

# The Construction of the Viewer

## Media Ethnography and the Anthropology of Audiences

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## The 'Other' as Viewer

### *Reception of Western and Arab Televised Representations in Rural Yemen*

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All relationships between people and nations involve two sides ... We must at least recognize (a) that 'they' are there, and (b) that so far as 'they' are concerned 'we' are what we are plus what they have experienced and known of us. (Said, 1981, p. xxvi)

One Wednesday in May, 1979, the latest news at the weekly market in the Yemeni valley of al-Ahjur was that a long awaited television transmitter that would give the valley access to national television had been erected. Until then, the high mountains separating the capital from al-Ahjur had obstructed television reception in the area. On the following day residents of the village of al-'Urta, where I lived, borrowed the only television set in their part of the valley from a family in a neighbouring village, and installed it to see if it would work. It did.

On Friday morning, the heads of ten families of this village of approximately 150 adults went into the capital, a two-hour drive away, to buy television sets which cost 300-350 US\$ each. On Friday night all village residents were invited to watch T.V. in homes where sets had been installed. This pattern was repeated in villages all over the valley. By Saturday evening, a mere four days after the initial announcement that television was accessible to them, virtually all of al-Ahjur's 4,000 residents had seen a television programme, most of them for the first time. Some of these people had seen their first photographs only months earlier; the vast majority had never seen a film. And few would have imagined the pictures of technological complexity that they now saw. Television literally brought home the range of Western technology.

There has been considerable discussion in anthropology and cultural studies on the effects of Western filmic representations (ethnographic film, cinema, T.V.) on Third World audiences and of the impact of media hegemony on traditional cultures. More recently, a number of scholars have questioned the commonly held assumption that audiences are homogeneous, passive receivers of televised texts.



They argue instead that viewers are selective, and that they construe meaning according to their own assumptions and experiences (Ang, 1985; Brunt, 1992; Featherstone, 1987; Kottak, 1990; Martínez, 1992; MacDougall, 1992). Brunt (1992, p. 70) writes that the focus on textual analysis has (ironically) too often objectified audiences as 'receivers' of a text and 'inhibited any concrete engagement with audiences'. She recommends that the ways in which audiences define themselves in the real world as well as *vis-à-vis* television should be studied, and that variations and differences within particular groups be taken into account. If meaning is constructed by viewers, and if the basis of interpreting filmic images lies in the interaction between viewers' cultural assumptions (values) and the form and content of the text, what happens when members of one culture view the filmic representations of another? How much of the message is communicated?

This chapter<sup>1</sup> records and describes initial audience reactions to televised messages in al-Ahjur, a small rural community in Yemen's northern highlands. It adds to the growing number of studies that focus on audiences as active viewers rather than passive receivers, *e.g.*, Ang (1985), Brunt and Jordin (1987), Davis (1989), Hughes-Freeland (1992), Kottak (1990) and Mankekar (1993). Most people's pleasure in watching T.V. was clear, yet viewers' judgments of and responses to what they saw varied with the content and format of each show. Television content was identified with, appreciated or censured according to viewers' interpretations. Exposure to television had a profound effect on viewers' perceptions of themselves in relation to others. Further, definite judgments were made about the producing culture's characteristics based on what appeared on T.V., yielding an interesting rural Yemeni perspective on the Western and Arab 'other'.

### The Viewing Context

Al-Ahjur is a picturesque basin-shaped valley located about 40 km northwest of San'a, the capital of the Republic of Yemen. At the time of my research it was a relatively affluent community with an abundant water supply, supported by a rich agricultural economy and remittances from Saudi Arabia. It is composed of about twenty-four villages, with populations ranging from fifty to five hundred adults each. Until 1974, most of al-Ahjur's residents had had little exposure to Western technology. I lived in al-Ahjur with my husband, Daniel Varisco, for eighteen months in 1978-79, conducting ethnographic field work<sup>2</sup>. Television was introduced six months before my departure from the field. In those six months I saw pronounced changes in the attitudes and knowledge of the residents of al-Ahjur. Additional information for this paper was gathered in subsequent field work from January-June 1983<sup>3</sup> and short visits to the community while I was on a variety of consulting assignments in Yemen 1983-85.

