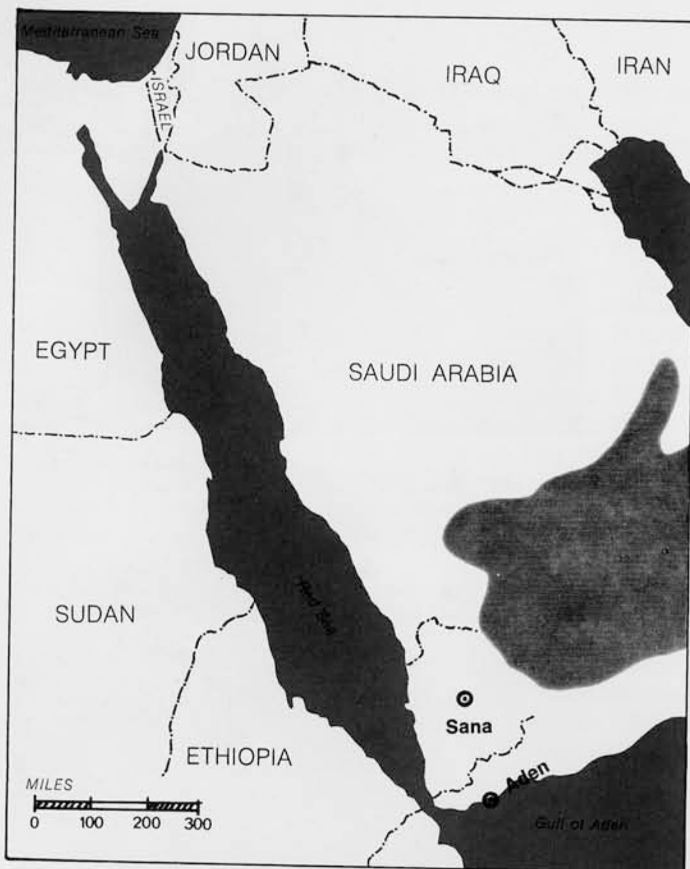
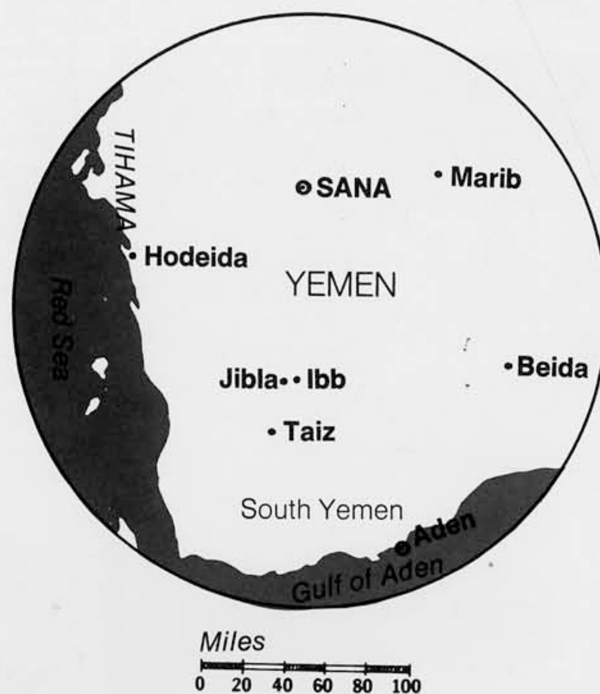




YEMEN: BREAKING WITH THE FEUDAL PAST

Leland Meister

Two aspects of the agricultural system in Yemen warrant description: the technology of the farmers and the relationship existing between the sheikhs and the farmers. Although the technology is sophisticated, it is reminiscent of an early stage of agricultural development as it depends primarily on human and animal labor. The relationship between sheikhs and farmers resembles a feudalistic organization of the agricultural system. Since neither of these conditions is accidental, it seems appropriate to place them in a brief historical context to shed some light on the present situation and the possibilities for change in the near future.

