Yemen: The Unknown Arabia

Tim Mackintosh-Smith
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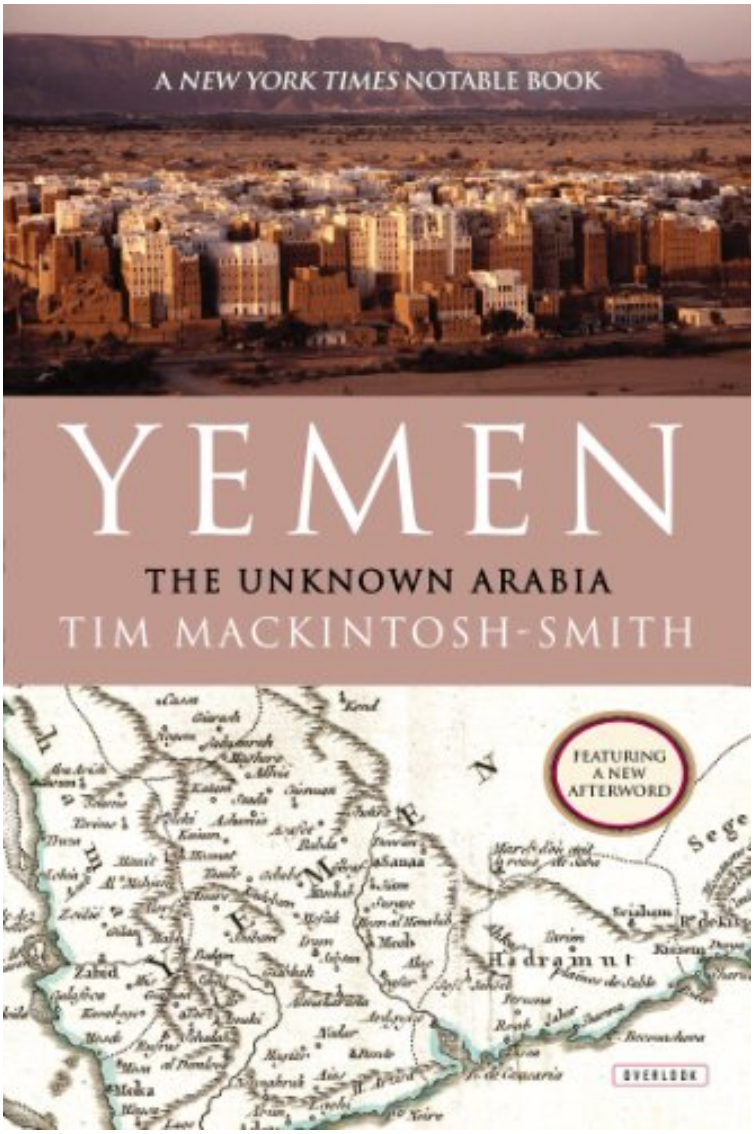

#1649479 in Books 2014-06-03 2014-06-03Ingredients: Example IngredientsOriginal language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.05 x .80 x 6.05l, .80 #File Name: 1468308823336 pages | File size: 31.Mb

Tim Mackintosh-Smith : Yemen: The Unknown Arabia before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Yemen: The Unknown Arabia:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. An insider's view of an unknown worldBy KerryahAs author Tim Mackintosh-Smith's book is sub-titled in this edition, Yemen is the unknown Arabia, one that is in many respects, at least at the time this book was published (2000)least like its Arabic neighbors.The author is a long-standing resident of the capital San'a, and uses it as his base to explore the language and culture of greater Yemen, including some memorable expeditions into deserts and mountains, visiting remote villages and ancient ruins.At times I found my

attention straying when the narrative became bogged down in technicalities that held little interest for me, but in the main I was happy to travel along with Mackintosh-Smith, especially when he visited places like Aden and the island of Suqutra, themselves atypical of the rest of Yemen.His exploration of Aden came at a time when the place was notorious for its nightlife (the early nineties) and incurred the condemnation of traditional Arabs. Good enough reason to visit it, the author felt. Consequently he finds himself in a night club with a disco ball and dance floor, plus a band that covered everything from Lebanese hits to Queen classics. To this reader's delight, he witnessed a local phenomenon in the form of the mutamaykalin, "the Michaelesques - the fans of Michael Jackson" who filled the dance floor.Mackintosh-Smith's experiences in Yemen culminate in the political struggles of the early 1990's in the wake of the first Gulf War. I was left wishing for a sequel to find out what happened next for the qat-chewing, language-loving author. Never fear, "Yemen: The Unknown Arabia" was his first book (which, incidentally, won a Thomas Cook Travel Book Award)and three subsequent volumes sit in my stack of travel books, awaiting my attention: Hall of a Thousand Columns Travels with a Tangerine: From Morocco to Turkey in the Footsteps of Islam's Greatest Traveler The Travels of Ibn Battutah0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Very enlightening...By ChojuroVery thorough trip through Yemen with tons of historical info. I felt as though I really got a better understanding of the country and its people... men at least as there is hardly any commentary on women's issues. For those issues I Am Nujood gives some different insight. The author is quirky which I love! It made me want to visit and feel sad about current events.14 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Gemillee- Beautiful al YemeenBy Jedidiah CarosaariI enjoyed this work. The author spends time focusing on most areas of Yemen- the Hawdramat, Sana'a, Aden, the mountains, and Suqutra. It would have been nice to have more detail on the coastal areas and the writing at times isn't excellent, but it is a very serviceable text. MacKintosh-Smith writes from the perspective of someone who really got inside the culture- as much as a traveler can get. He retains an etic perspective, and does not live, grow, and die with the Yemeni. But this is one of the few travelogues where one can find information on qat, and even the author using it on a regular basis (though it remains classified as a drug at the same level as cocaine by the U.S. government).It is also one of the few places where you can find a modern description of travels in Suqutra, which is worth getting the book by itself. The chapter on Suqutra describes a land isolated biologically for millions of years, displaying evidence of gigantisism as you find in Hawaii, where few predators have controlled the growth of fauna and especially flora. There are cucumber trees there, and others that look like upside-down umbrellas. Much of the flora and fauna are unique to the island. Further, severe storms six months of the year prevent access to the island. So, while over the years there have been invasions on the coast of the island by different parties, it has largely grown up unscathed into modern times. The language diverged from South Arabian in about 750 BC, and the people seem to be a mixture of Arabic, Greek, Portuguese, and Indian- but no one knows for sure. While they do now have cars (301 of them), the cigarette lighter is still an unknown machine. And since the government severely limits non-Yemeni visitors to the island, this is a rare and exciting bit of a story of what the people are like. I only wish there was more about the island.