Al-Ahjur was not a pristine, isolated community. For at least two thousand years, Yemenis have had contact with outside influences through trade and economic colonisation, and they have borrowed and adapted selected aspects of clothing, cuisine, agricultural practice, and other cultural baggage. In the nine-

teenth and twentieth centuries, however, Yemen had very little contact with the industrial world. It was the policy of the Imams who ruled Yemen during this period to keep out Western influence. Whatever their reasons for this policy, it also protected the country from colonialism.

A revolution toppled the Imamate in 1962, but a protracted civil war maintained the country's relative isolation for another seven years. In the early 1970s a significant number of imported goods and services in the form of mass media and development agencies entered Yemen. Simultaneously, a large portion of the male labour force left Yemen to work in nearby Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, returning once a year with cash and imported goods. After this, change was rapid. By 1978 almost anything could be purchased in San'a, Yemen's capital: Ann Page popcorn, Scottish marmalade, frozen French chickens, Canon camera equipment, Seiko watches and Guerlain cosmetics. Changes were occurring in areas other than consumption: the city of San'a doubled in size in a seven-year period; schools, hospitals and a modern airport were built.

Nor was al-Ahjur politically isolated in the 1970s. Some of its residents had fought in Yemen's civil war while others had participated by donating money. An important traditional value was (and still is) to remain abreast of current affairs, in the past through exchanging news in the market, and later through radio. Returning immigrants brought news from Saudi Arabia.

In 1974 a government-built dirt road reached al-Ahjur, and residents mobilised immediately to build feeder roads to each village. Toyota trucks replaced camels as the principal means of long-distance transport. A trip that once took three days now took two hours. When the road was paved in the 1980s, the trip was further reduced to thirty minutes. Urban consumer goods, including imported synthetic fabrics, gold jewellery, primus stoves, Chinese blankets and thermoses, flashlights, tape recorders and radios all became more easily available. Some entrepreneurs invested their remittances in diesel-powered flour mills which they transported to their home villages by truck. They ground fellow villagers' flour for an affordable fee, leading to a considerable reduction in women's work load (women had traditionally ground flour by hand on heavy stone mills). Others bought diesel-operated electric generators. They wired the houses in their own and surrounding villages on a fee-paying contract basis, supplying customers with electricity from sunset to midnight each evening. Electricity was kept on later during weddings in order to accommodate the festivities which sometimes lasted all night. An electric microphone system was attached to major mosques so that sermons and tapes of sermons could be broadcast all over the valley. After this was done, electricity was turned on at noon on Fridays so that the Friday sermon and prayer could be broadcast.

The availability of inexpensive imported wheat, rice, tea, sugar and soft drinks had modified the traditional sorghum-based diet and helped shift the focus of traditional agriculture from subsistence to the cash crop, *qat*.<sup>4</sup> Within a five year period, al-Ahjur's residents had seen their first cars, power mills and electric



lights. Their work was made considerably easier by these new technologies, but all of these together did not have the far-reaching impact on their attitudes towards the outside world that television was to have.

Although they had a keen interest in local, national and international politics, what the majority of al-Ahjur's residents did not have in 1979 was a clear image of what the modern world outside Yemen looked like, or firsthand experience of foreign lifestyles. The resident anthropologists and their occasional guests did their best to accommodate themselves to local customs (indeed this was prerequisite to their being accepted). Tourists to the valley were few and stayed mainly on car roads. They did not often venture into villages and rarely interacted with the people they saw.

When we first arrived in al-Ahjur most people were very friendly and hospitable, full of curiosity about life in our country. Although we were asked in detail about our families, dress, food, wedding customs, dancing, agriculture, architecture and landscapes, no one questioned that we would like it here. What struck us was the unabashed pride of most Ahjuris in their own heritage, agricultural tradition, abundant water supply and healthy air. We were often told stories of how people who were chronically ill would come to spend a few months in al-Ahjur, always to be completely healed. Conversations about life overseas would often end with a declaration, 'but here is best, right?'