The importance of agriculture in Yemen cannot be overstated since about eighty percent of the six million people are farmers, most of them subsistent farmers. The major crops are sorghum, maize, wheat, cotton, coffee, and qat—a small tree whose leaves are chewed by the people every afternoon for its rather mild narcotic effect.

My wife and I worked for two years (1971-1973) at a mission hospital in Jibla, a small town of six thousand inhabitants located about five miles from Ibb, the capital of the Ibb province between Sana and Taiz in the fertile central mountain region. Jibla stands at six thousand feet elevation and has a near perfect climate; the temperature never hit the freezing mark in the dry winter and rarely hit

1
Almost all durah in our area was the crooked-neck variety. Thus, the head does not hang down because it is heavy (sorghum heads in the U.S. are usually two or three times this size) but only because it grows this way. Other parts of Yemen have a straight-neck variety.

2
A mountain village near Jibla nestles amidst the terraces during the dry season.

3
On the plains of Yarim (where this was taken) and in the Tjhama, camels are also used for plowing.

4
Two neighbors working together are planting maize near Jibla. The rock wall behind them is about seven feet high.

ninety in the summer as the daily rains cooled off the afternoons.

Farming has changed little in Yemen since ancient times, and the cultivation of durah (sorghum), the most important crop in the Ibb province, serves as a typical example of Yemeni agricultural technology in which almost every available resource is utilized in an eternal cycle of production. It could be argued that qat is a more important crop than durah since it is the main cash crop, but the bread made from durah is the single most important food in the diet in the Ibb province. Durah bread and vegetable sauces must provide a very nutritious diet since the hospital has seen few cases of malnutrition since its founding in 1964.

One of the most striking features of Yemen is the numerous contoured terraces that stretch high up the mountains, the result of the work of many generations of farmers. Beginning at the bottom of a mountain, farmers dig into the slope until they unearth poor soil or the wall of soil into which they are digging begins to crumble. Then they stack rocks into a retaining wall to hold the soil on the terrace above them. They lean the wall slightly into the terrace, making it unnecessary to use mud or mortar to bind the rocks. Walls sometimes reach eight feet in height but most are three to five feet. This digging and rock stacking process is repeated as they work their way up the mountain.

The plots of land on the terraces vary from several acres near the bottom to a small fraction of an acre up the mountainside. So numerous are these fragments of land carved out of the mountains that tractors and other cumbersome machinery are out of the question. In the opinion of several United Nations agricultural advisers on the experimental farm near Ibb, the present method of cultivation—the ox-drawn plow—is the most workable "machine" for farmers in the Ibb province.

The durah is planted in April or May after the first rains have begun. The rainy season has two stages—the first, from April to June, consisting of intermittent rains of varying amounts, and the second, from July to September or October, having heavy rains almost every afternoon. In planting the durah, the farmer plows a furrow with his pair of oxen and small iron plow (which was forged by a local blacksmith). After plowing the furrow, he comes back, drops seed into it, and mashes down the soil with his foot to preserve the moisture.

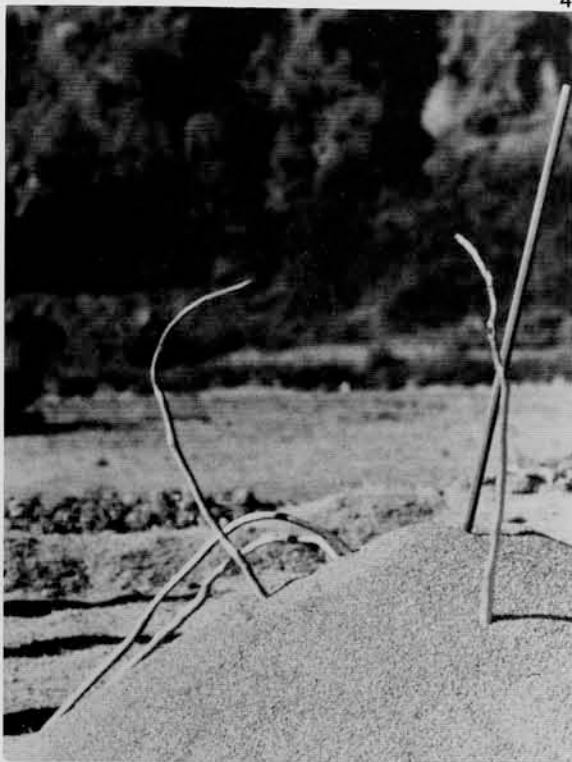
When planting is over, the wait for rain begins. Sometimes the early rains are unreliable, and in our second year in Yemen the rains began but stopped. As the rainless days stretched into weeks, the disaster of a drought loomed in the minds of the people. They turned to their religion (Islam) in this time of need. Mosque leaders of Jibla called the people together for special rain prayers in the mosque. People walked out of Jibla to a bonfire one night where they offered special prayers for rain. A daytime prayer was held atop a mountain near Jibla where a mosque once stood near the ruins of an old Turkish fort. In the evenings men and boys lit small fires in the mountains in supplication to Allah to send rain. The rains finally came (al-hamdlillah—praise to God).

