

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Visit to Manakha

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Dear Peter;

The view of Yemeni villages you get from picture post-cards and glossy photography books is a dramatic one.

Perched on soaring mountain peaks, seemingly seated atop the clouds, these stone walled villages look down upon green ribbons of cultivated terraces descending the rock face in hundreds of stair steps.

Thousands of villages in the country do look like that. But I hadn't seen any up close, until I visited the Manakha area at the end of February.

Manakha is a large town of about 5,000 inhabitants located in the western part of the central highlands some 120 kilometers west of Sana'a. It is the largest populated center in the mountain region known as the Haraz.

The Haraz range contains some of Yemen's highest peaks. The Jabal Shibam rises to 2,900 meters above sea level. Manakha itself sits on a slope at 2,200 meters.

As a point of comparison, Yemen's highest peak is the Jabal Nabi Shu'aib, which is 3,720 meters up. This mountain is located just west of Sana'a on the Sana'a-Manakha-Hodeidah road.

I went to Manakha to visit Wolfgang, a German friend of mine studying the dialect of the town and region. Wolfgang had invited me to come see him in Manakha. I finally took him up on the offer and spent three days there.

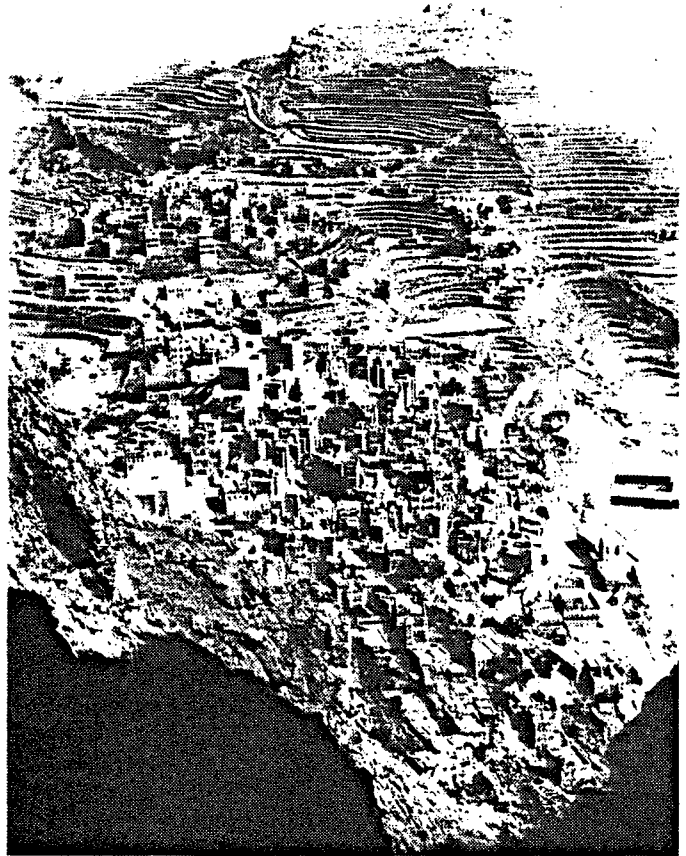
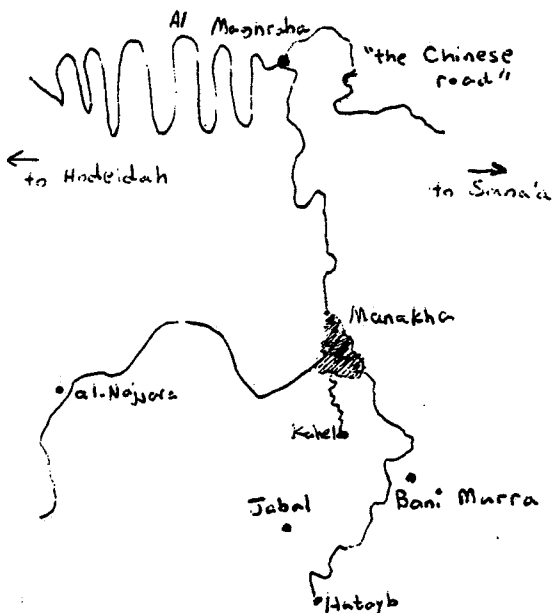
The journey began at the office of the General Transport Corp., Yemen's publicly-owned bus company. The office is located on the Sana'a-Hodeidah road in the part of Sana'a known as Bab al Yemen (the Yemen Gate).

