a more literate, urban understanding of Islam, just as village poverty and local practice are intertwined. The words of one villager, who remarked that "before, people [in Wad al Abbas] were so poor and ignorant, now they understand Islam better," reflect this constellation of related things. Economic development and technological advance also are associated with Islam. Meetings concerning such issues as the village water pumps are held at a village *zawiya*.⁹ One of the prime movers in local efforts to establish running water and, later, electricity is also a leading figure in the local shift toward fundamentalist Islam. Villagers refer to this young man (who, in the early 1980s, was studying for a master's degree at the Islamic University in Omdurman) as the *Mawlana*, in recognition of his knowledge of Islam. Perhaps because of his piety, people of the region trusted him with the large sums of money collected for electrification, reportedly totaling £5500,000 in the late 1980s.

Western bureaucratic forms derived from colonial and post-colonial administrative practices are ubiquitous in Wad al Abbas. There is a board (*ijma*) for this and a board for that, including one to reform local wedding practices. Every ceremonial celebration, be it a wedding or a circumcision, has someone with a notebook, usually a

schoolboy sitting at a table, who records the cash donation given by each guest.¹⁰ Thus, ritual is bureaucratized, harnessing the power of literacy—a skill with both religious and material value. And bureaucracy is ritualized: through the ritual of formal record keeping, villagers can appropriate for themselves and demystify the powers of officialdom.

Asha, a village *shaykha* (*zarr* possession cult leader), models her seances on the bureaucratic pattern of Western medicine, referring to the meetings as *kehfif*, the term used for medical appointments. She keeps her income and various things in a small box resembling a toolkit and similar to that used by the government-trained midwives and other health practitioners. While entranced, Asha not only speaks Arabic, but *harari* (dialect) that is supposed to be *Habeشي* (Ethiopian), although it is actually a modified Arabic, and therefore not entirely unintelligible to the participants. Among Asha's paraphernalia is the colonial tarbush. The example of the *zarr* (Boddy 1989) is instructive because it confounds any notion that local culture ever was unadulterated or produced autonomously by the community. The practices introduced in the name of true Islam in the 1980s build upon earlier syncretisms.

Wedding celebrations are another vibrant local tradition that is anything but static. Marriage contracts are formalized by men at the village mosque, but marriages are completed through a series of rituals, sacrifices, and feasts that lasts for seven days or more. Wad al Abbas brides decorated with henna dance barefoot to the lively beat of the *dilaka* (Sudanese drum) and the singing of unmarried girls.¹¹ Among the wedding songs popular in the early 1980s was one about a Toyota pickup truck and another about gasoline in which Shell and Mobil were mentioned by name.¹²

Western-style white wedding dresses are worn by some brides for part of the festivities. As surprising as the revelation that traditions are invented (Hobsbawm 1983) is the realization that tradition is constantly reinvented. The invention of tradition is not an act but an ongoing process. Like the *zarr* seance and the wedding, which blend various elements of African, Islamic, and Western culture, village ceremonial life draws its power and vitality from diverse sources. Islam plays a special role in this process, helping to fuse the indigenous and the exogenous.

Despite the fluid, syncretic properties of culture, the process of transformation in Wad al Abbas is nonetheless fraught with tensions. For example, in the early 1980s some young men got the idea of taking their brides to a hotel for a honeymoon, as would urban Sudanese were doing. As one of these men pointed out, a honeymoon doesn't completely violate the tradition of secluding the bride; usually even the groom would see his bride except at night for at least the first forty days of marriage. This particular groom was forbidden a hotel honeymoon by his father and uncles, who said, "We don't want one of our family to be the first one in the village to do this."

The elder men's fear of standing out as a target for criticism sheds light on the role of Islam as an agent of change. Deviations from local practice that can be justified in terms of more closely obeying Islam clearly leave one less vulnerable to reproach.