Early in the crop season the farmer, with his curved digging tool (mafris), rakes a mound of dirt around the bottom of each durah stalk to prepare his crop against the winds and rains of the second stage of the rainy season. Durah grows to a height of six to eight feet.

After the durah heads have pollinated and seeds have formed, the farmer or his wife begins to strip the green leaves from the stalks to feed them to his livestock. As soon as he strips the leaves, he ties several durah stalks together to strengthen the tall, naked plants against the weather until the seeds can ripen. In feeding the green leaves to the livestock, the farmer or his wife wraps the leaves around last year's dry durah stalks to coerce the animals into eating the tough stems. Thus, the durah crop is gradually stripped of its leaves to feed the livestock for several weeks.

5
Durah stalks tied together with leaves await ripening and harvest in a field near Ibb.

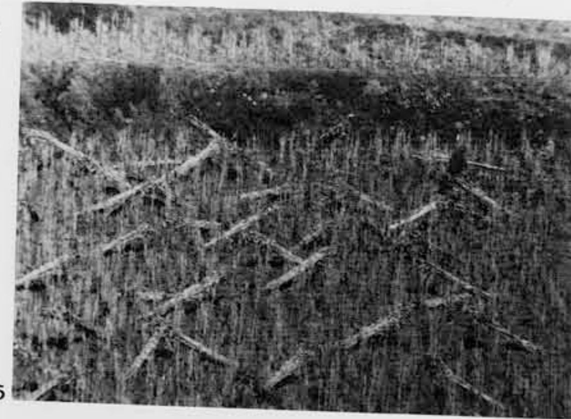
The seed heads mature, and when harvest time arrives in October and November, families enter the fields. While the men cut off the stalks two feet above the ground with a curved, serrated knife about six inches long and lay the stalks in the middle of the rows, the women cut off the mature heads and put them in five-gallon cans. Men, women, children, and donkeys form lines as they carry the cans to the threshing floor, a flat area which in the off-season in Jibla is used by the young men as a football (soccer) field. Threshing floors dot the landscape with their red and yellow piles of grain as each farmer has a pile which represents one field or his total crop of durah.



1.2
Swinging their arms in a circle, the men pound the durah with their curved sticks until they thresh every grain from the heads. They are on a threshing floor just outside Jibla.

3
The man throws the grain into the air so the wind can separate the grain from the chaff. (Threshing floor outside Jibla.)

4
The curved sticks are a slow but efficient means of threshing the durah. The sticks are stripped of their bark, soaked in water, and bent in their present shape before they are allowed to dry.



5
After the durah stalks are cut and the heads are severed from them, the stalks are tied in bundles and stacked in the fields. (Between Jibla and Ibb.)

6
These women have the task of carrying the dry durah stalks from the field to the house to stack up for use later as feed for their animals.

The farmer threshes his durah with a curved stick, pounding for hours until the seeds are separated from the heads. He then winnows his grain by throwing it into the air with a wooden shovel and allowing the wind to blow the dust and chaff away. Finally, he rakes his grain into burlap sacks and hauls it to his house to store it. Part of it his wife will grind into flour for bread; part of it he will plant the following year; part of it he will use to pay his rent or tax or both to the proper authorities. Speed is essential in threshing. A rain on the durah while it lies on the threshing floor could spoil it and result in hardship or disaster.

