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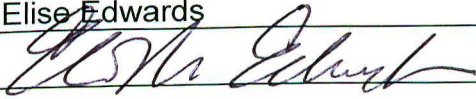
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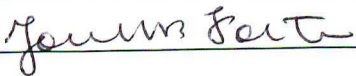
Applicant Patrick Edward Thevenow
(Name as it is to appear on diploma)

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Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Dr. Elise Edwards  5/8/12
Date

Reader(s) Dr. Jon Porter  3-11-12
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Coffee and Dates: Perceptions of Life in the Modern Middle East

قهوة و تمر: مدركان عن حياة في الشرق الأوسط عصرى

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History and Anthropology

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Patrick Edward Thevenow

May 4, 2012

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Introduction

Old men were everywhere. The Nizwa Souq was crawling with them as they wandered through the labyrinth of shops to converse, eat dates, and drink coffee. Instantly, scenes from Wilfred Thesiger's "Arabian Sands" came to mind as the old men of the souq went about their daily business. This was the first time I had truly been on my own in Oman—away from my school and the Americans there, away from the modern conveniences of Muscat—yet as my initial sense of bewilderment subsided, I began to realize this research was going to change the course of my life. The men I met in Nizwa would show me life in the Middle East from a perspective I had never before considered; I was allowed an intimate glimpse of daily life for these old men. They welcomed me into their group, their "qawha brotherhood" as I would later term it, and permitted me to experience their daily activities in a way few are allowed to. Now, nearly two years later, those precious days I spent in Nizwa, along with time spent on a 2011 return trip, have remained the epicenter of my academic pursuits. Understanding life in this part of the world has become a central pillar of my research interests as I have honed the focus of my studies throughout my undergraduate career. Perceptions of these men and the vanishing lifestyle they represent have filled countless hours of thought and discussion as I have attempted to better understand what I experienced in Nizwa and share it with the others.

My love affair with the Middle East was cemented during my first visit to the region as a tourist in Egypt after graduating high school. Faces passed me everywhere I went, daily life surrounded me, yet I felt as though all of this was beyond my grasp to understand from my position at the time. The person I was then wanted to experience

the “real” Middle East, but looking back now I must ask what I considered to be life the “real” Middle East? Certainly, I had a perception of what it was, but that is all it was: a perception. Now, as I am finishing my undergraduate studies, I am still attempting to understand the “real” Middle East, but coming to a definition of it is an impossible task.

My intrigue with uncovering the “real” Middle East led me to study abroad in the Sultanate of Oman during my sophomore year. I spent the semester living with an Omani family and planning for the month of research and writing that would conclude my time in the country. Before arriving in Oman, I had a very general sense of what I wanted to accomplish—upon leaving the country I had found an angle for my research work in the study of male social interactions. My work there focused on the interactions of old men who socialize in the souq of Nizwa, Oman. The time I spent working with the old men of Nizwa Souq provided me with a body of research from which I have been able to dramatically expand my research interests. My work has helped me to answer some of the basic questions I originally had, yet in the process has brought up more in-depth and intellectually stimulating questions that, through proper examination, will help me to better understand what the “real” Middle East encompasses. How has perception influenced the construction of Middle Eastern stereotypes? Further, what role do the people and governments represented by this image have in creating it? Do social interactions in the Middle East influence how this part of the world is viewed? In the time since my first encounter with Oman, I have developed these interests well beyond the level of a typical undergraduate student in an attempt to understand more complex facets of life in the Middle East, from not only a western point of view, but an Arab perspective as well. My work now encompasses

discourses of identity and perception, though this by no means exhausts my possible angles of inquiry. The men of Nizwa have provided me with a specialized area of study within the Middle East that can be used to better understand social interactions and identity in Oman and throughout the Arab world.

Through an intense analysis of my original fieldwork in Oman, I have attempted to further understand social interactions and identity through several large research projects. My first, "The Qawha Brotherhood: A Glimpse of Daily Life in Nizwa Souq," was largely a narrative ethnography of daily social interactions over coffee and dates between men in Nizwa. Upon my return to the United States, I expanded my understanding of the Middle East through continued dialogue with this work. "Arabian Perceptions" was the result of my continued study. With this, I examined the roots of historical and contemporary perceptions of the Middle East through engaging my own fieldwork with work conducted in Arabia largely before oil revenues began to work upon the culture. Still seeking to enhance my understanding of the Middle East, I returned to Oman with scholarship funding in the summer of 2011 to conduct further research for this thesis. In addition to working with the same men in Nizwa, I spent time examining the dynamics of social interactions, similar to those I observed in Oman, in Iraq and Lebanon in order to increase my understanding of this vital part of life in other regions of the Middle East. My most recent experiences in the Middle East have increased my drive to re-examine, expand, and complicate my undergraduate research; all of which has driven me to compile this thesis.

As a student of anthropology and history, cultural differences and transformation have been the core of my studies. Building from this anthropological

lens and my desire to better understand the culture and people of the Middle East, my studies have left me fascinated with the discourses through which identities are created and perceived from both within and without a culture.

Spurred by these questions, I have created the work you are now reading. It is my sincere desire that through stories of everyday life this work will help to soften the severe eye many people often cast upon this part of the world. Though I discuss life in many different parts of the Middle East, the core of this story is built around the old men of Nizwa, Oman. Without their acceptance and tolerance of my work, I would have never been able to understand their daily life in the personal way I have. These men have put a face on life there; a face I hope will come to epitomize daily life for others as well. Without their help, this thesis would not exist. The people I have come into contact with and the friends I have made while conducting this research have assisted me greatly and for that I am eternally grateful. My thanks go out to the old men and shopkeepers of Nizwa Souq for welcoming me as they did. I would not have been able to learn what I did without their cooperation and openness towards having an American student join them in their day to day activities. Further, I cannot forget to mention the students in Nizwa who allowed me to sleep on their floor while I conducted my research; Faisal al-Aufy and Sultan al-Farsi for assisting me with translation; and Sultan al-Hashmi at Sultan Qaboos University, Jon Porter at Butler University for serving as a thesis reader, Alex Boodrookas, Steve Dipangrazio, and a host of other individuals. Elise Edwards, my research advisor at Butler University, has been an incredible help in the process of creating this thesis. Her guidance in conducting my research, both in the field and at home, has been second to none.

Additionally, I must mention the financial assistance given to me by Butler University's Fairbanks Foundation that enabled me to return to the Middle East for continuing research in the summer of 2011. It is impossible for me to name everyone who has helped me with this project, but their assistance has all been greatly appreciated. It has led to me coming to a greater understanding of both myself and the Middle East in a way few have the opportunity to experience—an understanding I now hope to share with those who are unable to experience it first hand.

I struggled with how to open this collection of stories. While the work is based on my time in Oman, I decided to open with an entirely different story. Though Oman has, no doubt, influenced my ideas on perception and the Middle East more than anything, my visit to Iraq has greatly impacted by thoughts on life in this part of the world. Ethnographies, at times, follow a formula in how they discuss the subject of their study. "Many ethnographies open with the trope of arrival. [...] Second books on the same community often begin with the image of return and the radical changes that author encounters after a long absence. I could not, however, follow this formula because less than a year had passed since my last visit [...]"¹ The scope of my work is not large enough to necessitate the use of a formula like this. Instead, I feel opening with an account of my experiences in Iraq is appropriate, as the reasons behind my trip to Iraq epitomize everything I have sought to find in my pursuit of studying the Middle East. No work would be complete without some examination of the author's motives and background, which all help to better position and clarify the arguments I make with this thesis.

¹ Abu Lughod, Lila. *Veiled Sentiments*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), XV.

Chapter One
Perceptions

I had finally found what I was looking for in Iraq. There were no busses of tourists speeding down the roads, nor were there any Americans in sight—well, besides the one carrying a rifle at the road checkpoint I had just passed through. The image of the Middle East built in my head was based upon a childhood of watching Indiana Jones and hearing romanticized stories of my Grandmother's year living in Jordan, but everywhere I had been until this point was filled with people from the outside world. I wanted the Indiana Jones experience, the Wilfred Thesiger and Lawrence of Arabia experience. I wanted to wander through a labyrinth of streets and be the only foreigner in sight. Oman had come close, very close, but there was still something missing from the months I lived there. My yearning to experience the Middle East this way was rooted not only in the romanticized historical view I have of the region, but in my desire to do something crazy and go somewhere perceived as dangerous. What better place to go than Iraq? My mind was made up and nothing could change it—so it was then at 21 years old and completely on my own that I boarded a plane from Beirut to Erbil with absolutely no idea of what I was getting myself into.

