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Literacy Through Poetry:

A Pilot Project for Rural Women in the Republic of Yemen

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Literacy Through Poetry is a pilot project in culture and poverty for rural women in Yemen, initially supported by the World Bank Culture and Poverty Unit. The project has attracted the interest of other donors, and since January 2003, supplementary funding has been provided by the Social Fund for Development (SFD) in Yemen. Since its inception, the project has been participatory. It is currently implemented entirely by Yemeni nationals. This includes the training of new teachers as the pilot is expanded into new communities. The pilot explores potential links between traditional arts and affective/effective learning strategies through using learners' own oral poetic traditions to teach literacy. Two broad questions addressed by the pilot are, Can a focus on local oral traditions encourage women to attend literacy classes? And, Does the method encourage the perpetuation of local poetic traditions?

In this essay, I describe the project, its rationale, and pilot successes and hurdles. I provide brief background information on Yemen, rural women's labor, and the impact of modernity on women's mobility and access to information. I describe the traditional role of poetry as a tool for self-expression and conflict mediation and suggest that the traditional uses of poetry foster critical thinking skills. A section on the history of the literacy experience in Yemen shows that neither literacy nor the use of poetry in pedagogy are foreign to this culture. The essay concludes with anticipated plans for follow-up in Yemen and elsewhere.

Description of the Pilot

Beneficiaries of this project are adult rural women in the Republic of Yemen who are not literate but who participate in a rich oral tradition that includes poetic composition, proverbs, and stories. The project was designed for women who are not interested in formal education but want to learn to read and write a simple letter, short verses from the Quran, the information on food and pesticide containers, and their children's schoolwork. The project offers an alter-
supervisory and training roles, supervisors collected the texts generated in the classroom to type, photocopy, and return to the learners, in order to provide them the opportunity to read their own words in printed form. In May 2003, four new classes were added to the pilot, two in San'aa and two in Manakha, a large town west of San'aa. Teachers for these classes were trained by Ramadan and Al-Maktari. For comparative purposes, these classes were held 5 days a week for 6 months for a total of 240 contact hours. Their urban location provided a balance with the rural setting of the initial pilot. The project was formally evaluated by teachers, supervisors, and focus groups of learners in May 2003. A second evaluation to test retention levels and to compare results from the project expansion with the initial five classes was planned for 2004.

All learners expressed the desire to continue classes for another year, and there was an increase in demand for additional 1st-year classes in the pilot communities. At the time of writing (summer 2003) there were plans to resume teaching in all pilot communities in December 2003.

Rationale

There are several rationales for this literacy project. First and most important, it provides literacy alternatives for women. A major premise underlying the project is that the achievement of literacy is itself empowering for both women and men and basic to development, a position supported by the often quoted Arabic proverb “Learning is a woman’s weapon” (Al-ilm silah al-mar’a). Given the very high illiteracy rates in Yemen (74% for women) and the hurdles faced by educators and learners, it will be difficult for the Republic of Yemen to achieve its goals of halving illiteracy by 2025. This project can help Yemen meet its goals by providing sustainable, high-interest literacy classes for adult women who are not interested in a basic education curriculum.

Second, it provides a cost-effective curriculum. The Freirean curriculum, based on learners’ own oral literature and personal experience, is inherently diverse, thus different curricula need not be devised for each geographic and cultural region in Yemen. Texts are developed by the learners, rendering the use of textbooks unnecessary at this level. Teacher-training requirements are short: a 2-week workshop before classes begin, with short periods of follow-up training. These factors may significantly reduce the costs of eradicating illiteracy in Yemen if the project is expanded after the pilot phase.

Third, it incorporates the arts into a development project. There has been a growing international interest in the inclusion of culture and traditional arts in development projects. Reasons for this interest include the realization that economic growth alone is not sufficient for development and poverty reduction; development projects that take local values and institutions into account are more sustainable than those that do not do so; even among the very poor, issues of culture and heritage appear to be more important than economic benefits alone; and cultural creativity and the diversity it engenders are important national assets (UNESCO, 1996, 1998; Wolfensohn, 1999). Several conferences, publications, and Web sites have focused on the importance of incorporating the traditional arts in development, yet little is known about what this means operationally. Development effort has been directed at marketing local crafts, encouraging tourism, and protecting museums and traditional architecture. Yet there has been little investigation of the relevance of what UNESCO calls “intangible heritage” (e.g., poetry, music, and dancing) to development. This project explores the extent to which the incorporation of expressive culture in adult education will increase the effectiveness of literacy training and simultaneously affirm and encourage traditional arts.

