

DESERT FRONTIERS. *THE DEVIL OF EDUCATION:  
A BLESSING AND A CURSE*

*Fronteras del Desierto*. El diablo de la educación:  
una bendición y una maldición

*Frontières du desert*. Le diable de l'éducation:  
une bénédiction et une malédiction

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Recibido: 08-04-2010; Aceptado: 13-04-2010; Publicado: 30-06-2010

BIBLID [0212-5374 (2010) 28, 1; 185-196]

Ref. Bibl. ANNEMARIE PROFANTER. Fronteras del desierto. *El diablo de la educación: una bendición y una maldición*. *Enseñanza & Teaching*, 28, 1-2010, 185-196.

RESUMEN: Tras años de haber trabajado *in situ* como consultora y profesora de educación y psicología, se presentan las observaciones y reflexiones realizadas acerca de las naciones musulmanas y del Golfo. Se analiza el notable incremento del alfabetismo en Arabia Saudí y los problemas asociados a un país que se está ajustando al cambio.

Se describen las consecuencias de una nación analfabeta, nómada y tribal que está descubriendo una riqueza colosal, así como la influencia en sus tradiciones y economía. Se presta especial atención a la batalla de las mujeres recientemente educadas para obtener mayor libertad y oportunidades en una cultura conocida por su ideología política basada en el género. Se identifican las barreras de género presentes en la educación universitaria y en el empleo y las tácticas utilizadas para mantenerlas. Se detallan los problemas que aparecen a la hora de enseñar a los estudiantes de las

tribus, pues para ellos prima la supervivencia en el desierto a través del liderazgo indiscutible y la lealtad sobre el conocimiento y la verdad.

Se discuten las consecuencias de un sistema de gobierno en el que no existe separación entre el Estado y la religión. Se explica en profundidad la importancia de los valores femeninos, cuya ausencia podría ser devastadora. La información aquí plasmada proporciona una forma de entender el cambio que están viviendo estos países, pasando de una cultura nómada y tribal a una sociedad integrada e industrializada del siglo XXI.

*Palabras clave:* educación, Arabia Saudí, segregación.

**SUMMARY:** Observations and insight into Muslim and Gulf State Nations after years of serving as an onsite, teacher and consulting professor in Education and Psychology are presented. The dramatic increase in literacy in Saudi Arabia and the problems associated with a country adjusting to this change are analyzed.

The consequences of an illiterate, nomadic, tribal nation discovering colossal wealth and its influence on their traditions and economy are described. Unique insight into the struggle of newly-educated women to achieve greater freedom and opportunity in a culture known for its gender-based political ideology is offered. Gender barriers to university education and subsequent employment, and the tactics used to maintain them, are identified in some detail. The practical problems in teaching students from tribes in which truth and knowledge are secondary to desert survival through unchallenged leadership and loyalty are presented.

The consequences of a government system in which there is no separation between State and religion are discussed. The importance of feminine values in a world where their absence could be devastating is explained in detail. The information contained herein can provide insight for countries changing from nomadic, tribal institutions to integrated, industrialized nations during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

*Key words:* education, Saudi Arabia, neopatriarchy, gender politics, segregation.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Les résultats présentés dans la recherche suivante découlent d'observations relatives aux États musulmans du Golfe Persique obtenues après des années d'exercice sur place en tant qu'enseignant et professeur consultant en sciences de l'éducation et en psychologie. L'analyse porte sur la forte hausse de l'alphabétisation en Arabie Saoudite et les problèmes d'adaptation que cela engendre pour ce pays. Elle décrit également les conséquences de la confrontation d'une nation illettrée, nomade et tribale avec une immense prospérité et son influence sur son économie et ses traditions.

Elle propose une analyse unique de la lutte des femmes ayant eu nouvellement accès à l'éducation pour davantage de liberté et de perspectives au sein d'une culture connue pour son idéologie patriarcale.

