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Bayt al Rabu'i

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Dear Peter;

The following covers my activities in and observations of a Yemeni highland village. The project has been going well, so far. As you will see in this report, my efforts to help the villagers acquire a water tank should solidify my position in the village.

### I. Getting Started

It has been my experience that the most difficult part of a village study is just getting started. The lion's share of frustration and aggravation occurs during this phase when you have to clear matters with the government bureaucracy, select a region and village, and find an interpreter.

My problems getting started in North Yemen were the reverse of my problems in Egypt. The Egyptians actually turned down my village study application. I evaded this problem by going to a place where a lot of tourists hang around. On the other hand, I had no trouble finding several villagers who spoke an adequate amount of English.

The Yemeni government was quite agreeable to my village study proposal. It took a month of laborious effort, but I was granted a six month residence visa based on my research proposal. But finding a translator (and a village) was another matter.

Until the 1962 revolution, North Yemen was effectively sealed off from the rest of the world. The country's traditional rulers, the imams, strove mightily to maintain Yemen's medieval isolation. Except for some technical experts, few foreigners were permitted into the country.

Unlike Egypt then, which has been open to the West for nearly two hundred years, North Yemen has a scarcity of people speaking western languages. The few that do, I discovered, tend to have good jobs with foreign agencies in Sana'a. It would be virtually impossible to find an English speaker living in a village.

It seemed to me that the best course of action would be to find a translator in Sana'a and then travel with him out to a village, preferably his own, several days a week. I spoke to an English class at Sana'a University -- an American teacher arranged that -- and posted notices at the Yemen-American Language Institute, which also teaches English to Yemenis.

The first two candidates to appear were unsuitable. One

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had a tendency not to turn up for appointments, a common Yemeni, and Arab, failing. The other had what I thought would be a difficult personality. In Egypt I had discovered the great importance of being personally comfortable with your interpreters.

After several weeks of discouragement, Hussein appeared. Hussein, 31, impressed me with his serious and business-like attitude. He is, in fact, a partner in a Sana'a import business. Although almost always late for appointments, he at least usually shows up. Right from the start, I had the feeling that Hussein was more dependable than the other Yemenis I had met.

But then Hussein is only half Yemeni. He is a muwaldin, or half-caste, born of a Yemeni father and Ethiopian mother. Like so many muwaldin, Hussein's family returned to Yemen from Ethiopia in the late 1970s. Sana'a contains many of these refugees from the Ethiopian revolution. The young people in these families usually learned English in the Ethiopian public schools. Most of the English-speaking Yemenis I've met have been muwaldin.

Hussein's features are more negroid than Arab. His skin is very dark and his hair jet black and kinky. He married an Ethiopian woman, as had his father before him. His young son has virtually no Arab physical features.

Hussein told me he had relatives, from his father's side of the family, of course, living in a village called Bayt al Rabu'i. This village is located about 70 kilometers north of Sana'a in the Qa'al Bawn, one of the country's major highland agricultural valleys. Hussein said he would take me there and introduce me to his relatives, the Mudahar family.

It sounded great. But I soon discovered that Hussein and I were not thinking along parallel lines. I wanted Hussein to accompany me to Bayt al Rabu'i for several days a week over a period of months. Hussein was thinking in terms of a one-shot deal. He was surprised I would want to make more than one visit to Bayt al Rabu'i.

After some inconclusive negotiations, we agreed to visit the village together and more or less see what happened. I was surprised when he refused to accept any money for taking me to see his relatives. He said something about it being his duty to help a stranger in his country and perhaps I could return the favor someday.

This was a bit of shrewdness on Hussein's part. Like his father, Hussein is a relatively successful merchant. He does not lack for money. But there is one great unfulfilled ambition in his life. His life means nothing, he has told me, unless he can go to the United States and get a Masters degree in English Literature.

Hussein is serious about books. When chewing qat (*catha edulis*, a mildly narcotic plant), most Yemeni men like to chit chat with their friends or just sort of space out. When Hussein chews qat, virtually every afternoon as far as I can tell, he likes to plow through something weighty like The Brothers Karamazov (in English). He says the qat improves his concentration.

After getting his bachelor's degree in English Literature a couple of years ago at Sana'a University, Hussein tried to study

for his Master's at a university in India. After discovering that the students there seemed to have little interest in academics and were always on strike for one reason or another, he returned to Yemen after less than a year.

Now, nothing less than an American school will do for him. He soon made it clear to me that the *quid pro quo* for his helping me find a village was my helping him find an American university. Since I do not exercise a vast amount of influence at American colleges, this continues to be an unsolved problem for me.\*

Hussein and I made our first visit to Bayt al Rabu'i on November 4. We were well received by his relatives. After a light lunch of bread and *bis bas* (peppered milk), we inspected the family's *qat* terraces while one of the sons harvested some leaves, and returned to the family's *mufraj* (traditional Yemeni living room with cushions on the floor and along the walls instead of couches or chairs) for a long late afternoon *qat* session.

Shortly before sunset, Hussein informed me that he had to get back to Sana'a to attend to business matters. This was a surprise. I had expected him to stay with me in the house until at least the next day.

Although Abdullah, the father of the family, had informed me through Hussein that his home was my home, I was quite nervous about being left alone with people I could scarcely talk to. But there was hope this problem could be resolved. Before he left, Hussein told me three Egyptian schoolteachers lived in the neighboring village of Agabat. He was sure I could stay with them. And Egyptians often speak some English, I thought to myself.

I spent a pleasant evening watching television with the family in the *mufraj*. The next morning, I accompanied them to the *sug* (market) in the city of Amran, about 10 kilometers away. That afternoon, I went with the eldest son, Mohamed, to see the Egyptian schoolteachers.

When Mohamed and I drove up to the Egyptians' house in Mohamed's Toyota Land Cruiser, a pajama-clad man came out to talk to us. I had the feeling the Egyptian was not keen on my staying

\* Although a frustrating experience, this business has given me some insight into the "eastern mind." Hussein moans and groans about how he has tried so long to get into an American university and failed. You would think he's spent half his life trying. So one day I finally asked him, how many colleges have you actually applied to? One, he said. It seems some American friend of his had promised Hussein he could get him into a particular university. Hussein sent off the one application and then put aside the four or five from other universities he has laying about his house. In Hussein's world, personal contacts are everything. A man can accomplish little without friends and influence in high places. I have tried to convince him that the best way to get into an American college is to send out at least five applications, thereby guaranteeing at least one acceptance. Hussein's scholastic record, English skills and professional experience should alone do the trick. But he is still obsessed with the idea that the right American can pull the right influence lever and all his problems are solved. Weeks ago, I offered to help him write a letter to the various colleges. I even gave him guidelines on what to say. He has yet to make a move on this. It's been months since Hussein heard from that other American friend, or that college, but he is still sitting around waiting for magic to occur. It's his version of a cargo cult, I guess.



Like most Yemeni highland villages, Bayt al Rabu'i is perched on a mountain slope surrounded by qat terraces. The plain below is reserved for agriculture.

there. After we left, Mohamed confirmed this. We continued on to a small grocery store where we spent the rest of the afternoon chewing qat with the shop owner and some other men. A crowd of children, intrigued by the rare appearance of a foreigner in their village, hung about the entrance the whole time, apparently waiting to see if I would do something wild or eccentric.

The qat chew, as usual, put me in an optimistic frame of mind. But when Mohamed and I returned to the house in Bayt al Rabu'i, I was reminded once more that I had a sticky problem on my hands.

I could tell that Abdullah's wife, Hassina (the sister of Hussein's father), was alarmed about the Egyptians' refusal to let me stay with them. While we settled down for another evening of television viewing, she anxiously quizzed Mohamed about what had transpired. The next morning, she asked me, it was almost like pleading, to speak to Hussein.

I was culturally sensitive enough to perceive the nature of her anxiety. It would just not do for this family to host a male bachelor boarder, and a stranger to boot, in a household where women are present. The women included Hassina herself and Mohamed's wife, as well as female relatives who periodically come to visit. They probably didn't distrust me, or their own women, but what would the neighbors say?

The next morning, I accompanied some family members and neighbors out to one of the family's fields in the plain to harvest sorghum. This is done with small hand-held sickles



Abdullah (on the right), me, and a neighbor man and boy standing in front of one of the Mudahar family's zhura (sorghum) fields we had just finished harvesting. Note the boy's military costume. These outfits, complete with epaulets, ribbons, and medals, are made in the Far East and very popular among small boys (or their parents) in Arab countries.

(mahshash). I had asked Hussein to tell the family that I wanted to work with them in the fields to get a good understanding of Yemeni agriculture. They must have been mystified at this, but gave me a mahshash and bucket and showed me what to do.\*

Sorghum grows on long stalks. The heads, consisting of cones of tightly packed kernals, are at the top. Sorghum closely resembles corn.

To harvest zhura, the Yemenis simply cut off the heads with the mahshash, collecting them first in buckets, then in large burlap bags. The stalks are harvested second and used for animal fodder.

The work is not particularly strenuous, but it is repetitious and tiring. I was intrigued to see small girls, as well as small boys, helping out. The most common agricultural job performed by rural Yemeni women and girls is the tending of

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\* This morning was actually my second experience harvesting zhura. I had also spent a few hours the previous afternoon helping the family. I managed to cut my thumb with the mahshash within the first 10 minutes on that occasion.

animals -- sheep, goats, cows, and donkeys. But I have also seen them performing harvesting and winnowing work. Occasionally, I have seen women working plows. Since such heavy field work is not a traditional woman's job, it indicates a large number of men are away from home working in the Gulf countries.\*

After about two hours' work in the fields, we had a light lunch of bread, bis bas, and tea brought by the women of the family. Then Mohamed drove me out to the main highway where I caught a bus to Sana'a.

I received a few stares from the people on the bus. Besides having done a fair amount of field work, I had not shaved or showered for two days. I have never asked them, but I am pretty sure the Mudahar family members wash themselves out of large bowls only a few times a week. It would have been too much trouble for me to request some water for that purpose.\*\*

Back in Sana'a, I mulled over my situation. It was clear to me there were some very positive factors. Here was a Yemeni peasant family in a small village willing to accept me into their home. They were friendly and hospitable and I had good feelings about them.

