Figure 1. A narrow alleyway of shops in the suq, Zabid.

The Zabidi House

ANNE MENELEY

Zabid never showed its finest qualities from its street – at least not in my view. Arriving there at the end of what passes for winter was not particularly auspicious for a Canadian anthropologist and her husband, a newly graduated architect. I found the relentless heat oppressive. The narrow streets were dusty, pipes were left exposed, blue and pink plastic bags blew around and hordes of unsupervised children enthusiastically demanded photos.

During our first three months in Sanaa (in 1989), then capital of North Yemen, we heard much about how Zabid was famed in the country for being the town where women went out and men had to stay home to look after the children. As the renowned fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta noted, Zabid's women are indeed famous for their warmth and virtue. The date-palm wine parties he spoke of were a thing of the past, but most wealthy families in Zabid still owned date farms in the surrounding wadi.

Women's competitive hospitality was the topic of my doctoral dissertation and subsequent book. It may seem like a hackneyed Orientalist trope, but Zabid's charm was in fact hidden behind the high walls: even the distinctive decorative brickwork on the external walls of houses was better appreciated from within the interior courtyards of household compounds. It was only after finding half a house to rent from one of Zabid's formerly wealthy families that we quickly got sucked into Zabid's hectic social life and began to appreciate its finer qualities.

This chapter takes up a venerable subject in anthropology: the social use of space. An early inspiration for this topic was sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's study of *The Kabyle House*, in which he argued, in classic Structuralist form, that the layout and spaces of the traditional Kabyle Berber house in Algeria express specific homologous oppositions: high/low, light/dark, day/night, male/

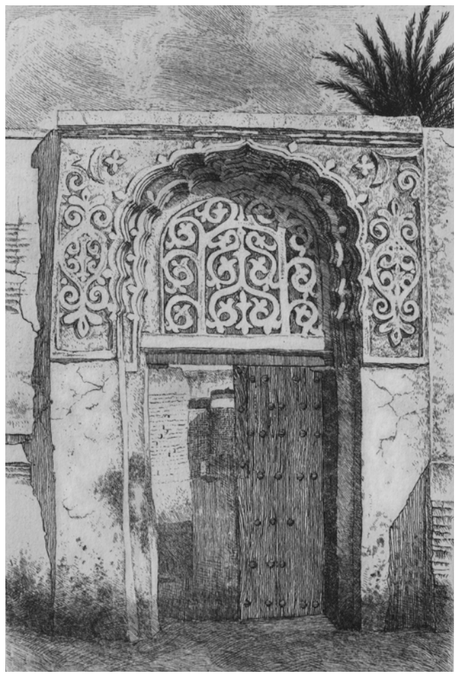

Figure 2. A Zabidi door. Etching, Patricia Smith, 1988.

female, culture/nature, and so forth.[1] Those of us who conducted research in Yemen did not find such sets of consistent orientations. It was obvious, however, that the interior space of the house was constructed, or perhaps more accurately, negotiated, by gender. That negotiation cannot be understood without reference to another classic anthropological topic, time.

The physical house in Zabid was both a domestic sphere and an incarnation of family honour. For women, the home's interior was both a private domestic space for the family and a public space for hosting guests from outside the family. The argument I made in my book is that women's hosting and guesting, which comprised a very competitive hospitality and mutual recognition of family honour, must be seen as an element of local politics and a means for jockeying for position among Zabidi families.[2] Rather than considering women as relegated to the private sphere, I examined the ways in which Zabidi men and women organised the space of the household in order to facilitate women's participation in the public sphere. Even though hosting guests was done in private homes, it was nevertheless very much part of Zabidi political life.

