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Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900–1940): An Ethnohistorical Study

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ABSTRACT

Although much has been written about women in the Middle East, several aspects have remained unexplored. This study provides a new perspective on women's culture in Saudi Arabia in the early decades of the 20th century using oral history and storytelling. Oral history can fill the gaps in the written history of women and provide a new narrative written by women. The study attempts to revisit the beginning of the 20th century and gather data about the culture regarding women in Saudi Arabia: How has it developed? Most research in this area uses secondary data and depends on interpretations of historical events. This study aims to provide a new narrative through the memories of women. Adding to testimonies, it utilizes other data, such as archives and travelers' diaries, to present a portrait of the culture regarding women in the 20th century. The main data method is in-depth interviews with a sample of eight women about their life stories. The results present an ethnographic portrait of the culture from several cultural dimensions, such as roles, work, marriage, relationships, and freedom of movement. This study contributes to knowledge as it provides novel data about the women's culture in Saudi Arabia (1900–1940) through the memories of women—an unprecedented study. The researcher suggests that additional oral history research should be done by taking larger samples from different parts of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Ethnohistory – Women – Culture- Cultural change – Saudi Arabia – history.

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1. Introduction

According to an African proverb, “every old man that dies is a library that burns” (Perks & Thomson, 2015). The proverb underlies the importance and urgency of documenting and archiving oral history for continuity and expanded utilization (Wasamba, 2015).

Saudi Arabia has been an obscure spot for researchers, and at the beginning of the 20th century, it was generally a nomadic tribal society, with a scarcity of documented data about this society and its culture, particularly regarding women. Most available images about the situation were

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fictionalized by outsiders' imagination, without access to the society from the inside, yet the voices of the women remained hidden.

This study primarily aims to preserve and record the testimonies and stories of a group of Saudi women about their lives to document some cultural features in Saudi Arabia (1900–1940), which tend to be missing from other sources (Alhuzami, 2018).

This study attempts to revisit the beginning of the 20th century and gather data about the culture regarding women in Saudi Arabia—how has it developed? Most studies in this area have used secondary data and depended on interpretations of historical events. This study aims to provide a new narrative through the memories of women. Adding to testimonies, it utilizes other data, such as photos, archives, and travelers' diaries, to present a portrait of the cultural change regarding women from the beginning of the 20th century until the present day.

Studying the culture of this historical period is substantial, as it represents the epoch of the indigenous nomadic stage before the beginning of modernization and socio-economic development that started a few years after the unification of the Saudi Kingdom in 1932.

This study presents part of a dissertation that traced shifts in women's culture in different historical periods through oral history and storytelling. For the first period covered in this study, a sample of eight women born before 1940 were interviewed for their life stories to produce a cultural narrative at that time. This study does not claim to be representative of or to completely overview women's culture at that time or to cover all its aspects. Rather, it attempts to provide new insight through the voices of a sample of women; hence, the outcome narrative should be seen here.

This study begins with a literature review, followed by a description of the methodology used, and then the results are presented through five cultural dimensions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Women and cultural change

Both women and cultural studies have an interdisciplinary basis that represents a challenge to academic boundaries (Franklin, Lury, & Stacey, 1991, p.171). Cultural studies tend to focus on feminism and gender concepts rather than on culture regarding women. Also, women's studies mostly use a social approach focusing on measuring the change quantitatively and in a certain period.

I faced the challenge of tracing studies that discussed the culture or cultural change regarding women. Although it is important to investigate women's issues in the cultural domain (Moghadam and Senftova, 2005, p. 395), most available studies were either social, political, historical, or economic.

There is a noticeable lack of women's history in cultural studies, and this could be because many cultural studies' researchers, who have worked on gender and women's studies, were not engaged in "historically focused research" (Arrow, 2007, p.169).

The revival of women's history began only in the 1960s and started to ask questions about women's culture (DuBois, Buhle, Kaplan, & Lerner, 1980, p. 28). Studies that considered the intersection between women's studies, culture, and history remained scarce.

Cruikshank (1991) used the life stories of three native elder women to interpret the past and document the unwritten social history of the Yukon in Alaska, emphasizing the role of the interpretation of the orally narrated life story. Another study that explored the "hidden" history and culture of women was Komori's (2007). This study explored the changing relationship between women and accounting in Japan across five historical periods, drawing on various literatures concerning the historical and cultural roles and positions of women in Japan.

However, among the most relevant studies in the literature is the study of Soomekh (2008), which presents an ethnographic portrait of what life was like for Iranian Jewish women living in Iran and now in America. Interviews were conducted with three generations of Iranian Jewish women—grandmothers, mothers, and daughters—to discover a portrait of their culture and how it has changed.