The two disadvantages were that I still had no place to stay in the village and had no access to an English-speaking interpreter. I decided I could get around the second problem by improving my Arabic. I had already begun taking a class in Yemeni dialect in Sana'a. As I improved my vocabulary, I could begin to communicate better with the family. So that left just one problem to solve.

On our way to Bayt al Rabu'i, Hussein and I had passed by, on the plain, the West German Al Boun agricultural project. This station, covering about seven hectares, is located about four kilometers north of Bayt al Rabu'i. If the Germans would let me stay with them, I could walk to the village in the afternoons and the family could drive me back at night.

I contacted Dr. Thomas Hartmann, the project director. Hartmann was very friendly and said there would be no problem with my staying at Al Boun. The project has five small houses, equipped with clean running water and electricity, available for project employees. There would be no trouble finding me a room, he said.

Approaching Hussein once more, I asked him to accompany me to the village one more time to see if his relatives agreed to these arrangements. Hussein said okay, but I could tell he was not thrilled with the idea of another trip out there.

Hussein has very little empathy for rural life. As soon as he gets out into the countryside, he wants to hotfoot it back to civilization. He doesn't like it when farmers drive by in their pickup trucks and quiz him about what we are doing out

\* In her Women and Development in the Yemen Arab Republic (Eschborn: German Agency for Technical Cooperation, Ltd. (GTZ), 1979), American anthropologist Cynthia Myntti wrote that "child-bearing and work in the home are the most important traditional roles of city women. In addition to these, rural women play important productive roles in the traditional agricultural economy. Women's work predominates, in fact, where subsistence crops are produced, and they have less extensive tasks in the cultivation of both traditional and modern cash crops."

\*\* Bayt al Rabu'i villagers get their drinking and cooking water from a well pump. But there is no running water in the homes.

there. On our first trip, one farmer actually gave us a ride just so he could question Hussein and drove us away from Bayt al Rabu'i. Hussein was furious about that. Also, I've noticed that taxi drivers frequently try to swindle him, but usually treat me fairly.\*

Hussein and I made our second visit on November 13. Hussein explained to the family that I would sleep at the German project and visit them in the afternoons about three days each week. They agreed to drive me back in the evenings.

My main obligation was to teach the youngest son, Yahya, 15, some English. This idea came up somewhere in the various conversations back and forth. I latched onto it eagerly because it gave me a role to perform in the village. I figured that if I just hung around, I would get on people's nerves. By teaching Yahya English, I had an actual task to perform when I visited the family.

Indeed, that was a fortuitous development. As the weeks went by, Yahya became my closest friend in the family. While working on English, I learned some Arabic from him. Because he understood the limitations of my Arabic better than the other family members, my communication with him was much more successful than with the others. He became my major source of information.

But I perceived a problem in this too. Unlike Americans, who cater to the needs of their children, Arabs maintain a strict hierarchical structure in their families. This structure is based on age and sex. One can see it in action at mealtimes.

The father of the family is lord of the table. The women serve him the largest and best portions of food. He parcels the precious meat out to the other members. As the family's youngest member, Yahya is the one delegated to fetch water for washing hands and assist the women in bringing the dishes. He is rarely given any meat. He finishes before the other sons and helps the women clear away the dishes.

When the family gathers in the mufraj to watch television, Yahya has to fetch tea, snacks, cushions and whatnot. Only if there is another youngster about, perhaps a relative over for a visit, can Yahya evade these duties.

By allying myself with the most insignificant member of the family, I placed myself in a weak position. It's hard to describe something as intangible as this, but I could feel it was a problem. During my visits to the family, I spent most of my time talking to Yahya in the mufraj. I felt isolated from the rest of the family.

Sometimes I would approach the village and find Abdullah and Ali, the second youngest son, working in a field. I would stop to watch them, maybe try my hand at working the plow. But it would not be long before Abdullah would inform me that rhada (lunch) was waiting for me fi'l bayt (at the house). Once Yahya arrived

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\* There might be a racial element to this. Arabs are proud of their tribal and religious heritage. Yemeni blacks, most of whom live in the coastal Tihama region, are looked down upon. Those in Sana'a tend to be relegated to low status jobs, like street sweeping. Hussein is related to the Mudahar family and is in very good standing with them, particularly since he helped them purchase a well pump. But he doesn't look the least bit Arab. Yahya mentioned to me one day that Hussein was nuss Habashi (half Ethiopian) wa nuss Yemeni. He didn't say that in a negative way; he was just stating a fact.

home from school, it was back to the mufraj.

Then this business of the khazan (water tank) started. One afternoon after lunch, Mohamed began talking about how nice it would be if the village had its own khazan. He gave me the dimensions needed for the tank (10 meters by 7 meters and 4 meters high). He asked me if I could ask the American embassy for such a tank. The villagers could install it themselves, he said.\*

I could see many pitfalls ahead if I got snared into this. If I tried to help them and failed, my status with the family and village would plummet. And it did seem unlikely I could do much to help them. But how could I refuse?

I told Mohamed I would talk to the Americans but cautioned him that getting the village a water tank was a momkin, mush momkin (maybe; maybe not) proposition.

To make a long story short, I contacted the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and they put me in touch with TransCentury Corp., a USAID-owned company that builds water projects in North Yemen.

On January 2, I took Mohamed to see a TransCentury official. This man, a Yemeni, said there was a good chance of Bayt al Rabu'i getting a khazan if it met the criteria. It appears the village does.

Mohamed must now write a petition and have the villagers sign it.\*\* The petition must be approved by several layers of the Yemeni government bureaucracy. TransCentury builds its projects at the behest of the Yemeni Ministry of Public Works.

I do not know what will happen now. It's up to Mohamed and the villagers to get that petition together and nurse it through the bureaucracy.

But at least I've done all I can for Bayt al Rabu'i in the matter of the khazan. I would expect that my status in the village will have improved when I return next week.

On the other hand, if the petition is a failure ...

Now you have an idea of what it's like trying to do a village study.

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\* The various foreign aid missions in Yemen tend to specialize in certain areas. The Communist Chinese build roads, the Russians supply military hardware, the British concentrate on health projects (human and veterinary), the French supply teachers, the West Germans have agricultural projects, and the Americans are known for water projects. In the early 1960s, the Americans built a water system in the southern city of Taiz, the first in the whole country. They are currently active in rural water projects. Mohamed knew this. The Americans had already installed a water tank in Harab al Souda, a village adjacent to Bayt al Rabu'i.

\*\* Yahya is the only literate member of the Mudahar family, so I expect he will actually write the petition.

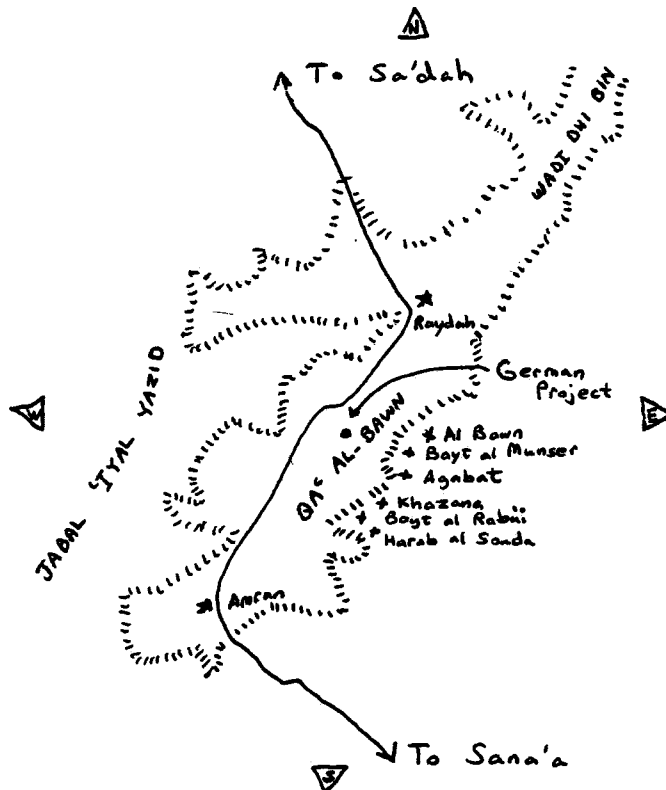


## II. The Valley

Driving north from the Sana'a plateau, one begins to ascend a range of hills consisting of black, volcanic rock. Coming down on the other side, one can distinguish the sprawling small city of Amran and beyond it a wide valley stretching into the northern horizon.

The valley is the Qa'al Bawn (Qa is Arabic for "plain," but note that the Arabic letter qaf has a hard "g" sound in Yemeni dialect), one of the richest agricultural areas in the Yemeni highlands. Situated some 2,200 meters above sea level, the valley has an area of some 26,000 ha., if you include the spurs and lower slopes of the surrounding mountains. These mountains rise a further 500 to 1,150 meters above the plain.

Two large settlements plug up the ends of the valley, Amran on the southern side, and Raydah on the north. Both are located on the Chinese-built asphalt highway leading north to Sa'dah. It's about 60 kilometers from Sana'a to Amran, 20 kilometers from Amran to Raydah, and a further 140 kilometers to Sa'dah.



The Qa'al Bawn can play tricks on the eyes. From the road leading into Amran, the valley appears as a bowl of whitish, cream-colored dust. From the eastern slopes, at Bayt al Rabu'i, it appears as a yellow, brown, and green checkerboard of cultivated fields.



Parts of the Qa'al Bawn are so dry that men can make more money selling the soil, for use as building material, than farming it. This sophisticated operation utilizes bulldozers and trucks.

Walking through the valley, one finds that both views are partially correct. There are large cultivated fields, particularly near the sites of well pumps, but also vast tracts of barren ground. One cannot pass through the valley in a vehicle without churning up clouds of very fine dust. In the afternoons, miniature whirlwinds spot the landscape, raising funnels of dust into the empty blue sky.

West German agricultural experts have classified the Qa'al Bawn as a "semi-arid region." Rainfall is only about 200 mm a year.\*

Some parts of the valley, in fact, are useless for agricultural purposes. Men with bulldozers and dumptrucks are busy digging up this dirt to sell in Sana'a or Amran for building purposes. Sometimes they work until 9 or 10 p.m.

