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IN MEMORIAM

# Christine Eickelman (1944–2024)

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Christine Eickelman passed away on 31 March 2024. The end was sudden—a stroke. Family and a wide circle of friends and admirers of her work on several continents found this ending shocking and distressing. All were grateful for her scholarly accomplishments and personal qualities that shined through, which are worthy of acknowledgement here.

Christine was born in St-Germain-en-Laye (France) in 1944. After her parents' emigration, she grew up in Montreal. Her undergraduate education was at McGill University, where she studied anthropology. This choice proved to be doubly fortuitous: she acquired not only the disciplinary skills that would later prove invaluable in her writing about provincial Gulf society, but also a husband. Dale Eickelman, then a McGill graduate student, presciently lent her a book on a Gulf indigenous population, the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq.

Dale and Christine became world travelers, not always intentionally—American cities, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Oman, the Orkneys. They were preparing to study Arabic in Cairo in the summer of 1967 just as war broke out. They ended up instead in Salt Lake City. Dale's doctoral studies took place in the tumultuous Chicago of 1968 under Mayor Richard Daley, when widespread violence erupted in April after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Later in 1968, they set out for Dale's intended fieldwork in Najaf, Iraq, traveling via Egypt and then Tehran to Baghdad in a pilgrim bus en route to the Shiʿi shrines in southern Iraq. Political eruptions intervened again as the Baʿth party, then under Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, overthrew Iraqi President ʿAbd al-Rahman ʿArif, who came to power in the so-called 17 July Revolution of 1968. The uncertain aftermath compelled Dale to abandon his line of research in Iraq, so Christine and Dale headed westward. Going through Egypt and Algeria, they arrived in Morocco and chose Boujad, a regional pilgrimage center inland from Casablanca, where they stayed from November 1968 to January 1970. From the beginning, they lived in the old part of the town.

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Christine spoke a rapidly improving Arabic, allowing her to go with women to places inaccessible to Dale.

In 1971, Christine and Dale moved to New York City, where Dale got his first academic job at New York University (NYU). Christine received a master's degree in Middle Eastern studies there, supervised by the renowned Arabist, R. Bayly Winder. At NYU from 1971 to 1978, she worked closely as an administrative assistant with the political scientist and Maghreb specialist, I. William Zartman, and later for a brief period with Richard Bulliet, the distinguished historian of Islam. Zartman and Bulliet were successive executive directors of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), then headquartered at NYU. Until MESA's move to the University of Arizona, Christine was MESA's only full-time employee. In her scholarly capacity, she remained a committed MESA Fellow.

She found what was to become her decades-long research subject in 1979-80, when she spent six months doing fieldwork in Oman in the northeastern oasis town of al-Hamraʾ, the provincial/tribal capital. Living with a small child without electricity, piped water, or telephones had its challenges, but Christine fit in easily with local society, gaining a proficiency in Omani Arabic. She became a regular attendee of daily coffee-drinking sessions and the other highly structured visits that women of the town engaged in.

In al-Hamraʾ, Christine kept daily field notes, which became the basis for her book, *Women and Community in Oman* (New York University Press, 1984). It is both masterly and empathetic and has been justly acknowledged as a landmark study in Omani and women's studies, skillfully weaving sensitive fieldwork with ethnographic insight. Widely used in Western university classrooms, it also was used in Middle Eastern ones after translation into Arabic in 2011 (*al-Mar'a wa-l-Mujtama' fi 'Uman*). Thanks to the miracle of WhatsApp, the Moroccan translator was able to liaise closely with locals of al-Hamraʾ for clarification.

Written in accessible and lucid prose, *Women and Community* is a personalized account, captivating and charming in recording Christine's involvement with families, and in capturing how her informants reacted to her and to her adopted mixed-race daughter. In her work, she eschewed static, deracinated social categories to highlight the flexible and adaptable social structures of Omani society. Households, neighborhoods, family circles, women's visiting practices, and social hierarchies come to life without oversimplification or romanticization. Readers hear not only Christine's voice clearly through direct reference to her field journals but also, more importantly, the words of the village women themselves.

The work was written at a time when social change was beginning to occur but had not yet crystallized, and Christine was to return to al-Hamraʾ in 1988 and again in 2023 to assess the extent and effect of rapid development. Even at the beginning of the 1980s, her work captured a sense of people seeking to hold on to basic social values while rising wealth and opportunities plainly shifted attitudes. Mindful of class and status distinctions, she noted a shift in lower-status women's deference to higher-status women in line with the former's rise in income. Yet she also found that the Omani sense of order

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and propriety (*khajal*), although increasingly stressed at the edges, remained largely intact.