Transnational fundamentalist forms of Islam thus provide a moral basis to argue against local tradition and practice. The indeterminacy of orthodoxy, moreover, allows a certain flexibility. In this way change can be represented as *tradition* rather than as innovation.

AMBIVALENCE, MODERNITY, AND GENDER

One thing communicated to the Sudanese in Saudi Arabia where their place—as immigrant workers, as blacks, and as Muslims from a poor country—is not an exalted one, is a vision of hierarchy. There is a great contrast, moreover, between the life that Wad al Abbas villagers actually live in Saudi Arabia, often sharing quarters with other workers and saving as much of their pay as possible, and the life of leisure and prosperity that villagers perceive the Saudis to enjoy and to which they aspire. Tensions are inherent in the process whereby villagers' vision of progress is one that devalues local identities and practices. In the global hierarchy perceived by the villagers of Wad al Abbas, it is better to be Arab than African, scripturalist understandings of Islam are superior to local ritual understandings, and the knowledge associated with worldly sophistication and formal education is more respected than local knowledge. Given the differences in women's and men's lives, this hierarchy is clearly gendered.

Though the 1980s villagers were actively articulating the distinctions between provincial and cosmopolitan, traditional and modern. In important respects women came to symbolize tradition, while men stood for modernity. The signs, symbols, and commodities associated with the Islamic revival were key components of local constructions of the modern.¹³ Even trivial practices assumed importance as statements of conformity with either a more international Islamic sensibility or a provincial one. For example, some villagers made a point that it was *harzam* (forbidden) to wear a watch (or anything) on the left hand. A woman explaining this to me added in support of this view, "The university students all wear their watches on the right hand," again linking "correct" Islamic behavior with education, sophistication, and elite status.

In Saudi Arabia migrants experience harsh exploitation and capitalist relations of employment unmediated by social ties. *Mukherrihs* generally do not dwell on the denigration they experience in the Gulf, perhaps because it would detract from the local view of the migrant as a success—a returning hero with booty from abroad. However, no migrant I spoke with had been invited into a Saudi home, something they were well aware of, given the open hospitality for which Sudanese are rightly renowned. Saudis treat the Sudanese as stigmatized outsiders, sometimes denigrating them as *abid* (slave) because of their dark skin. One villager actually filed a court case against a Saudi who insulted him by addressing him as *yu abid* ("hey, slave"). Another villager returned home earlier than expected, explaining, "The Saudis don't like people from outside. I will only go back there if I make the Haji, otherwise not." Among

a group of women talking about Saudi Arabia, one said, laughing at these uncomfortable thoughts:

They won't give their daughters to a Sudanese. They don't want us. Like the Felala [Sudanese of Nigerian descent who are regarded as inferior]. They call us "*abid al arab*" [slaves of the Arabs].

"You are a Saudi," said a *mukherrih*, congratulating the host of a huge circumcision celebration for his sons, meaning "you are wealthy" (from the cash donations offered by all of the guests). He went on to explain to a group of guests, "She [indicating me] comes from the *biggest* government in the world—you come from the smallest." This was in fact not the usual context of my social relations in Wad al Abbas at all, but his sojourn abroad had given him a different perspective on things. Another *mukherrih*, musing on his experiences abroad, asserted to me, "We Sudanese are *better* than the Arabs, because we are a blend of African and Arab." His statement suggests one way of resolving the ambivalence about African and Arab identity that many Sudanese seem to feel.¹⁴

More typically, villagers strive to claim a broader Arab Muslim identity. One means of expressing this is through adopting what they see as more orthodox Islamic practices or, at the least, paying lip service to "orthodoxy" by criticizing local practices as not properly Islamic. While few people were altering their behavior profoundly, many used disparaging statements about various local practices to assert "I know better." This ethos of estrangement from local custom added another dimension to village life—the vague presence of a global context in which things at Wad al Abbas were not as they ought to be. Given that women are particularly identified with the local, it is no surprise that women's behavior became a central focus of fundamentalist critique.