And yet, the Qa'al Bawn has been farmed since time immemorial. The wheat from this region used to be famous in Yemen and has been celebrated in a popular song.

This was a subsistence agriculture based on sorghum, wheat, barley, and lentils. Traditional Yemeni agricultural technology allowed the farmers to grow their crops on the small amount of rain that did come.

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\* Lippmann, Dieter. The Al Baun Project: Its Situation and Activities. Eschborn: German Agency for Technical Cooperation, 1983.



After they have plowed a field, Qa'al Bawn farmers often use a maharr (a board with metal pegs underneath) to smooth out the ground turned up by the plow.

The farmers would cultivate natural depressions in the valley. These depressions collected some surface flow after the rains. Water channels (masqi) were dug to divert the water to fields. Dry wells were sometimes dug to collect subterranean water. Alfalfa, onions, qat, coffee, or grapes might then be grown.

The system was susceptible to drought. In a bad year, the winter wheat and barley might fail to mature and the harvest consist only of grasses for fodder.

Given these limitations, the German agricultural experts believe that traditional Yemeni techniques for rain-fed farming could scarcely be improved upon. I accompanied one of these Germans one day to a village west of Amran. He was very excited about the manner in which the villagers had constructed water channels out from a major wadi (a stream bed that is dry except during the rainy season) to irrigate their terraces.

At another time, this man told me he had read somewhere that the Queen of Sheba might have brought knowledge of these South Arabian engineering techniques to King Solomon's court. "What are we doing here, then?" he asked.

If traditional Yemeni farming methods are well suited to the ecology of the highlands,\* the introduction of well pumps and all-year-round irrigation has brought new threats to the ecology, as well as new opportunities for the farmers.

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\* Anthropologist Daniel Martin Varisco argues persuasively for this in a recent study of the al Ahjur valley, located about 20 kilometers southwest of the Qa'al Bawn ("Irrigation in an Arabian Valley" in Expedition, Winter 1983).



Although tractors are used in the Qa'al Bawn, traditional plowing methods are more common. This scene could have occurred thousands of years ago. The man maneuvers his single-bladed plow through the soil while the woman scatters wheat seeds in the furrows.

The primary limitation on Qa'al Bawn agriculture has always been scarcity of water. The Germans pointed out to me the many positive factors, such as direct sunlight all year round, a soil that can be greatly improved by using nitrogen-based fertilizers, and the fact that nighttime frosts are a problem for only a few months out of the year. Solve the water problem and Yemen could be agriculturally self-sufficient, they said.

A tremendous step forward was taken about 1968 when farmers began using diesel motor pumps to extract water from their wells. This mechanical irrigation led to the increased production of alfalfa, qat, vegetables, and fruits. It also enabled the farmers to take advantage of new high-yield wheat introduced by the Germans and other foreign aid missions.

Today, when you stand at almost any spot in the valley, you can hear the steady chug-chug of the motor pumps echoing across the plain. Well pumps have become one of the major sources of rural investment for men flush with money returning from the Gulf oil countries.

The Mudahar family owns part shares in two well pumps near Bayt al Rabu'i. Although they still grow sorghum and wheat on dry fields, they have experimented with new crops, such as potatoes, high-yield wheat, melons, and tomatoes, on their irrigated fields. The money that allowed them to make this investment comes from Saudi Arabia.

Mohamed, the eldest son, spent 15 years working in Saudi Arabia. Two sons, Ahmed and Muduhar, are there now, working in the construction business.

This story repeats itself all across the valley.

At the beginning of December, I accompanied an Egyptian extension agent working for the Germans on his rounds of some villages north of Raydah. We visited three farmers. All of them were considered "leading" farmers, both because of their readiness to adopt new seeds and techniques and because of their relative wealth. They all owned part shares in well pumps and had extensive irrigated fields.

Farmer number one had two sons working in Saudi Arabia. Farmer number two had a brother working there. He said he and his brother switch off going to Saudi Arabia and staying on the farm. Farmer number three said he did not have any sons, but he goes to Saudi Arabia himself for six months out of every year to drive a truck and bulldozer.

For Yemeni farmers, investment in a well pump is an expensive proposition, even if they only have part shares. The usual procedure is to hire a company to drill the well. Since the Yemenis never bother with scientific geological surveys, the company simply parks its truck and drilling apparatus where the farmer wants his well and starts drilling. It's on a pay-as-you-go basis. If the company doesn't find water, they try somewhere else — if the farmer can still afford it.

The usual cost for drilling the well and installing the diesel pump is about 250,000 YR (the current exchange rate is 4.90 YR to the dollar). Then come maintenance and fuel costs.

It is unclear as to what the farmer gets in return for his investment, whether his increased income from new cash crops pays off the cost of the well pump. Since Qa'al Bawn farmers have been installing these well pumps since the mid-1960s, one must assume they are getting a good return on their investments.

But a 1977 German project study of the valley found a continuing high rate of domestic consumption of harvests. The only significant cash crop was qat.\*

There is certainly no doubt that the traditional Qa'al Bawn economy, based on subsistence farming, would never have supported these investments. It would be fair to say that the underpinning for the current prosperity in the valley is the 1970s oil boom in the Gulf states.

When the oil money runs out, the future of the Qa'al Bawn is likely to be bleak. One of the Germans told me that one day, thousands of years from now, archaeologists will be digging tractors, motor pumps, and Datsun pickup trucks out of the sand and marvelling at the prosperous agriculture that once existed in the valley.

One concern of the German experts is the drop in the water table. They suspect that the limits of well pump irrigation in the valley may have already been reached.

The German project currently utilizes one well pump, although it has plans to install a second one. The water level at this pump has dropped from 35 to 47 meters in the past four years.

It is not unusual in the Qa'al Bawn to find water levels of 150 meters, or more. As the wells get deeper, the

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\* A good summary of the various Qa'al Bawn studies can be found in Yemeni Agriculture and Economic Change: Case Studies of Two Highland Regions (Sana'a: American Institute of Yemeni Studies, 1981) by anthropologists Richard Tutwiler and Sheila Carapico.



Because of the high level of male migration to the oil countries, it is very common in the Qa'al Bawn to see women performing non-traditional farming tasks. This one is operating a maharr. I have also seen women operating plows.

cost of extracting the water increases. Of the two well pumps the Mudahar family partly owns, one has a water level at 80 meters. The other well is 97 meters deep, so the water level is somewhat above that.

The Germans complain that the farmers do not use the precious water efficiently. It seems that the usual mistake is to use too much water at too infrequent intervals.

One morning when Mohamed came to pick me up at the German project, I introduced him to the horticultural expert. Through an interpreter, Mohamed asked the German about his potato crop. Mohamed had been irrigating the field every 16 days. The horticulturist told him every 10 days would be better.

Another time, I accompanied this same German to look at some roman (a type of fruit) trees in a village near Amran. Most of the trees were doing very poorly. One grower said he irrigated his roman trees at the same time he watered his alfalfa. The German told him that was insufficient.

As the Qa'al Bawn farmers become more familiar with irrigated farming, this situation should improve. But the continuing scarcity of water will probably never be solved to the extent that the Qa'al Bawn can support an export-oriented agriculture.

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Tribalism is still strong in the Qa'al Bawn. A Yemeni official working at the German project has complained to me that the locals pay more attention to their sheikhs (tribal leaders)

than they do to government officials such as himself.

A recent incident at the German project demonstrates the continuing strength of tribal bonds. A laborer got into a dispute with another laborer over a very trivial matter and shot him. The victim was not killed, but the laborer ended up spending about three months in jail. Since he is a very poor man, his tribe got together to pay the 20,000 YR the police were asking for incarceration costs.\* An incident like that can help the foreigner understand why many Yemenis have such pride in their tribal identities.

But Bayt al Rabu'i itself does not have a functioning sheikh, because some time ago the villagers decided that "every man should be his own sheikh." I asked Yahya who the kabir (big) sheikh was for the whole area. His first response was hakuma Raydah (government office in Raydah). Only after some reflection, did Yahya mention a Sheikh Salih Mohamed Firas living in a village called Theyfan.

This indicates to me that, at least in the Bayt al Rabu'i area, tribal affiliations are not as important as they once were. Yahya has told me that during the civil war, the villagers supported the imam, which means they followed their sheikhs. But nowadays, everybody is for the republic, he said.

Most of the Qa'al Bawn is inhabited by tribes of the Bakil confederation, the largest in Yemen. Tribes in a confederation are allied, but essentially independent.

The eastern edge of the valley, including Bayt al Rabu'i, is held by the 'Iyal Surayh tribe. Another Bakil tribe, the 'Iyal Yazid, dominates the western edge of the valley, as well as the plateau to the west of the Qa'al Bawn known as Jabal 'Iyal Yazid.

The area north of Raydah belongs to tribes of the Hashid confederation, the second largest confederation in Yemen. From the 7th century until 1918, Amran was a Hashid hijira, or place where tribal conflicts are adjudicated.

During the second Turkish occupation of Yemen (1871-1918), the Hashid sheikhs in Amran sided with the Turks against the Yemeni imams. When the Turks left the country in 1918, the Hashid moved their hijira to Kahmir, a town north of the Qa'al Bawn.

Although Amran was a major Turkish center, the villages of the Qa'al Bawn apparently saw little of the Turks. In Bayt al Rabu'i, at least, people are proud that the Turks never entered their village.

Tribal ideology is reflected in landholding patterns in the valley. Virtually every tribesman family farms its own land. There are few large estates run by absentee landlords.

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\* One prominent feature of the Yemeni judicial system is the enormous fines paid for the privilege of hitting, stabbing, or shooting someone else. This might be one reason the Yemenis don't appear to indulge in that much violent crime, despite the fact that virtually all men carry knives (the janbiyya dagger) and guns. A French priest I know has a Yemeni acquaintance who was shot by his own brother in a trivial dispute and put in the hospital. The Yemeni court decreed that the errant brother pay his own father 20,000 YR and the government 10,000 YR "for the common good." This government does need all the money it can get.

