



Traditional *ard* cultivation in a highland Yemeni valley, 1978. Photograph by Daniel Martin Varisco

Turning Ploughshares into Words: Dialectical Diversity in Yemeni Arabic¹

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“And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Isaiah 2:4

Beating swords into ploughshares has long been a prophetic hope, but the unending violence and uncivil strife in the Middle East today reminds us that swords still have the upper hand. I suspect that more young men today “learn war” than have an idea what to do with a “ploughshare.” Real swords, at least those of museum quality, are wielded in the modern era on a Shakespearian stage or for sadist video beheadings, but real

ploughshares still till the soil in parts of the shared “Biblical” world as a primary means of farming; this includes Yemen, where I first studied plough cultivation in the late 1970s. Not being a theologian or rabbinical nabob, I cannot comment on either the spiritual truth or practical application of Isaiah’s dream. Even if the people in the region that religiously reveres the patriarch Abraham would have occasion to break a Saracen sword out of a museum exhibit, they would undoubtedly not smith a ploughshare out of it anymore. Not being a political scientist or a syndicated columnist, I will leave the sword talk for others, but rather offer a brief diversion for turning ploughshares into words.

To set the furrow straight from the start, my purpose is twofold: first, to discuss the progress of a life-long project to compile and annotate a comprehensive lexicon of Yemeni agricultural terms; second to entertain you as an unrepentant *adabist* with tidbits of deliciously devised morphological morsels from the linguistic *muḥīt* (the ocean of words as al-Firūzābādī might call it) of Yemeni dialects. Generations in al-Yaman *al-khaḍrā’* (the Verdant Yemen, as al-Hamdānī phrased it over a millennium ago) have demonstrated a rich agricultural history, so it should not be surprising that there is a diverse range of vocabulary on agriculture and seasonal lore with dialectical variants and cognates stemming back into

earlier South Arabic languages and Hebrew.

Dialectical Diversity in Yemen

A word about Yemen’s dialectal diversity, before excavating this substratum of phonemic import for panoptic reconstruction. There is, for example, no one “Yemeni” dialect, as anyone who travels around the country can readily determine. Fortunately, we have some lexical documentation, usually sporadic in detail, on Yemeni dialects of the distant past, although this is often linked to the generic pre-Islamic Ḥimyarī. There are also several major dictionaries compiled by scholars who knew Yemeni dialects firsthand: for example, the *Shams al-‘ulūm* of Nashwān ibn Sa‘īd al-Ḥimyarī (d. 573/1177), the shorter *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* of al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/1414) and the massive *Tāj al-‘arūs* of al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790). Occasionally there are specific references to Yemeni dialect terms in more general lexical works such as al-Ṣaghānī’s (d. 650/1252) *Al-Takmila wa-al-dhayl*, Ibn Manzūr’s (d. 711/1311) *Lisān al-‘Arab*, and Ibn Sīda’s (d. 458/1066) *al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ*.² Obviously, reconstructing a dialect no longer spoken is a far more difficult task than conducting linguistic analysis with living speakers. A number of scholars have contributed to our understanding of surviving Yemeni dialects, including Count Landberg (1901-13, 1920-42) on the Ḥaḍramawt and Dathīna,

Ettore Rossi (1939)³ and Janet Watson (1993) on Ṣan‘ānī, K. Nāmī (1948) on Taiz, Otto Jastrow (1983) on Jibla, Walter Diem (1973) and Peter Behnstedt (1985, 1987, 1992) on several northern regions, including Ṣa‘da.

Information on dialect terms can also be found from travelers, most notably the works of Eduard Glaser (see Behnstedt 1993), historians such as R. B. Serjeant and G. Rex Smith and anthropologists who conducted ethnographic research. There are also useful studies of the links between Yemeni Arabic and Yemeni Jewish dialects, a notable example being the work of Goitein (1934, 1960). Unfortunately, what would seem to be a valuable reference for contemporary Yemeni dialects, Moshe Piamenta’s (1990-91) derivative *Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic*, is severely flawed and should be consulted with caution (see Varisco 1994a).