I like to take the bus whenever I can. It's much nicer to stretch out your legs from a comfortable seat in a modern and spacious



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Kenneth Cline is a Village Reporting Fellow of the Institute studying village life in North Yemen and Egypt.



A view of Manakha from a mountain to the south of town. Continue further up this mountain and you reach the village of Kahel.

Renault bus than to squeeze into a crowded Peugeot taxi. In a taxi, my feet invariably go to sleep because of the odd, cramped position of my legs. An elbow digging into your side is no fun either.\*

I was fortunate on this trip to have an interesting travel companion.

Ahmed was in his mid-30s with a small, black mustache attached to his polished, round face. He wore a western style-stripped shirt and light brown suit coat. But instead of trousers, he had on the traditional Yemeni futah -- a skirt similar to a Scottish kilt.

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\* Or worse. While taking a taxi from Marib to Sana'a, an old gabili (tribesman) sitting next to me held his submachine gun in such a manne that the barrel pointed right at my temple. It did no good to tell myself the gun might be unloaded or at least have the safety catch on. I know for a fact that gabilis do keep their guns loaded. Earlier in the day, I had been in a taxi where a passenger leaned out the window and fired off a few bursts -- he wanted the taxi ahead of us to stop so he could chat with the occupants (they did stop). I don't know enough about guns to tell if the safety is on. After half an hour, I could stand it no longer. Min fadlak (please). I said, and nudged the barrel away. The man let out a squawk of indignant protest. Although he kept the barrel pointed at the ceiling from then on, he was terribly offended. Only in Yemen.

This futah was checkered, with orange and brown the predominant colors.

I was surprised when he spoke to me in excellent English, with an American accent no less. He introduced himself and asked if he could sit next to me. Fine, I said.

I questioned Ahmed about his English. Had he ever been to the States? No, he had never even been out of the country. Perhaps he had learned English in school, then. Not that either. Ahmed said he had learned all his English from books and by watching television and movies. English was his hobby.

"Some people like to collect stamps," he said with a smile. "I like to study English."

We chatted about a wide range of subjects as the bus crossed the mountain ranges between Sana'a and Manakha.

Like most Yemeni men I've met, Ahmed was eager to talk about the defa'a (or "brideprice" — defa'a is a form of the verb "to pay"). He said the average defa'a in the Hodeidah area, where he lives, is about 50,000 YR (at present, the exchange rate is about 5.60 YR to the dollar). In the tribal highlands, this can go up to 150,000 YR or more.

These high brideprices (the man, in a sense, "buys" his wife) make marriage in Yemen difficult and expensive for men, he said. On the other hand, divorce is comparatively easy. The Muslim man only has to say "I divorce you" three times and he is free. He does not have to pay the woman anything although she takes her personal wealth (including her share of the defa'a -- part of it was kept by her father) with her when she leaves.

I explained the American alimony system.

That's the difference, said Ahmed. In Yemen, the man pays everything in the beginning and nothing at the end. In the United States, the man pays little to get married, but a lot to get out of the relationship.\*

Although the bus, and Ahmed, continued on to Hodeidah, I got off at a small town called al Maghreba.