While men's lives were being transformed by the necessity of working outside the village and even outside of Sudan, the standards for women's comportment and dress became the focus of concern in a way that men's were not. A new construction of masculinity and male superiority was being forged and the differences in men's and women's life experiences were invested with meaning in terms of a natural order of difference between men and women. Comaroff and Comaroff (1993:xxxviii) argue that capitalist ideologies of modernity "grouped counterimages under feminized signs—rural, preindustrial, ritualistic, primitive."

This is one way of understanding what is happening at Wad al Abbas when women are cast as provincial and ignorant, while men are seen as advanced and knowledgeable (Bedri 1987). I overheard one man complaining to another, for example, about the dangers of television, saying, "Women hear someone crying on television and mistake it for a *bika* [funeral] and get everyone up in arms." Women, thus, represent the unsophisticated and irrational. And a man can express his own disap-

proval of television through an argument about its effects on women and (through women) on the community. It is significant, moreover, that this man referred to crying because the local practice of ritual crying by women at funerals was deemed un-Islamic according to the newfound wisdom.

Wad al Abbas weddings also reflect the representation of man as modern and woman as traditional. For example, younger educated grooms wear Western dress rather than the *jilbabiyā* normally worn by men when in the village. Brides, on the other hand, always appear at least part of the time in Sudanese wedding regalia. Wedding portraits taken in Senar studios capture this dichotomy: the Western-dressed man stands beside the bride bedecked with a headdress of braids and fake gold coins, a nose ring attached by a chain to her earring, henna up her arms and ankles, as if the man and woman had come from two different cultures.

One way new understandings of Islam are expressed is through the medium of feminine modesty. Villagers' reevaluation of local wedding practices, for example, focused on the ritual dance performed by the bride without a *tauwāb* and before a mixed audience. Moghadam (1994) argues that "identity lies in the private sphere" and women therefore are key symbols in the Islamic resurgence because women represent the private domain. However, the distinction between private and public is itself a historical construction, and one that takes on particular significance in capitalist culture. Al Wad al Abbas new Islamic ideals may have helped give meaning to the changing nature of domestic and communal life as villagers increasingly participated in the global economy in ways that drew them away from their households and community.

During the 1980s villagers constructed new forms of private space, and female seclusion increased as villagers adopted new forms of architecture and dress. Up until the early 1980s few village houses were enclosed by courtyard walls. Compounds were demarcated by low mud walls or thornbrush fences, if at all. By the late 1980s, villagers who had the means were building high brick or cement walls around their homes, separating domestic and public space definitively. Less fortunate villagers strove to achieve similar effects through such means as adding burlap screens on top of their mud walls.

The fluidity of the division between public and domestic in the early 1980s was reflected in the fact that women wore their *tauwābs* all the time, adjusting them in different ways depending on who was present or whether women were at home or in the public thoroughfare. In contrast, by the late 1980s it was common for women to take off their *tauwābs* completely once they were inside the *hosh* (courtyard). A woman of the family with whom I lived even instructed me to remove my *tauwāb* when I kept it on inside the *hosh* as I always had done before. Some women also began to wear ankle-length robes underneath their *tauwābs*, rather than the short, sleeveless smocks (*shawāw*) that had been standard in the early 1980s. Such "Islamic" dress was considered a mark of sophistication.

If fundamentalist forms of Islam represent sophistication and progress, local Islam is regarded as ignorant tradition. Its inferiority is symbolized through its association with women (Ibrahim 1989). Thus, a man dismisses the significance of local *fakis* (holy men) as "*kalam al niswān*" ("women's talk" or "women's affair"), even though many village men as well as women continue to venerate *shaykh*s, participate in Sufi orders, and make pilgrimages to local shrines.