Arguably the most fascinating and least understood country in the Arab world, Yemen has a way of attracting comment that ranges from the superficial to the wildly fantastic. A country long regarded by classical geographers as a fabulous land where flying serpents guarded sacred incense groves, while medieval Arab visitors told tales of disappearing islands and menstruating mountains. Our current ideas of this country at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula have been hijacked by images of the terrorist strongholds, drone attacks, and diplomatic tensions. But, as Mackintosh-Smith reminds us in this newly updated book, there is another Arabia. Yemen may be a part of Arabia, but it is like no place on earth.

Mackintosh-Smith brings us to a place we don t know at all and lets us in . . . he seems incapable of writing a dull sentence, and in him the scholar, the linguist and the storyteller swap hats with marvelous speed. Jason Goodwin, The New York Times Book About the AuthorTim Mackintosh-Smith has lived in Yemen since 1982, earning the official title of Shaykh of Nazarenes. This, his first book, won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Prefatory NoteYemeni history is at times bewilderingly complex. Although in Chapter 2 I have tried to sketch in the general lines of pre-Islamic history, I have avoided doing so for later periods so as not to overload the reader with dates and dynasties. To compensate, the Glossary includes brief notes on some of the more important rulers of Yemen; also, the Bibliography is fuller than is usual in a book of this nature. It is a book which, I admit, treads the thin line between seriousness and frivolity. If at times it veers towards the latter as it does, for example, when I relate the more questionable anecdotes of the medieval traveller Ibn al-Mujawir I can only repeat his near contemporary Yaquts apologia concerning the edible monopod poets of Hadramawt: I have merely quoted from the books of learned men.In transliterating Arabic words, I have followed the most commonly accepted system but minus the macrons and subscript dots; I have omitted initial ayns and hamzahs but have retained final ayns; the two letters are not distinguished when they occur within a word. A few readers may find this annoying, but it makes for clearer typography. Thus, the capital city of Yemen, ?ana (otherwise Sana, Sanaa and Sanaa), appears in this book as

Sana. As for my rendering of Suqutri words, I apologize in advance to the half dozen or so scholars of that language for any deficiencies they may find.IntroductionA definition is the enclosing of a wilderness of idea within a wall of words.Samuel Butler, NotebooksTHE RAIN BEAT DOWN. Horns rasped against the door: a sheep trying to get in. I didnt blame it spring was late in the Isle of Harris and it was cosy inside, all peat smoke and roll-ups. An easterly gale was whistling across the Sound from Skye and flinging sackfuls of hail at the tin roof of the croft house. The noise was deafening.You have to be somewhere quiet like Harris in the early stages of learning Arabic, somewhere you can walk around unheard, muttering strange, strangulated syllables, limbering up minute and never-used muscles of tongue and glottis. I got up to make tea. Hhha! I said to the matches when I found them; Ghghgha! when they refused to light. ? I mouthed to the hooded crow on the fence outside the window; that innocent-looking sign represented the trickiest letter of all, a guttural stop pronounced with constriction of the larynx, my grammar said. The hoodie croaked back and flapped off to peck out lambs eyes.The fire let out a rich belch of smoke. I threw on another sod of peat and drew up a chair. Cowans Modern Literary Arabic lay open at The Dual (not content with mere singulars and plurals, Arabic also has a form for pairs): The two beautiful queens, it said, are ignorant. The odds against ever uttering the sentence were high: grammars, like theatre, call for a suspension of disbelief. Under Cowan was an Arabic reader produced for British officers in the Palestine Mandate. At the bottom of the pile, as yet untouched, was a dictionary. I reached for it and looked at the title page. The dictionary had been compiled for the use of students and published Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam by the Catholic Press, Beirut, in 1915. As I turned its foxed pages, I broke through the wall of words into a wilderness of idea. It was another world, a surreal lexical landscape whose inhabitants lived in a state of relentless metamorphosis.Over there was a zabab, a messenger or possibly a huge deaf rat, while in the distance grazed anaamah, an ostrich, although it might have been a signpost, a pavilion on a mountain or even a membrane of the brain. Nearer to hand someone was maljan, sucking his she-camels out of avarice; hed be in for a shock if he had istanwaq them, mistaken male camels for she-camels. He could just be suffering from sada, thirst, also a voice, an echo, a corpse, a brain or an owl. Maybe his well was makul, holding little water and much slime. He was in a bad mood so I passed on quickly, worried that he might tarqa me, strike me upon the clavicle.In Dictionary Land you could come across a malit, a featherless arrow or a hairless abortive foetus. That, at least, showed a clear semantic link. So did firash, a mat/wife, and siffarah, an anus/whistle/fife. But other entries defied rational explanation, seeming no more than the word-associations of a hopeless head-case: you could take your qutrub, your puppy/demon/restless insect/melancholia, for a walk; qarurah could be the apple of ones eye, also a urinal. With a single verb, nakha, you could both slay someone and bear them sincere friendship; with another, istawsham, you could look for a tattooist; and if you were a calligrapher, you could be adept at yayyaya, forming a beautiful letter ya perhaps thus: On the culinary side, you might be akra, fond of trotters or thin in the shank, while with the verb karrash you could contract your face or prepare a haggis; the latter could be accompanied by a helping of wahisah, a dish made of locusts and grease, and washed down byadasiyah, an aromatized soup of lentils or bat-dung used as a medicine. Alkhan doubled for a rotten walnut and a stinking uncircumcised person. The sounds of Dictionary Land included inqad, the squeaking of eagles/the noise of fingers being cracked/the smacking of lips to call goats or even the noise made by truffles being extracted. The truffles might be of a species called faswat al-dab, also the name for a kind of poppy and, rendered literally, the noiseless flatulence of a male hyena.Somebody once said that every Arabic word means itself, its opposite or a camel.