What I would experience over the four days I spent in country would completely change the way I looked at Iraq. Eight years of perceptions and romanticism created by continual news reports of violence were washed away by the reality of Iraq. No longer was Iraq only what I saw on the news, but rather a living reality sprawled before me. It was what I had wanted to find since ever setting first foot in the Middle East—someplace few people outside of the region dared to come and, to me, as close to a culture unmolested by tourism as possible. Granted all of this

was beginning to change, but in June of 2011 American troops were still manning the roads outside of Kirkuk and I was smack in the middle of it.

I arrived in Erbil late in the night on June 13. Erbil International Airport was a massive, abandoned stone tomb. Every footstep of my fellow travelers echoed through the hallways. It was quite different than what I had expected, but then again I wasn't sure what I was expecting. I was more nervous than anything arriving there, I mean, I was in Iraq. I have grown up with Iraq on the TV... and not for good reasons; Iraq is a war zone. Customs was the quickest I have ever been through. While other people in lines around me were grilled with questions, as soon as the customs official saw my blue passport with its embossed golden eagle he smiled, entered my information into the computer, took my picture, put two stamps on page nineteen, and I was on my way. I was in Iraq.

I was greeted with that now familiar blast of warm air which never fails to meet me upon arrival in any Middle Eastern country. Exiting the airport I was looking out upon a vast plain of dead grass. Not much of a welcome. That would change as I got into the city and I soon found myself the center of attention wherever I went. While I have been used to doing the sightseeing when I travel, in this moment I became the sight. The media exposure I have had to the country suggested to me it would be fraught with dangers, but what I discovered were a kind and welcoming people, ever glad to make me feel overwhelmingly accepted in their country. Their kindness was bred out of a return to normalcy that my presence suggested; a return to a time when seeing a Westerner didn't necessarily entail him carrying a rifle and riding in an armored car. Inasmuch as I was a sight to the Iraqis, the city was a sight to me. It was

laid out in a manner similar to many other Middle Eastern cities, but the one difference here was the lack of Western outsiders. It was as purely Middle Eastern as I could hope to find—daily life at its best. It epitomized the romanticism of the Arab world I had long sought to find, yet was still filled with the realities of life in this part of the world I had long since accepted; most obviously seen in the Coca Cola banners hung outside many of the small restaurants I passed.

The Middle East has long been a source of mystery and intrigue for Western audiences. In order to understand why certain stereotypes have been created as they have, one must trace them to their roots. Through exposing realities, both contemporary and historical, behind perceived images, the culture of the Middle East can be more clearly understood as the misperceptions and images which have long defined Arabia are replaced with knowledge of reality. In order to help with this, I will utilize a theoretical framework derived from the work of Jean Baudrillard in order to examine the creation of an Arabian simulacrum by outside observers through the manipulation of stereotypes created by perceived images. Looking at social interactions helps to shape perceptions of life in Arabia as they reflect a direct connection to both an earlier time and the ever changing present. Beyond this connection with past and present, different forms of social interaction highlight the changes which are currently taking place in Middle Eastern culture. Shifting demographics have produced a divide between young and old in the Middle East which has become an increasingly critical factor to understand as young people become more important in shaping the future of this part of the world. Through drawing upon many different anthropological and historical sources, in addition to original ethnographic

fieldwork in the Sultanate of Oman, a better understanding of the reality, not just perceived reality, of daily life in the Middle East is obtainable.

Life in the Middle East reflects a strong connection to tradition and remains more visibly connected than some other cultures. One of the most important connections with tradition, or the link with history we perceive as tradition, is found within the social interactions of daily life. Through understanding the ways in which members of a society interact with one another, the intricacies of that culture become more easily understood. The cross-cultural similarities that exist in the simplicity of social interactions enable people to connect on a basic level, thus fostering mutual understanding. Similarities between interaction in Western and Middle Eastern markets are one example of the basic forms of interaction that exist across different cultures. When observing a culture from without, though, the perceived images that define a society pose certain challenges. What something is, and what something is perceived to be are two entirely separate entities. It is impossible fully understand a society through the cultural snapshots presented through news, popular culture, or literature, and these images portraying the modern Middle East fit within certain stereotypes. Images demonstrate what people want to see coming from this region of the world. As the culture of the Middle East changes with time, new images will help to create different perceptions of life in this part of the world.

Images such as these create a simulacrum of Middle Eastern reality. Jean Baudrillard's thoughts on simulations describe the creation of a hyperreal image and how it replaces the real:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is,

an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced.²

This idea is critical to understanding why stereotypes originate and persist within the collective conscious of a population. So long as images which come from the broadcaster's image of the Middle East represent the same ideas, these perceptions will remain built around a simulation of reality; a hyperreality. Through examining the roots of these images, though, physical reality, and "all its vicissitudes,"³ becomes increasingly tangible and these long held perceptions can be replaced by a deeper understanding of reality.

Dangers posed by interpretation can frequently be encountered when relying upon the perceptions of others to formulate opinions. While these dangers can be mitigated, to an extent, through careful examination of multiple sources of information, much of what is broadcast from the Middle East is far from the reality of daily life. "Much of what the rest of the world sees in the Islamic world, particularly the Arab states, is viewed through a filter of myth and stereotyping."⁴ Events such as the Israel-Palestine conflict and war in Iraq become ingrained in the conscious of those who view them and these images manifest themselves as the only representations of the Arab world available to many people. It is no doubt, then, stereotypes feed upon the violence so commonly seen in the Middle East. The mundane reality of daily life is little noted, yet the essence of daily life is the very foundation of Middle Eastern culture.

² Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 4.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Seib, Phillip. *The Al Jazeera Effect*, (Washington: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008), 12.

Violence captivates audiences in a way daily life cannot. Scenes of life are fleeting, but scenes of death become immortalized in public memory.

Most Americans know little of the Arab people, their customs, or their accomplishments. The results of a national poll revealing American perceptions of Arabs were published by the Washington-based *Middle East Journal*. 'Barbaric and cruel,' 'treacherous,' 'warlike,' 'rich,' and 'mistreaters of women' were descriptions frequently used. Many myths perpetrated by writers for television and film, novelists, cartoonists, and others promote false perceptions. Arabs are portrayed as extremely wealthy, as sex maniacs and white slavers. They are described as terrorists, their society as violent, and their religion, Islam, as radical.⁵

Through these perceptions, the created stereotype becomes "staggeringly tenacious in its hold over rational thinking."⁶ Distance surely plays a role in the creation of these stereotypes, as relatively few Americans have any direct interaction with ordinary Middle Eastern culture. "The greater the distance we are from any group, including Arabs, the greater the reliance upon preconceived images about that group."⁷ With this in mind, the value of understanding daily life in the Middle East becomes self evident.

Stereotypes that define the Arab world for foreigners have been built around a selection of captivating images. The romanticism of Middle Eastern culture that once pervaded Western thought has now been replaced by perceived notions of a violent and ignorant culture, while the traditional ways of life, such as the prolific images of life in the desert, that have served as the foundation for earlier stereotypes of the Middle East have begun to vanish. As this way of life has disappeared over the last several decades, new perceptions of culture have been created from the images of a vastly different Arab way of life. Stories such as that of T. E. Lawrence no longer come from the Middle

⁵ Shaheen, Jack G. "Media Coverage of the Middle East: Perception and Foreign Policy," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (V. 482, Nov., 1985), 162.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

East; rather, stories of suicide bombings and civil unrest paint a picture of daily life continually marred by violence. While there is truth to these images, they are not the whole truth. As the nomadic and traditional ways of life that have long served as the basis of Middle Eastern perceptions disappear, new images have created a modern Arab simulacrum removed from reality.

Chapter Two
Basim

My entrance into the qawha brotherhood began with a short conversation in the failing light of a spring night in Nizwa Souq. On my third day of observing the happenings of the souq I struck up a short conversation with an ancient looking man named Basim. His worn face somewhat resembled the mummy of Tutankhamun; dark and wrinkled, with a white tuft of beard on his chin. His dress was similar to the rest of the men in the souq, a white *dishdasha* and *mussar* adorned with a simple green vine design. I had noticed him over the past few days as a regular in the souq and was determined to start a conversation with him. A few other old men had just walked away, leaving him alone on the stone bench. He stared out at the scene in front of him: fruit trucks to his left and fish on his right, with the stench of unrefrigerated fish on a 110 degree day pervaded the air. Flies were everywhere. They seemed to descend on most every living thing, myself included, though Basim did not seem to mind them.

“Salaam aleykum,” I said in greeting as I took a seat beside him.

“Wa aleykum salaam,” he returned in a hard to understand, deep growl of a voice. He seemed friendly enough, though.

“Kaif halleck? Shay ackbar? Shay alum? [How are you? Is there any news? Anything going on?]” I sputtered.