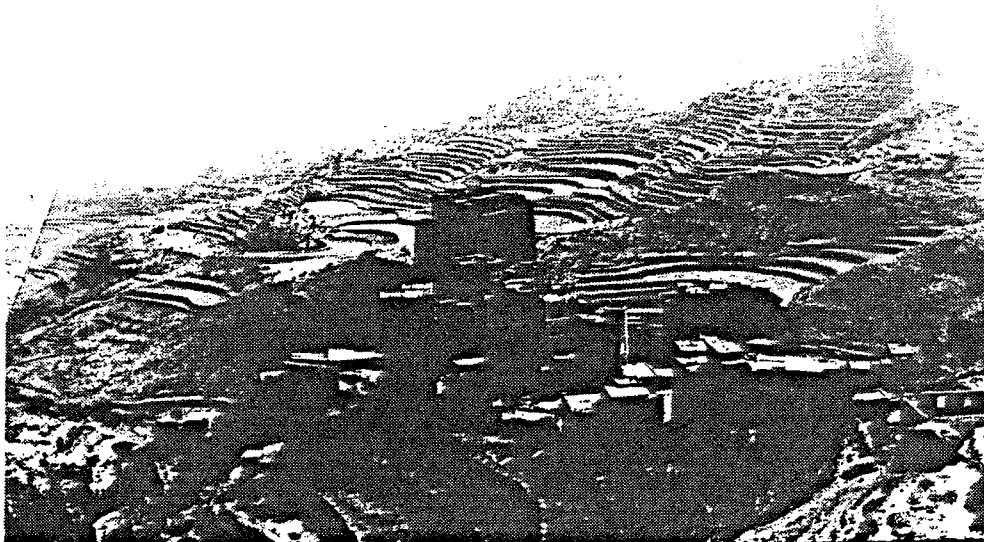
During the early 1960s, the Communist Chinese built the paved road from Sana'a to Hodeidah. While the old dirt tracks over the mountains had passed through Manakha, the new road did not. Instead, the Chinese built a short connecting road from al Maghreba to Manakha, six kilometers away.

Al Maghreba exists only to serve the buses and taxis passing through it. A line of shops and restaurants fronts both sides of the road.

When you get out of the bus, you can walk over to a shop for a Canada Dry and then join the men milling about the waiting taxis. Inevitably, you are shown to the one going to Manakha and are off.

The ride to Manakha takes only about 15 minutes. The taxi meanders around some mountains and comes to a large town sprawling down both sides of a ridge.

\* The problem of escalating brideprices exists in other Arab countries. On Jan. 18, the Saudi English language paper Arab News carried a news item about the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It said that many UAE men are marrying foreign women because the brideprices are beyond their means. In the UAE, they can go up to \$50,000. A UAE legislative committee is considering requiring men to deposit \$27,000 with the government as "insurance" when they marry foreign women. It is also considering giving financial assistance to poorer men so they can marry local girls.



A typical Haraz Mountains scene. Note the trees in the terraces in front of the village. That's all gat. At least at this time of year, the local farmers were growing nothing else but gat.

Unlike so many other Yemeni towns, Manakha is not of great antiquity. Medieval records do not mention it.

The settlement became important only during the second Turkish occupation of Yemen (1871-1918). The Turks conquered Sana'a and other major cities, driving the Yemeni imams into the northern mountains. But they were dependent on their supply route from Hodeidah to Sana'a.

This road passed through Manakha. The Turks built a fortress on a peak overlooking the town. This and various public buildings they erected still stand today.

The Turks left the country after their defeat in World War I. But Manakha's importance as the main center between Sana'a and Hodeidah continued.

The German explorer Hans Helfritz came through Manakha in 1931. In his book Land Without Shade (New York: Robert M. McBride & Company, 1936), Helfritz described Manakha as "the most important place situated on the Sana'a-Hodeidah route." The Imam Yahya (ruled 1904-48) maintained a large garrison in the town.

Those glory days are long gone. When the Chinese road bypassed Manakha in the early 1940s, the town went into gradual decline. It continues to be a regional suq (market) for the Haraz villages, but it is no longer tied into a major trade route.

This fact becomes obvious when you walk through the Manakha suq. Half the shops are closed up. Trading is desultory.

As is unfortunately the case with most Yemeni towns, Manakha supports no industry. Even traditional handicrafts, such as



Wolfgang Werbeck is a true scholar. His language skills are awesome. He is fluent in most major European languages as well as Arabic, and can read ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

silversmithing, basketmaking, and rug weaving, have disappeared. In their place, the stores are filled with the usual Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese imports.