Reactions to foreigners depended entirely on personal experiences, local custom, and the behaviour of the stranger. Among some Ahjuris, unpleasant experiences abroad (primarily in Saudi Arabia where they worked in the service sector) resulted in a certain suspicion of foreigners, especially a fear of ridicule. But others were more willing to accept foreigners precisely because they had no idea that there could be radical differences between cultures. In many cases this very ignorance led to greater ease of interaction.

But while our hosts were very proud of their civilization and landscape they were critical of their own society. We were asked if people in our society lied and cheated as they did in Yemen. Did they quarrel or covet (*hasad*) what others had? It was often assumed that nobody could be quite as bad as Yemenis. When young married women would quarrel with their husbands or in-laws, or leave for their natal homes in protest (*hanaq*), the older folk would chide these women and contrast them to the anthropologists who (they thought) got along so well, and, according to them, 'never quarrel'.

In sum, what we found among most Ahjuris who had not travelled abroad was an idealised view of the superiority of their own civilization and a concurrent idealisation of the superior morality of 'others'. Compared to the clarity of Yemeni society, images of the outside world were vague and undifferentiated.<sup>5</sup> And it was assumed that although we may differ in dress and custom, our lifestyles and values were essentially similar. This was all before they met the televised 'other'.

## Viewing Contextualised

Television was broadcast from a single government-controlled channel originating in San'a, and beginning at 4 pm every day except Friday, when it began at noon. Television programmes included newscasts; Quranic reading and religious discussion; variety shows, including local comedy skits, comedies from other Arab countries and acrobatic displays; television dramas, both locally written and imported; American Westerns (e.g. *The Rifleman*) and police films (e.g. *Kojak*, *The Fugitive*); documentaries on customs and activities in other parts of Yemen; music and poetry recital; and dancing from Yemen and elsewhere.

Because the electric generators in al-Ahjur were not usually turned on until sunset, people would start watching after their prayers. The television set would be turned on as soon as electricity became available. Some households did not switch off their lights or television sets, but left them on until the electric generator was turned off at 11 pm, so that both lights and T.V. would come on automatically at sunset. Whereas in the past most would retire by 9 pm and wake up before dawn to pray and irrigate their fields (men), or fetch water and bake bread (women), now many stayed up until 11 pm watching T.V. and consequently had a hard time getting up in the morning.<sup>6</sup>

Television sets were placed in the *majlis*, the room in which visitors were welcomed or, in houses with no separate *majlis*, in the room where family and friends congregated during leisure hours. The walls of these rooms were typically lined with mattresses for people to sit on and cushions for them to lean on. Rugs or imported straw mats covered the remaining floor space. Some of these rooms also contained charcoal brasiers, water pipes or small kerosene stoves. People would sit close to each other on the mattresses. If it was too crowded, they would sit on the rugs on the floor as well. The T.V. set was placed at one end of the room so that all present could see it. The whole family would watch together along with neighbours and friends who dropped in.<sup>7</sup>

For a few weeks, television viewing was a nightly affair in which almost everybody participated. The previous evening's T.V. programmes became the main topic of conversation, with people recounting their favourite lines *verbatim*. Sometimes a few people would re-enact parts of the script together. There was the usual identification with characters, and newborn children were named after television personalities or characters in television programmes. Many of these were names not previously used in the area. One unpopular *shaykh* (tribal leader) was nicknamed Mansur al-Kalbi after the villain of a televised serial.

During the month of Ramadan, when people stayed up until the wee hours of the morning, electricity was left on so that a thirty-part dramatic serial produced in Kuwait could be watched. This was a story of epic heroism in the early Islamic period. Much to my chagrin virtually everyone watched this exciting serial; I had been assured that I would hear traditional folk tales during the long evenings of Ramadan! A drummed ceremony that traditionally announced the last day of Ramadan was ignored in favour of watching the last episode of this show. Friday



afternoon visits now featured television, with only a smattering of the gossip and teasing that once characterised these informal social events. Impromptu dancing declined.