Finally, the project empowers women. While recent developments have provided some women in Yemen with new opportunities for education and labor force participation, this has not necessarily been the case for all women. Technological changes associated with modernity have tended to reduce women’s workload, but they have also constrained women’s mobility and their input in public life. Women’s work in agriculture, fishing, and herding is sometimes thought to conflict with the prevailing ideology that the male head of the household should be the sole provider. Thus, attempts are made to reduce women’s workload and increase their inclusion when possible. The intent of this project is to empower women with the literacy skills necessary to effectively negotiate today’s world while it reaffirms the value of traditional mechanisms that provide women with an important input and voice in their own communities.

Background: Ecological and Economic Diversity in Yemen

Located in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is marked by environmental diversity, which directly affects the economic roles of women and men. In the mountain ranges that encompass about 60% of the country, subsistence agriculture on terraces has long
been the primary economic activity. In the past 3 decades, tube wells have expanded irrigation on level land. On the long, low coastline, traditional occupations include fishing, herding, and spate (floodwater) agriculture (Varisco, 1997). Herding was the traditional activity in the sparsely populated, arid Eastern Plateau. Although reserves of natural gas and petroleum have been discovered in this region, Yemen has not been able to achieve a high level of economic benefit from oil revenues because of adverse economic consequences following the first Gulf War.

Rural/urban distinctions are important. An estimated 80% of Yemen’s population live in small, scattered villages in which entire families are active participants in subsistence or cash-cropping activities, which may involve agriculture, fishing, herding, or a combination of these. Women living in rural communities actively contribute to the household economy, enjoy considerable mobility, and rarely veil in public. In communities defined as towns, however, few women participate in agriculture or fishing, and all women, with the possible exception of those of very low status, veil in public.

Rural Women’s Labor and Mobility

Traditionally, the expressed ideology of sexual separation was mitigated by women’s significant contribution to the subsistence economy, tribal law’s insistence on the respect and protection of women, and the relative isolation of Yemen’s rural communities. Rural women had, and in some cases continue to have, significant input in economic and political decisions in their respective communities. Partly because this is rarely formally acknowledged, the extent of women’s participation in any particular activity varies with community and household.

Traditional rural women travel far to fetch water and even farther to collect firewood. They sell their wares at weekly markets and visit relatives. Women and men work together in the fields or in fishing-related activities and socialize together except at formal occasions, which are gender segregated. Women can thus keep abreast of local and regional issues. Typically, when men meet to discuss and mediate a dispute, women also discuss the case at a nearby location. The dispute is again talked about by the family at home in the evening. When the men meet again the following afternoon, they bring with them the opinions of the women of their households. Unfortunately, recent changes have decreased rural women’s mobility as well as their access to information, thus limiting their ability to provide informed opinions on local issues (Adra, 1982).

In some cases, male out-migration to the Gulf countries in the 1970s

and 1980s increased women’s economic and decision-making roles (Adra, 1983). Another consequence, however, was the import of ideas new to rural Yemen about the “proper” comportment and dress of women (Adra, 1996). Returned migrants often tried to limit women’s mobility. Radio and television broadcasts of reformist sermons redefined for many the appropriate behavior of women and stressed the importance of gender segregation. More recently, they have disparaged local folklore, including poetry and song. Ironically, with increased access to television and consumer goods that had previously been associated with urbanism, many young rural women now wear the urban veil when visiting friends and relatives. For these women, seclusion is a sign of modern sophistication (Adra, 1998).

Poetry in Yemen

Poetry recitation and composition is integral to Yemeni culture and forms a major component of its heritage. The ability to compose poems not only is important among the urban elite but also has traditionally been a sign of tribal identity in rural Yemen (Adra, 1982, 1998; Caton, 1990; Miller, 2001). For women and men in Yemen, poetry provides a socially accepted manner of publicly expressing deep feelings of sorrow, joy, and concern. Short poems and proverbs are often inserted in conversation to make a point. Poetic competition, in which individuals or groups try to top the previous contribution, is common in rural Yemen. This poetry may be taken from the region’s repertoire, or regional tropes may be adapted into new compositions.