2.2 Women's studies in Saudi Arabia and the Arab region

Cultural studies that treat issues concerning women in the Arab region are also lacking (Varghese, 2011, p.41). Some studies have discussed social and cultural issues regarding Saudi women (Doumato, 1992; Al-Khateeb, 1998a; Al-Khateeb, 1998b; Saker, 2008; Le Renard, 2011; Al-Ahmadi, 2011). However, with many of these studies, we face the problematic issue that Fenster and Hamdan-Saliba

(2013) described as the dilemma of the outside/inside Middle East research. The outside research studies were published in English and had more universal access than those conducted inside the region in Arabic. This situation makes the inside research “hidden or invisible to Anglo–American academic knowledge” (Fenster & Hamdan-Saliba, 2013, p.529). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Western's perception of the situation remains vague.

Many women's studies, when discussing the situation of Arab women generally, start with a stereotype rather than an objective exploration. When their behavior is observed from the outside, without listening to their self-reflection, Muslim or Arab women could be easily called passive, dependent, obedient, and victimized. This could also be because those “raised in a Western tradition tend to approach life history with certain preconceptions about what constitutes an ‘adequate’ account of a life” (Cruikshank, 1991).

Among the significant contemporary studies about Saudi women is the dissertation of French researcher Amelie Le Renard entitled “Females and Public Spheres in Saudi Arabia.” Le Renard (2011) ethnographically explored the lifestyles of Saudi urban women in the capital city Riyadh to comprehensively understand the gender situation in the country. The significance of this study is that Le Renard has participated in society, visited families in their houses, chatted with women in universities and workplaces, had coffee meetings, went on shopping trips, and observed the lifestyles of Saudi women in both public and private spheres. Le Renard (2011) discussed the mistakes made by many studies when considering Saudi women as a social group and attempted to generalize them.

Another study is Doumato's (1992), which analyzed the gender ideology in Saudi Arabia and its relation to political issues. The study discussed gender culture politically, which overshadowed other factors. Since culture is so complex, discussing the political impact without investigating the social fabric, tribal heritage, and economic dynamics cannot provide a complete picture.

However, as further explored, there is no previous study about Saudi women that discusses the culture and the cultural change historically. All existing literature discusses the subject of Saudi women socially or politically.

Moreover, there was no ethnographic study about Saudi women, except that of Le Renard (2011). As further researched, we have not found any research that explored the history or cultural changes regarding women in Saudi Arabia, making this study the first, even if limited, to cover the culture regarding women in Saudi Arabia, which makes it a prominent, original, and pioneer study that fills a gap in the field.

3. Methodology: Implementing ethnohistory and oral history

The complexity and dynamic nature of culture imposes the use of over one method to understand it. Hence, ethnohistorical methodology was incorporated due to its ability to facilitate recording native cultures (Rogers & Wilson, 1993, p. 8) and to utilize several ethnological methods and materials (Fenton, 1966, p. 75).

Moreover, examining the history of women particularly entails using variant types of methods and data sources, such as in ethnography:

As women are invisible (or at best indirectly referred to) in accepted sources of data (such as literature, inscriptions, numismatics, etc.), there is a need to ferret out new sources of data. This might require juxtaposing conventional historical sources with oral traditions (such as oral histories, proverbs, folk songs, etc.), particularly while drawing the histories of women from the grass-roots. (Poonacha, 2004, p. 401)

Ethnohistory is a combined approach of historical and ethnographic methods such as oral history that depends on interviews with people about their memories and life stories. The significance of oral history is that it obtains information that cannot be found in written sources. Moreover, it is used in many forms of historical, social, or political works, yet, rarely used to explore cultures.

Despite its power to record the past, oral history has often been criticized based on “its potential unreliability—the fallibility of human memory.” Although in oral history all available records must be used to verify the results, some argued that “oral history's strength actually lies in its unreliability, in the discrepancy between fact and memory” (Marcus, 2008, p. 3).

History was essentially a documentation of the political struggle for power, where the lives of ordinary people were giving little attention. Historical time was divided by the changes of reigns rather than the changes affecting ordinary people. Even local history was rarely concerned with the daily life of the community and the street. Hence, the greatest strength of oral history lies in the opportunities it offers for opening up social worlds that have hitherto been hidden. At the heart of the methodology is “a distinctly empowering ideal—a desire to give a voice to individuals and groups often ignored by orthodox histories” (Cockcroft, 2005).

Oral history is an ideal means of exploring culture (Cockcroft, 2005). Although many scholars have mentioned that oral history can be used to study cultures (Thomson, 1999; Del Giudice, 2009; Perks & Thomson, 2015; Thompson, 2017), it is rarely implemented methodologically in the study of culture. Moreover, Perks and Thomson stated that by studying the combination of people’s experience, memory, and history, oral history “opens up a powerful perspective” that encourages us to understand the culture from inside (Perks & Thomson, 2015, p. 36). Furthermore, exploring how women explain and see their past offers valuable insight into the social and cultural framework within which they lived, their roles, the cultural patterns, and the complex relationship between individual and culture (Perks & Thomson, 2015, p. 88).

