Omani Cultural Characteristics within the Family: An Ethnographic Investigation

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Abstract

This longitudinal ethnographic study investigated social and communication interactions within Omani families to assess how collectivism is fostered. Specific aspects of family life that were examined included visits with the Al-Hajri family, Omani weddings, mannerisms toward ailing loved ones, deaths, and burials. Findings revealed that the collective aspects of social interaction play a significant role in Omani family structures. Indeed, Omani culture does not rely on self-sufficiency and individualism. Rather, obligations of mutual support (Ayish, 1998) between the individual and his/her family are of paramount importance within Omani family structures. Implications of this study are provided.

Keywords: Omani families, intercultural communication, collectivism
Cultures provide us with values, beliefs, principles, and customs. In essence, cultures influence as well as shape how individuals see the world (Obeidat & Al-Shalabi, 2011). Both media portrayals (e.g., scene in the movie Taken where a wealthy Arab sheik is involved in the sex trade industry, Muslim-American neighbor as terrorist in 24) and the lexicon of the 21st-century have been anything but favorable to those from Arab countries, or to those professing to be Muslim (Halse, 2012). Connotations associated with words such as safety, terrorists, and Al-Qaeda (meaning “bases” in Arabic) are spun into the American mindset on a daily basis. Even President Obama’s middle name, Hussein, was demonized in the American media. In their discussion of Islamophobia in the West, Obeidat and Al-Shalabi (2011) noted the following:

Negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims, disproportionate coverage on issues such as extremism and violence, and one-dimensional (and often distorted) reporting on Islam and the Muslims reinforce common stereotypes and prejudices towards the Middle East and its peoples, and contribute to a general climate of mutual mistrust, antipathy and fear towards Muslim and Arab communities. (p. 27)

Nisbet, Ortiz, Miller and Smith (2011) conducted a public opinion study on American perceptions toward Muslim Americans before and after the death of Osama bin Laden. Even after his death, over 50 percent of Americans felt that Muslims in the United States “undermine American culture” (p. 4). Over two-thirds of respondents felt that Muslim Americans do not have beliefs and values similar to those of most Americans. Finally, over 70 percent of surveyed Americans in this study do not perceive Muslims to be trustworthy, peaceful, moderate, safe, or tolerant. As Schanzer (2011) suggested, most problems attributed to Muslim Americans center on the American public’s lack of education concerning Islam (p. A1).

Intercultural communication scholars have had limited opportunity to thoroughly immerse themselves (DeTurk, 2001) within an Arab culture to accurately examine their communication interplays. Among the few exceptions were Love and Powers (2002, 2004) studies on teacher/student interactions in the United Arab Emirates. Therefore, given concerns noted earlier, one purpose of this investigation is to allay stereotypic perceptions by providing Westerners with a better understanding of what social interaction is like within Arab families.

In his research on cross-cultural work-related values, Geert Hofstede (1984) discovered four dimensions responsible for significantly influencing behavior in all cultures. They are individualism/collectivism, high/low uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and high/low power distance. Of these four, the individualism/collectivism dimension is contrasted for purposes of this study. American culture is depicted as individualistic or self-reliant and self-determined. Klopf and McCroskey (2007) suggested, “It is as though we have a wall around our self that differentiates our self from that of other people” (p. 90). Other individualistic cultural traits include a preference for equalitarianism and group life consisting of assertive and competitive communicative behaviors (Klopf & McCroskey, 2007).

In contrast to the individualistic-centered approach to life, collectivistic cultures are highly group-oriented. That is, group attachments are strong and one’s own self is dependent on another person’s self (Klopf & McCroskey, 2007, p. 90). Moreover, an individual’s goals are intertwined with that of the group (e.g., clan, family, organization). Paternal status differences are also common in collectivistic cultures. Researchers have characterized Arab culture as one in which family loyalty takes precedence over individual needs and accomplishments (Feghali, 1997; Khalid, 1977; Nydell, 1987). In essence, Arab societies are indebted to their families and the “strong emphasis on mutual interdependence influences social interaction patterns throughout the life span” (Feghali, 1997, p. 352).
Despite Hofstede’s (1984) groundbreaking research on cross-cultural value dimensions, his data did not include an examination of Arab cultures. As Feghal (1997) suggested, “Arab countries are frequently cited as ‘collective,’ based on descriptions which may not realistically reflect dynamic societal change in certain areas of the region” (p. 355). In addition to providing insight into interactions within Arab families, a second goal or purpose of this investigation is to shed light on Arab cultural communication patterns/values. Assuming that Arab cultures are indeed collective entities, this study provides insight into how this is communicatively and/or socially portrayed.