Most work in Yemen, including agriculture, fishing, and herding, is accompanied by sung or chanted poetry. Traditionally, the interminable activity of grinding grain on handheld stone mills was a major locus of poetic activity by women. Women composed or recited poetry to lighten their task. They would sing their feelings and opinions without risk of censure. Hearing these women’s words, family members could modify their own behavior toward the women or use these expressions as a guide in selecting marriage partners or mediating disputes with in-laws. With the advent of diesel-powered flour mills and the easy availability of imported flour, women no longer grind grain by hand. Few regret the passing of this arduous activity, but many speak nostalgically of the poems they composed (Adra, 1982; see also Abu-Lughod, 1986). Like other aspects of modernity, the shift from hand mills has been accompanied by the loss of an important means of public self-expression for women.

Perhaps the most dramatic use of poetry in rural Yemen is evident
in conflict resolution and political discourse. Men's poetic practice has been enhanced through television and audiotapes (Catton, 1990, Miller, 2001). In contrast, few rural women poets are quoted in public venues. Although there have always been, and continue to be, women known for their classical poetry, and many of their poems have entered the national repertoire, technology has not been kind to the two-line poems traditionally composed and recited by rural women on a daily basis. In general, traditional women (and some men) think it immodest to have their poems transmitted and quoted by strangers.

Whereas women used to exchange folktales, recite poetry, and dance during leisure hours, they now watch television. The poetry, music, and dancing that were once highly valued forms of expression are increasingly criticized along with women's traditional health practices. Women, who before exposure to television in their communities were very proud of their traditions, lost their confidence when they discovered the awesome technological advances of other countries (Adra, 1996). Their increased seclusion and diminished voice in the community, along with the more recent reformist attacks on their folklore, have further damaged their self-esteem.

Another loss that has accompanied modernity is the reduction of situations that develop critical thinking skills. Poetry is inherently ambiguous, permitting a range of interpretations and an understanding of the complexity of the problem at hand. It synthesizes the issue under discussion. Daily use of poetry and the substantial amount of time spent in conflict mediation in Yemen encouraged the development of critical thinking skills. One goal of teaching rural women literacy and affirming their poetic traditions is to restore their sense of competence in an increasingly literate world.

A History of the Literacy Experience in Yemen

The idea of literacy is not foreign to rural Yemen. Literacy is an important value in Islam, the majority religion in this country. According to Muslim theology, the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel, and the first word revealed to him was a command to read or recite (iqra'). Classes teaching local boys, and sometimes girls, to memorize and read the Quran have existed in Yemeni communities since at least the 9th century c.e. Most households own a Quran or feature Islamic calligraphy on their walls.

In addition to religious injunctions to read and to learn, each plot of land, however small, has a written deed detailing its size, location, and the name of its owner. This is carefully stored with the owner or

the local sheik, who also keeps records of dispute settlements. Thus, while rural Yemen has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world, literacy training is not an intervention hoisted upon a helpless population from outside.

The use of poetry in education is not new to Yemen. Poetry was an important mnemonic device in traditional Islamic education. Schools of Islamic law would condense legal texts into poems for students to memorize (Messick, 1993). The Quran, on which traditional schooling in Yemen was based, is recognized as highly poetic. Arabic books written in poetic form and delivering messages on child raising and grammar have been widely circulated in Yemen during the past 4 decades. Thus, education and poetry are very comfortably paired in Yemeni society.

The Curriculum

The curriculum for this project was designed by Maritza Arrastia (1995; Arrastia et al., 1991) and Fatiha Makloufi, who have worked together since they developed the Mothers Reading Program in New York in the 1980s. The Mothers Reading Program employed a Freirean approach to literacy in which the text is developed through the learners' own discourse. It is a method particularly suited to the goals of Literacy Through Poetry, in which the text is also generated by the learners. Before training teachers in Yemen, Arrastia and Makloufi piloted their curriculum among Yemeni women enrolled in literacy classes in Brooklyn, New York.