A crooked smile lit up his face as I continued speaking in Arabic. With a slight chuckle he responded in the usual manner, “Ma shay ackbar, ma shay alum [No news, nothing is happening],” before asking the same of me.

As I was replying another man shuffled by, stopping to talk with Basim. While they engage in an incomprehensible conversation, the man begins to cut chunks from a

cucumber he is holding in his right hand. The conversation ceases as he focuses all of his attention on the cucumber, all while cucumber chunks are still flying into the street. This short old man holds the cucumber close to his face, examining it. When he is finally satisfied with it, he bites off a chunk with a sharp crack and walks on, leaving Basim and I alone on the bench. We sit quietly, with nothing to say. People pass us and Basim speaks to them, though they rarely acknowledge him. Finally I had enough of the awkward silence.

“Messmook? [What is your name?]”

“Mmmm?” he replies in confusion. I repeat my question and he points to himself.

“Aowa, enta [Yes, you],” I say.

“Esme Basim. Messmook? [My name is Basim, what is yours?]”

“Esme Batrik,” I said, using the Arabicized version of my name to make it easier to pronounce. It didn’t help.

“Babblit?” he said confused.

“Batrik,” I said clearly.

“Babbik?”

“Batrik,” I say once again, laughing. He begins to chuckle as well. He takes another try at my name.

“Babrik?”

“Ehhh, nefsashay,” I say, not knowing the Arabic for “close enough” I tell him it’s the same thing. The laughter from this situation seemed to diffuse any tension between us and I pushed on with more conversation. I told him about myself, where I

was from, where I studied, what I studied, and what I was doing in the souq. I decided to try my luck with more of the local dialect.

“Kaif al housch wa bousch? [How are the goats and camels?]”

His reply was a chuckle and shrug of the shoulders. Shortly thereafter he stood and walked off, without a word, only stopping to briefly chat with other groups of men before disappearing from sight.

Chapter Three
First Contact

The sun beat down upon the hot sidewalk as an old man walked across it. His face was dark and his walk slow, but he kept moving. He crossed the courtyard of this part of the souq and took a seat on a mat with several other old men in front of a small shop. Each was dressed in the same manner with a *dishdasha* and *kuma* or *mussar*. The man I had watched join this group would be one of many who would come and go as I befriended this group; however my attention was quickly drawn to the man sitting in the doorway of the shop. He wore a wrinkled white *dishdasha* and his head was wrapped in a simple white *mussar*. He was a big man by Omani standards, not overweight, simply muscular. His large nose was rounded and his white beard was pierced by a grey streak running through the middle. His eyes were the most striking feature on his face, large and friendly. They seemed welcoming and caring. His face was well preserved compared to the other men, though he did not seem to be as old as them, either. The corners of his eyes were marked with crow's feet, but his face was generally smooth and light, at least compared to the faces of the company he kept.

His name is Atif and he works as a part time tailor—though his younger years were spent in the Omani Armed Forces. Behind him is the small, crowded one room shop he works from, though it is more of a storage closet than a shop. The lower shelves have different types of sewing machines in various states of disrepair. Chaos reigns inside this room, but it is a controlled chaos. Atif knows where everything is. He rarely sells anything, but when he does he knows exactly where everything is. Of everything in his shop, it seems he prizes his sewing machine above all else. It is a Chinese model, but it looks nearly identical to what would have been seen in the early

twentieth century, except with the addition of an electric motor. Today, though, he is not inside the shop. He sits upon the red and white mat in front with the rest of the men. These men talk amongst each other and to many people who walk by, though there is little need for them to initiate conversation with those passing by as the passersby do so before the old men. They seem to be a fixture of the souq, gathering in the same place every morning.

Placed in the middle of the red and white mat are a thermos of coffee, a bucket of dates, and a small silver bowl of water. The strong, distinct smell of Omani coffee pervades the area. The tray holding the date bucket is lined with a plastic bag and upon it rest countless date pits. Grabbing dates directly from the bucket, each man crushes it between his right thumb and forefinger to remove the pit and soften the date before absentmindedly chucking it into his mouth and grabbing another as the conversation goes on around them. The rough, dry hands of the old men slowly eat date after date as they sit upon the mat in front of Atif's shop.

Chapter Four
Historical Perceptions

Daily life in the Middle East has changed radically over the past sixty years. The introduction of cars, the discovery of oil, and increasing exposure to non-Arab cultures have brought about drastic changes in how contemporary Arab life plays out. As a wave of youth-led protests and revolutions favoring democracy spread across the Middle East in 2011, understanding the divide between old and young becomes even more critical. Today's generation has grown up in a world far removed from that of its forbears. The Middle East of 1940 looked little like the Middle East of the present thanks to advances in communication, travel, and most importantly, the revenue derived from sales of oil. Throughout Arabia, the discovery of oil brought about changes which have caused the ways of life of older generations to disappear forever. Some suggest, "the changes which occurred in the space of a decade or two were as great as those which occurred in Britain between the early Middle Ages and the present day."⁸ A comprehensive analysis of Arab life pre-oil and post-oil is beyond the scope of this research; however, by focusing on the social interactions of men in each generation the effects of change become more visible. While the Middle East may look superficially different from western cultures, the common cultural denominator found in social interactions brings the reality of the Middle East closer to home than a stereotype ever could.

Wilfred Thesiger travelled across the interior deserts of Southern Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen from 1945 to 1950 before much of that remote region had been charted by Europeans. His record of the years he spent living with the Bedu presents an

⁸ Thesiger, Wilfred. *Arabian Sands*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 5.

image of a way of life little noted by outsiders. His interactions and involvement in daily Arab life stand in sharp contrast to the way of life now visible in the modern Middle East. Young people are now coming of age in an environment vastly different than that of their grandfathers. Though life is now undoubtedly different, a vestige of it remains in the social interactions and lifestyles of older generations. A comparison of this way of life, built upon my ethnographic fieldwork in the same region as Thesiger's travels, with what was experienced sixty years prior will chart the changes which have taken place in the Middle East and shed light upon the differing mindset of young and old. Understanding the changes between young and old generations of Arabs, in this instance through a case study of Oman, is pivotal to understanding the dynamics of the modern Middle East.

Social interaction for old men in the Sultanate of Oman is focused around the ritual of qawha. Qawha, in modern standard Arabic, simply means coffee. In Oman, however, qawha encompasses an entire traditional custom and social function of daily meetings over coffee and dates that is repeated by thousands of Omani men every day. The daily routines of Omani men, qawha included, may seem trivial, but these interactions form a key part of traditional Omani society. This practice is firmly rooted within Oman and while some aspects of it have changed over time, one thing has remained constant: it remains a fundamental form of public interaction between men. Thesiger noted the importance of coffee and dates in many interactions with Arabs, such as this case with the *wali*, or regional governor, of Salalah, Oman: "I greeted him in Arabic, and before we started our discussion I ate a few dates and drank three cups of

bitter black coffee handed to me by one of [the *wali*'s] retainers.”⁹ This meeting took place in 1945, yet meetings taking place in modern Oman are still prefaced by the ritual of qawha. When I met with different faculty at Oman’s Nizwa University in 2010 we shared qawha at the opening of each meeting.¹⁰ Still today in most every office or shop a bowl of dates and a thermos of coffee are produced before any discussion or business can begin.

Though qawha is part of many different meetings, today traditional qawha is best preserved in the souqs (marketplaces) of the Middle East. These marketplaces have long been centers of trade and commerce and have played an important role in daily life throughout history. Despite their importance, they have remained little studied. The social interactions which take place within an Arab souq are prime examples of interactions amongst older men. The souq is seen as a bastion of tradition by some. Tourism officials in the Middle East advertise souqs with the image that “to walk around the bazaar ‘is like nothing else in the world. Experiencing it is to experience the East at its most romantic: it is the stuff that travelers’ tales are made of.’ In a booklet published by the Syrian Ministry of Tourism the covered Aleppo market alleys are said to be ‘living museums which depict medieval life.’”¹¹ In Oman, the Nizwa Souq is home to a thriving population of old men who gather every morning for

⁹ Thesiger, *Sands*, 45.

¹⁰ This data comes from my personal ethnographic fieldwork in the Sultanate of Oman studying social interactions between both young and old Omanis. The data was collected between January and May, 2010, in part for an independent research project for the School for International Training Oman. During this time I lived with an Omani family and witnessed many aspects of daily life with an intimacy few have the opportunity to experience. Further, time was spent outside of Oman, particularly in Qatar, and fieldwork from my time in this country will be discussed later in this honors thesis. I returned to Oman for further fieldwork in 2011 in order to gather more information on Omani qawha customs. This new research continues to support what I saw during my first stay in Oman.