While the farmer is threshing his grain, his wife and children are stacking up the six-foot stalks and carrying them in bundles to the house. These are the stalks he will wrap with leaves of next year's durah crop and feed to his animals.

The completion of a successful harvest is cause for celebration. On three successive Thursdays in November, people from Jibla and surrounding villages walk the paths that lead to jabal a-Taker (Mt. Taker), the highest peak in the area (about 10,000-foot elevation), for a day of feasting, music, singing, and dancing. It is a festival of thanksgiving for the food they need to insure life for another year.

Soon after the harvest the farmer returns to his field, his iron plow slung over his shoulder, driving his two oxen before him. If he does not own a pair of oxen, he can rent them for six to eight rials a day (one rial equals twenty to twenty-five cents). After he plows a furrow beside the two-foot stalks still standing in the field, he and his family pull out the stalks by hand, beat the roots on the ground to shake loose all the soil, and stack them up to carry home to use as fuel for the cooking fire.

In the mountain villages the whole family works in the fields. Unlike their urban sisters, Yemeni village women wear no veils and work beside their husbands and neighbors. Although these women did much of the same work that men did, I never saw a woman plowing with oxen nor threshing durah with the curved stick.

Late in the winter or early in the spring the farmer cleans out the animal manure from the first floor of his house where the animals live, deposits it in heaps in his field, and spreads it out. He does the same with the ashes from the cooking fire. Thus, the remains of the crop—manure and ashes—are put back into the land, and the cycle is ready to begin again.

In the near future Yemeni farmers will be using some new methods along with the traditional ones. United Nations experimental farms are introducing new seeds, fertilizers, and better methods of irrigation. Some wells are being dug for more water. A few small tractors are appearing in flat areas where they can be used. Small gasoline engines are pumping water from the streams into fields during dry periods of the rainy season in a few places. The introduction of a small threshing machine would speed up the threshing process and eliminate some of the danger from unexpected rains spoiling the grain that now must lie on the ground for several days or more. However, as we shall see, the rapid introduction of technology would pose a serious problem for Yemeni society.

2

1, 2
The farmer plows furrows beside the remaining stalks before he pulls them out and shakes off the dirt.

1

The sheikhs control almost all the arable land in Yemen, and the Ibb province is no exception. They own great tracts of land, some of which they rent to farmers living in small mountain villages, some tilled by the sharecroppers who live on the sheikh's land. There are also many small land owners who live in their own homes in Jibla, Ibb, and other small villages, but they too are under the authority of a local sheikh.

The sharecropper who lives on the sheikh's land, owning virtually nothing, not even his house, comes closest to the condition of a peasant in a feudalistic system. He works the land for a portion of the crop that will feed him and his family; the other portion belongs to the sheikh. In return he also receives a measure of security. Every sheikh maintains a bodyguard or small militia, its size dependent upon his wealth. Since the farmers and their crops are a vital source of this wealth, he protects them from bands of marauders and from rival sheikhs. Sometims a farmer's son may join the sheikh's militia, but the farmer himself would serve in that capacity only in an extreme crisis (in the northern and eastern parts of Yemen, however, the tribesmen farmers are fierce warriors for their sheikhs).

Some farmers own their land and home and produce enough to feed their families. Others own only small plots of land (usually from their part of an inheritance), insufficient for their families' needs; they rent additional land from the sheikh, paying for it with a portion of the crop. All pay the sheikh a protection tax. The local saying was that the farmer had to pay the protection tax, not to protect himself from thieves, but to protect himself from the local sheikh who collected the tax.

The rapid introduction of mechanization could radically alter the situation. Fewer sharecroppers would be needed to work the land. Since fewer renters would be needed, many of the small land owners with not enough land would have to sell. These farmers and their families would have to go to the cities which do not yet have adequate utilities nor enough industry for jobs. The cities are still adjusting to the boom from the immigration of thousands of people from South Yemen (1971-1973), but many of these were from the middle class with some money to invest and begin anew. Sharecroppers will not have this capital.

