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Sana', November 1975.

Fouad Elkoury

## Change in North Yemen 1977-1989

# A Tale of Two Families

Sheila Carapico and Cynthia Myntti

Virtually every aspect of life in North Yemen has changed dramatically since 1977, including those aspects of Yemeni society which represent continuity with the past: tribalism, rural life, and use of *qat*.<sup>1</sup> The driving force for change has been economic. By 1975, Yemen was caught up in the dramatic developments that affected all Arab countries. Rising international oil prices generated enormous surpluses in the producing countries, enabling them to initiate ambitious development plans and forcing them to import workers.

The Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) was in a good position to provide those workers. In the late 1970s, one of the jokes around the capital city, Sana', was that Yemen had neither an "open door" nor a "closed door" but a "no door" policy with its oil-producing neighbors. Ill-defined and sparsely settled borders allowed easy movement of Yemeni workers to Saudi Arabia and of their remittances and goods back home.

In addition to geographical proximity, Yemenis enjoyed a certain social proximity to the Saudi job market. Until August 1990, Saudi Arabia allowed Yemenis to live and work in the kingdom without visas. Many Yemenis owned businesses in Saudi Arabia, while other foreigners were not granted such rights. In the early years of the oil boom, many older Yemeni migrants found a good market for the skills they had learned in Aden when it was a British colony: knowledge of English

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and commercial, domestic or secretarial skills. These advantages placed Yemenis ahead of their competitors for jobs, at least in the years prior to the arrival of highly organized work brigades from South Korea and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

This movement of labor had a phenomenal impact on North Yemen. Some Yemeni regions lost up to half their male labor force to the Gulf, and the national total may have reached as many as 1.23 million. By 1982, remittances reached an annual record high of \$1.4 billion. It was a time when Yemeni citizens, on average, vastly increased their spending power.<sup>2</sup> Yet the government, unable to effectively tax these remittances, was forced to rely on friendly countries for aid to meet its basic fiscal commitments. Officially recorded foreign aid reached \$401 million in 1982, mainly from wealthy Arab states and to a lesser extent from multilateral and other bilateral donors.

When the world demand for oil dropped and wealthy countries cut back their ambitious programs, Yemeni workers lost their jobs and returned home. In early 1990 there were still no official figures on the scale of "the return"; officially recorded remittances of only \$600 million suggested a substantially smaller Yemeni workforce abroad.<sup>3</sup>

The discovery of oil in North Yemen's eastern desert in 1984 promised to make up for only some of the losses in remittances and foreign aid. Yemen's comparatively large population (estimated in 1986 at 9.3 million) meant that oil wealth would have to be divided among many more people than in the Gulf countries. Still, the domestic political implications of Yemeni oil were significant. Government control of the oil revenues would make the state an increasingly important actor in the Yemeni economy. While in the past, individual Yemenis were rich and the government was poor, by 1990, relatively speaking, the situation was reversed.

These changes affected the lives of virtually every Yemeni family over the years 1977-89. We examined the cases of two families that occupied very different positions in the old social hierarchy. The first is an urban family from the Old City of Sana', members of the *sayyid* strata, reputedly descended from the Prophet. The second is a peasant or *ra'iyya* family living in rural Ta'iz.

Both families had prospered during the short-lived period of affluence only to find themselves now unable to maintain the same standard of living despite hard work. Lacking the economic and political currencies needed in contemporary society, by the summer of 1989 they each found themselves in a precarious position. These cases show the extent to which family fortunes are connected to the national economy, and illustrate the replacement of old status rankings by factors related to class. Whereas in the old days a Zaydi *sayyid* family related by marriage to the royal family was considered part of the pampered Sana'ni "elite" and the Ta'iz family were smallholder peasants, both were now self-employed at the margins of a national market economy. Neither family possess the prerequisites for success or even security in this new economy: the right educational certificates, the right political connections (or "backing"), and money.

The household perspective also reminds us that through this tumultuous period women in particular held tenaciously



Child in Sana', 1973.

Fouad Elkoury

to traditional Islamic and cultural values, modified only superficially by the introduction of new commodities into their daily lives. Living by traditional ethical values, however, seems more difficult than before.