¹¹ Rabo, Annika. *A Shop of One's Own: Independence and Reputation Among Traders in Aleppo*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 6.

qawha with each other. The interactions that take place amongst older generations everyday in Nizwa Souq have changed little over time. This is an old man's ritual. No young people are typically to be found loitering in this part of the souq. Different places and different times mark the gathering habits of the younger generation.

Besides social interaction, few men have any other purpose in coming to the souq, as it provides a public space for social interaction which is not found in the home. Nur Elmessiri and Nigel Ryan, in a study of Souq Al-Imam Al-Shafei in Egypt, found the people who gathered there to sell things, junk in this case, did not truly come to sell things. They gathered, loitered, and spent their time in the souq for a lack of anything else to do. The items laid out for sale served only as an excuse for them to be there. "The 18-year old is loitering. He can do so from Wednesday afternoon to Friday evening because these are the hours of the market. If he is loitering with intent, the intention is to loiter rather than to sell the few objects that lie on the ground in front of him. He is passing time, as are many of his putative customers."¹²

The people at this souq in Egypt gathered there because it was the most attractive way of spending their time. No attractive means of social interaction were to be found in the home, so they came to find it at the souq. The vast majority of men at Nizwa Souq do not gather there to sell anything, so that cannot be their reason for loitering. In place of selling random objects, these men have qawha. Qawha serves as the visible purpose for coming to the souq. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word "loiter" thusly: "to delay an activity with idle stops and pauses; to remain in

¹² Elmessiri, Nur, and Nigel Ryan, "Arms Full of Things: Souq Al-Imam Al-Shafei at the Southern Cemetery," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (V. 21, 2001), 11.

an area for no obvious reason.”¹³ The men are loitering in every sense of the word; however, they have found a something in qawha to substantiate their loitering, though it does not necessarily provide them with purpose; selling random objects gave those who came to Souq Al-Imam Al-Shafei a reason to loiter in the same sense.

Conversation is a crucial aspect of the qawha ritual for the old men in Nizwa Souq. Qawha is not qawha without conversation and any subject is fair grounds for discussion around the coffee pot. Thesiger noted the importance of conversation amongst the Bedu during his travels and the same feelings towards conversation hold true amongst the men in Nizwa. “After dinner we sat round and talked, the favourite occupation of the Bedu. They are unflagging talkers. A man will tell the same story half a dozen times in a couple of months to the same people and they will sit and listen with apparent interest. They find it an almost unendurable hardship to keep silent.”¹⁴ Many of the topics discussed over modern day qawha could easily have been discussed during Thesiger’s time, or earlier: the *felaj* water channels, farming, market prices, and the date harvest, are all subjects I heard discussed over qawha. Further, marriage dowries and their ever increasing costs are a topic of discussion. Men complain about how expensive it is to take one wife, yet alone multiple wives. Certainly the antiquity of these subjects, and their prominence in modern conversation, places them within the possible boundaries of historical qawha conversation. While we cannot guarantee that how these subjects have been talked about has not changed with time, their continued importance substantiates their use as a comparison between historical and modern conversation.

¹³ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2008.

¹⁴ Thesiger, *Sands*, 86.

During his years in the desert, Thesiger frequently noted topics of conversation amongst groups accompanying him. "Later my companions spoke of camels and grazing, and of how to cure mange, of the price of flour in Salala[h], of when the dhows might be expected to arrive there with dates, and of an old man who had died recently in Ghaidat on the Mahra coast."¹⁵ Their discussion seems no different from what is discussed still today in Nizwa Souq. Thesiger continued to note more of this particular conversation:

Musallim spoke of the festivities he had watched at a slave's wedding in Salala, and bin Turkia described the feasting and dancing at a recent circumcision ceremony among the Mahra. Said said, 'By God, Ali's son made a fuss when they cut him. He cried out like a woman.' The others laughed, and some of them exclaimed, 'God blacken his face!' [...] Musallim next told a long story about an oryx hunt, which I had heard at least three times before.¹⁶

The conversation in Nizwa souq is frequently repetitive and old news is at times discussed more than new news. The questions I was asked and stories told by the old men in Nizwa were repeated multiple times.¹⁷ The similarities to conversations of the pre-oil Middle East demonstrates the ties the men of Nizwa Souq retain with their past. The lifestyles and social interactions of these old men consistently reflect their history and the culture in which they came of age.

¹⁵ Thesiger, *Sands*, 124.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

Chapter Five
Cherub Mai

“Cherub mai [would you like a drink]?” said a voice, startling me from my writing. I looked up to see several of the men from the mat standing near their water cooler only feet from me. Basim, the man I had met the night before, was there offering me a glass of water. He wasn’t the only one standing, though, as several others had joined him, including the shopkeeper.

“Shukran [thank you],” I said, thanking him as I took the glass from his slightly trembling hands. As I drank from the large glass cup any awkwardness which may have existed as a result of my foreign presence seemed to dissipate and the men smiled and talked amongst themselves. Once I finish off this glass of water another man refilled it and asked if I would like another drink. I politely turn him down, shaking my hands in the Omani fashion. He shrugs his shoulders and downs the glass before passing it on to the next person. A few more men fill the glass to drink, first offering it to me before drinking it themselves.

“Salaam aleykum! Kaif hallek? Ahamdidullah! Zane! Shay ackbar? Shay alum? Ma shay, ma shay, ahamdidullah,” come the long strings of welcoming words flowing from their mouths. I reply back as fast as I can, shaking different hands as fast as I am speaking to them. They begin telling me their names; though through thick accents and quick speaking I am unable to understand most. Their faces are all dark and weather beaten, each telling its own story. Friendly eyes are everywhere as we strike up simple conversation. It has taken four days for them to become interested in my presence, though I believe Basim has told them about me already. He remembered me from the night before, when they asked where I was from he answered for me:

“Amreekeeah!” he said excitedly as they all nodded their heads in approval.

I scarcely have time to ask them questions as they keep talking to me and I am simply trying to keep my answers straight. After the initial greetings and questions are out of the way I ask if anyone speaks English, receiving a resounding no for an answer. This was going to make research more difficult. I was expecting a few of them to speak English, but it didn't seem I was going to have any luck there. When the chatter died down many of the men walked off, including the shop keeper. There were only two men left and they returned to the mat.

Several minutes later, while I was still taking notes on the previous encounter, one of the men from the mat came back to the water cooler. He poured a glass of water and offered it to me, the cold water overflowing from the glass mug. I politely turn it down and he quickly downs the entire glass.

“Hello! How are you?” he says in English to me. In a fit of surprise I reply back to him in Arabic. I ask if he speaks English, but he says no. He only know a few odd words. We begin to strike up a conversation in Arabic. His name is Muhammad. We speak of the Arabic language and how difficult it is for me. I tell him I had only been studying Arabic for a few months in Muscat.

“Ahhh! Muscat! Mumtaz [excellent]!”

Many of his sentences are ended with the words “slowly, slowly” in English. He doesn't seem to know what they mean, but uses them with a great grin on his face, simply enjoying being able to use them in conversation with someone who speaks English.

“Kaif ousratika [how is your family]?” I ask about his family.

“Zane, zane [well, well].”

“Kim zowjah [how many wives do you have]? Chicos [children]?” I ask in an attempt to find out about his family. He replies that he has one wife, ten children, and four grandchildren before asking me if I was married.

The beginning of the conversation went along much of the same style as many others I had during the course of my first stay in Nizwa. All of the men were curious about me, my family, my past, where I studied, what I thought of Oman. They would ask me many questions about America and the weather there. Nothing ever went really deep, but I believe that was due to the language barrier. The men did not seem too terribly interested in deep topics, though. Much of what was discussed was full of laughter and jokes, though serious moments did occur.

Muhammad spoke a lot about reading, writing, and studying Arabic. He used many different words to describe the language to me. After we had surpassed my Arabic vocabulary for questions and answers on the subject, he tried pronouncing my name. It was not an easy task for him, just as it was not an easy task for Basim. He laughed as I tried to correct him, but I quickly grabbed my pen and paper and wrote out my name in Arabic. He took my notepad and carefully eyed it, slowly sounding out the letters.

“Batrik!”

I nod. He takes my pen and holds it tightly as he puts it to the paper. His words appeared to be nothing more than scribbles as he concentrated on writing out his own name, paying attention to nothing else. As he wrote he pursed his lips tightly together and his face became constipated with concentration. The wrinkles and crow’s feet

around his eyes seeminly told the story of long years spent under the beating Omani sun. His hair is frizzy, at least the little that is not covered by his *kuma*. After he finishes writing he hands me the notebook.

