

# Kuwaiti Women in Pre-Oil Kuwait as Seen by the American Missionaries

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## Abstract

**This paper is based on the writings the American missionaries in Kuwait. The mission was established in Kuwait in 1911 and stayed there for more than half a century, providing health services through “The American Hospital”.**

**This study examines the position of Kuwaiti women as reflected in the writings of the missionaries, especially of the women, whose writings are unique in their ethnographic data on Kuwaiti women in pre-oil Kuwaiti society. Although the main focus is on women’s position, several socio-economic aspects of Kuwaiti society are illustrated.**

The American Missionary Hospital in Kuwait (1914-1967) was established by The Arabian Mission of The Reformed Church in America. The Reformed Church in America is a direct descendent of the Dutch Church in Holland and is one of the oldest denominations in the United States, having arrived along with the Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup>

The members of the mission started their work in the medical field four years before the establishment of their hospital, from a local house in Kuwait town. The members of The Arabian Mission sent their reports and articles to *Neglected Arabia*, which was published quarterly. The title was later changed to *Arabia Calling*. In this paper we will refer to these two periodicals as A.N. and A.C. Although the Arabian Mission which had stations in Iraq, Bahrain, Muscat, Kuwait and occasionally provided some medical assistance for remote areas in Arabia as a part of their out-station services, failed to accomplish their main objective which was evangelization of Moslems, it has nevertheless, provided the best and sometimes the only medical services in this region.

In spite of the fact that for some time after their arrival in Kuwait they were not accepted by some Kuwaitis and were regarded as infidels, they succeeded gradually in establishing strong relationships with the locals and became familiar with life among the people and were respected by them.<sup>2</sup> The missionaries maintained the same standard and style of living as the locals. Their loyalty to Kuwait was practically manifested by staying in Kuwait during the Battle of Jahra (1920), although they knew that they were the main target for the fanatic *Wahhabi Ikhwan* who waged this battle against Kuwait. The missionaries extended their assistance by treating the casualties of the battle.

The members of the Arabian Mission were very keen to understand Islam and the Moslem culture. It should be mentioned here that the members of the mission spent some time learning Arabic before being sent to their station. Some of them were well-read in the Arabic language and also in the books of both classical and popular Islam. They had a good chance to study the societies in which they were stationed, due to the duration of their stay, which in some cases reached several decades. This gave them ample opportunity to investigate these societies and accumulate information in a way which was not available to other travelers, especially in the Gulf region, who would generally write only descriptive and incidental data. One subject which was not mentioned in such a detailed and elaborate way in any other western source, was that of women in society. It was the Mission's policy to encourage its women to build up personal relationships in Arab society. Some women made their homes available to

receive local women - usually on a set schedule - in their *majlis* or *diwaniyyah* (sitting room) which had entrances isolated from those used by men. They used their acquaintance with the local women for purposes such as infant care, home hygiene, sewing and teaching elementary literacy.<sup>3</sup>

The main goal of the mission was to "submit the Crescent to the Cross". One important means to achieve this end was to expose what they considered to be the vices of Islam, and they found that the inferior position of women provided them with the opportunity to do so. Evangelization could be best performed through native women. It was thought that since no people could rise above the condition of its motherhood, until the Gospel got into the harems no movement towards Christianity could be expected".<sup>4</sup> This notion was held by the missionaries, in spite of the fact that they regarded Moslem women's position as inferior. They recognized her influence over her children and her role in their socialization. They certainly hoped that if a woman was to be converted to Christianity, it would be easy for her children to follow her faith.

Further, missionaries had a special interest in native traditions and customs in order to understand the natives, be understood, and avoid unnecessary offense.<sup>5</sup> This task was not possible without knowing the women in those societies. It should be mentioned that missionaries' accounts of women were not limited to the harem women. They also wrote on women as patients, hospital workers, maids, and slaves in their ordinary "out of harem" life, from both Bedouin and urban milieu. Missionary hospitals were the place where women of different backgrounds and countries were diagnosed by the staff who experienced these women's stay in their hospital. Missionaries themselves developed the talent for differentiating them from each other the moment they entered the door:

"The sallow, thin-faced women from Dubai, the tall, draped ones from Qatar, and the thickly shrouded women from Hassa. It is not only their clothes that mark them as strangers, but was also their child-like disregard for rules and regulations, their regal indifference, and independence. They knew what they wanted and they were determined to get it. Bedouin women had great pains and they wanted great medicines. Tiny pills, small bottles, injections that do not hurt - these are scorned. They like violent and drastic results!"<sup>6</sup>

Cases of Moslem women were recounted, and their inferior position under Islam was stressed in order to strengthen the position of Christianity among Christian women at home. The fact that Islam started to spread

among Christians in England through “Mohammedan missionaries”, and that the teachings of Islam appealed especially to western women was considered a threat to Christianity by the American missionaries. Dr. Calverly found the idea that some western women were led to believe that “Mohammedanism” exalts womanhood the height of absurdity.

“Would that those who hear and believe such a claim could visit Arabia and see for themselves a little of the heartache and despair brought about in the lives of Arab women by the very religion which is said to exalt them. Polygamy, concubinage, easy divorce and the teaching that women are inferior to men and were created for their usage, all these things make misery the most common feature in the experience of Arab women.”<sup>7</sup>

After writing about the misfortune of a Yemeni woman, who was a co-wife of a well-to-do Kuwaiti Muslim, Dr. E. Calverly writes at the end of her article:

“Christian women, thank God that you were not born to the lot of Moslem women! May your thankfulness not content itself with mere words of gratitude. You and I can bring to our Moslem sisters the abundant life which Christ brought to us”.<sup>8</sup>

In the countries where the missionaries were stationed Christian women’s life styles were used as a model. This was done to show the natives the advantages Christianity offers to women. These advantages were shown through Christians’ daily behavior and conduct.

In justifying the need for a home for the single ladies which were needed to take advantage of the medical and evangelistic opportunities among the women of Kuwait, Rev. Calverly wrote:

“Such a home for the unmarried ladies of our Mission will be an eloquent testimony to the Arabs that the Christian system of life does not make it necessary for a woman to be married in order to be supported. Arabia needs to know that women should be free to express their personalities in independent careers if they so desire and the careers of service which our single ladies have chosen plead for the freedom of women in the most attractive, convincing, and ennobling manner.”<sup>9</sup>

It is obvious that Rev Calverly was not as unrealistic and ambitious at the time (1928) to have hoped to persuade Kuwaitis to copy the model of a “single ladies home”. it was merely an attempt to reflect an image of the Christian society, which he thought should be admired. It is really difficult to assume that Kuwaitis found the life of a group of single women without a male relative or guardian, regardless of their profession, acceptable. It is

also difficult to assess people's reaction to and interpretation of occasional visits of male members of the missionary to the home, no matter how friendly and innocent these visits were.<sup>10</sup>

### **Moslem Women as Seen by Missionary Women**

Female members of the American mission had the unique chance to enter the harems and recount the life inside them. Doctors criticized the traditional health practices carried out on young women, especially in the field of childbearing and child delivery, by old women of the family and traditional midwives. They were sympathizing with young women and also with slaves. One could assume they had many friends among these two categories who probably had more confidence in them than in the locals. They also had friends and acquaintances among bedouin women. All of these options would not have been possible even for a female traveler. In spite of the fact that members of the Mission were not welcomed at the beginning, after some time local people started to respect them. Women missionaries were allowed into the harem. One could assume that especially women were admired and respected by the local women not only because their services were in demand but also because they represented an active and positive image of women which was not to be copied or even dreamt of in such a secluded and traditional Moslem society.

