



Listening Carefully to Intercultural Dialogue in Saudi Arabia

Guest post by Trudy Milburn

Asked to travel to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia last March to conduct training sessions at a local university I felt some trepidation, but ultimately agreed to go. Fear of terrorist activity against foreigners was my main concern. However, since I study intercultural communication, I was excited to learn first-hand about a culture and a region that seemed to only be in the news because of oil and war.

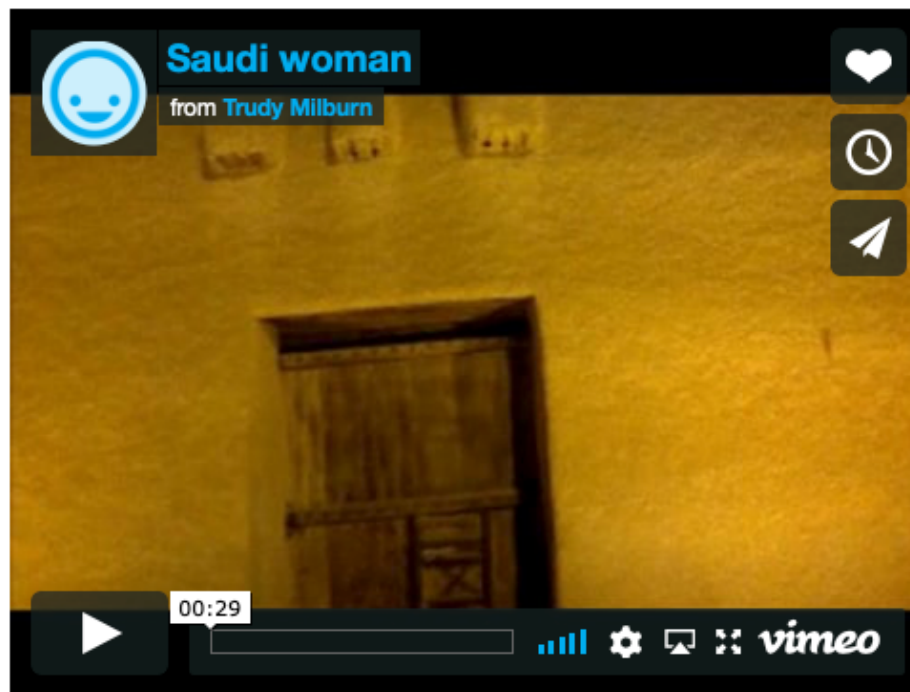
One interaction I witnessed in a public square has remained somewhat of a mystery.

Our guide escorted my colleague and I to the old city-center that functions as an historic landmark and museum. As we arrived, we heard the call from the loud-speakers near minarets to prayer time. Everyone began moving in the direction of the nearest mosque. Some women knelt to pray on prayer rugs in or near the shops. I asked about the difference, and was told that the women can pray anywhere, it is only men who must go to the mosque. Our guide himself was exempt for two reasons, he was still a student and because he was working.

Standing quite near us, by the entrance to this museum, were about three or four young men, perhaps in their early twenties. Their dress identified them as Muslim, but since they did not wear head coverings, I could not tell if they were Saudi men. We watched an elderly woman approach the group of men and speak loudly, gesturing towards the mosque. From an American perspective, it seemed that she was berating them for not going to the mosque. Her tone and the volume of her talk made it sound like she was really disapproving of them. She stood near to the group and continued in this manner for some time. In comparison to her, the few others remaining in the square were quiet and you could begin to hear the chanting of the prayer from the mosque's loudspeakers. She seemed to be causing quite a scene and the men shifted their stances as she approached, backed off, and re-approached.

We asked our guide what she was saying. From our American perspective, we imagined that she must be chastising them for not attending the prayer with everyone else. What our guide told us surprised us. He said that she was beseeching them, as good sons, to attend. To confirm my recollection, I asked my colleague and he recounted that we were told that she was telling the men how much she cared for them and loved them and that they should be good and pray. My colleague

was holding the camera taking the video while I was speaking; we saw interaction in the background. Here's the video, since the individuals are too far away to identify.



The rhetorical choices she made to persuade these men to go to the mosque initially suggested she was breaking the social norm whereby women typically respond to men's lead. However, her ability to shift the frame and take the role of a concerned parent who was merely reminding them of their duty to Allah, indicates a rhetorical sensitivity we would be wise to heed. Perhaps some situations where dialogue seems impossible actually have spaces where, given the proper roles, one can make statements that otherwise would be considered unlikely or impossible.

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