Thompson (2017) categorized oral history into three forms: the first and broadest is oral history, the term mostly used by historians, community workers, and many social researchers for recoding any kind of memory of the past. This type often focuses on just one phase/theme in a life. The second form, which has been implied particularly by anthropologists to study societies, cultures, and social changes, is a life story: recording the story of a person’s whole life. Thus, while oral history is not always a life story, recorded life stories are always oral history. The third form is oral tradition, which is mostly utilized by anthropologists, ethnologists, or folklorists. It is the memories of the past handed down “orally” between generations (Thompson, 2017). In this study, the second and third types of oral history were both implemented: the recorded life stories of the sample and the stories of their mothers who lived at that period to recover the voices of women from the past. The first form was unapplied because it concentrated on a specific historical event, which is not the case in this study.

The sample comprised eight women who were born before 1940. Finding and selecting the sample; locating elderly women who were born before 1940, ensuring their health conditions, memorizing abilities, willingness to participate, and telling their life stories to a stranger were difficult. Also, trying to balance the regional and cultural diversity of the sample was another challenge.

Initially, the snowball method was used. Some friends and colleagues in Saudi Arabia were asked to help call volunteers who would like to help and invite participants. Some friends helped by connecting some relatives or friends. However, to ensure sample diversity, an appeal for volunteers for interviewing was posted through Twitter and Ask.fm.

Some interviews were conducted face-to-face, however, we noticed that some participants, even if they were willing to cooperate, were reluctant to talk face-to-face with a stranger (the interviewer) about their lives. Hence, other interview procedures were used and found more effective. The first method was to conduct the interviews by phone. This gave the interviewees more sense of anonymity and comfort.

Table
The

	Name	Year of birth	Region	Interview Mode	Duration of Interview (min)
1	Melha	1926	Central Region & Eastern Region	Via her granddaughter	75
2	Modi	1930	Northern Region	Face-to-face	60
3	Nora	1928	Northern Region	Via her daughter	80
4	Mezna	1937	Central Region	Via her daughter	70
5	Eda	1935	Central Region	Face-to-face	55
6	Roqaya	1935	Central Region	Face-to-face	(one interview)
7	Safiya	1934	Eastern Region	Via her granddaughter	75
8	Amra	1940	Central Region	Phone	65
	Total time (min)				480 min (8 hours)
	Average time (min)				60 min

1.
sample

The second method was to train and assign a relative of the interviewees to conduct the interview with her and record it. This procedure was more effective for some reasons: 1) it gave them a sense of security and comfort; 2) it helped them to talk more easily and openly; and 3) the interviewer worked as a translator for some strong dialects. This was applied with all ethical considerations, and the interviewees properly understood the interviews' purpose before signing the consent form.

When the interviews started, we were keen to note everything. The raw material of oral history consists not just in statements but principally in the expression and representation of culture and, therefore, includes literal narrations alongside the dimensions of memory, ideology, and subconscious desires (Perks & Thomson, 2015, p. 54). Hence, a focus was given to the participants' expressions, the words and idioms used to describe an idea or event in their lives, even the dreams they discuss sometimes. It was important to note and write a diary.

First, the recorded interviews were transcribed in Arabic. Sometimes we had revisited the interviewee or her relative and asked them to ensure that the word or idiom was understood correctly. We drew a pattern for each interview, compared it to others, and wrote down reflections. When a new pattern arose in later interviews, we would revisit some previous interviewees to question more to check whether it was a common practice/belief. Then we started to compare, applying the constant comparative method. During this process, we moved in and out of the data collection and analysis process. This back-and-forth movement or cycles between simultaneous data collection and analysis is called "iteration" (Lingard, Mathieu, & Levinso, 2008).

Finally, after the extensive process of iterations, the stories were written and categorized according to five components of culture: roles in private and public spheres, work and financial independency, marriage and divorce, relationships, and freedom of movement. These components of culture were selected because they relate to the lives of women and their circumstances.

4. Results and discussion: The new narrative

Before the unification of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the majority (60–80%) of the population were traveling nomads Bedouins who used to travel in the desert as tribes or clans. Every tribe had its own land and water resources and would fight to protect them. The remaining population were either non-tribal or settled-tribal habitants living in villages or small towns and working as farmers, local merchants, sheep owners, or in trade. The civilization level varied between villages, small towns, and big cities in the western region. Resource scarcity, famines, poverty, attacks of infectious diseases, and tribal battles were so common at that stage. The living conditions were dreadful.