Women do, however, have less access to knowledge about the world beyond the village and "orthodox" Islam. Despite much talk in the village about other places and Saudi Arabia in particular, few women have seen much of Sudan, let alone been abroad. One woman, for example, does not know Khartoum and so remembers her son's work locale as "Burrī" when he works in Bahri. Once, when I referred to the river in Khartoum, an elderly woman exclaimed, "Do they have a river there, too?" unaware that the Blue Nile that flows past the village merges with the White Nile at Khartoum to form the River Nile.

Standing with the women in the open space where villagers had gathered to celebrate *Azād al Dabhiya*, we were too far away to hear the words of the Khallā and the Mawwana who were the speakers. At the Mawlid celebration where men were reading from the Qur'an to a large audience gathered outside the mosque, I asked a woman why no women were reading. "Do we know how to read?" she replied. "All we know is *surat al salāt* [the verses of prayers]." Added another woman, "I don't know the words to the prayers, I only know how to perform the movements."

Women's experiences are rooted in the local. Nonetheless, local self-definitions and gender constructions are contingent on a global context and shaped by transnational cultural flows. From their vantage point in the village women are able, moreover, to perceive various hierarchies that extend beyond it. For example, one day some Nuba¹⁶ girls were teasing a couple of village girls, saying things in a Nuba language the villagers did not understand. The village girls replied in turn with insults in schoolgirl English, adding in Arabic (the shared language) a further assertion of superiority: "*We* speak English, *you* speak dialect."

Despite their different positioning relative to sources of scriptural knowledge and "orthodox" practice abroad, women are active participants in the diffusion of new Islamic ideas entering the village. Women discuss and exchange information, such as that "sheikh so-and-so" said that dyeing your hair was *haram*, that it was said on the radio that women should not hold jobs, or that a newly fundamentalist village man said all pictures are *haram* and forced his family to dispose of their television set. New ideas like these circulated through the village like rumors. In discussing local practices that were being brought into question, women often used vague language such as "they say it is *haram*," this formulation reflecting the speaker's lack of direct knowledge of scriptural Islam. Such formulations also give a sense of the disembodied form in which cultural critique transpired in Wad al Abbas: rather than being defini-

tively associated with particular proponents, the new fundamentalism was a pervasive ethos. Thus, a woman explained to me, "We used to go to the river for every [ceremonial] occasion, but now people are dropping it." Another said "When my father died I put dirt on my head and wailed, but now I learned that that is *haram* and when you die on the last day you will be interrogated." Another woman told me, "In the past [when a widow had completed her mourning seclusion] she would shave her pubic hair and cut her nails and bury them in the dust of his [her husband's] grave." All the women present laughed at this, and one exclaimed, "Isn't that bad! We don't do that anymore."

But women do not simply accept all new ideas or comply with them equally. For example, while in one discussion women seemed to be taking seriously the idea that hair dye might be unacceptable, they casually dismissed the idea that women should not be employed, saying, "We can't go by that." Telling about how girls, but not boys, are restricted in the high-school dormitories in Sennar (the closest high school to Wād al Abbas), a girl commented bitterly, "Only girls are forbidden everything." A young woman and her audience laughed disdainfully as she recounted how the Mawlana rode all the way from Sennar (an hour away) with his eyes shut because there were women present in the vehicle. An eighty-year-old woman, referring to the subdued funerals becoming more common as a result of the new fundamentalist sensibility, commented critically, "People have given up mourning the dead."

Since the younger generation of women have opportunities for formal education and literacy, the cultural gap between them and their male peers is smaller. The first two Wād al Abbas women ever to finish high school graduated in 1981. Over the course of the 1980s growing numbers of women gained experience outside the village, pursuing education, accompanying migrant husbands, and one even working abroad (as a teacher) along with her husband. One of the few women to travel to Saudi Arabia with her husband now talks to me as a fellow sophisticate, asking questions about where America is located. She has a new sense of the world and of our places in this larger system. She is one of the younger women who have adopted a new style of dress, wearing an ankle-length *ibaym* (long flowing dress).