I have visited two large estates with the German extension agents. One was owned by the family of former Yemeni president Ibrahim al Hamdi (assassinated in 1977, his fourth year in office). It comprised a 1,200 libna farm and 200 libna fruit tree garden northwest of Raydah.\* All of it was irrigated. The workmen said they keep part of the harvests and send the rest to al Hamdi family members in Sana'a.

The other estate was a few kilometers north of the German project. It belonged to a Sheikh Abdullah Bin Mussein from Khamir. A man working in the fields said this particular irrigated parcel covered 1,000 libna. There was another parcel nearby, but he did not know how large it was.

The Mudahar family has about 1,800 libna. But I estimate that only about 300 libna of that is irrigated. Irrigated land, where yields are much higher than on rain-fed ground, is the real test of rural wealth in the Qa'al Bawn.

When they harvest crops, the Mudahar family does employ men, women, and children from other families, who get a share of the harvest. But I'm sure these people are not "sharecroppers" in the sense of full-time renters on a piece of land. Because of the heavy migration to Saudi Arabia, there is a labor shortage in the Qa'al Bawn, as in the rest of Yemen. I would imagine a lot of farmers hire themselves out to other farmers at harvest time.

\* \* \*

Religious diversity is not a feature of the Qa'al Bawn. Most inhabitants belong to the Zaydi branch of Shi'a-Islam. The Zaydi tribesmen have been the traditional rulers of Yemen. From the northern highlands, they have been able to dominate the Sunni Shafi'is concentrated in the southern and coastal regions.\*\*

I am not aware of any non-Zaydi Muslims in the valley.

There are some Jews, though. Most of Yemen's ancient Jewish community left the country after 1948. But a few remain in isolated spots.

Some are in Raydah, at the north end of the Qa'al Bawn. I was having supper at a restaurant in Raydah one evening when I saw a young boy walking by on the street. He wore a typical full-length Yemeni robe and skullcap, but his hair came down on both sides of his head in the long side curls traditionally worn by Jewish men in Yemen.

One day at the German project, some of the Yemeni laborers kidded me about how they could find a Jewish wife for me. The interesting thing about their remarks was that they referred not to Jews living in Raydah, but to some living in nearby villages.

The remaining Yemeni Jews are a very mysterious people. They have no public visibility in the country at all. A government tourist brochure says the Yemeni people "are all Moslems."

They must be one of the loneliest minorities in the world.

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\* The libna is the term for land measurement used in the Qa'al Bawn. It equals about 64 square meters. Extension agents working for the West Germans complain that local farmers are never very precise when counting up their libna. The figures never seem to tally. I have similar problems trying to figure out the Mudahar family holdings.

\*\* Zaydism is closer to Sunnism in belief in practice than other Shi'i sects. There is little mysticism or belief in "hidden" or semi-divine



### III. The Village

My visits to Bayt al Rabu'i usually last three or four days. I will take taxis from Sana'a to the German project, typically arriving on a Thursday afternoon. Thursday night I spend at one of the German project houses brushing up on my Arabic.

The next morning, I'll get up around seven, make myself some tea or coffee, have some breakfast brought from Sana'a, and then stroll around the project perimeter. It's a nice walk. There are farms beyond the fence and you can watch the Yemenis plowing their fields or grazing their sheep.

Friday is an Arab holiday, so there is usually nobody around on that morning except me. But on Saturday mornings, the Germans and their extension agents arrive from Sana'a around 7 a.m. Then I have plenty of people to talk to. Sometimes I'll accompany the extension agents on their morning rounds.

About noon, I get ready to walk to Bayt al Rabu'i.

I time it so that my appearance at the Mudakar family house coincides with both lunch and Yahya's return from school. Lunch was part of the original agreement worked out by Hussein. It's fortunate for me, because my house at the German project has only a small butane burner, property of the Sudanese extension agent who lives in the house with me. Trying to prepare a decent meal with that would be impossible and trying to catch a taxi to Raydah for meals would be a tremendous hassle.

As it is, the large lunch I have with the family holds me for the whole day, except for light morning and evening snacks.

I set off out the project gates with a knapsack containing my camera, a jacket, and a sweater. By the time I return in the evening it will be quite chilly.

The Yemeni winter doesn't seem like winter during the day, when one can stroll about in short sleeves. I think my walk to the village would be downright unpleasant during the Yemeni summer. But right now, the temperature is almost ideal.

There are roads of sorts crisscrossing the plain. They are no more than dirt tracks skirting the edges of the cultivated fields. In some parts, the dirt is such an incredibly fine powder that clouds of it rise up wherever you plant your feet. Needless to say, a truck passing by leaves you in a fog of the stuff.

This is also the time of day when those miniature twisters appear. I've been caught by one a couple of times. The whirlwind bears down on you and next thing you know, a vortex of angry dust is beating about you. Seconds later, it's sweeping away to dissipate in a nearby field, almost as if its controlling force had suddenly evaporated.

Another interesting feature of the plain is the flocks of vultures.

If you haven't actually seen a vulture, you can't be prepared for the enormity of these monsters. Their tilted water jug-shaped bodies are the size of small dogs, and their wingspans approximate a boy's outstretched arms. When they beat



The Mudahar family House in Bayt al Rabu'i. The use of cement blocks instead of cut stone is a recent house-building innovation in the area.

through the air, there sounds not only the leaden flap-flap of their brown feathered wings, but also the chilling whoosh whoosh of heavy masses plowing through the atmosphere.

There are areas of the plain where the local farmers dump their dead or dying farm animals. The time I saw the vultures up close, a flock of about 50 of them was feeding on a donkey carcass. At my approach, they scattered reluctantly and angrily.

When I first began making this walk to the village, I attracted a certain amount of attention from people living along the route. One man left his plow and hurried over to tell me about his irrigation problems. He looked slightly disgusted when I told him I was not a khabir ziraa allemania (German agricultural expert).

Other people, particularly children, would call out after me when I passed by. People in the valley are very nosy. When they see a stranger, they want to know who he is, where he's going and what he's going to do when he gets there. I always have an easy way out of these inquisitions, though. I can just shrug my shoulders and say ma'ara'fsha arabi (I don't know Arabic).

Now that my weekly trek through their territory is less of a novelty, I get less attention from the locals. By the time I get to Bayt al Rabu'i, where everybody knows me, people hardly look up from their work.

The walk from the German project to the village is about four kilometers. Most of the time I head due south. When I draw parallel with the mountain slope upon which Bayt al Rabu'i sits, I cut in towards it, heading east.



A view of Bayt al Rabu'i showing more traditional structures built of cut stone or just rocks stacked together. There are houses, animal pens, and granaries in the picture.

Some of the best agricultural land in this part of the valley is close to the mountain slope. There are several well pumps here, for one thing. Also, this land is the first to get runoff from the slopes when it rains. There are fields of sorghum, wheat, alfalfa, potatoes, and vegetables.

When you begin moving out of the plain and up the rocky slope, you encounter mostly qat terraces. Qat is very susceptible to cold, so it grows best on mountain sides, usually in walled terraces, where it is protected from the winds. Many of these terraces are irrigated from well pumps located high up on the slope.\*

Yemeni villages tend to be constructed out of the materials present in their immediate locales. Bayt al Rabu'i sits on a mountain of black and grey volcanic rock. Most of its buildings were built of that stone, so the village blends right into the mountain side. It appears as a rather harsh, somber,

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\* Qat is, far and away, the most lucrative cash crop in the area. A Bayt al Rabu'i farmer once sold two or three rows of his qat bushes for 90,000 YR, the highest price anyone there can remember. A farmer has two methods of selling his qat. He can harvest and market the leaves himself, or he can sell the harvest to an outsider. The buyer then harvests and markets the crop. The Mudahar family uses this second method. They have about 100 libna in qat. I've noticed that much of it is used for home consumption, mostly by Mohamed. Abdullah and Ali seem to have less interest in qat and Yahya is too young.

and colorless environment.

The villagers themselves dress somberly. The women are always draped in black. Mohamed's wife varies that a bit by wearing a light green sweater, every day. The young girls often wear dark red dresses with gold trim. All the women wear pants, usually black, under their dresses.

The men will usually wear a white tribal gown with a grey western suit jacket. These jackets are often of very good quality cloth. Abdullah has a light blue one that he wears when going to town. Some of the boys in the village, such as Yahya, have taken to wearing pants. Yahya's best outfit is a tan corduroy suit with matching pants and jacket. It is always very dirty though. Yemeni villagers seem to wear their clothes several days before washing them.

Bayt al Rabu'i sits on the mountain slope surrounded by two other villages of similar size. Khazana is just north of it; Harab al Souda just south of it.

Bayt al Rabu'i comprises about 50 houses and about 275 inhabitants. There are six major families in the village. Harab al Souda has about 400 people, 65 houses, and 10 major families. Khazana has about 150 people, 25 houses, and four major families. All of those numbers are approximate.

One can assume from these figures that the average household size is about five or six people.\* The figures on 'major families' indicate a high level of intermarriages among related people.

'Arabs in general are thought to be endogamous, that is they prefer to marry within their group, however that be defined,' wrote Cynthia Myntti. 'The preferred marriage -- patrilateral parallel cousin or Ibn 'amm (son of paternal uncle) -- is the closest one can marry within the patrilateral group without violating incest prohibitions.'

Bayt al Rabu'i literally means 'the house of al Rabu'i,' indicating the village began as one family's residence. Many Yemeni villages have 'bayt' in their names. It is very likely that most of the present-day villagers are descended from this al Rabu'i, except for those who married into these families from other villages.

I have asked Yahya how long ago this al Rabu'i lived. He did not know. Could be hundreds or thousands of years, he said.

Most of my information about the village is speculative because I spend all my time with the Mudahar family. I briefly visited one other house, but gathered no information there.

I do know some things. There is no telephone service in the village. The only telephones in the entire Qa'al Bawn are in Amran and Raydah.

There is no postal service. The only post offices in the

\* According to the 1975 census, average household size in the Amran area is 6.3 persons.

Yemeni censuses are notoriously inaccurate. The government seems to fudge the data to make the country appear poorer than it really is, and therefore more eligible for foreign aid. This makes other figures suspect. The official per capita income of the country is \$460. But the West German embassy estimates the figure to be closer to \$1,200.