This method is consistent with studies indicating that teaching reading is most effective when it is based on material that is familiar and interesting to the learners (Smith, 1997; see Moustafa, 1997 for specific studies). Contemporary educators also support the Freirean premise that reading, the decoding of words, is not more difficult than other decoding skills already mastered by learners, such as understanding language, interpreting the visual world around them, and decoding social mores.

Thus, in this pilot, learners were encouraged to develop a story based on their reading of a photograph of a familiar scene, a community issue, or any topic of interest to them. An abbreviated version of the story, including any poetry, proverbs, or religious verse generated in the discussion was then written on the board or flip chart. Readers read the text chorally with the teacher then chose a word or phrase from the text to learn syllables and letters. Each learner also chose words to copy into her personal dictionary. Texts were typed,
reproduced, and returned to the learners, who then read their stories and poetry in typed form. Finally, the typed texts for each class were bound into a book that was distributed to the learners. After 9 months of classes, learners had compiled personal dictionaries of 25-120 words, and each had a "book" that she had helped write. These books also serve as archives of local poetry and lore.

An intensive 5-day training session was conducted by Arrastia and Makloufi in August 2002. It was attended by the seven rural teachers in training and eight staff members of IEAEO. Training was Freirean and modeled the method being taught. Participants felt comfortable with the trainers and introduced poetry and proverbs into discussions from the first day of training. IEAEO staff suggested expanding the program to Sanaa and adding a fifth class to the pilot, a suggestion that resulted in the formation of the urban class.

The New York-based trainers were impressed with the participants' assertiveness and advanced critical thinking skills. Traditional Yemeni society's respect for women's intelligence, the existence of strong support mechanisms among women, and the role of pervasive conflict mediation in developing critical thinking skills helped to ensure the success of this workshop. Participants felt, however, that the time allotted to the training was too short and recommended a 2-week training course in the future.

In addition to there being continual monitoring and evaluation by teachers, learners, and supervisors, the pilot was formally evaluated in May 2003. IEAEO administrators Aziza Hamid Sharaf and Ni'ma S'a'id Murshid visited classrooms, observed teaching, reviewed teachers' plan books and attendance rosters, interviewed learners, tested reading and writing skills, and checked personal dictionaries. The evaluators also interviewed learners who had dropped out of classes to determine their reasons for leaving the program. Among the factors they considered in their evaluation were the acquisition of literacy skills on the part of learners and their use of these skills outside the classroom; learners' attitudes toward their own poetry and folklore and whether or not participation in the pilot had encouraged them to express themselves through poetry; and other impacts of the project on learners, teachers, and their communities.

Pilot successes included learners' acquisition of literacy skills, low drop-out rates, renewed community discussion and interest in traditional poetic traditions, and the generation of new community interest in the education of women. A major success with implications for the feasibility of the pilot was its participatory component; participatory monitoring and evaluation were integral to pilot implementation.

The literacy achievements of the learners in this pilot surpassed expectations. By May 2003, 78% were able to read material not covered in class and to write a few sentences on a topic of their choice. Teachers and supervisors agreed that this method, with its use of poetry, facilitated the acquisition of reading and writing skills. It taught learners to sound out words, which in turn made it possible for them to read material not encountered in the classroom.

In spite of serious hurdles and the absence of incentives such as sewing classes or income-generating components, learner commitment and enthusiasm remained high. Drop-out rates were very low (19%). Only three of the original participants dropped out because of lack of interest in the class. Other reasons for dropping out included personal or family illness, change of residence, husband's disapproval, or schedule conflicts with agricultural-labor requirements.

This pilot appears to have overcome younger learners' disdain of local lore and renewed discussion and interest in traditional folklore among learners of all ages. Initially, some learners insisted to their teachers that they did not know traditional poetry. This hurdle was overcome in a variety of ways, one of the most effective being the visit of rural learners to the urban class, where they were met with traditional welcoming rhymes. The rural learners responded in kind, as was their custom. This experience appears to have dissolved their inhibitions. Teachers found that substantial amounts of poetry were generated by topics that engendered strong feelings. Several learners composed new poetry on issues in the news, including the 2003 Iraq war. The collection of texts generated in each class provided a small archive of women's lore in Yemen.