Since most local programming was realistic, and because of the nature of filmic images (see Hastrup, 1992), it was assumed that films not only reflected real life, but that televised images were typical of their producing culture. Viewers in the nearby town of Amran assumed, after seeing *Fury*, a show about acrobatic horses, that American pets in general were more 'clever' and more easily trained than Yemeni animals (Thomas Stevenson, personal communication). On a trip to a village a day's hike away, my husband was asked if he had met Steve, hero of *Six Million Dollar Man*. Because Yemen's population was so small, and face-to-face interaction so important, many Yemenis had met or could expect to meet famous Yemeni personalities in their lifetimes. They naturally assumed the same of us.

### Viewing Reviewed

The initial impact of television in al-Ahjur was multi-faceted, ranging from appreciation and identification to rejection and censure. The benefits of the medium were rarely questioned; almost everyone enjoyed watching and marvelled at the technology.<sup>8</sup> There were changes in religious attitudes and behaviours.<sup>9</sup> But most important of all were changes in the ways that Ahjuris perceived themselves in relation to the outside world and relative to other Yemenis.

On the whole, comedies and soap operas filmed in Yemen and other Arab countries were much appreciated, as were displays of athletic and acrobatic skill from all over the world. A series of lighthearted, locally produced, comic skits on injustices in the social system were enjoyed. One of these focused on the problems inherent in polygynous marriage; another pointed out erratic and discriminatory employment practices in civil service jobs; a third, chastised men for their impatience with their hard-working wives.<sup>10</sup> These short plays, spoken in Yemeni dialect and set in familiar surroundings, were discussed appreciatively by Ahjuri audiences. They were better understood than lectures and panels on health and social issues which were also produced locally. Even programmes by highly respected personalities were less effective because of their use of standard literary Arabic and unfamiliar settings, with panellists in Western clothes, sitting in chairs instead of Yemeni style furnishings.

Perceptions of the nature of the world outside Yemen were altered radically. The first surprise was with the technological and architectural complexity of other countries. Yemenis, who have lived in fabulous seven-story houses made from hand-carved stone for at least 2,000 years, and whose agricultural terraces were unrivalled in the Arab World, were justly proud of their civilization. Those who had not travelled overseas had no idea how much more technologically complex the industrial world had become in the past 300 years. From skyscrapers and factories to Moulinex blenders and the daily operation of a bank, Ahjuris responded

with awed admiration. They would comment frequently on the technological feats that they saw. Some began to question the adequacy of their own lifestyle. Messages presented by experts on television, even when poorly understood, were accepted as superior to local knowledge, and local lore was devalued correspondingly. In 1983, when I asked older women about traditional child rearing practices, I was told more than once that they were not relevant, that I should listen to what the doctors said on T.V. instead. This was not an attitude that I had encountered among older people in my earlier field work.

Almost immediately after exposure to television, a new awareness of the distinctiveness of countries began to replace the tendency to dichotomise the world into Yemen and a homogeneous foreign 'other'. Countries were characterised and judged by their television productions. I was asked if my country was like Syria or Egypt. Many disapproved of the immodest clothing and overt expressions of sexuality seen on Egyptian soaps. Syria, on the other hand, was well regarded because its representative on T.V. was Ghawar, a dynamic slapstick comedian who is very popular in Yemen. Although the benefits of T.V. were largely unquestioned, television content was judged by local standards of morality.

Dissonance between American producers' values as represented by televised images and Yemeni values led to considerable misunderstanding and the formation of negative opinions about the United States. Differences in behavioural norms, conceptions of the role of the individual in society, attitudes towards conflict and women's roles<sup>11</sup> will be discussed in order to help explicate the cultural lens through which Ahjuris received televised messages.