The upcoming 1985 census is expected to be more accurate than previous ones.



These men are winnowing sorghum by throwing it against screens. The first step is to crush the sorghum heads under the wheels of a tractor. Using the screens is the second step. Finally, the men stand on upended barrels and dump buckets of crushed sorghum onto a tarpulin. The wind separates out the remaining chaff from the kernals. Harab al Souda is in the background.

country are located in the major cities. I doubt you could mail a letter to anyone living in Bayt al Rabu'i.

Only two houses in the village have electricity. The Mudahar house is one. They each have their own private generator. The Mudahars' generator cost about 4,000 YR. It is turned on just before dark. At night, several neighbor children and a few adults come over to the house to watch television.

The Yemeni government has succeeded in electrifying the major cities and towns. But in the countryside, electricity is usually privately owned.

The village children have access to a primary school in Agabat, a village of about 500 people located about two kilometers to the north. This school contains grades one to six. About 150 pupils are taught by three Egyptian teachers. The villagers of the area have provided the teachers and their wives with a small house near the school. I know two boys from Bayt al Rabu'i attending this school. Yahya is one.\*

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\* I went with Yahya to look at the school one day. The wife of one of the teachers, a large woman in a cream-colored dress with a scarf around her head but no mouth veil was sitting on the steps talking to two veiled, black-draped Yemeni women. The Egyptian woman waved us over to have some tea. Yahya was reluctant to go. Aw come on, I said. While we were drinking our tea, the Egyptian woman gaily plied Yahya with questions about me while the Yemeni women stared at me over their mouth veils. Yahya finished his tea quickly and looked uncomfortable the whole time. A Yemeni woman would never be so bold with a foreigner such as myself, even if she was consumed with curiosity.



Using the wind to separate out sorghum chaff. Note the woman at the left. Village women play a major role in harvest work. This one is veiled, but probably to keep out the dust. Yemeni village women frequently go about unveiled. Veiling, strangely enough, is considered a "citified" and modern custom, and a sign of class status. Wealthy urban families keep their women the most secluded.

Unlike Egypt, which has an extensive system of village doctors, Yemen has medical facilities only in the cities and large towns. There are few doctors in the country, and almost all of them are foreigners.

Bayt al Rabu'i is fortunate in that it is not as isolated as many Yemeni villages. Amran is only a half hour's drive away. Several doctors practice there.

Yahya had a bad accident one evening. He was going to shellac a window frame. He wasn't sure if his can of polish was empty, so he held a match in front of the round hole at the top to look inside. The resulting flash of flame scorched the right side of his face. He was very fortunate that his eye was not damaged.

The next morning, he was taken to a doctor in Amran who **treated the burn** and applied a gauze bandage. The doctor also gave Yahya various medicines to combat infection.

If this incident had occurred before the 1962 revolution, when you could scarcely find a doctor in the entire country, Yahya would have been in bad shape.

The villagers are also fortunate in that they have access to clean drinking water. About 20 percent of the country's population does not.

Bayt al Rabu'i's water comes from a well pump high up on the slope. Pipes lead to various places in the village. When the water is turned on at certain times of the day, the women



Yemeni farmers also use the wind to separate out wheat chaff, as these men here are doing. Yemeni agriculture is very labor-intensive, which is a problem when so many village men work outside the country.

uncap the pipes and fill up their water jugs.

The villagers would like to install a holding tank (khazan) so that the women could take the water any time during the day. Harab al Souda, which has its own well pump, has a khazan. Khazana has its own well too, but no holding tank.\*

The Dayt al Rabu'i well pump is co-owned by seven men, one of whom is Abdullah Mudahar. It was installed about three years ago at a cost of about 300,000 YR.

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\* Khazan is an Arabic noun meaning "'storeroom'" and can refer to a granary or a water tank. Khazzan is a verb meaning "'to store something'" in modern standard Arabic, but in Yemeni dialect it means "'to chew qat.'" The reason for this is that the ball of masticated leaves is stored in the cheek. We know that the village of Khazana did not get its name because of a water tank, so it must have something to do with a storehouse, for grain perhaps. It seems far-fetched, but "'Khazana'" could also be a reference to all the qat terraces nearby.

#### IV. The Family

When you ascend the slope to Bayt al Rabu'i, on a rocky path winding between qat terraces, the first house you come to belongs to the Mudahar family.

The house would not get a passing glance from a camera-carrying tourist. In a country where many rural stone houses rise up several stories from their mountain tops like medieval castles, the Mudahar house appears utterly utilitarian. It is a squarish one story structure built of concrete blocks.

Other houses in the village are built of cut stone, rise at least two stories high, and sometimes have attached circular buildings that look like castle turrets. The only distinctly Yemeni feature of the Mudahar house is the semi-circle stained glass windows along the upper portion of the mufraj.

But that's an important aspect of the Mudahar family -- compared to some of their more traditional neighbors, they are modern-minded folks. They are one of only two families in the village with electricity and a television set. They own a Toyota Land Cruiser, being one of the few village families with a vehicle. They own part shares in two well pumps, a new irrigation technology that arrived in the Qa'al Bawn only 15 years ago. They now have one son, Yahya, attending primary school, thereby demonstrating their appreciation of the value of education.

They are progressive farmers as well. Altogether, they own about 1,800 libna of farm land. Most of that is rain-fed sorghum. The family continues to plant, harvest and winnow their sorghum crop much as their ancestors have for millenia. They have smaller fields of rain-fed wheat, which they also farm by traditional methods.

But on their approximately 300 libna of irrigated land, Abdullah and Mohamed have shown a willingness to experiment. They have grown tomatoes, potatoes, melons, and new high-yield wheat (they call this burr allemania, or "'German wheat,'" because the German extension agents introduced it to the area) on this irrigated land. All of these crops are new to the valley.

They have had their problems. Abdullah has tried three times to grow melons. Each time, his crop was ruined by insects. He planted his tomatoes too late this year and they were prematurely killed off by frost. Mohamed's potatoes have not grown as big as they should have because he irrigated them too infrequently. But their irrigated wheat, alfalfa, and qat all seem to be doing well.

Most of the family's problems with irrigated farming should be resolved over time. Their two well pumps have been operating for only a few years.

They show a willingness to take advice. Mohamed recently talked to one of the German experts about his potato crop. He seemed to take the German's suggestions seriously. Mohamed asked if he should continue to water his potatoes to make them bigger. The horticulturist told him he should harvest immediately because of the lateness of the season -- further irrigation would be a waste. A couple of weeks later, Mohamed harvested the potatoes and took them to Sana'a to sell.





Three of the Mudahar brothers. Yahya is second to the left, Ali is holding the baby (which I think belongs to one of the brothers working in Saudi Arabia) and Mohamed is next to Ali. The other three men were helping the family winnow their sorghum crop that day. The man on the far right, Ahmed, is a frequent visitor to the Mudahar mufraj. He always wears that same Air Yemania T-shirt. I have often wondered if it's the only shirt he has, or just a prized possession.

One can speculate that experience of the outside world has something to do with the family's modernism. Mohamed, 30, the eldest son, spent 15 years working in Saudi Arabia. I believe he is the one who bought the Toyota Land Cruiser in Saudi Arabia and brought it back to the house.

Two sons, Mudahar, 27, and Ahmed, 21, are now working in the Saudi Arabian construction business. Their continued remittances must play a major role in the family's current prosperity.

Yahya, 15, the youngest son, is the first family member to attend school. His world view is rapidly expanding beyond the stone walled qat terraces of Bayt al Rabu'i.

The only son to follow Abdullah in the traditional life is Ali, 17. The family apparently decided that someone had to stay on the farm to help Abdullah with the field work.

The Mudahar household is best described as an extended family household. Mohamed and his wife live in the house with their two small children, Bushra (about a year or two old) and Ibrahim (maybe six months), and have a room of their own.

In this respect, the Mudahar family is typical of rural Yemeni families.

"The ideal household form in rural Yemen has been the extended, patrilocal household," wrote Tutwiler and Carapico. "Sons marry and bring their wives to live, and their children are raised among paternal grandparents, uncles, uncles' wives, and children. Daughters are married into another house, but usually retain the right to return to their father's house."

At present, the Mudahar household contains eight people. They are: Abdullah and his wife, Hassina; Mohamed and his wife (I don't know her name) with Bushra and Ibrahim; Ali; and Yahya.

Abdullah and Hassina also have two daughters. But my information on one is very scanty, on the other nonexistent. Getting information about Yemeni women is exceedingly difficult. It is considered impolite to even inquire about their names. I have heard that in urban centers, it is not unusual for a Yemeni man to never even see the wife of his best friend, so secluded are the women. Hussein instructed me to never address or even look at women I encounter in the village.

Even though Hassina is his aunt ('amma, or sister of his father), Hussein does not know the name of Mohamed's wife or the name of one of Hassina's daughters. That's the daughter I have no information about, except that she lives in another household and is thus married.

The only reason Hussein knows the name of one daughter, Amina, is that there had been negotiations a few years ago for Hussein to marry Amina. Hussein balked at the brideprice, which now can be as much as 150,000 YR, or even more for a woman from a wealthy family.\* Hussein married an Ethiopian woman (and probably paid little or nothing) instead.

Amina visited the house one day. She is a rather pretty girl. When Ali drove me back to the German project that evening, Amina rode with us. Ali dropped her off at her home in Bayt al Munser, a small village just north of Agabat.

I actually do see a good bit of Hassina and Mohamed's wife. Sometimes when I arrive at the house in the afternoons, the men are out in the fields and Yahya still at school. The two women are usually present to usher me into the mufraj and serve me some tea before the men return home for lunch. I exchange pleasantries with them and inquire about various matters. There is no problem with that. But I never have any direct, sustained contact with them.