“Mā salaama [good bye]. I’m sorry,” he quickly says as he gets up and walks off.

Obviously he does not understand the meaning of “I’m sorry”—his voice is delightfully cheerful: I wonder where in the many years of his history he picked up that phrase. I wish I could speak more with him about his past, but am unable to defeat the language barrier in order to do so.

Chapter Six
Nizwa Souq

Nizwa Souq is home to several different groups of men gathering in the same general area, but in separate spaces. Every so often they would become involved in discussions with men in other groups, but they seldom moved from their own meeting place to do so. In as loud a voice as the old men could muster they would shout across the open plaza in the center of the souq. Entire conversations are carried on like this, echoing Thesiger's experience with Arab conversation in the desert. "Bedu always shout at each other, even if they are only a few feet apart. Everyone could therefore hear what was being said by everyone else in the camp, and anyone who was interested in a conversation round another fire could join in from where he was sitting."¹⁸ While the setting may be different, the actions remain the same. Modern day conversations in Nizwa I observed echo the style of conversations noted by Thesiger over sixty years ago. These Nizwa men would have been boys then, but in growing up around that culture they adapted it to their own use. Now in their old age they continue to utilize the same mannerisms and style of social interaction witnessed amongst their fathers.

The social interactions between older generations of Arab men are not unique to the Middle East. While their form of interaction, qawha, may be unique, social interaction in marketplaces is found across the United States. Drawing such a direct parallel with American society brings the realities of the Middle East much closer to home. This style of Arab social interaction can be likened to the American men who gather around the courthouse square or at the farmers' market. Both of these locations serve a similar purpose to Nizwa Souq, and the interactions of the people who gather

¹⁸ Thesiger, *Sands*, 62.

there seemingly fill the same role as the interactions of the Nizwa men. A study on farmers' markets in the United States showed their use as a means of social exchange. A fur market in Indiana sees more sellers than buyers show up, though the market seems to have taken on a purpose not entirely related to buying and selling: "Although prices average only 25 cents a pelt, there seems to be little danger that the market will die out; the sport of dickering over prices and the social exchange are enough to perpetuate it."¹⁹ Though this account is dated, it still demonstrates the similarities that exist between the traditional role of markets in the United States and Oman. If the Nizwa Souq follows the same pattern as this fur market, there should be little chance of it fading away, though perhaps the forms of social interaction will change over time. There are more men who gather in the souq than there are merchants and their social exchange with everyone there seems to be more than enough to sustain the souq beyond simple commercial sales. "The market was not drowned out [by] the cacophony of mass commercial produce distribution. Perhaps it is merely as Sir Halford Mackinder once wrote, 'Among geographers it is a commonplace that no human settlement is more difficult to supplant than an established market.'"²⁰

While this comparison between American and Middle Eastern public space is not critical, it helps establish common points of reference between the two cultures that are crucial to better understanding similarities between social interactions in each country. Daily meetings over coffee are not as unique an aspect of Arab culture that they cannot be identified with by people far removed from this way of life.

Descriptions of the use of public space around courthouse squares in the United States

¹⁹ Pyle, Jane, "Farmers' Markets in the United States: Functional Anachronisms," *Geographical Review*, (V. 61, N. 2, Apr., 1971), 194.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 196.

could be perfect descriptions of Middle Eastern souqs with only minor contextual changes.

The square brings together those who work there, those who come to do business, and those who come merely to visit and loaf. The square provides more room for socializing and a more attractive setting than a downtown devoted only to business and traffic. And it belongs to everybody. Different sides of the square often became the meeting places for different social groups on court and market days.²¹

Regardless of where people are from, they seek a comfortable space in which to interact. Just as certain places have been traditional gathering places in America for many years, so has the souq in Oman and the rest of the Arab world. Understanding what people do within the public spaces they interact in will help one come to a better understanding of the culture as a whole. The same fundamental characteristics of social interaction run across east and west. The marketplace, commercial center of the town, holds an important place in the minds of those who gather and live there.

Qawha as a means of social interaction has long been an established part of life in Oman, being passed on from generation to generation. While this cycle has gone unchanged for years, the changes that have come alongside oil and pervade nearly every part of Arabian life have driven a wedge between young and old Omanis. Thesiger noted the changes he saw coming to the Middle East: "Even before I left Arabia in 1950, the Iraq Petroleum Company had started to search for oil in the territories of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. They soon discovered it in enormous quantities, and as a result the life I have described in this book disappeared for ever."²² Old men in Nizwa still cling to their traditional forms of interaction and gathering; they grew up

²¹ Price, Edward T., "The Central Courthouse Square in the American County Seat," *Geographical Review*, (V. 58, N. 1, Jan., 1968), 57.

²² Thesiger, *Sands*, 5.

with these cultural traditions and change comes slowly to them. Younger generations across the Arab world are coming of age in a world unlike anything their parents and grandparents grew up in. The changes that have taken place in Middle Eastern society are reflected by the changing forms of social interaction among young people. While they remain reminiscent of the interactions of older generations, they are distinctly different. Interactions between *shebab* (young people) demonstrate the Middle East is keeping one hand on the past as it moves towards the future, and while this may ensure that interaction customs such as qawha survive, it does not ensure their intact survival. College students in Nizwa paid no attention to the qawha ritual in which the old men took part, though they knew of qawha and practiced it as a formality when necessary.²³ Any rituals of social interaction amongst themselves were performed in a different setting with no explicit connection to the qawha conversations of Nizwa Souq.

Thesiger's assertion that the way of life he witnessed had disappeared forever is a broad statement which, at least in light of the lifestyle found amongst men in Nizwa, does not seem to be entirely true. The lifestyle Thesiger found among the Arabs may be gone in part, but it still remains visible in the social interactions of old men. Their lifestyles reflect the way of life they grew up with and have not entirely abandoned. Certain aspects of life have obviously changed, the shift from camels to trucks for example, yet through their social interactions these old men retain the way of life Thesiger described as "a vanished past."²⁴ He contended that anyone going to Arabia will "never know the spirit of the land nor the greatness of the Arabs. If anyone goes

²³ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

²⁴ Thesiger, *Sands*, 7.

there now looking for the life I led they will not find it [...].”²⁵ Thesiger is right in one sense, the life he knew no longer exists, yet it is not a wholly vanished past. This way of life has been broken into pieces, which are now scattered throughout the culture of the Middle East. If one wishes still to see this seemingly antiquated way of life today, the men of Nizwa Souq provide a clear example. As this generation dies, however, the direct link to Thesiger’s Middle East dies. His Arabia remains visible because of the direct connection to an earlier time these old men provide. Perceptions of this way of life have fueled the stereotypes which defined the Middle East long before oil changed the images that spread from Arabia.

Images coming from the post-oil Middle East have spurred the Baudrillardian hyperreality that has come to define the modern Middle East. What the world sees in the Middle East has changed shape: one hyperreality has supplanted another. Representations of Middle Eastern culture broadcast today are highlighted by the divide between the young and old people which further underscore the changes that have taken place in the span of half a century. Understanding the differences and similarities between this older generation and the young people of today is crucial to understanding how an apparently polarized generational divide is not so insurmountable after all.

The nature of this generational shift in social interaction must be understood relative to its culture. Though these changes are enormous for this way of life, they do not veer entirely from the traditional course of life within the Middle East. Susan Kenyon noted the relativity of cultural changes within the Muslim world during her fieldwork in the Sudan. “It must be stressed from the outset that such changes and increased opportunities are relative to that culture and society: a Muslim society with

²⁵ Thesiger, *Sands*, 7.

Islamic ideals, both traditional and modern, popular and formal, which are quietly pervasive and openly adhered to.”²⁶ These changes must also be examined in light of the mindset of each generation. Topics of conversation are bound to be different between groups of twenty-year old men and seventy-year old men as the subjects discussed by a twenty-year old Omani amongst his friends demonstrate. “Yeah, man, [we hang out at] night mostly. All night. Sometimes during the day but it’s hot during the day. You know, man, [we talk about] the usual. Cars and football. Mostly girls, man. We always talk about girls.”²⁷ Cars and football are not *felaj* and dowries, though Thesiger noted conversation among men and boys which is not completely removed from what this Omani discussed. The difference is in context. Many of the *shebab* of today live in more urbanized environments, stay connected through cell phones, and drive in cars, while Thesiger’s Arabs lived more nomadically in the desert and travelled by camel, yet their conversations—regardless of age—mirrored the general ideas still discussed today as Thesiger witnessed when an old man had a new son with his wife. “Old Tamtaim was there, and he told me with pride that his wife had just produced a son. I remembered how after a long march he had shuffled round in a war-dance when he got off his camel, to prove that he at any rate was still fresh as ever.”²⁸ This must also be considered through a lens of masculinity, for this conversation is typical of conversations many men have throughout their lives, regardless of age. The *shebab* of today talk about girls, just as the men of pre-oil

²⁶ Kenyon, Susan M., *Five Women of Sennar*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 3.