Ideal public behaviour in Yemen is characterised by responsibility, generosity, modesty and the control of one's emotions (Adra, 1982; 1984). Propriety and the presentation of self are of utmost importance in this society. One only presents one's best 'face' in public, in dress as well as demeanour. This is taken for granted; most public behaviour is deliberate and is the best that the presenter has to offer. It did not occur to anyone in al-Ahjur that televised programmes that are exported (i.e., *presented*) may represent the producers' most lurid fantasies and not a vision of the ideal life. In Yemen, as is the case elsewhere in the Middle East, fantasies and emotions are expressed freely, but only at home or in other intimate contexts. Ahjuris could not imagine that Americans, who are world leaders, would be so unsophisticated as to publicise their fantasies. It followed, then, that what they saw on television must be an accurate reflection of life in the United States; and that what they saw was the very best face America had to offer.

In the West, the relationship between the individual and society is conceived as a hostile one in film as well as in reality. Rambo (as well as John Wayne and other heroes of this genre) portrays an independent, unhampered hero working alone to destroy an evil system while conquering its enemies (Warner, 1992). Such films represent, and perhaps simultaneously construct, popular frustrations and fantasies with 'the system' both in the United States and England.<sup>12</sup>



But this particular opposition is not necessarily universal. The assumed relationship between the individual and society in tribal Yemen is its mirror image. Here, the system is considered benevolent and threatened only by unrestrained self-indulgence. Arab epic heroes work toward saving the system from the actions of corrupt individuals. If Yemenis are dissatisfied with the government, it is with what they see as corruption among some politicians. Parliamentary meetings are often televised, and the proceedings roundly criticised by viewers. Yet, it is particular individuals who are criticised, not the system.

These differences in attitude are related to differences in power relationships. Yemeni leaders rule by consensus, and they are normally accessible to their constituents. From the latter's perspective, there is always the possibility that policy can be changed if one's argument is convincing enough, or if one has enough allies to speak on one's behalf. This is quite different from the rigidity of rules in the industrial West and the perceived inaccessibility of leaders.

Accepted ways of dealing with conflict also differ markedly in the two societies. As MacDougall (1992, p. 95) notes, 'For Western film-makers, conflict is almost an essential discursive principle, if not in obvious form, then in the form of issues or problems requiring resolution'. The intended message may not be communicated clearly to viewers whose approaches to conflict vary.

Among Yemenis there are highly developed traditional mechanisms for averting violence (Caton, 1990; Adra, 1982). Conflict, while not repressed, is ideally kept under cover, to be dealt with quietly through mediation. Public confrontation is considered offensive. Mediation is put into play at all levels. When an argument between two parties gets heated, loud voices alert passers-by to intervene; arguments between in-laws or husband and wife are mediated either within the family or with the help of influential neighbours and friends (Adra, 1982); impartial people of stature mediate inter-tribal and inter-regional conflicts (Caton, 1990). Fist fights are rare in Yemen and are considered serious breaches if they do occur. When children fight, adults in the vicinity are expected to pull them apart.

This avoidance of violence is reflected in child rearing practices, where corporal punishment by rural Yemenis is almost unheard of.<sup>13</sup> The Western concept that violence is a natural expression of people's darker nature is not shared by Yemenis. Locally produced programmes are more likely to be didactic or comic than sinister. It is, consequently difficult for many Yemenis to appreciate much of the open conflict and unrestrained violence they see on T.V.

The Yemeni censure of filmic violence contrasts sharply with that of Indonesia, where anger and other emotions are also dealt with differently than they are in the West (Heider, 1991a; 1991b). Heider (1991a, p. 64) points out that among Indonesians who view anger as dangerous or evil, 'viewing intense anger in film is a way of experiencing the forbidden'. Differences in Indonesian and Yemeni categorisations of violence may explain their different reactions to violence on film. Violence is not repressed as it is in Indonesia (and to some extent in the United States). Instead, it is channelled and bounded in specific ways. Losing

one's temper is considered more undignified than sinful. Undignified behaviour can be quite damning, however, in a society where propriety is highly valued, as it is in Yemen. Meanwhile the fascination with violence that is shared by Americans and Indonesians may well be due to its repression in real life.

Media portrayals of women, courtship behaviour and sexual activity were also shocking to Yemenis. In rural Yemen, formal courtship is nonexistent and informal courting behaviour is best ignored. Legitimate sexual activity is relegated to the intimacy of the bedroom. From this perspective the idea that bedroom scenes could be televised is absurd.