They do not wear mouth veils when working around the house, by the way. But when Hassina takes the cow down to the water

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\* The high brideprices in Yemen are the bane of Yemeni society, a national scandal, if you will. Known as the defa'a, this is the money the husband pays to the bride's father. The father supposedly keeps it to hold in case his daughter leaves her husband. But, in practice, it appears the family uses the money to help marry their sons. The bride receives between one-tenth and one-half of the defa'a as her personal wealth. This is called the mahr. The defa'a seems to have become a victim of Yemen's galloping inflation rate. As recently as 1972, the average defa'a in Sana'a was only about \$1,350. A muwaldin friend of Hussein's, now serving in the Yemeni army, told me his fellow soldiers are obsessed about the problem of finding enough money to buy themselves wives. They talk about nothing else, he said. For the women, it seems the defa'a is a form of personal security in a world where men hold all other important power.

pump, or leaves the house for another type of errand, she will slip on a veil. I have occasionally encountered her on the paths and been unsure it was her, until later when she returned to the house.

My most frequent contact with Hassina and Mohamed's wife is during meals. They bring in the various dishes and sometimes eat with the men.

The family's matbakh (kitchen) is a small room attached to the main house. It has only one door, no windows, and a few ventilation holes just under the roof. When the women are working in there, it is filled with smoke. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them asphyxiates herself one day.

Poorly ventilated kitchens are one of the most dreadful features of domestic Yemeni architecture. Anthropologists and others who have been in Yemeni kitchens say this is a problem throughout the highlands. One wonders if the Yemeni mania for keeping the women hidden doesn't have something to do with this.

The food that comes out of this matbakh is very good, though. I enjoy Yemeni food. The Yemenis spice their food more than the Egyptians.

On the other hand, rural Egyptians have more access to vegetables than do rural Yemenis. The meals I have at the Mudahar house are virtually 90 percent starch.

I have seen only two vegetables used in these meals -- scallions, eaten separately and tomatoes, used in sauces.

The first dish served at rhada (lunch) is 'asid. Most books define 'asid as 'sorghum porridge.' But I have asked several times if 'asid is made of zhura (sorghum). No, it's burr (wheat), says the Mudahar family.

The Mudahar women process the wheat into a thick dough. Meat juice, usually chicken, is poured over this. You scoop a glob of this stuff, dip it in the juice, and eat. The Yemenis are very fond of 'asid. To my mind, its main value is that it helps fill the stomach.

Another dish that may begin the meal is fatut. I like this better. fatut is simply pieces of bread soaked in ghee (clarified butter). This dish is sometimes called khobz samn. It is rather sweet and a good appetizer.

After these dishes, a bowl of rice cooked in tomato sauce is likely to be put in front of me. I am not sure if the family eats rice frequently, or just when I show up. They know that I like it, and have apologized several times when they didn't have any. Unlike the ingredients for most of their other dishes, they do not grow rice and have to purchase it in the Amran suq.

Helba is next. This is a great favorite of the Yemenis. To make it, the women crush fenugreek seeds (this is a herb) and whip it up with some other ingredients. Helba is a Yemeni potpourri. They put everything into it -- leeks, scallions, tomato sauce, meat juice, potatoes, anything they happen to have around. They eat it by dipping bread into it. It is spicy and quite delicious, once you get used to it.

Toward the end of the meal, Abdullah will parcel out pieces of chicken or mutton to the family members.

This is always a rather embarrassing time for me because I know meat is a luxury for them and Abdullah always puts the largest piece on my plate, usually on top of my rice. I have come

to realize how important gestures of hospitality are to these people, so I don't protest. I just eat it, and then leave the table so he can't give me any more.

At this point, we always go through the same little song and dance. Abdūlah vigorously urges more food on me and I just as vigorously protest that I am malian (full).

When I first began visiting the family, I tried to pay them for these meals by bringing a box of Lipton tea for the women and a carton of Rothmans cigarettes for the men. I did this for about a month or more until Yahya told me I shouldn't. He used the word ayb (shame), a rather strong expression.

So I don't bring those items anymore. But I still try to bring something every visit. I recently brought Yahya an Arabic translation of The Three Musketeers.

\* \* \*

The Mudahar family strikes me as representative of the great changes taking place in Yemeni society today. You have a father, Abdullah, who has always lived the traditional life on the farm; an eldest son, Mohamed, who has experienced the outside world but retains strong roots in the traditional life; and a youngest son, Yahya, who almost certainly will one day leave the farm and work in the city in some educated profession.

For the women, change comes much more slowly. The life of Mohamed's wife will essentially repeat Hassina's, except that she will have more access to modern labor-saving devices. For young rural girls, the traditional life remains a closed circle.

Here are the major family members with comments on their personalities and roles in the household:

#### a. Abdullah

Abdullah Abdullah Mudahar\* is the patriarch of the family. Probably in his 50s, Abdullah is a strong, active, robust man, as befits someone who has spent his whole life doing physical labor.

The combination of his bulbous nose, prominent cheekbones, and jutting gray-whiskered chin, gives Abdullah a comical look when he laughs, but a ferocious expression when he is angry. Abdullah is prone to quick mood changes. He can be laughing and joking one minute, and raging at someone the next.

One evening, I was sitting in the mufraj waiting for Yahya to fetch the Toyota from wherever Mohamed had left it in order to drive me back to the German project. I heard a crash outside, looked out the window and saw that Yahya had somehow driven the truck

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\* Arab men identify themselves by three names -- their own, their father's, and their grandfather's. They can also add on the great-grandfather's name or special family or clan names. But usually, the three will do. Abdullah has a problem in that he was given the same name as his father. Because it's cumbersome to repeat "Abdullah," he is usually identified as just Abdullah Mudahar. His sons use "Abdullah Mudahar" as their second and third names, i.e., Yahya Abdullah Mudahar. Because Mudahar ends up being in the same position as a western family name, I call them the "Mudahar family."

into the stone fence at the entrance to the family compound. While Yahya sat haplessly in the front seat, Abdullah stormed around the vehicle, shouting and gesticulating violently. When Yahya opened the door and reluctantly stepped out of the Toyota, Abdullah whacked him across the side of the head, punctuating this blow with much verbal abuse.

It was a lot of to-do about nothing. The front fender of the truck had hardly been dented. Abdullah must have discovered that when he began dismantling part of the wall so Yahya could pull the Toyota out.

When I walked into the yard about 10 minutes later -- Ali was going to drive me back -- Abdullah was sitting placidly in front of the house shoving sticks of sorghum stalk wrapped in alfalfa into the mouth of a cow. He very pleasantly invited me to have a cup of tea before I left. You never would have known he had been in a rage a short time before.

Along with his mercurial temperment goes piety. As far as I know, Abdullah is the only male in the family to perform his Islamic prayers five times daily. I have never seen Mohamed, Ali, or Yahya pray at all. But Abdullah will stop whatever he is doing in the fields at the appropriate time, bow towards Mecca, and say his prayers while touching his head to the ground several times.

One morning I woke up in the mufraj around 6:30 -- this was one of the times I slept at the house -- to see Abdullah seated on his bed with an open Koran before him softly mouthing phrases. The curious thing about this is that Abdullah can't read. At the most, he knows a few letters and can spell his own name.

There are times when I wonder if Mohamed has taken over Abdullah's role as lord of the household. I know that Mohamed makes a lot of the major decisions. It was his idea, for example, to try to get the khazan. Abdullah often defers to his son. Mohamed also monopolizes the mufraj in the afternoons by bringing over his friends to chew qat. Walking out of the house after these sessions, it's not uncommon to find Abdullah sitting outside feeding the cows or just chatting with the women.

Mohamed also has a big say in agricultural matters. He is definitely the one in charge of the potato crop. I do not know to what degree Mohamed separates his property from the family's. But according to Tutwiler and Carapico, ownership or rights in a rural Yemeni household "are held by the household unit -- usually characterized as a shared kitchen -- which is also a consuming unit and serves as the main source of labor. The principal of common ownership covers land, livestock, grain stores, the house itself, and most implements and furnishings, excluding only clothing and a few personal articles."

According to that statement, Abdullah should have as much control over the potato crop as Mohamed.

But despite Mohamed's apparent spheres of independence, there is no doubt that Abdullah is in full command when the family harvests its rain-fed sorghum and wheat crops.

I have watched several of these operations and have noticed it is Abdullah, not Mohamed, who gives the orders and directs the activities.

My tentative conclusion is that Mohamed has a lot of

influence over the irrigated crops, probably because his money provided a major share of the family's investment in the two well pumps. But when it comes to decisions about the traditional rain-fed agriculture, Abdullah is still paterfamilias.

b. Hassina

Hassina is Abdullah's wife and the sister of Hussein's father.

Although she is probably in her 40s, her kindly and inquisitive face is not especially weathered -- as is unfortunately the case with many rural Arab women. Like her husband, she is spry and active. Whether working in the kitchen or feeding the animals, she is always busy.

Also like her husband, Hassina has volatile moods. You can hear her high-pitched wail shrieking in the yard one minute, and then find her smiling and joking the next.

Hassina is extremely pleasant and friendly to me. She smiles when she greets me, and is solicitous about serving me tea and lunch. If I meet her near the water pump at the base of the slope, she will instruct me to immediately scurry up the hill to have lunch at the house.

She is a bundle of nerves though, when it comes to the damnable problem of the sayyara (car). The family, particularly Hassina, takes seriously their obligation to drive me back to the German project at night.

There have been several occasions when one of the sons took the sayyara off on some errand and didn't return until late at night. I am quite content to settle down in the mufraj with the family to watch television. But Hassina gets very distraught. She gets up to look out the window, or even walks outside to peer around in the darkness for distant headlights in the plain. Returning to the mufraj, she'll mutter anxiously about the sayyara and the missing son.

The sons who are sitting watching television will get impatient with her and say things along the lines of "aw come on, Mom." This doesn't faze Hassina. She'll get up again and head for the window. Her nervousness makes me nervous.

I am not sure if Hassina is still concerned about the honor of the family women if I stay after dark, or thinks I will be upset if the sayyara doesn't arrive soon. I always say soothing things such as mush mushkila (no problem) and malesh (it doesn't matter). My remarks don't help though.

On one of my most recent visits, Abdullah and Hassina both asked me if I wanted to stay the night at the house. I was quite astonished. Thinking that they were just being polite, I said no. Maybe my presence in the house is more acceptable now. It's too bad I can't question Yahya about these complex subjects (my Arabic breaks down when I get past simple sentences).

