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**GOODS AND GOODNESS**

*Anne Meneley*

The condition of gratitude easily has a taste of bondage.  
 George Simmel

I spent a great deal of time with one élite Muslim family during Ramadan, the month of fasting, which is characterized by quiet days and hectic nights in Zabid, the Yemeni town where I lived during my ethnographic fieldwork. Toward the end of the month, the women in the family spoke constantly of how all the new dresses, *de rigueur* for the festival [*'id*] celebrating the end of Ramadan, were snapped up so quickly in Zabid. No one wanted to be shamed by appearing on this day in an old dress or an unattractive new one. As the *'id* approached, Fatima, a 10 year old daughter in the family, became increasingly agitated as she had not been able to find an acceptable dress. Each night as I entered their house, Fatima was carrying on yet more vociferously. I was surprised at the dismissive attitude of the women toward Fatima's almost hysterical upset at the thought of having to squeeze into an old dress that everyone had already seen. (They themselves would not have dreamed of it). In the women's defense, Fatima *had* been having tantrums so loud that the neighbours had come over to teasingly ask who was being murdered, embarrassing the women who prided themselves on having the sort of family that could solve internal disputes peacefully. Fatima's female kin, whose nerves had been frayed by cranky children who had neither slept nor eaten enough in the excitement of Ramadan, had had enough of her fuss and refused to do any more. It was Fatima's sixteen-year-old brother, Ahmad, who patiently took her on his motorbike night after night, to every store in Zabid until she finally found a suitable dress. I was amazed at Ahmad, a handsome and aloof teenager, showing such patience and consideration by looking beyond Fatima's less-than-charming behavior to the source of her concern. She beamed in her new dress on the *'id*, back to her old good-humoured self.

The intense concern with material goods, especially those associated with adornment, intrigued me, as did the way in which relationships between male and female kin were continually mediated by material considerations. It seemed to me that Fatima's distress was a rawer, less socialized, and therefore less acceptable, enactment of the social and psychological consequences of proper adornment for adult women. Things like proper clothes are invested with great emotional and class significance in Zabid, although adult women would be unlikely to betray their

concerns in the form of tantrums.

I discuss here how Yemeni women's subjectivities are structured in relation to material objects and particular notions of 'goodness'. Material objects in the form of female adornment and 'goodness' as indicated by appropriate feminine comportment are intrinsic to the constitution of families as respectable in Zabid. I suggest that the way in which goodness is understood among elite and respectable families leaves women vulnerable in particular ways because of the strong idealization of natal kin ties, as well as the particular connections people make between goods and emotions. I examine these themes via several stories that I was told by women about their relationships with their fathers and brothers, or by contrast, about their husbands. Although goods travel from women to men occasionally and frequently between women, the presents that index their virtue come from men. In this paper, I highlight the flow of material goods within natal and marital families, from father to daughter, from husband to wife and from brother to sister.

I have been inspired here by Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), although her account of her working class British upbringing in the 1950s, is of course, empirically distant from the circumstances of elite Muslim women in Zabid. What is useful here is her emphasis on ideas and practices of 'goodness' being inextricably linked to class. In addition, she emphasizes the centrality of *things*, particularly clothing, in the way in which people begin to envision themselves in historical landscapes providing a theoretical framework by which to consider the importance of adornment for elite Zabidi women. Like other recent theorists, she articulates the need for a more complex attitude toward the place of consumer goods in class 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977). Although anthropologists have long emphasized the importance of objects and persons in other cultures, (in the extensive literature on exchange such as Mauss 1970; Weiner 1992; Strathern 1988), theorists like Simmel (1996) and König (1973) note our ambivalence about consumption in Western societies. Some have argued that commodity consumption in Western society is central to enactments of class (Bourdieu 1984) and personal identity (Miller 1987). However, de Grazia suggests that there is still a reluctance to take commodities associated with women's adornment seriously, as they connote a sense of frivolity or triviality (de Grazia 1996). Stallybrass (1998), in an insightful article entitled "Marx's Coat" argues for the need to be less contemptuous toward goods like clothing, noting that often respectability needs to be bought in sartorial form, a point which is woven as well throughout Steedman's memoir.

In Middle Eastern anthropology, there is much written about the article of clothing that shields women's adornment from the eyes of unrelated men, the veil, but less with the items of adornment themselves, which are of grave concern to Middle Eastern women.<sup>1</sup> As Moors points out, the veil is described as fused with women's persons, yet adornment, particularly jewelry, is equally central to personhood (1998:208-11). Along with Moors' important discussion of Palestinian women's gold jewelry, other works in Yemeni ethnography, such as vom Bruck (1997), and Meneley (1996) attempt to accord fashionable adornment the importance which

it is given in Middle Eastern communities. Weir notes the connection between emotion and gifted goods in the maintenance of Yemeni social relationships (1985:152-3). Mundy, speaking of material exchange and morality in Yemen, notes how a bride's "place in the hearts of her own family" (1995:133) is indicated by their wedding presents to her. As I argue here, goods and the manner of their transmission profoundly affect gendered subjectivity in Zabid. It is not a matter of petty women hankering after jewelry and party frocks, but rather women's desire for the public recognition of their value and virtue by male kin or husbands, which determines their value in wider social terms.