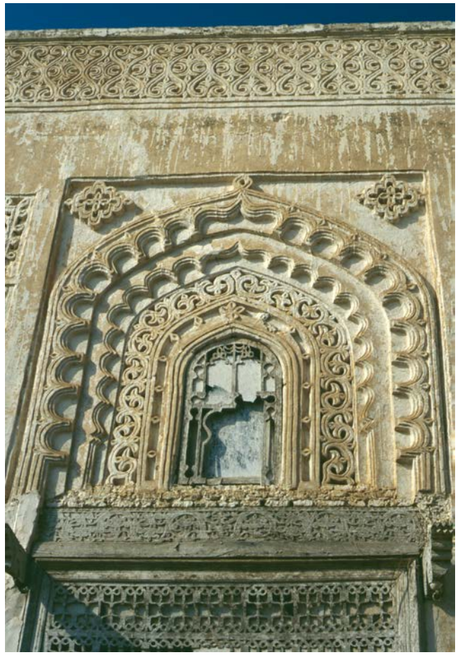

Figure 3. Decorative plasterwork over a doorway, Zabid.

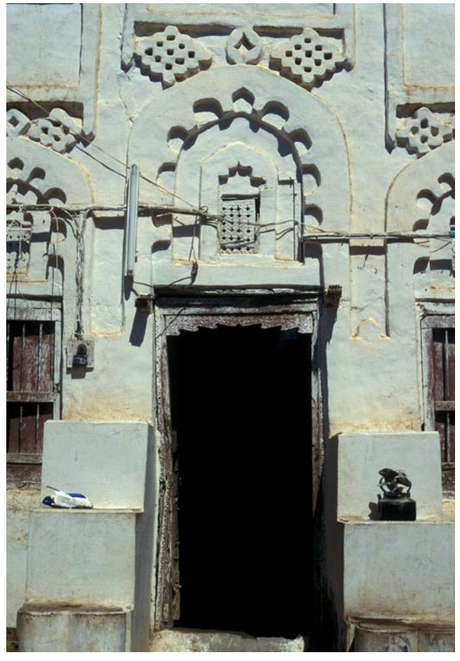

Figure 4. Bold geometric decoration over a door and around windows, Zabid.

Figure 5. A painted ceiling inside a house, Zabid.

These political effects required a complex collaboration between male and female family members. In order to host female guests, a Zabidi house had to be imagined as one where women's reputations could not be compromised. That meant that the male members of the family could not be present and would not enter the hosting room or courtyard when female guests were present (see Dorman and Weir, this volume). Wealthy families had a separate male reception room (*mabraz*) that usually had its own access to the street so that male guests never needed to enter the house proper. Less wealthy families marked daily time by transforming domestic space for all genders into a space exclusively for hosting female guests. The house size varied markedly according to wealth. The wealthiest families had building complexes with several rooms, with each room the primary residence of a married couple. The formal hosting for women's parties took place in the largest room or, during the summertime, in the courtyard.

In contemporary North America, the kitchen is often a key site for socialising, but that was not the case in Zabid. The kitchen was a dark, smoke-filled room with kerosene burners and stone-rollers. I only ever entered the kitchens of families with whom I had close relations, and this was usually to 'help' them prepare lunch. In fact, I was considered extraordinarily incompetent in the kitchen, but my hostesses nevertheless indulged my wishes to participate, as one would a toddler wanting to 'help'. Meals, even at weddings, were not times for socialising. People ate swiftly, without conversing. Rather, the time for socialising was after lunch, often accompanied by *qat*, a leaf that is popularly chewed throughout Yemen and contains a mild amphetamine.

Figure 6. View of a family compound from the street, Zabid.

Men, too, had very active social lives. I never participated in male social activities, however, since I observed the local standards of gender segregation. Political scientist Lisa Wedeen makes an argument similar to mine that Zabidi male identities were not based on a self-actualising individual,[3] but were grounded in family identities, whose main public sphere was the *qat* chew. Men tended to go off to chew with their friends and associates immediately after lunch, finishing some time around the evening prayer (*salat al-maghrab*). There were two sacrosanct visiting sessions for women, structured by the afternoon prayers (*salat al-'asr*) and evening prayers.

