

BOOK REVIEWS

UNDERSTANDING ARABS

by Margaret K. Nydell

Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press Inc, 1987, 64pp

The author helpfully explains in the preface that the book is written for western "non-specialists who want or need to have a clearer understanding of the thought patterns, social relationships, and ways of life of modern Arabs." As well as being a primer on Arab character and behavior, it is an excellent quick reference book for checking up on our behaviour in the Arab world.

A fourteen page introduction outlines patterns of change which influence Arab thinking and behavior today. Nydell deals particularly with westernization and fundamentalism.

The body of the book deals with matters essential to understanding of and effective interaction with Arabs. Pithy summaries of key points in each of the ten chapters give a quick overview of the material dealt with, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Beliefs and Values — "*All Arabs share basic beliefs and values which cross national or social class boundaries. ... Their beliefs are influenced by Islam even if they are not Moslems, child-rearing practices are nearly identical, and the family structure is essentially the same.*" This chapter closes with helpful summary lists of values, religious attitudes, and self-perceptions.

Friends and Strangers — "*Among Arabs also, a friend is someone whose company they enjoy. However, equally important to the relationship is the duty of a friend*

to give help and do favors to the best of his ability."

Emotion and Logic — "*Arabs consciously reserve the right to look at the world in a subjective way. ... Arabs are more likely to allow subjective perceptions to direct their actions. ... honor is more important than facts ... people are more important than rules.*"

Getting Personal — "*For Arabs the space which is comfortable for ordinary social conversation is approximately the same as that which Westerners reserve for intimate conversation.*"

Men and Women — "*Arab men and women are careful about appearances when they meet. ... The public display of intimacy between men and women is strictly forbidden by the Arab social code ... even between husband and wife ...*"

Social Formalities and Etiquette --- "*Generosity to guests is essential for a good reputation. ... Your personal image and status will be affected by people's perceptions of your hospitality.*" The chapter closes with a list of generally accepted rules of etiquette.

The Social Structure — "*Foreign residents of Arab countries automatically accrue most of the status and privileges of the upper class. ... No upper-class person engages in manual labor in front of other people. ... Upper-class Arabs are careful about their dress and appearance whenever they are in public because the way a person dresses indicates his wealth and social standing. ... When you plan social events, do not mix people from different social classes.*"

The Role of the Family — "*Family loyalty and obligations take precedence over loyalty to friends or the demands of a job. ... The reputation of any member of a family group reflects on all of the other members. ... There is no real basis for a close relation-*

ship except ties of kinship. ...the most important requirement for a 'good' child is respectful behavior in front of adults. Children must greet adults with a handshake ...and refrain from interrupting or talking back."

Religion and Society — *"Arabs identify strongly with their religious groups, whether they are Moslem or Christian and whether they follow religious observances or not. A foreigner must be aware of the pervasive role of religion in Arab life in order to avoid causing offense by injudicious statements or actions."*

Communication with Arabs — *"Eloquence is emphasized and admired in the Arab World far more than in the West ... how you say something is as important as what you have to say. ... words have power; they can affect events A careless reference to bad events can lead to misfortune or make a bad situation worse. Arabs avoid such references as much as possible and use euphemisms instead."*

The book is obviously written by someone who has had close and personal involvement with Arab countries and peoples. While acknowledging that Arab world culture is far from monolithic, Ms Nydell does an excellent job of identifying features and characteristics which are common. I identified again and again with her analyses.

The book closes with two appendices, the first giving an overview of the Arabic language, the second an overview of each of the countries of the Arab world. The latter especially helps put in perspective the common factors which have been dealt with in the body of the book.

Reviewed by Editor

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis by Monia Hejaiej

UK: Quartet Books Limited, 1996, 369 pages, £11

Monia Hejaiej provides a perceptive account of the personal lives of three women story-tellers from the medina (old city) of Tunis. These Beldi women are members of a historic and highly civilized community, the city's traditional elite. Through her family ties to that society, Hejaiej was able to enter the intimate world of these women tale-tellers. She interviewed them between December 1989 and April 1990 in their homes in Tunis and recorded their tales.

The primary intention of this book is to deal with the relationship between teller, tale and society. The author was able to focus on the role and importance of tale-telling in the lives of three Beldi women, Ghaya, Sa'diyya and Kheira. The first part of the book centers on these women and the world of the Beldi community. In the second and major part the author presents the forty-seven tales themselves.

From the description of the Beldi women and their world, it is easier to see the significance of certain points stressed in their stories. For example, Ghaya is concerned that women exhibit the traditional values of patience and resignation, so she reinforces this value system in her story, 'Sabra'. Hejaiej notes the unusual parallel between the life story of Ghaya and the tale of Sabra. The tale, which offers a creative depiction of Ghaya's suffering, becomes a cathartic ritual dramatization of her own life.

This book is of interest to all who want to understand the women of the Beldi