It should be noted that missionary women of the time did not even represent the majority of American women. They were educated, mostly in medicine, which was newly opened for other women. The Arabian Mission started as a bachelor effort and the two pioneers Zwemer and Cantine, before leaving the United States, signed a pledge to the effect that they would not marry for a specific term.<sup>11</sup> Later on, women were allowed to leave their country to remote and totally different, and by some standards primitive places, and without any member of their families.

Yet in spite of all these differences they had with the locals, missionary women tried to respect people's traditional life, though in their writings they showed a strong criticism, especially on women's condition. They usually held Islam responsible for the inferior situation of women. In spite of the respect they had for the locals' lives it seems that some of them could never reach a point where they could accept the personality of Arab women in a cultural context. She remained a mystery even after more than half a century had passed on the work of the Arabian Mission in Arabia. On her first visit to Kuwait, Alice Van Kempen writes on Arab women as follows:

“One thing that has continually struck me is the Arab women. The first thing is their appearance. They look like black mounds gliding along when they are walking down the street. They are completely covered with a black, cloak-like garment that has a thinner veil for covering the face. Unless you know a woman very well by distinguishing factors other than face and form, they all look alike”.<sup>12</sup>

This feeling of unfamiliarity was reciprocal, being unveiled did not make the missionary women more open and more acceptable in the eyes of Kuwaiti women, as the same writer stated:

“In writing about the women, I cannot omit what seems to be one of their outstanding characteristics, that is, their curiosity. When we Europeans walk, shop or visit, it is the habit of the women to stare. As they cannot get a good look with their veils down, they usually raise them unless men are present. When we are in church, they lift their veils to look in as they walk by; when we are riding in a car, they peer at us from under their veils”<sup>13</sup>

Even at the beginning of the socio-economic change in Kuwait, and in spite of the optimistic prospect it carried for women, Madeline A. Holmes wrote in 1954 about the fate of three Kuwaiti women. They are from different social backgrounds yet they share the same fate which is interpreted by the missionaries to be the direct outcome of Islam, except that poverty makes life more difficult in the case of the Bedouin woman. The main subjects regarding the position of women are often recurrent in the writings of most missionaries due to the fact that they always had the model of the Christian, mainly western, society in mind, and the comparison with this society was never absent from their writings, specially as concerns women. Their main criticism of women’s situation was mainly directed to the early age of marriage, polygamy, the preference for giving birth to boys, men’s domination, confinement to one’s house, seclusion, veil, women’s low expectations, ignorance and the blind acceptance of their fate.

She asks the American woman if she can put herself in the place of any one of them. She starts with Fatima’s life and the future which awaits her 10-year old daughter:

“First, your name is Fatima. You are a beautiful, dark-haired woman, with a placid face. Married at thirteen or fourteen, you have satisfied your husband with a child every year or so, most of them boys. You are quite happy knowing that your husband is pleased with you. In fact, you have told the lady doctor that you feel sorry for her because she does not have a good husband to

take care of her, too. Your husband is very good to you, bringing home the food and picking out beautiful cloth for your new dresses. In fact, he takes such good care of you that the only time you have been outside the walls of your home since your marriage was the time that your life hung in the balance. The doctor convinced your husband that you had to be taken to the hospital for treatment. Since you were about twelve years old, no man except members of your own family and servants has seen your face. You know the modern Kuwait only by hearsay; you have seen none of its progress. You haven't even seen your husband's shop! No, your little ten-year-old daughter no longer goes to school. You have said that the Koran is really all she needs to know, and she is getting too old to be out on the streets. You are taking good care of her, too, and will try to arrange a good marriage for her in a couple of years. Will she dare to remove her veil and go out while you are here."<sup>14</sup>

Then she explains how miserable the life of a rich and unusual woman can be. Even while she enjoys many facilities not available for other women. The following case reflects some early aspects of socio-economic change that took place in Kuwait in the early 1950's. This was seen mainly in the life of affluent people. It also reflects the effect of this change on women's life. Some women from rich families started to experience freedom, especially through removing their veil during travels abroad. They also developed new skills, and probably feminine finesse and elegance, and a tendency for acquiring western goods and clothes.

"Now your name is Laila. You are one of the unusual women who are interested in the world outside. Your husband is becoming richer every day: In fact he is so rich that he doesn't know how to spend all his money. For months, hundreds of workers have been building a house bigger and more beautiful than any other in Kuwait. When finished, there will be fountains and trees and flowers in the courtyards. Inside, the rugs, curtains, and furniture are the most expensive that can be bought. You have cupboards filled with sterling silver and fine china. Your wardrobes are overflowing with the Parsian clothes you brought back from your vacation last summer. Yes, you went without your veil while you were travelling. Your husband says that you may discard it now, but you do not dare to in Kuwait because of the gossip that it would cause. There is only one fly in the ointment, and it is steadily growing into a big green-eyed monster. Your

husband is now building another house which can mean only one thing – he is going to take another wife. Instead of only three, there will now be four to share his affection – not to mention the concubines.”<sup>15</sup>

Then comes the story of the Bedouin woman - Sadeeqa:

“You are little Sadeeqa, a desert beauty with shy clinging-vine ways. Yes, you are dirty – water is very scarce and the flies cling to the eyelids, nose, and mouth of your tiny baby. He isn’t doing very well, poor starved little mite, because you haven’t enough milk for him and you never heard of a formula before you came to the hospital. How pitiful to hear him crying most of the time from hunger. Now you are dreadfully sick, but Allah is merciful. Allah is great and if Allah wills, you will get better. The doctor has said that you can never have any more children. That is cause enough for your husband to divorce you, and then what?”<sup>16</sup>

Mary Cubberly Van Pelt, who spent over 20 years in Kuwait, from 1920-1940, wrote the following account of Kuwaiti girls.

“Arab women and girls in al-Kuwait are intelligent, endowed with charm and a grace of manner, and are taught the deportment of a lady. Girls are veiled early, lead somewhat sheltered lives, and learn the accomplishments customary to their environment. The custom of seclusion for women is strictly adhered to, and together with the wearing of the veil accounts in large measure for the lack in education”.<sup>17</sup>

She wrote that polygamy, concubinage, and slavery were all legal in Kuwait. She also wrote on several aspects of women’s lives, marriage, polygamy, dowry, concubinage, divorce.

“Poligamy, concubinage, and slavery are all legal, and practiced to the extent of individual whim and purse. The rule for poligamy limits wives to four at a time; however, a poor man can ill afford plurality of wives, nor yet frequent divorce.

“Marriages in Kuwait are invariably contracted by the parents or by paid agents. They are declared before the religious judge and a sum of money is paid to the parents of the bride-to-be; with this a trousseau including gold ornaments is supposed to be bought. These ornaments are thereafter her own, and can be taken with her if she is divorced. Marriages of first cousins are customary but not compulsory, as is often alleged, Contracting parties rarely have seen each other, and courtship begins with marriage. It is only the virgin who has no say whatsoever as to whom she shall marry and when she shall marry.

“Divorce is easily effected by the man for any or no reason, and there is no stigma attached to it. There is no public opportunity for employment of women, and remarriage is the usual practice. Great inequality in age and experience can and very often does exist between husband and wife. Although children belong to the father, many women are left with the responsibility of little children after being divorced, and often receive scant, if any, help from the father.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet, in spite of their negative views regarding Islam and the prevalence of religious fervor, missionaries provided vast information on women’s life and socio-economic life in the region, in general and on the harem’s life in particular.