Modesty in dress, for both women and men, is the rule in the northern highlands. Heads are covered at all times. Several layers of clothing are worn except when doing physical labour. An extra layer of clothing (jackets for men, large head scarf for women) is worn when visiting or when travelling between villages. In this regard, modesty is an important aspect of Yemeni presentation of self, as it is elsewhere in the Middle East.

In the Middle East and in the West women and family are thought to restrain men. The two societies differ, however, in their valuation of such restraint. In the United States women are seen as hampering a highly prized individualism, which is in turn considered the basis of a healthy society. Consequently, women are often portrayed, Eve-like, as a source of problems for men. Women in the Rambo genre of film, for example, are presented as standing in the way of the hero's mission (Warner, 1992). By contrast, Middle Eastern culture values the family and family relationships more highly than individual self expression. A woman, by virtue of her modesty and the moral strength she presumably derives from this modesty, is expected to temper men's baser tendencies to selfishness and violence, thus assuring a viable social order.<sup>14</sup> The perpetuation of social life depends on respect for women and their familial roles. Thus in al-Ahjur scant clothing on women is interpreted, not as an expression of an exalted freedom, but as whorish inducement to keep men away from their social responsibilities. The fact that almost all women portrayed in Western dramas are presented as sex objects is at the very least puzzling to Ahjuris.

Finally, in the United States, an individual's primary responsibility is to self and nuclear family. Responsibility to others is secondary. Yet social responsibility is one of the most important values in Yemeni society (Adra, 1982). That an individual may not recognize his or her responsibility to society is incomprehensible; that producers of internationally aired televised programmes may not consider themselves accountable for the morality or immorality of their programmes is literally incredible.<sup>15</sup>

What happens when Western filmic representations are shown to people whose assumptions about human nature, intentionality and the nature of society are almost exactly opposite of those in the West? Or, when it is assumed that T.V. portrays reality and that televised behaviour reflects the ways that Westerners normally act? Initial reactions in al-Ahjur included confusion and rejection. One



Ahjuri friend, genuinely puzzled at what she had seen, asked me, 'What kind of society is it over there, are they all licentious (*jannaba*)?'<sup>16</sup> They're always getting into fights! And the way that they get married: if a man likes a woman he runs after her, and if she likes him, she runs after him, then they marry (cohabit) immediately?' The images she saw were those of immorality and disorder, and she could not understand how such a society would function.<sup>17</sup> Another, better educated, friend once told me, 'Everything evil is found in America'. When I protested, she granted, unconvinced, that there was good too, but that there were also 'a lot of problems'. Others asked how I could live in a city as riddled with crime as New York. Several friends have asked over the years if there is any family life (*hayat ijtima'iyya*) in America. These questions were asked in all sincerity by people who had not been to the United States, but who had watched American television programmes.

Also damaging to images of the U.S. was the 'export' of Western prejudices (Kuehnast, 1992). My husband was asked repeatedly about blacks in America. Wasn't he afraid of the violence and criminal tendencies of American blacks? When, after denying that African Americans were any more criminal than anyone else, he in turn asked Yemenis why they asked, invariably the response was that they had seen black criminals on television. High status, professional and wealthy dark skinned Americans are simply not shown on the commercial media. The prejudices of Yemenis living in the northern highlands have been traditionally based on social status, not skin colour.<sup>18</sup> The scattered individuals in the valley with very dark skin, including at least one highly respected *Sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), were not lumped together as a group. The one-to-one association of colour and status is new to the area and media-induced.

While viewers responded negatively to what they saw as immorality in Western televised representations, locally produced programmes about life in Yemen and about the government were better received. Exposure to these resulted in a marked increase in knowledge of other parts of the country. Until then, Yemen's mountainous terrain and lack of good roads had limited communication and travel between the various regions. News of the outside was traditionally transmitted by itinerant merchants, occasional visits with distant kin or trips to famous healers. But direct contact with other Yemeni tribal groups was rare.

