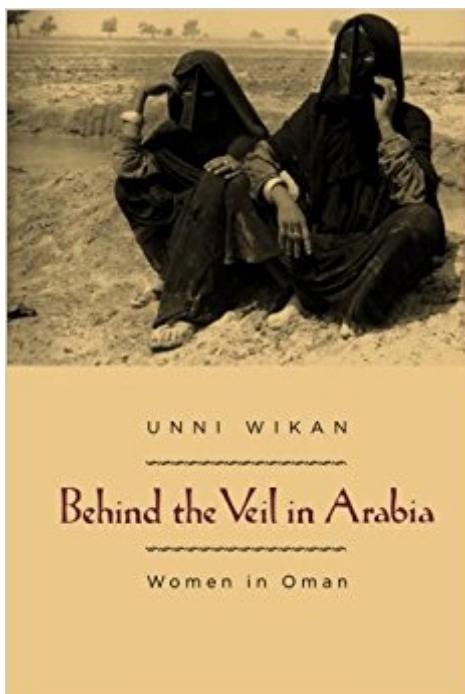


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Behind The Veil In Arabia: Women In Oman



Synopsis

Through photographs and detailed case histories, Unni Wikan explores the strict segregation of women, the wearing of the burqa mask, the elaborate nuptial rituals, and the graceful quality of Oman's social relations. "Wikan does provide insights into the real position of these secluded and segregated women. . . . All this is interesting and valuable." "Ahdaf Soueif, *Times Literary Supplement*" The book is detailed, insightful, and . . . engrossing. Anyone interested in the day-to-day triumphs and sorrows of women who live 'behind the veil' will want to read this account." "Arab Book World" Wikan, a fine ethnographer, has an eye for everything that is distinctive about the culture and . . . builds up a wholly convincing picture. Above all, there is a sustained attempt to penetrate the inner lives of these strangely serene people." "Frank H. Stewart, *Wilson Quarterly*" This book will certainly be of interest to all scholars concerned with sexual identity in the Islamic world." "Henry Munson, *American Anthropologist*

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Customer Reviews

Unni Wikan is professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo, Norway, and the author of numerous books. She has also taught at Harvard University, Beersheba University, L'cole des hautes tudes en sciences sociales, and the London School of Economics. In 2004 she received the Norwegian Fritt Ord Award for "her insightful, openhearted and challenging contributions to the public debate on the value conflicts in multicultural societies." She is a member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters.

It's not as if there are so many anthropology books written about the women of Arabia and their lives. No, I haven't found a great number. I bought this one some years ago and just got around to reading it. The Arabic-speaking Norwegian author, wife of renowned anthropologist Fredrik Barth, lived in Oman for six months back in the 1970s, not long after the country opened up to the world. It was an excellent chance to study a culture not yet much affected by "globalization" (though many men had worked abroad in the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, India or Zanzibar). I liked her introduction for readers, and all her descriptions of interactions between women, between husband and wife, and between women and their families. I liked the fact that she did not swallow the common Western preconceptions about Muslim or Arab women, but dealt with everything as she saw it, with fresh eyes, as it were. I appreciated her efforts to analyze what she saw and come to some broader statements about the lives, roles, and overall position of women in Omani society (or at least that of Sohar, on the Batinah coast). She realized that many Omani women were not the oppressed creatures often depicted in Western press and literature and she described how they relished their roles, felt comfortable, and proud. So far, so good. Very good even. But as I read through this study, many questions kept coming up in my mind. First of all, how accurate could this study be if the author only stayed six months in the town of Sohar, split into two occasions ? The topic she'd chosen demanded a longer period of research, though not all anthropology does require it. Secondly, I noted that most of her friends and informants were young girls, between 13 and 19 years old. Would their comments or behavior be typical of women over the whole age range ? No comments from the author about this. Thirdly, though Wikan does put herself into the picture in many places, admitting that she pushed people to discuss subjects they might not otherwise have mentioned, etc., she does not take her overall presence much into account. Might not the silence and the reticence be a factor of her presence ? OK, I am someone totally unfamiliar with Oman and the society of Arab women. I could be wrong. But it comes to mind. Fourthly, and rather irritatingly, after long sections of discussion of honor, shame, sanctions, segregation of sexes, the meaning of the burqa, role-realization in marriage, and other interesting topics, I reached page 280 only to read "With such limited material, I shall not be able to penetrate and expose the inner workings of married life in Sohar. But for once, I do not say 'unfortunately'. Let Soharis keep their secrets. The dignity with which individuals and couples struggle to comport themselves, so that their lives will embody the gracefulness and style they so value, deserves to be respected." (!!) So what had I been reading up to that point ? I felt the ground taken out from under my feet here. I agree that respecting the people one studies is an excellent idea. Perhaps it is the only idea. But in the case when you don't get information, it behooves you not to try to write a book ! The constant emphasis