### Gender and the Transmission of Goods

As Steedman (1986) so poignantly indicated in her account of working class women in England, means of access to things become powerful determinants of class subjectivities, a point also elaborated upon by Young (this volume). Although the things, the culture, and the class are different in Zabid, the gendered distribution of goods there was salient to elite Zabidi women's subjective awareness of themselves. Goods travel along the lines of cross-gender relationships in Zabid: husband-wife or father-daughter/brother-sister. The central focus of this paper is about how goods are used to reveal the worth of people and the quality of relationships. I focus on cross-gender natal kin relationships in Zabid, and contrast them with marital exchanges.<sup>2</sup> Although women receive the same kinds of goods from both husbands and fathers, women distinguish quite sharply between the two donors. In everyday conversations and practices, the affective and moral distinctions between natal and marital kin come alive.<sup>3</sup>

Many women in elite Zabidi families do not marry at all, and therefore it is not uncommon to have women who spend their entire lives in their natal homes and receive goods only from their natal kin. This pattern is uncommon elsewhere in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. The reasons for its presence in Zabid are several: inheritance, labour, and issues of honour. While women's right to inherit land is respected, if they do not marry their land remains under the control of their fathers or brothers rather than that of their husbands or sons.<sup>4</sup> The importance of unmarried women's labour in large elite families was also an issue that women discussed obliquely; they noted how difficult it was for a married woman with children to perform all the household labour (cooking, cleaning, laundry, and child rearing) as well as the hospitality labour. Women's visiting takes place daily in Zabid, according to an elaborate etiquette.<sup>5</sup> Women are required to both represent their families in public and provide hospitality to guests; elite households, with wide-ranging social ties, require the labour of several adult women. Unmarried women are particularly well suited to this duty, unencumbered by children of their own.<sup>6</sup> Unmarried elite women are accorded respect as members of their natal families. They, along with older married women whose children are grown, are the mainstays of the women's visiting networks. There is no palpable stigma to being unmarried and sometimes

leaving your daughters unmarried was discussed as a matter of honour. Women would say "we don't marry outside our family", implying that there was no one equal to them, and that their families can afford to support them in the style appropriate to women's formal visiting. (Non-élite families, conversely, tend to marry off their daughters.) As an unmarried woman, one will not have a chance to become a powerful matriarch, although, given the vagaries of the material and reproductive fortunes of a family, this is not guaranteed for married women.<sup>7</sup> Both unmarried and divorced women supported by their families participate fully in women's social life.

As in many Arab societies, cross-gender natal family relationships (father-daughter and brother-sister) are affectively very close. A woman's primary identity, as noted above, is always derived from her natal family and it was customary for a woman to introduce herself as "the daughter of X" first, and then as "wife of Y" if she was married. Both married and unmarried women may be referred to by a feminized version of their family's patronym. Suad Joseph describes the brother-sister relationship in terms of 'connectivity', suggesting in Arab Middle Eastern societies, that personal identities are not seen as separable from those of one's kin (1994).<sup>9</sup> Anthropologists have described this shared identity in several ways. A common earlier approach was to focus on how women's sexual comportment could affect the reputation of their male kin in terms of an honour/shame discourse (e.g. Meeker 1976; Dresch 1989). Abu-Lughod's (1986) work importantly shifted this discussion to consider how concepts of honour affect the subjectivities of those who are weaker in the social system. Speaking specifically of the brother-sister relationship, Joseph suggests that brothers learn that loving their sisters means controlling them, while sisters learn that submission is an inevitable outcome of love (1994:55-56). Discourses about emotion are intimately involved in power relationships, as Abu-Lughod and Lutz point out (1990:14). In Zabid, both masculine and feminine subjectivities are structured through highly valued, idealized, even romanticized relationships, in which love and power and material exchanges are intertwined in complicated ways.<sup>10</sup>

### Goodness

In everyday conversation among Zabidi women about familial relationships, talk of 'love' predominates over talk of subordination or control. In Zabid, women display fierce loyalty to the family, evidenced in sensitivity to social slights, and proud statements about the achievements or generosity of their fathers and brothers. The connection of personal identity and self-worth to the actions of others within the natal family means that self-surveillance and the surveillance of the comportment of others is a collective commitment of both male and female members. Zabidi women waxed eloquent about their affection for, and loyalty to, their natal kin, often declaring that one always loved one's father's home best. 'Good' women were concerned for their families before themselves. When I asked one woman if she spent her schoolteacher's salary on herself, she retorted "Do I love only myself?" Élite women

are not forced to hand over their salaries to their families, yet they often do.<sup>11</sup> One woman spent her salary buying outfits of clothing for each of her brother's nine children, all of whom had plenty of clothing. Another family, who had three unmarried women working as school teachers, talked about how they had devoted their salaries to making their brother's wedding party a smashing success. They did not feel coerced by their male relatives; they had a sense of collective pride in the lavish wedding they had produced. Good families loved each other, were not riven by discord or competition, and displayed mutual concern for each other. Good fathers or brothers treated daughters and sisters with care and generosity, making sure they were well dressed and cared for. Good daughters or sisters took care to guard the familial reputation for piety and respectability through modest comportment. Mutual concern and respect ought to characterize natal kin relationships and transgressions of this norm were harshly condemned. The fact that unscrupulous brothers in one élite family sold off land which was the rightful inheritance of their sisters was used to impugn the reputation of the family as a whole. Similarly, avaricious sisters who demanded too much from a brother returning from working in Saudi Arabia were criticized for undermining the man's ability to marry. Well-off fathers who had poorly dressed family members were criticized for their miserliness.