Manakha is fortunate to be the beneficiary of some government spending. The town has a hospital staffed by foreigners, several schools, and various government offices. It also receives electricity from the power station at Hodeidah.

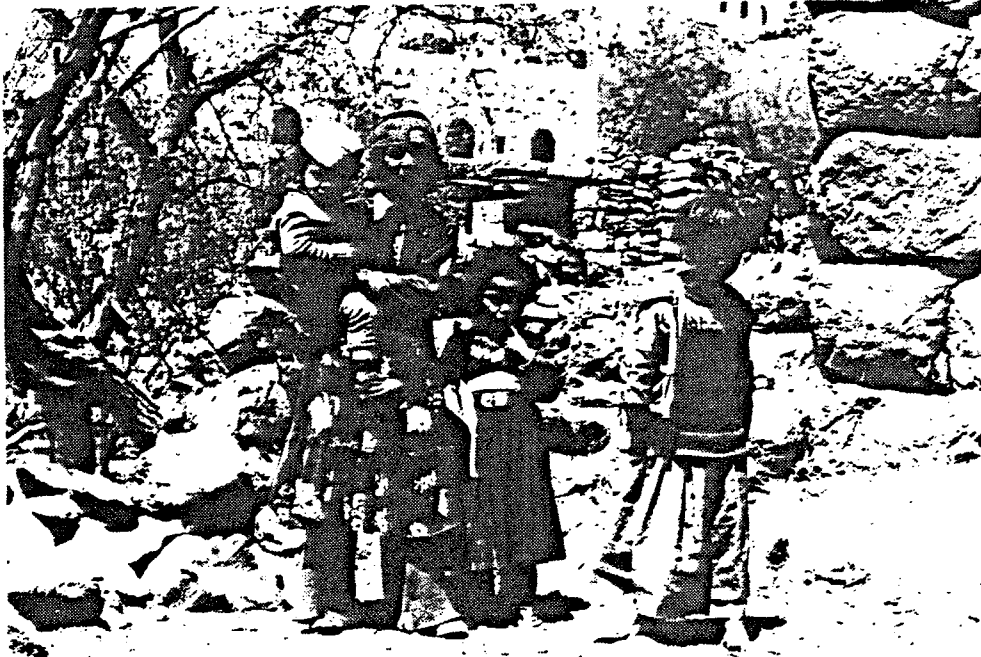
Despite the lack of employment opportunities, Manakha residents enjoy some important amenities.\*

Wolfgang lives in the center of town in a house he has rented from a Yemeni family. Some boys I met in the street escorted me to the house. All I had to do was ask for bayt Wolf (Wolf's house).

Wolfgang lives on one floor of the multi-story

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\* A small tourism industry is coming along in Manakha. There is a small "tourist hotel" in the town. This is favored by European tourist groups who cruise around the country in four-wheel-drive vehicles and think they are "roughing it."



Some children from the village of Kahel. It is the custom in Yemeni families for young girls to take care of their younger siblings. Note the pants underneath the girl's dress. This is typical women's costume in Yemeni villages.

building. He has a small bedroom, kitchen (equipped with a butagas stove), and hammam (bathroom). The hammam is pure traditional Yemeni.

In recent years, urban Yemenis have taken to installing showers, sinks, and flush toilets in their bathrooms. But the traditional arrangement is to wash out of buckets. The water simply runs out of a hole where the floor joins the wall. Urine goes the same way and evaporates while trickling down the outside wall of the house. Fecal matter goes down through a hole in the floor and drops into a pit underneath the house, where it is removed every couple of months.

Wolfgang lives in relative comfort. He can cook for himself. The electricity allows him to work at night. The major hassle is carrying jerry cans of water from a pump truck parked near a school back to his house.

Wolfgang was not at home when I arrived. His landlord came downstairs to tell me he wouldn't be back for several hours. Luckily, the boys who had brought me to the house took me around town looking for Wolfgang.