* But to me the world of the qamus, the dictionary (or ocean), was even more bizarre. To do it justice called for the descriptive faculties of the pre-Islamic poet Taabbata Sharra, whose name means He Who Carried An Evil Under His Armpit. And this dictionary was a shadow of Lanes, which in ten folio volumes over a period of thirty-four years only got as far as the letter qaf. Lanes was based on works like The Bridal Tiara of al-Zabidi, the great Yemeni-educated lexicographer and a contemporary of Dr Johnson. As a small boy I used to stare for hours at the fanciful oriental watercolours on my grandmothers walls; dreamed recurringly of flying over desert encampments in a telephone box; was shown, by my father, a strange, misshapen red globule which he produced from his bureau and said was the blood of an Arabian dragon. Now, out of these pages, the exotic beckoned once more, and I was hooked.The door opened. I turned round, expecting to see a black woolly face, or a Person from Porlock; but it was Roddy, the person from next door. He had been out gathering his flock and was soaked. A bottle stuck out of his poachers pocket.Och, youve let the fire burn out. He looked briefly at the dictionary, sighed and snapped it shut. Lets have a drop of the Grouse.The vision was not shattered just temporarily blurred. Time and again in the years that followed, some verbal curiosity or weirdness of phrase would sidetrack me out of the corridors of the Oxford Oriental Institute and back into Dictionary Land.I didnt get the drift of lines 667. Could you, er ? Verily I have seen upon your mandibles the belly- and tail-fat of a lizard./ Your words reveal the buttocks of your meanings. Im sorry? Your words reveal the buttocks of your meanings. Oh.They taught us abstruse and arcane mysteries, how to compound the base elements of syntax into glittering and highly wrought prose. We were apprentices in a linguistic alchemy. And, like alchemy, Arabic seemed to be half science and two-thirds magic. The Arabs themselves are spellbound by their language. Look at the effect on them of the Quran: the Word divinely beautiful, terrifying, tear-inducing, spine-tingling, mesmerizing, inimitable was sufficient in itself. It did not need to become flesh. But Quranic Arabic is only one manifestation of the language. You can be preacher, poet, raconteur and fishwife in a single sentence. You can, with the Arabic of official reports, say next

to nothing in a great many words and with enormous elegance. You can compose a work of literature on the two lateral extremities of the wrist-bone. You can even be cured of certain ailments by procuring a magic chit, infusing the ink out of it, and drinking the water: word-power at its most literal. They taught us all this, but they didnt teach us how to speak it. After two years of Arabic I couldnt even have asked the way to the lavatory.My tutor spun round from his computer screen. Yemen? Why do you want to go there?It must have been a shock. Usually only a truly major disaster, a wrong case-ending or a misplaced definite article, would unstick him from his corpus of Andalusian erotic verse.I I met a Yemeni who said Yemeni Arabic was the closest dialect to Classical.He smiled a painfully long smile like the rictus on a ventriloquists dummy. They all say that, you stupid boy. Yemen. His mouth puckered around the word as if it were some disagreeably bitter fruit. Lemon. Why dont you go somewhere respectable Cairo, Amman, Tunis?Cairo was out, a bedlam of smog, smugness and touts where the last Wonder of the World was disintegrating under acid rain and tourists feet. Amman, I had been told, was the most boring city in the Arab world. Tunis was, well, complexe.In fact Id lied. Id never knowingly set eyes on a real live Yemeni. But I felt that my tutor would find the true reason for my demanding a sabbatical in Yemen even less palatable. Some years before, the Museum of Mankind in London had recreated a corner of the market of Sana, the Yemeni capital, as part of Britains World of Islam Festival. Yards from Piccadilly was a secret, labyrinthine microcosm of the suq. Even its sounds and smells were reproduced. The swiftness of transposition was unreal, although little more so than the ten-hour flight from London to Sana. The exhibition wasnt Yemen, but over the years it became a Yemen of the imagination which I peopled with faces seen in books: faces which were proud but not arrogant, grave but not severe, delicate but not weak, their eyes intensified by kohl and calligraphic eyebrows.My reading revealed that others, too, had been bewitched by Yemen. Never, wrote one medieval visitor, have I seen glances more penetrating than those of the Yemenis. When they look at you, they dive into you Many references, however, were hardly complimentary. Yemen was seen as at best a backwater, more usually as backward. For example, a Yemeni who had been extolling his country at court in eighth-century Baghdad was attacked thus: What are you Yemenis? Ill tell you. Youre nothing but tanners of hides, weavers of striped shirting, trainers of monkeys and riders of nags. You were drowned by a rat and ruled by a woman, and people had never even heard of Yemen until a hoopoe told them about it!* I was not put off. My first glimpse of Yemen had been at far too impressionable an age.Besides, Yemen the Yemen I was seeing at second hand had something of Dictionary Land about it: as well as the talking hoopoes and dambusting rodents, men chewed leaves and camels lived on fish; they (the men) wore pinstriped lounge-suit jackets on top, skirts below, and wicked curved daggers in the middle; the cities seemed to have been baked, not built, of iced gingerbread; Yemen was part of Arabia but the landscape looked like well, nowhere else on Earth, and definitely not Arabia.In the end my tutor relented, even gave me his blessing though he warned me not to be away too long. So I set out to explore Dictionary Land on the ground; and perhaps, eventually, to understand the people who lived in it.Ive been there ever since.1Hard by HeavenThou coveredst it with the deep like as with a garment: the waters stand in the hills.Psalm 104, v.3LONG AGO, shortly after the waters of the Flood had begun to recede and the Himalayas, the Andes and the Alps were still islands on the face of the deep, some two-thirds of the way along a line from Everest to Kilimanjaro and just inside the Tropic of Cancer, a few eddies marked Arabias re-entry into the world.It was not a dramatic rebirth the Mountain of the Prophet Shuayb is an unremarkable hump. Shuayb himself was still seventeen generations off; by his time mankind would be back to its wicked old ways. But for the moment it was a clean start, the world an empty stage.Enter Sam. Sam ibn Nuh, or Shem the son of Noah, knew that the future of humanity lay in his loins and in those of his brothers Ham and Yafith. He was to beget and give his name to the entire Semitic race: perhaps it was the weight of this awesome responsibility which, the medieval traveller Ibn al-Mujawir says, he wished to alleviate by finding a place with light water and a temperate healthy climate. This stony and windswept mountain would not do, but 4,500 feet below and half a days journey to the south-east was a plain ringed by rocky peaks, where the flood had left a rich layer of silt.This was the spot. Sam bounded down the mountain and pegged out a foundation trench, only to have his guideline stolen by a bird. The bird flew off with the line and dropped it on the east side of the plain. To Sam, this was a clear sign. So it was there, on the future site of the Palace of Ghumdan, under the rising of Taurus with Venus and Mars in conjunction, that he came to build the worlds first city: Sana.Elsewhere, the receding floodwater had revealed a chain of mountains running from north to south, broken by occasional hollows and plateaux where, as in the plain of Sana, alluvial deposits would attract settlers. To the west and south the mountains ended abruptly in jagged escarpments overlooking plains; the plains lay just above sea-level and were hot and sticky but more fertile still. Eastwards, the mountains shelved into a desert which, even when Sams progeny had multiplied, would remain empty except for outlaws and oilmen. Far to the south-east and close to the deserts fringe was a deep scar of a valley, hemmed in by barren steppes, where one of Sams descendants would settle, giving it his nickname Hadramawt Death Has Come.So the veil was drawn back from the rucked-up corner of Arabia called Yemen, being on the right side,yamin, of the Kabah of Mecca; or because it is blessed with yumn, felicity; or after Yamin the brother of Hadramawt.All this, some say, is nonsense. Around the beginning of the Christian era Sana grew from an outpost where the road from Marib, capital of the ancient kingdom of Saba, meets the watershed; Hadramawt is just another pre-Arabic name, the traditional etymology a fanciful back-projection; Yemen, al-yaman, simply means the south.The truth is that Yemens distant past is still obscure.