Daily programmes that showed life and work in other parts of Yemen were very popular. 'A picture of my country' (*Sura min biladi*) focused on a different community in Yemen each day. It covered the traditional economy, interviews with locals and samples of local poetry and dancing. These programmes provided the rural population with recognition and visibility and helped forge a sense of unity with other Yemenis. There was strong identification, especially among younger Ahjuris, with Yemenis shown on tape, speaking a language, reciting poetry and performing dances that, while different from their own, were still recognizable as Yemeni. Because they were so well understood, they could be criti-

cised or imitated.<sup>19</sup> Differences in dialect, music and economy were discussed. Similarities with Yemenis from other regions became part of daily conversation.

Ahjuris were impressed by televised portrayals of the government. Until then the central government had seemed largely irrelevant. Al-Ahjur, like other rural regions in Yemen had been economically, socially and politically self-sufficient. Agriculture was primarily for subsistence with a few cash crops that had only recently become important. Disputes were resolved locally by traditional mediation. Major projects, such as building mosques, schools and roads, were undertaken through a system of cooperative labour in which every household participated.

Respect for the government increased with television coverage of Yemen's President and other high officials performing official functions, opening hospitals, and meeting with leaders from other countries. Visits to the President by various ambassadors were faithfully reported. Army parades and displays of military hardware were impressive. Sometimes parliamentary sessions were televised. Discussions of the national charter (*mithaq*)<sup>20</sup> were also televised, giving Ahjuris a chance to observe the political changes going on in their country. Through television, they became aware that countless other Yemenis were also participating in such discussions. News that the government might provide services such as hospitals, schools, cheap electricity, and paved roads kindled an appreciation of its potential role in their lives.

Ahjuris began to define themselves as Yemeni nationals rather than as tribesmen (*qaba'il*). Perhaps the simultaneous exposure to clearly 'foreign' and dissonant Western images helped cement such feelings of unity. It is largely through the channel of television that the central government in Yemen has gained the popularity it enjoys and that unity with South Yemen could be achieved (Adra, 1993)<sup>21</sup>. President Salih's initial trip to Aden in 1989 was televised in full including six hours of motorcade through Yemen with people lining the roads. To non-Yemenis this may have been tedious, but Yemenis all over the country were glued to their television sets in appreciation of this momentous event.<sup>22</sup>

### A Parting View

Radical changes in the attitudes of al-Ahjur's villagers were apparent even in the first six months after their exposure to television. These include an exponential increase in knowledge of the outside world along with the creation of new stereotypes and changes in patterns of entertainment and ritual. Not all of the changes in al-Ahjur in the 1970s and 1980s were due to television, television came to the area packaged with other consumer goods. But exposure to television, and to televised representations did play an important role in altering Ahjuri perceptions of themselves in relation to foreign and Yemeni 'others'.

It will be recalled that Ahjuris had tended to idealise their own civilization while they assumed that the morality of others was superior to their own. This image was turned on its head after exposure to television. Yemen's architectural



heritage no longer seemed so impressive next to the technological feats of the industrial world, but local morality looked very good when compared to that portrayed in foreign films. Television content did not objectify foreigners any more than they had been already; but the stereotypes changed.

On the other hand, T.V. served to humanise other Yemenis. Ahjuris' perceptions of themselves as members of a tribe, potentially opposed to other tribes, shifted to self-identification as Yemeni nationals. Even without exposure to television the locus of identification for much of Yemen's rural tribal population had begun to shift away from the tribe (Caton, 1990). Many traditional tribal markers lost their importance or were re-defined to represent an urban synthesis of modernity and tradition (Caton, 1990; Adra, 1993). In this case, television facilitated Yemen's transition to a country with a viable central government, a transition fostered by the realities of international politics and a global economy.

Televised representations were accepted at face value in al-Ahjur. Whether these served to humanise or further objectify the 'other' depended largely on the way in which the text was received. When the text was compatible with Yemeni expectations and assumptions, it humanised the 'other'; when it clashed, the 'other' was objectified. In either case the 'other' was in the eye of the beholder, not a separate metaphor on a silver screen.

