

## Veiled (male) ethnographers

### Reflexive blind spots and gender segregation in Yemen

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#### *Introduction: gender segregation and ethnographic engagement*

Since the theme of this conference is the public sphere, and since the country where I work, Yemen, is now commonly cited as “the second Afghanistan”, I have felt that I had to talk about gender-segregation. But as far as I am concerned, I must confess that “the condition of the Yemeni woman” is an issue that I usually run away from. Now if you think about it for a minute, this in itself is a very strange situation: how is it that I can't talk about it, even though I have been experiencing gender-segregation during fieldwork since 2003?

Of course, my first reaction was to blame the public sphere: as you know, gender-segregation is usually referred to under the label of “the condition of women”.... So my family and my friends and my neighbours rightly point out regularly: how can you ever talk for women when you don't see them while you are in Yemen? Upon reflection, however, the problem is trickier than just the covering of the issue by the French media: just an invocation of ethnographic empiricism won't do. For precisely, as a man, I don't feel *engaged ethnographically* on gender-segregation.

At the moment she touches the ground in the field, a female ethnographer is warned that she will not necessarily be viewed as a “respectable woman”: her gendered status is at stake in her social behaviour. On the contrary, in the field I tend to think : I am a man and *there is nothing I can do about it...* Indeed, I do fieldwork quasi-exclusively in a world of men, but does it necessarily imply that I am not confronted to a “system of gender” that impacts on my status and my ethnographic activity? Why is “being a man”, this feature of my identity, devoid of problematization?

In my PhD research I study the masculine sociability of young people in the city of Ta'ez. Recently I have focused on the role of a particular register of informal jokes that always deal with the idea of *feminisation*. In daily conversation one finds dozens of alternative expressions to say “Wow, if you were a girl”, often with a poetic touch... More generally, it is very instructive to study the situations in which Yemeni young men invoke “love” in their social relations, or just call each other *habibi* (“my love”). I have come to identify a “culture of beloveds”, in reference to – this is a revealing point in itself – historical studies that identify an “age of beloveds” (Andrews et Kalpakli 2005), roughly covering the historical period of the Renaissance. Today, talking about a “culture of the beloveds” may sound polemical, to Yemenis and Westerners alike, because it is quickly misunderstood as a “homosexual culture”. Despite its occultation from the public sphere, I argue that this “culture of the beloveds” is still profoundly present in the Yemeni culture and in the social construction of gender. Hence it is central to understanding the effects on gender of the current socio-economic conditions (demographic prevalence of young people in the population - 75% of Yemenites are under the age of 30; economic depression and inaccessibility to marriage).

But the purpose of this paper is to dwell on the ethnographic reasons why Western researchers are usually blind to this aspect of the Yemeni culture. Do Yemenis spare us from personal

implication in this sociability? Do they do so out of mere politeness or for more ambiguous reasons? Aren't there implicit barriers to social implication, a tacit arrangement reproduced by both the ethnographer and his informants?

If such an intermediate status exists for male Westerners, it is the result of a process of slight accommodations and adaptations: first, throughout history as the society progressively experiences "the West"; second, for the visitor in the first months of his trip, as he settles and adjusts his own "lifestyle" in the field. That is in brief why my plan today is to submit a fieldwork experience both to ethnographic analysis and to reflections of historical anthropology. However, the ethnographic episode that I will relate here is a complete opposite from a "slight adjustment": it is a big complication that occurred in my first fieldwork, almost a caricature, that I consequently censored for the most part in previous academic writings.

Before conceiving of "masculine sociability" as an object of study, I was confronted to it through the social engagement that inquiry requires. As any beginning ethnographer, I was both determined and naïve... That is probably what makes those developments enlightening for today's question: they expose the logic of slight accommodations that usually go untold.

First, I will relate the ethnographic circumstances in which I came to be confronted with, and involved in, this "culture of beloveds". I will briefly develop the underlying rationale for this culture, so that you don't view it as intrinsically untenable from the start; only then will I expose how my implication degenerated into an "affair", that is an intricate imbroglio of accusations and abuses. Analysing the situation at the end of this plot, I will explain why it was so difficult for me to exercise ethnographic reflexivity and account for the "culture of beloveds" that I had witnessed. Finally, I will give evidence for the generic dimension of this episode and put it into historical perspective.