Archaeology has hardly begun to come up with solid facts. Early Yemeni historians, though, produced their own interpretation using genealogy. At the base of the family tree comes Sam. Higher up is Sams great-grandson, the Prophet Hud. Huds son Qahtan is at the top of the trunk, and from him spring all the South Arabian tribes, branching across the map of Yemen and beyond. In the process, the names of people and places have become inextricably intertwined: the family tree has grown luxuriantly, fed by the genealogists on a rich mulch of eponyms and toponyms. To get to know Yemen as the Yemenis see it means clambering around this tree, one which spreads vertically through time and horizontally through space. History and geography, people and land, are inseparable.The new school of historians are doing a hatchet-job on the family tree, questioning the very existence of the traditional ancestors. But in the end it hardly matters who is right. Whether Qahtan the central figure, the South Arabian progenitor was an actual person or not, he represents a people who share a distinctive culture, one which has lasted for at least three thousand years.As for the story of Sam, even if it is a legend, it is the South Arabians Genesis.My landfall in Sana was more prosaic than Sams. The Ethiopian Boeing lurched and creaked its way down through layers of turbulence. For the last couple of minutes before landing, the plane circled over the city. It was not as I had expected.Like those desert plants which grow suddenly after decades of suspended animation, Sana had shot out suckers, tentacles of development. In the past, arrival had always been through its gates; the principal entrance, Bab al-Yaman, had come to be seen as an architectural statement of the citys famed introversion, emphasized perhaps by a row of severed traitors heads along the parapet, its gates shut at night, putting a stop to all movement. Now you arrived along roads of half-finished buildings. The statement of entry had been upstaged by a preamble of petrol stations.I was afraid that Sana, with the dissipation of its dramatic presence, might have lost something of its soul. But, just as Ingres had conjured up the East in his Paris studio and sanitized it, giving us the odalisques but not the odours, the eunuchs but not the screams of castration so I had invented Sana in Oxford. The mistake had been to think of it as a museum.Today, the ribbons of building have joined into an all-but seamless urban weave. Sana is busy, at times frenetic. It suffers from traffic jams and lack of planning. But it is lively, diverse and even with the countrys current economic difficulties still prosperous. What I had imagined to be the timeless calm of an ancient walled city was stagnation, a comatose sleep ended by the brute kiss of revolution.In the Old City the heart still beats. The noise of al-Zumur, the quarter named after a mosque founded in1547 by Uzdimir Pasha, the Ottoman conqueror of Sana, pulsates outside the front door: car horns, motor-cycle taxis, two egg-sellers competing with loudhailers, the cassette shop across the road, the crackle and pop of roasting black peas. Yesterday there was a man with wild hair and a drum extemporizing songs, lays of old Baghdad (not about Harun al-Rashid, but Saddam Husayn and his adversary, George Bush: O would that I were a bird, says Saddam. For I would land on Bushs head and the crowd is in suspense and shit on it!). And last Ramadan, every day before the sunset prayer, a fettered man would call for alms beneath my window; a taxi driver who had crashed, he was in gaol until he could collect the blood-money for his dead passengers. His insurance policy had been with God; now, coin by coin, the Faithful were paying out his claim. The sounds all float up from four floors below, a distraction to writing. So, Sanani houses being tall, Ill move up another couple.From here the ring of mountains surrounding the Sana plain can be seen in full; a tradition says they flew from Sinai to Yemen in shock when Moses asked to see the face of God. Over there is the place where Sam first began building, and through the other window is Jabal Nuqum, near the base of which the bird dropped his guideline. Even this is hardly the best place to be writing, this belvedere on the roof; it is too easy to get carried away by the skyline of which you are a part. But up here, among the birds and the occasional flying plastic bag, street noises are far away, and you could be sitting in a jewelled casket the room is tiny, eight feet by five, and lit by coloured glass windows. It is sometimes called a zahrah in the dictionary, a flower/beauty/brightness. My house is a few centuries old but the changeless style of Sanani architecture makes it hard to date. Only yards away a man is putting the final cursive plaster frieze on to a similar room, hanging on a swing above the chasm of the street. Behind him the dust is beginning to obscure Jabal Ayban and the road to the sea. A west wind is blowing up, banging the shutters. And with it comes the call to prayer not the effete recorded invitation of other lands but a live, human roar: COME AND PRAY! gusting across Yemen from Zabid to Zinjibar, from Hizyaz to Habarut and all the way to Suqutra, the Island of Dragons Blood off the Horn of Africa.I must go down and pick up some more cigarettes, down the seventy-seven (I think) steps into the dark entrance hall. I slide back the bolt of the massive door and light and noise and piles of alfalfa tumble in my neighbour sells the plant for fodder, alongside jars of marigolds, roses, basil and rue. She is veiled and wrapped in a sitarah, a large blue and red cloak like a tablecloth. Next to her a man from the Red Sea coast has tobacco from the other side of al-Mukalla on the Indian Ocean; then a boy with a headscarf full of walnuts from Hajjah, in the mountains north-west of Sana. In front of them is a line of barrows, some with oranges, some with plastic shoes, some with knives, razors, nailclippers, torches and mechanical drumming monkeys. Across the street are the secondhand clothes sellers. All the synthetic textile wealth of the Far East is here in a mle of colours and patterns. Behind the clothes is a row of gold shops, tarts parlours of 22-carat glitter set off by pink and peach velvet walls and more mirrors than a hairdressers. The sharshaf maker, who runs up a ladies all-enveloping outer garment of Ottoman origin (any colour as long as its black, any number of pleats as long as they froufrou), adds a sober note, a crow among peacocks.The secondhand clothes sellers are a long way from the subfusc mustiness of an Oxfam shop. They are lost in a maelstrom of flying cloth and brown forearms thrusting from under