We finally found him at a house where he was teaching English to two young Yemenis -- Salih, 23, and Mohamed, 22. One method Wolfgang uses to record the local dialect is to trade off English lessons for stories and jokes told in the dialect.

The atmosphere was relaxed. Everyone was sprawled amongst the cushions of the mafraj (traditional Yemeni living room) chewing qat and sipping Pepsis. I took some of the qat the



The village of Bani Murra.

boys offered me, but repaid them by taping some of their lessons in my crystal clear American accent.

Wolfgang told me later that he does not enjoy chewing gat every day. But when Yemenis offer it to him, he feels obliged to take it.

Yemenis claim gat improves their concentration when they are working. To an extent, this is true. Gat produces certain amphetamine-like effects which give you a charge of energy.

But sometimes this "charge" can affect you like too much coffee — it can make you nervous and jittery. That does not contribute to productivity. Also, after a few hours, the stimulant effect wears off and you become quite relaxed — again, not conducive to sustained work.

Wolfgang says the boys he teaches English to are bright, but have short attention spans.

The next morning, Wolfgang and I set off into the mountains on foot to look at some villages. In two days, we visited three villages — Bani Murra, Kahel, and Jabal.

All three are inhabited by Ismaili Muslims. The Ismailis are the smallest of Yemen's three major Muslim sects. The other two are the Shi'ite Zaydis and the Sunni Shaefi'is.

The Zaydis are concentrated in the northern and central highlands. Through their traditional rulers, the imams, they became the dominant power in the country.

The Shaefi'is are located in the coastal Tihama and in the southern highlands. They tend to maintain less tribal organization than the Zaydis and have come under their domination.

The Ismailis came to Yemen in the 9th century A.D. In the 11th century, they founded the Suleyhid dynasty, which ruled most of the country and lasted from 1061 to 1138.

Although they are Shi'ite too, the Ismailis became



A boy and his monkey in Bani Murra. Arabs generally treat animals badly. This was no exception. Even though they must have seen the monkey around a lot, the village children pestered it unmercifully. They threw rocks at the animal, shouted at it, and did everything they could think of to keep it in a state of terror. The boy at left, who led the monkey around on a string, seemed helpless to halt the abuse.

victims of Zaydi persecution. Many Ismailis fled to India, where they still maintain a colony.

Every year, Indian Ismaili pilgrims come to the Haraz to visit Hutayb, the shrine of a 12th century Ismaili saint, Matim al Hamidi. For the Ismailis, Hutayb, located about five kilometers south of Manakha, is second in importance only to Mecca and Kerbala.

Wolfgang and I tried to find Hutayb, but got lost on the winding mountain paths. It's best to go in a four-wheel-drive vehicle with someone who knows the way.

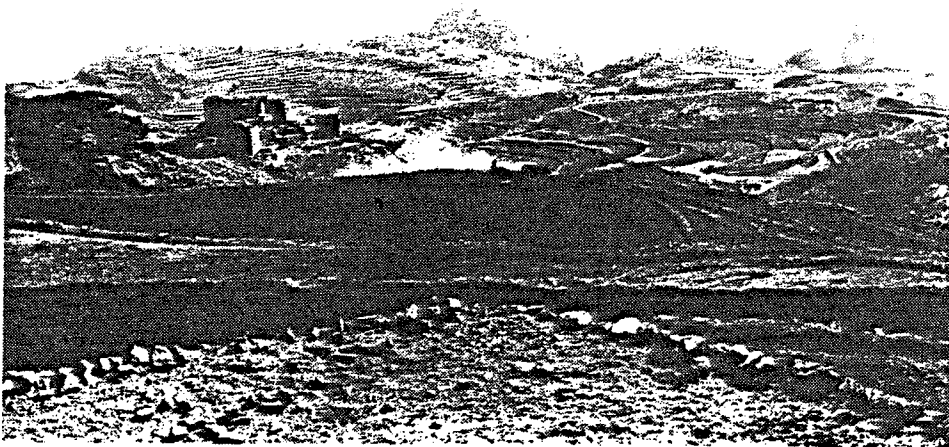
At each of the villages we came to, Wolfgang pulled out his tape recorder to collect examples of the local dialect. He would ask people to tell him jokes and stories.