Les obstacles mis aux femmes pour accéder à l'université ou plus tard à une embauche seront étudiés à l'aide d'exemples précis, tout comme les stratégies employées pour maintenir ces obstacles. Sont également présentés les problèmes pratiques

rencontrés dans l'enseignement à des étudiants issus de tribus pour qui la vérité et la connaissance sont secondaires par rapport à la survie dans le désert grâce à des valeurs telles que la loyauté et le pouvoir.

Il en découle une discussion sur les conséquences d'un système gouvernemental qui ne connaît pas la séparation entre l'État et la religion.

On expliquera en détail l'importance des valeurs féminines dans un monde où leur absence pourrait être dévastatrice. Les présentes informations peuvent apporter un certain regard pour des pays passant du statut d'institutions nomades et tribales à celui de nations industrialisées et intégrées au cours du 21<sup>ème</sup> siècle.

*Mots clés:* l'éducation, l'Arabie Saoudite, Neopatriarchy, la politique des sexes, la ségrégation.

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. A likeness of His light is a pillar on which is a lamp –the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a brightly shining star– lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof gives light, though fire touch it not –light upon light... (*The Holy Quran*, Chapter 24, Section 5, Verse 35. English Translation by Maulana, 2002).

#### 1. NEW SOLUTIONS REVEAL NEW PROBLEMS

«The Girls of Riyadh», «The Satanic Verses», just to mention two of the outputs from the «infidel» lands, knock heavily on the doors shielding the Saudi Kingdom.

The «Devil», in the form of Western religious, political and economic ideas, was not allowed into the country because it began to endanger Saudi Arabia's politics of isolation and exclusion. Modern technology and travel have begun to pour that information into the country like a torrential storm. King Abdullah's scholarship program for young adults enrolled in foreign, higher-education programs, offers a broad exposure to Western education, culture and new employment opportunities. Muslim scholars, traveling to modern, foreign countries, are feeling the influence. The light of the blessed olive tree is not favoring either the East or West. The «other» is becoming there «brother» and some don't know what to do!

Domestic Saudi Arabia has also participated in this process of technological influence. The wisdom of Muslim scholars has spread throughout the kingdom due to the development of electronic media and the increase in literacy due the spread of public education (Doumato, 1999, 2003). With this colossal increase in information available to Saudi Arabia citizens, the questions arise: Has the hegemonic, Wahhabi doctrine of isolation and separation begun to crumble? Without doubt, political and economic factors have started the ball rolling, but how fast is it rolling, and how far will it go? Is much of Saudi tradition threatened? A brief examination of the massive, economic changes influencing the Arabian Peninsula may allow the reader to begin to understand the societal evolution during this transition.

## 2. ECONOMIC TSUNAMI AND EDUCATIONAL AFTERSHOCKS

The nomadic, tribal society of the Middle East was radically shaken by the economic earthquake triggered by the discovery of black gold during the 1970's. All six, Gulf Nation States of the GCC were involved. This resulted in alteration of work force requirements, infrastructural development and educational and societal reforms. This evolution demanded tremendous effort from both government and private enterprise. In 1970, Saudi Arabia had one of the lowest literacy rates in the Middle East (15 percent of men, 2 percent of women). After a quarter century of dedicated effort, the country raised that level to one which is competitive worldwide (Warnock Fernea, 1998). Education continues to spread rapidly in the Saudi Kingdom. Thirty-five years after the literacy campaign started, figures finally reveal a great, national victory.

Although the national challenge for literacy has been met, others now follow in its wake. As Glanz *et al.* (2001) mention, there is a lack of studies dealing with education in the Gulf area, especially in Saudi Arabia. I can say, from my experience as a researcher and professor in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, that this lack may result from the fact that a researcher's work is very limited, and the central role of education, when compared to the notion of neopatriarchy, does not shine as brightly as often promoted by official figures. Local and foreign women must struggle within the limitations of this key component of Saudi society. As a young, Western researcher, I was able to succeed, despite many of the limitations and satisfy some of the student's hunger for knowledge.