sitarahs, glinting with gold bangles. Only the man selling platform shoes is alone. Menswear is often startling, with lots of fake fur and checks that shriek, but Ive picked up a dove-grey jacket lined in scarlet which could have been from Huntsman of Savile Row, except for the stitching. Another find was a smart barathea tailcoat. I tried it on but it was tiny, shrunk by the sea and cast up on a beach from a 1930s PO liner gone down in the Gulf of Aden, the dance band playing Eternal Father, Strong to Save as the sharks of al-Shihr scented the supper of their lives Well, maybe.One day I saw on the street something that stopped me dead. It was a piece of clothing as familiar to me as my own body, but translated into another sartorial idiom. A boy was wearing it over a zannah, an ankle-length shirt, and a miniature jambiyah, a curved dagger. He was scuffing a deflated football along. I called him to stop. There it was, grey flannel with navy piping and a fleur-de-lis on the breast pocket: my prep-school blazer.I looked inside. Steer Geary Gentlemens Outfitters. There was the ghost of an inkstain on the pocket, where my birthday Parker had sprung a leak in 1972. The space for the name-tape was empty.As he kicked the ball away a wave of nostalgia flooded over me. It passed, leaving behind a strange, deep stillness of spirit. It was the calm of completeness, of the wheel turning full circle, of being in the right place at the right time.If that had been an intimation of spiritual completion, a later experience, in Sana Airport customs shed, provided a fair simulacrum of Limbo. The place is a vast metal box, echoing with cries of supplication owners begging for the redemption of their goods. To get to it I had to cross a great Stygian lake where the citys sewage had bubbled up.Inside the shed I found the crate containing my motor cycle. It had come here via Addis Ababa and appeared to be in one piece. I gave it a pat and made for the low buildings which house the Customs masulin, the responsibles literally, those who are asked questions. To get in I waved a piece of paper, the central portion of which was a typewritten request to import the machine into Yemen, addressed to the Director of Customs. Over the weeks it had sprouted marginalia, each ending with the enigmatic squiggle which in Arabic passes for a signature.On my first visit to the Customs Authority I had buttonholed the Director as he was getting out of his car. Using the wing as a writing-desk and with a flourish of his costly pen, he wrote what I eventually deciphered as: No objection. For the attention of the Secretariat. Beginners luck. The Head of the Secretariat had no objection either and with a second marginalium written with a less costly but still desirable pen passed the matter on to the Head of External Affairs. In External Affairs it was the same story: no objection, refer to another department. I noticed that the lower the position in the hierarchy, the more complex the signature became. At the same time the pens decreased in quality until, in a nameless department where bottom-drawer bureaucrats sat reading the newspaper or practising their signatures, someone was persuaded to write something with a chewed and leaking biro. By now, time was beginning to distort: I had been in Customs for a good part of each working day for a fortnight. Where could they refer the case to now? Only the tea boy hadnt been consulted. I looked at the latest addition to the document. No objection. For the attention of Director of Customs. The buck, it seemed, was in perpetual and slow motion. Like the Buddhist soul, it had described a complete circle while the officials were reincarnated in ever lowlier forms. As I left the office my eye caught the main front-page headline of a newspaper: Minister of Civil Service and Administrative Reform Calls for Immediate Shake-Up. The paper was a month old.As a last, desperate ploy, I returned in a suit and tie, the letter in a smart imitation leather attach case, and headed for the Directors office. Over the past two weeks, a bond of camaraderie had grown between us co-petitioners, but now the disconsolate men squatting by doorways didnt recognize me. The soldier on the door of the Directors antechamber cleared a way through the crowd. I entered the sanctum sanctorum, the eye of the storm. The few people in the room addressed the Director in hushed voices. The costly pen glided.My turn came. You may remember me Ah, he interrupted, smiling. The man with the fiery bicycle.Everyone else called it a mutur, even if fiery bicycle was what you used in written Arabic. The Director leaned back and stroked his moustache. Their importation into Yemen is prohibited.I recited to myself the mantra of a British Resident Adviser to one of the sultans of Hadramawt in colonial days: Never get angry, be quiet, very quiet, speak and act softly. I may be mistaken, but you have already written No objection. I beg to be allowed the honour of contributing to the exchequer by paying duty. Besides, there are thousands of fiery bicycles in Sana. Indeed, I came here today on a fiery bicycle taxi. I paused. No sign of softening. I went on: But perhaps that was an illusion. Perhaps I, who appeared to be moving so swiftly and noisily through the traffic, was in reality riding on air and, I looked out of the window, farting.The Director snorted. I looked at him and saw he was laughing. He wrote in the last empty bit of margin, No objection. Refer to Airport Customs Department. Calculate sum due. I had broken out of the circle, achieved a minor nirvana.At Airport Customs, I watched the responsible concerned make his calculations. The process seemed to be based not on simple addition but on logarithms and exponentiality. The sum due was thirty thousand riyals.He saw my dumbstruck look, crossed out the three and wrote a two. Is that better?I said I was most grateful, but it still seemed a lot for two wheels. He scrubbed out the whole figure and wrote fifteen thousand. Happy now? Such transactions are like painting in watercolour or cutting hair: go too far and the thing is ruined. I said I was delighted and left, clutching the papers.If the customs shed is Limbo, then Alis Restaurant is a foretaste of Hell. The Sananis possess culinary skills unsurpassed in any other land, wrote the great tenth-century historian and geographer al-Hamdani. Measured against the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, the comment is true: Sana has an old and indigenous cuisine. My lunch was the same as that described by Ibn al-Mujawir in the thirteenth century: wheat bread, hulbah fenugreek flour whisked to a froth with water and meat. Ali himself stands in a cloud of