Case Analysis of Omani Culture

Methodology

This longitudinal ethnographic field study (Denzin, 1997) entailed staying with and observing different Omani families (n=16) on numerous weekends (Thursday and Friday) spread out over nine months. For data collection purposes, there are several types or forms of participant observation that researchers can utilize. In this study the researcher carried out the role of complete participant (Keyton, 2001). This methodological approach was selected because it enables the researcher to interact as a member without revealing that he/she is observing as well as analyzing interactions. Therefore, the researcher “observes from a perspective of full membership” (Keyton, 2001, p. 272).

Aside from observing and participating in conversations with various Omani families, journal entries of field activities were kept. Specifically, the researcher kept field notes in the form of personal reflection, hunches, and overall impressions that were recorded for each day of data collection. This resulted in the generation of 478 journal entries from field notes incorporated into the data set.

Next, a critical consideration in qualitative communication research is the interpretation of meaning by the researcher. Data in this study was collected as micro and midlevel evidence. The former entails obtaining direct quotes from participants and the latter entails assessing interaction patterns (Keyton, 2001). Since both forms of evidence require minimal researcher interpretation, the outcomes result in contingent accuracy or “accurate representations of phenomenon” (Keyton, 2001, p. 71).

Finally, Omani families were interviewed to further certify the accuracy of personal reflections and impressions made by the researcher. This was done to prevent researcher misinterpretations of the data set and to promote interpretive validity (Johnson, 1999). Using different data collecting techniques or data triangulation enables the researcher to increase descriptive validity (Johnson, 1999; Keyton, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Family Life in Oman

The Al-Hajri Family

Meeting the family

While teaching at a small private college in Northeast Ohio, I learned from a history colleague that a Fulbright exchange graduate student from Oman was teaching Arabic courses. I’ll never forget the first time Amal (meaning “hope” in Arabic) Al-Hajri came into my office. There was a light tap on my door and I welcomed her in as she stood by the extra chair in my office. Before me appeared this shy, soft-spoken woman in her 30s, wearing a multi-colored shayla (head covering) and a long drab-colored conservative dress or abaya. Almost immediately I noticed she kept standing until I seated myself first.

Our first conversation was perhaps both awkward and strange for Amal; however, it blossomed into a special friendship. I no longer felt like I was dominating our conversations.
Over time, Amal became much more comfortable with me and started initiating conversations. Due to my interactions with her, I wanted to experience for myself life in Oman. That opportunity occurred the following spring in an advertisement placed in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for a professor to teach in the Business Communication Department at a large Omani university.

I will never forget my first experience with the three touch nose kiss. It was a hot September afternoon and I was traveling with Amal’s uncle, Zahran, for the two-hour journey from Muscat to her home in Al Ghabbi. It had been a little over a year since I had last seen Amal in Ohio, and I was looking forward to meeting her family as well as her husband (whom she married in July). The trip to her house was a bit scary in that Zahran drove his Kia like a NASCAR driver. For nearly two hours I kept hearing a bell sound and didn’t know what to make of it. It turns out that most cars in Oman have a bell sound to warn drivers that they need to slow down. That didn’t matter; Zahran was oblivious to the distraction.

Once I arrived, it seemed everyone was questioning me about the trip. I didn’t get it at first, but they really wanted to know what I thought of his driving. I replied, “Oh, the trip sure seemed quick.” Zahran and everybody else just laughed out loud.