Along with new Islamic sensibilities have come other new parameters of conduct for women in the expanding social field. One of the first female high-school graduates from Wād al Abbas got a job teaching school in the village. She said:

People thought that a girl going to school or working in an office with men—there would be *ʿadh* [shame], that she would not know how to keep her honor [*sharaf*]. But now they saw that girls have studied and worked and nothing had has come of it. So they're all letting their daughters study. In fact, many are paying to have their daughters in evening school now so they can get their degrees.

Another young woman told me:

Before it was considered *ʿadh* [shameful] for a woman to travel. But people opened their minds and got educated a little and saw that it's OK and now so many go. . . . People in the past didn't let a girl work. Women weren't educated and she may bring *ʿayr* [dishonor] to her family and they're afraid of that. But now girls are educated and know how to behave.

While in the early 1980s women sent children to make purchases in the village shops, by 1988 women made such purchases themselves. "We used to scold women for that and say *ʿadh*, but not anymore," said one woman, linking this change in attitude to education and "understanding."

Young women are also consulted more often now as part of the marriage proposal process. When I asked an older woman about this change, she said her recently engaged son had talked to the girl "before he even talked to his own father." She explained:

Before, the boy and girl weren't educated. The girl would *ʿakhyi* [be shy].¹⁷ It's better now. Before, you didn't know whether the girl wanted or not. If she was unhappy or if she was pleased, she was married all the same. Now if she wants, OK, if she doesn't want, she refuses right away. It's better.

By the late 1980s education was accepted as a positive thing for both boys and girls by many villagers. Marriage nonetheless remained a priority in parents' concerns for daughters. While parents generally wished to delay a son's marriage until the young man had worked for a while and contributed economically to the family, a good marriage was of such paramount importance where daughters were concerned that girls were withdrawn from school to be secluded once engaged. There were signs of change in the 1980s, however, as some grooms encouraged their prospective in-laws to keep girls in school, in some cases even paying for school expenses. Young men's greater opportunities, relative to older men, for labor migration, and particularly for work abroad, was giving them greater say in the matter of marriage because grooms were assuming greater responsibility for their own wedding expenses and for establishing the new conjugal unit.¹⁸ The shift of generational power from older to younger men is reflected in changing notions of what is desirable in a bride—young grooms want a bride who is consenting to the marriage, and they are also more likely to want a bride with some education.¹⁹

Thus, even as women become the symbolic focus of fundamentalist reform and of local tradition, women are gaining greater control over their marital destiny, obtaining education, and, in a few cases, even garnering their own incomes through formal employment. Increasing Islamic "orthodoxy" and expanding horizons

for women are not so much opposing processes as two facets of the larger transformation of the village resulting from capitalist expansion and incorporation into global cultural circuits.

FORGING MODERN IDENTITIES AND FOLKLORIC TRADITIONS

A significant element in the process of transformation in Wad al Abbas is the objectification of culture and the ability of individuals to "play" with cultural forms and craft a more individualized identity and style. The intensified contact with powerful others such as the Saudis who do not share their culture allows villagers to see their culture through strangers' eyes. They thus experience a kind of alienation that allows them to be critical and self-consciously aware of their own culture (and alternatives to it). Migrants also become estranged from village culture after years away. The focus of fundamentalist critique on particular practices held up as bad examples both reflects and further intensifies this process, by isolating specific practices from the larger cultural context.

This process opens up space in which individuals can "play" with culture to create a personal style, inventing individual solutions to the questions of identity raised by global encounters. Culture is objectified and made manipulable as different imported and indigenous elements are combined in novel formations by various individuals. Thus, for example, appearance and presentation of self took on new meaning as the range of choices expanded.