The demand for educated workers in the extremely affluent culture could not be met by the uneducated, national, labor pool. As a result, a tremendous increase in the educated, expatriate population took place on the Arabian Peninsula during the economic advances of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A lack of skilled labor resulted in a similar influx of millions of so-called «blue collar» workers with limited education. Currently, the population of the GCC countries is around 35 million people, and «in each of the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), non-citizens outnumber citizens in the workforce» (Nagy, 2008) and Saunders (2001) have named this surprising plurality «global citizens».

## 3. NEOPATRIARCHY AND GENDER POLITICS

The wealthier Gulf States have developed a discrepancy between the unemployment of public and private sector workers. In spite of all the effort to employ local people and nationalize the workforce, «Persian Gulf citizens are now facing double-digit unemployment rates. The public sector generally hires nationals and is usually overstaffed with employees presenting with problems of absenteeism» (Saunders, 2001). This is a growing concern in terms of productivity and the expansion of services and industry. Citizens therefore have to be encouraged to enter their countries «private sectors» (Gogia, 2007: 3)

that unfortunately offer lower wages, different health care systems and other linguistic and technical challenges (Gogia, 2007: 3). This unique problem is the legacy of colossal, but probably impermanent, national wealth during the last several decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

With new oil-wealth available in the 1970's and a tribal ethic of sharing, the native public employees were paid substantially better than the expatriates in the private sector (Bahgat, 1999: 132). «This system of make-work, government jobs insured the loyalty of citizens to their governments, and helped introduce a sedentary, working culture among what were once largely tribal populations» (Gogia, 2007: 3). There are, however, problems associated with the nationalization of the work force where nationals expect higher wages, currently being subsidized by the government. In addition to the envy of the expatriates, the supply of oil is finite and many international consumers of oil are making energy independence a top priority. The more educated and influential royalty and national leadership are aware of this and might find the nationals and expatriates competitive bidding more attractive than abandoning their superluxury life style. The potential loss of the nationals' enviable subsidies could result in political destabilization (Willoughby, 2008).

The rapid expansion of educational services and the increase in the nationals' literacy and skills are now suspect of being detrimental to the indigenous population because they are having greater difficulty finding jobs because they have been taken by expatriates. The memory of the former national threat of hopeless, envious and uneducated tribes requiring pay subsidies may be fading. The development of economically-dependent and materialistic citizens by inexperienced leaders will likely suffer few, admitted supporters. Expatriates, especially female teachers and their now demanding graduates, might become national scapegoats.

It is thought that the vast oil revenues helped in creating what Sharabi (1988) terms the postcolonial system of neopatriarchs in which the political control is exerted through existing tribal-based networks in which loyalty is paramount. Central to this patriarchal organization is a system of male domination in which the males are given legal power and prestige that is withheld from females. The educational revolution in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia appears, in some instances, to have been adapted to perpetuate the barriers of a hegemonic, gender ideology. But, to what extent are these barriers weakening? In what way is education supporting the dissolution of barriers, and how is it upholding them?

#### 4. RESTRICTIONS AND BARRIERS WITHIN INSTITUTIONS OF FREE THOUGHT

The national religion of Islam permeates every aspect of life and, at times, cannot be separated from what Westerners would call the secular part of the culture.

Western education is perceived as being liberal by many Arabs, and it is regarded with suspicion by many Islamists.

[...] many Muslims are Islamist, and almost no very pious Muslims are liberals; most Muslims remain conservative, traditional believers. This group includes the majority of clerics and ordinary people (Rubin, 2006: 101).

Wahhabi Islam is, «a revivalist movement that has for two centuries dominated Najd, the home of the ruling dynasty, and has shaped government social policies» (Doumato, 2000: 28). It was used by clerics and the Al Saud dynasty to forge a sense of common identity intended to supersede tribal loyalties, and create a King seen as the rightfully-guided Islamic ruler (U.S. Library of Congress 2003). Islamic, religious affiliation is a determinant factor, not only in securing jobs, but also for getting admission into educational institutions. The hiring of personnel and selection of students for admission is commonly based upon their family names and tribal affiliations. There is no apparent, published evidence of discrimination based on Islamic, religious affiliation. From what I have seen, during my years as a university professor in the Gulf, this is a very important factor that is never openly discussed or admitted.