4.1 Roles in private and public spheres

It is difficult to differentiate between private and public spheres at that time (before 1940), as the majority of the population were Bedouins. In the encampment, the tribe represents the big family and the society simultaneously. The "home" as private sphere was an open tent "Bait Al-Sha'ar" where people gather and drink coffee. With no notion of houses or walls, the borders between private and public spheres were unsophisticated.

Apparently, there were traditional gender roles in the tribe, "women used to knit and cook while men go for hunting," Safiya (participant) said. However, it is difficult to consider the Bedouin women's roles as solely traditional, particularly when comparing them to women in urban areas. It is clear that women were regarded as inferior to men; this was witnessed by travelers such as Burckhardt. They had almost no access to authority or power positions in the tribe. Burckhardt stated that "although women were seldom treated with neglect or indifference, they [were] always taught to consider that their sole business is cooking and working" (Burckhardt, 1830, p. 350).

Nevertheless, Bedouin women had roles that were unavailable for women in villages. According to the interviews, women handled heavy works, such as installing tents, slaughtering animals for food, and helping men in carrying the cargo when traveling.

The interviewees, Melha, Nora, Roqaya, Eda, and Safiya (participants), described the daily routine roles in similar ways: shepherding, firewood gathering, cooking, and knitting. However, they emphasized that these roles were not discriminated on the grounds of sex or age. Almost all the Bedouin interviewees agreed that these roles, such as shepherding, were flexible and depended on the availability of tribe members and the circumstances.

An example of this flexibility in the household is Eda's (participant, 80) story. Her father took good care of her and her siblings when her mother divorced him: "He did all the house works. He used to cook for us, feed us, clean, wash dishes, and shower my baby brother." When other interviewees were asked if this was commonly acceptable and could be represented as a cultural practice, they approved. Even in the villages, a participant mentioned that she was taught how to bake bread and cook some traditional dishes by her father, who was better at cooking than her mother. The stories indicate that, although they may seem traditional, the roles in private spheres at that time were flexible and dependent on the circumstances and needs. Some photos taken by travelers in that era also show signs of this flexibility and spontaneity when handling the roles.

In contrast, women in villages had stricter gender traditional roles, and according to the stories, they had almost no access to public spheres. Modhi, Mezna, and Amra (participants) confirmed that when girls started their puberty, they were expected not to leave their houses until they marry.

However, the stories reveal that women in villages could have their own properties and businesses and control their own lives without the intervention of male relatives. Mezna's (participant) mother lived alone and managed her business. Moreover, importantly, the arrangement of marriage in several stories was managed by women. Mezna stated that her mother arranged her two first marriages. Modhi's (participant) grandmother arranged her marriage without even consulting her father. Melha stated that her father sympathized with her when she ran away from her new husband, but her mum was strict: "She threatened me with a stick to return to my husband's tent." These scenes give signs that women's decisions in their private spheres were not as negative as could be anticipated.

The Bedouins used to move from one site to another every few days, searching for water and grass for their sheep. "When traveling, women were everything" Melha (participant) said. She described how the women controlled the packing process, arranged the cargo, and when arriving, they chose the location of the tents and set them up.

Arming is an additional aspect of gender roles. Bedouin women were supposed to protect their families' possessions when men were away at war or hunting. It was common for them to own and use a weapon. Through her story, Safiya (participant) talked about her mother owning a rifle that her uncle gave her. Through her story, Melha also mentioned her grandmother's Turkish rifle.

My grandmother owned a luxurious Turkish rifle that was richly inlaid with silver and brass. It was an extraordinary and famous one; everybody wished to own it. Many chiefs and rich people gave her fine offers to buy, yet she refused. [...] She used it when thieves tried to attack her sheep once. My husband saw in his dream once that she gave him her rifle and he was privileged.

Safiya (participant) also told us that her mother owned a rifle that her uncle gave her. When asked if this was common, they confirmed that it was quite common; a woman either has her own rifle or her husband gives her one of his own before traveling.

Another cultural practice that illustrates women's roles is their ability to protect strangers in a cultural practice called "Dakhel." This practice means safeguarding a stranger who is fleeing from danger. When a stranger asks a woman for her protection and she gives him her word of honor and touches him, then his protection becomes the responsibility of the whole tribe, even if they found out that he killed their son. A woman's word in this practice is as firm and worthy as a man's own. Burckhardt stated witnessing this practice during his travels (Burckhardt, 1830).