All the learners who completed the year indicated a strong interest in continuing to study. Older learners requested a 2nd year using the same method of pedagogy, while younger learners who wish to complete secondary school asked for classes in the IEAEO curriculum designed to feed graduates into the formal education system. Several learners told their teachers that they had developed this enthusiasm for learning through attending pilot classes. Supervisors and teachers felt that the method fostered self-expression and increased self-confidence among learners. One supervisor noted that the use of poetry encouraged creativity and assisted in the adaptation of learners to a rapidly changing social context.

Teachers maintained their commitment to the pilot in the face of local opposition in one village, the demand for textbooks from learners who had had previous experience with formal schooling,
delays in the delivery of desk chairs, and other logistics problems. One teacher commented that her experience with the pilot taught her that problems have solutions. Teachers actively sought to improve their pedagogic skills and developed confidence in their own teaching abilities.

Many in the pilot communities were skeptical, at first, of this approach to education, but their doubt dissolved as they saw learners acquiring literacy skills. The pilot has generated community interest in literacy training for women and created a greater demand for literacy classes for women in all the pilot communities.

Teachers and supervisors noted that participation in the pilot led to improved relationships between learners and their families. Learners also appeared to be more involved with their children's homework. One learner, whose adult daughter was a teacher in the pilot, had been indifferent to her younger children's homework before her participation in the class. As she began to acquire literacy skills, she also began to scold her children when they watched television instead of studying. Other learners were able to help their young children with their homework.

At the beginning of the term, many learners lacked the necessary skills to pose questions or even respond to those asked by their teachers. By spring 2003, most learners knew how to respond to these questions and some could formulate their own questions. Although this was not the primary aim of the pilot, health and environmental messages were delivered in classes when requested by learners. These included classes on malaria, bilharzia, and water conservation. As a result, learners in one community began a campaign to bury used food cans; in another, women were more careful in protecting the cleanliness of water tanks. Finally, class discussions and poetry exchanges on the topic of elections broke down several learners' inhibitions about voting.

A Participatory Project

This pilot has been implemented locally with minimal dependence on expatriate consultants. From the project's inception, the project coordinator and project manager worked closely with IEAEO. They stressed that the pilot was not intended to replace extant IEAEO projects but was an alternative for learners who would not otherwise enroll in literacy classes. The name of the pilot was changed to Literacy Through Cultural Heritage at the request of IEAEO administrators who were concerned that a project focusing on poetry would be perceived as frivolous. Pilot communities were chosen in coordination with IEAEO. Women administrators at IEAEO participated in the teacher-training workshop and were active supervisors, mentors, and evaluators. Two of the rural teachers were on loan from IEAEO, and the teacher of the urban class was an IEAEO administrator. Community participation was an important component in the pilot. Only communities with an expressed interest in hosting the pilot were chosen for this project, and decisions on the locations of classes within the community were made primarily by the learners and teachers.

To the extent that texts are based on discussion generated in class, with topics chosen by the learners, the curriculum was participatory. Enrollment and attendance in class was entirely voluntary. Learners were not provided with financial incentives to attend class. Learner requests for Islamic education, discussion of social problems, and topics in the media were honored by the teachers. Where learners were reluctant to focus on poetry and proverbs, texts were based on social concerns. Teachers were also active participants. Dialogue between learners, teachers, and supervisors nourished this pilot. Most important, training of teachers for the Social Fund for Development (SFD)-funded expansion was conducted entirely by local trainers.

"Participatory monitoring and evaluation" is a process that incorporates mechanisms for continuous feedback, identification of problems, and their resolution during the course of a project (Baker, 2000; Rietbergen-McCracken & Narayan, 1998, pp. 191–192). This has been the case with this pilot since the teacher training workshop in August 2002, when follow-up training workshops were scheduled at the request of the teachers in training. Throughout the project the suggestions and comments of teachers, learners, and supervisors led to modifications in the curriculum, teaching methods, and topics covered.

Hurdles Faced by Learners and Teachers

Hurdles faced by the pilot included those that resulted from the learners' social and cultural contexts and those resulting from teaching and classroom contexts. Because of learners' inexperience with classroom situations, they often found it difficult to ask or respond to questions; they needed to learn classroom behavior, such as taking turns speaking, and some needed to be reminded of their commitment to attend classes. There were problems with some learning tools. Most learners refused to use tape recorders. Some learners expressed boredom with the photographs they were initially given. In response, teachers introduced calendars and other generative materials.