Women's dress and hairstyles are an important area of such individual creativity. Islamic dress (*hijab*) does not so much replace the *roub* in Wad al Abbas as offer additional choices. Whereas in the early 1980s all women past a certain age wore *sir-wal* (baggy shorts) or *shawals* (short sleeveless dresses) under their *roubs*, in the late 1980s some women began to wear different outfits—usually *jellabiyas* or *ibayyas*. Moreover, at the same time as self-consciously Islamic dress was being adopted by some women, for the first time I saw women walking around the village with curlers in their hair. In the early 1980s there was one basic hairstyle consisting of tiny braids worn by all adult women. In the late eighties I observed increasing heterogeneity as individuals made different choices. Nor is it that Western and Islamic styles are opposing choices—one sees curlers combined with the new Islamic attire as well as with the *roub*.

Rituals such as weddings and funerals are a conglomeration of symbolic public statements about identity, gender, and social relations. It should be no surprise then that they are central foci in the process of change in Wad al Abbas. Like hairstyles and dress, which are open to individual creative possibilities, rituals are areas of broader cultural creativity in which villagers can refashion their image of themselves. As they do so, symbols shift in meaning and traditions are reast. Subtle changes in wedding rituals illustrate this process. Among the regalia sometimes worn by local brides are

hijab (Islamic amulets). At one wedding a woman pointed out to me that the amulets worn by the bride around each upper arm were not "real *hijab*" but "just for decoration." (*Hijab* were regarded as unacceptable from the fundamentalist perspective.) Thus, objects that once had real ritual significance may come to be valued merely as folkloric color—as *symbols* of tradition, rather than as true expressions of it. The fake thus stands for a certain kind of authenticity.

Similarly, villagers told me that in the past there was a part of the wedding called *jirrig* where the bride and groom spat milk at each other and on the guests. Villagers said this was replaced by spraying (commercial) perfume around. As one older woman put it, "They gave up milk and switched to perfume, because all the people laughed and the bride's clothes got dirty." However, at an urban wedding on the outskirts of Khartoum I was able to observe a milk-spraying *jirrig* ceremony. This *jirrig*, like the fake *hijab*, is decontextualized tradition enacted as a symbol of itself, no longer invested with deep ritual meaning. Such "traditions" can be performed as nostalgic folklore without tainting the family's reputation with the mark of backwardness. Local culture, thus, is reified at a certain level of abstraction that was not possible when it was simply the taken-for-granted way of being and doing. It is the decontextualized, ossified tradition created by modernity that therefore stands as a representation of tradition.²⁰ In this form tradition has been rendered powerless and therefore can be reintroduced to invoke local identity and community at a symbolic level now that communal ways no longer govern existence as they once did.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism can be seen as part of the decline of the local community as the center of moral and social power. The fundamentalist perspective on Islam is part of the process whereby the role of the individual in making cultural choices is heightened and made visible. Fundamentalist Islam offers a more individual religious identity and means of expression than the kin-based structure of local Sufi brotherhoods (Umar 1993). The new Islam emphasizes self-discipline: to be Muslim is an achieved rather than an ascribed status. You as an individual make the choice to be a true Muslim; it is not simply a fact of your birth into a kin-group or community. While women have been constituted as symbols in the process of societal transformation, women also have shown their ability to manipulate symbols—casting aside at times their role as custodians of tradition, and using the symbol of Islamic dress to claim space in the emerging order of modern Sudan (Bernal 1994; Hale n.d.).

CONCLUSION

Many have suggested that Islam offers a stable identity in a rapidly changing society (Moghaddam 1994:9). However, it may be the opposite that makes Islamic fundamentalism appealing—the pace of institutional change is so slow compared with the ability of individuals to change their ideology or mode of dress. A new Islamic identity is important to the villagers of Wad al Abbas, in part, because Sudan's political economy

has proven so unresponsive to their aspirations. Fundamentalist Islam appears to hold out the possibility that change can come simply by willing it (Simone 1994).²¹ It does not represent stability, but rather a process of transformation over which the individual exercises some control.