## 1. The ethnographer as "beloved"

I made my first fieldwork in the Yemeni city of Tazeh three months in the summer of 2003, for the preparation of my master's degree. I had left with a general idea: to study the social life of the urban youth and its conception of marriage in a context of gender segregation. However I was driven onto a more specific object of study by the particular situation of my "best informant" - that is, the person I met that I liked most and with whom discussion seemed easiest... Zayd was a young student that had just finished university, and he was eager to discuss with me a large panel of issues, ranging from religion to politics. I had but a basic knowledge of Arabic, and he was the only one who would never get tired of it.

Zayd intended to leave to the capital looking for work and start his professional life, but then it didn't turn that easy for him. He was forced to stay in the neighbourhood where he had grown up and I stayed there with him. It turned out that Zayd had a sort of charismatic authority amongst the jobless young men of his neighbourhood, whom he considered as "brothers". He felt that he had to be a good influence for them, that he was responsible for driving them on the "righteous path" of Islam... They seemed to see him in return as a "leader" (*za'im*). So I ended up studying this authority: the ideology of love and brotherhood that he was promoting in the neighbourhood, as well as the material and financial aspects of this influence and its sociological determinations.

That is, in brief, what academic material I have retained from this first fieldwork: a case study of some informal authority. But the most troubling thing for me at the time was my relationship with Zayd and how intricate it was with a social game that I could hardly follow.

I had met Zayd in quite usual circumstances, through a group of students from the University. But as I visited him more and more in his own neighbourhood, finally spending all my time there, the frame of sociability surrounding us changed as well. In the eyes of others, I became Zayd's guest and "special friend". Until then the status of our friendship did not need to be

made explicit, but in the course of my socialisation in the neighbourhood I became Zayd's "beloved". Though I did not see it at the time, I understand now that the emergence of this "love" was intricately linked with the social situation that was his.

Zayd was actively managing the situation, committed to controlling both the boys' behaviour and what I would perceive. This gave the situation a sort of excessive ritual taste: Zayd would make me sit on his left in the little room where he was presiding the gathering of his young neighbours. I was not fluent enough in Arabic so as to be able to understand jokes or elusive remarks, so during the discussions we had with other *shabâb* (young adults), he would take pain in reformulating for me, giving speech alternatively to each of them and inviting me formally at times to give my opinion. Actually, through all those precautions to regulate the situation, a status was ritually assessed for me in front of the *shabâb*: a status strictly inscribed inside the frame of those formal philosophical discussions. Zayd was conforming to the model of the "informant" at the service of an "orientalist": to compensate for the fact that I was subsidizing him financially even though I was staying in his place, he elaborated a particular form of "intellectual hospitality". But would this relationship make sense in the boys' sociability? Zayd had necessarily to compromise between the demands of our intellectual relationship and the constraints of this sociability. The conflicting imperatives of both were resolved by him through a narrative of love, played as a part of this collective ritual.

Hence, when we were in front of others Zayd would turn to me at one point and claim "I love you!"; progressively, the other *shabâb* would play and demand that I claim that "Zayd is my beloved"... Most of the time however, this would take more subtle forms. Zayd was promoting his influence in the quarter with a discourse on the perfect authority (ultimately that of Prophet Mohammed) of a "charismatic leader" (*za'îm*) whose moral excellence would allow him to mobilize his troops through love instead of coercion. The *shabâb* would come to me with a cunning smile and ask: "Who's your *za'îm*?"...

## **2. Enacted love declarations: a "culture of beloveds"**

Let me pause here and anticipate on some material from my present research. I would like to convince you that this kind of enacted love declarations serve as ritual - in Leach's sense, they express social positions - by drawing the outline of the situations where those declarations are most likely to take place.

Putting aside the small old medina, the city of Taz is around 3 decades old. Most of its inhabitants were born in the mountains and it is a mosaic of village communities transplanted in town. The professional domains, and especially commerce and shops, are all founded on collective communitarian strategies. However the younger generation, which has experienced the city and the modern schools, yearns for a more "cosmopolitan" sociability despite the freezing of economic opportunities, and so friendships that cross communities are not rare. Still, those elective relations are not independent from the regionalist organisation: it is very striking to me how those friendships are not regulated through periodic "sincere" or "private discussions", but rather through the mediation of each one's community. It is as if those relationships are symbolically renewed when submitted to the relatives from the village, who are made to witness, for example, some enacted domestic quarrel between husband and wife, that ends up with the promise of reconciliation through a "hot night"...