There were serious schedule conflicts with the agricultural calen-
Hope, September to November is the major harvest season in Yemen’s highlands, with heavy labor requirements for women and men. Agricultural-labor demands were largely responsible for absenteeism among learners and prevented several women from enrolling in literacy class. Scheduling classes in agricultural communities to begin in December would alleviate this problem.

Nine months is not a sufficient period for learners to acquire fluency in reading, writing, and simple grammar. Many learners continued to experience problems with letters that are difficult in Arabic; they had difficulty in distinguishing letters that look or sound alike and letters that are pronounced differently from how they are written. In writing, learners sometimes left out the dots that distinguish letters. Thus, a 2nd year of instruction was recommended.

Another major hurdle was the teachers’ lack of experience in the classroom and the initial underestimation of their training needs. Teachers were not given a manual offering a variety of teaching/learning activities, tips for classroom time management, alternative ways to generate class discussion, ways to combine group work with individual attention, reporting techniques, methods to evaluate the performance of adult learners, and so on. Further, logistics problems made it impossible to hold follow-up teacher workshops from November to January, which caused anxiety among the teachers and delayed the resolution of their problems.

Delays in returning typed and photocopied texts to learners made it difficult for them to connect typed text with their spoken words. In some cases, words in texts were changed from the original colloquial to standard literary Arabic, which caused confusion among beginning learners.

**Future Directions for This Pilot**

Literacy Through Poetry’s successes exceeded all expectations. Not only did most learners acquire reading and writing skills but all were interested in continued study. These successes, in turn, fueled demand for literacy classes among women who had not enrolled in the 2002–2003 term. Learners and teachers developed a new self-confidence, and some learners acquired the empowering skill of asking questions. Classrooms were important venues for empowering women to vote and supporting their efforts in disease prevention. Discourse on traditional poetry was revived, and participants in the pilot are again using poetry to express themselves. Some of the new poetry composed by learners differs in style from traditional poetry, a necessary adaptation for the sustainability of the genre. Also crucial to the sustainability of the project is the extent to which it has been implemented locally. All these impacts further the development of critical thinking skills, which have been threatened by modernity.

At the time of writing, plans for pilot expansion include a 2nd year of classes for participants in the pilot and possibly the addition of a 1st-year class for a new set of learners in each of the pilot communities. Only learners with no previous experience in literacy are to be enrolled in the 1st-year classes, to avoid the problems teachers faced in dealing with varied learner skill levels and to facilitate final evaluation of the project. It has been recommended that rural classes begin in December, when agricultural labor requirements are low. By spring 2004, SFD will make recommendations to IIEAO based on evaluation results from all pilot classes. Ideally, IIEAO will incorporate this project within its illiteracy eradication program. Expanding this pilot to other countries of the region that also have a dynamic tradition of oral poetry is also under discussion.

**Appendix: Sample Texts and Poetry**

The following are samples of texts, proverbs, and rhymes generated in pilot classes. Although most of the verses are traditional, some were composed in class. All are in the dialect of the northern highlands of Yemen. While the prose text is presented here only in the author’s English translation, poems and proverbs quoted below are first written in the original Arabic (in transliterated form, not in Arabic script) followed by their English translation in parenthesis.

1. All rural classes discussed the problems faced by orphans in light of Quranic injunctions to protect them. In the following story, an orphan is forbidden from attending school by her exploitative stepmother:

   Khadija, an orphan girl, is forbidden by her stepmother to study because she wants Khadija to help with household chores. Khadija has suffered because of this deprivation from learning and from a mother’s love. Her desire for learning was such that she visited her friend, Aisha, daily to study with her. And as the proverb says:

   *Ya muhsina ya `anbarud walima*  
   La tusakiri fawqi ana yatima.
   (Oh, unblemished one, oh, fruit of the bridal banquet  
   Do not shut me in, I am an orphan.)