At Wad al Abbas and around the world women have assumed particular symbolic importance in the Islamic revival (Antoun and Heglund 1987; Merriami 1991; Kandiyoti 1991). Gender relations operate as a marker in identity politics, and control over women may symbolize the reproduction of the community (Yuvall-Davis 1994; Helle-Lucas 1994). Yet contemporary communities are not reproducing their current form so much as transforming themselves under changing conditions (Ong 1987; Appadurai 1990). This process gives rise both to new mechanisms for controlling women and new opportunities for women to renegotiate their positions in gender relations. Islamic ideologies serve as catalysts of change and as a means of inhibiting women, in particular, from fully exploring all the possibilities opening up in an expanding social universe. At Wad al Abbas regarding women as more backward and less Muslim than men also may be a way of representing in local terms the inequalities that villagers (and male migrants in particular) experience between themselves and others in the global system. Local inequalities thus are reconfigured as they are integrated into a global hierarchical schema.

The case of Wad al Abbas sheds light on the way local constructions of gender and modernity are contingent on global processes. The analysis presented suggests that Islam, which is both local and universal, provides a ready medium for crafting solutions to the contradictions between the local and global contexts that people increasingly must inhabit simultaneously. This casts the worldwide Islamic revival in a new light and helps explain why this movement has appealed to so many Muslims in the postmodern age.

NOTES

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- I use the (sometimes maligned) term "fundamentalism," rather than "Islamism," because fundamentalism is broader in meaning (e.g., some scholars use Islamism to refer to demands for an Islamic state), and because fundamentalism implicitly invites comparison to other religions rather than implying something unique about Islam.
- All references are to the 1980s, when fieldwork was conducted, unless otherwise indicated. I spent 1980-82 in Wad al Abbas and returned there for a short stay in 1988.
- This has obviously changed since Sudan's support for Iraq in the Gulf War.
- The *umra* is like the Hajj but can be made at any time of year.

Villagers, moreover, are aware of brand names, distinguishing between name-brand goods and similar items or knockoffs by referring to the former as *al asli* ("the original").

- The passports villagers were able to obtain in the 1980s were explicitly marked "valid for Arab countries."
- Holiday celebrating the birth of the Prophet.
- This fact is not lost on villagers. One man remarked that he had more respect for Egypt since it had its own factories while Saudi Arabia simply purchased things.
- A place of prayer associated with a particular Sufi brotherhood.
- The practice of giving money (*khur' al gushi*) was coming to be regarded as un-Islamic. Perhaps a handful of villagers, including the *Mawana*, were known not to participate on religious grounds.
- At most weddings the drum is more likely to be an empty plastic gallon container than a real *diluka*.
- These were topics of popular interest since Toyota pickups were a hallmark of bourgeois status (let's face it, Mercedes cars), and the country was periodically racked by fuel shortages and skyrocketing prices.
- This differs from the urban circles in Khartoum where a group opposed to the NIF called themselves "modern forces."
- There is, moreover, tension between African and Arab identity within Sudan—not simply a division between an African southern Sudan and an Arab northern one, but an ambivalence that permeates northern Sudanese society. Local culture in Wad al Abbas is dynamically syncretic of African, Arab, and Western ideas and practices.
- The *tomb* requires some skill to wear, so early on I adopted the *ferha* (cloth covering head and upper torso) that young girls wear as modest attire in the village.
- There is a Nuba settlement adjacent to the village that supplies agricultural labor and illicit alcohol.
- This refers to a formal ritual shyness/avoidance required by local etiquette.
- I do not say "household" here because it was established practice for the newly married couple to reside with the bride's family for the first few years of marriage.
- Nonetheless, since men generally do not want a wife's education to exceed their own, the issue had to do with the groom's educational background as well as his economic standing. *Mukhrimis* tend to have more schooling than the average villager, however.
- Perhaps these examples prefigure the fate of many distinctive local Sudanese practices, if they are to survive at all.
- This may shed light on the appeal of *shari'a* law, which in Sudan has become the key symbol of the Islamic revival at the national level (Warburg 1991). *Shari'a* is so powerful precisely because it is a symbol and not fixed to specific historical conditions (Simone 1994).

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