Sana, the capital (pop. 70,000) and one of the three major cities of Yemen (Taiz and Hodeida are the other two), is one of the cities with an acute utilities problem. There is no public water supply, only individual wells. According to research by a French architect for the United Nations, a public water supply would increase the consumption of water, leading to the destruction of many homes which have stood for several centuries. The houses are built of clay and mud and rest on shallow foundations, and the increased water in the ground would result in a shifting of the foundations and cracks would occur. The architect estimates that in ten years many homes would be damaged beyond repair. To complicate the problem further, the present water system with individual wells has widespread contamination with hepatitis. Thus, there is a legitimate demand for quality water.

On the other hand, the city's problems could increase immeasurably if great care is not exercised in the application of modern technology. A sudden inflow of sharecroppers, coupled with the deterioration of houses from a public water supply, would not be an improvement over the people's present living situation. Also, the beauty of Sana, which is reputed to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, and the ancient beauty of the rest of Yemen should be respected and preserved by technology.

Let us return to the problems confronting sheikhs and farmers. A sheikh maintains himself in a multi-storied castle (or castles), often surrounded by a wall, perched high on a mountain commanding a magnificent view of the landscape, but more importantly, the castle commands a superior military position. Alone on its mountain perch, the sheikh's dwelling can be seen for miles around, a constant reminder of his presence to all the farmers in their villages below. Presently there is much discontent with the wealth and power of the sheikhs but most Yemenis remember a

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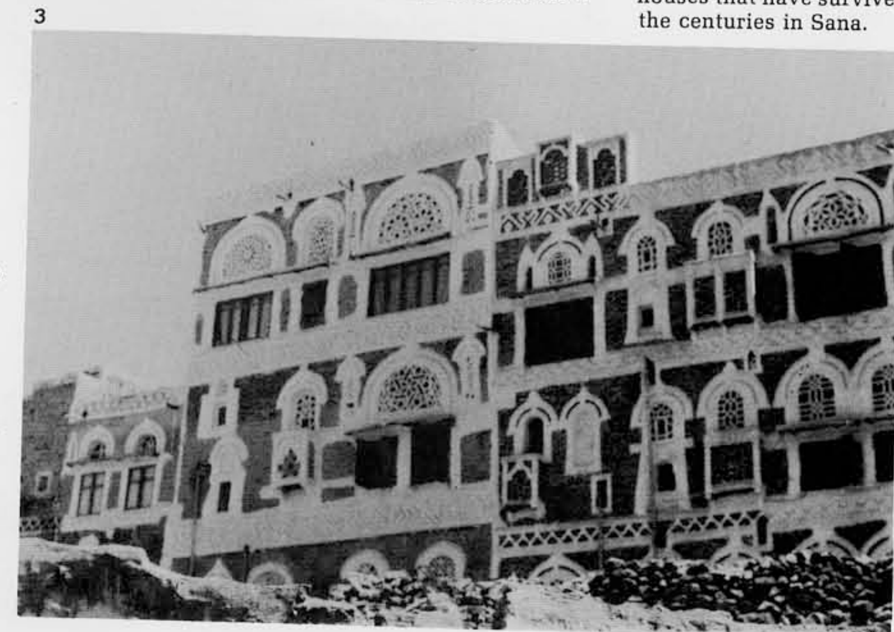

3
Some of the many ornately white-washed houses that have survived the centuries in Sana.

A sheikh's house overlooks the Habla countryside near al-Udain in the Ibb province. This three-storied castle has a generator for electricity, chairs, silverware, and a cook schooled in France.

time in the recent past when the local sheikh was their source of security and protection, however slight it was at times. Thus, the sheikh's house has also been a visible symbol for a needed local authority and has engendered a local allegiance that has traditionally been very strong. However, in this disunited land where other sheikhs seek to conquer him and obtain his wealth and land, the local sheikh has been and continues to be in a precarious position of power (the ruling sheikh in our area was shot by an assassin soon after our departure).