It is important to stress the contributions of Yemeni scholars who have analyzed or recorded their own dialectal terms. The largest published compilation is Muṭahhar al-Iryānī’s (1996) *al-Mu‘jam al-Yamanī fī al-lughā wa-al-turāth*, which provides annotation of a wide variety of dialect terms, including examples in proverbs and poetry. The major drawback to this valuable reference is the failure in most cases to identify the provenance of the meanings; nor

does al-Iryānī spend much time tracing specific terms back to classical Arabic usage. There are a few sources available on specific Yemeni dialects, such as Zayd ‘Inān’s (1983) work on Ṣan‘ānī. Several Yemenis have collected and annotated proverbs (e.g., al-Akwa‘ 1405/1984, al-Adīmī 1409/1989, al-‘Amrī 2000 and al-Baraddūnī 1985) and traditional poetry.⁴ For Yemeni agricultural and seasonal terms, the work of Yaḥyā al-‘Ansī (1998) is essential; al-‘Ansī, a self-trained folklorist, locates the usage of terms and provides numerous samples of proverbs and local poetry.

Arabia Viridis: A Lexicon of Yemeni Agricultural Vocabulary

In early 1978, when I first arrived in the valley of al-Ahjur in central Yemen to begin ethnographic study of local agricultural and irrigation practices, I carried with me (quite literally into the field) a photocopy of Ettore Rossi’s (1939) *L’Arabo Parlato a Ṣan‘ā’*. My university Arabic with its grammatical focus needed to be melded with the local dialect (which was close to that in Ṣan‘ā’), especially for the focus of my research. From the start I began a notebook of local terms, field-checking those provided by Rossi and allowing farmers to tell me the words they usually spoke. As an ethnographer spending hours upon hours with farmers as they worked, I also had a chance to hear the words they used without prompting. I had

also brought with me a copy of R. B. Serjeant's (1974) translation of a chapter on cereals from the 14th century *Bughyat al-fallāḥīn* by the Rasulid sultan al-Malik al-Afḍal. Finding words still spoken that were not in Rossi but were in the 14th century treatise was exciting, so much so that I have spent my career since then combining ethnography with textual analysis, especially for vocabulary on agriculture. My Ph.D. dissertation on water use and irrigation in Yemen included 150 pages of glossaries, somewhat to the alarm of the anthropologists on my committee but encouraged, as you might expect, by my committee Arabist, George Makdisi, who was pleased and surprised that an anthropologist would pay as much attention to words spoken as to actions observed.

After three decades I have a rather large collection of terms that I am attempting to document systematically, and which I intend eventually to publish as a lexicon. This is integral to a larger project I am calling *Arabia Viridis*, a study of Yemen's agriculture during the Islamic period with a focus on the rich textual corpus from Rasulid Yemen (13th-15th centuries). The goals for the lexicon include documenting the etymology of each term, tracing its historical usage in Yemeni texts, comparing relevant information from classical Arabic lexicons and other dialects, indicating the range of recorded

connotations, and providing examples of usage from texts and oral lore such as proverbs.⁵ To work the agricultural metaphor even deeper, my project involves planting seeds of vocabulary and following their semantic growth but also a fair amount of weeding out overstretched speculation and outright wrong transcription or translation. Non-native Arabic speakers, especially those with weak linguistic training, have a tendency to mis-hear words; even the most knowledgeable Arabist can be fooled in the field. To a lesser extent, even native Arabist scholars who are not familiar with Yemeni dialects may assume connotations that do not hold across dialects. An example of this is an assertion by Sema'an Salem (1996:115), in a review of my book (1994) on the almanac of al-Malik al-Ashraf, who insists that the 13th century Yemeni usage of *khawkh* should be "plum" rather than "peach."⁶ Not in Yemen, neither in the Rasulid era nor today. Were Ustadh Salem to make a pit stop in Yemen, he could taste the difference himself. Similarly, my friend the superb Arabist George Saliba (1985) once wrote that the verb *dharā* in the same Yemeni astronomical text which contains al-Ashraf's almanac meant winnowing, while in Yemen it means, through the present day, sowing of grain. These examples are the tares that inevitably grow among the meanings actually applied; linguistic sleuthing requires a thorough threshing out of such misunderstandings in the process. When my

compilation is further along, I intend to return to Yemen and spot check selected terms in the field as well as engage Yemeni scholars for their help.