²⁷ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*. This selection came from an interview with a twenty-year old resident of Muscat, Oman.

²⁸ Thesiger, *Sands*, 78.

Arabia spoke of girls. Traditional and contemporary lifestyles are not as different as they may seem.

Chapter Seven
Hard Work

Nearly every day a man wearing only a *wazar* and t shirt walks through the souq pushing a wheel barrow back and forth between the vegetable souq and some other unknown location. After Muhammad leaves I see this man come walking through at a slow pace. He is older and Omani from his looks, but is not wearing a *dishdasha*. His *wazar* is stained and old, his shirt stretched and worn, but he does not seem to mind. His face is unkempt and he walks with a limp, but back and forth he goes, passing through with vegetables in his wheelbarrow sometimes, fruit another time, random boxes still another time. He walks back and forth, always from a location just out of my eyesight. Just as the men I gathered with were regulars in the souq, so was *wazar* and t-shirt man. At times he would stop to speak with a few of the men in different places around the souq. Across from the group I observe is the *halwa* man and his shop. *Wazar* and t-shirt man exchanges a few words with him as he pushes his wheelbarrow by. He does not come to a complete stop though, just slows down, always working and always continuing on with the job. The only time he stops his ritual is when he is on his way to the souq for the first time in the morning. He will stop and speak with a few men as he works his way onward into the souq without his wheelbarrow, but once the wheelbarrow is in hand he is all business.

Muhammad returned to the souq shortly after *wazar* and t-shirt man disappeared from view. Taking a seat by me again, we start a new conversation. This one centers on religion. He asked if I am a Muslim and how many Muslims there are in America. He seemed particularly intrigued when I said there were Muslims in America but no call to prayer. Next he asks if people in America speak Arabic. He follows my every

word with an “al hamdulillah [praise to God].” He asks for my notebook again and I give it to him. Clenching the pen and scrunching his face with the same strained look of concentration as before, he tries to write his name under where he had previously scratched it. It is still not legible, but he is proud of it, holding up the page and reading it to me, carefully naming each letter.

Chapter Eight
Youth

As youth begin to play a more active role than they did in the past in the direction of Arab society, the environment in which they grew up will continue to leave a progressively larger footprint upon Middle Eastern society as a whole. Modern conveniences are being used alongside traditional aspects of culture to form a society which remains only a semblance of its former, historical self. "In the 1970's, Oman entered a position of balance between the traditional past and a heavily Westernised future. Its dilemma was captured in the typical picture of an Omani individual, who still carried a *khanjar* but adorned it with a wristwatch, who carried a camelstick but travelled by Land Rover or Datsun, who dressed in white *dishdasha* and skullcap yet concluded business deals by telephone in English and spent his holidays in London."²⁹

The impact of these changes is becoming increasingly noticeable amongst young people as they adopt foreign customs at a faster pace than previous generations. The Middle East has much to gain by joining the global economy, yet many older men remain concerned with preserving many aspects of the historical traditions that have been carried on for centuries. Understanding how these influences have impacted forms of social interaction in the Middle East illuminates the important role of history in Arab society. Historical forms of interaction in use until recently have quickly been replaced by a "radically transformed character of life"³⁰ which arrived alongside the changes wrought by oil.

While the means of social interaction between young and old may differ, some semblance of the older style of interaction can still be viewed in the social foundations

²⁹ Peterson, J. E., *Oman in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1978), 213.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

of Omani youth. Nizwa youth gather outside of the traditional souq, instead preferring the cafes and sidewalks of the modern part of town, which rarely sees the old men of the souq. Rather than incessant conversation with one another, they frequently look towards football as a means of facilitating their social interaction.³¹ They come together over a football match, televised on the side of a restaurant. *Shebab* sit at plastic tables, many wearing the traditional dress of the country, though this dress is a requirement at the local university in a type of forced tradition and few bother to change when they return home after classes. As the matches are played shouts erupt at bad calls and goals. When the game quiets down conversation among the groups turn to different aspects of the game or to complaints about the food they are waiting to be served. Young people interact with one another over *shawarma* and fruit juice at night rather than coffee and dates in the morning as the old men do.

The *shebab* of modern Oman do not utilize the souq in the same fashion as the old men. The old men confine themselves strictly to the old souq and avoid the new part which is built of concrete block and filled with modern storefronts. The souq they frequent is the same as the souq their parents visited; made of mud brick and stone. Young people, when they do gather in the souq, choose to gather in the streets near modern shops: groceries, internet cafes, and a multitude of stores selling anything imaginable. More frequently, though, they gather away from the souq altogether. It does not play the same role in their lives as it does for the old men. By gathering together in cars or at the ocean side corniche in Muscat, for example, they escape from the social conventions of the souq that have shaped the interactions of generations of Arabs. This desire to escape from forced tradition and established social convention is

³¹ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

mirrored in their choice of music, dress, and speech. Young people have largely turned away from traditional Middle Eastern music in favor of foreign music, rap in particular. A young Omani described his feelings towards the music he listened to: "We love rap. Most of the guys that listen to it here don't understand the words, though, because their English is no good. I like Tupac, man. He's the best. There is Oman rap but the government tells them they can only talk about certain things, not like rap from America. It's just the government wants stuff to be... traditional."³²

When the *shebab* are not gathering over football, their social interactions become much more visually reminiscent of the qawha interactions. Friends gather along the oceanfront corniche or in other locations to talk, bringing chairs or sitting on ledges. A two-liter bottle of soda is produced in the same manner as a pot of coffee is produced by old men in the souq, while plastic cups replace the ceramic coffee cups and dates are replaced with potato chips. Some of the *shebab* follow the same routine every night, either going to the corniche or driving around the city listening to music. Regardless of their style of interaction, there is always some sort of enzyme to fuel it. Whether it is music, soda, or soccer, the *shebab* find something that allows them to interact more comfortably with one another.

While this is reminiscent of qawha in Nizwa Souq, the younger generation is embracing modern international influences as it moves into the future. Their style of social interaction is influenced by the past, yet with the distinct outlook of the *shebab*. As young people become further removed from the old men of pre-oil Oman, modes of interaction will continue to change. The massive amount of exposure to outside influences will continue to shape how *shebab* interact with each other in social settings,

³² Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

while the old men never had the opportunity to embrace outside customs continue life as they always have. Prior to 1970 Oman was essentially a closed society and the amount of global influence within Omani society was still at a minimum compared with other Middle Eastern countries.³³ As Oman moves into the future the norms of social interaction will continue to change and develop based upon the influences that take root within the country.

Thesiger's interactions with young people in the 1940's demonstrate their acceptance of the culture of the time. One of his constant companions in Arabia, bin Kabina, was sixteen years old when he first travelled with Thesiger. He fit right alongside the other Bedu who accompanied Thesiger, regardless of age. "He had very white teeth which were always showing, for he was constantly talking and laughing. His father had died two years before and it had fallen on young bin Kabina to provide for his mother, younger brother, and infant sister."³⁴ Bin Kabina was a very hardworking individual and never complained of the life he lived, yet the old men of Nizwa have remarked on the laziness and lack of productivity of contemporary Arab youth who spend their time riding around on mopeds or loitering in the modern parts of the souq.³⁵ In contrast with modern youth, bin Kabina endured the harsh environment and struggles of the lifestyle he lived—even when they were not his responsibility. "[Bin Kabina] turned up while we were watering thirsty camels at a well that yielded only a few gallons an hour. For two days we worked day and night in relays. Conspicuous in a vivid red loin-cloth, and with his long hair falling round his naked

³³ Peterson, *Oman in the Twentieth Century*, 13.

³⁴ Thesiger, *Sands*, 70.

³⁵ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

shoulders, he helped us with our task.”³⁶ While bin Kabina was telling a story about the life of a man who ended up in poverty because of his generosity Thesiger “could hear the envy [of the man’s generosity] in his voice.”³⁷

³⁶ Thesiger, *Sands*, 69.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

Chapter Nine
Qawha Conversation

After my initial contact with the men in front of Atif's shop was made, I began to join them every morning and partake in their conversations as best I could. I was living their way of life. Conversations varied every day, of course, but they generally touched on a wide range of topics. One conversation I did not take part in, but understood surprisingly well, was on the problems with young people in Oman. It seemed too stereotypical a conversation to be having, old people sitting around complaining about young people, but their concerns were valid. An Omani youth walking through the souq triggered the entire exchange.

