C7 7

The Surface of Politesse

Acting *murtāḥ* in Dhofar, Oman

Kamala Russell

C7.P1 I read a provocation in Bergson's address to students. This essay follows that provocation by considering the ways communicative practices we would otherwise call "politeness" may instead express an ethical dimension of social interaction that he calls "politesse." I will discuss aspects of communicative practice common in the community where I conduct fieldwork, with speakers of Śḥerēt in the highland areas of Dhofar, Oman, that are concerned with creating pleasant and easeful interchange. However, following Bergson past the exchange of normative indices of polite manners, I consider the problems of interpersonal engagement that these practices point to. As Bergson asks us to consider interactional conduct together with self-formation, I locate this "politesse" within the wider project of Islamic ethical life that animates everyday life in Dhofar. I argue that this politesse reflects a discipline of avoidance, deflection, and concealment distinct from Bergson's far more liberal trajectory toward recognition.

C7.P2 I use the term "politesse" here in the sense of the remarks by Bergson that inspire this volume, where he moves past normative strategies of deference and pleasantry to describe a politesse achieved not through the enactment of specific forms of talk but rather a more aspirational state of heart and mind. Bergson begins this essay, originally an address to graduating students, by describing a familiar image of politeness understood as a set of discursive practices (and bodily ones as well) that serve as normative indices of either one's manners or one's intent to perform them: "the forms and phrases of civility; to pay no attention to them is the sign of a poor upbringing." Bergson, rightly and presciently, decries the hollow and instrumental relation between self and other that accompanies interacting (and theoretical or pedagogical discourse about interacting) with a stringent focus on the correct performance of normatively valued conduct. He argues instead for the virtues of an education that would consider and inculcate more than a desire-as-strategy

Kamala Russell, *The Surface of Politesse* In: *Rethinking Politeness with Henri Bergson*. Edited by: Alessandro Duranti, Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press 2022. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197637852.003.0009

to either placate another or be recognized for one's well-mannered display. In asking for the development of "qualities of the heart and mind" that exceed strategic indexical trajectories of acting polite to being (seen as) polite, he advocates for a consciousness of the interactant (oneself and one's interlocutors) as present at once in their heart, mind, soul, and body, and not only in their conduct.

C7.P3 Whatever one feels about the rhapsodic humanism of this implicit notion of the self, I think there is a lesson for linguistic anthropologists in being asked to think about interaction as a potential meeting of souls, not only the inscription and re-inscription of semiotically mediated identities. Bergson points to a new way that the cultivation of selves can bear on both interactional textuality (how people speak and act) and the formative role of sociability in shaping a community. His politesse is an ethics of entertaining another's perspective, which he describes as both a spiritual openness to their speech and the ability to anticipate and avoid wounding their sensitivities.

C7.P4 In this essay, I take up this provocation to think past the instrumentality of the "functions" of discursive signs and think instead of the ethical dimensions of encountering others that interaction entails. However, I take issue with his assumption that the ethical self is naturally inclined to and formed by the act of communing with others. Further, Bergson assumes that this communion (described in superlative terms) makes possible ideal forms of egalitarian social and perhaps even political reform. What about the forms of exposure, intrusion, privation, shyness, or deflection that may better serve an ethical project whose ends (and at times even means) are located outside trajectories of social recognition or reform?

C7.P5 In the Muslim households in the highlands of the Dhofar region of Oman where I lived and conducted fieldwork, we spoke Śherēt Modern South Arabian. Śherēt is an endangered Semitic language that is increasingly being inundated with Arabic and to a lesser extent English, as just one result of the transformative developments that the former sultan Qaboos has brought to rural Dhofar over the past forty years and that continue under his successor. This period has also brought increasing urbanization, dependence on a market economy centered around the municipal seat of Salalah, and greater inclusion in circulatory publics of Islamic discourse and pedagogy that link mountain-dwelling Dhofaris to other parts of the Gulf and wider Islamic communities.