## In the Heart of the Old City

The Sana'ni family today includes a relatively young matriarchal figure and widow, Amat al-Karim. her son 'Abd al-Rahman and daughter Khadija, their spouses and 10 young children.\*

In Amat al-Karim's eyes, Khadija and 'Abd al-Rahman were born into nobility. Though neither rich nor politically active, they lived in a fine quarter inside the northern gate of old Sana', between a mosque and its garden, just off a main street, the markets and a square with a school.

Amat al-Karim loved her husband, Muhammad, a gentle, honest scribe who traced his ancestry directly to the Prophet. She was grateful to her parents for the good match, for her sister's marriage to a branch of the royal family, and for her own modest inheritance of several farming terraces outside town. Her son and daughter, toddlers at the time of the 1962 revolution, grew up proud and pious like their parents. Herself able to half read, half recite the Quran, she enrolled them in

\* Names have been changed. While the details of the families' lives are true, general opinions expressed were gathered in Yemen at large.

# Yemen: Unification and the Gulf War

Sheila Carapico

On May 22, 1990, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (the PDRY, or South Yemen) and the Yemen Arab Republic (the YAR, or North Yemen) joined to become the Republic of Yemen. "A Tale of Two Families" reflects the malaise in North Yemen on the eve of unification; the situation in the south, since the 1986 street battles in Aden, was even worse.<sup>1</sup>

Unity offered beneficial economies of scale in oil, power, administrative apparatus and tourism. It made political sense, too, reflecting the view of most Yemenis that the division into separate countries was artificial and imposed.

Formal unification heralded unprecedented pluralism and political opening. Televised debates in parliament, dominated by the former ruling parties of the YAR and the PDRY, the General People's Congress and the Yemeni Socialist Party, exposed bureaucratic corruption. Some three dozen new parties, of Nasirist, Ba'thi, liberal and religious orientations, began publishing newspapers and organizing for May 1992 elections. Sana' University students demonstrated to replace national security police with student workers as campus guards. Military checkpoints virtually disappeared from Sana', Aden, and the highway between them. In June and July of 1990, the mood was like that in Prague.

The sudden suspension of Saudi, Kuwaiti and Iraqi aid, the embargo of Iraqi oil shipments, the collapse of tourism and the decline in regional commerce cost Yemen nearly \$2 billion in 1990, although a sudden infusion of migrants' remittances cushioned the blow. While ministries struggled to pay faculty and health workers' salaries previously financed from the Gulf, investment plans were scaled back, the *riyal's* value

dropped, prices rose sharply, and a half-million returnees camped outside Sana'.

Yemen's refusal to join the coalition caused the deepest rift in Washington-Sana' relations since June 1967, but it also captured US attention. US Secretary of State James Baker visited Sana' but failed to persuade the government to join the US-Saudi axis. President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih repeated Yemen's condemnation of Iraq's invasion but observed that intervention by a massive multinational force was liable to "destabilize the entire region."

American dependents, Peace Corps, USAID, USIA, their European counterparts, and business people gradually evacuated Yemen. Once the war began, the remaining 20 US diplomats and marines moved into the embassy, and oil industry employees stayed off the streets. Yemeni media now carried Baghdad's war coverage, along with denunciations of Voice of America and the BBC. After some demonstrations, and then a calm, someone threw grenades at the Sana' International School, there were small explosions at several embassies, and the heavily fortified US compound came under machine-gun fire from a passing car.

For all its popularity, Yemeni unification is anathema to Saudi Arabia. Although the YAR's more conservative social, economic and political system appeared to dominate the new union, a unified Yemen of 13 or 14 million people posed a potential military threat, the Saudis felt, and its relative freedom of press, assembly and participation, including women's participation, could set a dangerous example. Riyadh tersely congratulated the new republic, but covertly subsidized an opposition "reform" party of conservative tribes and fundamentalists.