In his book, Carl Raswan also mentioned a story about a lone shepherdess living alone in a tent with her two dogs. He stated how they met her during their travel, how she hosted and provided them with food, and how she used to go to hunt with her rifle (Raswan, 1936, p. 37). Another noteworthy incident to mention is the conversation that Carl had with Mashail, the blind young wife of the chief of Ruwala tribe when she said:

I cannot be brave and commanding like Aliya, [a woman] who led our men against Ibrahim Pasha [Ottoman leader], and I do not possess the spirit of the Lady Turkiyye, my mother, to sit in the council-tent

with our chiefs. Yet my people come to consult me, because they say that my soul is a mirror, which holds the image of the future long enough so that my tongue can describe it. (Raswan, 1936, p. p.47)

He described her as a wise woman who the influential men of her tribe approached to greet and consult. Mentioning Aliya, a female figure in the tribe, who had a leading role at their wars against the Ottomans, and her mother Turkiyye, who used to set in the council tent with the elder tribal chiefs, gives an image of hidden roles that were never mentioned in the traditionally written history.

Another example that indicates the role a woman can play at that period was the rule of Princess Fatima Al-Zamil. Fatima was the wife of the Prince of the province of Hail. After her husband and son's death, she was nominated by two of the most powerful tribes in the central Arabian Peninsula at that time: Shammar, her tribe and Al-Rasheed, her husband's tribe, to rule the province that covered 300,000 square meters, as the guardian of her young grandson. She was a well-educated woman with a good military knowledge and was described as a keen political negotiator. During her reign from 1911 to 1917, no war occurred; she stopped several wars with her negotiation skills and imprisoned her brother-in-law to stop him from revenging crimes that could have started a tribal war. However, she led one war in 1915 and won the battle. Fatima was mentioned in the diaries of Gertrude Bell, who stayed at her palace for few days, yet Fatima did not meet her. Bell stated that "Fatima rules them all" (Bell, Dairies, 1914A) and that "she is very clever and can read and write." In other notes, she stated that Fatima "is the power behind the throne here" "of whom Ibrahim [her brother-in-law] stands in deadly fear." (Bell, Dairies, 1914B).

4.2 Work and financial independency

Bedouin women used to do knitting, sewing traditional clothes, and making dairy products to sell in villages and towns. This was mentioned in several participants' stories and in travelers' dairies (Burkhardt, 1831; Dickson, 2015). "From time to time, women go together to the nearest town to sell their products," Roqaya said. Hessa (participant) also said that her mother, who lived in a village, told her that when Bedouins settled nearby, their women visited the village to sell their goods: "They were good negotiators and handled all their trade by themselves; we were astonished by their strength and cleverness."

Edda and Roqaya (participants) mentioned that they used to make some dairy products and wool yarns and go with other women every few days to nearby villages to sell them in exchange for coffee, rice, and flour. Moreover, it was common that they had their own property of horses, camels, and sheep herds, and that they rode their animals with high skill. Nora (participant) mentioned that her mother was living alone in a house she owned after she divorced her husband; Safiya's mother also built a house and lived there alone with her daughters after divorce. Both of them mentioned that their mothers owned sheep and camels. Mezna (participant), who was a villager, mentioned that her mother was wealthy and owned farms, houses, and traded.

Another point to mention is that women had the right to inherit properties and money. Although, certainly, there were common practices of men controlling women's inheritance, the data in the stories regarding inheritance were positive. For example, Mezna described how her mother inherited a fortune after her father's death. Mezna herself inherited some farms and much money after her second husband's death. However, in villages, women had fewer opportunities to work. "Women in villages had different circumstances, you cannot generalize," said Mezna.

In some villages like Sudair, my village, women were not used to working outside their houses. They were wealthier and their families had servants. They were expected only to work in their houses: cleaning, cooking or making dairy products. But in other nearby villages, such as Twaim, the situation was different, women went to farms to help their husbands and girls went to bring water by themselves. For the girls in my village this was unacceptable.

However, they also worked on sewing and selling goods. When their husbands traveled to other countries to work, they had more opportunities or space to work. For instance, Hessa described how her mother controlled the household budget when her husband moved to work in Kuwait. She cared for the cows and bought some sheep. She used to make and sell yogurt. They had a better life financially after she controlled the income that her husband sent.

Generally, the data collected in this study show a variant space for work for women in that time. Women's opportunity was wider in the Bedouin communities, yet the opportunity narrowed down in

the urban areas. The impact of socio-economic factors is indisputable; the absence of their men who used to travel constantly for wars, hunt, and work, at a time of poverty, enabled them to take responsibility of their families and allowed them practice some types of work—trading of livestock.

4.3 Marriage and divorce

In the Bedouin tribal traditions, women are expected to marry their cousins from their father's side. It is obvious through the stories, except Eda's (participant), that women could not choose their husbands in their first marriage. Moreover, unless he is a cousin or a tribe member that she knows, the bride may not see her husbands before marriage.