Anthropologist Cynthia Myntti has noted how, in the Yemeni extended family, "authority follows seniority lines among the males and females." Hassina's charges include Mohamed's wife and a young girl I call "Layla" (if you don't know their names, why not make them up?). This "Layla" is related to the family somehow. Because of facial resemblance, I think she is the sister

of Mohamed's wife. When Layla does appear at the house, she helps the other two women with the chores. Yahya, usually at the bottom of the family hierarchy, then gets a chance to order someone else about.\*

Hassina's major domain is the matbakh (kitchen). She seems to have full authority over Mohamed's wife, and sometimes Layla, in the preparation of meals. But her domestic sphere of influence goes only so far.

"Women have a considerable influence on all that concerns the household, whether it be extended or nuclear," Myntti wrote. "Their power is restricted in that they do not participate in the public world of the market,\*\* nor have ultimate control over the monthly household expenditures. All final decisions rest with the males who are responsible for the support of the household."

Another female sphere of influence is the care and feeding of farm animals. Hassina and Mohamed's wife spend a good part of the late afternoon feeding the family's two cows. This is a tedious business. Because alfalfa is in limited supply, the rural Yemenis supplement cow diets with sorghum stalks. The animals don't really like sorghum stalks, so the women wrap them in alfalfa and shove them into the bovine mouths. Cows take their time eating, so the women can spend hours feeding them.

The German experts say this diet is low in phosphorous, a necessary nutrient, and that many Yemeni cows are undernourished.\*\*\*

The Mudahar family has a small chicken coop in the front yard, basically just a pile of rocks bonded together with earth. The women are in charge of these chickens. The eggs are fried and eaten with bread for breakfast; the meat turns up a few times a week for lunch.

The women also take care of the family's two donkeys.

### c. Mohamed

Thirty-year-old Mohamed has his father's large nose, but otherwise his features are more regular. His hair is jet black and curly and he has a small mustache.

As the head of a nuclear family within the extended household, Mohamed is an important figure at the Mudahar house. I do not know how much wealth he has contributed to the family -- he spent 15 years in Saudi Arabia -- but I suspect it is

\* Layla, who is maybe 10 years old, is not a very intelligent girl. She usually has a blank expression on her face. Yahya treats her like she's stupid. Once when she dropped some tea glasses on the mufraj carpet, he yelled at her and took a light slap at her. I used to interpret her blank stares at me as some form of hostility. But now I think she likes me. Lately, I have begun to wave at her when I see her. She shyly waves back.

\*\* Both urban and rural women do sell certain items in the suqs. Hassina once took nine chickens, tied together by their legs in groups of three, and about a dozen eggs to sell in the Aaran suq. Women in the Sana'a suq sell bread.

\*\*\* Although they raise both cows and goats, rural Yemenis do not seem to use their milk to make cheese. Cow's milk is drunk fresh or used to make ghee (clarified butter), also known as samn baladi.



Mohamed, with a friend, standing in the friend's qat terrace. Note that qat bushes can grow to the size of small trees.

considerable. I think the Toyota Land Cruiser is largely his.

Although he has seen a little of the world, Mohamed was apparently unimpressed by it. He acts like a man who never left the farm. He dresses in tribal costume, complete with janbiyya dagger, just like all his neighbors. His idea of a good time is to chew qat with his buddies in the afternoons.

Mohamed is a bit out of his element in a more sophisticated environment. I noticed that when he and I went to Sana'a to see about the khazan. The Yemeni man working for the American water project company wore an elegant dark suit and spoke excellent English. Mohamed sat there in the office like a bump on a log while this man conversed with me in English. The official could just as well have talked to Mohamed in Arabic. Mohamed was the one who wanted the water tank, after all. But when these two did talk, Mohamed came off as nervous and inarticulate. So I carried the burden of the conversation.

When we got to Hussein's house, Hussein put on one of his video tapes, a television movie in English about the medieval seer Nostrodamus. Hussein was very excited about how Nostrodamus had supposedly predicted Hitler and Napoleon and tried to explain



all this, in Arabic, to Mohamed. He could just as well have explained it to the wall. Mohamed looked baffled and slightly harassed. All he really wanted to do was go chew qat -- he and Hussein later went to Hussein's office to do that.

When I first began visiting the Mudahar family, I saw a lot of Mohamed. Sometimes I had the feeling I was his personal guest at the house.

But as I began spending more time with Yahya, I saw less of Mohamed. In truth, Mohamed and I have little in common and conversation tends to be a bit strained. He does sometimes provide interesting information about agricultural matters, though.

For example, one day I helped Abdullah, Mohamed, Ali, and Yahya harvest some rain-fed wheat. From a squatting position, you grab clumps of the wheat and cut them at the base with the mahshash.

Abdullah and Ali both started joking about how all this would be done with machines fi Amrika. Abdullah made tractor noises with his mouth and Ali moved his arms like a threshing machine. I said this field would have been cut dagee'ga (in a minute) in the United States. They thought that was funny.

While we were hauling the bags of cut wheat back to the house in the Toyota, Mohamed pointed out the family's plot of irrigated wheat and identified it as burr allemania ("German wheat," used in the valley to describe any sort of high-yield wheat). He surprised me by saying that burr Yemenia (the local rain-fed variety we had been harvesting) fetched a higher price in the Amran suq than the burr allemania. When I asked him why, he said he didn't know. Mohamed said he personally liked the bread made from the German wheat.

I later asked some of the German experts about that. They said it was customary in Third World countries for people to favor the taste of their local grain varieties over the new high-yielding ones.

Mohamed's qat sessions with his friends have provided their little moments.

One afternoon, a man sitting next to me asked me how much money a wife cost in the United States. Sifr (zero), I replied. Everyone looked incredulous. I carefully explained that men don't pay for wives in the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union like they do in the Arab countries.

Mohamed seemed to grasp this point better than his friends, but he retreated into what I thought was a rather resentful silence. He probably had paid 150,000 YR or more for his wife.

The man who had asked the question originally just couldn't get over it. "Amrika kwayyis (good)," he said, twice, in an awed tone of voice.

One aspect of Mohamed's personality I do not like is his pursuit of favors from me. It was his idea to ask me about getting the khazan. Also, one time when we went to look at his potato field, he asked me if I could help him borrow a tractor from the Germans to harvest the crop. I told him no way that time.

These requests tend to put me on the spot and make me uneasy. Nobody else in the family does that, although Abdullah once told me lazim khazan (we must have a water tank).

There is an edge to Mohamed. He loves to play with with his two very young children, Ibrahim and Bushra. But if one of them cries, makes a mess, or somehow becomes inconvenient, Mohamed will switch from making playful "goo-goo" noises at them to delivering a sharp slap. As soon as the child starts bawling, Mohamed yells for his wife to take it away.

Yahya once told me he prefers Ali over Mohamed. In fact, although I couldn't follow all that Yahya was saying, I had the feeling he didn't much like Mohamed at all. He seemed to be telling me that Mohamed had a nasty temper.

I can believe it, even though Mohamed is on his best behavior around visitors.

#### d. Mohamed's wife

Mohamed's wife is a pretty young woman whom I know very little about except that she is pregnant at the moment and always wears a light green sweater. I do not even know her name.

I would guess her age at mid to late 20s. She seems to spend most of the day around the house helping Hassina with the domestic chores, particularly cooking.

For a long while, Mohamed's wife wasn't particularly friendly toward me. She seemed wary or doubtful when I showed up, said very little to me, and rarely smiled at me.

She has warmed up a good bit the last few visits. She is still not as friendly or open as Hassina, but she does smile once in a while. She even makes an occasional attempt at conversation.\*

#### e. Ali

Ali, 17, is the second youngest son. Sporting a light mustache and goatee to go with his long face and gangling body, he lacks the boisterous humor and occasionally rough manners of his father and oldest brother.

He has an extraordinarily calm, quiet, and pleasant personality. One cannot easily imagine him becoming very angry or upset.

My own contact with Ali is limited. He spends most of his time in the fields helping his father. But he is unfailingly

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\* One can waste a lot of time speculating about these matters. But the fact that Mohamed's wife is a young woman, and I am a relatively young man, might have something to do with this. Cynthia Myntti has a shrewd observation that might be apropos here. "Men, by their actions in the community, can enhance as well as destroy the honor of the family," Myntti wrote. "It is often argued that women cannot enhance family honor but only destroy it. Honor is a precarious social evaluation and the restricting of women is a major attempt to safeguard it."

polite and courteous towards me.

It would be interesting to know if the family has any plans for Ali other than his continuing to help Abdullah on the farm. For a Yemeni son, the advantage of working in Saudi Arabia is that he returns to the farm with with some independent wealth. The son remaining behind can only wait for his inheritance.

Mohamed and the two sons now in Saudi Arabia have a degree of independence from the family. Yahya's education gives him various options.\*

But Ali, I suspect, has a narrower road to walk in life.

#### f. Yahya

Fifteen years old, Yahya is the youngest member of the family, not counting Mohamed's two children.

It has struck me that Yahya's subordinate position as youngest son often conflicts with his role as the only literate member of the family. Abdullah and Mohamed can order Yahya about at mealtimes, but when they want to read or write something, they have to come to him. Since Yahya is the first family member ever to go to school, he is a pioneer of sorts.

Yahya resembles Ali with his narrow face, but Mohamed with his shock of curly black hair. He has his father's good humor, but with a more sophisticated twist.

He is not at all shy. He carries himself with self-confidence. He can be thoughtful at times, but also enjoys boyish pranks. When taking me back to the German project, he drives those twisting potholed dirt tracks like he was practicing for the Daytona 500. Mohamed would have a fit if he saw it.

Since I spend more time with him, I know Yahya best of all the family members. He and I have developed a fairly effective way of communicating in Arabic. Yahya understands the limits of my Arabic better than the others. Sometimes when Abdullah or one of the others tries to say something to me and I don't quite catch it, I will look over at Yahya for him to interpret the remark in simpler Arabic.

But there are many occasions when we just fumble around. This is frustrating for both of us. I miss a lot of interesting information that way.

Ostensibly, I spend a good part of the afternoons with Yahya to teach him English. I don't know whether this was Yahya's idea, or the family's.