Washington has traditionally

dealt with North Yemen through Riyadh.<sup>2</sup> Sana' got a modest \$30 million or so annually in US development assistance, but the PDRY was on the State Department's list of "terrorist states." Economic plans of the unified state called for freer trade and investment, and Soviet influence seemed on the wane. When 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih became the first Yemeni president to visit Washington in January 1990, two months after being designated to lead the future unified state, the Bush administration approved \$50 million in trade credits. YAR ambassador Muhsin al-'Aini stayed on in Washington, while the PDRY's 'Abdallah al-Ashtal remained as the new country's UN delegate.

It was against the backdrop of this most important event in its recent history that Yemen responded to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Initially opinion was divided, but the balance shifted after Saddam Hussein, in his first major speech of the crisis, declared that Iraq had been inspired by the Yemeni example to pursue Arab unity by erasing colonial boundaries, and Saudi commentators lambasted Sana' for refusing to commit troops to the kingdom's defense. The Saudi request for US troops to confront Iraq prompted extraordinary protest demonstrations, and the consensus at many *qat* chews shifted decisively against Saudi Arabia. At the same time, pro-Saudi elements formed a Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Kuwait.

Mindful of both the public mood and longer term interest in maintaining ties with the West and the Gulf, the government declared and held to a policy of neutrality. The Salih regime condemned the invasion, hostage-taking and annexation, but did not support sanctions or use-of-force resolutions. UN rep-

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school. By the time of Muhammad's death in 1970, Khadija had completed five years and 'Abd al-Rahman had finished intermediate school.

Neither Amat al-Karim nor her neighbors could anticipate the fantastic changes of the 1970s, as second-hand affluence from the oil boom and continuing upheaval within Yemen transformed the world around them. Through this tumultuous period, Amat al-Karim and her children held closely to the family and religious values she learned as a child, but their own choices and the changing environment left them in a very different position 25 years after the revolution. Whereas the status position of a Sana'ni *sayyid* previously ranked the family among the elite, nowadays it is their economic class that situates them socially.

Amat al-Karim found spouses for her children through the network of her aunts and sister. Both literate and demure, Khadija was not wanting for suitors. In the end, Amat al-Karim accepted as her son-in-law a military man, who was often stationed in Cairo during the early years of their marriage. Because of his frequent travels, Khadija continued to live in her mother's home. For her son, Amat al-Karim selected from their wide kinship network a bride nicknamed Ghafura, who also moved into their crowded house.

Their house in the old city consisted of three stories. Goats, chickens, fodder, fuel and grain were kept on the ground floor. Amat al-Karim shared the second story flat, containing a large *diwan* (sitting room), two bedrooms, a traditional bathroom and a large ordinary room used for baking, cooking and eating, with 'Abd al-Rahman and his family. Khadija and her children occupied the smaller top flat.

In the late 1970s, the family enjoyed the benefits of Yemen's new affluence, although none of them joined the flood of workers going to the Gulf. 'Abd al-Rahman, whose educational qualifications were rapidly becoming insufficient, had become bored with his routine, low-paying government clerkship. Somewhat idly at first, he began painting Islamic verses on colored glass, of the sort commonly embedded in the plaster around interior windows and doors in Sana'ni houses. With the flurry of new residential construction taking place in Sana' at the time, sales were soon so brisk that 'Abd al-Rahman matched his government salary and more in his afternoons. He rented a neighborhood shopfront and quit his government post about a year before his marriage in 1977.

Through 1980 'Abd al-Rahman scarcely kept track of his daily earnings, but often grossed 500-1000 Yemeni rials (YR) a day (\$111-221).<sup>4</sup> Much of the income went toward buying appliances. As they became available on the market, the family bought a tape recorder, washing machine, refrigerator, television and video. They paid gladly for water and electricity hookups and purchased better quality meat, *qat*, household items, jewelry and clothing, although their tastes remained quite traditional. Their courtyard goats and chickens were replaced by milk, eggs and meat purchased from the market.

Khadija and 'Abd al-Rahman's wife Ghafura turned their attention wholeheartedly to motherhood, enjoying almost annually the 40 days of festivities and relaxation that follow childbirth. They passed their time at home with the children or celebrating the marriages and births of others. Khadija bore

five children in the first decade of marriage (one of whom died); Ghafura had six. The three-story house resonated with the sounds of children.