Now after all, I think everybody here has had similar experiences, though maybe not in the same gendered configuration. Let us say for example that (you are a man) you are taking a (female) good friend from work with you for a week in a cottage full of old secondary school friends... In this context, it might make sense to introduce her during the whole week, saying something like: "She is my forever lover..." Ritual love declarations are a common way to socialize a new person in a pre-existing group, to negotiate his/her introduction with respect to

the community. There is no question either that, whatever the relationship with this colleague was before, this situation will give a “special taste” to your friendship.

So in Western countries too, this kind of enacted love of the second-degree (or third-degree or forth-degree...) is part of life, and even central to it. In our societies, “sincere private discussions” are an alternative mode of legitimate regulation for relationships, but it does not remove occasions for a communitarian mode of regulation. However, one big difference is that in our societies, the patterns for this social regulation preferably include the mediation of women: if you take a male colleague with you, then you might make him feel at ease through jokes involving a female friend... Yemenis have great difficulties understanding that this constant hinting at love relations between men and women is not synonymous with sexual relations. Conversely, some behaviours of men in Arab countries are interpreted from the West as “gay” manners, which they are not in most cases. The crucial distinction is the presence of an audience: saying “*habibi*” to a friend when alone together has *de facto* a different meaning. In Yemen, according to the situation, it could be understood as a direct seductive attack equivalent to an aggression.

Thus in Yemen some relationships come to be granted with a particular status (a “special friendship”), and this only means that this relationship is somehow counter-intuitive, with respect to some “theoretic” social order. That is why the longing of young people for individual relationships outside their community allows for reflection that combines gender and social history. For that matter, conversely, making “special relations” is a powerful tool to redraw the contours of the intuitive social world. That is precisely what Zayd was doing with his young neighbours: while making them witness his “eroticised” relations with the French guy, he reinforced in contrast the sentiment of fraternal solidarity between them, making residential proximity stronger than the disparity of their origins.

In order to complete the stage décor, I will add that Zayd's social strategy is “sociologically situated”: in the current context of economic uncertainty, it is part of a general tendency for the urbanized minor “state bourgeoisie” to favour new “connections” in the city over ancient roots in the village. Locally, this spirit is antagonist with that of shopkeepers, which view Zayd's manoeuvres with suspicion...

### **3. Contested alliances of inquiry: the ethnographer as “bitch”**

[here, I translate as “bitch” an insult designed for men, *makhnuth*, which roughly means “that effeminate man that it is legitimate to screw”. A translation in terms of “homosexuality” would be bewildering and would not facilitate comprehension. What is more, the substantive *makhnatha* (“bitchery”), which is most common despite its vulgarity, primarily denotes any form of illegitimate sexual intercourse.]

If the rhetoric of “love” serves to establish new relations, the possibility of a sexual interpretation is, of course, also present in Yemen. It serves as a tool for negating the legitimacy of the social bond: contestation turns a “pure love” into a “screw”... However such an accusation necessarily has social implications with respect to the community which has witnessed and acknowledged this relation. If a member of the community is accused of being sexually abused by his “special friend”, this is an insult and a proof of contempt for the whole community. If that member is accused of abusing his “special friend”, the whole community is instituted as enemies and rivals. In any case, only the cohesion of the community guarantees the symbolic integrity of the relationship.

At the time, I was far from understanding all this. The only thing I could perceive was that I had become dependent on Zayd's help and now he was not willing to help me regain my

independence. The partnership with him was by far the most exciting perspective available for my enquiry, but I was very uncomfortable with the ambiguity of my status as a "beloved". My attempts to clear the air with him through "personal discussions" were viewed by him as strategic moves and they did not help anything. My arguments finally proved effective in the presence of the other boys, on the day I claimed in front of them that he "did not respect me". Reluctantly, Zayd was forced to extend the scope of our debates to local issues: while keeping the role of presiding the debates, he would put to discussion the question of how a *real* Islamic leader should behave. Those discussions, otherwise fascinating, shook his local legitimacy, and they did not lessen the interest of the boys for our "love affair". On the contrary, this muddled confusion only enflamed the escalation of conjectures: the street-corner young men, lacking occupation, would endlessly comment on the latest developments of the plot. Gossip blended romance and politics: "Does he really love Zayd, or is he making use of him?"... "Why does Zayd love him?"... "Is he trying to be *za'im* in the place of the *za'im*?"