C7.P6 Despite these reorganizations of the linguistic and social landscape, hospitality is and remains ubiquitous: essentially every day we were visited

or would visit. This "we" is meant to refer to myself and the residents of the homestead where I lived, but primarily "we" meant me and the women of the house. This is not because the men were definitionally unable to be in a "we" with me (they as men and me as a woman not related to them) but, rather, because the men were often elsewhere, while the other women and I were almost always at the house.

C7.P7 Less mobile, the women of the house did not visit others as often as we would receive primarily male and more mobile guests at our own home. These guests were often family. The guests who would come and stay for meals, talking late into the night and cohering around them large groups of residents, were often close relations or old friends of the family. But we were also visited by men we had not met before and who would have been unknown even to the brothers, husbands, fathers, or cousins whose wider range of mobility meant they were not often among us. If it was at evenings and mealtimes that we tended to receive better known guests, when darkness and platters of food facilitated closer and more integrated gatherings, then it was afternoon, teatime in fact, that tended to be the time for new visitors. In other areas of my work, I deal with this openness of the house, the organization of domestic spaces, and the construal of that space in interactional frameworks that address the gaze and presence of outsiders as an everyday problem for both women and men. Here, though, I will deal less with shared space and more with a politesse that restricts what is shared between interlocutors.

C7.P8 In Dhofar, people often speak about being *murtāḥ* (which means something like "relaxed" in both Arabic and Śherēt). Though most visible in the scenes of group hospitality that punctuate each day, being *murtāḥ* also branches out into other, smaller, more intimate, and more fleeting genres of interaction. Being *murtāḥ* entails an affable demeanor, pleasant and joking conversation, and, most interestingly, avoiding the discussion of personal affairs and emotional states and responses. Even in spontaneous interaction with members of one's own family, discussion of personal matters and affective expressivity occur only in one-on-one talks that are confined to the latest hours of the night and furthest reaches of the house. So perhaps paradoxically here, acting relaxed and open actually entails forms of emotional suppression and generalized anonymity. Like Bergson's politesses (of the heart and of the mind), a Dhofari politesse of being *murtāḥ* produces a scene of welcome, tolerance, and harmony, but one that is geared toward mutual concealment and the exact avoidance of the vulnerability and interpenetration of sensitivities that Bergson so rhapsodizes.

C7.S1 ## Definitions

C7.P9 The word *murtāḫ* is a borrowing from Arabic into Śĥerēt. In Arabic, it is derived from the tri-radical root *r-w-ḫ*. This is a very prolific root that participates in derivational processes across many different classes of verbs and nouns, though these derivations all share the sense of free movement, as in the movement of air. The word *riḫ*, meaning "wind," is derived from this root. The verb *rāḫ* is probably the most commonly used "go" verb in colloquial Arabics. Other derivations mean "respiration" and the general circulation of air (for example, by a fan, *marwaḫa*). The root derives the philosophically prominent and polysemous noun *rūḫ*, which can refer to the soul, the self, the breath, the seat of moral consciousness. *Murīḫ* means "loose," "light," or "free-flowing," like clothes that drift away from the body. This Arabic root also derives *rāḫa*, meaning "rest," "comfort," "ease," and "relaxation." And of course, *murtāḫ* is the active participle of the verb *irtaḫa*, from this root.

C7.P10 In Śĥerēt, *murtāḫ* participates in some regular phonological processes, but compounding its status as a loanword, it is often used with Arabic and not Śĥerēt feminine endings. However, the Arabic verb *irtaḫa* (from which *murtāḫ* is derived as participle) has been taken into the Śĥerēt verbal system in a fully productive way as *irtāḫ*. Most other verbs in Śĥerēt describing such changes in emotional, physical, or internal states take a more basic morphological pattern (*xētik, hundik*: I'm thirsty, I'm tired) without the infixed -t-. These "t-stems," as they are referred to in the Semitics literature, are rarer and less productive in Śĥerēt than they are in Arabic (Rubin 2014: 131–132). It is also rarer, pragmatically, to used the derived active participle to describe a current state, so where in Arabic I would say I am *jaw'ana* (hungry), in Śĥerēt I would more likely use a perfective verb to make the similar statement: *tilfik* (I am hungry). For this reason I speak in English about "being *murtāḫ*" rather than feeling or acting so. As such, the Śĥerēt verb *irtah* is used quite often. It is one of the most common ways to say that you enjoyed an object (*irtaḫk b-ish*) and the typical way that someone would describe the success of an action they undertook in order to feel better from a minor ailment or problem that was bothering them (*shirokik t'an b irtaḫk*: I did such and such and relaxed). So, much like Bergson's politesse, being *murtāḫ* is not an assembly of specific actions but the resulting state involved in one's reception of others, experiences, or events.