### **Missionaries in the Harem**

It was the duty of every lady in the mission, in her position as a doctor, a wife of a doctor, or a nurse, to take any new female member of the mission to visit the important harems, and to be introduced to the women of the palace (when one existed as in Kuwait). She was also introduced to other families of different social classes. In their position as doctors or nurses, they had more chance to be introduced to the families and be acquainted with private and secret matters of the social life. Hence, their account of this aspect of people’s life in the Gulf is rich and revealing and casts light on this as yet undocumented part of women’s life at this time. Their description of the harem’s and women’s daily life inside the privacy of their homes is a unique source of information into women’s lives in that era. It was obvious for the missionaries that all the precautions and restrictions imposed on women, and all the practices aimed at keeping male-female segregation, were to insure that woman’s honour was kept intact in all possible ways. One might think that, in a male-dominant society, in a society governed by the strictest Islamic doctrines in the early twentieth century, women would have no opportunity to have any emotional or sexual relationship with a man. Dr. Calverly, who was familiar with Moslem societies states: “How a girl protected by the walls of a Muslim’s harem could find opportunity for flirting was a mystery to me”.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, how could a girl who lived in a society where girls were confined from the age of puberty to the harem, where she had to wait an arranged marriage to take place even without her consent, where any premarital relationship was inconceivable, maintain a relationship with a man? Apparently, there were ways where such relationships could take place. But when the girl was tempted to break the harem laws and society’s doctrines, her punishment



was beyond imagination. The case of Azeeza was one example of such punishment:

Azeeza, who was a girl of thirteen or fourteen in 1915, was discovered to have exchanged notes with a young man, through a third party. Her father who was a pearl broker and Dr. Mylrea's patient (he had tuberculosis) ordered his daughter, whom he was fond of, to be "walled up". In the heat of mid-summer, she was kept in the upper room of the house, where masons had filled in the door and windows, leaving only a small opening so that little food and water can be passed in. She was given 40 days to repent, after which some male relatives must kill her, or leave her die in her imprisonment. The girl entered her third month imprisonment, when her father died. Before his death, Dr. Mylrea tried to convince the father to release her, but in vain. He even asked the ruler Sheikh Mubarak to interfere, but the ruler's answer was:

"I never interfere in these domestic matters of honor. "The decision rests with the people of the house. It is their absolute right, from the very beginning of Arab history".<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the missionaries ask the British political agent to use his influence and ask the ruler to do something to release the girl. His task was successful and the men of the Shaikh were sent from the palace bringing the order for release.<sup>21</sup>

Moza is another girl, who had to pay her life as a punishment for her "revolt" against her society's rules concerning women's chastity: Moza was found to have been pregnant. And while her partner had received no punishment, she was killed for the disgrace she brought upon her family. It seemed that the arrangement for their meeting had been done by passing notes to one another. Dr. Calverly assumes that:

"Moza's brother must have suffered because of his sister's death, since it was he who had taught her to write. This was against custom in Kuwait, where it was generally agreed that it was very dangerous for girls to learn to write".<sup>22</sup>

In later years, this kind of punishment seemed to be less in action, in spite of the fact that the danger of implementing it was still present. Dr. Mary Bruins Allison, who served in Kuwait from 1934 to 1964, recounts an incidence of adopting a child of an unmarried girl from a "Sulubi" tribe, by an American family. This was not the only case:

"In spite of the seclusion and veiling of women, Satan did seem to appear and girls would come to the clinic asking to be relieved of an unwanted pregnancy. It was considered the duty of a brother or father to wipe out the sin by killing the girl. I knew that

happened, so I regretted having to refuse. But I promised if they came for delivery, we would keep it a secret and find a mother for the baby, and they could go home immediately".<sup>23</sup>

While Azeeza's father punished her in such a brutal way, in later years, with the establishment of a new society, another father (a government official) chose a different solution for his daughter's dilemma, a solution more suitable for the values of a society making its first steps towards modernization:

"Once the wife of one of the government officials whispered in my ear and asked me to come and help her daughter. I drove with her to the so-called "bad area" of silent streets where no children played around the doors. We entered a door into a small, neat courtyard and then into a bare, clean room furnished with only a low cot. Here her daughter, a very young girl, was unsuccessfully laboring to deliver a baby. Clearly, the girl was unmarried and taken to the area of secrets where no one talked. We brought the girl to the hospital and delivered the live baby with forceps. Over my protests, the mother called a taxi and took both of the patients home immediately. The next day the girl's father sent for me to treat his daughter at home, which I did. There was no baby in the house and nothing was said about the diagnosis. I suspect the mother decided the baby couldn't live and found some way for it to die. As long as there was no talk, there was no penalty. I felt this father knew and loved his daughter".<sup>24</sup>

Recounting life in the harems, was a task limited to female missionaries: doctors, wives of doctors and nurses, as male doctors were not allowed inside the harem, except in few exceptional cases. Not only male doctors had no access to the harem, but even when examining a female patient in the clinic, doctors had to ask for their wives assistance as women refused to show parts of their bodies to the male physician.<sup>25</sup> Although they sometimes, were subject to mockery in the streets, at the harems they were received with hospitality and respect, and were subject to many questions regarding their life in the West, their hair style, jewelry, clothes, dowry, marriage and other social and religious matters.

Harem women were not unaware of what was going on in the public life as many incidents were reported to the harem by the servants or poorer women, who slightly contacted the outside world, and the same time were received in the harem.<sup>26</sup> Often a slave girl was sent to invite the missionary ladies to the harem or the missionary ladies sent a messenger to the harem to inquire if a visit was acceptable. Then they were cordially received. They



were sometimes seated in the men's sitting room (when men were absent), which was the most important place in the house. Missionaries (especially women) wrote about women from different classes in Kuwait. They maintained strong relations with some of them to the extent that they were even considered friends.<sup>27</sup> Their writing on the harem life in pre-oil Kuwait, is one of the most outstanding written information on Kuwaiti women's life at this era. Missionary ladies knew many wealthy and aristocratic families in mostly the affluent western district. Among them is the following, one whose life is an example of life styles in most affluent pre-oil Kuwaiti harems.

"We were getting to know by this time a good many of our neighbors in the western end of the town. Among them were a number of wealthy and aristocratic Arab families. Favored wives, in the harems of these families, were like hothouse flowers, shielded not only from the gaze of men, but also against fatigue that might mar their beauty. Slaves did the menial work and carried the babies around. The hours passed pleasantly in these households, with numerous callers and innocent gossip to prevent life from becoming tiresome. Now interest was often connected with the visits of an old woman who peddled expensive skills and of another woman who could be hired to embroider intricate designs in gold thread on the women's garments. All the choice delicacies that the sook afforded, or that the ladies themselves had the skill to prepare, were offered to guests in these harems. Talk during such visits centered around matters vital to women: births and deaths, divorces, marriage, and betrothals.

"A few of the older women were absorbed in religion, their lips moving inaudibly in recitation of verses from the sacred Koran, disregarding the conversation around them. One such lady whom I remember in particular was the mother of one of the town's most prosperous men. She was addressed by the honored title of hijjiya, having gained this distinction by making the long and difficult pilgrimage, by hajj over the desert on camel back to Mecca. In those days, few women in Kuwait had ever ventured on that journey. It was said that this highly respected Muslim lady gave generously of alms to the poor".<sup>28</sup>

Other women in the harems were also observant of their religious obligations.

"In the harems, women chose a prayer rug that had been carefully guarded from pollution of any kind and correctly placed

to point toward the sacred city, Mecca; then oblivious to the world around them, they remembered their Maker and their duty toward Him."<sup>29</sup>

A description of the harem of the Sheikh of Kuwait around year 1917 shows some characteristics of the ruling family's harem. Their hostess was the first lady of Kuwait.

"She motioned us to the chairs which were obviously arranged for European visitors, while she sat on a rug on the floor. There were large hard pillows against the wall and a small and softer pillow was near her so that she could lean her elbow against it when she got tired.