Meanwhile, the cohesion of the "brotherhood" was lessening, and people outside were talking more and more openly. Some shopkeepers I knew, who until then only warned me to be "on my guard", were now alarmed by the rumours that they were hearing. Zayd himself, who began to retreat from the plot, warned me that people had been interpreting our quarrels as sexual dissensions... I saw for myself that the more liberty I would take, the more I would be confronted with advances: other university students would come and say: "I'll be your informant... Zayd is a prick! I'll tell you what those boys are all about..." Less educated boys, awkwardly proposing to answer my questions, would compensate with an ambiguous seduction that I found both pleasant and frightening<sup>1</sup>.

Finding allies beyond the reach of Zayd's influence allowed me afterwards to analyse the limits of his authority. Initially, however, I did not do this out of ethnographic strategy, but rather as a desperate effort to make my situation more comfortable. On the contrary, once totally dropped by Zayd, solicitations from the other boys became unbearable. Conflict became unavoidable and I spent more and more time retired with the shopkeepers. The shopkeepers saw the young jobless men of Zayd's neighbourhood as scum (*tarâtîr*), never losing an opportunity to beg or to shoplift. Conversely, the boys viewed the shopkeepers as "greedy" (*maslihi*). The more I stayed with the shopkeepers, the more the boys would be provocative, and the more my firm reactions were viewed as morally condemnable. Now that I had switched sides, I sensed that they all agreed on calling me a "bitch".

I must clarify here that until recently in the North, commerce was widely seen as a contemptible activity. The specificity of Taiz is that large portions of the population have for a long time made a living through commercial activities, there and abroad. In the Yemeni common sense, this particularity of Taiz is commonly associated with a reputation of vulgarity and "bitchery". Hence, it is not by chance that the process that led to the re-qualification of my alliance with Zayd was fuelled by an antagonism between shopkeepers and other parts of the urban population. I should add that I interpret the violence of the vulgarity in the public space of Taiz as the tangible remains of the tensions of the 1994 civil war between Aden and Sanaa<sup>2</sup>. Using Boltansky's sociology of the dispute, the denunciation of social bonds as illegitimate should be interpreted as the practical manifestation of the conflict between different conceptions of justice coexisting in Taiz - notably the "merchant city" and the "domestic city" (1990, pp. 84-85). Coming along with the "fraternal love" of this quarter was a certain mode of regulation for material relations, whose officially

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of the plot, sexual threats came from Zayd's closest relatives, who had a special interest in giving a sexual symbolic to the whole plot in order to discharge their family and the neighbourhood community.

<sup>2</sup> The war opposed a coalition of tribes and Islamists to the socialist ideology of the secessionist South.

celebrated principle was that of domestic sharing. Of course in practice, Zayd was there to mediate this principle according to my actual willingness to participate, but he would symbolically appropriate the resource that I represented (at times he would even manage to ostensibly carry my wallet himself...). The shopkeepers were prompt to denounce my friendship with Zayd, for through their ideology of economic balance, they promoted an alliance on other material and conceptual grounds. Their intervention played a crucial part in the development of my own suspicions towards Zayd's politics and my own discomfort: since their ideology was definitely closer to my own culture, they reactivated a persistent feeling of shame regarding my affective involvement. Instead of pushing forward participant observation so as to understand "from the inside" the moral organisation of Zayd's group, I felt the imperative need to clarify the status of our relationship, notably through making our monetary relations explicit and contractual. At one point I even proposed to Zayd that I give him a salary for being my informant. My offer was unconceivable and Zayd turned it down: he plunged into perplexity and retreated a bit more.

#### **4. Ashes of a culture: historical perspectives on ethnographic conditions**

I have rapidly sketched the anatomy of the process that led to the re-qualification of my alliance with Zayd, including the entangled and conflicting principles that took part in it at each stage of the process. Now I want to focus on the perception of this episode *a posteriori*.