As soon as I took off my shoes and left them by the front door I was ushered into a large sitting room with some couches and a Persian rug. Since everyone knew Amal and I were friends, I got to meet her brothers, sisters, and mother together.

After the introductions, Amal told me that Mr. Mohammed—her father—was tending to his greenhouses and/or camels, but he would be home soon to greet me and have lunch. Almost on cue, in walked this tall, thin man with black hair and a black beard, wearing a dirty white dishdasha (full-length garment worn by males) with a matching massar ( turban). As he spoke the words “salam alaikum” (peace be upon you) I noticed what appeared to be several missing front teeth. Then as quickly as I said “alaikum as salam” (on you be peace) I felt this death grip embrace, and within a split second this man was touching my nose with his three times while making kiss sounds per touch. I became flush and kept touching my lips and face while Zahran was standing in the background with tears running down his face amused with my discomfort. Still laughing he said, “So doctor, what do you think of our Bedu ways?”

*Dining and leisure time with the Al-Hajri’s*

Immediately following “the encounter” it was time for lunch. In arrived this large silver circular platter piled quite high with rice and topped with king fish as well as chicken (guests can be served other meats such as goat, camel, and ox). It was placed on the Persian rug with a sheet of plastic underneath the platter. We (the men) all sat in a circle around the food while the women did the same in a different room. I could tell by the look in his eye that Zahran wanted additional entertainment. He said as he smiled, “Doctor, why do you sit like a woman?” I replied, “Because it is comfortable.” Then he proceeded to use himself as a visual aid teaching me this strange sitting technique that looks like something you do in a yoga class. “Now you try it, doctor,” instructed Zahran. I got about half way down and just locked up. My legs would not bend any further and I almost fell into the platter. This time Amal’s father, her brothers, and Zahran were all laughing out loud from my blunder. Then we started to gorge on the food via using our right hand (tableware is rarely used).

Next, I noticed that the men had this interesting way of making rice balls with their right hand (women do it the same way) and using their right thumbs to guide it into their mouths. When it was my turn, I failed miserably with most of my rice oozing between my fingers going
all over the place. On cue Zahran zeroed in on my mistake and tried helping me. Worth noting is that during meals there is usually a small bowl for dipping your fingers after eating.

About fifteen minutes after lunch it was time for some Omani coffee and dates. One of Amal’s younger brothers stood and poured it into a small china cup with his left hand while I, as the guest, and senior family members (her father and Zahran) remained seated on the carpet in their large family room (which contained couches as well). Her younger brother then distributed cups of coffee with his right hand to me followed by Amal’s father and uncle. This process continued until everyone had his fill of coffee. The server knows when you are finished because the person receiving the coffee will shake the cup slightly in a horizontal manner. This process is the same with Omani women.

Once we finished eating I was both surprised and delighted that the women joined us on the couches (seated separately from the men) to engage in conversations. In most Omani homes I have visited, this is a protocol violation in that a male guest (vice versa) rarely, if ever, interacts with the opposite sex. However, since I was a friend of the family, an exception was made.

After engaging in small talk (e.g., my impressions of the university, of Oman, questions about my family) for about an hour, it was time for the men to show me the local museum and the family farm. Mr. Mohammed grows cucumbers and other vegetables in his greenhouses and raises camels. I was fascinated by all the camels that seem to roam wherever they please in Oman.

Once we left the family farm I was quickly ushered to Amal’s new home. It was beautiful having large marble squared floor patterns with a dark brown stained front door. In fact, most homes in Oman look like squared forts surrounded by an eight foot high privacy concrete wall. Also, the windows and doors have a curvature style that emulates what you see in mosques. It turns out they brought me to Amal’s house to meet her husband, Mohammed (same name as her fathers). Unfortunately, he was taking an afternoon nap (common in Oman) and I felt bad for waking him. Zahran politely told him to go back to bed and that it was time for all of us to take a nap. Out came the bed rolls, but I went into a separate room to watch some television. After the 60-minute napping period, Amal’s husband was busy rushing to and from the kitchen. It was time for our afternoon snack. Out came the plastic sheet, then the large silver platter covered with fruit and yogurt cups. Upon conclusion of the snack, we continued with the coffee and date ritual as noted earlier.