CARE OF THE HOUSE: CLEANLINESS AND VIRTUE

The disarray of Zabid's streets contrasted with the order of the houses, which were immaculately clean. I was amazed at how Zabidi houses always appeared so tidy for guests who either were invited or dropped by during the visiting periods. This required consistent care from the women in the household. The day began early with the dawn prayer (*salat al-fajr*). The first task was sweeping and splashing water on the mud floors of the houses and courtyards that surround them.

It was a matter of pride and honour for Zabidi women to have houses that were well-preserved and presentable for a visiting public. The beautiful brickwork on the exteriors was periodically whitewashed before religious celebrations or weddings. The interior of the rooms and courtyards was encircled with high couches, unlike the reception areas in the highlands where people sat on carpets on the floor (see Dorman, this volume). Cushions lined the backrests and seats of the high, wooden couches. The coverings on high couches were immaculate, ironed and neatly tucked in. In Zabid's heat and dust, this was no small achievement, as the courtyards and mud floors required morning and afternoon splashing with water to keep the dust from rising. When a rare strong wind [*ghoba*] hit, one could hardly see; when it died down, everything and everyone was covered in dust. Even in normal

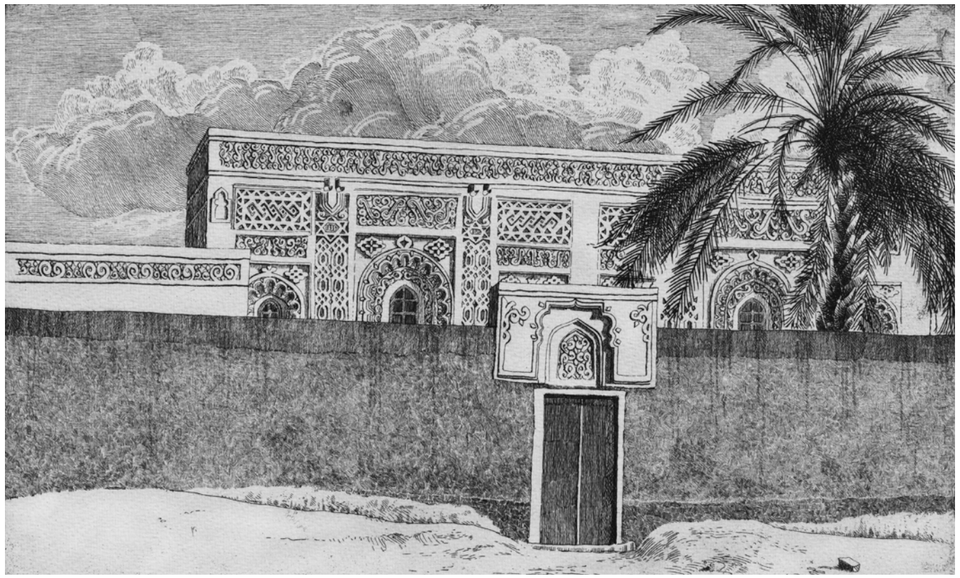

Figure 7. A Zabidi house. Etching, Patricia Smith, 1988.

weather conditions, keeping Zabidi houses presentable required considerable women's labour.

A dirty or unkempt house was a potential source of gossip, and could tarnish the reputation of the family. While guests were invited for particular events, it was considered appropriate to expect the arrival of guests at any time after the afternoon prayer. As I discovered, however, it was not considerate of guests to arrive immediately after the time of prayer, as hostesses themselves needed to pray, finish tidying, and wash and dress in order to greet their guests. It was believed that one's body should be as neat and clean as the room, with clean clothes and combed hair, and kohl on one's eyes – and for married women, lipstick. Women removed their chadors upon entering the hostess's house. For this reason, it was important that they could trust the family they were visiting to protect the space from intrusion by unrelated men.