on the grace, style, and reticence of Omani women began to pale. I questioned whether the author had understood the whole picture. I wondered if the lack of conflict or interest in gossip was not just a function of young women keeping quiet before an older foreign woman. If you have read my review thus far, you'll see that I have my doubts. Plus, for readers of the 21st century, this is purely social history because Oman must have changed dramatically since 1976. Nevertheless, for some insights into the interactions that Wikan DID observe, for a sympathetic and (I felt) accurate description of how young women felt about marriage, what factors influenced parents to choose a particular husband for the girl, the style of married life, and the segregation of sexes, and for a few Sohar life stories, this is still an interesting and probably useful book. The idea that the Arab woman (at least in Oman) is a submissive, slavish creature with no personality of her own must definitely be tossed out the window (if you hadn't done so long ago.)

This book reports on two short field studies done by a female Norwegian anthropologist in Sohar, Oman in the mid-1970s. The book mostly focuses on the relationship of women to their families and marriage roles. Her descriptions of women's lives in this community in Oman just after the country opened up to foreigners are extremely interesting, as the society has no doubt changed dramatically along with the economic transformations. The community that she describes is unique in their emphasis on nonverbal means of communication. Indeed, one of the author's main points is that people researching cultures must be alert to all forms of communication, not simply verbal forms. The author is careful throughout to stress that her observations are those of an outsider trying to comprehend what she observes. Naturally, it would also be very interesting to get an insider's viewpoint for comparison, but for a number of reasons, this was not possible at the time, and now the society she describes probably no longer exists in the same form. I would recommend this book to anyone studying history of society or development in Oman or the Gulf countries. It would also be interesting for those studying gender roles in the Muslim or Arab worlds.

I very seldom feel compelled to add my voice to the din, but in light of the other reviews this book has received, I wanted to give my perspective. This is one of the most brilliant books I have ever read. This could have been very dry, like an academic thesis, but the author manages to write eloquently and makes these women come to life. It is not a portrait of all the women in Arabia, nor even in Oman. It is a glimpse into the life of few women in a single neighborhood in Sohar. And what a life it is. I couldn't imagine living like these women, but the author makes them real to me, and I can see both the good and bad of their experience. It is an absolutely fascinating portrait, and I

am glad that I stumbled upon it at the library. Highly recommended, if you enjoy a glimpse into how "other people" think and behave.

The reader of this book and the reader of Women and Community in Oman (Christine Eickelman) will find that Behind the Veil in Arabia is mostly focused on the negative aspects of the local community in a way that gives the reader a negative impression of the simple life of the villagers. These negative aspects might not be fully comprehended by a westerner who paid a few visits to that village and so the visitor must realize the full picture and be fair before you judgement of what he or she thinks is negative. The reality is there is no community that is sin free, however, above all if they do not live up with a certain values that in general must be fair and tolerable by all members, then the community will not survive at all. In this book there are indeed few pictures (or at least illustrations) to prove the observations mentioned in the book as well. I suggest that the reader go on and get Women and Community in Oman by Christine Eickelman available from .com and compare.

THE best book I read in the last 6 months. It is a book for those who want to study the situation in Saudi Arabia

This book was well researched and well written, but the author's opinions are strongly felt throughout the entire book. The author's voice is also somewhat condescending. While I did learn a little bit about Arab women in general and women in Oman in particular, a much broader sample of women's lives in Arab countries is found in "Price of Honor" by Jan Goodwin. Also the information in Ms. Goodwin's book was researched for several years in the 90's, whereas Ms. Wikan's book is based upon only 9 months of living in Oman during the 1970's.

This was the first anthropology book about the Middle East that I ever read. I could not have loved it more. Because of this book, I began to read others and eventually got my PhD in the subject.

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