The obedient behavior of women at that time should not be taken away from the social context and tribal traditions where even men had to obey their fathers or their tribal leaders, even in personal decisions such as marriage. Dickson mentioned that both women and men expect their parents to find them a mate when they reach the age of manhood (Dickson, 2015, p. 140). Melha (participant) explained how it depends on the girl's character, her family's circumstances, and the economic situation:

It is difficult to say that something was common. It depended on the woman herself my dear. If she was strong, she could refuse any proposed man, if she was young, weak, or an orphan, she probably would fear to refuse and disobey her parents or guardian.

Also, it depended on the girl's family and their economic situation. At famine time, there is no choice. Spoiled girls of wealthy families have more choices, in contrast to the poor ones. At that time, they did not see it as forcing but a strategy to survive: everyone is just trying to find a supporter to feed his daughter. No time to make choices. It was a hunger time my dear; people were literally dying of hunger.

All the interviewed Bedouin women asserted that their parents did not seek their opinions in their first marriage. However, after divorce, they had the right to decide in their marriage. Nora (participant) also stated that "girls' opinions were not usually sought in their marriage, especially when they were orphans like me." The interviewees agreed that only young girls were forced to marry, yet widows and divorced women could choose for themselves. However, all women could ask for divorce, and it was so common as they mentioned. This was also noticed by several travelers, such as Burckhardt (1830) and Dickson (2015). Dickson even mentioned that when a married woman fell in love with another man, she might tell her husband the whole truth and ask him to divorce her. "This happens fairly often," he stated (Dickson, 2015, p. 58).

Another practice mentioned in several stories of Bedouin women is to run away from the first marriage. Roqaya (participant, 88) got married and when she disliked her husband, she ran away and stayed with her parents till he divorced her.

- *When I was fifteen, I was married to a young man. I refused him but my parents tried to convince me. When I met him, I refused any intercourse and I beat him!*

- *You beat him?*

- *Yees (with a voice of pride) I beat him and I ran away to my parents' house. They tried to return me back the next day but I refused and I ran away. I climbed a hill and hid in a cave for few days. When my father finally found me sleeping there and he saw my pale face he cried and swore that he would never force me back there. He knew how determined I was.*

- *Then?*

- *I stayed with my parents till he divorced me. I stayed for seven years until I agreed to marry to another man. This time it was by my choice and he was a good man bless him.*

In Nora's dramatic story, her brother forced her to marry his widower friend, but when she ran away and asked for divorce, he did not attempt to return her or force her again. She stayed for nine years. When she traveled later to her mother and her brother came to ask her back, she refused.

- *You refused?*

- *Yes! I refused and I stuck to my mother. I said: if you want to take me I have a condition: take my mother with me! [...] He tried hardly to convince me but I refused even if he would kill me. When he saw how serious I was he left me with disappointment.*

- *Did he try to be violent with you?*

- *No, not at all.*

- *And you stayed alone with your mother?*

- Yes, I stayed with her. We stayed together for about a year. Some people blamed my brother for leaving his sister alone but he told them that she has grown up now and she has her own decision. [...]. Then I married my husband.
- This time by your choice?
- Yes. By my choice and I moved with him to Al-Ahsa.

The stories of Nora, Melha, and Safiya show how the culture was not strict about the decision of divorce or about the refusal of a proposal. Eda referred the difference between her situation and Roqaya's to her lack of courage:

We were in the same tribe. When my father tried to arrange a marriage for me, I strictly refused. I threatened them I would kill myself or run away and he cancelled the whole idea!

Nora was a young orphan when she married, but when she grew up and saw a brave example (of her cousin), she was courageous to run away and ask for divorce. Neither her brother nor her tribe tried to force her back since she was determined. Melha's story also supports this argument:

- Was it common that girls were forced to marry?
- No, not always. Some do force their girls, others do not. Usually when the girl is young her parents make the choice for her. For example, I was forced to marry my first husband. But when I met him, I refused to stay with him!
- Why?
- No reason. He was a good young man but I just couldn't have any feeling for him. I ran away from the first night. I went back to my parents. My father was sympathetic with me but mum was strict. She threatened me with a stick of wood to return to my husband's tent. I ran away again. [...] Finally, I went to Lafi, bless him, my brother in law. [...] Lafi gave me his word of honour to protect me. [...] Since then my parents could not touch me or force me to go back to my husband. I was divorced and I stayed there for about eleven years refusing to marry again.
- Did they try to force you to marry again?
- No, not at all. I was grown up at that time. I refused many proposals.

Melha's story agrees with the stories of Roqaya, Safiya, and Nora. Despite the indications of arranging and forcing the first marriage, these stories illustrate the common practice of divorce among women and the possibility of refusing marriage after the first divorce.