Ordinary or celebratory parties, like weddings or visiting a new mother after a birth, required women to be clean, nicely dressed and to wear gold jewellery. By contrast, visits on the occasion of a death required withdrawal from conspicuous display and consumption on the part of both the hostess and her guests. The cushions were removed from the couches, and bitter *qishr* (a hot beverage made with the husks of coffee beans) was served instead of sweet tea. On such occasions, none of the women wore gold jewellery or lipstick, as grief had to be displayed visibly on unadorned bodies.

HOSTING

I have never been to as many parties as I attended in Zabid. The Zabidis were particularly gifted at making a guest feel welcome. When guests arrived, they were immediately greeted by a member of the hosting family, and often asked why it had been so long since their last visit. Initially I found this question confusing, especially if I had recently visited the family but I soon learned that it was asked out of politeness. After all, if no one missed your absence, your presence could not have meant very much.

On my second visit to Zabid in 1999, a woman from the family I was staying with accompanied me to the house of our former neighbour. During my absence the two families had had a dispute over land. The woman who accompanied me left rather abruptly, even refusing tea and I later found out that she was indignant because the hostess's greetings did not include the customary questions about the health of her mother and her family.

Guests were urged to sit on the high couches and make themselves comfortable, while the hostess plumped up the cushions or brought additional ones. Guests were exhorted to relax (*irtahi!*). A glass of sweetened tea was brought automatically. To explicitly ask guests if they wanted tea (as would be normal in a North American or British context) was considered off-putting, or implied miserliness. Hosts strived to embody the very opposite of miserliness: generosity (*karama*) was a most-valued quality in a person, a host, and a good Muslim. The generosity and manners [*adab*] of the hostess were some of the many ways with which she upheld her family's honourable reputation in Zabidi society.

A certain degree of age segregation was evident at women's parties. Eligible unmarried teenage girls consumed only tea and were offered watermelon seeds (*zayaka*). The seeds were hulled and consumed as the young women conversed among themselves, and the shells were discarded on the floor.

Married women, especially those who consumed *qat* and smoked the water pipe (*mada'a*), were seated together so that they could easily exchange small bundles of *qat* with one another – exchanges that were often as competitive as the visits themselves. Women who smoked also shared the *mada'a* with their fellow smokers.

Figure 8. A multi-storey Zabidi house.

It was fairly common, especially among wealthier families, for at least one of the sisters never to marry and to remain in her father's home throughout her life, helping with the domestic labour, including childcare. These single women were beloved and revered like mothers, and they shared parental concern for the care and comportment of the young girls in the family. Unburdened by pregnancy and breastfeeding, they were often as integral to the smooth functioning and hosting duties of the household as their mothers: the larger and wealthier the family, the more demanding were the women's hosting obligations. Many of these unmarried women were *qat* chewers and smokers.

Jugs of water made fragrant with incense were placed on a high table, ready to relieve dehydrated guests from the heat or their *qat* chewing. Another essential part of hospitality was the offering of perfume and incense. Visiting women usually arrived already adorned with *full*, the fragrant Arabian jasmine flowers, which were strung and fixed in a woman's hair before leaving her house. Elaborate jasmine necklaces were worn on special occasions such as weddings. Guests were offered incense and perfume, in the form of sprays and oils; but, as these scents were believed to be sexually enticing, only married women accepted the offer.

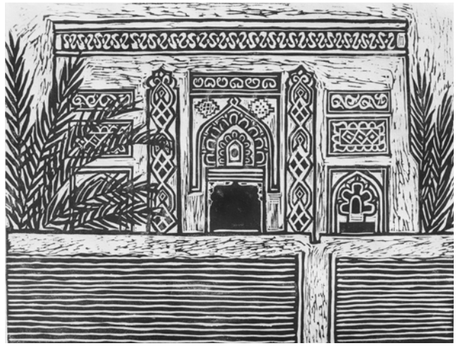

Figure 9. Exterior façade of a Zabidi house.
Linoleum cut, Patricia Smith, 1988.

