

## Al-Hima, A Way of Being

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*Hala Kilani (MA student UCL)*

"From society to society people know how to use their bodies,"

Marcel Mauss (2006:78)

Hima is a traditional system of management and conservation of natural resources practiced by tribes in the Arabian Peninsula since more than 1400 years.

The term hima literally means in Arabic a protected place or protected area. For rural communities living in the Arab world, the term holds connotations that appeal to their collective memory and hence when evoked, the term is not only readily recognized as familiar but also valued and triggers an air of acceptance and ease among communities living anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula or Arab Middle East.

Drawing on the actor-network theoretical framework, particularly the work of Bruno Latour and Marcel Mauss as well as fieldwork in six hima sites in southern Saudi Arabia, this dissertation demonstrated that the processes involving embodied knowledge resulted in a particularly female gendered anthropomorphosis in line with the nature-woman allegory (MacCormack and Strathern 1980). Himas transformed into a family member, a powerful actor in a kin-dominant society. It played part in social relations, in a network binding people and this landscape tightly by notions of place, identity, emotions, ethnicity and religion.

Their protection is equated to the protection from violation (sexual) reserved to women in these conservative rural Arab societies. This is why their violation is insulting to one's honour.

Ali Duwayli'i from hima Humayd illustrates this passionately: "The value of the hima to me is the same as the value of my sister or my daughter, it is my honour, I won't let anyone violate it, I will

protect it like I would protect my daughter or my sister".

Culturally there are parallels to this linguistically in terms referring to conservation institutions and prohibitions rooted in Islamic legislation. The word haram means wife and at the same time a sanctified inviolable zone such as haram Makkah and haram Madina. In the same vein, har?m or moharram means prohibited and harim zones are greenbelts and easements - whatever is near developed land and pertains to its well-being, such as its pathways and watercourse, its rubbish dump, its square etc." (Llewellyn 2003:20) considered in Islamic law as other forms of protected public areas - and the word harim is at the same time the plural of horma, which means a woman that is prohibited to anyone else other than her man (husband).

These similarity and double meaning further the unconscious cultural links between himas and women, the gendered anthropomorphosis and the deeply felt insult of the violation of himas, which seems to have been expressed in language and has now become seemingly trivial. The act of entering one's protected own, his hima is almost equivalent to a non-accepted sexual penetration perpetrated on a sister, a daughter or wife.

Beyond mirroring the tribe and its social structure and objectifying identity, honour and pride, himas played an active part in forming social relations through discipline, laws, alliances, religion, punitive sanctions, relations with other tribes and alliances. As the main body of material culture for the tribes of Arabia, in a cycle of reciprocal maintenance, the himas maintained the tribe and the tribe maintained the himas throughout centuries.

Himas are like Latour's Berlin key at the same time strong and fragile (Latour in Graves-Brown 2000). The discovery of oil and the sudden modernization in recent history resulted in their substitution by another material culture. This situation along with cultural colonialism and political forces acted on this social network and disintegrated kin ties, in which himas are an important link. Disconnectedness between inhabitants of the region and their natural environment ensued and the creation of Latour's much criticized "mind-in-a-vat" (Latour 1999) situation in the praxis of nature conservation followed.

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This indigenous knowledge, along with the himas themselves are now reduced to a form of intangible cultural heritage running the serious threat of disappearance, a threat driven by the change in technological practices and political forces.

However, this dissertation questioned the possible disappearance of this system based on observations in the field that support the argument that not only would the anthropomorphosis and the emotional bonds forged between himas and their long term custodians prevent their disappearance but also based on Alfred Gell's theory himas are works of art, the distributed consciousness of the ancestors, the embodied knowledge of which, enchant a wide community of scientists and nature conservation professionals (Gell 1998). To both these groups and even to the anti-tribal structures in Saudi Arabia, himas will remain as they hold value and are powerful actors by being there, if only at the centre of a live debate.

However, threatening or not, himas are part of the chain of associations. Ignoring them will not change this and neither will destroying them because they can exist as a concept in the immaterial realm. Ignoring them would be as dangerous as ignoring any other part of the chain: the government, religion, conservationists, modernity etc.

Latour taught us that none of the parties in the debate are right to negate or destroy the other links of the network. The only way is to accept the new elements, such as modernity that were introduced to the chain and which propelled it to another dimension. The only way is to accept that we live in a hybrid world and to work towards the connections because in the long run, the destruction of one link will lead to the annihilation of the entire network.

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