With such an excellent interpreter at hand, I took the opportunity to ask questions about the local agriculture.

Everywhere, we ran into the same story. Many village houses are abandoned and falling into ruin because the families have moved to Manakha or Sana'a, where the men have a better chance of finding work.

Three years of drought in Yemen have wreaked havoc with the Haraz agriculture. At this altitude, farmers cannot adopt the usual Yemeni solution of installing motorized well pumps. Unlike the farmers of the Qa'al Bawn or Wadi Juba, Haraz farmers





This Haraz farmer hasn't seen much rain in the past three years. But he's plowing his fields in the hope that it will come this time.

are utterly at the mercy of the weather. If the twice-yearly monsoon rains do not come, their crops do not get any water.

"There is no rain; there is no God," said a despairing old man in the village of al Jabal.

The government is very worried about the drought situation in Yemen. It promoted a massive, country-wide prayer-for-rain on March 1. The Saudis do this frequently. But this kind of display is apparently rare for the Yemenis.

President Ali Abdallah Salih led thousands of people (men only, since it was a public event) in prayer at a stadium on the outskirts of Sana'a. The national television station devoted most of the evening news to coverage of this prayer and those held in the country's other major cities.

Yemen's first rainy season extends from April to May. At the time I left the country, about the middle of April, I had seen only a few light showers in Sana'a.

As far as I could tell, the only crop being grown on the Haraz terraces in February was qat. A great many terraces were either abandoned or lying fallow.

In the village of Bani Murra, a 75-year-old man named Ali ibn Ali told us the local farmers grow wheat and sorghum along with their qat. A man in al Jabal cited wheat and sorghum, and added barley and helba (fenugreek seeds, used as a spice in traditional Yemeni dishes).

Swedish anthropologist Tomas Gerholm did a study of Manakha in the late 1970s. In his book Market, Mosque and Mafraj: Social Inequality in a Yemeni Town (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1977), Gerholm estimated that 65 percent of the land near Manakha was devoted to sorghum; 20 percent to qat and coffee (mostly the former, the once-famous Haraz coffee has declined



The village of al Jabal as the afternoon fog from the Red Sea rolls in. This village was the poorest and most forsaken of the three we visited. It seemed to be half empty. It was also the most remote. You have to climb a mountain to get to it -- hence the name, Jabal (mountain).

into insignificance since the 1940s, mainly because qat is more profitable); and 15 percent to barley and wheat.

If we had visited the area a couple of months later, when the Yemeni winter had passed, we would have seen those other crops.

I asked some villagers about tribalism. Were the tribes and their sheikhs as important as they once were?

In Bani Murra, a 17-year-old boy named Tahir tended one of the village's two small grocery stores. He identified the local tribe as the Ya'abir.

According to him, the tribe is not so important anymore. "Everything is linked to Manakha now," he said.

A man in al Jabal, where negativism seemed to run deepest, said simply, "There are no tribes."

Half the houses in al Jabal had fallen into ruin. Few children were to be seen. A few old men sat around the village mosque and chatted in a bored, lazy fashion. Nobody was very friendly to us.

By contrast, Bani Murra, which is just off a major track through the mountains, was quite lively. A group of boys recited poetry and sang songs for Wolfgang to tape. Both men and women were intrigued by the voice-making machine. The women squealed with delight when Wolfgang played their voices back to them.

Kahel, which overlooks Manakha, was quiet, but not as desolate as al Jabal. Since the men had gone off to the fields



Al Jabal. Not a fun place, and hard to get to.

or to Manakha, we saw only women and children.

Three women intercepted us as we were walking down an alley in Kahel. One of them brought us some coffee laced with cardamom. We sat down and chatted with them.

Wolfgang struggled valiantly to cajole them into telling him some fairy tales, of the type they would tell their children. They claimed they didn't know any. Wolfgang said later he was sure that wasn't true.