She was small and stout with fair skin and her pretty Arab clothes falling gracefully about her made her a real picture. Her close fitting dress was of a delicate shade of pink silk and over that was a full robe, golden brown in color and also of silk. Around her head was the black veil of milfa which came down under her chin and was spread out over her chest making the pink and brown underneath even more artistic.

"After we were seated, we again asked about her health and the usual salutations passed between us... Her hands looked all the whiter because of her rings. On both of her middle fingers were three narrow chased gold bands, on the third fingers were turquoise rings and on her little fingers were rubies and pearls. She threw off her cloak, letting it fall behind her, and then we had a chance to see her bracelets. There were five on each arm, each bracelet being from a quarter of an inch to an inch in width. One pair consisted of plain gold bands, the next of pretty fret work and then another of filigree work and pearls. The last pair nearest her hands were of large amber beads. But she was really very plainly dressed to-day for we had seen on previous visits her many necklaces, loops upon loops of chains coming down to her waist.

"It was a warm day and we had walked a long way and were very grateful when she called one of her maids-in-waiting to turn on the electric fan. Bye and bye various women came in from the harem and sat down quietly on the floor around the sides of the room and the conversation became more general. It was an upper room with one window opening towards the sea and another looking down on to the courtyard below. The room was an exceedingly plain setting for such a pretty picture, but the little lady graced the room rather than the room the little lady. There

was a cheap European carpet on the floor and a black iron bedstead at one end of the room. The bedding was rolled up at the foot of the bed and underneath were odds and ends of china, a little tin trunk and a basket full of sewing.

“On the varandah and round the door sat the women of the harem, both slave and free, all interested in the foreign callers. One of the women sitting by her asked if we did not smoke and our hostess answered for us. Then she called her special maid, Fatum the endearing form of Fatima. Presently, she came and smiling faintly to us learned down to take her mistress' order. She disappeared into an outer room but soon reappeared with a tray loaded with glasses of sherbet and we could hear the ice tinkling as she walked. Behind her came another maid with a folded bath towel thrown over her right shoulder and as we finished the sherbet, she offered us this towel to wipe our lips with.

We were asked a good many questions about our country and there were gasps when we said it took two months by sea to get there.

“Another maid now came in and placed a low table or stool in front of us and yet another brought in a large tray perhaps three feet in diameter, and set it down on the stool. We were each given a bath towel to spread on our laps and then we were invited to begin. In the center was a plate of apples and all the other good things were grouped around it. There were plates of watermelon cut up in little squares, places of different kinds of nuts and plates of Arab sweets. We were urged to try each kind and when we had finished, without making much impression on the bountiful provision, we were told that we had eaten nothing. We were given knives and forks and spoons and so, in their opinion, there was no reason why we could not do justice to such a repast. One woman, however, who was sitting in a corner remarked that, of course, we couldn't satisfy our hunger if we ate with knives and forks. Our hostess laughed a merry laugh and said, “They know how - we are Bedous and eat with our hands; we could never satisfy ourselves if we ate with spoons”. Cups of hot milk with a suspicion of tea in them and a great deal of rose water were now brought in.

We had asked if we might sit on the floor around the large tray and when all was and we were asked if the tea were tasteless or insipid. Alas! Would that it were. In addition to the rose water, each cup was half full of sugar taken away, we all had pins and needles in our feet and were glad to go back to chairs.

The sun was getting low in the west and we felt that we had imposed ourselves on our kind hostess long enough, but we could not make a move to go until the coffee was served. Eventually, we heard the clatter of the little coffee cups piled up one inside the other and there then appeared a slave woman who carried a pretty brass coffee-pot in her left hand and the cups in her right. She poured out a few thimblefuls of coffee for each of us. It was strong coffee and we had to drink three cups".<sup>30</sup>

The presence of the electric fan and many slaves and maids, the way the first lady was dressed, especially the abundance of her jewelry, all indicated the relative wealth of the Sheikh. Yet the meagerness of the furniture and the lack of luxury articles is a sign of lack of sophistication in the life of the ruling family, especially if compared with life in other royal courts. It also reflects the general economic life in Kuwait before oil.

Years later Dr. Mary Bruins Allison visits a family with Mrs. Mylrea<sup>31</sup> She described life in the harem without specifying the economic position of that harem. Yet it seemed to be rather middle-class (according to the standards of time).

"We walked the empty beaten tracks between windowless clay walls whose heights were equal so no house would overlook the private territory of another. Access to the house was by a large wooden gate with a small door to admit one person at a time. Children playing on the doorstep were expecting us and rushed inside to announce our coming. Inside the gate was a bent passage with a partition concealing the open-air courtyard called the harem, meaning "forbidden". Here the women need not veil, but kept their heads covered with a scarf, ready to cover their faces if one of the men of the household suddenly appeared.

"The center of the large, bare court usually had the opening of a cistern to store rainwater. Around it were verandahs with many doors and iron-barred windows with wooden shutters. These opened into rooms which provided separate domains for each household in an extended family system sometimes consisting of forty or more members. These would be the elderly head of the house, several brothers with one or more wives, unmarried grown sons and daughters, children, widowed and divorced sisters, orphans, and servants.

"Our hostess welcomed us at the door of her room with poise and dignity. If an Arab woman accompanied us, the exchange of ritual greetings was as involved as a litany. The phrases were

formal yet poetic and gave a grace to meetings that must ease the strains of the confined harem life and its rigid traditional code. The women of good class seldom went out of their houses except for formal calls or deaths. In fact, there were no places for them to go. Women did not go to the mosque. All shopping was done by the men, and clubs and schools for women did not exist. Even sickness did not permit exit at any time, because a recent widow was supposed to mourn in her room for four months.

"We removed our shoes, leaving them outside the door to inform any man of the house that women visitors were present so he would not enter.

"Our hostess' personal room served as her living room, bedroom, and a storage space for her and her children. The furniture consisted of a high, wide four-poster bed with curtains. There was ample space below it for children's bedding rolls, tin trunks, and sometimes dishes. Most of the women still owned one of the ancient heavy wood chests decorated with brass medallions and lines of brass studs standing on its four painted spool-like legs. Here were kept locked the family treasures of jewelry, festal garments, and heirlooms. The room seemed dark, as the window shutters had no glass. The floor was covered with cane or coir mats and crude Persian carpets. There were some shelves in the walls filled with colored tinsel vases but no pictures because custom proclaimed that any likeness of human features would invite idolatry.

"We sat down on the long, stuffed pallet along the wall, leaning against the cushions behind. The Arab women neatly folded their legs, but mine had not been so trained and my skimpy Western clothing did not cover me as their flowing clothes did. Our hostess courteously understood and bade me stretch out, but to point the soles of one's feet at others was insulting, so I kept shifting my position and never was comfortable.