C7.P11 When I asked Śĥerēt speakers what the word meant, they would act it out. Someone would lean their head back, close their eyes, and adopt a dreamy expression. They would sigh, and in a small and light voice say *aaah irtāḫk*. It is what you feel when you are not put under pressure or feeling shy; they oppose

it to the feeling of being choked up. Being not *murtāḫ* is being upset. Current displays or even oblique references to past anger or despair are quickly followed with questions (What's with you, are you upset?) or, more summarily, *bik tle*? "Is there something in you?" These intrusive negative affects are described as reactions to exposures from outside: you let someone get to you, get in your heart, and you are no longer *murtāḫ*. Being *murtāḫ*, then, is not only a simple transient state of comfort; it is a prophylactic discipline of not reacting and not pushing others to react.

C7.P12 This is not to say that expressions of intense emotion are avoided; this is certainly not the case! Although authentic displays are distributed and tend to occur in one-on-one contexts, interior spaces, and less socially active times of day. Even in hospitality, though, there are strategic or comical breakages such as "angry" refusals of joking marriage proposals, and even failures to interact as a result of overwhelming shyness and anxiety. Still, such breaks do often bear critical mention after the fact. Furthermore, people do at times lose control, and some people are not good at being in control in the first place.

C7.P13 For example, there are people who engage in *xīrt'* (a speech genre like scolding) and people of whom it is said *bish/bit ġaro* (that they have lots of talk in them). *Xírt'* can be transient, such as when someone asks "Why are you scolding me" or says "Don't scold him like that" in reference to a specific event. I was told that *xirt'* is wrong insofar as it is a reaction to another's actions and thus an admission that someone's failing made you angry. Furthermore, those who scold seek to amend those failed circumstances by dominating those at fault with insults and rage. The problem with scolding is not that it can hurt others, but that it belies the scolder's own over-engagement in the situation.

C7.P14 To have lots of talk in you (*tēkin bik ġaro*) is a thornier issue. This is not something that is typically said to someone's face; it refers to a pattern of behavior, or may name a general disinclination to have that person around. It's often accompanied by a gesture where the tongue is extended in disgust as the pointer finger circles the side of the cheek. (This looks much like the English gesture of a finger circling at one's temple to mean someone is "crazy."') People who have lots of talk in them act too familiar; they may be braggarts or gossips, but either way they produce discomfort in their interlocutors and, more important, suspicion that they will speak too much about you and your encounters with them to others.

C7.P15 These breaks in the *murtāḫ* surface of sociality, these affective outbursts, are issues not only of the improper revelation of one's subjectivity or of shame; it is not a problem of reputation that is being raised. The interlocutor is not involved as a privileged adjudicator of the speaker's self-presentations. Instead, these moments raise issues of improper contact. They are intrusions and

exposures in the face of the other. This is an argument for the importance of personal space to ethical practice.

C7.P16 If Bergson argues for a kind of presence to interaction that exceeds the trading of discursively normative and well-mannered signs, then a *murtāḫ* politesse is also a different approach to the work of being polite. But instead of calling for deeper forms of engagement that are meant to ethically shape interactants, this is a politesse that refigures the form and function of interactional encounters; it institutes distance both between participants and between interactional encounters and an ethical relation to one's own life.

C7.S2 Encounters in Dhofar

C7.P17 It is this distance that marks the gatherings that occur almost every afternoon, between the *ʔaṣ'r* prayer and sunset, in Dhofari homesteads. On one of these afternoons, at the typical time for short visits and tea, a number of women and I were assembled on the front patio of the house. We formed a loose circle.