But he did get some recipes out of them.

The young woman who had brought us the coffee was pretty -- I could tell because she wasn't wearing a veil -- and buxom. Her green dress was downright daring, for Yemen. The décolletage of her bodice did not exactly plunge, but it showed a bit of skin beneath the neck.

Most remarkable of all, her hem went down only to her knees and she wasn't wearing any pants underneath the dress. I have never, before or since, seen a Yemeni peasant woman showing bare legs.

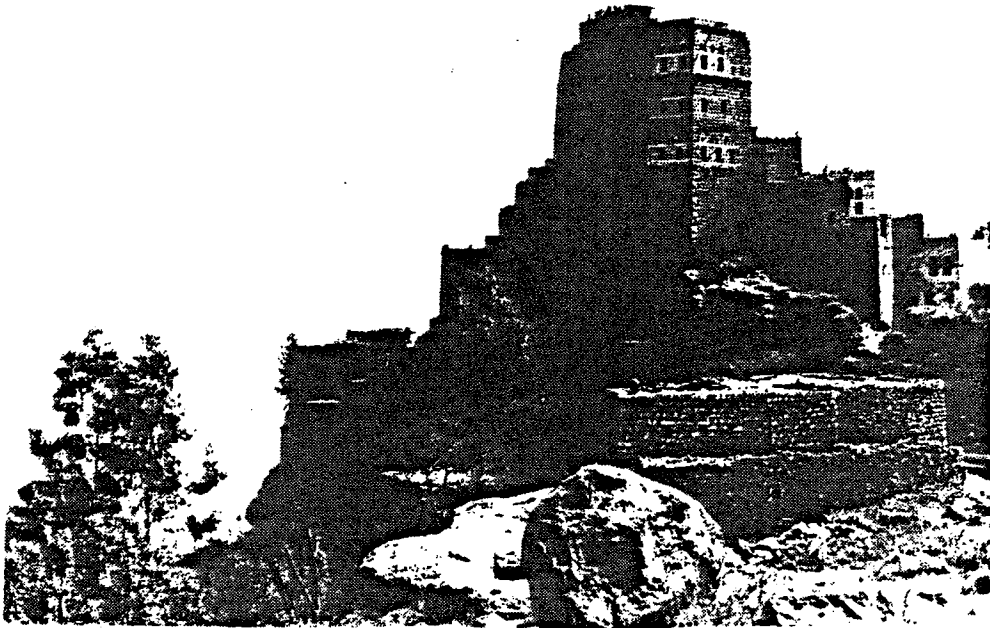
Completing the unusual picture, a necklace spelling the English letters L-O-V-E decorated her attractive neck.

Considering everything, I was really glad her husband wasn't around to see her talking to us.

The second woman was large and middle-aged. She wore a dress with grey, yellow, and white patterns, trousers underneath, and a dark sweater. I took her for a modest sort, because she slipped her mouth veil on while talking to us.

Then Wolfgang asked her a question about henna (a red dye Arab women use as a cosmetic). She pulled up her head scarf to show us her flaming red hair. The other two women cackled with glee at this.

Yemeni women frequently stain their hands and feet



The Haraz Mountains villages are visually the most interesting I've seen in Yemen.

with henna. In Egypt, I had been told older women sometimes dye their hair with it. But this was the first time I had seen henna-dyed hair in either country.

The third woman was also middle-aged and wore a purple dress with glittery gold flower patterns. She was thin and had a pinched, narrow face.

For some reason, she had gotten the idea that Wolfgang or I might be conned into buying a cheap scarf with a picture of Britain's Queen Elizabeth on it. Either of us would have been interested in a local handicraft. But this cheap, tacky import?

Wolfgang and this woman played out a tug-of-war for about an hour. He would try to wheedle fairy tales out of her and she would try to sell him the scarf. Both of them lost.

I think the other two Kahel women were just curious about us and wanted to chat. But this thin woman seemed interested in only one thing — to sell us that scarf.

She must have regretted buying it in the first place.

Sincerely,