Saudi Arabia is a prime example of a country with a harsh policy enforcing a conservative, gender ideology based on a neopatriarchal society fostered by a traditional tribal system. Historically, educational institutions in Saudi Arabia were established primarily for males; however, more institutions are now being created primarily for females. They offer traditional «female-specific majors» such as Medicine and Interior Design. Famous institutions, like King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in Dhahran, or Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University (PMU) in Al-Khobar in the Eastern Province, have established separate women's colleges within the university campus.

##### 5. POLITICS IN DESERT EDUCATION-WASTA AND MUTAWWA'IN

«Wasta» and «mutawwa'in» are two additional practices commonly encountered while teaching in Saudi Arabia. The practice of wasta permeates all aspects of society and involves both the act and the person who mediates or intercedes to settle disputes. In Western culture wasta is frowned upon by university professors who feel students should be graded according to their achievement. This individualistic approach stands in opposition to the collectivistic make-up of the influential, social groups that hold the power in Saudi Arabia. Expatriate teachers and university professors, who impose this Western mindset in their treatment and evaluation of students, are regarded as «inflexible, hard-headed, arrogant, and stupid» (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993: 127).

After being admitted, students socialized in an environment heavily dependent on wasta sometimes assume that wasta will influence the university professor. They attend class irregularly, do not study for midterm tests, and then appear before the teacher asking to be passed [...]. Often the father, or an important relative, attempts to influence the professor (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993: 120).

This can be a difficult situation for an inexperienced teacher. While stronger and more experienced ones courageously suffer the accusations of ignorance and incompetence, new teachers may be tempted to capitulate, especially if the deficiencies are small, or the wasta can effect the teacher's personal life in the community. The student's and wasta's shock by academic failure can generate considerable resentment for the educator. For the young student such a grade is a violation of a centuries-old, nomadic and tribal ethic of unquestioned-obedience to senior authority... a successful, intertribal-combat ethic destined to failure in the more-egalitarian and reflective classroom.

During the late 1970's, and into the 1980's, there was much social upheaval. The muttawwa'in, or religious police, gained considerable power and authority which they still retain to different degrees. Therefore muttawwa'in is especially influential in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. «While the muttawwa'in represent a potent symbol of the Saudi regime's commitment to Islamic governance, they also create a climate of fear and are an intimidating presence, particularly for women who choose a more liberal lifestyle» (Doumato, 2003: 242).

## 6. UNTOUCHED DESERT BARRIERS

Theoretically, the educational efforts of the King are respectable. When the practical application of the scholarship program for women is considered, limiting cultural, as well as religious issues, are very problematic. Because of the Islamic requirement that Muslim women be accompanied by a male relative or sponsor to journey the walking distance of three days (Al Hashimi, 1996) and obtain «a male relatives agreement before seeking work, education or travel» (Vidyasagar and Rea, 2004: 266), the scholarship funds often go unused by the general public. These families are unable to afford sending two members overseas with a requirement to provide funding for one of them. Hence, the poor families who need the scholarships don't get them, and the wealthy families who don't need the assistance do get them.

Some successful females, that have conquered the economic barriers, have been frustrated by the untouched right of their husbands' to deny travel, work, or study at a university. The «all-male, all-Wahhabist judiciary» (*The Economist*, 2006: 8) has been an additional source of gender-based ideology and restriction. «Not even the Wahhabist obsession with preventing ikhtilat, or "mixing" of the sexes, comes near the top of many Saudis» long wish-list for change» (*The Economist*, 2006: 7). Gender segregation in educational institutions and public places, such as restaurants and banks, leaves homes to become a sanctuary of freedom. In some government departments and other public spaces that have failed to create a women's section, females are obliged to send a male agent or be accompanied by a Mahram or protector, usually a male family member such as a father, husband, brother or son. Although there are clearly female, career opportunities, there are many barriers that remain untouched by the infusion of national wealth and education.

