

I wrote this article after my Yemen trip last year in August.

If it is Gods will

Traditional thinking in Yemen is more and more interspersed with modern influences. The fortunate Arabia (arabia felix) from the ancient world belongs nowadays to the poorest countries of the earth

Reportage from Josef C. Ladenhauf

The so called West lies undoubtful behind you, where men wear skirts and hold hands with each other. The Orient is reached where only covered women walk the streets and the muezzin calls through cracking loudspeakers to the prayer before sunrise. In the morning the market pulses in narrow lanes without names; Chicken change gaggling their possessor, it smells from incense sticks, caraway and cardamom. On the other side of the street a jeep is parked. The spare wheel covered with an awning showing Saddam Hussein; smiling, in the winner-pose with a machine gun.

Yemen, most fertile country of the Arabic peninsula, was beneath the Incense-Street. Its long gone prosperity was founded on that aromatic grains, which also nowadays must not be missed in any celebration. Only Decades later coffee started to be main export good. While in the ancient times called Arabia felix, Yemen ranges among the poorest countries today.

The consequences of the Gulf War in 1991 threw Yemen far back in development. Support from the Gulf-States was immediately cancelled as the country didn't clearly put itself on the Saudi-Arabic side in the Kuwait-Conflict. At the same time approximately one million migrant workers had to go back to their home country, where there was no possibility to earn their life own. Yemen was facing its economical and social ruin. And unemployment is up to today one of the biggest problems the developing country has to fight.

22 year old Ibrahim from Taiz doesn't have worries about his future. He already has a job: As Imam he is not only religious leader but speaks also about political and social topics. As almost all young men his age he is married. The bearded man is the key-bearer of the decades old Aschrafija-Mosque. Very proud he guides tourists over the historic area, but they are not allowed to put feet in the sacred carpeted halls. Ibrahim is also teacher in the local Koran-School. He underlines: "We don't need universities or academies. All that a Muslim has to know, he will learn in the Koran-School and the Mosque."

A lot of young people see that differently. More than 18.000 students study at 16 different universities in Yemen, more than half of them are women. Also the foreign student Lurna Strikwerda is among them. 24 year old Lurna got an award from an American Institute for Yemeni-Studies and was a little concerned before she started her excursion. "But since I am here, I feel safer than I do in any street in an American town for example at eleven in the night" the student from Chicago explains. Statistics shape Lurnas impression into clear figures; the probability to become victim in a robbery is 90 times higher in a metropolis in the USA.

"It is important for America to learn about the Middle East, to understand about the complex coherences and realities of that countries and not only grasp something on the news channels like Fox-TV", is Lurna sure. She wants to work for the government or a NGO after she finished studying.

But not only tourists und students from the "first world" feel attracted by Yemen. Every year thousands of Africans come, mainly from Ethiopia and Somalia – without passport and illegal. They do small jobs in the metropolises on the lowest rank of society; as sweepers, garbage collectors, engravers, day labourer, men and women. Behind them lies usually the dangerous crossing of the sea. Every year hundreds of Africans die trying to come to Yemen with tiny boats. Few of them manage to become more or less integrated. Their origin is way too obvious. African children collect plastic bottles in the streets. Honey dealers give them some Rial for that. (1€ = 280 Rial).

"Inshalla" is the word, mentioned early or later in every conversation. It means "if it is Gods will". Soon becomes clear that this is more than a flowery phrase. People really go along with their fate, because this is what Allah determined for them in their belief. If it is a car accident, disease, loss of work doesn't matter. It is taken with countenance and carried with patience, as Gods will. Deep religiosity is the sprouting force of the population, from the high educated member of the government to the simple raisin seller.

Men and women have merely common living areas. They usually don't act together in the visible social context. The only domain where both meet is under their own roof. Often different generations live together.

26 year old Miriam Imesch comes from Switzerland and spent more than five months in Yemen to study Hebrew and Arabic. "Sometimes you see men working on the fields, but those who really work hard are the women", is her experience. As foreigner she usually wore a headscarf and had the occasion to meet women in everyday life. "Conversation got boring quickly, all was about marrying, having babies and housekeeping", Miriam remembers.

"Islam is democracy" Ahmed Alwan Mulhi Al-Alwani, Yemeni ambassador in Vienna, is convinced. If everybody would follow the Korans advice, the good and justice for all would be assured. That sounds rather radical. The ambassador

mentions different kinds of democracies that can not be compared with one another. “Whether European, Islam or American System, democracy is from the beginning like a new born baby screaming”, he says. The following social behaviour depends on the education and if the child is supported to built its own opinion or more to be silent and take what ever comes along.

“Important is alternating respect and appreciation” Al-Alwani points out. He is Yemen’s ambassador in Austria since September of the last year.

The ambassador doesn’t contradict that hat the idea of democracy came from Europe but he mentions quickly in that context that the Arabic culture is far older and a lot of essential comforts came originally from Arabia.

Only on thing earns almost the same attention like the daily prayers. It is a small leaf called Qat. You chew the fresh leaves and store them on one side in our mouth. It smells a little bit like young corn and you keep it there for hours. In the afternoon men gather – meanwhile also more and more women – in the living room, *mafrash* to chew Qat, smoke water pipe and change news. Yemen Observer, a weekly newspaper, headlined that every day circa 20 million of working hours are lost by Qat-meetings. Many people without stable income spent more than half of their money on it.

What is for many expensive and very often the only vice is the daily bred of thousands of Qat-farmers. They built up terraces in the high lands under difficult circumstances to grow the demanded leaf. Next to it grows coffee, corn and millet. You don’t become rich like that. But if it is God’s will, you earn enough to make your living by selling it in town.