In Zabid, the gendered distribution of goods had implications for a woman's sense of self worth — her subjective awareness of herself as a woman of value. In the moral economy of Zabidi households men distribute goods to wives, daughters, and sisters. Here, things, particularly gold jewelry and dresses, are said to indicate the 'love' of the male donor, one of the few public expressions of affection allowed in Zabid. Gold, in particular, is thought to indicate a woman's value and virtue. Women enter their women's parties clothed in the goodness of their men. Goods gifted from men to women represent masculine goodness: men who provide well and generously for the women in their families are capable, responsible, and generous. Women's value is recognized, and made public, by these gifted goods. The presents are a kind of secondary acknowledgement of their competent accomplishment of their familial duties. Their virtue is also recognized implicitly in this process. Female virtue is a personal accomplishment achieved through appropriate comportment. The index that draws attention to their virtue and their value to their families — displayed to the significant audience of other women — is the clothing and jewelry given to women by husbands and fathers.<sup>12</sup>

I have argued elsewhere (Meneley n.d.) that a notion of goodness buttresses hierarchical relationships between the élite and the non-élite. Here I focus on the intertwining of integrity and self-worth among women and their male kin that has particular consequences for élite women. If unmarried women are not given their due, as they understand it, they have little recourse, because making disputes public is considered a characteristic of non-élite families. Wives are owed dresses and jewelry not only on marriage, but also on the birth of children, so the material differences between them and their husband's sisters may become particularly marked over time, especially as women continue to receive gifts from their natal families as well.<sup>13</sup> But

as a woman's personal status is so closely bound with that of her family, she is reluctant to harm the collective reputation. She therefore cannot air her deep personal hurt and the slight to her value, which is inherent in material neglect by kin. As Probyn observes in her discussion of Steedman: "The very 'thinginess', the materiality, of the things can be seen as images that bridge systems of discourse and the hopes and disappointments — the emotions — of very real individuals" (1993:101-2).

### Affection and Betrayal in Families

Given the gender segregation in Zabid, I only saw male and female kin interacting together in those families to whom I was closest. However, conversations about brothers and fathers were ubiquitous; and evidence of women's pride and affection, as well as their anger and disappointment in their male kin, was always at hand. Although I did not have in-depth conversations with men as I did with women, I see no reason to assume that men had less complicated feelings about their sisters.

I did make many observations of deep affection between brothers and sisters. One morning as I was making a casual visit to a friend, her neighbour, Miriam, came rushing in with a letter. She was crying softly, and her hands were trembling so much that she begged my friend's aunt to open the letter for her. Her brother had left to attend university in Egypt a few months earlier, and this letter to his sister, closest to him in age of his siblings, was the first news they had had from him. Her tearful rejoicing and thanking of God bespoke her deep attachment to him, moving the neighbours and I to tears ourselves. The neighbours later teased me. They, after all, had known Miriam and her brother all their lives, while I had only recently met Miriam and had never even seen her brother. The elderly aunt concluded that I must have been thinking about my separation from my own brothers.

On my recent trip to Zabid, I heard a story about the son of a large and wealthy family. He was a sweet child who had some difficulty walking and an odd, bird-like appearance; I got to know him on my first field trip when he was about four. No one had commented much upon this, until they took him to the doctor about his legs and were told that he suffered a birth defect. He had terrible difficulties in school, and his sister, a few years younger than him but in the same grade, exclaimed when she saw his frustrated attempts to understand his school work, "Oh, I wish I could give you my intelligence [*'aql*] and take yours instead!" Their mother and sisters told me this story, touched by her willingness to sacrifice for her brother.

It is customary for adult men to 'bless' [*tabarak*] their female kin with presents of money on religious festivals. Brothers and fathers visit married women in their husband's homes on these occasions for brief formal visits when the exchanges take place. I witnessed this event on *'id al-kabir*, when I had come over early in the morning to my friend's house to help prepare the festive lunch. As my friend's brother's wife's father and brothers came to greet her, we hustled ourselves into another room where we could see, but not be seen by the young bride's relatives. The

event was brief and seemed affectively muted: the young wife bowed her head to be kissed by her father and shook hands with her brothers, and they quickly departed. This quiet event seemed to concern very little more than the transfer of money. But money is not necessarily drained of qualitative significance because of its capacity to denote abstract quantitative units, as Simmel suggested (1978), but is rather a way in which social value is concretized in practice. This transfer from male to female kin is an example of the "personalized sentimentalization of gifted moneys" (Zelizer, cited in Weiss 1997:353).<sup>14</sup>

Neglect of these obligations was a palpable questioning of a woman's goodness and value to her natal kin. Although these exchanges were not public events, everyone knew if a woman had been neglected by her kin and her vulnerability was therefore publicly exposed. This slight was met with anger. I asked why one woman's family refused to speak with her mother's brother's family, even though they lived in close proximity. She bitterly told me that her uncles had never come to give her mother money on the *'id*, and even neglected to give her children the customary few *riyals* which is theirs to squander immediately on candy. The offence was considered so serious as to lead to a severance of the kin ties, a dramatic and uncommon step in Zabid.<sup>15</sup> This act made the woman more dependent on her marital family, reversing the assumption that suggests that a woman's primary supporters are her natal kin.

Another woman, Layla, had experienced both betrayal and nurturance from her natal kin. During our first morning alone (her sisters were at school and her mother was busy with chores), she began to tell me what she laughingly described as her 'story' [*qissa*]. She showed me her photo album, which contained pictures of her wedding. In the photos, she looked exhausted and pale, as she herself pointed out to me, caked in the heavy makeup characteristic of Zabidi brides. She had been miserable when her parents arranged for her to be married at age 15 to her mother's brother's son. She had not wanted to be married and the marriage itself was troubled from the start. Layla appealed to her brother, Majid, to pick her up from her husband's home, which he did, twice, defying the will of their father. It was only when it became clear that Layla's husband was beating her, even though she was pregnant and seriously ill, that her family relented and arranged for a divorce. Because the initiation of the divorce came from Layla's family, her father was obliged to return the payment from the groom's father, as well as the gold that she had received from the groom. Layla didn't care about the gold and, in fact, was happy that they took it, because she thought that the less financial connection she had to her husband, the more likely it was that she could keep her son. Her son was about 5 years old at the time we met. He was the apple of her eye: she called him "my life" [*hayati*], continually showering him with kisses. It was her constant fear that her former husband would take him away from her, as was his legal right; she never accepted child support from him. She said that Omar, her son, feared his father, hiding from him on the rare occasions when he visited. She laughingly told me that Omar had said, in his childish way, that Majid was his father. Although this was

recognized as baby nonsense, Layla said that Majid had been more of a father to her son than her ex-husband had. Majid had contributed emotional support to his sister's child; it was striking to see how Omar had begun to emulate Majid's comportment when I returned to Zabid nine years later.