After spending the afternoon at Amal’s home, we went back to her parents’ home that evening. We all sat on several large rugs in the back yard with men on one side and women on the other. I was thinking to myself how wonderful it is to spend so much time engaged in face-to-face interaction. In his book *Arabian Sands*, Wilfred Thesiger (1959) said that Arabs in the Gulf Region value “leisure, courtesy and conversation” (p. 105). Little did I know that while I was relaxing out back several cars were being loaded up front. Zahran instructed me that some of the men and I would be traveling to the 1001 Arabian Nights campground for dinner. We had another filling meal on a hot, humid September evening. Erroneously, I thought we would be spending the night in one of the spacious gray tents located within the campground. Instead, we drove back to within a mile or two of Amal’s village and camped out on top of a large, flat sand bar. Zahran and I laid our bed cots out on the sand and gazed up at the infinite number of stars in the heavens. We spent hours talking about religion, politics, and customs before going to sleep.

After Zahran returned from morning prayer at the village mosque, we returned to her parents’ home for breakfast. Unlike in my home, cereal is not a common breakfast meal in Oman; instead, I was served a warm meal generally consisting of bread (thin, paper-like) called
khabz rkak, along with eggs, and beans. As with any meal it should always be eaten with the right hand, and it is considered bad manners to accept food or pass it with the left hand. This is because the left hand is considered unclean and is used to wash after relieving oneself.

Despite the gender segregation at lunch and dinner, I was pleasantly surprised to see the women joining us for breakfast. They sat together on one large rug in the backyard while the men sat on another. After breakfast, the family was engaged in small talk and I could sense a close affinity between Zahran and his baby sister or Amal’s mother. They were laughing, telling stories about their relationship together as young children. Afterwards, Zahran encouraged me to try what appeared to be a sugar cube shaped piece of brown candy. I asked him what it was for and he said it was like chewing gum. I obliged and started chewing the alien object as my facial expressions could not mask my disdain for this so-called chewing gum. I started spitting it out immediately in the grass and ran to the nearby faucet for water. Zahran and his sister burst out laughing. The entire family was laughing for that matter. “Alright Zahran, what did you give me?” He replied, “Doctor, it is what you call frankincense.” Laughing, I replied to Zahran, “I should have known you were up to something!”

After the chewing gum episode, I noticed that an incense container with smoke coming out of it was offered to Zahran. He took it and placed it under his dishdasha and then into his sleeves. I inquired, “What are you doing?” “This makes you smell good, doctor,” he replied. Zahran then walked over and handed me the container. Later I learned it was their polite way of saying it is time to go.

So as we left Amal’s family home, everyone walked us to the car and wished me a safe return back to Muscat. I think they were trying to bless me because they knew Zahran was oblivious to speed limits. Oh well, it really didn’t matter. What mattered more was spending quality time with a very special Omani family.

Weddings

Prior to the traditional Omani wedding ceremony, if a man is interested in marrying a woman he can take several approaches. First, he can ask her father directly. This can be a bit unnerving in some regions such as Daklia because the father can refuse his request without even asking his daughter for her opinion. A second more pragmatic approach entails having his mother approach the girl’s mother about his intentions to marry. Her mother can then break the news to her father.

Before any final decision is made, an interview occurs. That is, the potential groom will be asked by the bride’s father and other male family members about his job, education, and if he smokes or drinks. Even his family name plays a role in the decision making process. Also, her parents will often inquire with the future son-in-law’s neighbors as to his character. The men will meet in one room to conduct the interview session, and the women, from both sides of the family, will discuss the groom as well. What if she has no surviving father? In this case, another male family member such as a brother or uncle will assume the responsibility. If the groom is from her immediate family (e.g., first cousin) an interview is not necessary.

Once the interview is complete, at a later date the bride-to-be is allowed to meet her suitor in the presence of most family members. The future bride can accept or reject the marriage proposal. Her decision will go to her mother, then to her father who will notify the future son-in-law of his daughter’s decision. It should be noted that this outcome may or may not happen depending on the region and whether or not the father gives his permission.