"The Arab ladies wore wide pants with gold embroidery called serwall, which fitted their ankles tightly. Above they wore a dress of some gay color under a gorgeous black mantle that could be draped over the head. A scarf always covered the head and neck. Women loved to display their jewelry, usually a nose ring, necklaces, rings, bracelets, and anklets. All of this should be gold if possible, but silver was acceptable, especially if set with turquoise, which was believed to confer fertility."<sup>32</sup>

“Our hostess concerned herself with heating the teapot in the brass charcoal brazier. She drew a large round tray with dishes from under her bed. She had thought-fully prepared everything, a cake baked over a kerosene stove, as they had no ovens, heavy cookies, pistachios, pumpkin seeds, dates, and oranges. The cup of tea would consist of hot goat’s milk, very strong tea, and plenty of sugar. It was surprisingly good except for the swarm of flies that accompanied the good. One often landed in the tea. It was hospitable to fill the cups to overflowing so a saucer served the spill. Our hostess did not eat or drink herself – she kept busy making the event pleasant for us. Finally, she served us a couple of teaspoonfuls of hot, bitter, strong coffee flavored with cardamom seeds from a graceful brass coffee pot. The tiny cups were always held in the right hand, as the left was considered unclean. Custom decreed that we take the cup three times and then shake it to signify that we were satisfied. As a final gesture, one of the women would sprinkle our heads with rose water from brass shakers, then pass around an incense pot containing flowing charcoal and frankincense from Oman. Our hostess showed us how to hold the incense pot under our clothes to carry the fragrance home.”<sup>33</sup>

“Our hostess showed us the other parts of the house. there was a rather smelly enclosure for chickens and a couple of goats. I asked to see the kitchen, a small room with a vent high up for smoke and light. Walls and cooking pots were black with years of soot, as the fuel was branches of palm trees and desert thorn bush, both cruel to hands and fingers. The small hearth had cement supports for cooking vessels. Some houses had pressure kerosene stoves. I learned later when treating patients that these stoves could explode and cause tragic burns. What a lot of patient suffering these women had to bear!”<sup>34</sup>

Mary Cubberly Van Pelt wrote on some of the characteristics of the life in the harem:

“Women know little marital security, but a surprisingly large number of marriages endure. In a harem, espial is the preoccupation of every woman, and she know that she and her children are subjected in turn to the surveillance of each and every member of her household and community. She must, indeed, develop a Daedalian mind if she would contrive to maintain any privacy, and outwit must malice pretense. She must teach her

children, long before they can talk, to protect her and their own family affairs; other persons must not know the facts, simply because they have no right to them. Consequently, considerable attention is paid to the effort of finding a courteous but completely misleading reply to many queries of a personal nature."<sup>35</sup>

### Life outside the Harem

Women had different limits of freedom according to their social classes. In regard to their visibility in public domain, poor women and slaves were seen more often. Bedouin women, were enjoying more freedom of movement both in town and in their camps in the desert. The most confined class was that of rich and aristocratic families. Nevertheless, not being visible in public does not mean that they were less free to enjoy themselves, within the limits available to them in the harem, given the fact that materialistic facilities were always more abundant to them than they were to women of poorer classes. Also, the distance between rich women and their men, was wider than that of poor women and their men.

One of the outlets available to women in Kuwait was picnicking (of course in its Kuwaiti way) when weather permitted, usually in spring. Springtime was a season to look forward to by both missionaries and Kuwaiti women. As in other fields of life, spring picnics varied according to the picnic goers financial situation. These picnics also allowed the missionaries to witness some customs and traditions.

"A number of Arab families looked forward to springtime as much as we did. Those who could afford it often set up camps in the desert. There, with only near-relatives present, Muslim women reveled in the freedom of going about unveiled. Sometimes we of the Mission were invited to spend a day with such a family. Camels, with their camel-boys, were sent for our conveyance. When we alighted at the main tent of the encampment our host took us inside and invited us to sit on Persian rugs and lean against camel saddles, covered with bright woolen trappings. The ladies of a family were never in evidence at such a time. But when the noonday feast was over, the women of our party always asked to visit the harem and were conducted to the tent of the host's first lady."<sup>36</sup>

Besides visiting Kuwaiti families in their desert camps, springtime offered the missionaries the chance to visit Bedouin families, ride camels, collect desert flowers for their vases, and above all, it offered them the unique chance of hunting truffles.<sup>37</sup>

Dr. Calverly describes women's picnics or Keshtas, taking place in the proximity of the missionary residence. In these picnics, women used to move around freely, to sing, and to dance.

"Besides family outing, there were women's picnics, or keshtas, of Arab ladies and girls from the town. Sometimes the women of our group were invited to join them at a place near enough to our homes to be reached on foot. Rice and meat had been brought and were still warm in the cooking pots. After the meal, the young girls entertained us by dancing to the accompaniment of the women's singing and clapping of hands in which we joined. Two lines of dancers faced each other at some distance, with uncovered heads and unbraided hair. When the singing had started, the lines approached each other with slow and rhythmic steps, the dancers bending their bodies deeply at intervals and throwing their long stresses with abandon, first to one side and then the other. Apparently as a concession to modesty, each girl held the edge of one flowing sleeve over her mouth and nose. The dancing appeared to be a serious business. Although I am sure the participants enjoyed it, never did I see any of them smile."<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, due to the proximity of the picnic place to the town, women and young girls used to go there in groups unescorted by male relatives, for the afternoon, usually immediately after lunch, or they might take their lunch and eat it on the picnic site. These were short picnics in comparison with family campings, which were set in relatively remote places in the desert. Calverly, also describes another type of picnic, which she calls indoor Keshta.

"In addition to desert picnics, there were also indoor keshtas, arranged by Muslim women teachers and held in the courtyards of the houses where they taught their pupils to recite the sacred Koran. Young girls danced at these keshtas also, just as we had seen them dancing in the desert. Spectators were women relatives and friends of the girls. We were sometimes invited to such an occasion. The dancers were nearly of an age to be married. I would wonder whether there might not be in such a company relatives of marriageable young men, looking for suitable brides. What better opportunity could there be for discovering girls of charm and grace."<sup>39</sup>

"Lunch over, a small basket was packed. A few pieces of charcoal were put in first and then a bit of camel thorn and on top, the cups and saucers, a little bundle of tea and a bundle of sugar.

The young girl put the basket on her head and carried a kettle filled with water in each hand. The daughter-in-law carried the little son and led the little girl by the hand and the mother followed a little behind us all. The hill was very popular that day and as soon as the different groups spied our white toppees, they rushed upon us. This did not suit our hostess and yet we could not get the women and children to go back to their own picnics. We were almost carried off bodily by our friends but our hostess said to them, "If you want them you must invite them and take them from their house as we did". Finally, they left us and we were able to start our fire and make our tea. After that we played games and tobogganed down the sandy hill".<sup>40</sup>

In the following description of two different kinds of picnics in Kuwait, we can notice two different types of outlets reflecting two separate realities:

"There are two small hills, about 35 ft. above sea level, just outside the town of Kuwait to the west. The first one is called the Hill of Joy and the second the Hill of Light. The mission doctor's residence now stands on the Hill of Joy, and many of our callers consider it still quite a picnic to come to the Hill of Joy, but of course the Hill of light is the place for picnics.

We used to see little black groups on the Hill of Light, sitting in the full glare of the relentless sun, enjoying themselves as much as if they were in a lovely woody spot. They know no better. The joy to the women and young girls is to get outside of their walled-in courtyards, throw aside that everlasting fear of men seeing their faces and to feel the freedom and vastness of the desert and the sea".<sup>41</sup>

After having lunch at the house of "some very nice neighbors", Mrs. Mylrea and Miss Schafheitlin accompanied their neighbours to a picnic. Little girls were also taken to picnic by their teachers for a day as Moslem schools had from a week to 10 days holiday during spring.

Going to picnic with the harem of the Sheikh was more elaborate, more prestigious, and more confined, yet had its own enjoyment and fun.

"Our last picnic was only a few weeks ago. The Sheikh's wife invited us to go with her to what is called Sheikh Jabir's Castle, a house in the Eastern end beyond the town and near the sea, where the Sheikh or the harem go for a few days to get away from city life.

The Sheikh's wife came for us in the carriage about 9 a.m. As it was strictly Ladies' Day, we were entertained in the big airy

room belonging to the men. There were a number of women and children there and everyone seemed ready for a good time. The children all had birds to play with. I wish I could have counted the number of pretty little birds that were tortured that day. As at home, the season comes around for marbles, hoops, jumping rope, etc., so the time comes here when every child must have a bird. These birds can be bought in the bazaar, and the older boys catch them with clever little traps. The children cut or twist one wing and tie a string around one leg. Every few minutes the little bird thinks he is free and is pulled back with an awful jerk.