C7.P18 A white SUV pulled up and a man walked out. He was unknown to any of us on sight, and his crisp white *dishdasha*, nice watch, and classy, if slightly feminine, sunglasses showed that he had clearly not come from wherever the men of our house were, off tending to the goats and camels. As he left his car and reached the two steps up to the patio, he tapped a small cane on the concrete verge, smiling and announcing himself: *hudhud*. I sensed the moment of our inertia before anyone moved to entertain this man no one had recognized. But, slowly, we rearranged ourselves. Most of the women dispersed into the house. One woman pulled a mat over for him to sit on, and the rest of us assembled into a line on the opposite side of the patio.

C7.P19 No one could figure out who this man was. I mouthed *muhn?* (Who?) to the woman next to me. She looked forward, gesturing ever so slightly at him with her chin as if to say: Pay attention and see. The other woman, on her way back from setting up his mat, made an exaggerated grimace (facing us but not him) to indicate that she didn't know him either. He greeted each of us in turn, moving down our line without names or other explicit vocatives. He asked each of us how we were in the common formula, and we answered using the most customary and least informative of answers, all in quiet tones of voice, almost mumbling, *alhamdulillah*. There was annoyance, though it was not explicit. He had disturbed a gathering of women, and now we had to engage him in conversation. Our prior relaxation now had to be refigured; now more structured expectations were at hand. The gaze of the outsider, the opposite gender, and the threat of another's talk were newly at issue. Whether or not he

sensed it, I do not know. Either way, protocol was followed, and we were each *murtāḫa*.

C7.P20 But then he asked after the man of the house by name and nickname. Surprised, that man's wife replied that he was well and asked if our guest had indeed met her husband. To this, he responded that he had been to our house before.

C7.P21 He said that he recognized the two women next to me from a fun evening in the rainy season, a couple months earlier. He had come to our homestead and sat in the room over there near the fire. Pointing at the two women next to me, he said they had been there with their husbands. He mentioned some joke that the man of the house had told to his wife, she right there, next to me.

C7.P22 I must remark: this interrogation is already an uncommon turn of events. In the interest of relaxation, and anonymity, agreement with the interlocutor often ranks higher than the "truthful" resolution of actual reference. But the woman went on with this line of disambiguation. Puzzled, she said she did not remember him.

C7.P23 Our guest realized a bit too slowly that the woman he met had not been this woman. He mumbled something about *tith-sh e-thaniya* (the other/second wife). This was his first remark that was not an affable declaration.

C7.P24 Taking the floor with a calm voice, the woman said, "It wasn't me; it was my husband's second wife." She and I made eye contact, sideways, and I tried to indicate that her glance had registered. After he left, as often happened, we digested the encounter that had just occurred. It had been strange the way he recalled the previous event. Neither of them mentioned the details of any *specific* embarrassment, but they asked repeatedly, rhetorically, dismissively, *ineh ða(h)n min salfa* (What kind of talk is that)?!

C7.P25 This interaction almost lost its *murtāḫ* screen. There was an unusual train of questioning. It raised the topic of polygamous marriage, which is understood to be fraught with sensitivities not expressed in public. The woman kept her cool, but the tension was there.

C7.P26 Though we began with the performance of niceties that bespeak welcome, and though we covered over any tickle of annoyance at being interrupted, and despite the fact of the woman's calm remark, the conversation veered in an uncommonly tense direction. As the women felt the need to point out: What kind of talk was that?!

C7.P27 My argument here is that this tension is not just a result of the intrusion of non-normatively polite topics into the conversation. Instead it is a result of the way these topics intrude on the first wife and may lead her to expose something to others that she is still wrestling with that is not theirs to observe, comment on, or interpret. Interactional participants are vulnerable in and

present to the interaction in ways that exceed their ability to have their sensibilities offended by impolite conduct. This is the very personal presence and very personal vulnerability of which Bergson speaks. Yet here, instead of engaging with others in this privileged space of communion, they act *murtāḥ*: a politesse of disengagement.