If she agrees to marry, the women, from both sides of each family, will discuss dowry arrangements. This process typically takes from one week to a month to complete. Once
complete, the groom’s mother, sisters, aunts, and cousins will bring the dowry gifts to the bride to be. Such gifts include gold, perfume, incense, shoes, clothing, and something called a mandoos. This is a large wooden box decorated with metal used for storing dowry gifts.

A typical Omani wedding can have between 500-1000 guests. Food and halwa (dessert) expenses alone can cost 450 OR (Omani Rial) or more ($1162 and up). Dowry costs for the bride can range from four to over ten thousand rial ($10,000-$26,000). Moreover, the groom is faced with purchasing land, the house, and appliances. It can easily cost the groom over 50,000 OR ($129,000) to be married. Thankfully, for him, his father and other male family members can assist in offsetting the costs. However, in some instances, I’ve heard stories of the groom having to sell his car to pay for wedding expenses. Although atypical in most of Oman, there are some places where the bride’s father gets a cut of the dowry money (2,500-5,000 OR). This can prove profitable if he has several daughters to marry.

Next, a process known as milka takes place. The Imam (religious leader) will visit the bride at her house and in the presence of her family ask if she wants to be married. The Imam’s task is to make sure she is really interested in marriage and not pressured to do so. Then the Imam will travel to the local mosque or majlis (gathering or meeting area) and ask the groom (one to three times) if he is ready for marriage.

Once both parties affirm their commitment to the Imam, a marriage contract is signed. In some cases this is done at the groom’s home or the contract can be signed at the mosque. The contract includes their names, occupations, identification numbers, and the amount of money she will receive in case of divorce. It is then signed by the groom and separately by the bride and her father. Moreover, there are two witnesses who sign the contract as well.

Depending on the region, a brief ring ceremony may or may not occur.¹ In some cases the groom will travel from the mosque to his bride’s home to put a ring on her finger in the presence of her family, and only his female relatives attend.

Toward the end of the milka process the men will meet in a mosque or majlis and be served halwa, coffee, meat, and rice for dinner. The women get together and eat food as well. Once the milka process is complete the new couple may be allowed to do things together such as go shopping. Again, this depends on the region, the bride’s father, and in some cases, an escort may be provided.

Finally, the groom and his family will go to get the bride at her father’s house. This is known as zefa. Most Omani families do zefa; however, on Masirah Island this process is conducted differently. That is, to give the new bride time to adjust, the groom may spend one month at her home between the hours of 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. After this time period he can then take her to his home. This is considered a shameful act in most of Oman and is rarely done.

I will further elaborate on how the wedding process occurs based on personal experience. In late March, I attended a wedding ceremony for the older brother of my student, Yaqdhan. It was about a 45-minute drive south from Muscat to the village of Sinaw. Along the way I asked Yaqdhan how many times I had to touch the nose of the men I greeted in the majlis. He told me that one nose-to-nose touch with a simultaneous kiss sound would suffice. After doing such with his brothers, cousins, and uncles, next up was his father. Yaqdhan’s father was in in his 60s, pot-bellied, had very dark hair and a pepper colored beard. His beard did not fluff gently down his

¹ Unlike Muslim women, men do not wear gold. Why? They believe that because of menstruation, women do not acquire physical ailments from the alloys within gold, whereas the opposite is true for men.
face like Santa Claus; rather, it spiked out almost horizontally as if to keep predators at bay. Regardless, the look on his face when I did the nose greeting was priceless. His eyes got very large and I really thought he was going to faint.

Later that evening I decided to go for a walk and give Yaqdhan a chance to speak with his family. As I was walking back toward the majlis on a narrow asphalt paved road, I noticed the head of a young boy pop up from behind a high concrete wall that surrounded his house. The young boy came running out in his brown kumma (traditional circular hat with multiple colors and designs) and brown dishdasha to greet me. In broken English I was able to deduce that his name was Yahya. He was 14 years old and in the ninth grade. He was exactly the same age as my youngest son. My young friend was itching to race me down the street. I took off my sandals and the race was on between a 50-year-old professor and the young 9th grader. We were starting to draw a crowd in that his brother and mother were observing from atop the concrete fence.

