CONCLUSION AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS

I did not go to school to learn to read and write. I sent my younger daughters to school and then they went to university, and such things. But, you know, they do not know what I know.

—Um Jihad

I see my conclusion as an attempt to reflect and draw together the different complexities that make up themes in this book. I have argued that narrowing the focus to include only water and water development is futile, because when we deal with household water in Musharafah we are dealing with the entirety of women’s performance, experiences, the structure of significance and identities. Water in the stories we heard is a metaphor for the totality of women’s lives. Um Muhammad, Um Qays and their neighbours’ lives fetching water involve acting on the world, ‘being in the world.’

As a life giving substance, water has immediate implications. Managing water, the women told us routinizes daily life. In the stories it is a medium for the expression of social relationships. In their immediate village history, water is seen as sedimentation of structures of power, inequality and resistance. As a symbolic system of meaning, water is both a structured and a structuring force. The book, as the reader realises, is not a straightforward venture, because as the women told us there are no uncomplicated lives.

Let me go back to where I started, with Granqvist. She engaged with subdued voices and challenged the established construction and misplaced observations of the ‘Muhammadan’ in the 1930s. Granqvist challenges notions of the orient with her use of photography. Between 1925 and 1931 she took over 1000 pictures of the scenery, men and women, everyday goings and comings, religious rituals, festivities and ceremonies. (Ulla Vuorela p.c). She took pictures of women in the process of doing different tasks, or on their way to work. Because Granqvist used the camera, ‘her individuals’ did not only have a face; they also had a name and a biography. Her five books are based on her intense search for what many of us try to extract during fieldwork. She tells us about ‘life questions.’ Granqvist labelled ‘her’ village as a ‘Muhammadan village’ where people followed ‘Muhammadan’ rituals, and the
rites were adapted to their life situation. But she did not explain Islam as a monolithic order; on the contrary she explained that Muslim law and non-Muslim customs are intertwined, and ‘her’ peasants bent Islamic law to manage different situations with which they were confronted.

Social organisations of the village were kept up because people followed rules, but they only did so insofar as they were practical in their life situation. History causes the bend in the rules; that is, for Hilma Granqvist the historical events were the tools that over time bent or changed the rules in the village. In realising the dimension history had in the village everyday life, she listened and was especially sensitive to religion’s hold on rural women’s everyday realities. Through pictures and writings about chores, ‘her women’ were presented in situations realistic for village life at that time in history.

In today’s scholarship on gender in the Middle East, several ‘new’ authorities on the subject are reflecting on issues which Granqvist wrote about in the 1930s, yet they do not seem to know about her. Consider the following quotation from her work

...as soon as the position of the Palestinian, or as one has preferred to call her, the Oriental woman, is under discussion, one has been too easily content to make judgements of a purely subjective kind instead of inquiring into the facts, the special conditions and laws which regulate the life of women in a Palestinian society (Granqvist 1931, p. 22).

Granqvist’s theme of, to paraphrase Abu-Lughod, ‘writing against the Oriental’ is as we already know part of our ongoing conversation about how to write about other women. She represents an early voice in anthropology, concerned with puzzling out ‘life questions,’ taking everyday life seriously and including it into academic writing. She let the women and men speak into her text, and demonstrates through this approach that men’s and women’s work was part of the internal village negotiations and variations.

Women in Musharafah are strong, persistent and proud of their achievements; they have succeeded in carrying out their responsibilities according to social norms. Um Khaled and her old female neighbours worry about others “talking.” There are norms to follow, and for Um Khaled, the worst two things neighbours could say about her are that she is “lazy” or that she has “no faith.” When she was younger “There were of course other things they could say,” she laughed. It is difficult for readers unfamiliar with Palestine or the Middle East to take in Um Khaled’s anxieties. A requirement for understanding these women is