smoke on a platform high above the ground, ladling beef broth, eggs, rice and peppers into a row of stone bowls. In front of him is a rank of cauldrons, each one big enough to boil a missionary. Below him minions tend gas cylinders that send great blasts of flame shooting up. Conversations are impossible in the roar; explosions are not unknown. The bowl of saltah, as they call the mixture, is brought to you red-hot, carried with a pair of pliers and topped with a seething yellowish-green dollop of hulbah. Lumps of meat are flambed in a wok-like vessel, and ten feet above this the ceiling is black from years of fireballs. Men squat on the floor, on benches, on tables (the ones in suits and ties are from the Foreign Ministry across the road). Those who have not yet been served wail and shriek for attention Ya Ali! Ya Alayyy! while Ali stands, erect and unhearing, his body immobile within a parabola of arms all his own, like those of a Hindu idol. The lucky ones who have been served eat with the saltah spitting in their faces, sweat pouring from their brows. The walls are covered with a huge photographic mural of the gardens at Versailles: parterres, statues of nymphs, cooling fountains.Lunch at Alis is not merely a matter of eating. It is the first step on the way to kayf. The meaning of the term has been discussed by Sir Richard Burton. One might call it, he wrote, The savouring of animal existence the result of a lively, impressible, excitable nature, and exquisite sensibility of nerve; it argues a facility for voluptuousness unknown to northern regions ; but in the end the translator of The Arabian Nights admitted defeat: kayf is a word untranslatable in our mother tongue. Lexicographers, who cannot be so realistic, have described it as a mood, humour or frame of mind. I, who chew the leaf of the qat tree, shall attempt a definition.Alis Restaurant is all to do with the humours. Blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile must be in balance to ensure perfect health and to enable the qat chewer to attain his goal of kayf, since qat excites the cold and dry black bile, prophylaxis against its ill effects means that the blood, which is hot and wet, must be stimulated. Hence the heat, the sweat, the bubbling saltah. Hence also the visits to the public baths before chewing qat, the insistence on keeping windows and doors shut during chewing, the elaborate precautions to avoid the dreadedshanini a piercing and potentially fatal draught of cold air.An old joke illustrates this obsession with heat. The angels, it is said, periodically visit Hell to make sure the fires are turned up. One day a group of them are detailed to check on the really wicked sinners, who spend eternity in individual ovens. Inside the first oven is a Saudi. He screams to be let out. Roasting nicely, they think, and slam the door on him. In the next oven is an Englishman; then come an American, an Egyptian and so on. All beg to be let out, but the angels show them no mercy. Eventually they open the last door. Inside sits a Yemeni, chewing qat and apparently oblivious of the flames around him. He draws languidly on his water-pipe, turns to the angels, and says: Hey, could you shut that door? Ill catch my death of cold.The other day it might, in fact, have been almost any day I had lunch at Alis then bought my qat from blue-eyed Muhammad across the road. He swore I wasnt giving him what hed paid for it (the oaths of qatsellers are notoriously unbinding). I argued. All right, he said, take it for nothing. A present. I folded some more notes, stuck them behind his dagger, and walked off with my purchase. Wrangling over the price is part of the business of working up a sweat. (Real mawlais that is, those inflamed with passion for qat used to run halfway up Jabal Nuqum, singing, before they chewed.) It was half past two and I was ready to start. My molar, as they say, was hot.In a house in the centre of Sana, I climbed the stairs to another room on a roof, grander than my own. On the way up, I called Allah, Allah, to warn women of my presence. Perhaps I should make the point here, if it needs to be made, that this is a very male book. As a man I am excluded from the society of women, as they are from that of men. Outsiders tend to see this dual, parallel system as a form of repression. The idea never occurs to most Yemeni women. They know that they wield power in many spheres, notably in the choice of marriage partners which, given an endogamous system, is a major influence on the distribution of wealth. Women play only a small role in the public domain, as they did in the West until quite recently; at least in Yemen, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, women are able to drive cars, enter Parliament, become top-ranking civil servants. But it is in the private realm of the home that the woman dominates, in practice if not in theory; men often gather to chew qattogether because their homes have been taken over by visiting women.The veil, so overlaid with symbolic meaning for Westerners, is for Yemeni women just another item of dress. If it is not essential as protection against the cold, then neither are stockings, bras or neckties. Casual Western observers, for whom the black sharshaf is a dehumanizer and who equate the veil with a gag, are allowing an obsession with symbolism to pull the wool over their own eyes. Underlying the use of hair- or face-coverings there are, of course, Arab-Islamic concepts of honour and modesty which the West does not share or has lost. The question of what to conceal face, breasts, ankles, the legs of a grand piano is not a question of sense but of sensibilities. The Turkey merchant Sir Henry Blount wrote in the seventeenth century of the Turks that they live by another kind of civilitie, different from ours, but no less pretending. His message has yet to get across. The veil is indeed a potent symbol, but a symbol of the unwillingness or inability of the West to understand the Arab world. The Iron Curtain has been and gone; the muslin curtain still hangs, and probably always will.Panting from the ascent, I slipped off my shoes and entered the room. It was rectangular, with windows on all sides which began a foot above the floor. Above them were semicircular fanlights of coloured glass. Into the tracery of the fanlights, and in the plaster of the walls and shelf-brackets, were worked the names of God and the Prophet, and verses of a pious nature it was a very legible room. Polished brass gleamed everywhere: rosewater sprinklers, incense-burners, spittoons with little crocheted covers, the great circular tray with its three water-pipes. Low mattresses covered with Afghan runners lined the walls. About a dozen men were sitting on them, leaning on armrests topped with little cloth-of-gold cushions.I