## Notes

1. Earlier drafts of this chapter were presented at the Third Annual Symposium of the International Association for the Advancement of Appropriate Technology for Developing Countries, Greenvale, N.Y., 20-22 November 1981, and the 92nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., 19 November 1993. I am indebted to comments by Steven Caton, Fadwa El Guindi, Karl Heider, Nizar Ghanim, Nathan Altschuler and David Hicks. Isabel Wildeman helped direct my understanding of American television. My profound gratitude goes to Daniel Varisco for sharing his observations in the field, discussing the issues presented here, and for his constructive criticism at various stages of writing.
2. This period of field work was funded by a National Science Foundation Grant for Improving Doctoral Dissertation Research and a Temple University Graduate Fellowship.
3. The second period of field work focused on attitudes towards breast-feeding and fertility. It was funded by MEAwards in Population and Development of the Population Council.
4. *Catha edulis*. This is a plant the leaves of which are chewed for a stimulant effect. For ethnographic perspectives on *qat* see Weir (1985), Varisco (1986) and Kennedy (1987).
5. The tendency to objectify the 'other' is apparently not limited to Euro-American social science.

6. There has been a corresponding shift in time patterns in San'a, as well. When I first arrived in March, 1978, shops were open and the streets were bustling with traffic by 6.30 am. In 1985, San'a's streets did not become busy until 8.30 or 9 am, although the city's population had grown.
7. Such audiences typically included men, women and children. In most rural contexts in Yemen women do not veil for family members or fellow villagers.
8. Notable exceptions were a few older members of the community who were simply not interested in watching and some local religious leaders who feared that television would have a negative effect on religious observance.
9. Changes in religious attitudes and practice were complex and would have to be dealt with in another paper.
10. This skit deserves to be described in some detail. It begins with a man's irritability that dinner is not ready on his return from work. He is not interested in his wife's justified explanations and scolds her for her laziness. That night, he dreams that he is responsible for the domestic chores while his wife goes out to work (portrayed in the full veil of urban Yemeni women with briefcase in hand). He cuts himself peeling potatoes, burns his arms at the stove, and leaves a hot iron on his shirt while he goes to tend his crying baby. He wakes up fully realizing how demanding and time-consuming housework can be.
11. By and large these are values shared by other Middle Eastern societies.
12. Brunt (1992, p. 75), in her research on television audiences in rural England, found a denial on the part of the audience that 'they' (media and politicians) could speak for 'us' (the audience). Similarly, a distrust of strangers is very much a part of American television and in social life. Kottak (1990, pp. 54-56) discusses American preoccupation with strangers.
13. Some families refused to send their children to schools where expatriate teachers beat students.
14. See Anderson (1990) for an important discussion of gender, social order and sacred space in Islamic societies.
15. I have spoken with television viewers in other Middle Eastern societies who are convinced that T.V. producers are so decadent that they do not see their images as immoral, or that they are intentionally trying to wreak havoc with morality. As in Yemen, these judgments are due to a lack of appreciation of media amorality.
16. The term denotes the ritual impurity of someone who has not bathed after engaging in sexual intercourse.
17. Davis (1989, p. 15) describes a similar view of American morality in Morocco: 'I sensed an attachment to an idea ... of a country without shame. The idea that Americans have different boundaries of appropriate sexual behaviour seemed to be transformed into the idea that Americans have no such boundaries'.



18. See Walters (forthcoming) for a discussion of race and social status in Yemen.
19. Adra (1993) discusses changes in local Yemeni dances and the development of a national dance form.
20. The term refers to a charter that set the goals for the new Yemeni nation. These were discussed weekly in schools and government offices throughout the country.
21. Caton (1990, p. 64) describes the Yemeni Government's use of poets to compose verses in its favour and the role of radio and television in airing these poems.
22. That the Yemeni government was utilising the media to promote itself is clear. Yet it should not be assumed that these propagandistic messages were exploitative. Yemen, perhaps more than any other country in the Middle East has been built upon indigenous, non-coercive tribal ideological structures. Yemen is currently extraordinarily democratic, with a plethora of political parties and dissenting newspapers.

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