These results are supported by the observations of Dickson. He emphasized that divorce was easy among Bedouins and was disregarded, in any sense, as a matter of shame for either the man or woman. Furthermore, no disgrace is attached to the woman who takes the divorce decision, and she can proceed to look for another husband (Dickson, 2015, p. 143). Furthermore, no disgrace is attached to the woman who takes the matter quite philosophically and proceeds to look for another husband. Moreover, Melha stated that the divorced woman was more admired and proposed by men and is known as Ayof, which means the "stubborn" who refused/divorced her husband, and indicates a strong independent personality.

In contrast, women's will in villages was more disregarded in their choice of marriages. This was clear in the stories of Modhi, Mezna, and Amra who knew nothing about their husbands until wedding day, and divorce was more difficult than in the Bedouin society.

The relationship between the married couples in the stories were noteworthy. Most interviewees stated that their parents had respectful and peaceful relations. For example, both Melha and Eda stated that their parents' relationship was harmonious and passionate. Hessa talked about the respect and passionate relationship of her parents:

They treated each other in a very lovely kindly way even though they were uneducated simple villagers. [...] I don't ever remember that my dad yelled once at my mother. When my mother went to work in the afternoon, he took care of us and he spent time telling stories and teaching us interesting things. He taught me to read and write from an early age; he also taught me how to bake the bread; he was an expert baker.

However, other interviewee stated issues. Safiya (participant) stated that her mother fled to her tribe when her father married another woman with whom he was in love with. Nora also stated

that her mother had a difficult life with her passed husband, who was 20 years older than her. Nevertheless, all the issues mentioned in the stories excluded abuse or violence.

4.4 Relationships

In the Bedouin community, the relationships between the tribe members were a sort of brotherhood. According to the interviews, “we were like brothers and sisters,” Melha said. However, there was almost an agreement between the interviewees that women do not talk to strangers for no purpose. “We talk only to men we know, relatives, and cousins. If a stranger greeted us, we greeted him. If he did not, we did not,” Roqaya said. “Why should we conversed with a male stranger?” Nora asked. Still, Eda disagreed with that and explained that it depends on the woman’s character, whether she trusts the appearance and behavior of the stranger and if he seems earnest, not frivolous. The conflict between Safiya and Eda about the space allowed in the relations demonstrates its subjectivity.

However, the village women were extremely conservative regarding the relations compared to Bedouins. This was witnessed by Burckhardt himself, who stated that he would seldom get an answer from women in towns or villages, yet he had several freely given conversations and “joined in laughter” with women from different tribes in the area. Burckhardt remarked that: “it has always appeared to me that the more a tribe is connected with the inhabitants of towns, the stricter they are regarding the seclusion of women” (Burckhardt, 1830, p. 353).

It is obvious that the amount of space allowed to these relations was subjective. In some stories, the interviewees stated that a woman might welcome guests and serve them a meal without having long conversations with them, like Safiyah, Nora, and Roqaya. In others, like Eda and Melha, they stated that she could entertain the guests and chat with them. This follows Burckhardt’s observations that Bedouin women may entertain guests who are strangers in their husband’s absence and sit with them, yet the guests usually show the manners of the man’s absence. Generally, the relationships between the males and females of the tribe seem simple and naive. It was warm with cousins and relatives but formal with others. Also, the relationship between women was strong. There was a sort of cooperation between them. Safiya exemplifies:

In spring, when there is a lot of milk. Women do cooperate to make butter and Uqt (dry cheese). It was a hard and time-consuming work. So, they arranged that everyday only one of them did a big quantity for the other women and they gathered at her tent at night to chat, eat and take the rest to their families. This way was fun and effort -saving.

Melha also described how women gather every night after finishing their house works. They used to gather to chat and have fun.

4.5 Freedom of movement

The ease of movement was an additional advantage of the desert life style. When Melha described the women’s gathering every night, I asked her: did you have to ask for your husbands’ permission to go? “Nooo,” she replied with a hint of resentment in her voice. “I just went! Just ate my dinner and fed my children and then go.”

Eda (participant) also confirmed that “it was very common that a woman did go and visit her friends at any time, day, or night, without any restriction.” She said, “I went to my friends; I stayed there until midnight. My husband never asked me where you have been or what have you done.” It seems as if the socially “safe” life inside the camp, where everybody knows each other, granted the married couples a sort of trust and confidence, which was a benefit for the women. However, in later eras, the new cities, with strangers and fear, affected women’s freedom of movement.

Importantly, while Bedouin women could move freely inside their camps, they could ride animals and travel alone at liberty. This can also be illustrated by Nora’s (participant) story about her grandmother who traveled alone at night after her husband’s death to attend to her family in another tribe. She left her children with their older half siblings and traveled alone. Her action was due to poverty and hunger at that time. She did not take her children with her, as she could not support them. Nora also described how she traveled alone on her camel to her mother. Likewise, when Safiya’s mother asked for divorce, she rode her camel and traveled alone at night to her family, although she was pregnant. She refused to let anybody accompany her. Safiya herself, after divorce, rode her camel, took her younger sister, and traveled to their mother alone.