"The middle of the morning we were given Arab bread and sweets and then were told that there was to be dancing in our honour. When we went back to the big room, there sat a slave with a big mandolin and soon girls took turns dancing. It was amusing for a while but soon became monotonous. There is none of the gracefulness which we are used to in our Western dancing.

"The lunch was prepared in town and sent out on donkeys, so was very late in coming, but was very good when it came. About 4 p.m. I asked if the carriage were ready. They said it was ready, but they would be delighted to have us stay on to supper. We made our excuses and said good-bye. Our Christian home looked so inviting when we got back – we were once more thankful that we were not Moslem women."<sup>42</sup>

Also the use of carriage by the Sheikh's family indicates that they were enjoying more financial facilities than other families. It was also usual to assign a day in the week for women to use the seaside or picnic house. Yet it is remarkable that even the life of the first lady of Kuwait did not attract missionary women as they found it according to their western standards, empty and boring.

Weddings provided another outlet for women to come out of their harem.

"Everyone in a neighborhood knew when wedding festivities were in progress. In the case of wealthy families, the singing and beating of tom-toms by slave women, together with the dancing of women of questionable reputation, went on for days. Spectators crowding in the courtyard joined in clapping hands to set the rhythm for the dancing. Any woman can go to watch the dancing and share in the excitement of such a celebration."<sup>43</sup>

Usually the bridegroom stays for a week in his bride's family house. For this occasion a room was decorated in a special way to accommodate

the bride and her husband. Women used to call on the bride for several days after her wedding.<sup>44</sup>

Dr. Calverly describes a visit to a newlywed girl, called Nejma, a few days after her wedding in her family's house:

"I had gone back for a polite call a few days later, at aaser, and found Najma leaning against the satin floor cushions in her bridal chamber. Her long, dark hair hung unbraided, about her shoulders. Her head was not covered either by a milfa or the draping of her thobe. Laden with the gold ornaments of her wedding dowry, she sat to receive the admiration and good wishes of a stream of women callers. When I spoke to wish her happiness, her eyes remained modestly downcast and she did not smile. Naturally, I reflected, a bride must feel sad at the thought of leaving the only home she has ever known".<sup>45</sup>

The month of Ramadhan was a month where social life could reach its peak. Women could leave their harem and socialize with each other, during night after breaking their fast. Ramadhan nights were active and hustling:

"It seemed to me that our neighbours looked upon the month of Ramadhan as the high point of the year's social life. In spite of the fast, more money was spent for food during those days than at any other time. Delicacies that they felt they could seldom or never afford in other months were prepared for the nights of feasting. The souk was brightly lighted and the coffee shops were full of men far into the morning hours. Besides the two meals, at the beginning and end of the night, there were – for the women, at least – evening parties arranged for the mid-days of the month. On these occasions, ladies who were not usually permitted to leave their homes visited their relatives. We felt honored to be invited to some of those gatherings and to sit, with Muslim friends, under a full moon, our chairs forming a circle at the center of a courtyard. Our hostesses appeared gay and carefree, in spite of having fasted all day."<sup>46</sup>

The joyful atmosphere of Ramadhan nights continued through the feast (days and nights):

"At the end of Ramadhan came the great feast, marking the end of fasting. For three days, the town celebrated this occasion. Almost everyone appeared in new clothes, on which the women had been working during the days of fasting. Children in bright new garments went to kiss the hands of their elders and receive gifts of money. In the sook vendors of gay toys and pink spun

sugar sweets were besieged by small customers. In the large market place at the edge of town, a crude carousel was set up for the children".<sup>47</sup>

Some women had a chance to witness and certainly, enjoy these festivities:

"As a part of the celebration of feast days at the end of Ramadhan in Kuwait, war dances called ardhās were held, out on the sand at the edge of the town. We liked to drive out and park our car where we could witness these displays. Someone would have stuck a banner into the sand to indicate where the dance was to take place; then, drawn by the sound of drums and tambourines, played by Negroes, a large number of spectators would collect. Standing a little apart, there was always a throng of silent, black-covered women carrying infants and accompanied by little girls. The bright colors of the small girls' dresses contrasted sharply with the new black bukhnaks framing their happy faces. We could see the brilliant thobes of some of the women peeping out below the lower edges of their black abas. How the women were enjoying the unusual freedom of the feast days!"<sup>48</sup>

Although in all cases Islam was blamed for the inferior position of Moslem women, Moslem women themselves were very loyal to their Islamic beliefs and teachings. In all the years that she spent in Arabia Dr. Calvery stated that she had never seen an atheist nor an agonistic among the women of Arabia.<sup>49</sup>

Kuwaiti women and missionary women used to exchange visits and invite each other to lunch or dinner. Yet, when both missionary men and women were invited to a meal in a Kuwaiti house, the wives and daughters of the hosts were never present at these meals. After the meal, missionary ladies used to ask permission to visit the harem. Kuwaiti women were never persuaded to eat with the men.<sup>50</sup>

As mentioned before, Bedouin women enjoyed more freedom in public life. Yet that does not mean that their overall position was better than urban women. In many cases she endured more hardship than her husband even in the fields which were supposed to be among his responsibilities. In his article "As seen by a Novice", which tells of his observations in Kuwait, Rev. Garrett E. De Joint wrote as follows:

We have been most sadly impressed with the position of womanhood in Arabia. Only when veiled and completely covered in a long black abba, dare she enter the street. High class women live their entire lives inside their masters' doors, with no chance of

going out except at early dawn. A usual picture among the Bedouin is of a man erectly strutting on ahead carrying only himself and his rifle. Behind is his wife, driving the donkeys or goats, carrying the burdens and generally directing affairs. When in the city she does all the buying, bargaining and selling. Whether city or Bedouin woman she is virtually enslaved. However, they tell us that many of the women are most charming and lovable in spite of it."<sup>51</sup>

In general the scene of Bedouin women in the Bedouin market place was an indication that she was active and productive and that besides her other tasks as a wife and mother, she had an important economic role, both at home and outside. Sour milk was prepared at home and sold in the market, spinning which was practiced by Bedouin women at home, was also carried out in the market in their spare time.

"Along one side of the market we notice a long row of Bedouin women. Each is seated beside a small skin or jar of sour milk, which she sells either in bulk or at so much per drink. Her spare time she spends in spinning yarn on a coarse spool" ("as seen by a Novice").<sup>52</sup>

Missionary women were in many ways different from the average American woman. They chose to evangelise the non-Christians out of their mere conviction in Christianity and their role in spreading it. For them to see Moslem women accept Islam and have a deep faith in it, in spite of what they regarded as shortcomings of Islam in allowing women an appropriate situation, was a mystery.

Dr. Calverly, recounting the Moslem practices and rituals, states that she

"had never seen an atheist nor an agnostic among the women of Arabia. Great and small, good and bad, they all believe with unswerving faith in Allah, the "creator of the universe, and in Mohammed His messenger." Their belief is also in a way, an affectionate one..."