As someone foolish enough to compile a lexicon that takes years to complete, there are a number of issues to be sorted out. If only for the sake of a reality check, I am well aware that Edward Lane's useful but long outdated Arabic-English lexicon only makes it about half way through the Arabic alphabet. There but for the discovery of the fountain of youth go I. Perhaps it is relevant as an explanation for why I might not live to publish this lexicon that I started out in graduate school as an archaeologist (not that I wish to embarrass any dirt-seasoned colleagues by citing missing site reports). Seriously, as though contemplating one's own eventual demise is not serious enough, there is the question of what terms to include. Unlike Lane, I am not tackling an entire language, nor sampling its overall classical usage. My focus is on the terms actually used or known in Yemen, whether shared denotatively with the language in a broader sense or specific connotatively to Yemeni dialects. A further focus is the subject matter: agriculture.⁷ In addition to the actions and tools involved in the mode of production, I expand the field of terms to seasonal and almanac lore, including weather, the environment of soil, plants and animals, time-keeping (especially star calendars) and relevant



A highland Yemeni farmer, 1978.

Photograph by Daniel Martin Varisco

social terminology. Finally, the ultimate product will be a reference guide to definitions, but not a definitive text in an absolute sense. I would not want students a century from now to consult *Arabia Viridis*, as we rely on Lane’s admirable but archaic lexicon, without using it primarily as a guide to the primary lexical sources.

Morsels for Morphological Musing

If, as is sometimes said, the Devil can quote Scripture (my beginning quote from the Prophet Isaiah notwithstanding), this is because words can mean more than one thing, which means a given word can at times mean just what we want it to mean. Let’s start with a *ḥadīth*. The Prophet Muhammad is

reported to have written a letter to Mālik ibn Nimṭ of Hamdān, in which it is said that the people of Yemen “*ya’kalūna ‘alāfahā.*” Most commentators say this is in reference to the seedpod of acacia (*ṭalḥ*), which is rendered ‘*ullaf*’ in classical Arabic. While starving people in desperation no doubt would resort to a readily available acacia pod, or eat grass for that matter, it seems a rather strange dietary habit. The Yemeni scholar Muṭahhar al-Iryānī (1996:266-67) suggests the standard interpretation of this statement is a misreading of Yemeni dialect and he offers an alternative based on South Arabic: the term ‘*alāt*’ which he cites as a dialectical variant stemming from South Arabic inscriptions. The contemporary usage of *ma’lāt* refers to what is

sown in the high mountain areas and terraces, including the area of Hamdān. It includes wheat, barley, lentils, peas, fenugreek and broad beans: all major highland crops in Yemen. Since no one eats acacia pods today, al-Iryānī thinks the Yemeni form is a better fit for making sense of the tradition. Fair enough, but my reading of al-Fīrūzābādī (‘*l-f*’) provides yet another cognatic possibility. This earlier Yemeni scholar, as well as al-Zabīdī, notes a Yemeni dialect term of ‘*ilf*’ for a shrub with leaves like the grapevine; these leaves are said to be preserved, dried and used as a substitute for vinegar in cooking meat. The variant ‘*ulluf*’ is also recorded. In either case the dialect variant makes more sense than the meaning given by non-Yemeni commentators who

probably never tasted an acacia pod nor mistook it for a plum.

In a second example, al-Iryānī (1996:268) reinterprets another tradition regarding taxes on the people of Najrān. This states “*wa-min al-'aqār 'ushr mā saqā al-ba'l wa-al-samā' wa-nuṣf al-'ushr fīmā suqī bi-al-rishā'*” in which *'aqār* is defined as agricultural land owned with a deed. He suggests that the term *ba'l*, which refers to land only watered by rain, does not fit grammatically since it does not provide water as the sky (*samā'*) does. He would substitute the Yemeni term *ghayl* in the sense of land irrigated by spring water, since both spring fed and rain fed crops are taxed at one tenth (*'ushr*) in contrast to the tax on well cultivation of a twentieth. Neither of these suggested changes will place al-Iryānī in the same heretical league as Herr Luxenberg's (2007[2000]) Syriacal remake of the *Qur'ān*, but it is instructive to see that long accepted interpretations are susceptible to reinterpretation on the basis of dialectical variation.