Let us summarize the situation towards the end: Zayd has retreated to his village. His attempt to introduce the ethnographer to the jobless friends of his neighbourhood is a total failure, caused by his senseless megalomania. In the eyes of people, his risky enterprise was motivated by underlying greedy purposes or it is seen as an additional proof of his long-suspected craziness. In any case, all agree that his behaviour is reprehensible: "That is what happens when you don't adopt the appropriate behaviour with strangers..."

The actors who were personally involved in the plot adopt two opposite lines of defence according to their position: the shopkeepers blame the boys for trying to trick me, while the boys defend the honour of the quarter by claiming that their guest was a "trouble-maker" anyway and not a real man, an "apple of discord" spreading disorder among the community of men. But both positions are not completely acceptable: as we have seen, the calculating spirit of the merchants is not legitimate, while it is not totally legitimate either to develop an apology of trickery. In the end, most observers adopt a neutral position and blame the overall episode in general terms: "The boys mixed with the French guy, and there was *bitchery*..."

The concept of "bitchery" (*makhnatha*) is precisely *designed* for this kind of situation, for it is intrinsically ambivalent. The word can be understood as a blame for those who try to "screw" (*khannath*) others, or as a blame for those who make trouble by not defending their honour (*makhnuth* is the corresponding insult, previously translated as "bitch"). In itself it is a compromise between the "virilist" tribal morality and the commercial values of fair transactions.

More generally the word "bitchery" alludes to an "occult" domain of social life, concentrating the contradictions of a culture, such that only Yemenis can get along with it. In 2006, when I deliberately began to get involved in the exchange of jokes and insults with the shopkeepers, some men would pass by and hear me cursing like a sailor in their shops... They would reproach the shopkeepers with indignation: "Shame on you! You have taught bitchery to the French guy..." But here the shopkeepers had an excuse, alluding to my previous misadventures: "Naturally, we teach him bitchery, so that he knows how to defend himself..." It is common sense that a Westerner should not be confronted with "bitchery", but this is not only a question of politeness. Somehow there is the idea that a Westerner would necessarily misunderstand, and that it would certainly bring "trouble". The Westerner exposes "bitchery", by making it explicit.

Today in Yemen, because of the historical transformations induced by the British intrusion in Aden and the recent opening of the country to the world capitalist economy, the West comes to be identified with "bitchery": it breaks the *enchantment* of the social world. With the endemic corruption of the new regime, democracy itself is largely perceived as the reign of disorder and "bitchery". This confusion is made unavoidable by the contrast between Western countries' discourses and actions in the Middle East; the exposure of naked women and the marriage of homosexuals only confirm the accuracy of the prejudice. In comparison, the golden age of classical Islam appears as a time when politics were not sullied by moral and sexual corruption. As we will see, this situation as a whole is precisely Zayd's inspiration.

Considering the whole story with care, it becomes clear that the ethnographer's abuse is *scripted*. All the people in the neighbourhood, who have been following the plot from a distracted eye, come together to the same conclusion. But actually, they have been saying it from the very start, while frowning suspiciously from afar: "This will only bring bitchery". Our first dispute and the long-awaited signs of disunion between Zayd and me, serve as a confirmation that "This is indeed bitchery". Gossip initiates a general climate of suspicion and corruption that finally come true, like a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. Actually, this climate is profoundly characteristic of the recent urbanization: this is how the Yemeni society reacts to those new conditions of social intermixture, aggravated by an enduring economic depression. From the start, Zayd conceived his plot in opposition to this climate. The supreme degree of his Islamic righteousness was there to prove it wrong, and that is why he would claim so openly the purity of his love. Zayd's ambition was imbued with political idealism: through my person, by mobilizing his lost and jobless "brothers", he hoped to demonstrate to the West the superiority of Islam as a political model based on love. But still, like a choir in an ancient Greek tragedy, Zayd's social environment announced again and again his inescapable destiny of failure, progressively instilling suspicion into the heart of the plot and finally forcing the protagonists to surrender.

Reflecting on this first field experience was only possible when I began to identify the cultural repertoire that had been mobilized throughout the plot. It happened in 2005 when I read a book called "the Empire of Passion" by Jocelyne Dakhliya (2005) who supervises my PhD research. In the continuity of previous research on political models in Islam, Dakhliya deliberately addresses a critical question: that of the passionate relations between the monarch and his counsellor. She identifies this commonplace thematic as a major recipient for Islamic classical political thought, and questions the circumstances for the disqualification of this thematic in modern Islamic thought.