But the project has not been a great success, whether because of my deficiencies as a teacher or Yahya's inattention as a student.

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\* Although a traditional Yemeni peasant family in many respects, the Mudahars have some important relatives in Sana'a. Through Hussein's father, they are related to a man with a high position at Sana'a University. There are plans to marry Mudahar, one of the sons now in Saudi Arabia, to a girl in this man's family. One can also see the implications for Yahya, if he is able to complete primary, preparatory, and secondary school.



Yahya sitting in the mufraj pretending to study English. My attempt to teach him to read English has been blocked by his slowness in learning the alphabet. I have taught him many words by sound, particularly for farm animals.

Figuring that you have to learn the letters before you can learn even simple words, I began by trying to teach Yahya the alphabet. That seemed to be going well for a few weeks. But when we got to "xyz," I noticed he hadn't really learned "abcd."

The situation stagnated after that. I found myself continually teaching him the same letters over and over again. Finally, I just concentrated on teaching him key words by sound alone, such as "donkey," "goat," "boy," "girl," "chicken," "cow," etc.

I hope the family is satisfied with that.

After giving the matter some thought, I've concluded that Yahya's slowness in learning the English alphabet is not a learning problem. On the contrary, Yahya does very well in the Agabat primary school. He has shown me his Math and Arabic grammar notebooks. He usually gets perfect scores on the various exercises. His ability to solve mathematical problems -- he is now working with geometry theorems -- is greater than mine was at his age (admittedly, no great accomplishment).

Yahya also has more intellectual curiosity than most Yemenis I've met. He's always asking me questions about other countries. We once had a discussion about which countries in the world still had kings. I pointed them out on an atlas at the back of one of his exercise books.\*

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\* Like all Arabic atlases I've seen, this one had a certain piece of land labelled "Palestine," but no mention of you-know-what. There is a large globe in the library of the American University in Cairo with labels in English. Someone had roughly scratched out the forbidden word.

Yahya's main problem is that he has so many other demands on his time. He spends six hours a day, six days a week, at school. It's a rather long walk to Agabat, so he leaves the house shortly after 7 a.m. and returns about 2:30. After having lunch at the house, he usually has to help his father in the fields -- if I'm not visiting.

In the evenings, only one room in the house is well lighted. This is the mufraj, where the family gathers to watch television. There is no chance of Yahya reading or studying much at night.

Another factor is that he has no room of his own. There is no place in the house he can retreat to for privacy. He sleeps in the mufraj with Ali and Abdullah. He stacks his books and papers on the ledges above the mufraj windows.

I suppose he might be able to do some studying on Friday, the day he's out of school. But when I show up on Fridays, I invariably find him out in the fields. In fact, Abdullah sometimes pulls him into the field on school days.

In short, Yahya does not have the luxury of free time that American children routinely enjoy. When he's not in school, he has to fulfill his work responsibilities. Even when he does have some spare time, he has little privacy.

Yahya has all he can do just to keep up with his school work. It would be too much to expect him to devote a lot of time to studying English.\*

For this reason, I don't push Yahya in his English lessons. If he wants to take the time to learn the alphabet, fine. If not, well, we can just sit there and chat.

That's what we usually do, after a half-hearted review of some letters. I think we both learn a lot from these sessions.

One thing that impresses me about Yahya is his relative sophistication about political matters. Whether he gets his views from other family members or at school, or whether he arrives at them independently, I don't know.

Yahya is a great partisan of the Republic. In the central room where the family eats meals, he has drawn a rather crude picture -- it looks like a pregnant turkey -- of the Republican eagle.\*\* The imams did nothing for Yemen, he has told me, but the jumhuria (republic) brought roads, hospitals, electricity, etc.

In the Mudahar mufraj hangs a photo of former president Ibrahim al Hamdi. Many foreign observers consider Hamdi the most development-minded of all North Yemen's presidents. Yemenis still mourn his 1977 assassination.

Yahya took the photo down from the wall one afternoon

\* I have often thought that one reason peasant societies stay "backward" is that farmers don't have the time or inclination to indulge in abstract speculation. Intellectual activities require a certain amount of leisure time. Descartes thought about the problems of existence while lying in bed. Because their lives are a daily struggle to keep themselves fed, peasants can't do that. They have to focus their thinking on practical matters. A peasant household has to be the worst sort of environment for nurturing a questioning, probing intellect. No wonder most intellectual advances come out of urban centers and not the countryside.

\*\* There is a house in Khazana painted in the red, white and black stripes of the Republican flag. You often see this in the southern part of the country, but rarely in the tribal heartland north of Sana'a.

to show it to me. Hamdi had a handsome, youthful face, sort of a Yemeni John Kennedy. Describing him, Yahya used the word muntaz (beautiful), a strongly affectionate adjective. He said Hamdi was the best of Yemen's presidents and loved his people.

What about Ahmed al Gashmi, the military man who replaced Hamdi (some people think Gashmi ordered Hamdi's death) before being himself assassinated several months later? He was a himar (donkey), said Yahya. What about the current president, Ali Abdulllah Salih? Swaya, swaya (half and half) was Yahya's cautious reply to that.

There are some strange gaps in Yahya's knowledge. He didn't know where Egypt is on the atlas. He knew the location of most of the Arabian peninsula countries, but not much beyond that. If I've taught Yahya anything, I've taught him some geography.

It must be difficult to imagine other ways of life in other countries when your only reality has been the traditional life of Bayt al Rabu'i. But television is breaking down some of the cultural isolation of rural Yemen.

To my mind, Yemeni television is deadly boring. Unlike Egyptian television, which features sophisticated dramas, lively variety shows, and both foreign and Arabic movies, Yemeni television is heavily weighted to the religious side of life. You can have hours of religious singing and Koranic instruction. Even the more secular offerings can be somewhat soporific. There was one show that consisted entirely of training exercises by the Yemeni army. For an hour or more, I watched soldiers marching, learning how to use bazookas, conducting attacks on imaginary enemies, digging foxholes, and so on.

But during the children's hour, in the early part of the evening, there are a few things to capture a boy's imagination.

The first half hour show is a Star Wars-type drama, apparently made in France and dubbed in Arabic, with puppets. There are lots of space ships flying around and men landing on worlds inhabited by weird aliens. Some of the young boys that come over to watch this program just sit there staring blankly at the tube. It's obvious they can't really relate what they're seeing to anything they know or understand.

But Yahya goes crazy with enthusiasm. He'll babble away to me in Arabic — I can scarcely understand any of it — about what's going on in the program, who the characters are, what the various spaceships are called, and what the evil folks are up to.

For someone who's been raised in a faintly medieval environment, Yahya has an enormous appreciation of space fantasy. One of his prize possessions is an Italian calendar book with a space story comic strip serial running at the bottom of the pages.

Yahya can't read Italian, but he's made up names for all the characters and has his own idea of what the story is about.

The second television program Yahya likes is a cartoon from France called Lady Oscar. The story is set in the France of Louis XVI. It's about a girl who, for some reason (I missed

the early episodes), dresses as a man and fights various villains. There's lots of dashing swordplay and dark conspiracies. In the last episode, Lady Oscar is killed leading the attack on the Bastille.\*

Yahya goes nuts about this show too. While we're watching it, he provides his usual running commentary.

But more than that, Yahya tries to relate Lady Oscar to other things. This show has led us into discussions of kings and revolutions. I tried to explain to him how several countries besides Yemen have had revolutions.

Other than the Koran, the only book lying around the Mudahar house is an Arabic history of the Muslim incursions into France during the Middle Ages. It doesn't seem to be a terribly objective history. Yahya has told me that the Yahudiin (Jews), having filus kathir (much money) in those days, paid off the Christians to go make trouble for the Muslims in Palestine (perhaps a reference to the Crusades?).

Yahya likes to read parts of this book to me (in Arabic, of course) and then explain to me what's going on. I can tell that he's made the connection between the France of this time and the France of Lady Oscar.

I have helped him go a bit further. I bought him an Arabic translation of The Three Musketeers (called "The Three Horsemen" in Arabic). I was curious to see how he would react to it. I don't think he's ever read a novel in his life. I know there is no library at his school.

After I gave him the book, we talked about the picture on the cover. It showed D'artagnen (sic) with his sword drawn and a beautiful woman standing next to him. I said this book and Lady Oscar were sowa sowa (same thing).

That perked his interest. He proceeded to read the book, virtually ignoring me for the rest of the afternoon. I couldn't have been more pleased. His first comment about the book was that it had many pages. But after he had gone through a few chapters, he said it was muntaz. That made my day.

A boy with Yahya's intelligence and curiosity should go far in any society. But he has many obstacles to overcome.

Yahya seems to have started school rather late. He is 15 years old, but only in the fifth grade of primary school. Normally, a boy his age should be in the 10th grade of secondary school. In short, he's five years behind.

It's convenient now for Yahya to attend the primary school in Agabat, about a 20-minute walk away. But what's going to happen when he has to attend preparatory and secondary schools in Amran and Raydah? It's too far to walk to either town. There are no school buses going out to the villages. Trying to hitch a ride every morning would be an uncertain business.

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\* Lord knows how Yemeni audiences react to the sex role reversal in this show. The idea of a woman doing the sort of things Lady Oscar does must be somewhat incomprehensible to them.

If the family was really serious about education, somebody could drive Yahya to school in the Toyota. But one can easily imagine them not willing to do that. The family needs the Toyota for its morning work in the fields. Driving Yahya to Amran or Raydah would be a major diversion of time (about half an hour's drive to either town) and resources.

With three years of preparatory school, and another three years of secondary school looming ahead, it would be easy for the family to lose sight of the payoff.

As it is, Abdullah succumbs periodically to the temptation to pull Yahya out of school to help in the fields. One can see that happening more frequently as Yahya gets older and stronger. The pressure on him to contribute to the family can only increase.

I once asked Yahya what he would like to do in life. He said he would like to be a medical doctor.

With all the difficulties before him, Yahya will have a hard time keeping sight of that goal. Circumstances could force him to give up on his education.

That would be a tragedy for Yahya, and perhaps also a tragedy for Yemen.

Sincerely,



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