## 7. A CRUMBLING BARRIER: EDUCATION AND FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

The Islamic society of Saudi Arabia accepts women in the realm of higher education but fails to integrate them fully into the broader social framework—namely the workforce. Although, as argued by Willoughby (2008), the increased educational attainment of women leads to a clear increase in female labor force participation and «the relative presence of women in the labor force has more than doubled over the past twenty years in every Gulf country but Bahrain» (Willoughby, 2008: 189). I would challenge his notion of «segmented feminization» which, according to him, characterizes the labor market structure such that a division is emerging in which wealthier women are working in the paid labor force while females from poorer households, without formal education, don't work outside the home (Willoughby, 2008: 184).

I argue that in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia there is no, direct, proportional association between educational attainment and female work participation, but education does serve multiple purposes: a) it is seen by many families as a means to increase the marriage opportunities of their daughters and thus an investment in the tribe; b) young women experience more freedom—not necessarily of thought, but to mingle freely with non-relatives within the constraints of gender-segregated, higher-education institutions; c) it is one form of «storing» a rapidly-growing, young (female) generation resulting from any modern, welfare system. Additionally, unemployment is a growing problem due to the rapidly increasing population resulting from traditionally encouraged large families along with improved health and living conditions. For example, «the 10 unemployment among Saudis currently stands at 11%» (Arabian Business.com). «A restive population of young Saudis, for whom there is little work, little wealth and no political participation is pressing relentlessly for change» (Rubin, 2006: 76). This factor argues that women be allowed to gain ground in the business realm.

## 8. EDUCATION: A CONTINUING CHALLENGE

This article describes the historical developments that brought about the economic changes that provided the basis for a Gulf-State, educational renaissance. It demonstrates how conservative social and cultural traditions have shaped new educational practices to maintain the barriers of an established neopatriarchal system. Education for women in the Saudi Arabian Kingdom is a tantalizing, double-edged sword: on the one hand it, increases hope and intellectual capacity; on the other, it produces disillusionment and frustration because it exists within a traditional, gender-segregated system that restricts their creativity and power. Saudi women alternate between traditional vigor stirred by conservative Wahhabism and contemporary frustration by a culture divorced from the global ethic of educational as well as economic opportunities for them. At the same time, a deteriorating economic situation, combined with the «unproductive» study and work ethics of



many males, argues the economic necessity for women to assume a role as co-breadwinners. Through education, some traditional barriers open while others close more tightly to avoid change. These barriers will ultimately be eroded by the blowing sands of desire and courageous effort combined with International economic and political pressure. Women will continue to strive for educational and work opportunities, and extend the boundaries of what is permissible to transform their current desert of opportunity into a beautiful garden, as many have already done in their homes.

Keeping in mind that these changes occurred over a period of thirty or forty years, it becomes clear that indigenous traditions and customs, that have been in place for centuries, have not yet had a chance to join with the rapid growth that appears to be possible based on Western standards that grew out of the notion of separation of church and state that produced a nation where religion and culture permeate every facet of life. «At its inception, what made the interpretative power of the ulama a force in shaping society was the political alliance between religion and state, and the empowerment of the ulama to enforce their version on Islamic law on subject peoples» (Doumato, 2003: 242).

#### 9. EDUCATION: A SURPRISING BLESSING

Throughout history threatened people have used everything from fire to drums to signal their need for help. Hundreds of miles of relatively-flat desert between limited water supplies and more limited food made these solutions irrelevant in much of the Middle East. A militant patriarchy evolved to secure extremely limited, scattered and inconsistent resources from nomadic, rival tribes. The needs of non-combatants, women and children, were commonly sacrificed. This geographically-veiled anachronism has continued, in modified form, despite colossal wealth and abundance of resources. Despite notable changes, feelings of isolation, frustration and hopelessness have continued in many people throughout the Persian Gulf.