greeted the chewers, interrupting their zabj, the rapid banter, the swordplay of insults that starts all the best qat sessions. Id scarcely sat down when an old man opposite turned on me.I was in Sawan this morning, and I saw this Jew. And, do you know, he looked just like you. You could have been twins!But but I havent got any side-locks, I parried feebly. Jewish Yemenis are required to advertise their religion by cultivating a pair of long corkscrew ringlets.Ah, he went on, you know what they say: Jewishness is in the heart, not in the length of the side-locks. I made a feint to gain time: Tell me: exactly how many side-locks did this Jew of Sawan have?What do you mean? Two, of course.Well, its a funny thing, but I saw a Jew in the qat market today and he looked exactly like you. You could have been twins. But he had four side-locks After half an hour of this verbal fencing, the zabj lost its momentum and devolved into solo joke telling.Once, someone said, there was a blind girl. She was twenty-five years old and longing for a husband; but whenever she brought the subject up with her father hed say, My daughter, you are blind. No one wants you. But dont worry youll find a husband in Paradise. Well, one day she was up on the roof hanging out the washing when she tripped and fell, down and down, six storeys. By chance she fell into a lorry carrying bananas and was knocked unconscious. The lorry drove on. Ten minutes later she came to. Ah, she thought, I am dead. Then, as she felt the bananas, she remembered what her father had told her and gave a little shriek: Slowly, slowly, men of Paradise! Please, take your turn! And many more in the same vein. Yemenis, and particularly Sananis, are a mixture of earth and polish, in contrast to their dour Saudi cousins of Najd and the unspeakably polite Levantine. Their contradictory nature was explained by al-Hamdani as the result of the conjunction of Venus and Mars when Sam founded their city: the Venusian aspects, he says, are religiosity, faithfulness, upright living, breadth of character, soundness in body, knowledge, poetry and dress, ease of living, and many other such qualities; the influence of Mars imparts a surfeit of passion, adultery, frivolity, fondness for music, singing and unseemly jokes, quarrelsomeness, and a tendency to mess about with knives and allow themselves to be henpecked. As for the women of Sana, while they are incomparably beautiful, swift and graceful, they are also prone to jealousy, coquettish and forward.Weightier matters are discussed at qat chews, and they are a major forum for the transaction of business and for religious and political debate. Many people also chew to aid concentration on study or work, and qat is the inevitable accompaniment to all important occasions from weddings to funerals. A funeral chew is known asmujabarah, a word which also means the setting of broken bones. But at the classic Sanani chew, it is lightness of blood charm, amiability that is admired, not gravitas. At a qat chew, one walks what a ninth-century poet called the sword-edge that separates the serious from the frivolous.My qat was good, a Hamdani from Tuzan. Qat is a dicotyledon known to science as Catha edulis.Unremarkable though it appears, chewers recognize a huge variety of types and are fascinated by its origin: when one buys qat one first establishes its pedigree. Quality is judged by region, by the district within a region, even by the field where the individual tree is grown and by the position of the leaf on it. The product of a tree planted inadvertently on a grave is to be avoided it brings sorrow. Qat can be any colour from lettuce-green to bruise-purple. It comes long or short, bound into bundles or loose, packed in plastic, alfalfa or banana leaves. In Sana, as a rule of thumb, the longer the branch, the more prestigious it is: less image-conscious chewers and I am one of them buy qatal, the pickings from the lower branches.Just as in the West there are wine snobs, in Yemen there are qat snobs. I once found myself opposite one. Fastidiously, he broke the heads off his yard-long branches and wrapped them in a dampened towel. It was almost an act of consecration. When he had finished, he drew on his water-pipe and appraised my bag of qatalwith a look that threatened to wither it. Everything, he said in an audible whisper, has pubic hair. Qatal is the pubic hair of qat. Besides, dogs cock their legs over it. He tossed me one of the tips from inside his towel. It was as thick as asparagus, its leaves edged with a delicate russet, and it tasted nutty, with the patrician bitter-sweetness of an almond. There was a tactile pleasure too, like that of eating pomegranates a slight resistance between the teeth followed by a burst of juice. I chased it with a slurp of water infused with the smoke of incense made from sandalwood, eagle-wood, mastic and cloves.Qat does not alter your perception. It simply enhances it by rooting you in one place. There is a story in The Arabian Nights about a prince who sat and sat in his palace. Sentient from the waist up, his lower half had been turned to porphyry. I used to wish the Arabian Tales were true, said Cardinal Newman. They usually are, to some extent.After the zabj and the jokes, conversations took place in smaller groups, then pairs, then, towards the end of the afternoon, ceased. I looked out of the windows at the city.There are three earthly paradises, said the Prophet. Merv of Khurasan, Damascus of Syria, and Sana of Yemen. And Sana is the paradise of these paradises.Many have looked on Sana and seen a divine aesthetic at work in its setting. An Iraqi visitor earlier this century eulogized the city in verse:Sana, home of lofty civilization,Dwelling of every brave and generous lord,Paris, London, and all the great citiesOf the Romans and Americans do not match you in beauty.The beauty of those other places is but embellishment and artifice;Your beauty is unaffected, the gift of your Creator.The mountains, says the historian al-Shamahi, are perfectly placed, neither so far away as to tire the eye when it focuses on the edge of the plain; nor so close as to stifle refreshing morning breezes or constrict the views that, just before sunset, take on such wonderful colours. They are mountains to be contemplated, like Fuji, if never so geometrical (although I once saw Nuqum, just after dawn, with a circle of cloud hovering over it, so precise that it might have been drawn by a compass).The climate, too, is perfect, if a bit dusty. And a little too cold in winter, added Ibn al-Mujawir, when ducks get frozen alive in ponds, with their heads sticking out of the ice. Foxes come and bite the heads off. But Sana is not as