Layla had forgiven her parents for marrying her against her will. I'm sure they often had cause to regret it. The bond between a man and his sister in one generation can often be strained by a marriage in the next generation. Her mother had had her heart set on Layla marrying her brother's son, but when it became evident how she had been treated, her mother had severed relations with her brother. Layla had turned to her own brother to be rescued from her mother's brother's son. Layla's father lost face for agreeing to Layla's marriage; several years after the fact, women still offered this marriage as an example of why one should never marry one's daughters against their wills. Her two younger sisters, Layla said, had learned from her experience, and had vowed never to marry. Although people often asserted that it was shameful to be divorced, there were several divorced women among the élite who suffered no palpable stigma within the women's community. Layla was a popular woman, invited to all the prestigious parties; her best friend and neighbour was from one of Zabid's most prominent families. She told me more than once that her father gave her everything she wanted; it was true that she had plenty of high quality gold jewelry. She was as finely dressed as any in the élite social circle in which she moved. While she loved her son, she had been repulsed by sex with her husband, which she associated with his violence. Her father could afford to support her in comfort, even buying her a VCR lest she be lonely during the day while her sisters were at school. She was a valued member of her household, taking over much of the hosting duties from her mother, and much preoccupied, in the last few months of my stay, with finding a beautiful and sweet girl for her brother to marry.<sup>6</sup>

Layla was a vehement advocate of the virtues of remaining in (or returning to) one's father's house. She argued that women had no need for marriage if they were already well cared for by their fathers. Layla's subjective awareness of herself and her possibilities was an élite one. The material benefits of marriage — the gold, the dresses — are available to élite women as daughters. Even when élite women do marry, their fathers are anxious to show that they do not need the material benefit of the payment to the father [*nuqud*] which will be consumed immediately on gifts to the bride or on parties in her honour. Élite brides take considerable gold from their fathers into their husbands' homes, impressing on their husbands that they come from a great [*kabir*] rather than a poor [*miskin*] family. Their families, even if they have erred in the arrangement of their marriages, can offer them safe haven if these marriages fail. Because visiting is not restricted to married women, Layla and the other unmarried women in Zabid have full and rich social lives. Layla even had a son, the one form of women's wealth that her natal kin could not provide.

### Husbands over Fathers

The cultural idealization of the father's home was actualized as a refuge for Layla and other élite women escaping bad marriages. This ideal of the father's home was even shared by many poorer women who must have known that their natal families could not have supported them comfortably for long, however close their relationship.<sup>17</sup> The actualization of the father's home as a haven could only occur in élite families. I encountered two women whose personal histories and class positioning compelled them to oppose explicitly the popular valorization of the father's house. Neither were from élite families; in contrast, they were both from families who could not achieve the élite ideal family that could support and protect family members. One, Iman, had been abandoned by her family and raised on the charity of a wealthy woman.<sup>18</sup> She was married at a young age to her husband, an orphan, whose wealthy neighbour paid for the wedding himself as an act of charity. Iman communicated her love for her husband to me when she asked me if I loved my husband more than my father. When I lamely mumbled something about them being different, Iman firmly told me that one always loved one's husband more than anyone else, even more than one's children. Iman's daughter told me that her father had been merciful enough never to tell Iman to 'go home to her family', a common refrain in marital disputes, as he knew she would have nowhere to go. This would have been a humiliating reminder of her abandonment in childhood. Abandonment is stigmatized and rare in Zabid, where children are usually desired and valued by both men and women. Iman and her daughters were extremely sensitive to social slights as a result of her non-prestigious origins. The family home in Zabid is endowed with much sentiment as the locus of the honourable identity of a family and as a secure place where one has an inalienable right to be. Her husband's creation of such a space for Iman, after she had been raised without one, likely contributed to the devotion with which she remembered him. Although she had not revered her own natal kin, she had inculcated the dominant reverence for the natal family, especially respect for the father, in her children. Whereas 'love' in our society tends to be idealized as a sentiment independent of relations of power, in Zabid relationships of subordination and dependency are rationalized by 'love'.

Another woman, Samiya, similarly disagreed that one is always most secure with one's natal kin. She gave by way of illustration a rendition of the early years of her marriage, which she told in such a witty way that we were all laughing despite the harrowing content of her tale. Her father had 'sold' [*ubi'i*] her when she was very young. No one usually referred to marriage as a 'sale' of a woman, although I heard it a few times colloquially when women questioned the ethics of men who arranged bad marriages for their daughters.<sup>19</sup> Even though she had been only eight or nine years old, her father arranged her marriage because he needed the money from the customary payment from the groom to the bride's father for a medical operation. He had no other way to raise the money he needed to treat his illness, but Samiya, her sister-in-law, and the neighbours who were present, were scathing in their

condemnation of him. Significantly, no one critiqued Samiya's husband for 'buying' such a young woman; the responsibility was judged to be entirely Samiya's father's. His need for medical care was not considered a valid motivation for his actions, which were characterized as selfishness. His offence lay in the reversal of the flow of goods, which ideally should go from father to daughter rather than the other way around. Samiya was treated as a means of acquiring material goods rather than the recipient of them, as a valued daughter should be.