To understand the relationship between sheikhs and farmers, we must explore briefly the historical context of the broader political atmosphere of Yemen. This approach may also give some insight into the causes of the increased discontent with the power of the sheikhs as the people are suddenly encountering challenges to their traditional attitudes toward political authority.

At least three factors have contributed to the ancient tradition of disunity in Yemen. First, the division into tribes under the rule of a local sheikh dates from the pre-Islamic era (before A.D. 622). These have not been nomadic tribes (Yemen has a few nomadic tribes on the northeastern border) but are settled and semi-settled farmers who have retained their tribal entity. Second, the country is divided into rural and urban dwellers, the latter being merchants and artisans. The rural tribesman considers himself superior to the city dweller. He shuns the easy and comfortable life in the city and considers himself more independent in that he settles his disputes according to tribal tradition without governmental interference. Finally, there are two large Islamic sects which add another divisive dimension to the society. These are the Zaydis of the Shi'a, who reside roughly in the mountainous region in the north part of Yemen, and the Shafi'is of the Sunni (Orthodox), who dwell in the lowlands of the Tihama along the coast of the Red Sea and in the southern part of the country. The two groups are almost equal in number, but more of the Zaydis are rural tribesmen, so it follows that more of the Shafi'is are urbanites which somewhat enforces the urban-tribal division. It can also be said that the Zaydis are more fanatical about their religion and consider themselves religiously superior to the Shafi'is.

On the other hand, there have been unifying forces at work, and one of the strongest of these was Islam. The division into sects did not prevent intermarriage between members of the two sects, worship at each other's mosque, nor cooperation in times of common crises. Foreign rule has also been a unifying factor. The Ottoman Turks occupied Yemen twice—from 1538 to 1630 and from 1872 (although they occupied the Tihama in 1849) to 1918. Various Yemeni leaders, especially Imams, united tribes and led revolts against the foreign authority.

One of the most significant developments in Yemen, and a very ambivalent factor in unification until the twentieth century, was the establishment of the Zaydi Imamate, the office of the temporal and spiritual ruler of the country, in A.D. 893. Al-Hadi Yahya founded the Rassid (or Rassi) dynasty which has continued through the present Imam, Muhammad al-Badr, who was overthrown in 1962 and lives in exile in London. At times the Imam has used his power to unify the country; at other times several powerful leaders claimed the title since it is not hereditary, and they clashed in ravaging wars.

During the reigns of the previous two Imams (Yahya, 1918-48, and his son, Ahmed, 1948-62), Yemen was effectively united. The basic foreign policy was the tactic of isolation. Since Imam Yahya's reign followed the second Turkish occupation, the fear of foreign influence was founded on valid historical reality. One result of this policy was the exclusion of much Western technology. For example, Imam Yahya forbade radios, and people recalled Imam Ahmed confiscating the evil device. A room full of radios in Ahmed's Taiz palace (which has been converted into a museum arranged exactly as the Imam left it) supports this claim. Of course, radios existed in the homes of the affluent so there was communication from the outside world, but it was a sharp contrast with today when almost everyone owns a transistor radio. Arab music blares on the streets from small coffee shops and restaurants, and one can listen to a radio even in remote villages. Electricity, airplanes, autos were available only for the Imam.

By isolating themselves from the rest of the world, the Imams could concentrate on

Leland Meister graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a B.A. in English from the University of Texas at Austin. After graduation, he and his wife went to Yemen where he taught English language courses, worked in horticultural activities introducing fruits and vegetables, and began a chicken project (prior to college he spent his life on a farm in central Texas). He was employed by the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. During the year since his return, he has completed a year of Arabic study at the University of Texas since he learned only the local spoken dialect in Yemen, and he is currently working on a novel.

internal affairs. It would be a mistake to think that the country accepted Imam Yahya's rule after the departure of the Ottoman Turks. The Turks themselves "ruled over" many tribes and the Zaydi Imam only by paying them monthly stipends, or bribes. Imam Yahya and his son, Ahmed, who commanded the army, spent much of the 1920's and 1930's suppressing tribal revolts (1922-23, tribes north of Sana; 1924-25, tribes of al-Jawf in the northeast; 1926-29, tribes in the Tihama; 1929-33, tribes in the east and northeast around Marib). By about 1938, Imam Yahya and his son had succeeded in establishing a semblance of order and internal security in the country.