cold as the village of Bayt Madin on the slopes of Jabal al-Nabi Shuayb, where in winter the mosque ablution pool freezes over and a qadi is said to have excused the villagers from the dawn prayer, even if their bollocks are made of iron. Very occasionally, it snows on the Prophet Shuayb. The event causes a certain linguistic complication, as Yemenis have no word for snow. You have to say, Ice that falls from the sky No, not hail. The stuff that falls slowly and looks like cotton.Sana at street-level is crowded and labyrinthine; but from this room on the roof you can see the green of gardens hiding behind walls of dun mud. The house faades themselves are never sombre, because of the plaster friezes that zigzag round each floor, increasing in complexity with every successive storey.The Sana house has its prototype in the Palace of Ghumdan. Probably built early in the second century ADand first mentioned in an inscription of the third-century Sabaean King Shaar Awtar, the palace has been celebrated by poets and historians ever since. Exaggeration is to be expected: its shadow reached the lip of Wadi Dahr, ten miles to the north-west; its lights could be seen in the holy city of al-Madinah, 750 miles away. Ghumdan, to judge by more sober descriptions, rose ten storeys, to a height of around 120 feet miraculously tall for its period. Built of variegated stone, it had hollow bronze lions and eagles on its parapet that roared and screeched when the wind blew. But the crowning glory of Ghumdan was its alabaster belvedere, so translucent that if you lay on your back and looked through the ceiling you could tell kites from crows as they flew overhead; the experience, according to al-Hamdani, was physic for a care-worn heart and the nearest thing to heaven in this world:If Paradises garden is above the skies,Then hard by heaven the roof of Ghumdan lies.And if God made on Earth a heaven for our eyes,Then Ghumdans place is by that earthly paradise.All that is left of the palace now is a hillock to the east of the Great Mosque, covered with later building. Yet its spirit survives in the tower-house of Sana. Since the city burst its walls after the Revolution of 1962, space has not been at a premium. But people still build upwards, subconsciously imitating the Sabaean builders of Ghumdan. Every upper room is a memory of that alabaster belvedere, a place of luxury and refinement implicit in the word mafraj.The mafraj is not always on the roof. There are ground-floor versions with pools and fountains, and a proverb goes: If your heart is at ease, even a donkeys arsehole can be a mafraj. But the classic type is like the one in which we are sitting, watching the kites and crows, looking at the view (tafarraj, from the verbal root ofmafraj), having our cares dispelled (again, tafarraj). In todays roofscape, however, the bronze lions of Ghumdan have been replaced by water tanks, some fashioned as globes or Scud missiles, or by satellite dishes. CNN offers even more distant prospects than Ghumdan.I find myself looking towards the place where the sun must have just disappeared. This high above sea-level we are spared the more vulgar sort of sunset. The afterglow is dusty, the sky above the city like the inside of a shell. But Im looking towards it, not at it theres a distortion in the window pane, interesting and annoying at the same time. A man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye.It is six oclock, or five to twelve in the Islamic day that starts with the sunset prayer. But, for a time, it is neither: the Hour of Solomon has begun, al-Saah al-Sulaymaniyyah. Saah has among its root meanings in the dictionary to be lost, to procrastinate. At the Hour of Solomon time refracts, as if bent by a prism.No one speaks. Introspection has replaced conviviality. Somewhere, my fingers are working at the qat, polishing, plucking. When it was still light I found a fat horned caterpillar. A good sign no DDT but you dont want to chew one.Were there a singer here, this would be his time. But the songs of the Hour of Solomon are as perilous as they are beautiful. Earlier this century in the days of Imam Yahya, singers could only perform in locked rooms, their windows stuffed with cushions. They had to hide their instruments for fear of imprisonment (fortunately, the old lute of Sana was small enough to be carried in the voluminous sleeves then worn). The Imam had banned singing with good reason: the songs are siren songs that tell of the flash of teeth beneath a veil like a silver coin in a well, of the saliva of lovers kisses intoxicating like wine, of beauty that is cruelly ephemeral. Lasting we thought it, yet it did not last.It is now quite dark. The coloured windows of neighbouring houses are lighting up, like Advent calendars.We qat chewers, if we are to believe everything that is said about us, are at best profligates, at worst irretrievable sinners. We are in the thrall of the curse of Yemen and the greatest corrupting influence on the country (two British ambassadors to Sana); we are in danger of loss of memory, irritability, general weakness and constipation, and from our water-pipes there is certainly a danger of getting a chancre on the lips (Handbook of Arabia, 1917); worse, we are prone to anorexia and to becoming emotionally unstable, irritable, hyperactive and easily provoked to anger, eventually becoming violent (Journal of Substance Abuse, 1988), while in Somalia, qat has starved the countrys children and exacerbates a culture of guns and violence (San Francisco Chronicle, 1993); even if we dont turn nasty, we doze and dribble green saliva like cretinous infants with a packet of bulls-eyes (the English writer David Holden). In Saudi Arabia we would be punished more severely than alcohol drinkers; in Syria blue-eyed Muhammad would be swinging on the end of a rope.In contrast to the above quasi-scientific poppycock, the only full and serious study of the effects of qat(Kennedys funded, it should be noted, by the US National Institute of Drug Abuse) concludes that the practice appears to have no serious physical or psychological effects. Yemenis themselves, while admitting that their habit is expensive, defend it on the grounds that it stimulates mental activity and concentration; they point out that at least the money spent on it remains within the national economy.Qat has inspired a substantial body of literature. Compare, for example, Holdens dribbling infants with a description of a handsome chewer by the seventeenth-century poet Ibrahim al-Hindi:Hearts melted at his slenderness. And as he chewed, his mouth resembledPearls which have formed on carnelian and, between them, an emerald, melting.As well as poetry, there is a weighty corpus of scholarly literature

on the legality of qat in Islam. It has been unable to find any analogy between the effects of the leaf and those of the prohibited narcotics. In the end, though, the question of its desirability and permissibility revolves around matters of politics, taste, ethnocentrism and sectarian prejudice.I can just make out my watch. Half past seven. Time, which had melted, is resolidifying. It is now that I sometimes wonder why I am sitting here in the dark with a huge green bolus in my cheek; why I, and millions of others, spend as much time buying and chewing qat as sleeping, and more money on it than on food.If we are to believe another major Western study of qat, we are making symbolic statements about the social order and engaging in an activity that is individual, hierarchical, competitive.* Where you chew, and with whom, is certainly important. But to reduce it all to a neat theory rumino ergo sum is to over-simplify. It ignores the importance of the qat effect something almost impossibly difficult to pin down, for it is as subtle and as hard to analyse as the alkaloids that cause it. It takes long practice to be able to recognize the effect consciously, and even then it sidesteps definition except in terms of metaphor, and by that untranslatable word,kayf.