

Emirati Women: Generations of Change

Jane Bristol-Rhys

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Jane Bristol-Rhys' *Emirati Women: Generations of Change* provides a rare glimpse into how the lives of Abu Dhabi women have changed as a result of the discovery of oil in the late 1960s. Combining eight years of oral histories, participant observation, and interviews – along with her own experiences of living and teaching in Abu Dhabi – Bristol-Rhys offers a lucid ethnographic account of a population that has been one of the most affected by Abu Dhabi's oil boom. Over the course of the chapters near the end of the book, Bristol-Rhys details the experiences of three generations of Abu Dhabi women and how they view their pre-oil past and face the challenges of the present.

In the introduction, "Generations of Change," Bristol-Rhys charts how Abu Dhabi's transformation into a wealthy and globalized city with a generous social-welfare system has propelled its residents from poverty into unimaginable wealth and consumption. But it is the impact that this rapid development has had on the perceptions of Abu Dhabi's women that serve as Bristol-Rhys' point of departure for the narrative account that follows in the rest of the book. By examining the public discourses and stereotypical representations that inform these women's own articulations of their identity, the author examines how three generations of Emirati women perceive their lives and experience the changes surrounding them.

The second chapter of the book, "Representations of Emiratis," traces the various collective narratives that have been produced about the Emiratis both by the tourism industry and by the various transnational expatriates that make up the majority of Abu Dhabi's population. As Bristol-

Rhys acutely demonstrates, the search for what comprises an authentic Emirati among these groups has given rise to the propagation of ethnocentric myths. Stereotypes that began with the British, who labeled the Emiratis as barbarians, continue to the present day with a tourism industry that depicts them as desert Bedouins. These images have been subsequently appropriated by expatriates and redefined to give shape to discourses that posit the Emirati as lazy and ill-suited for work. Bristol-Rhys here argues that, as they have no historical knowledge of life before oil, the new generation of Emiratis – represented by Bristol-Rhys’ own students – has also come to believe these myths about their own capabilities. And yet, this seems to be a much too diluted answer to how authenticity is manufactured, made hegemonic, and ultimately appropriated by Emiratis themselves. We do not know how the Bedouin myth is resisted by older generations of Emiratis, who have the historical knowledge to challenge the major claims of this myth. Nor does Bristol-Rhys tell us how the narratives of the older generation describing their hardworking pasts intersect with the “lazy hapless” narratives of expatriates and the tourism industry to inform her students’ understanding of their own heritage.

The third chapter of the book, “Days of the Past,” is undoubtedly the most informative. Following through with her introductory discussion of Abu Dhabi’s rise to oil wealth, Bristol-Rhys provides a rich, contextualized account of how Abu Dhabi women in their late sixties and seventies experienced pre-oil life. Interweaving interviews with historical narrative, the author discusses the deteriorating socio-economic conditions and abject poverty that was a marker of daily life in Abu Dhabi in the mid-twentieth century, the coping strategies these women used in order to manage, and the sense of divine grace that permeated their discourses. It is precisely Bristol-Rhys’ combination of history with eyewitness accounts that gives this chapter its leverage. However, Bristol-Rhys does not explain precisely how the older generation of women she interviewed moved from impoverishment to unimaginable personal wealth – a small but critical piece of information necessary for understanding Abu Dhabi’s impressive growth and providing the chapter with greater empirical clout.

In the fourth chapter, “Our New Lives Behind Walls,” Bristol-Rhys moves away from a discussion of Abu Dhabi’s past to an account of its present. Looking at the Emirates through the eyes of women in their forties and fifties, the author tellingly describes the loss of freedom and independence and the constant struggle to save face and compete with fellow Emiratis that define the worlds of these women. The new Abu Dhabi – distinguished by its modern hotels, malls, coffee shops, and restaurants – has

increased Emirati men's freedom of movement and access, while largely restricting those of women to behind closed doors. At the same time, Abu Dhabi's rapid development and wealth accumulation has come to represent, for these women, luxury and conspicuous material consumption.

The chapters near the book, "Marriage, Education and Choices" and "Being Emirati Isn't Easy!," offer an engaging glimpse into the ways that the newer generation of Emiratis understand their lives and relate to their past. Here Bristol-Rhys addresses many of the issues that have been the subject of recent domestic and international attention: perceived threats to Emirati national identity; the stratifications and caste-like divisions within Emirati society; and the soaring divorce rates and cultural norms that challenge mobility prospects for young, university-educated Emirati women. In so doing, Bristol-Rhys provides an intimate portrayal of life that challenges commonly held assumptions about Emirati society and Muslims. At the same time, Bristol-Rhys is not apologetic; in "Being Emirati Isn't Easy!," she does not shy away from more sensitive topics – including excessive reliance on domestic labor, flagrant consumption, and a historical disconnect that prevents young generations from remembering and acknowledging Abu Dhabi's impoverished pre-oil past. And yet, in exposing the fault lines within Emirati society, Bristol-Rhys' narrative reiterates a familiar theme in studies of Muslim societies - the tension between tradition and modernity – that leaves much to the imagination. For instance, how do socio-economic class and Emiratis' own positionalities inform their views? Bristol-Rhys' account relies on the views of an elite, well-educated group of young Emiratis. How do Emiratis from the lower middle classes experience the present and view their relationship to the past? Does a willful rejection of the past necessarily suggest that the past is "devoid of meaning and relevance" (120) for young Emiratis? Or is this willful disconnect simply a coping strategy, one that they use to fit into the multicultural, globalized society in which they now find themselves? While the chapter's juxtaposition of tradition and modernity provides a useful thematic touchstone, it does so at the expense of greater analytic refinement.

In the seventh and final chapter of the book, "Traditions and the Future," Bristol-Rhys brings the narrative of Emirati women's experiences of pre-oil life and the present life full circle. From the older generation's laments of the loss of their Emirati cultural heritage to the redefinition and reevaluation of traditions by the younger generation of women and their mothers, the chapter provides us with a look into the future of Abu Dhabi and how current generations will reshape and redefine traditions of the past to fit into the city-state's constantly evolving socio-economic and cultural climate.

A combination of scholarly perspective and personal experience, *Emirati Women: Generations of Change* is one of the first ethnographic accounts of an Emirati population that is often the least accessible to observers. And yet, the book's eloquently written account often comes at the expense of greater empirical refinement and analysis. References to the link between the field data and broader theoretical themes – including the tourist gaze and the social construction of identity – are mentioned in the book but never fully developed. Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, the book remains a fascinating eyewitness account into the lives of women that we rarely hear about in the West. The book's description of the struggles that Emirati women face in making sense of their identity in an increasingly globalized society reaches across cultures and speaks to a theme that is universal in scope.

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