In 1982, members of the family decided to pool their resources (Khadija's bridewealth, savings from the men, cash traded in from jewelry, and loans from relatives) to purchase a fashionable new one-story house outside the walls of the old city. It cost YR 220,000 (\$48,888 at the new, lower exchange rate). They spent a further YR 50,000 on decoration and a Western-style bathroom. The kitchen was a separate open room in the courtyard, a more healthful arrangement than in their old house. Khadija and a widowed aunt continued to live in the increasingly decrepit house in the old city.

By the summer of 1989, the family retained neither the prestige of the old era nor the affluence of the oil-boom years. 'Abd al-Rahman now earns less than half what he made in the peak years. The slowdown in housing construction has meant less demand for his religious verses and patriotic designs. The devaluation of the Yemeni *riyal* has increased the cost of his paint and glass. Many other necessities and niceties of daily life also cost more, and family demands surpass what he brings home. Ten-year-old appliances are breaking down, and need to be repaired or replaced.

'Abd al-Rahman's wife and sister now tell him that had he stayed in his secure civil service job, he would probably be a director by now and that surely a decent position awaits him still. He checked into the possibility of returning to the government, but learned that his intermediate education would gain him only an unskilled, entry-level position and a meager salary. The traditional familial ties that yielded good marriages in the old city are of limited value now in the world of government. In his late 30s, he is the model Sana'ni son,



In North Yemen.

Robert Prochnow



Rural girl in the Taiz market.

Sheila Carapico

husband, brother and father—loving, sober, hard-working and pious. Yet the smart Western suits of today's successful men are not his style, and his nieces call him old-fashioned. Like his old neighbors and friends, he manufactures artifacts linked to the lifestyles of an earlier generation. His children prefer imported goods.

Khadija has by now joined her husband in Cairo. They live in a fourth-floor, four-room suburban apartment. There is no place for her children in overcrowded Egyptian schools. Ghafura, for her part, lives with her family in the one-story suburban house, now surrounded by workshops, a lumber yard, and the smaller houses of recent arrivals from the countryside. Both women longingly recall the old days in the old city, with its familiar social network and the never-ending cycle of afternoon parties for new brides and mothers. They both fear that their children are not being taught the proper old city manners, respect and piety that they want them to have. They are keenly aware of the importance of school certificates, yet they remain more concerned about their children's moral education.

## In Rural Ta'iz

Far away from Sana', in a village outside Ta'iz, the Qasir family represented the epitome of success. Theirs was an extended family in which all except Mustafa, the father, resided in the tall stone house in the village and worked in agriculture. They worked on lands they owned or rented in a sharecropping arrangement (*shirka*) common in that part of

Yemen. Like other families with excess labor, they took in rented lands to maximize production.

The grandfather, 'Ali, had spent his youth as a stoker on steamships moving from Aden to Southeast Asia, Suez, Europe and beyond; he returned to farming after his retirement, doing what men do in agriculture in those parts of Yemen—the plowing and threshing. Grandmother Sybil worked alongside him, and tended to the farm animals. Aziza, their daughter-in-law, managed the household; she organized maintenance tasks such as shopping, cleaning, cooking and fetching water, arranged agricultural work, and helped her father-in-law decide about expenditures. In the afternoons or during agricultural slack-periods, she was a seamstress. In the 1970s, Aziza's three sons and three daughters were in school but they also helped with cooking, cleaning, fetching water, running errands and shopping in the market town, and with agricultural work.

Aziza's husband, Mustafa, was in Saudi Arabia, where he held down two and sometimes three jobs. As a boy he had lived with his father in Aden, where he learned some English, how to be a houseboy, cook and servant, and how to read and write Arabic. In Saudi Arabia, he worked variously as a construction foreman, a cook, a clerk and a shop attendant. To keep down costs, he shared living quarters with other Yemeni migrants, sent a small remittance to his father each month, and scrupulously saved every *riyal* of the rest. When he returned to Yemen after four years away, he brought with him luxurious gifts: a fake fur coat for Aziza, a color television, new and fashionable ready-made clothes for his children, imitation Persian carpets, a washing machine, a butagaz-fueled stove

with oven, a blender and other household appliances. He took his parents on the pilgrimage to Mecca. The bulk of his savings went toward the cost of building a new house, a one-story bungalow, for Aziza and their children.