Samiya fought her husband so seriously that he had to drug her before the marriage could be consummated. She told in heartwrenching detail of the depth of her misery during the first year of her marriage and her longing to go home to her father's house. Samiya described her attempts to escape her husband's home, only to be taken back by her father. By the time she told me the story (several years and three children later), only the anger and betrayal over her father's actions remained. In contrast, she revealed how she had gradually overcome her fear of her husband and learned to love him. She was anxious to present her 'goodness' as a wife, while tacitly claiming that the way in which she had been treated by her natal kin absolved her of any obligation to be a 'good' daughter or sister. She refused to see her brother or his family. Although her father was dead, she did not pray for him or speak well of him as was so common for the daughters of deceased men. She was even reluctant to mention her father's name when asked who she was by strangers. As the relationship to one's father, through patrilineal kinship, was considered the primary means of assigning identity, it was considered somewhat disingenuous not to mention one's natal family. However, she was quite willing to describe her devotion to her husband, which was far less common in Zabid than talking fondly of one's father or brothers.<sup>20</sup> She did not talk of their intimate relationship, but she conveyed her affection by describing the special care she took of his clothes, her care to make sure that no stain marred his flawless appearance in public. She described how she had insisted on washing his clothes a few hours after giving birth to her first child. Although no one would have expected that she fulfill this wifely duty so soon after giving birth, Samiya said she would not let anyone touch his clothes but herself. Samiya and Iman are atypical in the sense that they explicitly articulated love for their husbands, an act which many women would consider rather racy or improper. Material goods spoke not only of present relationships, but recollected the past and anticipated the future: in Iman's case, a home from which she could not be ejected; in Samiya's case, objects and their care became the medium through which to reveal her affection. Clothes given from men to women are both a right and an obligation and a sign of affection. The appropriate care of men's clothes was a means by which wifely affection could legitimately occupy the public domain.

Samiya's husband's family was of a much higher social status than her natal family, but his father had died young, and his paternal uncle, a distinguished Zabidi, was miserly, according to Samiya, and refused to help his nephew. Samiya further demonstrated her devotion to her husband when she announced to us that she was going to give her husband her wedding gold to sell so he could start a new business.

A woman's gold is hers alone, and a husband cannot legally alienate it without her permission. To give it back to him was thought to undermine her position relative to him and others. Samiya said that many women had told her not to be foolish and that she would never see her gold again.

This distrust of husbands seemed to be well grounded in the experiential knowledge of women in Zabid. To give only one example, a woman in our neighbourhood had given her wedding gold to her husband shortly after their marriage in order that he could migrate to Saudi Arabia to look for work.<sup>21</sup> She hadn't heard from him in three or four years and was stuck with a penniless mother-in-law and neighbours who treated her with open contempt for being a fool rather than pitying her for being a victim of an unscrupulous man. But Samiya explained to me that she loved her husband and would help him in any way she could. Her sister-in-law defended Samiya's decision, arguing that her brother could be trusted. Samiya knew what a statement she was making through her gift of her gold to her husband, and she was willing to risk the inevitable criticism from the women's community, where suspicion rather than trust was thought to be a more pragmatic attitude toward one's husband. Gold occupies a special place in the world economy, as Annelies Moors (1998:209) points out; in the Middle East it is often a more reliable form of saving, given often unstable currencies. It is also a means by which local qualities of personhood are connected to world economic flows. In the subjective awareness of Zabidi women, gold jewelry given as gifts or as bridewealth [*mahr*] constitutes a woman's virtue and its absence questions it. It is also a valued form of property (and security) which no one has the right to alienate from women.

Samiya's unmarried sister-in-law, Sophia, had made during Samiya's narrative many interjections attesting to Samiya's misery in the first year of her marriage. Although she and Samiya joked about arguments that they'd had in the past, they appeared to get along very well. As will be elaborated further on, there is often tension between a wife and her husband's sisters who remain unmarried in their father's household. While unmarried women in Zabid are not excluded from adornment practices as they may be in other parts of Yemen,<sup>22</sup> they do have less consistent access to new items of adornment, as husbands make customary gifts of jewelry and dresses to women upon the birth of children. Although Sophia also received presents from her brother, Samiya told me privately that whenever she got a present from her husband, like perfume or incense, she would give part of it to her sister-in-law. Giving her a 'taste' of the gifts, or letting her borrow her new dresses, would prevent Sophia from becoming angry through resentment. Material possessions make one vulnerable to the evil eye; sharing one's goods protects one. Giving to one's sister-in-law is not obligatory, but it is considerate (and prudent, if one desires to avoid the tension that may arise between sisters and wives).

### Vulnerabilities and the Natal Kin

The above examples highlight the importance of natal kin through women's stories



about their transgressions. Because their fathers had so clearly fallen short of their obligations to their daughters, the daughters had very little ambivalence toward them. Although Layla's family had shown bad judgement in arranging her marriage and initially disregarded her pleas to be released from it, they had eventually welcomed her back with every luxury. But Layla's father was still alive and her brother only recently married and without children. Other women, such as my friend Magda, were unmarried women in households where their fathers had died and brothers had married and produced several offspring. Magda had a complicated relationship with her elder half-brother, Abdullah, who had become the head of their household when her father had died some 15 years earlier. Magda remained unmarried in her natal household; she helped to care for the brother's children and shared the burdens of housework, hospitality, and visiting. Magda told me that while women were usually affectionately cared for while their fathers were alive, they feared that their brothers might become less solicitous of them, as they become preoccupied with the needs of their wives and children. This shifting orientation from sisters to wives is evidenced by material exchanges. Her story indicates the ambivalent relationships that may arise over time between brothers and sisters, despite their bonds of loyalty and affection.