Strangely enough, I realized that the developments of my alliance with Zayd echoed major structural details in the story of the relationship between Calif Harun al-Rashid and his Persian Vizir Ja'far al-Barmaki: the rumors concerning my eventual religious conversion; the eventuality that I wish to become Calif in the place of the Calif... ; even the dramatic event that concludes the story, when Zayd decides to throw me away from the quarter (Ja'far had his head cut off...).

Following up this discovery, Dakhliya directed me to a range of very recent books in literary history that proved precious to understand the archaeology of the symbolic configuration that I had been confronted to. This historiographical trend follows Edward Saïd's "Orientalism" (1978): it studies the Islamic social construction of the West and its impact on Islamic societies themselves. In recent years those approaches have blended with post-Foucauldian studies, deconstructing sexuality as a separate and autonomous biological domain. In their reflection on sexuality and political forms, they have shown how the construction of gender and sexualities are imbedded in the symbolic construction of identity and difference. What is

more, they have studied the consequences of the encounter with European Christianity on the construction of gender in the public sphere.

In a recent book dedicated to love poetry in the early-modern Ottoman and European culture (2005), Andrews and Kalpakli identify an "Age of the Beloved" spanning from the middle of the XVth century to the beginning of the XVIIth century. In these times, the culture of the beloved was a sign of refinement, associated with the courts of princes and higher strata of society, both in the Ottoman Empire and in Renaissance Europe. Khaled El-Rouayheb makes a similar statement in a book accurately named "Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World" (2005). This refined culture was not equivalent to a generalized apology of the act of sodomy, which is forbidden by Islam; on the contrary, the fact of interpreting love relations between men sexually was viewed as a sign of rudeness and brutality. This higher culture disappears with historical modernity -- at least from the sources that allow for historical study -- at a time when denouncing the sexual mores of the elites becomes a growing form of political contestation. However, such a denunciation had always been a latent possibility in previous times: according to these historians, one of the crucial factors for the empowerment of this argument is the growing encounter with European Christianity. As the circles of power become increasingly aware of their own image as it is reflected -- and deformed -- by Christian observers, this form of denunciation acquires credibility.

## 5. Ashes of an encounter

As we have seen earlier through examples of the current socio-historical context, the problem of "love and abuse" that has been discussed here is central to the way Yemenis think about identity and difference in general. But Islamic societies have experienced profound conceptual shifts<sup>3</sup> when they began to associate identity with Islam, posing Europe as the ultimate Otherness. Those studies<sup>4</sup> are crucial to understand precisely the local effects of the (Western) ethnographic gaze. They enlighten the particular status of the "culture of the beloveds" with respect to social stratification, modernity and the West<sup>5</sup>. Precisely, it is possible to read those historical tensions "from below", provided that we pay close attention to ethnographic contexts: any ethnographic encounter reproduces a structural scheme, produced by misunderstandings that have been integrated over time; they are thus constantly anticipated and in the end confirmed by each new occurrence of encounter.

This is what makes the Islamic "culture of the beloveds" such an *evanescent* culture: Yemenis might experience it in practice, but not account for it in the public sphere. Since he is always expected to make public his (predictable) observations, the encounters of the ethnographer with the "culture of beloveds" are subjected to a social pressure that inevitably causes those encounters to degenerate. Whether it produces small repeated incidental experiences or such a large-scale "affair", the confrontation of a Western ethnographer with the "culture of beloveds" is an implicit *initiation* to the field that leaves him with a bitter taste<sup>6</sup>, feeling guilty: by threatening to cross a forbidden limit, he is reminded of his place as a foreigner with an untold warning that he will be alone bearing the responsibility of his observations.

The final situation described above, with Zayd ostracized and all the rest agreeing to hastily repudiate the whole episode as "bitchery", is paradigmatic of a symbolic configuration where the ethnographer will hopelessly attempt to make society acknowledge that he has seen what

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<sup>3</sup> Those shifts were always initiated from the public sphere; everyday practice are by nature less accessible for historical investigation, hence the necessity for ethnographic scrutiny.