Then Yahya did something that I read about but was surprised to experience firsthand. After laughing and teasing about how slow I was, he reached out and held my hand with his. I guess this was his way of connecting or bonding with his new friend. I must admit it felt a bit awkward holding his hand. Almost instantly, I was thinking to myself “thank God this wasn’t happening in the United States, because I would be labeled as a pedophile.”

The next morning, just before 5 a.m., I heard the sound of someone tapping a microphone and the voice of Yaqdhan’s father reading the Holy Quran. How convenient, the tiny family mosque was located right beside the majlis. It was Thursday (start of the weekend) and preparations for the wedding celebration were about to get underway. I learned from Yaqdhan that there would be over 500 hundred hungry male guests attending a much larger village majlis later than evening, and we had much food to prepare for them as well as the women.

Around 6 a.m., Yaqdhan and his father brought two camels over to the slaughter area. The front of each camel was positioned toward Mecca and a brief blessing was given. Then each camel was tied down kneeling in the sand with a rope pulling their heads back toward their left side. Yaqdhan approached the first camel with his long, dual-bladed knife and made about a 15 inch incision in its chest cavity area. Within a matter of minutes the camel died. He repeated the process with the second camel.

Next, there seemed to be an army of men cutting the meat from the camels and loading it in the back of Toyota. I was impressed that it took under an hour to totally dress each beast. Then they drove the meat across the road where it was cleaned. Scattered throughout the yard were various rugs where everyone, including myself, had a task to complete. Once we processed the meat into smaller chunks it was placed in eight very large metal pots waiting to be cooked. It was amazing witnessing how effectively and efficiently the various groups operated. As with just about any type of endeavor, almost anything done in Oman entails a group effort.

As the food was cooking, visitors stopped by the yard to pay their respects. I was very moved to see this little old man with a long white beard arrive, without sandals. Someone told me he was 94 years old. We spent most of the mid-day eating dates and drinking Omani coffee in our various circular groups sharing stories about political events unfolding in locales throughout the Middle East, including Oman. I spent a good chunk of this time interacting with the children who seemed curious about the strange blonde guest with hairy arms. The young boys became enthralled with learning how to play the “rock, paper, scissors” game. I also taught them how to do the “thumb battle” game.
As the temperature got hotter that afternoon some of us went back into the smaller family majlis to take our nap. Taking a nap in the afternoon after lunch is a common practice in Oman. Around 6:30 p.m. that Thursday it was time to go to the much larger village majlis for supper. It was a very large, squared meeting room building inlaid with beautiful marble flooring and soft cushioned benches surrounding the entire interior walls, and rows of benches continued in the middle of this spacious building. As guests entered the majlis, protocol dictates that you must stand up, shake his hand and at least say “salam alaikum” (peace be upon you). Just for the fun of it I would sometimes add “kaif halak” (How are you?) for the shock value. To be honest, I never shook so many hands in my life! The whole process took over an hour. It was as if an entire 100 square mile area of guests made their pilgrimage just to this one building. As these men passed by I couldn’t help but notice all the beautiful knives (khanjar) they were wearing. Each khanjar was shaped in a capital J design encrusted with beautiful silver cases with some having ivory handles. These knives are generally worn for special occasions and formal events.

After the lengthy “meet and greet” session, I took notice of the various forms of interaction taking place all around me. Some of the men were chatting like old friends that had not seen each other in years. However, most sat there just staring into space oblivious to what was occurring around them. I couldn’t tell if they were happy, sad, tired, upset, hungry, or just plain bored. It all reminded me of something Jan Morris (1957) once said in her book, Sultan in Oman, “The Arabs sat there stiff as statues, only moving to finger their beards or adjust their robes, sometimes twiddling their canes or shifting their rifles, but never smiling, whispering, expectorating or even coughing” (p. 234).