Suad Joseph's insights about the intertwining of patriarchy and love in Arab families cast light on Magda's relationship with Abdullah, which was marked by close affection and respect, coupled with fear and resentment. In Joseph's words, "patriarchy seated in love may be much harder to unseat than patriarchy in which loving and nurturance are not so explicitly mandated" (1994:58). Magda often spoke well of Abdullah, of his patience and goodness as a brother and as the head of their household. But she told me of a minor incident that occurred when she had been in charge of the cooking. She had run out of salt and sent one of her nephews out to buy some more. She added a spoonful, but it still did not taste right, so she had added another. Her sister thought it tasted sweet so she added yet another spoonful. Finally, they realized they had been accidentally adding sugar instead of salt. They were laughing as they told me the story, but Magda said that at the time she had been unnerved — she mimicked a trembling hand — at the thought that Abdullah would be angry at the ruin of lunch. But he too had seen the humour in the mishap. Magda used this anecdote to explain that Abdullah, unlike some men, was good and gentle, but still her fear of his anger bespoke the hierarchical relationships between men and women in elite families.

Magda, like many Middle Eastern women, played a prominent role in the politicking between families. She had a special role in her family, that of informal counselor to Abdullah when he became head of the household. Abdullah came to Magda rather than their brother for advice about when to sell land when they needed money. When he was angry with his friends or associates, or had troubles with the workers on his farms, he stormed and ranted and it was left to Magda to reason with him so that he would not be so frustrated as to make a hot-headed scene in public. I know the two were fond of each other and that he respected her for her wisdom and

political acumen. It was through her that material goods were transferred to needy neighbouring women. When Magda was approached by a woman of a poor family who had been badly treated by her kin, or when she heard of a woman who might be forced into the humiliation of selling her jewelry for food for her children, she would ask Abdullah to direct charity toward them. She herself would not have dreamt of complaining to anyone outside of her family, never mind asking them for anything.

Unmarried elite women like Magda are sometimes set against their sisters-in-law. Although they help raise their brother's children and sometimes may be affectively closer to the children than their mothers are, they are not the mothers to whom the value accrues. Over time, unmarried sisters may be (or feel themselves to be) excluded from what they have a right to, especially as the brother's sons approach marrying age and demands on the family's resources are high. As Samiya recognized when she shared her husband's gifts with his sister, things can become objects of envious desire and competition within Zabidi families. Magda criticized Suad, Abdullah's wife privately to me, claiming she was avaricious and demanding of Abdullah's resources, to the detriment of Magda and her siblings. While Abdullah was more than generous with his wife, Magda told me that he sometimes complained about clothing Magda and her sister, also unmarried. Magda would be bitterly hurt; she was fond of Abdullah, as he was of her, and she had legal right to some of the land Abdullah managed as she had inherited it from her father. Magda's body tensed up and her voice became sharp when she told me of Abdullah's insult to them. She did not think Abdullah was inherently a bad man; she was wounded by his treatment of her. The natal family is the primary institution for establishing identity; those hurt by their natal kin are hurt by those closest to them. Married women mistreated by their husbands can retreat to their natal families, or at least know that the mistreatment came from an outsider rather than kin. Unmarried women who suffer ill treatment at the hands of their kin have nowhere to go; they are hit at their most vulnerable point.

In Magda's landscape, she was a good woman. Like many elite women, she displayed an intense pride in her family; she told me in confidence about the ways in which tensions were covered up in public and exacerbated in private. In public, elite women are fiercely loyal to their families but their stories about illness often describe a different tenor of familial relationships. For the sake of family reputation, for example, women often elide in public the ill treatment they receive at the hands of their male kin. But this poor treatment was frequently held, in the economy of emotion in Zabid, to be responsible for a state of malaise or sickness. No matter how envious and resentful she was of Suad — and Magda had suffered on occasion from Suad's sharp tongue — Magda never gossiped about her. Similarly, she mentioned nothing about Abdullah's slights outside of the family. Magda said that Abdullah's betrayal had weakened her, making her vulnerable to the illnesses which plagued her while I was in Zabid.

The other experiences which Magda thought had made her vulnerable to illness were a series of deaths of beloved family members: her father, Abdullah's full sister,

and finally Abdullah's mother, to whom she had been very close. In her narratives about her illness, she stressed these tragedies — tragedies she had shared with Abdullah — as a precondition for it.<sup>23</sup> What she perceived as Abdullah's undercutting of her value, by his unwillingness to provide tokens of it in material form, made her vulnerable. It was this negative emotion, caused by grief at familial tragedies or generated by neglect by natal kin, and exposure to the anger and grief of others, which Magda, and other Zabidi women, interpreted as making one open to the myriad illnesses which were ever-present in Zabid.

I did not know Abdullah nearly as well as Magda, but I think that he also considered himself a good man. And, it is possible in Zabid, as elsewhere, to love a sister and yet treat her badly in some instances. Although I was shocked when I heard of Abdullah's actions toward Magda, it is possible that he was frustrated, as many men are said to be, about being the focal point of women's competing desires, especially as the family often had cash flow problems despite their considerable landholdings. The household has recently split, with Abdullah the head of one household and Magda's full brother the head of the other, as I discovered on my later visit to Zabid. The tensions the women perceived as being between them and Abdullah may have been perceived, in fact, by Abdullah as being between him and Magda's full brother. Abdullah's relationship with Magda was not always easy to read. In the last few months I was in Zabid, Abdullah took Magda to see doctors in several cities, as the illness that was to cause her death several months later worsened. The willingness to seek medical treatment, like the adornment of women, was considered to be a public statement of affection. By looking at the same material facts that Zabidi women do, we can see Abdullah's affection for Magda as well as his neglect of her.