After gaining this unity, Imam Yahya maintained it via the hostage system, a method employed for centuries in Yemen. During the campaigns, the Imam and his son, Ahmed, took as hostages the sons or close relatives, usually ranging from five to fifteen years of age, of the conquered tribal sheikhs, and imprisoned them in old palaces or forts. At the time of Imam Yahya's assassination in 1948, it is estimated there were 4000 hostages. From Taiz one can see the citadel al-Qāhira, used by Imam Ahmed, which people called the Imam's boarding school for sons of his favorite relatives. Besides taking hostages from the conquered tribes, the Imam took sons of powerful sheikhs whom he appointed to government offices, a security tactic to insure the sheikhs' loyalty to the Imam.

Another method of maintaining control was taxation. To become too wealthy was to challenge the Imam's power. Thus, the Imam enriched his treasury by additional taxes over and above regular taxes whenever he thought a sheikh was becoming too wealthy. A folk saying describes the climate that existed: a sheikh could be poor and look rich or he could look poor and be rich.

Using these tactics, Yahya and Ahmed achieved a fair measure of their goal of internal order and unity. Harold Ingrams, a British observer, wrote in 1941 about the contrast between the security of Yemen and the Aden Protectorate to the south:

> "One of the most striking things in the Yemen after the Protectorate is the complete security. The contrast was vividly brought home by the constant sight of men and women working in the fields without a thought of being robbed by their neighbours. I had lived at close quarters with the Protectorate for so long that I was more accustomed to see cultivation confined to the immediate neighbourhood of fortified homesteads in which refuge could be taken as soon as the first shot cracked."

Thus, small farmers obviously benefited from the Imam's achievement.

Internal order under this feudal arrangement of a loose federation of sheikhs under the Imam was to last a little more than twenty years after Ingrams' observation. The oppressive tactics stirred opposition, resulting in Imam Yahya's assassination in 1948, and attempts to assassinate Imam Ahmed in 1955 and 1961. Finally there occurred the revolution in 1962 which made Yemen a republic. Again there were divisions, and civil war between supporters of the revolution and supporters of the Imam raged into the late 1960's when the success of the Republic (Yemen Arab Republic) was assured for the present time.

For all its failures the revolution and the ensuing Republic accomplished some significant things. The Republic opened the country to technology, although it is only recently that it has been able to concentrate on peaceful technology. It will take time, but improved technology will come to the farmers. As stated before, it is my hope that it does not come too quickly.

The greatest historical significance of the revolution in 1962 was its termination of the Imamate tradition. Although this may be rather obvious, the break with the ancient Imamate tradition was no small change for the Yemeni people. In spite of the power struggles and oppressive tactics of the Imams for centuries, the Imam for most of the Yemeni people was God's chosen ruler and interpreter of the Koranic law. He was the temporal leader, but more importantly in the minds of the people, he was their religious leader, a man surrounded by a religious and mythical aura. They regarded him as supernatural and accorded him the powers of healing with his touch, taming wild animals, and *tawhah*—the power to injure from a distance. Thus, the revolution secularized and demythologized the office and the man who heads the state of Yemen—an important step for people on the way to determining their own destiny.

The revolution has not significantly altered the relationship between the sheikhs and the farmers. Sheikhs still control the land, the wealth, and the power in the countryside where most people live and work. However much the opening of the country to the flow of technologies and ideologies, to Arab nationalism, to education, and to extensive communication with the outside world makes possible a further change in authority patterns, the pattern existing between the sheikhs and the farmers will be a most difficult one to change. However, the revolution has unavoidably begun a process that will add to the discontent with the prevailing conditions and will challenge the traditional authority of the sheikhs in a country that in many ways still resembles a feudalistic society. 24

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