Having sampled two hors d'oeuvres of theological interest, we can move on to more mundane matters, such as what a ploughshare might turn over. There are numerous terms in classical Arabic for the traditional plough and its various parts. A term that appears to be unique to and widespread in Yemeni dialects is *ḥalī* (see Varisco 2004:87). In al-Ahjur and

indeed in much of the highlands, as well as the Ḥaḍramawt this is a generic term for the plough. Al-Iryānī (1996:196) notes that the term refers to the wooden part of the plough, if it is one piece, but only to the upper part attaching to the yoke in a frame with two wooden parts; this is a meaning marked a century ago by Glaser (Grohmann 1934:7). In the only lexical reference I have found thus far, al-Zabīdī (*h-l-y*) quotes al-Ṣaghānī (writing in the 13th century), who identifies this Yemeni term as “*al-khashaba al-ṭawīla bayna al-thawrayn*” (the long piece of wood between the two bulls); I take this as a reference to the frame that connects to the yoke rather than the yoke itself. In Sabaic this term can refer to movable property (Beeston et al. 1982:68), which is suggestive of its origin. For a Yemeni farmer his plough may have been one of the most important movable items he owned. But I speculate, as befits the subject.

Printed dictionaries seduce us into thinking we know what a word means, as if the English language did not really begin until Samuel Johnson recorded it in typeset. Beginning Arabic students whose native language is English live by the words found in Hans Wehr, usually not considering that this is an English translation of a German text purporting to distill what the Arabic means. *Mea culpa*; I keep my Wehr and my Lane handy, but these sit next to the “real” Arabic lexicons that

dominate my bookshelf. Even the classic Arabic lexicons need a reality check. What makes *Lisān al-'Arab* “real”, when it is part of a lexical *silsila* that ultimately rests on what earlier Arab scholars are reported to have said about what they claim to have heard in pure Bedouin utterances? A dictionary may set a meaning in stone, but in a sense this only tells us what the word meant once it was fossilized into the dictionary. Etymology is always a kind of linguistic cosmology, leaping back to orality by leaps of faith in literary fragments. Consistency is often our only guide, as is equally the case for scholars of the *ḥadīth* literature; just as spurious traditions proliferated until al-Bukhārī and his colleagues pruned the most egregious, it is probable that some of the attributed meanings in early Arabic lexical texts are not representative of actual usage. There are numerous examples in the surviving lexicons to illustrate this. This calls for contemporary and artful speculation on what we can safely assume is a largely speculative “science” of lexicography in Arabic.

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Selling qat (*Catha edulis*) in the Yemeni market of Manakha, 1987. Photograph by Daniel Martin Varisco

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Endnotes:

¹ This paper was presented at the 2007 MESA conference.

² See al-Ḥilālī (1408/1988) for a study of Yemeni terms in major Arabic dictionaries. Al-Selwi (1987) compares specific terms in the work of al-Hamdānī and Nashwān with earlier South Arabic sources.

³ See also his other articles on Yemeni dialects, e.g., Rossi (1938, 1950, 1953).

⁴ I am not aware of a specific work on dialect terms in Yemeni poetry, but there are numerous published anthologies with annotation of specific terms and more recently analysis of poetic genres by Western scholars, including Steven Caton (1990), Flagg Miller (2007) and Mark Wagner (2005).

⁵ I intentionally do not list poetry here, not because it is irrelevant but because I do not believe in reincarnation and suspect I will require a substantial longevity to finish what I have started. I do not think I can put meter in before I expect to peter out.

⁶ I responded to the misperceptions of Yemeni dialects by Salem in Varisco (1997).

⁷ A brief window into this effort is my article on Yemeni terms for the plough and cultivation in the *Journal of Semitic Studies* (Varisco 2004).