### Conclusion: Material Goods and Emotional Subjectivity

When I returned to Zabid, close to nine years after my initial visit, I met Fatima, the girl described in the paper's opening. She bore no resemblance to the frantic, high spirited, desperately demanding child I remembered. She had the demure demeanour of an elite woman, shortly to be married. She had learned, as most elite Zabidi girls do, that one doesn't demand one's rights in such an overt fashion. Elite women say that it is not shameful to be poorly dressed or adorned if you are from a poor family. This, of course, is an elite perspective and likely the poor feel differently about it. If one is from a wealthy family, it is downright humiliating, as Fatima's frantic search for a dress indicated. She did not want to appear to be from a poor [*miskin*] family, or to appear to be neglected or less valued by her family, even at a young age.

These ethnographic examples convey a complicated view of how identity, emotion, and goods are entangled between brothers and sisters, fathers and daughters, and husbands and wives in ways that have powerful consequences for female subjectivities. Steedman's work reminds us that notions of goodness — inculcated in childhood — have significant psychological and social consequences. Elite women

are constituted as 'good' sisters or daughters through their discretion, but if that discretion involves covering up abuse or slights, it is perceived as weakening their health. The collective discretion of family members is part of the way in which elite status is constituted, a means of setting elite families off from non-elite families who could not keep their familial disputes or problems secret. Women are involved in establishing and maintaining class relationships, but they are sometimes made vulnerable by these hierarchical practices. Poorer women could appeal to outsiders like Magda in cases of abuse or neglect, desperate acts that at least allowed them to receive charity or intercession.

As I have demonstrated, sisters and brothers share a reputation and their subjectivities are intertwined. Goods are supposed to be supplied out of 'love', an implicit yet public statement of a woman's value, and a nonverbal recognition of her goodness. The material support from brothers to sisters implies their propriety in highland elite families as well as in Zabid (vom Bruck 1997:207). Mundy notes that wealthy women can expect more from their brothers, for many more years, than can women in poorer families (1995:142). As vom Bruck argues for the Sanani elite, "A woman wears her moral disposition on her skin" (1997:181), in the form of jewelry and clothing which acknowledges her propriety. I have been drawing attention to the consequences for elite women if they feel that their propriety has not been properly recognized. They *know* that their adornment will be commented on, and that the lack of adornment will be a cause for speculation. Women are dependent on their menfolk to publicly recognize their worth in material form. The paradox is that one's virtue is constituted by one's appropriate comportment, yet one cannot call attention to it oneself.

There is, of course, more than one perspective, as worth and value are continually negotiated and contested between different family members. Although the elite have more than anyone else, they do not have a limitless supply of resources. While people do not talk of 'love' as a limited good, they often act as though it were, certainly with other women and between family members. Although there is a sense, too, that one ought not to make unreasonable material demands, either as a wife or a sister, there is not always agreement on what is 'one's due' and what is too much to ask.

There is a dialectical relationship between goods and goodness, between value and the tokens of value. Women negotiate the space between their intrinsic value, as they come to perceive it, and the public tokens of their worth. They have control over the former through their own comportment, but for the latter they are dependent on their male kin. Unmarried women see themselves as giving unstintingly to their natal families, contributing to the household labour, knocking themselves out for the brother's weddings, raising his children, cooking for his guests, and hosting the family's associates. In many cases, their generosity of spirit only becomes remarked upon, or even thought of, in times of insult. When sisters are neglected, especially in favour of a wife, it seems that they are not valued as she is. Having to call attention to the fact that you too, as a sister, have a right to inherit from the father's estate and



be supported from it, exposes the connection between material goods and 'love' and between goods and 'goodness'. Drawing attention to their *rights* means that the gift is not given out of 'love' and the unmarried women are themselves made vulnerable, as they try to counter the implicit suggestion that they are not proper women deserving of their brother's or father's recognition. It is this exposure that leaves one vulnerable, especially since pride and one's dependence on one's family's reputation prevents one from unfurling one's hurt within the family outside of it. The anger at the neglect — a loss in which material goods are tied up in love and respect — makes one dangerously vulnerable to illness. Love is not idealized as independent of relationships of domination and subordination or as independent of material exchanges, and that has particular consequences for elite women's subjectivities. Gratitude, as Simmel notes in the epigraph cited above, does have a taste of bondage, but being clothed in love rather than demanding one's rights is preferable in Zabidi structures of feeling.

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### NOTES

1. This is not to imply that veiling is irrelevant; as Leila Ahmed, to choose but one example, so clearly articulates, it has long been embedded in political and economic relationships between the West and the East (1992).
2. Same-gender familial relationships, mother-daughter and sororal relationships were extremely important as well, but talked about less frequently as they were regularly enacted in the everyday world of the female public.
3. The practice of father's brother's daughter's marriage in Arab societies is said to confuse or conflate the distinction between natal and marital kin. The practice was not

unknown in Zabid, although it was viewed with considerable ambivalence. Even so, it did not obscure distinctions between natal and marital kin, since marriages were arranged between distant enough kin that they would inhabit different family complexes, or different sections of the same complex. They have distinct social identities despite an overarching shared identity as members of the same patronym. In the case of marital discord in patrilineal parallel cousin marriages, divisions quickly appear along natal kin lines.

4. Women have rights in the family property; they inherit a half share of what their brothers receive, according to Islamic inheritance laws. In Zabid, as well as elsewhere in land-owning economies in the Muslim world, the inheritance laws tend to fragment estates over time, and there are several tactics to try to cope with this tendency. The estates on which the Zabidi elite's economic and social position depend are located in the river valley surrounding Zabid. The competition for arable land is fierce and if the estate is fragmented into small parcels, it becomes difficult to farm.

5. For a detailed description of this practice, see Meneley (1996).

6. The problem of women's labour is not solved by a co-wife, who will also be producing children. Unmarried women are such an asset precisely because they do not have children of their own. Polygyny is not common; women do not like it, although they stop short of condemning it because it is condoned by Islam.