On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009 education and technology changed that forever. As a young, Iranian woman lay dying on the street, with blood pouring out of her nose and mouth, a bystander transformed his cellphone and education into a message that brought tears to the world. The young woman was a music student who had been murdered by an admitted, government gunman trying to silence the voice of citizens seeking democracy through peaceful demonstration. Within minutes the image was circulated around the globe via its student and teacher inspired, internet services.

As her historically-illiterate, fellow citizens watched their emerging democracy being crushed, they sought help using their newly-acquired cellphones and instruction manuals. Through the miracle of technology and education, the formerly-undecipherable collection of letters became words of liberation from thousands of years of oppression. They continued sending pictures of human abuse and murder to the farthest corners of the planet. Government arrest of

some students and seizure of their campus was in vain. An army of cellphonewielding classmates and educators fled throughout the city sending pictures during their strategic retreat. From the villages of Africa to the summits of Tibet, the eyes of the world watched the eyes of Neda roll-up in death, as her courageous teacher knelt and wept by her side. At that moment a formerly-naive world vowed to cease the wanton humiliation, abuse and murder of Gulf State women. The Devil of Education became an Angel of Liberation.

Although it took nearly two centuries for women in the United States of America to obtain arguably equal rights, there are compelling reasons why it could be much quicker in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are witnessing the convergence of important trends. The most powerful country in the world nearly elected a woman President. Within three years she may defeat the incumbent, and control its military force. Those who think she has witnessed the abuse of women with indifference, are engaging in thought that may become the object of bitter regret. Through education, democracy is spreading around the world, and women are commonly given the right to vote. In those nations military policy is frequently determined by elections. The more territorial and aggressive male voters, and the more maternal and accommodating females, usually maintain a balance in the severity of military response to perceived national threat. This moderate balance, in the United States of America, responded to a devastating attack on their World Trade Center by invading and revolutionizing two Middle-Eastern countries while conducting lethal, aerial-robotic operations in others.

During this time American women, and women around the planet, have witnessed their sisterhood being abused, humiliated and slaughtered on the streets of Arab and Muslim nations. The previously naïve, female sentiment is certainly changing. As a direct result of education, several Gulf Nations now have a legion of hidden, cell-phone reporters capable of instantly transmitting pictures around the world. Every abused, Gulf Nation woman has nearly a billion brothers and sisters watching and waiting for an opportunity to intervene on her behalf. If there is a major, terrorist attack upon the United States of America, or other woman-voting democracy, those former voices of moderation may join their male counterparts in a policy of maximum, permissible force against nations directly or indirectly involved, many of whom treat women unequally or brutally. It could take generations for those military targets to recover.

As a direct result of education, those nations that deny women equal rights are alienating potential partners in trade totaling billions of dollars annually. Oil reserves are being slowly depleted, and major, oil consumers are seeking alternative energy to prevent global warming and reduce national energy dependency upon terrorist-influenced nations. Gulf Nation, economic security will ultimately depend upon new industries such as tourism. Tourists would not want to visit a country that has a reputation for abusing or demeaning women; nor would they likely buy goods from such a country. Gender-based, trade boycotts may appear in the future. The possession of nuclear weapons in the Middle East is a reality, and

access to defensive means may be determined by countries powerfully influenced by the votes of women. The education of Gulf State youth in foreign countries has been endangered by Islamic militants, and the abuse of women is adding to their difficulties.

People in Middle East Nations, and around the world, should be aware of the importance of democratic, female sentiment and these new potentialities. The future quality of life in the Gulf States may largely depend upon their people attending to the following words from the Prophet Muhammad,

O you who believe, it is not lawful for you to take women as heritage against (their) will. Nor should you straiten them by taking part of what you have given them, unless they are guilty of manifest indecency. And treat them kindly. Then if you hate them, it may be that you dislike a thing while Allah has placed abundant good in it (The Holy Quran, Chapter 4, Verse 19. Translated by Maulana Muhammad, 2002).

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