"..... Not only have they faith in Allah, but they believe also in jinns, in demon possession, in enchantments, and all kinds of charms and magic. It seems never to occur to them to doubt the truth of the supernatural. Everything that falls to the lot of man is "from Allah". Every thing which may or may not happen depends "upon Allah". Man cannot in any way escape what is written on his forehead, his fate. There is a certain amount of comfort in fatalism, for it leaves no room for regret or remorse".<sup>53</sup>

## Moslem Women in Pre-oil Society

The fact that missionary women were aware of the active role of women is obvious through their insistence that “until the Gospel gets into the harems no movement towards Christianity can be expected”. Hence, while she did not have a significant role in public life, she might possess a powerful influence in the privacy of the harem. At the end of her article on “The need for women workers among the women of Arabia”, and after recounting what she thought to be the vices of Islam and the shortcomings of Moslem women, Marrison Wells Thomas states as follows:

“I repeat that although the woman is not recognized as a factor in Mohammedan society, her influence is not the less strong for being indirect. That the work among the people as a whole be most effective requires that work for women go on apace with that for men”.<sup>54</sup>

Even in the harems they had an active roles as wives, as sisters and especially as mothers. Religious women enjoyed much respect in both Sunni and Shii families, and in case of rich women they helped needy people.

In spite of the fact that many cases mentioned of Kuwaiti women are mainly those which illustrate the cruelty and wretchedness of their life, especially as being subjected to divorce, polygamy and different other maltreatment by society, yet sometimes these same cases were active and tried their best to overcome the difficulties of their life. Saeeda, an ex-slave, was making a living through her work in the hospital in spite of her miserable life with her mean and cruel husband. Her other co-wives were also working, to help their husband who had forced them to do so. Perhaps Saeeda is an example of not only an active woman but even a rebel by converting to Christianity, if her conversion was real.<sup>55</sup> The other rebels were Moza and Aziza who proved that they had their own ways of escaping the restrictions of the life in the harem. Badura, Dhahaya, Umm Mohammad<sup>56</sup> and many other women who were regular visitors and friends of women missionaries were only a few examples which show that women were not confined to the harems and they had access to the outside world and left their homes not out of need to work or to be treated but simply to socialize, even with non-Moslem women.<sup>57</sup>

Many poor Kuwaiti women worked to support their families. They worked as servants in the rich houses, or in the missionary hospital. There were women vendors who used to sell their goods in the harems. They as such, had more access to the public life and used to bring news from outside to the women inside the harems. These women were active not



only inside their houses as they were apparently supporting their families by their work, but they were also aware of what was taking place in the outside world. Poor women were hard working members in that society, where resources were very limited.

In her article "The Ubiquitous Gasoline Tin", Mrs. Garret de Joing wonders how women could hold their gasoline tins filled with sweet water and place it upon their heads so carefully and walk off to their huts so slowly that not a drop is lost. Women had to wait in the tough climate of Kuwait in summer and winter for the ship which carried sweet water to arrive from Shatt-el-Arab.<sup>58</sup> The scarcity of water in Kuwait was a burden which Kuwaitis, especially women whose task was to help their family to cope with, had to face in pre-oil Kuwait. Water was so scarce that in the winter when people got a few rains there were the puddles of water standing in the shallow depressions of the desert to which the poor went to fill their tins and bring them back home, thus increasing the family's supply of drinking water. Women had to cope with diseases which afflicted their children, Children were victims of diarrhea, dehydration, malnutrition, worms and ulcers. They had to face consecutive deaths of their children as a result of some these common diseases. Due to lack of modern medication women resorted to local treatments which were not always favourable, such as opium which was used for children as a home remedy for diarrhea and to quiet crying. Women themselves were treated by local midwives and suffered from their malpractices. Still births were also common, as a result of these malpractices, or consecutive births or the mother's young age.<sup>59</sup>

After her long stay in Arabia, Dr. Mary makes the following judgement on arab women:

"I came to admire the Arab women. They were heroic and took what most American women wouldn't stand for. They felt this suffering was the will of God. It was sin to complain or ask relief."<sup>60</sup>

In spite of the fact that missionary women were, in most cases, trying to project the inferior position of the Kuwaiti Moslem woman, they were aware that this inferiority did not mean that she was passive in her everyday life. In fact, one could argue that if it was not for their continual attempt to illustrate Islam as a religion, which gives no credit to women, they could have looked more deeply into women's active aspects of life.

It should be noted here that although missionary women were hoping to see Kuwaiti women in a better position and gaining access to education (Dr Calverly had an English language class in her house to teach girls) and

freedom, albeit in its western standard, when change took place not all of them were happy about its outcomes. The complaints about the change in people's moralistic views and their tendency to accumulate money and the change in the ecological aspects of life were not uncommon in their writings. Yet they were, in general, happy to witness the beginning of change in the Kuwaiti women's life.

## NOTES

1. For more details on the history of the Arabian Mission see H.J. Bergman. "The Reformed Church in America's Mission in Iraq, 1890 to 1950 (with Special Emphasis on the Work of John Van Ess)." MA Thesis, University of Puget Sound 1963. See also A.D. Mason and F.J. Barney (1926), *History of the Arabian Mission*, the Board of Foreign Missions Reformed Church in America, New York, A. Clarke (1993), *The American Mission Hospital, Bahrain*, The American Mission Hospital Society, Bahrain, and A. Al-Timimi (1988). (In Arabic). *Evangelization in the Region of the Arabian Gulf. A Study in Social and Political History*, al-Kameel establishment, Kuwait, H.C. Zeigler (1977). "A Brief Flowering in the Desert; Protestant Missionary Activity in the Arabian Gulf, 1889-1973. MA diss. Princeton University, 1977 and L.R. Scudder III (1998). *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Michigan.
2. For more details on the history of the mission in Kuwait see A. Bennet (1915) "The Opening of Kuwait." (N.A. 92), and S. Mylrea's unpublished memoirs on Kuwait before oil, written between 1945-1951. Also see S. Mylrea (1950) "Old Times Evening in Kuwait" (A.C 220), and S. Mylrea (1946) "Musings of a Senior" (N.A 210).
3. See L. Scudder, p. 204.
4. Mason and Barney, p. 212.
5. E.E. Calverly (1925) "Occasions of Stumbling" N.A 135, p. 12 and D.F. Van Ess, (1956) A.C. 243, p. 15
6. A.M. Harrison (1946) "Women of the Interior", N.A. 208, p. 8, 9.
7. E. Calverly Dr (1919) "Beauty for Ashes" N.A 110 p. 3"
8. E. Calverly (Dr) "One of the Least of These-His Sisters" (1916) N.A. 96, p. 8.
9. E. Calverly (Rev) (1928) "Kuwait and the Tercentenary" N.A. 145, p. 14.
10. Arab men's behavior towards women was also a source of confusion for the missionaries, until they fully understood society's norms and traditions. Dr. Calverly recounts the following incidence of her early years in Kuwait:  
 "Edwin liked to invite his men friends to our living room in this new house and have me serve them tea. It was a revolutionary idea, for Kuwait, that a wife should join her husband in hospitality to male guests. It took a good while for any of the men to understand and adjust to this custom of ours, just as we were slowly adjusting to their customs. I remember meeting on the street one of Edwin's friends who had recently had tea in our home. Naturally, I smiled and bowed. The man was covered with confusion and blushed. My own face must have flamed, for I felt my cheeks burning. After that, when I saw that I was about to pass an Arab man whom we had entertained, I made it a point to look the other way. Edwin had explained to me that for a Muslim man to show recognition of a

woman on the street was to do her dishonor. I did my best to remain unselfconscious in the living room as Edwin and I entertained male guests; and a few of Edwin's friends learned to be less embarrassed with me". E. Calverly (Dr) (1958), *My Arabian Days and Nights*. Thomas Y. Crowell Company. New York P. 48.