7. If sexual satisfaction or desire for children troubled unmarried women, they did not speak about it in public, or at least not to me. Voicing the former sentiment would have been considered shameful. Some, having helped raise their siblings and brother's children, were distinctly jaded about children and the work they involved.

8. This is in marked contrast to other Yemeni communities where unmarried elite women do not visit (vom Bruck 1997:182).

9. She argues "One's sense of self is intimately linked with the self of another such that the security, identity, integrity, dignity and self-worth of one is tied to the actions of the other" (Joseph 1994:55).

10. I will restrict my discussion here to feminine subjectivities, as I do not have the same quality of data for men.

11. But the fact that women had their own income to buy their own dresses if they wished did not mean that their brothers or fathers did not still owe them presents.

12. vom Bruck makes a similar observation of elite highland Yemeni women (1997:200). However, in Zabid, this fact holds for unmarried sisters as well as wives.

13. Wealth as a mother is evidenced by wealth in adornment, at least in elite families, a pattern also evident in highland Yemeni elite families as noted by vom Bruck (1997).

14. Some of the many possible meanings of money are discussed in Parry and Bloch (1989).

15. His neglect was not just a minor act, but a sign that she could not expect even the bare minimum from him, never mind more substantial aid if she or her children were in need.

16. Majid had married by the time I returned in 1999. The family was delighted with

the young woman, whom they all referred to as "our bride". They had devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the event of Majid's wedding; Layla drew on her wide circle of women friends for aid in preparing the festivities.

17. In another incident, I inadvertently interrupted a rare fraternal visit by Tayyiba's brother, visiting from Saudi Arabia for 'id al-kabir, the religious festival after the Hajj. Tayyiba and her brother were sitting quietly and comfortably together, talking in low tones, when I was ushered into the room. I regretted my untimely arrival, since the brother immediately departed and Tayyiba seemed to have been having a rare happy moment in a difficult life. An immigrant from Yemen's highland area, she lived on the margins of Zabid, reliant for survival on the charity of neighbours. She was cheered by her brother's visit and gifts; on other days, she told me how hard life was, and how she could only rely on God to help her as her crippled husband and irresponsible son did very little to support the family.

18. Adoption is virtually unknown in Zabid; sometimes children are fostered but they are not considered members of the family. Those without family ties are viewed with at best, pity, and at worst, contempt. A further discussion of this family's attempts to improve their social position is in Meneley (1996:186-189).

19. The other critique would be to describe the arrangement of a marriage as "forbidden" [*haram*], for instance, when a girl was married very young. These characterizations refer not to the legal legitimacy of the marriage, but rather its moral legitimacy.

20. When I returned in 1999, Samiya insisted I meet her husband and photograph them together, an unusual request in Zabid where women do not usually let people outside of the family photograph them. They seemed devoted to each other, and had had three more children in my absence.

21. Moors suggests that in Palestine, "modern" women view lending their gold to their husbands for labour migration as a form of investment in a collective future (1998:221). This formulation depends on trust between the husband and wife, which is not a precondition for marriage in Zabid, although it may develop later, as it did between Samiya and her husband.

22. For instance, vom Bruck (1997) notes that unmarried women are excluded from adornment practices in Yemen's capital, San'a'. While they do not use certain kinds of incense and perfume, nor a great deal of make-up if they are teenagers, they wear gold, jasmine flowers, nice dresses, henna, and *khidhab*, a temporary tattoo, on special occasions. While vom Bruck suggests that unmarried elite women in the highlands are less fully gendered than married women (1997:206-9), I can not make a similar argument for Zabid.

23. See Meneley (1998) for a more extensive account of Magda's understandings of the causes of her illness and a search for a cure.

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## BLUSHING IN THE FIELD: Deconstructing Sexual Sites and Meanings

Camilla Gibb

### The Self from Elsewhere

In looking back on certain of my experiences in the field I am embarking on a reflexive course which situates the anthropological self as a "sexually cognizant knower" (Kulick 1995:6). This understanding does not require a particular expertise, but rests on a more general conviction that our relations in the field can be usefully framed by our experiences. As Kulick among others has shown, an exploration of "erotic subjectivity" can be epistemologically productive (ibid.:23) and serve as a means to look reflexively at the dialectical relationship between self and other (Dwyer 1979).

This piece is necessarily retrospective. Its gestation occurred during conversations between myself and another anthropologist, Maureen FitzGerald, while we were preparing to lecture together on sexual diversity in cross-cultural contexts. In remarking on the relative lack of ethnographic literature which foregrounds sex and sexuality,<sup>1</sup> we were forced to acknowledge the absence of description of anything 'sexual' in our own original work, let alone any analysis of the ways in which sexual categories and meanings are constructed amongst the people with whom we worked. While Maureen and I in some senses represent different generations of anthropologists, this common, conspicuous absence probably reflects the fact that the discussion of sexuality has only relatively recently been legitimized, funded, supported and taught within anthropology.

Clearly we are not renegades. Like most of us, perhaps, we are influenced by training which has only relatively recently begun to challenge essentialist views of sex and sexuality in any consistent way. What is perhaps more striking, is that the experiences of being a woman for whom sexuality is not a coherent and inflexible aspect of identity but shifting, fluid, at times conflicted, and of varying degrees of context-determined relevance, did not, ironically, prepare me to explore issues related to sex and sexuality in the field. This paper is a partial exploration of how and why this might have been the case. I reconsider certain situations and relations in the field which I relegated to the 'margins' — recorded in my journal and stored in my memory, or relayed in informal conversation. 'Sexual cognizance' is evidenced here by the admission and omission of certain situations that struck me as 'sexual' although they weren't necessarily being construed as such for the other participants