None of the men thought the *shebab* [young people] of Nizwa ate enough. The majority of young people who passed through the souq were quite scrawny, generally lacking any muscle or fat at all. On top of this, many of them lacked any motivation. They spent their time riding around the town on mopeds or loitering in the souq, doing nothing productive. This was met with many *al hamdulillahs* from the men. They all agreed. The conversation became more hushed after this. Looks of concern showed on the faces of many of the men as they talked about drug problems many of the young people faced. Atif felt they were making many of the kids go crazy and stated that drugs were corrupting the *shebab* of Oman. They all shook their heads. None of them liked what they saw with the younger generation. The entire conversation was hushed and serious; none of the usual laughter or smiling was present. A long silence followed before they spoke again, this time on different subjects. This was as serious as the conversations got while I was with them, but it was a major problem in Oman they were aware of and discussing.

The *felaj* [water delivery channels] system was often brought up by many of them. They all discuss when the schedule permits them to use the water and how they will be using it. This seems to be a fairly common topic among them, as it was brought up multiple times. When I asked them about other subjects generally brought up, the old men mentioned a vast array of topics. Their banter is just as normal as conversation amongst friends in any other situation. Life, news, car accidents, deaths; they are all discussed. Together, they plan to visit the family of the man when someone from the souq passes away. Another subject brought up while I was on the mat was marriage and the increasing cost of the dowry. It is becoming such an expense it is hard for a man to take one wife, yet alone multiple ones. They all complained with many “al hamdulillah” thrown in.

Chapter Ten
Wandering Old Man

Basim walked through the souq every day before and after he sat at the mat. Many times he carried random objects with him as he travelled around, though they always seemed to disappear before the day was over. One day found him wandering, each hand clasped to a piece of gaudy silver Bedouin style jewelry. They swayed back and forth in his hands with each step he took as he crossed the souq courtyard on multiple occasions. He disappeared and then reappeared carrying only one of the necklaces. Shortly thereafter he reappeared again with no jewelry. As he approaches the mat to join us I see him counting out a rather large wad of money. From what I can tell there are over one hundred rials in his hand. He counts them carefully before placing them back inside his pocket and sitting for coffee and dates.

Jewelry was not the only thing Basim was seen wandering the souq with. In addition to random bags of vegetables, he was also seen carrying two rifles. With a worn, Arab decorated Martini-Henry rifle in one hand, and a rusty air rifle in the other he disappears into the part of the souq which is home to the gun shops. A short while later he reappears without the rifles. I was never able to ask him what happened to the rifles, but one can only assume he sold them. Is this how he provides himself with income, selling objects to dealers in the shop? The language barrier prevented me from ever finding out.

Chapter Eleven
Tradition and Tourism

More Omani *shebab* are turning from the traditional national dress of a *dishdasha* and *kuma* in favor of more Western clothing, though dress has not changed nearly as much in Oman as it has in other Arab countries. Young people love to speak English with the expatriates and tourists in their country. They have been exposed to so much English language media throughout the course of their lives and schooling it is cause for great excitement when they can converse with a native English speaker. These changes represent the growing disparity between young and old in the Middle East. As the older generations disappear traditional society as it has existed throughout history is steadily losing ground to a contemporary Arab culture in which modern elements of culture have usurped traditions that have long marked life and society in the Middle East.

While the souq may no longer be the center of social interaction for those in the Middle East, areas of commerce still play an important role. Western malls have supplanted the souq as the preferred commercial location for social interaction as younger and middle aged urban Omanis gather at the local hypermarket or mall in the evening to browse the mostly Western shops or eat in Western restaurants. Coffee still plays an important role in Omani social interactions, though it is an entirely different form of coffee than that which is served in Nizwa. The City Center Mall in the Omani capital of Muscat has two Western coffee shops, Starbucks and Costa, offering an area of seating that is frequently filled by Omanis as they eat muffins, drink coffee from paper cups, and talk with one another.³⁸ This is one possibility for the future of the

³⁸ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

Omani qawha ritual. Oman is mixing old with new, yet the coffee culture which exists in Oman is rapidly emulating the coffee culture that has come to dominate certain aspects of social interaction in the West. Regardless of the near universal culture of interaction associated with coffee, Omani qawha has long stood as a unique form of social interaction. While it still continues to play an important role in Omani social interactions, the changing face of qawha stands to further underline the changes that are taking place in the Middle East. Modern commercial outlets have become the center of social gatherings as Arabs move towards a future far different from what they have traditionally known.

Western style malls seem to capture the attention of the *shebab* more than many other western cultural imports. Historically, the souq was the mall—there was no other shopping available short of individual bartering amongst people and good souqs were few and far between. “The market [in Salala] consisted of only a dozen shops, but it was the best shopping centre between Sur and the Hadhramaut, a distance of eight hundred miles.”³⁹ The men in Nizwa Souq have developed a culture which is more dependent upon social interaction than commerce; however, commerce remains the pretext compelling them to gather. “If the purpose of sitting in the market is to sit in a market, then to sell one's all on the very first day would be a dangerous thing.”⁴⁰ One particular shopkeeper in Nizwa does not make enough money from his business to make it worthwhile, yet he opens everyday for the men to come and sit outside his shop.⁴¹ This is not unique to Nizwa Souq. The marketplace is an instrument for social interaction, not just commerce. “Selling, one might deduce, is only one function, and

³⁹ Thesiger, *Sands*, 44.

⁴⁰ Elmessiri, Nur, and Nigel Ryan, *Arms Full of Things*, 12.

⁴¹ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

not necessarily the most important, of Souq Al-Imam [Egypt].”⁴² Young people in Oman have moved away towards this type of commercial interaction. They go to browse but not buy, talk but not shop; walking through the corridors of the mall every evening—if they are not gathered at the corniche or in their car—as they talk with one another. Large groups of *shebab* will occasionally burst into laughter or argument as they walk, conversing or pausing to interact with groups of their peers.⁴³ They respect the social conventions of their country and of the souq, yet they have not adopted them. They have, rather, adopted the influences of modernization into their own lifestyles creating a means of social interaction reminiscent of tradition, yet entirely new at the same time.

Other countries face the same struggles as Oman in combining the old and the new in order to create new forms of social interaction. Souq Waqif in Doha, Qatar has been restored and restyled, opening up what was once a traditional souq to restaurants and shops from Häagen Daz Ice Cream to high end jewelry stores. The main body of the souq now caters to tourists who visit Doha, while more distant parts of the souq retain their role in providing necessary goods to Qatari citizens. The new tourist souq and the old traditional souq stand in sharp contrast with one another. Near the Häagen Daz ice cream shop is a small tailor’s shop where an old man has been making traditional Qatari clothing for years, well before the reorientation of the souq’s purpose. He is continuing with the same way of life he has always known, yet the changes taking place around him are undeniable. He speaks no English and tourists frequently come by to take pictures of him. More interesting than this man’s decision to remain in his

⁴² Elmessiri, Nur, and Nigel Ryan, *Arms Full of Things*, 11.

⁴³ Personal Fieldwork, *Oman*.

shop are the old men who gather in Souq Waqif. Old men gather to talk with each other, pushing wheelbarrows that serve as carts and seats. The Qatari Government pays these men to come here and gather in what it sees as a traditional style for the benefit of the tourists.⁴⁴

The Souq Waqif men are not nearly as many in number, nor do they come for the same reasons as the old men in Nizwa. Nizwa men gather on their own accord, while the men in Doha stand to benefit monetarily from their social interactions. The idea of old men, in traditional dress no less, gathering in public is an image foreign visitors want to see. The traditional atmosphere of the souq, combined with the old men who fill the role of souq actors, provides an ideal setting for tourists who wish to see a romanticized image of the Middle East. This image is what they perceive non-violent daily life in the Middle East to look like and the Government of Qatar feeds this image by providing a stage and actors in order to carry on this lifestyle within the confines of metropolitan Doha. This view of the Middle East seems to be one that is commonly held, as the sights which many tour groups see perpetuate an image such as what Souq Waqif represents. What was once a way of life and an everyday form of social interaction has become a spectacle for foreign eyes. The rate at which these traditional forms of social interaction are becoming idealized as the quintessential Middle Eastern image varies from region to region, but it is a danger every country faces as they open themselves to increasing tourism and international attention. Souq Waqif becomes an even more fitting example in light of Doha's clinched bid to host the 2022 Soccer World Cup, which will bring a mass of foreign visitors to the city. As the men who normally carry on this way of life die, they will be replaced by those who

⁴⁴ Personal Fieldwork, *Qatar*.

have different ideas about what natural means of social interaction are. The men in Souq Waqif would not gather there without pay and the same could soon be true of Nizwa Souq when the present generation of old men are dead. Arab governments will continue to perpetuate this perception of the Middle East at whatever cost; for the reality of the new Middle East has lost much of the romantic appeal which long appealed to foreign visitors. What is reality now will soon only remain on a stage set by governments looking to boost tourism revenue.