11. See L. Scudder, pp 202-205.  
In an interview held in October 1995 with the author Rev. Scudder's parents served in Kuwait from 1939 till their lives' ends (his father died in 1975 and his mother in 1991). He himself was born in 1941 in Kuwait and spent a part of his life in it. He stated that: "Missionary women respected Arab women's lives and tried to understand them. They were certainly aware of the force of local traditions and religious beliefs. They understood Arab women, but this understanding was always accompanied by some pity".
12. A. Van Kempen (1951) "A newcomer Looks Around", N.A. 224, pp. 3-6. Cornelia Dalenberg known in her stations in Arabia by the name Sharifa asked a woman from Hufuf once why the women let their garments drag in the dust. The woman answered that the men around Hufuf are excellent trackers: they read signs in the dust of the streets or the rocks of the desert almost like a North American reads posters in a train station. It is nothing for a good tracker to trace the route of a stray camel over miles of barrel desert. Likewise, a man skilled in such things would be able to get her all kinds of information from "reading the footprints" of a woman going about the city. There even seems to be a little fear that a criminal would be able to pick out the trail of a woman from the market place to her home. For that reason, the long clothing functions as a device for wiping out the trail of a woman. Miss Dalenberg concludes with her belief that there was some truth to what the woman told her. See C. Dalenberg and De Groot (1983) *Sharifa*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Michigan. p. 196.
13. A. Van Kempen, p. 5.
14. M. Holmes (1945) "You are a Woman in Kuwait" A.C. 237. P. 6
15. M. Holmes (1945) p. 6
16. M. Holmes (1945) p. 6
17. M. Cubberly Van Pelt, "The Sheikhdome of Kuwait", *The Middle East Journal* Vol. 4, Jan. 1950, No. 1, p. 17.
18. M. Cubberly Van Pelt 1950, p. 16.
19. E. Calverly (Dr) (1958) p. 75
20. Mylrea's Memoirs, p. 126.
21. Azeeza's story was mentioned in both Mylrea's memoirs pp. 125-127, and Dr. Calverly (1958) pp. 74-78).
22. Calverly (1958) p. 76.
23. M. Bruins Allison (1994). *Dr Mary in Arabia*. University of Texas Press. Austin. p. 72.
24. Bruins Allison, p. 73.
25. See E. Calverly (Dr) (1919) "In the steps of the Great Physician" N.A. 108, pp. 3-8.
26. See for example E. Calverly (Dr) (1958) p. 22, for how the news of opening the missionary dispensary spread from one harem to another. On the other hand, Dr. Mylrea in his memoirs wrote: "There is a great deal that goes on in the women's quarters of the houses that the men never know about". Dr. Mylrea's memoirs p. 108

27. E. Calverly (Dr) "Just Friends" N.A. # 114, 1920, pp. 10-14.
28. E. Calverly (Dr) (1985) pp. 78, 79.
29. E. Calverly 1985, p. 30. Although an enthusiastic and active missionary Dr. Calverly states that: "Never through the years have I ceased to feel emotion at the sound of the prayer call and the sight of Moslems at prayer. People of other religions can learn from the Moslems something of the dignity and solemnity of worship".
30. S. Mylrea (Mrs) (1917), "The First Lady of Kuwait" N.A 103 pp. 19-12
31. She arrived in Kuwait in September 1934. Dr. Calverly came to Kuwait in Dec. 1911, and she was the first female physician to practice medicine in Kuwait. Dr. Mylrea first visit to Kuwait was in June 1911, and his wife came to Kuwait in Jan. 1914. Dr. Mylrea introduced some western inventions in Kuwait like steel and concrete building technique, electrical generators and other facilities, but above all western medicine. For his contributions in modernizing Kuwait he was eulogized as "father of modern Kuwait"
32. M. Bruins Allison, p. 29, 30.
33. Bruins Allison, 31.
34. Bruins Allison, 31.
35. M. Cubberly van Pelt, pp. 16, 17.
36. E. Calverly (1985) p. 110.
37. E. Calverly 113. Once when Dr. Calverly had invited captain William Shakespear, the British Political Agent in Kuwait as a guest for dinner, she used alfa alfa in the dinner table vase. To give the alfa alfa a desirable smell she sprinkled it with some eau de Cologne. It should be noted that Captain Shakespear was fond of well-set meals and traveled always with his Goan butler.
38. E. Calverly, p. 113.
39. E. Calverly 113-114. The term (Kashta) with an 'A', is a word in the Kuwaiti dialect derived from the Persian "Gasht", which literally means "wandering" which normally takes place outside the house.
40. Mylrea (Mrs) (1916) "Picnics in Kuwait". N.A 99. p. 6.
41. Mylrea, 1916, p. 5
42. Mylrea, 1916, pp. 6, 7.
43. E. Calverly (Dr) (1958) p. 82.
44. See also Bruins Alison, M. pp. 51, 52 for more details on weddings in Kuwait.
45. M. Calverly (Dr) (1985) op. cit. p. 83. Milfac is a black, usually transparent rectangular cloth, used to cover the hair. Thobe is a light, usually black, wide and ankle length garment worn on the top of the dress and under the abaya (black cloak).
46. M. Calverly, pp. 108, 109.
47. M. Calverly, p. 109.
48. M. Calverly, pp. 115, 116.
49. E. Calverly (Dr) (1919).

50. E. Calverly (Dr) (1958) p. 108.
51. De Jong, E. Garret (Rev). (1927) "As Seen by a Novice" N.A. 142, p. 9.
52. De Jong, p.9. Also see Thomas Wells (1903) "The need for women workers among the women of Arabia" N.A 47. p. 20.
53. E. Calverly (1919) p. 5. Scudder (1998) states that: "Gulf women, in any case, did not think of themselves as competent to enter into religious debate". P. 204.
54. Thomas Wells (1903) op. cit p. 20. see also (S. Mylrea (Mrs) (1915) "Working for Kuwait's Women", N.A. 92, pp. 10-12).
55. Calverly infers that Saeeda who was then a sick and frail woman had converted to Christianity. As a door-keeper for years in the hospital she had heard the Gospel "hundreds of times and understood the message". One day after dragging herself to the hospital she had this conversation with the lady physician:  
"Oh, Khatoon (lady)," she moaned, "I think I am going to die." "and if you do, Saeeda," answered the doctor, "will it not be a real gain to go from all this wretchedness to the heavenly Home? Don't you believe in Jesus as your saviour? Are you afraid Saeeda?" "No" she answered, "I am not afraid. I do believe." The other patients heard this testimony and she spoke without hesitation. E. Calverly (Dr) (1925) "Saeeda" N.A 134. P. 12. Saeeda's conversion was not announced to the community, and the missionaries decided to have her buried in the Moslem cemetery, in response to her husband's desire.
56. It should be noted that in general women were intentionally given pseudo-names in missionaries' writings.
57. See E. Calverly (1920) "Just Friends" N.A 114.
58. See G. De Jong (Mrs) (1930) "The Ubiquitous Gasoline Tin" N.A 153. And also de Jong E. (1943) "Water and Life" N.A 201.
59. Dr Mary Bruins who arrived in Kuwait in 1934 described women's suffering in labour and child-delivery as follows:  
"Usually when labor pains began at home, the woman would retreat to one of the small back rooms of their house to avoid making a mess in the living rooms. She reclined on a bed of sand with some older women sitting with her. There were no real midwives. If the case delivered normally, the woman out the cord of the baby and dressed it in black swaddling clothes. She straightened the legs and bound them and the arms into a compact bundle tied up with long strips like a little mummy. Then they would pack the mother's vagina with bits of rock salt for several days. This was done to heal wounds and shrink the parts back to their former size. However, this treatment dehydrated the vaginal tissues and often reduced the cervix to a hard core. At a following delivery, the cervix would not dilate to allow the baby to be born and the mother would die." Bruins Allison, M. op. cit P. 66, 67. Also see Calverly, E. (1958).
60. M. Bruins Allison, p. 127.