Although not formally excluded, the presence of little children was discouraged at these events. These gatherings were not mother-and-child playgroups, but served as time for women to get away from domestic duties, to get together and socialise as adults and as representatives of their families within the women's public sphere.

Among wealthier families, women's parties frequently ended as late as ten o'clock in the evening. Everyone was tired by the time they were over. Afterwards houses returned to being private spaces where only the members of the family were present. On occasion, while sitting with my friend and neighbour Magda in her house for a quiet evening, I witnessed her sisters and sister-in-law come into the room, tear off their chadors and collapse on the couches, worn out from socialising. Women's gatherings were often formal events for representing one's family in public, and they could be competitive and exhausting although also iconic of what was best and distinctive about Zabid.

There was much attention paid to how practices of veiling and gender segregation affected the honourable status of women and much less about how it affected the status of men. The honourable status of men was maintained by post-puberty girls and women being veiled in their presence; young boys and low-status men were not considered as threatening to women's virtue and piety. A couple of examples from my field research illustrate this. One evening, we were invited after Ramadan to our neighbour's house to celebrate *Eid al-Fitr* – my husband socialising with the men and I with the women. The group of women I was with had just arrived and we were in the process of removing our chadors, exchanging kisses, and settling onto the couches. As we did so, the family's young son, about 12 years old and wearing an enormous turban on his head, entered and, upon seeing us, abruptly turned away and left. His mother laughed, saying that he had decided that he was now a man! Her mother's best friend, who had known him since his birth, called after him, demanding that he come back and give her a kiss. All the women had a good chuckle at his claim, as it was hard to imagine a compromising virile masculinity in his skinny little frame. The other male in the family from whom no one veiled was an old servant. He would amble up to greet every woman warmly, kissing her hands. However, we never saw the head of the household, who himself was an aged man, or his married sons.

PIETY IN THE HOUSE

For centuries, Zabid has been famous for its number of mosques. Every mosque has its own muezzin with his own style of performing the call to prayer, and the city's men prayed regularly in their local mosques and together in the congregational mosque on Fridays.

Although women were as committed to piety as the men, they did not pray in mosques (at least not at the time of my study). They prayed regularly, but in the house. It was common for women to pay a visit to another house after the first prayer, but guests who were staying at the same house for the duration of the evening washed and prayed on the host family's prayer rugs.

Hosting parties was perceived not only as a calculated strategy to increase the social standing of one's family in the community (even though close account was kept of presences and absences), but also as a moral and ethical duty for pious Muslims. It was believed that wealthy people ought to display generosity (*karama*). Sitting alone in one's house instead of engaging sociably with others was considered shameful and sinful, and as something that Westerners might be inclined to do.

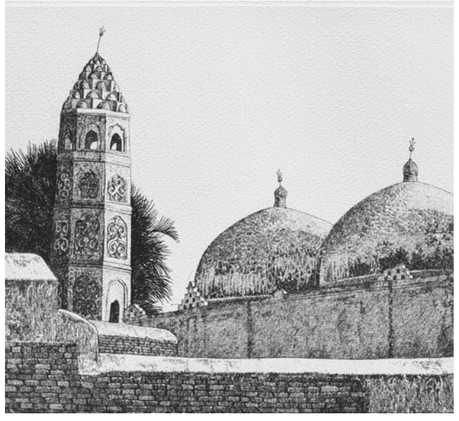

Figure 11. A neighbourhood mosque in Zabid.

Figure 10. A Zabidi mosque. Etching, Patricia Smith, 1988.

Figure 12. The Great Mosque, or al-Asha'ir Mosque, Zabid.

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NOTES

1. Bourdieu, P., The Kabyle House or World Reversed. *Algeria 1960*. Cambridge, 1979.
2. Meneley, A., *Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town*, Toronto, 2016.
3. Wedeen, L., *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*, Chicago, 2008.