   2. This text is a story of an overworked woman.
Hajja Jum’a is a 60-year-old woman with three sons and two daughters. Yet because her daughters are married to men in distant villages, she has to do all the housework, agricultural tasks, and herding. [Young adults usually take over household duties, leaving elderly women—by Yemeni standards—free from the most arduous tasks.] While working in the house, Jum’a would recite the following verses [composed in class by several learners]:

Wa himm ya qalbi haninak ahsan
Hanin mukhfi, la zahar wa la ban insan.
(My sorrowful heart, your sorrow is tender
Hidden sorrow, neither visible nor apparent to anyone.)
Hinni ma’i ya sa’ila wa shu’ba
Ayna ja’ ‘umur qalbi wa kawy waqa’ bih?
(Feel for me, oh, stream, oh, channel
Where is the love of my life and what has happened to him?)

[Use of a male pronoun is a common trope in Arabic poetry. Despite its use here, “the love of my life” refers to the woman’s absent daughters.]

3. This text is a story generated by a photograph provided to the class. It refers to the practice of mediation between a wife and her husband or in-laws. If she feels that her rights have been violated, a wife moves back to her father’s or brother’s house in protest (hanaj). Her relatives then mediate the quarrel. The verses are proverbs that comment on the difficulties facing married women.

The setting is the guest room of Saliha’s house. Her husband’s sister, Hamida, has come to them in protest. Hamida’s brother’s children, Muhammad, Abdullah, and Asia, have come over to greet their aunt in the guest room. Saliha is offering them breakfast, and Hamida is talking with her nephews and niece.

Ya haniga labud min ruju’ish
La yinfa’ish ahlish wa la dumu’ish
Ilka samil akhdar yarid ruwish.
(Oh protestor, you must return.
Neither your family nor your tears will help you.
There is no hope for your [hurting] soul.)
Ma yadum lilmar’a al-harib
Ilka bayt ahla’ala al-kharib.
(Nothing remains to the woman who flees
Except the ruins of her family’s house.)

NOTES
I am grateful to those in Yemen and the United States who have supported this project in various ways. Unfortunately, I have room to name only a few. The pilot could not have been implemented without the cooperation of Ahmad Abdullah, director of IEAEO, and his extraordinary staff. Amat Al-Wali Al-Sharki, director of training, Social Fund for Development, has been supportive from the project’s inception. At the World Bank, special thanks go to Shaha Ali Reza, acting director, External Affairs and Outreach, MENA; Ousmane Diagana, senior operations officer, Human Development, Sanaa; and the staff of the World Bank Country Office in Sanaa for their support. Carmen Niethammer, operations officer, has painstakingly back-stopped this project and saved it from drowning in bureaucracy. Above all, I am indebted to Suad Ramadan, in-country project manager, for her untiring efforts in implementing and evaluating the pilot. For their critical reading of earlier drafts of this essay, I thank Mary Strong and Daniel Varisco. Finally, Jihan Varisco’s meticulous proofreading greatly enhanced the manuscript’s readability.

1. These are the reasons many adult women in Yemen state for wanting to learn literacy skills.
2. For information on the progress of this pilot, see \www.worldbank.org\poverty/culture/projects/poetry.htm
3. The idea for this project developed out of my earlier exploration of ways to incorporate culture and the arts into development projects (Adra, 1999). For more information on the World Bank’s discussion of this issue, see \http://www.worldbank.org\poverty/culture/index.htm.
4. See Taminian, 2001 for a discussion of urban poetic traditions in Yemen.
5. Abu-Lughod (1986) describes a similar use of poetry in Egypt’s Western Desert.
6. A common aphorism said to support new knowledge is “Al-‘ilm min Allah” (Learning comes from God). Also often quoted are expressions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad translatable as “Search for knowledge from the cradle to the grave” and “Seek knowledge [even if it takes you] to China.”
7. Financing for curriculum development was included in the World Bank’s funding of the initial phases of the pilot.
8. Most participants commented favorably on the modesty and approachability of the trainers in their evaluation of the training workshop.
9. There was local opposition to the perceived frivolity of lessons that relied on poetry and proverbs rather than textbooks (although all communities had agreed to this method as a condition of being included in the pilot). This, and the expectation that wooden desk chairs would be provided for learners, reflect an indigenous appreciation for a formal educational experience.
10. The name Literacy Through Poetry has been maintained in this essay because it makes the project and its goals clearer to an English-speaking audience.
REFERENCES


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