Finally, it was time to eat. In came platter after platter of all the meat we had cooked earlier. Each large circular platter was piled high with a mixture of camel and ox meat embedded on top of a mountain of rice. The room and outer courtyard were filled with men sitting on the floor/ground eating with his right hand at what appeared to be over 100 platters of food. After all the waiting, we gorged for about 15 minutes with little talking, then it was all over.

After feeling bloated from all the meat and rice, I decided to walk back less than half a mile to put my camera back in the smaller majlis where I was staying. Judging by all the trash on the ground, it appeared that the women had a wonderful feast as well, in our absence.

It was now time for the zefa or picking up the bride and bringing her to her new husband’s home. As the men and women were busy making arrangements on who was going in what car or bus, I couldn’t help but notice how beautifully dressed the women were. All around me appeared a potpourri of colors with some women wearing long white bridesmaid dresses and others dressed in various shades (green, red, blue, purple, brown, and black) of traditional Omani clothes covered in gold jewelry and henna painted on their hands and feet. Before making our 30 minute journey to pick up the bride, I was encouraged by Yaqdhan to fire some shots from his rifle into the Arabian night sky.

The journey to get the new bride (zefa) was one of the most interesting car trips I have ever made. Our convoy included about twenty cars and a bus. Along the way, Yaqdhan periodically fired his rifle into the sky while driving. Every vehicle has its emergency flashers on and the new couple’s car was decorated with streamers and flowers as is common practice. We arrived to the bride’s home and the groom was anxiously awaiting his opportunity to bring her back with him to their new abode. He invited me to sit with the other men just outside the concrete wall on a large rug while sharing fruits, halwa, and coffee. I could tell he was very excited about picking up his new bride.
Meanwhile, on the inside of the concrete wall, I looked inside the gated area and saw numerous rugs spread everywhere with hundreds of women singing, clapping, and eating. Then I heard a strange rhythmical sound bellow out of their mouths in unison. It was as if hundreds of tongues were moving north and south all at once. Soon the beautiful sounds were muted by the sounds of rifles shooting into the Arabian sky. It turns out a posse of Yaqdhan’s Bedu friends bought some additional firepower to the celebration.

After an hour of eating, shooting, and listening to singing, it was time for the convoy to take the new bride to her husband’s home, which happened to be next door to his father’s. All along the way car horns were blaring, emergency flashers were engaged, and the sounds of rifle fire were echoing into the air. Family members of the bride made the trip as well so the convoy grew progressively longer.

Once we arrived in the village, hundreds of women converged into the bride’s tiny home. As before, there was clapping, singing, and those strange yodeling sounds. The men were positioned on the asphalt road just in front of the groom’s home. A lot of them started doing traditional Omani dancing in the road. This entailed dancing around a cane stick that many of the men brought with them to the wedding. Of course, there was much more shooting into the night sky. By midnight I was exhausted. I went to the smaller majlis, turned on the fan to keep the mosquitos at bay, and fell to sleep only to be periodically awakened by the sound of gun fire. I was told the celebration ended around 3 a.m. and morning prayer would be just two hours later.

Ailing Loved Ones and Family Closeness

One of the most telling aspects of Omani families is the love and dedication they have toward their relatives. This is very apparent when walking on the grounds of any hospital in Oman. Specifically, you will see large blankets spread on the ground underneath trees or between bushes. Placed on the blankets are food and beverage containers along with pillows. At times you will see just men on one blanket and women on another; and, I have witnessed occasions where both men and women are seated on the same blanket. It is really special to watch as one of the Omani men approaches the group of other men seated in a circle on the blanket. All will stand up almost in unison to greet the group newcomer by shaking his hand or by touching noses. This hospital ritual is very common among the Bedu or Bedouin people in Oman. That is, they feel obligated to be near their loved one during his or her stay in the hospital. This could entail days or weeks of “camping out” in order to be near their sick family member.