C7.P28 To some extent of course there is a normative pressure to be welcoming. But the end of acting *murtāḥ* is not to protect our guest, of whom the women later spoke dismissively. Rather, like the dismissal, it is to avoid public engagement with the personal topics he touched on. To not have acted *murtāḥ* would have betrayed something of the first wife's personal affairs, calling into question her feelings about her husband's second marriage. Though polygynous marriages in Dhofar are both common and commonly understood to be potentially hurtful in the abstract—the common term for a second wife in Śḥerēt is ɬ*'iret,* "the one who damages"—such wounds are rarely if ever spoken about with regard to specific people or circumstances. Such attachments are regarded as sticking points in one's life to which may accrue doubts of God's mercy and resentment for one's circumstances. Instead of giving her faith over to another's scrutiny in this way (and also her love, her submission, and even potentially her erotic life), her easeful manner kept it for herself. This was not a sacrifice of authentic expression for the sake of collective comfort. Instead, it preserves both the distance that makes possible this interaction and her own ongoing work around the doubts this wound may raise.

C7.P29 One way to understand this dynamic would be to say that the exposure of potential indices of a crisis of faith to public scrutiny is a threat to this woman's identity in the eyes of others. However, this rhetoric undercuts the very purpose of her withdrawal behind easeful *murtāḥ* hospitality.

C7.P30 Another interlocutor once quoted this Śḥerēt proverb to me:

C7.P31	**her ʕaʃ**	**dʃũʕ**	**ġaro**	**ḏeyo**	**daʕoʃ**	**tʃũʕ**	**be**[1]
C7.P32	her ʕa-ʃ	d-ʃũʕ	ġaro	ḏ-eyo	daʕo-ʃ	tʃũʕ	be
C7.P33	if DESID-2fs	CONT-2fs.imperf	talk	POSS-people		still-2fs	2fs.imperf.hear a.lot

C7.P34 I would idiomatically translate this as "If you are going to listen to what others have to say, you have a lot to listen to." I asked her what it meant, and she replied, *o' atirtaḥ lo* (Sh: you won't relax). Concern for the words of others can trouble you and affect you. She cited the proverb after I told her I was leaving for Dubai for yet another visa run. I had mentioned that it was possible a

[1] Glossing conventions: DESID = desiderative; CONT = continuous aspect; POSS = possessive; IMPERF = imperfect; PART = particle.

particular bureaucrat was blocking my residence permit application. I had not betrayed too much emotion or ire in my tone or affect, but I had made a claim that that person had some negative opinion about me. I had thought she would agree, accept this as a reason, and perhaps sympathize. She answered instead with this proverb. In the frame of the proverb, its receiver wants to hear others' opinions; I seek their talk. The speaker of the proverb warns that this seeking is never-ending. She warns against instrumentalizing interactions with others in a search for their opinions and approval, for reflections of myself. The ethical here is not oriented toward seeing greater recognition in the eyes of the other (or providing such a space of tolerance for another), as Bergson stresses. It was my use of the negative opinion of another as an explanation for my complaint and thus supposed state of dejection that warranted this advice. I did not seem *murtāḫa*; I was letting it get to me.

C7.P35 Personal and private contemplation, self-critique, and reform are a large part of the lives of my Muslim hosts in Dhofar, and being *murtāḫ* in interactions only makes space for those practices, which are ongoing anyway. Ease is not the end state. Ease instead is a sign of non-disclosure. With her *murtāḫ* conduct, the first wife does not reveal her wound to others, nor does she stifle herself in covering it over. She makes space for her own ongoing work of Islam (of submission) in and by making space for herself within communal engagement.

C7.S3 The social and the otherwise

C7.P36 If Bergson calls for an attunement to the other in order to avoid intrusion and instrumentality, then in a sense my Dhofari interlocutors do as well.

C7.P37 Bergson hopes for a productive interlocution that can be transformative of selves and, perhaps later, of society. This an image of the transformation of a nation and its existing citizenry from within. It is not a politics as much as a call for an ethical interlocutorship at the heart of existing social and political institutions. His address can certainly be read (and critically) as an apology for and to elite educational institutions and a classical canon. Not only is its text quite literally a self-congratulation (it is, after all, a commencement address), but he predicates the students' value and necessity on a claim that the politesse they produce makes "elite souls," naturalizing the social and political conditions by which these already-elites hold access to the elite futures in which their open minds and hearts can find expression.