Souq Waqif's old men demonstrate the simulation of Arab life that prevails in foreign consciousness. What was once real in Doha has been replaced by an image of reality. The old men of the souq are no longer there on their own accord; rather they are there at the insistence of a government hoping to please tourists. The souq is poised between new and old, a representation of what the Middle East has become. Heritage survives superficially, while the reality of this modern souq now lies in its position as a tourist draw. Once a center of social interaction between Qataris, it has become a center of social interaction for tourists seeking to experience the society they perceive when thinking of the Middle East. This perception poses a threat to the reality of Middle Eastern society as the tangible reality becomes further removed from perceptions of reality. So long as the Middle East remains trapped by perceptions based on history, its modern culture will, at least to Western eyes, remain hidden. The Middle East now leads an existence within a hyperreality.

Baudrillard's ideas can be applied to this situation in that what is perceived as real has become reality, while what perceptions are based upon no longer counts as reality. "It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality, but of concealing

the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”⁴⁵ Before the physical reality of life in the Middle East is swallowed through that which is hyperreal, the real must be preserved lest it be lost and the Middle East be recreated solely through perception. Vestiges of the real are, intentionally or not, preserved in the interactions of young people as their modes of social interaction draw upon the qawha interactions of their forbears. This may enable tradition to survive, though it will remain hidden behind the hyperreality that takes center stage in perceptions of what the Middle East is:

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 25.

Chapter Twelve
Qawha Commerce

During each of my stays with the men of Nizwa Souq, I saw Atif sell only a few things. One instance was with a rather large tourist who purchased a *wazar*. The tourist stared at the table displaying Atif's *wazar* for sale and picked one out. Atif stood up from the mat and approached him, raising two fingers to tell him how much it cost. The man dug around in his pocket for two *rials* and placed them in Atif's hand.

"Tamr [dates]? Qawha [coffee]?" Atif asks after the *wazar* has been put in a bag. The man looks at his wife and then shakes his head.

"Yes, yes please," they both say.

A handful of dates are given to them and they carefully finger their way through them, putting the entire date in their mouth. Magically, the pits seem to disappear for the moment, as they do not come out of their mouths. A small cup of coffee is given to each person next. The man raises his glass to the old men on the mat in a toast, but is met by blank stares. They have no clue what he is doing, but smile at him nonetheless. The couple down their coffee, hand the cups back to Atif, and thank him. The woman holds up her hands and rubs them, showing the stickiness of the dates on her fingers. One of the men hands Atif the pitcher of water and he pours some on her hands. They both thank the men and walk off, heading towards a trash can some ways away. As they pass the can I see them stop and spit date pits into the trash. They had been keeping the pits in their mouths the entire time, not sure what to do with them. A few of the old men caught a glimpse of them doing this and snickered with me.

Atif conducted business with a few Omani men on different occasions. Some came to him with paperwork and he always took the time to go over it. He discussed it

away from the other men and did not bring any business affairs up in conversation on the mat. Regardless of this paperwork business, I saw only a small amount of money cross his hand each time I was with him. Not nearly enough money to stay in business, but then again he does not show up every morning for the business.

Chapter Thirteen
Brotherhood

The Nizwa Souq is home to friends. These men interact with each other nearly every day and have been doing so in front of this particular shop for the past seventeen years. They sit and talk about anything; surely nearly every topic possible has been brought up throughout the long years. The qawha brings them together in a sort of brotherhood which keeps them coming back day after day. When a man does not show up for several days they come together and go to his house for a visit, to make sure everything is alright. Things do not seem right in the souq if they are unable to gather in their normal spot. Atif did not show up one day and the men seemed lost. The older ones wandered around the souq with even less of a purpose than when his shop is open; they had nowhere to go. Even I felt the effect of not gathering with the men. Dates, coffee, and conversation had become a part of my morning ritual as well and the morning did not seem right without it. Regardless of the amount of time they spend together, these men are more than mere acquaintances; they are friends and members of a brotherhood forged by fourteen years of gathering together over qawha.

Chapter Fourteen
The Future of the Past

Nizwa Souq remains a living example of historical social interaction in Oman, yet its days may be numbered. The men who use the souq for social interaction are slowly dying and taking their way of life with them. The generational divide between these old men and the current generation of *shebab* is forging a radically new image of social interaction in the Middle East. Traditional locations of interaction are passing out of use and may soon exist only in perceived foreign notions of what social interaction in the Middle East once was. However, even the radical changes which have arrived alongside oil and modernization are not enough to fully eradicate centuries of custom from daily Arab life. These customs are now being adapted for use in a new reality. "I realized the Bedu with whom I had lived and travelled, and in whose company I had found contentment, were doomed."⁴⁶ Thesiger believed the life he knew in the Middle East passed out of existence after he left, though his assumptions were premature. The traditional way of life he witnessed them living still exists amongst the old men in Nizwa, and while some have traded camels for cars, they still remain as a living testament to a way of life that was carried on unchanged for hundreds of years. The historical reality they represent is no longer fully representative of the present reality, yet they remain a part of it. When these old men are gone their way of life will continue to exist only through the perceived reality of others.

Differences between young and old generations may be vast, though they both stem from the same heritage. History can never be erased, yet the lives of old men now represent both a living history and a vital link in understanding the realities of life in the

⁴⁶ Thesiger, *Sands*, 329.

Middle East. The images that consistently come from the Middle East now are now fraught with violence and hatred and while this is, unfortunately, part of the reality of life in the Arab world, it is by no means the complete reality. Daily life rolls on in the Middle East, just as it does in every other country of the world. Violence and perceived realities are not everything—the mundane affairs of everyday life provide a common ground to which even the most different of people can relate. In order to break down stereotypes, we must visualize a picture of what the true Middle East is like, the one not represented in the Souq theatre of Qatar or on the television screen.

The men of Nizwa Souq reflect an aspect of life with which people from the most diverse of backgrounds can identify; friends gathering with friends to discuss life. Regardless of the setting, whether it is Nizwa Souq or the local Starbucks, social interactions of this type allow for varied groups of people to understand each other; all bound by something as simple as how they interact with one another. As the Middle East, and indeed the rest of the world, progresses forward and away from the cherished past, new realities will force a constant reevaluation of how different cultures are understood, yet so long as basic human interaction persists this will remain possible. The perceptions surrounding the Middle East have left it shrouded in mystery, intrigue, and stereotypes for many, yet the study of daily life can lead us to see what is common across cultures. Through exposing realities, both contemporary and historical, behind perceived images, the culture of the Middle East can be more clearly understood as the misperceptions and images which have long defined Arabia are replaced by knowledge and reality. Cultural traditions found in daily life enable people with different

backgrounds to better understand one another and in doing so foster relationships that help to break stereotypes and build positive cross-cultural bonds for the future.

Glossary

dishdasha

An ankle length, long sleeved garment worn by men in Oman. It was traditionally white, but different colors are gaining popularity. This is part of the Omani national dress.

felaj

An ancient system of irrigation channels that often run underground from mountainous regions into cities. They played an important role in the history of Oman and still continue to be the only source of delivered water in parts of the country.

halwa

Omani sweet that is frequently served for guests or before the drinking of coffee in the home. It is a traditional symbol of Omani hospitality.

khanjar

A symbolic, traditional knife carried by men in Oman. Now it is more frequently worn as part of a formal dress. The knife is curved and worn in a sheath positioned in the middle of the stomach.

Muscat

The coastal capital of the Sultanate of Oman. Population is approximately 700,000 people in 2010.

mussar

A square of cloth that is wrapped into a turban and worn by some Omani men. It can be worn either directly on the head or wrapped over the kuma.

Nizwa

City of approximately 70,000 people located 90 miles west of Muscat.

Oman

Arabian Peninsula country located south of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and east of Yemen. Population approximately 3,000,000 in 2012.

qawha

Arabic term meaning coffee. In Oman the term describes the entire process of socializing over coffee and dates.

rial

Omani form of currency. One *rial* can be divided into 1000 *baisa*. Fixed exchange rate of one *rial* to US\$2.60.

shebab

Arabic term meaning young people.

shawarma

Arabic food popular across the region consisting of roasted meat and vegetables wrapped in flat pita bread.

souq

Arabic term meaning marketplace.

Wali

A regional governor in Oman.

Wazar

A cloth undergarment usually worn under a *dishdasha*, though not exclusively. It is worn by wrapping it tightly around the waist.

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