Death and Burial

The family of the deceased will receive guests for three days in the majlis, mosque, or will rent a tent. Males will mourn and pay their respects in the aforementioned locales. Females, on the other hand, will mourn and pay respects in the home of the deceased. The family is to provide food for the guests. The deceased family member’s body is washed by family members of the respective sex and then it is wrapped in a white sheet. The body is then placed in the ground with the right side down facing Mecca/Mekkah. Then, a thin rock is placed on the surface near the head and foot areas to mark the burial place. Most of the time there is no inscription on the rocks.

Discussion

One important goal of this study was to provide Westerners with more accurate descriptions of Arabs by examining social and communication interactions within Omani families. A closely related secondary goal entailed exploring collectivism within Omani family structures. Love and Powers (2002) argued that such research is needed by intercultural
communication scholars so that others can better “understand the culture and more effectively interact with individuals who are a part of Arab society” (p. 229).

My experiences with Omani families were completely antithetical to those portrayed in the American media (e.g., billboard advertisement in Los Angeles for the television show 24 depicting a Muslim-American family as terrorists with the slogan “They could be next door.”). I found them to be among the most approachable and hospitable people I had ever met. Indeed, as far as reputation in the Gulf region, Omanis are known “for their friendliness, tolerance, and lack of arrogance” (Neal, 2010, p. 255). Heines (2007) concurs by noting that “The Omani people are extremely courteous and polite. Friendship and kindness is one of their most prized virtues” (p. 111).

Based upon this ethnographic field study, Omani culture does not focus on self-sufficiency and individualism. Instead, emphasis is placed on obligations of mutual support between the individual and his/her family (Ayish, 1998). Earlier examples of this were provided when discussing the collective occasion related to preparing food for the wedding, community involvement at the wedding majlis, and the collective desire to be near sick family members during hospital stays. In fact, the collective aspects of social interaction are “the most desired value within the Arab’s value system” (Khalid, 1977, p. 127).

The Bedouin families visited by the researcher had characteristics one would expect of traditional Omani households (Ayish, 1998; Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). That is, extended, endogamous families with a large number of children having multiple generations living in one house or living in nearby houses within the same village or town. Worth noting here is that assisted living or elderly care facilities are nonexistent in Oman. Also, the family structure is patriarchal with the husband/father being the primary authority figure and provider. Despite contemporary changes in the Arab family (delayed marriages, higher divorces rates, and fewer children), researchers have found that the “Omani family is generally highly cohesive” (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007, p. 139).

During my stay in Oman, I felt like an extended member, or at the very least, an honorary member of the Al-Hajri family. Before departing from the Al-Hajri home for the last time, I observed Amal’s father (baba) having a lengthy conversation with her. When Mr. Muhamad finished speaking, he motioned to Amal to translate their discussion. “My father wants you to know that if you leave the university, or ever need a job, you can work for him on his farm and he will provide you with a car, house, land, and a camel.” Amal’s family is not wealthy and I was moved by the generous and serious offer. Almaney and Alwan (1982) suggested that “to a foreigner, the Arab’s outstanding trait may well be hospitality” (p. 91). In the Arab Gulf region, Bedouin hospitality promotes a man’s honor and his reputation (Torstrick & Faier, 2009). His reputation is considered to be of more importance than material wealth.

In their article on “Cross-Cultural Misunderstandings between the United States and the Arab World,” Obeidat and Al-Shalabi (2011, p. 24) ask some compelling questions about the type of Middle East most people envision. That is, do people see a world led by religious radicals or one in which a stranger is treated with the utmost hospitality? Do they sense Muslim women being treated indifferently or do they know of the close-knit extended families that display strong relational bonds?

Unfortunately, most Americans probably envision the negative aspects of the aforementioned questions based on mediated and political influences. This fosters ethnocentrism in that we judge others cultures (i.e., the Arab World) as right or wrong, instead of focusing on the unique differences between us (Zaharna, 1995). Fortunately, through my immersion into
Omani culture, I was able to ascertain a world of immense hospitality and close-knit family structures. In essence then, Oman is a mutually interdependent culture that values the collective contributions of everyone rather than the works of one.
References


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