C7.P38 Such a reading echoes critiques of Jürgen Habermas' (2015) ideal description of a public sphere that would serve as a dynamic site of rational-critical

debate situated between private forms of education and institutions of political expression and governance (cf. Cheah 1995; Fraser 1990). Bergson's address, albeit far less rigorously and critically grounded politically and historically, locates a similar sense of possibility in a secular ethics of interaction that is tied to a becoming through education. Where Habermas points to a dramaturgical and reflexive textuality of the self as a mechanism of such a *bildung*, Bergson highlights instead the openness to another's subjectivity as more than a mirror of one's own as constitutive of his ideal politesse. Rather than predicating a link between (textually mediated) self-awareness and (linguistically rendered) rationality, Bergson sees a receptivity toward the other as the basis of his ideal.

C7.P39 Habermas is thus a doubly apt, if anachronistic, foil. If the transformative potential of the public sphere lies in its ability to generate opinion as reform, then it is a discursive calculus of rational-critical debate that is enabled by the particularly textual entry of a public imaginary into private ethical becoming. Bergson, on the other hand, locates the potentiality of his ideal politesses outside of pragmatics and in moments of subtle interpenetration where "word[s] slipped" into ears, hearts "vibrat[ed] in unison," and another's grace suffused our body to produce an "exquisite sensation of these dreams where our body seems to have abandoned its weight and area." He invokes the "delicious uselessness" yet delight in being and talking together that marked the (notably erotic) symposia of Socrates and his students. With these sentimental images, Bergson grounds his ethics in something beyond interactional textuality yet is definitive of interaction.

C7.P40 Though I was at times irritated by his air of elite self-congratulation, I found this interactional focus of Bergson's essay quite interesting: he directs attention to the actuality of co-presence. It is this dimension of social encounters, the fact of a sentimental and semiotic vulnerability, that calls for ethics, and not just a set of norms for conduct. Bergson's ideal politesses not only recognize this mutual vulnerability; they delight in it. In such a view, the telos of the person is an ethical social relatedness, and not only a sharing of space but a commingling that can both train individuals and potentially reform social institutions.

C7.P41 Both Bergson and my friend the first wife recognize that interaction makes people vulnerable to each other. But in Dhofar, the object of politesse (the space between these vulnerable interlocutors) is not the object of eventual communal or spiritual reform. Instead, that reform takes place outside the reflection chamber of interactions with others. For my Dhofari interlocutors, it seems that interactions, regardless of where and with whom, are not meant to be the place where interpenetration with the other can found a harmonious

ideal. Instead, it is distance and ease as practiced by the collective that makes possible the work of reforming the self, elsewhere. Unlike Bergson's acceptance and even enjoyment of commingling, the practice of being *murtāḥ* quite explicitly regards the exposure (to others' opinions and questions, as well as just the force of their gaze) that interaction entails as something in need of redress.

C7.P42 The work of submission, of Islam in relation to the Divine, undeniably permeates life in these homesteads. The politesse of being *murtāḥ* is an indication that interaction, particularly the hospitality interactions that are in Dhofar, the salient stage for the collective, is not where that work occurs. This politesse does not clearly reform the self to better enact, build, or contest a collective through what is shared by way of communication. Instead, the work of submission requires a disengagement from the other and retreat to concern for one's own soul that is enabled by affable, welcoming, and calm performances of relaxation. Whether or not one is actually relaxed, well, that is exactly the kind of intrusive question that a *murtāḥ* politesse avoids.

C7.S4 References

C7.P43 Cheah, Peng 1995. "Violent Light: The Idea of Publicness in Modern Philosophy and in Global Neocolonialism." *Social Text* 43.Autumn: 163–190.

C7.P44 Fraser, Nancy 1990 "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25–26: 56–80.

C7.P45 Habermas, Jürgen. 2015. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. John Wiley & Sons.