Mustafa returned to work in Saudi Arabia, but in 1983 he lost one job after another. After an extended and fruitless search for new work, he returned to Yemen.

Since then he has drifted from one unsuccessful venture to another. At one point, he was unable to repay a bank loan he had taken out to start a small restaurant; Aziza sold and pawned her jewelry to make the bank payments. It has been difficult for Mustafa to settle into business because he now needs certificates and permits for everything, and must bribe officials to get them. He has become exceedingly discouraged about the possibility of earning a decent income honorably.

He has also become disheartened about his own children, especially his sons, who do not appreciate the value of hard work, spend more than they earn, and seem ashamed by his lowly work and powerlessness. Some call the new generation the "Nido generation"—spoiled on the Nido powdered milk so plentiful in the affluent 1970s.

Mustafa's and Aziza's eldest son Hamud works in a civil service job in Ta'iz. Like many other village men, he lives in town during the week and returns to the village on weekends. Nearly 30 years old, father of three, he spends more than he earns on his personal habits: smoking cigarettes and chewing expensive *qat* daily.

Chewing *qat* has taken on enhanced functions in Yemen in the 1980s. Nationally, consumption is on the rise because more people—men and women—are chewing daily. Average daily chews cost about YR 100 (\$10). Together with the cost of cigarettes, expenditures on this recreational drug can easily exceed a household's income. There is new evidence that some men are inadvertently "starving their families" to support their *qat* consumption.<sup>5</sup> That fathers like Mustafa, who in an earlier era would have reached middle age and been supported by their sons, are instead finding themselves covering their sons' debts, means that somehow, begrudgingly, they appreciate the important social function of the *qat* chew for their sons. Yemen is a more complex place now than it was in their youth. To get things done in Yemen today, one needs "backing." Backing assures individuals of jobs, certificates, perquisites, "justice" and business opportunities. If one does not have a tribe to turn to, as is the case for many of the southern districts of the country, one creates and reinforces one's backing through daily social intercourse around *qat*.

It is not surprising, then, that Hamud has failed to relieve his parents of their burden of work by providing regular cash support. His irresponsibility has become the major source of conflict in the family, particularly when he runs up large debts that he expects his father to pay. Yet everyone knows that his irresponsibility is the necessary price of keeping in with friends and in the know. Men who do not chew *qat* are stigmatized as miserly, negative and anti-social.

In 1988 the second son, Salih, a university student, pressured his parents into coming up with enough money to allow him to marry a cousin. When Mustafa and Aziza finally acknowledged that it would be impossible, he left for town and

refused to visit them until a year later, after they had made arrangements to finance the marriage. When the marriage finally took place in 1989, with an installment brideprice and "no frills," Salih only complained that things were not good enough for his bride and himself.

Other aspects of family life have changed as well. When Aziza and Mustafa moved into their own house, they insisted on reducing the amount of rented lands taken in by the extended family. They would work on their patrimonial plots, but no more. Aziza also looks after six sheep, but no longer keeps more demanding animals such as cows. Nor does she sew clothes for her daughters and herself; it is more economical to buy the cheap imported clothes from Southeast Asia which are now available in the village shops, the Turba market and Ta'iz town. Aziza and her daughters derive great pleasure from their leisure time, something unknown to them a few years ago. They spend their afternoons and evenings sitting in front of the television, watching Egyptian soap operas or Saudi religious programs.

Aziza worries about her daughters and their future marriages. She wants them to marry close so that she can keep an eye on them, but views the pool of desirable bridegrooms as distressingly small. She questions the sincerity and ultimate motivation of the youthful converts to religious fundamentalism, and wants her daughters to have nothing to do with them. "These religious men say that everything is shameful (*'ayb*): we shouldn't go out with uncovered faces, we shouldn't educate our daughters. This isn't real religion," she says. Yet, as Aziza has seen with her own sons, the current situation forces many ambitious young men in the direction of excesses: irresponsible financial management, corruption, and overconsumption of *qat*, cigarettes and even alcohol. As she puts it, "Life nowadays is unstable."