At this stage, we can see that Bedouin women had more freedom than townswomen, as mentioned by Dickson (2015). The nature of the nomadic lifestyle facilitated women's ability to move, build relationships, make choices of marriage and divorce, and practice their business.

However, women in villages in the central region had less ability to move or travel. Mezna and Amra stated that all the girls in villages were not expected to go outside their homes after puberty until marriage. "Only married women can go outside," stated Mezna. Moreover, women in the villages could not travel alone or ride animals. However, the villages varied depending on the economic situation. When the economic situation was bad, the need for labor forced the families to take their girls to help in farming.

However, although they were controlled by men and their will in their marriage was ignored, women had in return some space of freedom regarding that historical time. Divorce, inheritance, and the ability to own properties were privileges that women enjoyed at that era. Despite poverty and the lack of states or authorities to rule, there was no prostitution or crimes of rape known in that period (Dickson, 2015). Women were protected through the rules of desert, even during war times.

5. Conclusion

This article presented a portrait of women's culture in Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the 20th century. The results indicate that the lives of women in the beginning of the 20th century were obviously harsh; there was clearly neglect and inferiority toward women. Yet when considering the bigger picture and comparing it with the state of culture in subsequent periods of time, we can see that the culture at that period was more flexible toward women compared to later periods of Saudi history. Some aspects and circumstances, such as the right to travel or divorce, were more favorable and advantageous for women in the early decades of the century than other difficult historical periods after the oil boom. According to the stories, women at that time had the right to divorce, own weapons and use them, own and ride their own animals, and travel. These simple rights were mentioned spontaneously through the stories and were supported by other resources, such as the travelers' testimonials. However, these rights and roles were dramatically removed from women in later time stages after the oil boom and other socio-economic and ideological factors. Hence, these results could indicate that tribal society or traditional heritage are not the major factors that induced the oppression and discrimination that Saudi women went through in subsequent periods of history.

Moreover, literature figures have tended to portray a very passive and weak image of women in the Middle East (Gocek & Balaghi, 1995) and to romanticize their images in history as "gentle victims of the harem," and this image is contrasted with the reality of their daily battles for survival, which bear little resemblance with the "perfumed undulating sexual prey" portrayed by some figures (Afshar, 2016). The results of this study show us how harsh, cruel, and challenging life was for them and their families during famines, diseases, and poverty, and this gives a completely different understanding of their lives, roles, and perceptions about their situation at that time.

By invisibilizing their voices, a passive historical image of Saudi women has been widespread, even in Saudi society, in that they were powerless victims and submissive members of society. This generalized stereotypical image gives a misleading perspective for scholars who want to investigate the shifts in gender culture through history. The assumption that women, at that time, were all passive, submissive, or victimized, without giving chance for other voices and showing the whole picture, would be a misleading approach to understanding gender relations (Ghanim, 2009). Hence, building a new image through different methods about women's history should be given more consideration in research.

By reinvestigating history and culture through storytelling, we have delivered a more nuanced image of women's lives, experiences, roles, and strategies of survival. These women's stories picture their strengths and bravery rather than their passivity. Women in these stories had a sense of autonomy: they ran away from a failed marriage, refused another, asked for divorce, insisted on living independently with their children, used weapons, and traveled fearlessly alone through the desert. Even if they were not conscious of their strengths, they challenged their circumstances. They were far stronger than how traditionally written history has portrayed them. Although we lack the evidence to

generalize the results and do not claim to by any means, these stories give a new, different insight into women's culture in that period.

Eventually, the results represent a valuable oral sources' archive that can assist in supplementing future research. Although oral history generates considerable controversy, it plays an important archival functions. These multiple, rich, divergent personal stories that emerge through oral history may complement and balance the one-dimensional or oversimplified images of women in the history of Saudi Arabia.

6. Implications and future perspectives

In this study, we aimed to increase our understanding of the culture regarding women through history and how it could be studied in future research. We derived some conclusions based on our work. First, the culture might best be conceptualized as a multifaceted process that involves individuals' testimonies and collective awareness, beliefs, and behaviors. Second, based on the research, trying to explore culture through oral history is hard to conduct because it is extremely difficult to obtain the consent of participants in a conservative society, to talk about their life stories and to publish them for academic research. The limitation of the sample is a major challenge, yet we decided to publish this study as a model for future research.

In conclusion, we derive a main implication from our work. We highly recommend that additional oral history research be done by taking a larger sample from different parts of Saudi Arabia. We also suggest that similar research should be done worldwide. We hope that our model to explore culture using oral history encourages future research to focus more on rewriting the history of women's culture through their voices. Consequently, new theories and narratives may develop regarding how and why certain components or dimensions of culture could be impacted by different interventions and factors through history.

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