This sense of social order in Oman gave rise to her distinctive interpretation of the public-private dichotomy. Rather than the then-conventional gendering—men as public, women as private—she persuasively placed the *ḥayyān*, the traditional family collectivity, at the core of the distinction. Putting it more simply than she did, the private realm is the family network cohabited by men and women; the public is the nonfamilial sphere where women participate but in segregated spaces and roles. This rich ethnographic observation has subtle conceptual implications as well: rather than assuming that women are inevitably restricted to the private sphere, they also can belong to a nonfamiliar public sphere in which men associate with men, and women associate with women. So, to the extent gendering occurs, it is an internal "public" marker, not the boundary-setter between male and female realms. Ample literature since the book was published points to women's agency throughout Arab and Islamic history and in the arts, culture, religious movements, economy, society, and politics. Even though Christine's formulation is Omani-specific, it certainly suggests, more broadly, that although women's roles and status may be intimately tied to household and family networks, at least in nonurban contexts, this does not equate to seclusion.

The return to Oman in 1988, presented in her 1993 article in the *Middle East Journal*, "Fertility and Social Change in Oman: Women's Perspectives," depicted the substantial physical development of the town al-Hamraʾ and economic transformations as a result of a new oil economy. She argued against the Orientalist trope linking higher birth rates to Islamic values. Rather, she attributed this to transformed cultural attitudes, such as a shift of social confidence in women's views of childbirth, which moved in tandem with, if not precisely caused by, the new socioeconomic conditions. Whereas previously women had been hesitant and fearful, they now welcomed numerous children. Visiting practices, which she insightfully highlighted earlier, now became even more central: the more postpartum visitations, the higher the social standing of the family. Because children were seen as a source of strength, she sensibly argued, any government efforts to promote birth control and family planning would at least need to take into account the subtle relationship between fertility and cultural attitudes. It is a matter of scholarly regret that she did not live to provide her scholarly assessment of what she found during her last visit in 2023 (Figure 1).

Although very different from Oman or Morocco or even Manhattan's Washington Square, the New Hampshire base, thanks to Dale's professorship at Dartmouth College beginning in 1989, provided a stimulating but tranquil milieu. Christine wrote, read, nurtured, volunteered, and welcomed, all thoughtfully. She intermittently taught at Dartmouth and wrote academic articles. She was an avid reader in several languages; she volunteered at a local library and served on its governing body from 2010 to 2020. An enthusiastic member and president of the International Women's Club between 2002 and 2008, she organized lectures and trips. She gave presentations to local schools and museums. In her later years, she actively supported the arts scene

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**Figure 1.** Christine at a coffee-drinking session, 2023. Some of the older women present first met her in 1979–80. They are joined by their daughters and granddaughters.

in neighboring White River Junction, Vermont. As important as these activities were to her, she was above all the foundation stone of her family and, with Dale, raised two precocious and centered children, Amal and Miriam. There could not be any greater achievement for a scholar who placed family at the heart of social research than the devoted sustaining of her own family.

With others too, Christine was never less than openhearted. I have fond memories of spending time as a guest with the Eickelmans in Hanover, and also in St Margaret's Hope on South Ronaldsay, one of the Orkney islands, where they were living between 1987 and 1988. The walks Christine, the girls, and I would take along the wild and freezing North Sea, as the girls excitedly watched for seals, brought out Christine's wistful reflections on the natural order. Even though the Eickelmans were distinctive as rare outsiders in a small, Orkney town, they made friends easily and it was not surprising that Christine, against all odds, began to decode local social relations. It is to be regretted that she never published this application of her anthropological skills.

Indeed, her warm welcoming style made her approachable to people from all walks of life. Friends she met in Morocco, the Middle East over half a century ago, Scotland, and more recently in China, became like family and remained so. She was never forgotten in Oman, and each time she returned she was enthusiastically received. When Dale visited alone at the homes of leading families in Muscat's greater capital area, after greeting men he would be ushered into a side room where women would crowd around for news of Christine.

The death of Christine Eickelman in 2024 robbed us of a sensitive ethnographer who showed us how local cultural constructions of women's private and

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public roles, childbirth, family, and community are socially significant but not static. As a person, she left us an example of a life well-lived: gentle, graceful, generous. As her hometown newspaper said, "her quiet style, openness, and fascination with sharing life with others gave meaning to her life and the lives of others."[1]

[1] "Christine Annick Marie Eickelman," *Valley News* (West Lebanon, New Hampshire), 9 April 2024, https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/vnews/name/christine-eickelman-obituary?id=54820432.

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