<sup>4</sup> See also an article by George Massad (2002), and his "Desiring Arabs" to be published shortly.

<sup>5</sup> In a book on "gender and sexual anxieties in Iranian modernity" (2005), Najmabadi studies the promotion of a "modern" model for domestic relations between husband and wife. She relates how this transformation came along with a disqualification of the culture of masculine sociability, perceived as "backwarded".

<sup>6</sup> This bitter taste is perceptible in Rabinow's "reflections on fieldwork in Morocco" (1977).



he has seen... In such a situation, "standard" ethnographic reflexivity (Weber 1989) is very hazardous to practice. As in Jeanne Favret-Saada's inquiry on sorcery in rural France (Favret-Saada 1977 : 27), there is no neutral position to speak from. Even addressing the issue with your informants may always be interpreted, with utmost subtlety, as a strategy of seduction...

This first fieldwork had a major impact on my following researching activities in Yemen. In the last weeks of my stay after this edifying experience, I would play the social game with ease, untroubled by the part of seduction in which social relations are always partially imbued. However this practical familiarity did not survive repatriation to France: it underwent a metamorphosis through a process of objectivation that I could only partially achieve. In 2003, the most rewarding mode of pragmatic participation had been the social negotiation of *respect*. But when I returned one year later, the academic treatment that I had dispensed to this social experience had blurred the intuitive frontiers of its territory. My defences were higher than ever and I did not let down my guard: I had become allergic to the slightest hint of seduction, including in relations of hospitality. This represented a major handicap to fieldwork, a "spell" that I did not know how to break. I compensated by a renewed interest for social analysis and social history... But it is only last year in 2006, through the help of the shopkeepers and the "exorcism" of their vulgarity, that I found my way back to the "forms of experience" (Lepetit 1995).

### *Conclusion: veiled ethnographers*

Let us go back to the issue of the condition of women. I have started my talk claiming that men don't speak out because they are blind to this issue. Let me illustrate this with a rapid comparison.

While working on this talk, I read the female ethnographer Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), whose acclaimed "Veiled sentiments" is probably among the most profound and achieved ethnographic insight on the life of women in a tribal society. At the beginning of her book, she recalls some conditions of her entry on the field that, according to her, played a crucial part in her ability to be integrated in Bedouin society: her father (who, as a Palestinian, was familiar with the Arab culture) insisted on accompanying her in the Western Egyptian desert, and personally entrust the chief of the Bedouin camp with the charge of his daughter. She writes :

*" What I had not considered was that respectability was reckoned not just in terms of behaviour in interpersonal interactions but also in the relationship with the larger social world. I had failed to anticipate that people as conservative as the Bedouins, for whom belonging to tribe and family are paramount and the education of girls novel, would assume that a woman alone must have so alienated her family, especially her male kin, that they no longer cared about her. (...) By accompanying me, my father hoped to lay any such suspicions to rest." (p. 12)*

Well, this account was a sort of revelation for me, because my father did not accompany me on the field. I was 23 at the time and I landed in this city "out of the blue". My motivations for choosing the city of Taiz was precisely that virtually no other French or Westerner would be living there other than me, and so I thought integration would be easier, both socially and linguistically. Bluntly formulated, I did not take my "tribe" with me... My choice to work in an urban area was motivated by my fear that affinities would be harder to find with rural Yemenis. I conceived fieldwork more or less consciously as an *adoption*, and probably my behaviour betrayed this.

Given those conditions as a whole, I had very narrow margin for action: I had to get integrated by putting myself under authority of someone, and then breaking free from this

authority meant that I would be called a “bitch”. I think it would all have been simpler if I had perceived this from the start: in any case, the conditions of arrival of an ethnographer in the field are never neutral from the point of view of kinship (even though some institutions, where male Westerners are most welcome, are historically constructed on the illusion of this neutrality). This comparison demonstrates how our “Western worldview”, in spite of all, is more or less structured by a *biological* conception of sexes, which generates a great amount of mystification when it comes to *gender* (this includes our non-pragmatic and essentialist views on homosexuality). The degree of this biological *a priori* is such, that it seems perfectly rational to us to believe in men's inferior cognitive ability to perceive what gender is made of in a distant society... This might well be what Yemenis mean when they say that we treat “our women” as *sexual objects*.

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