As the prosperity and satisfaction of the 1970s gave way to the austerity and relative deprivation of the 1980s, a sense of frustration and alienation developed. We noticed it especially among these women and their friends who, always quick with a quip, grew increasingly cynical about the political order. Though both families enjoyed the security of home ownership, they each now relied mainly on the precarious earnings of one man with nothing of material value to pass on to his sons. The women worried about this, about the erosion of the moral fabric of society, and about the contradictions between what they still felt was right and the kinds of action that seemed necessary to get ahead. ■

#### Footnotes

1 *Qat*, or *Catha edula* Forssk., is a mildly stimulant shrub cultivated in the Yemeni highlands, Ethiopia and, it is said, the hilly districts of Israel. The fresh leaves of the plant are chewed for their euphoric effect. Most Yemeni men and many women chew *qat* each afternoon in social gatherings "where the real work of the country is accomplished and decisions made." See J. Kennedy, *The Flower of Paradise: The Institutionalized Use of the Drug Qat in North Yemen* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), and S. Weir, *Qat in Yemen: Consumption and Social Change* (London: British Museum Publications Limited, 1985).

2 See Cynthia Myntti, "Yemeni Workers Abroad: The Impact on Women," *MERIP Reports* #124 (June 1984), for a discussion of the effects at the micro-level.

3 See Sheila Carapico, "Autonomy and Secondhand Oil Dependency of the Yemen Arab Republic," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10,2 (1988), pp. 193-213.

4 The exchange rate for the *riyal* was then artificially high. Until 1983, the Yemeni currency rates were stable against the major currencies of the world, at \$1=YR 4.5. By 1989 the *riyal* had been devalued to \$1=YR 10.

5 This is contrary to what Weir suggests in her book on *qat* (pp. 101-108).

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representative al-Ashtal became the Security Council's most prominent, consistent advocate for diplomacy.

The al-Sauds took this neutrality as an affront. They cut aid in August. Next, they summarily revoked special residence and working privileges for over a million of the Yemenis in the kingdom, life-long residents as well as short-term sojourners, forcing the majority to sell what they could at distressed prices and head south.

News of the US bombing of a Baghdad shelter full of civilians and of the ground assault politicized Sana' as never before. While the Arab League's minority anti-war faction met at the Hadda Ramada, Tahrir Square overflowed with tens of thousands of enraged students and expelled migrants.

In the confluence of these events—a new nationalism, sudden lifting of political constraints, a war jeopardizing national and individual well-being, and a leading role at the

UN—Yemenis and their government feel they have found a political voice. Popular slogans against the war and the Gulf monarchies have helped legitimize a regime which, in turn, tried to play a mediating role in the Arab League and the Security Council. Saudi and US “punishment” has so far only heightened a sense of nationalist self-righteousness. This will deepen if Yemen and other poor Arab states that declined to back the war are forced to pay. ■

#### Footnotes

1 For one account, see Fred Halliday, “Moscow's Crisis Management: The Case of South Yemen,” *Middle East Report*, #151 (March-April 1988).

2 After the fall of the shah, the US rushed \$100 million in arms to Sana' when Saudi Arabia requested weapons to protect the YAR from the PDRY. See *New York Times*, February 12 and 13, 1979; *New York Times*, February 13, 1979; and *Washington Post*, December 4, 1986, for articles describing the *quid pro quo* for Saudi involvement in Iran-Contra dealings. The context for these events is discussed by Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1985), especially pages 282-294 and 387-397; and Anthony Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability: Saudi Arabia, the Military Balance in the Gulf and Trends in the Arab-Israeli Military Balance* (Boulder: Westview, 1986). The case for Saudi hegemony is made in Saeed Badeeb, *The Saudi-Egyptian Conflict over Yemen 1962-70* (Boulder: Westview, 1986).